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THE ENGLISH MYSTICS





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# THE ENGLISH MYSTICS

*By*

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*Monk of Downside Abbey*

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TO  
ABBOT BUTLER  
WITH GRATEFUL AFFECTION



## INTRODUCTION

**M**Y primary aim in this short book has been to give some account of the lives and writings of the English medieval mystics. They form a group of religious teachers of whom any country and any century might be proud, but of whom, for various reasons, their own country has been until recently almost entirely oblivious. There are some signs that this oblivion is passing. Editions of the separate mystics have been produced in fair numbers within the past twenty-five years. Yet they are still far from well known, far less widely known than many other spiritual writers of this and other countries, whose works show less religious genius and less suitability to the needs of the present day. Their value is assuredly very great to the student of English religious sentiment; it is great also (and this is more important) to the reader who goes to them to seek what alone they wished to give, a stronger motive for the love of God. Close and repeated examination of any subject of study is apt to make one overrate its comparative importance; geese are very readily seen as swans; the natural love of what one is pledged to recommend to others—the *amor negotii suscepti*—is too often deceptive; but I cannot help feeling that the medieval mystics, too long ignored, should be as familiar to English readers as St Teresa or St Francis of Sales. I feel confident that all who read them will be well repaid.

Only those medieval mystics have been included whose works are available at the present moment to the

ordinary reader. Father Augustine Baker, though an Elizabethan, has been added to their number for reasons which will, I think, commend themselves to all who know *Sancta Sophia*. He was saturated with the thought of his predecessors, and his teaching comprehends and supplements theirs to an extraordinary degree.

I have prefaced my account of the mystics with a few remarks on mysticism in general, and on the mystical experience. These chapters may be thought an excrescence, and must necessarily be found inadequate. However, it seemed to me that they were an attempt to answer questions which must pass through the mind of all who read the mystics. Too many, Catholics and non-Catholics alike, are prejudiced against true mysticism by confusing it with false, and a full discussion of the whole subject by a Catholic theologian who is also a philosopher is greatly to be desired. That discussion I cannot pretend to supply. What I have written aims at no more than summarizing the conflicting views on mysticism and outlining what I believe to be the traditional Catholic position. Those who are interested solely or primarily in the English mystics themselves may, if they wish, pass over the two first chapters, which are quite independent of what follows, and of necessity are somewhat involved.

In conclusion, it is a pleasure to acknowledge the help that I have received from Abbot Butler, who read my manuscript and suggested many changes, and from Dom Justin McCann and Mr. Algar Thorold.

DOWNSIDE,

*June, 1927.*

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# THE ENGLISH MYSTICS

## *PART I*

### I

#### THE NATURE OF MYSTICISM

**I**N the course of the last fifty years many writers have treated of mysticism in all its aspects. Nearly all have thought it desirable to begin by lamenting the misuse of the word mysticism and by stating what they themselves understand by it. Yet, in spite of their labours, it cannot be said that at the present day there is any agreement among psychologists, religious thinkers, and men of ordinary education as to the precise meaning which the word should bear. There can, indeed, be few words in the language, not obviously ambiguous, which are susceptible of more shades of meaning; it is as if the intangible nature of the mental experience had taken possession of the words men make use of to describe it. Yet it is clear that no profitable discussion, however simple, can be based on a term of uncertain meaning, and it is therefore necessary once more to review the history of the word and to state what meaning it is to carry in the pages which follow. Such a review is all the more necessary if, as is surely the case, the word is now thoroughly ambiguous and is used by competent writers to describe mental processes and experiences which are quite unconnected with each other.

The word mystic in its Greek form was originally used to describe those who had been initiated into the sacred rites or "mysteries" at Eleusis or elsewhere, who had thus acquired a knowledge withheld from others, and who were bound to secrecy regarding what they knew. The word "mystery" was adopted by Christian writers from St Paul onwards, and was at first used of many mysteries of the faith. Very soon, however, it was narrowed to mean anything connected with the faith that was symbolical or typical and therefore hidden. Thus many of the Scriptures and many of the rites of the Church have two significations, the obvious and the hidden. St Paul's identification of the rock struck by Moses with Christ, and the more general recognition of the Paschal Lamb as foreshadowing the Saviour, are examples of the mystical or hidden sense of Scripture. Similarly, the bread and wine of the Eucharist can be called mystical, because after consecration they become something quite different from their appearances. This sense of the word mystical still remains in theological writings as a perfectly legitimate use.

Soon, however, the adjective (for the personal noun "mystic" and the abstract "mysticism" are modern derivatives) came to be used in a wider sense, rendered familiar by the title of Dionysius the Areopagite's treatise on prayer, the *Theologia Mystica*. Here mystical means that department of theology which deals not with what the natural reason can know of God and his nature, nor with what has been revealed by God himself to the world, but with what certain elect souls can know of him by intimate experience and by his own gift. This meaning also has survived, and with certain modifications is the sense in which the Latin word and its derivatives are used by

Catholic theologians and writers of every century, though, as we shall see, their attention has been concentrated upon some aspects of the subject rather than upon others.

Meanwhile the word had passed into common non-technical use, especially in the countries affected by the Reformation, and had deteriorated in meaning. Since the genuine adept in mystical theology and mystical interpretation of the Scriptures held views which were novel, or seemed to be so, any who laid claim to personal revelation or illumination were said to have mystical opinions, and since what was mystical seemed often incomprehensible, all incomprehensible manifestations of religion were called mystical. Finally, the word was used to describe all religious teaching that was symbolical or occult, such as that of Boehme, Swedenborg, and theosophy in all its branches ancient and modern. Hence, apart from works by Catholic writers, or writers in sympathy with the Catholic tradition, almost all the uses of the word in the eighteenth century—an epoch singularly unsympathetic to mysticism in all its higher manifestations—are derogatory or abusive or entirely neutral. Most of these uses have survived. In the well-known line of Tennyson describing the arm which brandished Excalibur, "mystic" seems to mean little more than mysterious, but it is more often used by his older contemporaries as a noun to signify one possessed by religious mania or given to vague, unsubstantial speculations or dreams on the subject of religion.

Such a deterioration of the word was natural at a time when the pure reason was being exalted at the expense of all other faculties of the mind, when religion all over

Europe had become excessively formal and institutional, and when, a little later, science, in the narrow sense of the word, and a materialistic philosophy dominated the greater part of the educated world. The religious renaissance which took place in many Catholic countries and in Protestant England soon after the Napoleonic wars, the appearance of a new spirit in sentiment and literature which has come to be called the "Romantic Movement," and finally, in more recent times, a reaction from materialism and determinism in philosophy, have all combined to direct attention elsewhere. It has been recognized that science can classify facts and appearances, but can give no judgement on values. A desire for a more personal and spiritual union with God on the part of believers has found a counterpart, among those who do not believe, in a recognition of a unity and beauty behind all the powers of nature. A system of psychology and apologetics has been adopted which leaves place for personal experience and processes of thought which cannot be expressed in terms of formal logic. This trend of feeling, which in different aspects may be classified on paper as religious or philosophical or literary, but which is in reality with the individual the work of the spirit of the times upon all the faculties of the mind, has caused the word mystic, hitherto appropriated to religion, to be applied to various other domains of thought, and has created the noun mysticism to define the territory which it proposes to examine. Mysticism and mystic have thus come to be used to denote those who have the power, or who claim to have the power, of attaining to some kind of direct and experimental perception of God or of divine or cosmic truth. Using the word in this sense, St Teresa, Jacob Boehme, and Emerson—to name no more than

these three clear examples—would be called mystics or mystical writers, in distinction to other religious or philosophical writers such as St Thomas Aquinas, Hooker, and Harnack. Next, by a slight stretch of meaning, the word was used to describe those who, like Wordsworth or Browning, saw, or claimed to see, a vision of unity or truth behind all the changing phases of the material world and the varied moral actions of individuals. Finally, since such a vision has a certain similarity with Pantheism, which sees God or the good in every thing and person and action, mysticism was often used as an interchangeable term with Pantheism; while others, seizing upon the experimental, emotional element, used mysticism, most unjustifiably, to cover not only all the relations of the soul with the Divine or Absolute as lover with the Beloved, but all except the most concrete and degraded forms of human affection. A glance through the pages of an anthology such as the *Oxford Book of Mystical Verse*, or the chapter-headings of almost any English history of mysticism, will show very clearly how vague the meaning of the word has become to the ordinary man or woman of education. When such a disagreement exists, it seems clear that we must admit that though some of the looser and more general uses of the word are incorrect, yet mysticism must be counted as one of those terms to which no one unchangeable meaning can be attached.

Perhaps nothing shows more clearly the confusion of thought even among students of the subject than the various and most divergent estimates of the value of mysticism. There is a well-known passage in Harnack where he gives it as his opinion that mysticism is merely Catholic piety, and that a non-Catholic who takes up

with it is on the way to becoming a convert.<sup>1</sup> This judgement has often been ridiculed, and it is probable that Harnack would express it in another form to-day; but it is clear that he understood by mysticism what Catholic theologians meant by the word fifty years ago—that is to say, the approach of the soul to God, as in the case of St Teresa, by means of extraordinary states of prayer and divine, often quasi-miraculous, operations upon the soul. At the opposite extreme is the opinion that Christianity has nothing in common with mysticism. Here, clearly, mysticism is taken to mean daring speculation on questions of theology, supposed revelations and illuminations such as those of Jacob Boehme, and the various forms of theosophy.

Apart from such judgements by writers of weight, everyone must be familiar with persons, either Catholics, non-Catholic Christians, or unbelievers, who either are attracted to everything mystical under the belief that only there will they find the sincere, the spontaneous, and the living spirit of religion, or are repelled by the conviction that mysticism must necessarily be either morbid or irrational or dangerous. In such cases neither one class nor the other would really desire or detest all that should properly be labelled mysticism; they are unconsciously using the word in too narrow a sense.

To avoid all danger of such narrowness, it has become usual among non-Catholics to understand the word so widely as to include all that has ever been taken for mysticism by any reasonable authority. Definitions have been framed so wide as to lose all limits; they include not only all true personal religion, natural and super-

<sup>1</sup> Quoted (without references) by Inge, *Christian Mysticism*, Appendix A, as saying, "A mystic who does not become a Catholic is a dilettante."

natural, as it exists among civilized peoples, but also vast territories of philosophical thought, and much that is merely an attitude of mind as intangible as that which bears the name of romanticism.<sup>1</sup> Some have even gone to the length of saying that the romantic in literature is merely a department of the mystical.

Setting aside all such extremely broad definitions, it is possible to divide recent books on mysticism into three groups, according to the view taken by their authors. The first of these groups regards mysticism as a deeper realization of every aspect of the universe as presented to our senses and intelligence; this may be called psychological mysticism. The second regards it as a particular way of receiving and interpreting religious truth, both natural and revealed; this may be called speculative or theological mysticism. The third regards it as a way of approach to God in knowledge and love under his direct influence and guidance; this may be called supernatural mysticism. They are often found combined to a greater or lesser extent; they agree in appealing to experience and vision and intuition, rather than to logical processes of the mind; they all claim to attain to an understanding of things hidden from the majority of men.

I. Psychological mysticism is perhaps the vaguest and hardest to seize of the three. It is based on a conviction,

<sup>1</sup> The following three definitions are from well-known books: "Mysticism is the art of union with reality" (E. Underhill, *Practical Mysticism*, p. 3). "Mysticism is a temper rather than a doctrine, an atmosphere rather than a system of philosophy." (C. Spurgeon, *Mysticism*, p. 2: Cambridge University Press, 1913). Miss Spurgeon throughout her book sets very wide bounds to mysticism. "Mysticism is the attempt to realize, in thought and feeling, the immanence of the temporal in the eternal, and of the eternal in the temporal" (Inge, *Christian Mysticism*, p. 5)

confirmed by almost universal experience, that the mind is capable of attaining to the clearest vision of truth and the real significance of things not when active and engaged in reasoning, but when quiet and contemplative, either by accident, or when stimulated by some vivid sense-perception, or when resting after the ascent of a long ladder of reasoning. As the mind can give no account of its movement at such a time, it cannot communicate to others the certainty which it feels. It can merely state its own conviction.

Probably all will remember such moments in their life, when the dull veil that normally covers the world seems for a moment to be lifted, and for a moment the mind trembles on the edge of a great discovery. For a moment the discordant voices are in harmony; goodness, beauty, and sympathy pervade all; a light that never was on land or sea shines out, and through the mists appear the battlements of a city not made with hands. Such phrases may seem vague and fantastic, but most will agree that the experience is a real and not uncommon one, and that there remains after it has passed a conviction that some kind of reality and certainty was attained, and that the impression was not merely emotional or sensual; that, in a very true sense, such experiences, be they what they may,

“Are yet the fountain-light of all our day,  
Are yet a master-light of all our seeing.”

These experiences, which are akin, though not altogether equivalent, to what we call artistic or poetic inspiration, have naturally found their clearest expression in poetry, as they have found their most powerful realization in music, though the poet does no more than see clearly and express justly what we all realize dimly in rare moments. Poems such as Wordsworth's *Lines Composed above*



*Tintern Abbey* have become the commonplaces of writers on mysticism. In a slightly different aspect, this sense of intense realization or intuition is described well enough in Browning's *Two in the Campagna*, and traces of it can be seen in Rupert Brooke's *Dining-Room Tea* and in much modern lyrical poetry.<sup>1</sup> It is often the outcome of a state of mind induced by absorption of various kinds—that strange feeling that we have done a certain action or visited a certain place long before; the sense of enlarged horizon that others besides Tennyson have felt at the repetition of their own or another's name; the impression of another presence at one's elbow; the conviction, not confined to great poets, that we are writing or speaking not what we have reasoned out but what we see.

So far there will probably be a general agreement that we have been describing a common psychological experience identical with, or akin to, the experiences known as mystical by the non-religious writers. When we pass further we are on controversial ground. Wordsworth has just been mentioned as best voicing what is meant by such an impression; but it may be asked whether what he experienced and described was not something of a different order, no longer a normal experience, but abnormal and in the nature of a trance.<sup>2</sup> Further, what

<sup>1</sup> See also Tennyson, *In Memoriam*, canto xciv.

<sup>2</sup> What, for example, is Wordsworth describing in the following celebrated passage:

“ We are laid asleep  
In body, and become a living soul;  
While with an eye made quiet by the power  
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,  
We see into the life of things.”

*Tintern Abbey*, 44-48.

“ Is it not plain,” says Dean Inge (*Christian Mysticism*, p. 311), commenting on this passage, “ that the poet of Nature, the

relation do such experiences as those of Wordsworth bear to others of a definitely religious, not to say supernatural nature, such as are described by St Augustine and St Teresa, or even such as are catalogued by William James? Again, have these experiences any such objective, intellectual worth as have conclusions arrived at from sense-perception or ratiocination? Have they, as such, any light to throw on the great problems that have always vexed the human mind? Can the basic truths of revealed religion, attacked alike by critical historians, scientific materialists, and sceptical philosophers, find a defence in the inmost experience of the individual? In another sphere of thought, do they give an objective, metaphysical value to the achievements of art? Does the musician really know more of reality than the scientist? Are they not far less trustworthy than the normal processes, allied as they are said to be to the wanderings of the morbid intellect worked upon by drug and disease? Or are they neither supremely valuable nor utterly worthless, but merely the momentary escape into consciousness of another personality, a subliminal self? And if so, is this second self allied to the beast, or does it have access to truth and reality in a manner denied to our surface consciousness? Without attempting to answer such questions, except, perhaps, implicitly by accepting conclusions inconsistent with one or another, we may point out that it is mainly to these last aspects of the problem that the attention of many modern psychologists and non-Catholic apologists has been directed, and that the territory of mysticism, as defined by them, marches Spanish ascetic [*i.e.*, St John of the Cross], and the Platonic philosopher [*i.e.*, Plotinus] have been climbing the same mountain from different sides?" That is indeed the question to be answered.

with that of hypnotists, alienists, and experimental psychologists of all kinds. It is this doubtful company into which it has been brought that is one of the chief causes of the distrust which mysticism has inspired in many who prefer the sunlight to the false dawns and wandering fires that shine upon genius and madness alike.

II. What may be called speculative or theological mysticism is at first sight, and perhaps actually and permanently, so different that it is hard to understand how both are considered under one and the same name by many students. There is no doubt at all that certain religious thinkers, certain Fathers of the Church, and even certain of the inspired writers, present an element of thought and sentiment which is not found in others, perhaps the majority, and which it has become customary to call the mystical element in religion, employing the word in almost its original sense. Among the inspired writers all will have recognized the presence of this element in St John and St Paul. Both these apostles make statements and deductions which are mysterious in quite a different way from such doctrines as the Trinity or the Divinity of our Lord, though these doctrines also appear more clearly in the writings of St John and St Paul than elsewhere. The statements alluded to are, in fact, more of the nature of theological conclusions or explanations. They stand outside the tradition of direct revelation, and though, since they are made by inspired writers, the Church of necessity regards them as true, yet in most cases they have not become part of the explicitly defined and propounded body of the faith, but remain for Christians to comprehend and probe according to the measure of spiritual understanding given to each.

Among such mystical teaching may be mentioned the conception of the soul's growth as bearing an intimate relation to the life of Christ. The soul only lives in so far as it is in the Word, and even its sufferings complete the sufferings of Christ.<sup>1</sup> This view of the life of grace was, as is well known, familiar to St Paul. "I bear the marks of the Lord Jesus in my body," he writes, and elsewhere speaks of his sufferings as filling up those of Christ.<sup>2</sup> Many of the saints, starting from his words, have found them pregnant with meaning. Similarly the indwelling of God in the soul is expressed by St John and St Paul in a manner far more explicit than is customary in the Synoptic Gospels. Another example, clearer still, is to be found in St Paul's identification of the Church with Christ himself as his mystical body, and it is worth noting that this concept was so present and real to his mind that he takes it as the basis for a further mystical comparison.<sup>3</sup> This is not the place to draw out the point at any length, still less to suggest that there are not in the Synoptic Gospels and in the teaching of the universal Church all the dogmatic principles of which these are legitimate deductions. All that is suggested here is that such views are characteristic of a certain type of mind and state of culture, rather than of the universal consciousness of Christianity, and that it is by no mere arbitrary use of words that they are called mystical.

The presence of such ideas in the inspired books might reasonably be taken as giving permission to Christians to follow such lines of speculation for themselves, and it is not surprising to find that many Doctors of the Church

<sup>1</sup> Col. ii 12; Eph. iv 13.

<sup>2</sup> Gal. vi 17; Col. i 24.

<sup>3</sup> Eph. v 23.

have availed themselves of this permission. Mysticism, even in the sense that we are now employing it, is not another name for philosophy, though the territories of the two overlap to some extent; and the mere application of philosophy to Christian dogma such as was attempted by the great Alexandrian doctors and again by St Augustine, and later most strikingly by St Thomas Aquinas and the scholastics, is not necessarily mystical. Indeed, a supremely competent authority can declare that St Augustine was not a mystic—a striking example of the ambiguity of the term, for another equally competent historian of mysticism consecrates a third of a volume to St Augustine alone.<sup>1</sup> Thus neither the Logos teaching of St John, nor the introduction of the theory of relations into the theology of the Trinity, is in any sense mystical. The mystical element is found rather in such attempts, for the most part dangerous and unfruitful, as those of the Alexandrians to regard many doctrines and rites as bearing one interpretation for the many and another deeper one for the few, or in the tendency found continually in some religious thinkers to symbolize and allegorize all historical events of the Old and New Testaments, to minimize the significance of the Passion and death of our Lord, and to emphasize rather his rebirth and growth in every Christian soul. Such writers prefer to consider the events of our Lord's life as a symbol, writ large in characters which all the world could read, of the work done by the divine principle in the souls of all, rather than as decisive happenings in the course of the world's history, with an immediate and eternal effect upon it. As philosophers, they deny

<sup>1</sup> "It would be hardly justifiable to claim St Augustine as a mystic" (Inge, *op. cit.*, 128). "Augustine is for me the prince of Mystics" (Butler, *Western Mysticism*, 24).

reality to anything in space and time, and feel that by attributing to events and individuals an eternal and absolute significance they would be taking for direct action what is at most a faint reflection.

It is unnecessary to mention many names among those who have devoted themselves to this mysticism. In different ways, and without regarding for the moment their relative authority and orthodoxy, such varied minds as Origen, Eckhart, St Catherine of Genoa, Dame Julian of Norwich, the Cambridge Platonists, Jacob Boehme, and William Blake have endeavoured to draw out Christian truth and doctrine beyond the limits of revelation. It is of the essence of such mystical speculation that it is not concerned with the interpretation of concrete points of theology. What we may call legitimate development of doctrine, analysis of the *depositum fidei*, means nothing to it. The theology of the doctrine of our Lady's Immaculate Conception or of the Sacraments owes nothing to mystical theologians, nor are they directly concerned with metaphysics in the Aristotelian sense of the term. They are more concerned with the transcendental and the immanent, with the problems of evil and free will, of immortality and eschatology. Hence it is that the Church has often raised such mystical writers to her altars, but has rarely approved or absorbed their speculations into her general teaching, as she has absorbed much platonic and scholastic terminology and the whole of the ascetic scheme of St Teresa and St John of the Cross.

Most recently of all, many religious thinkers outside the Church have turned their attention to this aspect of mysticism. The attacks on dogmatic religion by higher criticism and post-Kantian philosophy have driven them to seek for a knowledge of God and the divine dispensations,

not in the body of revealed truth which Christianity claims to have been revealed by our Lord and handed down by tradition, but in the religious experience of themselves, their contemporaries, and certain select souls throughout the ages. They do not regard the mystics primarily as saints or as leaders, but as prophets of the religion of the spirit, "that autonomous faith which rests upon experience and individual inspiration."<sup>1</sup> Experience is to them everything; dogma is only valuable in so far as it echoes experience; mystics are those who have experienced. Mysticism—"the intuitive experience of absolute reality"<sup>2</sup>—supplies a record of man's contact with Reality, the Divine. Dogma gives in crystallized form what mysticism gives in solution and active. Mysticism is life; dogma is life petrified. Hence mysticism is studied for the evidence, the data that it supplies. It is useless to ask whether it is natural or supernatural; such terms mean nothing. This point of view, which is almost peculiar to Anglo-Saxon or Teutonic minds, has never been adequately considered by Catholic theologians. Its importance at the present day will not be questioned by any who are familiar with current religious literature.<sup>3</sup>

III. We have now to consider, in the third division, what we have called supernatural mysticism; and though

<sup>1</sup> Inge, *The Platonic Tradition in English Religious Thought*, p. 27.

<sup>2</sup> E. Underhill, art. "Mysticism" in *Encycl. Brit.*, 1926.

<sup>3</sup> This paragraph, I am fully conscious, gives a very inadequate account of an extremely influential phase of thought. It is difficult for one accustomed to think in terms of dogmatic religion to appreciate such an antagonistic view; moreover, its supporters frequently lack lucidity. I cannot help feeling that a deeper understanding of such opinions—I am far from suggesting an agreement with them—would be of the utmost value to Catholics in their endeavours to influence those outside the Church.

it would be both unreasonable and impossible to confine the word mysticism to this alone, yet it is with this that we shall be mainly, if not entirely, concerned in the pages which follow. Mysticism in this sense may be defined as the way of approach to God consequent upon a conviction that an immediate union between God and the soul is possible in this life. This conviction is by no means always present in persons sincerely religious. Just as there exist profound differences of outlook among theologians, so in the practical and personal religious life of the Jewish and Christian peoples a wide difference of sentiment has been noticed. On the one hand, God may be regarded as the supreme ruler and Lord of the universe and of the men within it. "The Lord is in heaven, and thou art on the earth." "Let them give praise to thy great name, for it is terrible and holy. . . . Exalt ye the Lord our God; and adore his footstool, for it is holy." Man lives in God's hand upon the earth; he must obey the divine commands because the Lord of hosts is omnipotent and terrible; if he trusts in the Lord all will be well; but the gulf between God and his creatures is so wide that no union between them is imagined: such a thing does not enter the mind. This position is characteristic of the Old Testament; but even after the Christian revelation and at the present day such an outlook is conceivable. It has, in fact, been the attitude of numberless sects outside the Catholic Church, and has made its appearance within the Church in lesser degree, notably in the years preceding the condemnation of Jansenism. In a modified form it is that of many believers. The world is looked upon as the vineyard to which our Lord so often likens it; men are set to labour in it under their taskmaster's eye, with certain bounds set around their lives; at the end



they pass into the unknown to receive their reward according to their works. To abandon the language of parable, there must be many of all ages who live their lives within the fold of the Catholic Church, who take part in her worship, receive her sacraments and hear the gospel of love preached, and yet regard God as a ruler or stern father rather than as a dear friend or lover, the Home from which they are exiled, the sole and eternal rest of their heart. Life is for them a probation in which they struggle to keep God's commandments; when this life ends they pass where all will be unfamiliar, but where faith tells them that there remains a rest for the people of God.

On the other hand, from very early days, even many centuries before Christ, another sentiment had grown up. The God who rode upon the tempest, whose voice was terrible even so as to shatter the cedars of Lebanon, who sent snow like ashes, who spoke in the mountain in cloud and thunder and trumpet-cry, was also the desired of the heart, the heart's portion for eternity, for the sight of whose face the psalmist yearned as the hart for the water-brooks. It is unnecessary to point out how this strand of love runs through the New Testament and culminates in the longing of St Paul to be dissolved and to be with Christ, from whose love neither length nor breadth nor things present nor things to come can separate him. It is, indeed, the hall-mark of Christianity, found wherever the Christian spirit is purest: in the liturgy of the catacombs; in St Augustine, whose heart was restless until it reposed in God; in St Thomas Aquinas; in the *Imitation of Christ*; in St Teresa, "undaunted daughter of desires," and in her namesake of Lisieux. We may doubt whether the other tendency is at all visible in those Catholics

who have had any claims to sanctity, but it is seen clearly enough among Puritans and Cameronians of the seventeenth century, who seem—for we dare say no more—to have had little conception of a personal union with God in love.

So far the matter is fairly clear, though in view of much that has been written it cannot perhaps be too strongly emphasized that there is no wide gulf separating these two tendencies, and that both in theory and in individual cases they shade off into one another. We have now to consider a far more controversial question. Many have discovered in the second of our two tendencies a form of mysticism. Such writers as Friedrich von Hügel and Inge are of this opinion,<sup>1</sup> and would rank the passages that have been quoted from the Psalms and St Paul as examples of the mystical element in religion, though with seeming inconsistency they deny the name of mystical to such books as the *Imitation of Christ*.<sup>2</sup> But unless we are to equate mysticism with love or "charity," it is hard to see how a longing to be with our Lord can be called mysticism. If all love of God is to be called mysticism, there would seem no valid reason for the word to exist or for the subject to be discussed.

But there is, surely, a further development than this in the Christian life. Natural and ordinary are treacherous words to use in religious matters, as they open up the great questions of grace; but, if it is permitted to use the words in their common meaning, we may say that such a personal love of God and of Christ as has been described

<sup>1</sup> Such, at least, is the broad impression I have received from reading their books.

<sup>2</sup> "The *Imitation* . . . is not, properly speaking, a mystical treatise," says Dean Inge, quite rightly (*Chr. Myst.*, 194).

is the natural consequence of our Lord's teaching and is found to a greater or less degree in all true Christians. What we do not find in all Christians is a conviction that while others believe and love and hope, they have seen and felt and known, in a way no less immediate and unerring—or rather far more so—than their ordinary sense-perceptions or rational deductions. St Paul, elsewhere in his epistles,<sup>1</sup> St Augustine,<sup>2</sup> St Catherine of Siena, Richard Rolle, and St Teresa, to name but a few, make this claim. In their different degree, they describe the circumstances that led them to this experience, and the way in which it was attained by themselves, and may be by others. For the moment it matters not whether they are concerned with a vision of truth or a sense of intimate relation with God; it is sufficient that something has passed between their soul and God so as to be immediately perceptible to the whole personality. This is certainly mysticism as understood by Catholic writers of all centuries, and this it is that we now have to examine more closely. Even here it is hard to define the limits exactly, though loose agreement is easily achieved. Parts of the *Confessions* of St Augustine, St Bernard's *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, the *Benjamin Minor* of Richard of St Victor, the *Cloud of Unknowing*, the writings of the two St Catherines and of St Teresa and St John of the Cross, are confessedly mystical; whereas the *Sermons* of St Leo, the *Imitation of Christ*, the *Introduction to the Devout Life* of St Francis de Sales are not. Unless we are to include all religious writers who speak with feeling of the personal love of our Lord, we shall surely need to restrict the title of mystic to those who describe, almost always from their own experience, a

<sup>1</sup> 2 Cor. xii 4.

<sup>2</sup> E.g., *Conf.*, ix 23.

quite extraordinary state of union with God in prayer. In other words, they are those contemplatives who have reached what is called the Passive Union or some equivalent experience, or to whom some special communication has been made. Whenever they become articulate, they appear as the adepts of a science or art, and their language is technical. They move on a plane of experience different from that of ordinary men, inexpressible in ordinary terms, and incomprehensible to ordinary persons. It is this technicality of language that distinguishes the religious mystic from the religious writer, and it may be taken as an unfailing negative test; that is to say, if a writer does not use this technical language we have no positive evidence that he is a mystic. The *Imitation of Christ* displays and appeals to a degree of sanctity that is little short of heroic, and it is probable that its author had himself attained to a high degree both of sanctity and of contemplative prayer; but his words are addressed to all and, in varying measure, go home to the hearts of all in whom the religious sense is at all developed. The same cannot be said of such a book as the *Theologia Mystica* of Dionysius. That is largely incomprehensible, and perhaps distasteful, to the majority even of holy souls, for the language is technical and the appeal narrow; but we have the evidence of a succession of saints approved by the Church that the words of Dionysius may be understood perfectly of an advanced degree of Christian contemplation.

Such, then, is Christian or Catholic mysticism. It is restricted in its appeal and uses a language of its own which is largely unintelligible even to the sympathetic or the saintly. Its end and distinguishing feature is what has been called the mystical experience; and here

again it is necessary to state as accurately as may be what we are to understand by a phrase susceptible of many different interpretations. Before we pass to this, however, it is worth noting that however clearly we realize the ambiguity of the word mysticism, it is hard to avoid verbal confusion, since no adequate substitute has yet been suggested to do duty for it. Attempts have recently been made by Catholic writers to substitute for religious mysticism the other traditional term "contemplation." Yet this is not without its drawbacks. On the one hand, there is a natural dislike of banishing "mysticism" altogether from the religious sphere which it possessed for so long alone. On the other hand, "contemplation" also is slightly ambiguous. The "contemplative life" of Aristotle and his successors, from whom the Church has borrowed the phrase, was not originally identical with a life of mystical prayer, and it is not clear that the scholastics always understood it in the mystical sense. On the whole, we shall probably do well to retain the term "mysticism," ambiguous though it be, hoping that the context will in every case make its meaning clear.

There lie outside the ranks of the classical mystics a number of otherwise unknown men and women whose abnormal mental adventures have been collected and published by psychologists and positivist students of religion. Few of them enrich the language or thought of mysticism, but they are not without importance, if only because a perusal of such recitals undoubtedly tends to cast discredit on the subject. It is hardly possible to resist a momentary feeling that the experiences of the saints are but a mere development of a sufficiently common, and often sordid or tawdry, mental state, akin

on the one hand to the manifestations of spiritism and insanity, and on the other to the enthusiasm of a "revival" in a Welsh mining village or of a negro baptism in the Southern States.

Those who wish to safeguard the reality of divine action upon the soul can remind themselves that these half-religious, half-psychological experiences are by no means common. The array of them in such a book as that of Professor Starbuck<sup>1</sup> is the outcome of years of diligent search by a specialist, and it is noteworthy that even specialists find it necessary to quote cases that have come under the experience of others many years before. Moreover, it would be a great mistake to trust implicitly that in every case the description corresponds accurately with the facts. Non-religious writers have always been ready to interpret or to discount the best attested records of sanctity; we, in our turn, may be allowed to suspend our judgement upon the truth and importance of an experience to which the sole witness is the subject of it. In the great majority of such cases, the character of the witness lends no support to his evidence, and for all we know he may have been influenced to a greater or less degree by previous reading, subsequent lapse of memory, a natural tendency to emphasize and transcendentalize ideas which were difficult of expression, and a natural desire to gain a hearing by magnifying the importance of his message. On examination, such a collection as that of William James will almost always appear a far less formidable rival of Catholic sanctity than was at first feared. Setting aside obviously morbid and vague narratives, in very many cases there is no need to suppose

<sup>1</sup> It was from Professor Starbuck that William James obtained many of his examples.

the action of any supernatural or even subliminal power. The description is merely one of an exceptionally keen emotion or non-discursive intellectual process. In other cases it is possible that old subconscious mental images are emerging into the field of direct consciousness. In others still, where the episode is followed by a change of life for the better, there would seem no reason to deny that the action of God's grace may be dimly perceived and felt all over the personality without postulating any distinctively mystical experience. In any case, there is nothing here that can touch the heights where St Teresa lives. A thousand exposures of disease, chicanery, and illusion cannot harm her.

“ Though all things foul would wear the brows of grace,  
Yet grace must still look so.”

## II

### THE MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE

**I**N the last chapter mysticism was considered from outside, as a particular phase or manifestation of religious thought. It may perhaps be well to pass over much of the same ground in a review that goes somewhat deeper and closer to the essence of the subject, to state as well as can be stated in a rapid survey what it is that the mystics perceive.

The most desirable end to any enquiry of this kind would undoubtedly be to arrive at some conclusion that would satisfy at once the Catholic theologian and the devout nun, the most acute non-Catholic theologian such as Dean Inge, the sympathetic Anglican student such as Miss Underhill, and the reasonable psychologist such as William James. Yet, attractive as this end must always seem, it is to be feared that a conclusion on the subject of mysticism which will satisfy all parties is unattainable, even in spite of the sympathetic attitude and sincere desire for agreement that now exists among students of religion and believers of every shade of faith. It is useless, and worse than useless, to deny that the widest differences of opinion exist on some of the most fundamental postulates of religion. Even though it may be true that no formal definition of the Church has ever been pronounced on the subject, no Catholic can approach mysticism without holding in his mind one fundamental truth of natural, and one of revealed religion. There



exists a personal God; and for any human act which is to please him so as to deserve eternal life, supernatural help, earned by the Passion of his Son, is needed. This question of the supernatural is, indeed, the touchstone, the shibboleth, which explicitly or implicitly divides into two parties all who write on the mystics.

The supernatural, as the word has just been used, does not imply the miraculous. For the moment there is no question of visions, voices, sensible favours, or the power of working signs and wonders. By the supernatural in Catholic theology is meant primarily all the assistance and every gift of intellect and will to which fallen human nature can lay no claim, but which redeemed human nature receives in greater and greater measure, as it proceeds from the first touch of grace that turns the soul to God to the final gift of the vision of God as he is in heaven. A Catholic is free to hold—though it would seem an indefensible position—that it is possible for unassisted human nature to attain to a merely natural and rational vision of God—that vision of him which would have been man's lot had he never been raised to the supernatural plane; but a Catholic is not free to hold that a man may of his own power make any step at all towards God as his supernatural end, still less that of his natural powers he can see God as he is.

Having made these introductory observations, we may put once more the great question suggested by the writings of the mystics. What is the peculiar perception enjoyed by those whom we have decided to call religious mystics? To this question various answers have been given, some explicit, but the greater number implicit, by all writers on mysticism. They may be reduced to four main headings, and it will be seen that in all of them there is

a clear prejudice either for or against the possibility of supernatural action on the soul.

I. The mystical experience, in so far as it means or deals with anything more than the purely subjective vision and emotions of a poet, a lover, and an artist, is hallucination or deceit. This view, though at the present day it would scarcely be defended by any competent student of the subject, is undoubtedly the unexpressed opinion of many. Now that a fairly broad-minded atmosphere surrounds all serious religious controversy, charges of deceit, at one time so common, are rare; but unbelievers and psychologists whose researches have been almost entirely experimental are still apt to reduce all mystical phenomena to the category of hysteria.

Catholics who reflect at all realize at once that such a view is against all the traditional teaching of the Church on the developments of the spiritual life; non-Catholics realize also, more clearly from year to year, that figures of such moral and intellectual sublimity as St John of the Cross or St Catherine of Siena cannot lightly be called knaves, lunatics, or even morbid subjects. The moral stature of the saints remains to challenge such a diagnosis. The cases under observation at the present time are almost always those of totally morbid and insignificant characters. The great mystical saints are men and women of extreme capability, sanity and moral excellence. Even if the symptoms appear the same in both, the moral worth of the saint and his achievement of labour puts the morbid element into an entirely different relation to his total personality. Whether the strange illness of St Teresa's early life was sent directly from the Lord of life and death, or was the reaction from, or penalty paid for, her great moral activities, cannot easily be decided; but

at least we can say that it was not the basis or origin of her sanctity. Figs cannot come from thistles; the greater cannot be caused by the infinitely less. If the mystic experience, with its consequent purity of heart, is the result of disease, we must change our idea of what is morbid and what sound.

II. The mystical experience is purely natural, but is a præter-rational and possibly supra-rational means of acquiring a knowledge of Being. There exists behind the sensible phenomena of the universe a great sum of Reality, the Absolute—God, if you will. Just as we can gain a knowledge of some part of reality by means of ratiocination, and of God by arguments of analogy from creation, so certain gifted minds can attain to glimpses of reality by a kind of intuitive vision which is apparently preceded and accompanied by no activity of the intelligence. Such an intuition cannot be comprehended within any definition or form of words; words and dogmas are but faint guesses at the truth; only a poet, an artist, and above all a musician can hold some of this fleeting vision and translate it for the less fortunate. Many of the greatest musicians have, in fact, made this claim for themselves, and Browning has put into the mouth of a composer the familiar line:

“ Let others reason and welcome; 'tis we musicians *know*.”

Such an opinion, as is clear, has a bearing on æsthetics no less than on mysticism. It at once explains and gives an extreme value to art, which it raises to a level with metaphysics. It is naturally contested vehemently by all whose philosophical position, either as materialists or sceptics, leaves no place in the universe for spiritual reality. As a mere theory of art, there does not seem to

be any valid objection that should prevent a Christian from adopting it, though it is hard to find a place for such intuition in the scholastic philosophy of the process of cognition. Only when it is proposed to extend it to the whole field of religious mysticism does it require a closer consideration.

Religious mysticism, on this showing, would be merely a department of a much wider subject. It would have no essential connection with "grace" or "charity"—that is, with the supernatural life of Christians. It would be, as indeed many non-Catholic writers have supposed it to be, a faculty strictly analogous to the poetic or artistic faculty, no more the result of effort or training than that which we call "ear" in music—that strange gift which many persons, although highly endowed in intellect, do not possess at all, and which others have in an exquisite degree of perfection. Similarly the mystical faculty, like the psychic faculty of spiritualism, would be found in some personalities and not in others, in greater degree in some than in others, and with no dependence upon religious opinions, save that, as of its nature it is connected with suprasensible reality, either immanent or transcendent, it postulates in the subject an interest in such things. Expressed in terms of Christian theology, it would be considered as the faculty of apprehending God by intuition, though in a finite manner—that is to say, not as he is. Just as the unaided human reason can be forced to realize his existence and attributes by a series of logical processes, so the mystic would come to the same realization by a kind of intuition which resembles experience, without any discursive process of the active intelligence. Being a perfectly natural operation it would not be the monopoly of Catholics or Christians, nor would

it have any necessary connection with sanctity. Hence some saints, as St John of the Cross, would possess it in an eminent degree of perfection, while it would be almost entirely absent from others. On this theory, growth in sanctity would bear no direct relation to mysticism.

This opinion, with insignificant differences of detail, is held by a large number of those who have given some thought to the question. It is an attractive theory, for, while possibly safeguarding the supernatural life of grace, it offers a clear explanation of the occurrence of seemingly identical experiences of the Divine in the lives and writings of men widely sundered by dogmatic differences. In so far as it gives a value to art and "nature mysticism" it may well be assumed as a working hypothesis. Unfortunately, it has become very common to regard the saints merely as specialists in a particular branch of human activity, as admirable, indeed, but no more so than a Shakespeare or a Faraday. The impression is given that they stand to ordinary men and women as Beethoven and Mozart to the concert-goer, worthy of gratitude, even of awe, but whom it would be worse than senseless to imitate. Tolerable enough when words are being loosely used, such an attitude becomes intolerable to a Christian if carefully analyzed. A saint is made and not born, and in his growth the vast forces of grace and free will have a tremendous, if imponderable, part.

III. According to others, the mystical experience can be criticized without any excursions into the realm of metaphysics. It is merely the emergence into the light of consciousness of a hidden personality, the subliminal self, either through a supreme effort of concentration or by some accident.

Now if by this is meant that the unions with God

described by the saints take place on a deeper level of the personality than mere surface consciousness, there is no difficulty in admitting it, though it will not materially advance the enquiry. But as usually put forward, this opinion stands for a purely naturalistic interpretation of mysticism, and would submit a St Teresa to the analysis of an experimental psychologist. Here it would contradict the deepest convictions and sentiments of Christianity. The great popularizer of the subconscious self was William James, and the series of lectures expounding his views have reached a wide audience and have exerted immense influence.<sup>1</sup> At the present day, perhaps, his theories command less support than they did a decade since. Unless the powers of the subliminal self are altogether insignificant, they must in some respects be superior to those of the normal or waking consciousness. Yet there would seem to be very great difficulties in the way of attributing to a self which is normally without will or voice powers greater than those possessed by the acting and responsible man. What test can the normal self formulate that will provide a criterion of the findings of the subconscious self? On the Christian hypothesis, the reason, both of the mystic and others, can appraise the credibility of supernatural experiences, and once granting the existence of God, there is no absurdity in supposing that he who created the intellect can satisfy it by means exceeding the grasp of reason. On a hypothesis that does not admit of the existence of a Creator who sustains his creatures and is present in every part of his creation, it is hard to see what criterion can supersede the reflex action of the reason. Moreover, such a theory implies that the greatest mystics were deceived

<sup>1</sup> *Varieties of Religious Experience*. See Bibliography.

in very important matters. St Teresa, and a host of others, would have gone to the stake sooner than admit that they had not in a very real way established relations with a divine personality. If we are to dismiss this as illusion, we must have good reasons for doing so. It does not seem altogether logical to accept these saints as the clearest witnesses to the unknown, while we reject, tacitly or openly, some of their deepest convictions.

IV. There remains the normal Catholic view which, in spite of controversy on points of detail, is taught in theory and practice by theologians and directors throughout the world to-day, and which has been extracted as a system from the writings of holy souls throughout the Christian ages. It may be put briefly as follows:

The God who is the object of our love and service is invisible to our senses and incomprehensible to our intellect. All our knowledge of him is derived from a process of abstraction and reasoning either from what we know of his creatures or from what he himself has revealed to us of himself—that is, in the light of unassisted reason or of reason aided by faith. When we pray to God, we direct our minds to a personality represented in our minds by a very complex concept or idea, the work of our reason and imagination working upon the material supplied by senses and imagination. We certainly believe, as Christians, that we have received supernatural habits and capabilities by the gifts of the Holy Ghost, and that we are constantly receiving sufficient supernatural grace or assistance to give our actions merit to eternal life, but we do not immediately perceive our reception of this grace any more than we immediately perceive the existence of God.

In heaven, on the other hand, we shall see God as he

is, and his action upon our souls will be felt immediately. Between this condition and that in which we live here below, there is clearly room for many intermediate states, such, for instance, as was that of the angelic intelligences during their time of trial, and it is the common view of Catholic theologians that mystics—that is, those expert in contemplative prayer—have in some part gone forward towards the Beatific Vision. Their finite concept of God, purified from association with creatures and simplified as far as may be, has in some degree given place to an apprehension of God, not yet seen as he is in the Beatific Vision, but yet approaching to that Vision. Their realization of God's action on the soul is no longer the work of a reasoned process starting from the truths of revelation; they perceive it immediately, so that it seems to them that he alone is acting and that they and their will are altogether passive. Hence the name of Passive Union has been given to some moments of contemplative prayer. Very often, alternatively, God may act directly on the intellect—that is, without any precedent activity of senses or imagination—and infuse new knowledge of supernatural truth, either contained in ordinary revelation or not.

The mystical experience, therefore, is a development of the action of grace. It is a *gratia gratum faciens*, a grace ordained by God for the further sanctification of the soul, and indeed the great mystics are unanimous in maintaining that the mystical experience purifies the soul more than years of mortification could do. It takes place only in a soul at peace with God and, ordinarily speaking, advanced in holiness, but mystics and theologians reiterate that the ultimate criterion of a soul's worth before God is not the degree of mystical favour received, but the



degree of charity inherent in the soul, and that the charity of one who is not a contemplative may be greater than the charity of a mystic.<sup>1</sup> It is entirely supernatural, though not necessarily miraculous, and is a growth, whether ordinary or extraordinary, of the normal supernatural life present, at least in germ, in every soul in a state of grace. Thus the only true mystics, in the Catholic sense of the word, belong to the Church of Christ, though they may well belong to the soul, and not to the body, of that Church. The hand of the Lord is not straitened, that he should not save, and just as we can never say that a particular soul within the visible Church has greater charity than one without, so we have no reason to suppose that the favours of contemplative prayer may not be given to those of good will who are ordained to die outside the pale of the visible Church.

If this is the true account of the mystical experience, we shall not be wrong in regarding it as in some sense the crown of the spiritual life, and as we shall be concerned with writings which assume in the reader a knowledge of Catholic spirituality, it may be well to give in brief outline the degrees of this life of perfection as they are described, with a striking agreement, by many mystical saints, and in particular by St John of the Cross, whom the Church has recently joined to the company of her Doctors. These degrees may vary to some extent in various temperaments; they may be almost obscured by accidental differences or greatly abbreviated by the special action of grace, but their main characteristics are visible in almost all religious mystics, and will be found present in some degree of clearness in the mystics who form the subject of our review.

<sup>1</sup> So, *e.g.*, Père de la Taille, *Contemplative Prayer*, p. 11.

The soul at her entrance upon a spiritual course ordinarily begins by making use of vocal prayer and meditation upon the truths of religion, together with certain practices of mortification and a regular life. The end of all meditation and vocal prayer is to produce an internal raising of the mind and heart to God—in other words, mental prayer or acts of the will. These, as the soul advances in self-abandonment, detachment from creatures, and love of God, become gradually purer, until they reach such a degree of ease and depth as to flow almost continually and unconsciously from the mind and heart. So far the prayer has not passed beyond a degree of purity and fervour reached at moments by all sincere Christians.

The next stage is that called by St John the “prayer of loving attention,” and it is in part described by the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* and by Father Baker. Here the imagination and the senses are inactive, and the concept of the mind has necessarily lost in distinctness. Even the motions of the will are imperceptible, and the soul is apt to think herself idle or distracted in prayer, though she is, in fact, in a far higher degree of activity than before, with her whole will absorbed in repelling every image and affection of creatures, that she may arrive at the Creator. This is the “prayer of simplicity” which has of late years become familiar in name at least from the writings of Père Poulain,<sup>1</sup> and round which a considerable controversy is at present proceeding among theologians, who are debating whether it is to be called “acquired” or “infused” contemplation, “ordinary” or “extraordinary” prayer. It is, at least, certain that it is a degree within the reach of and lawfully to be aimed at by any soul seriously

<sup>1</sup> Especially his great work, *The Graces of Interior Prayer*.

striving towards perfection in the spiritual life. It is in this degree of prayer, in its higher stages, that there usually occurs what St John has called the Dark Night of the Senses, when the soul, shut off from the world of the senses and imagination and as yet unaccustomed to the light of contemplation, is in a painful darkness of mind, which is in reality an excess of light.

After this degree we enter for certain upon the territory of the mystic. The prayer of simplicity, in its various forms, is the highest that can be attained by the efforts of a soul assisted by "ordinary" grace, and is, in fact, the highest attained in this life by the vast majority of holy souls, and even perhaps by some of heroic sanctity. What follows is God's free gift and favour in a more special sense, in that it is not, *de facto*, the usual and proportionate outcome of what has gone before.

In the Passive Union, the most typical feature of "infused" contemplation, the bonds which join the inmost soul to the discursive intelligence and senses are loosed, and God speaks directly to the soul, which is immediately aware of his presence and message and action. This, in its highest form, is the intellectual union of Father Baker. In the intellectual order it results in a new and altogether unassailable conviction of the truths of religion, and often in a fuller comprehension of them. In the moral order, its results are even more striking. A moment's touch of God's finger in this way, we are told, is of more value to kill self-will than a lifetime of active renunciation. After this union others may, and commonly do, follow if the soul is faithful; but in the intervals she must, of course, rely upon active prayer and mortification. It is usually at this period in the spiritual growth that there comes what St John calls the Dark Night of the

Soul, which appears to be the same as Father Baker's Great Desolation. Here the soul, by some mysterious working of grace, is stripped of the last vestige of self-love. Mystics themselves compare this desolation to that endured by our Lord on the Cross, and try to explain it by saying that God seems to hide himself, not only as in aridity and the Night of the Senses, from the imagination and emotions, but from every power of the soul, so that she is left to feel the weight of her weakness, her sinfulness, her rebellious instincts—in a word, her nothingness—without any sense of an all-powerful, all-merciful, and loving God to whom she can turn. So terrible is the suffering of this state, which may continue for months or years, that some souls, even after the great favours they have received, fall away and turn for comfort to the senses and the affections.

When this state, the division between the proficient and the perfect, is passed, the soul is near to the degree known to St Teresa as the Spiritual Marriage, and to Richard Rolle,<sup>1</sup> perhaps, as the state of perfection where a fall is actually, though not potentially, impossible, where she is entirely given to God and has, in a sense, begun the life of the Blessed. She can advance to no further degree in this life.

In this summary no account has been taken of features which to many seem intimately associated with the experience of mystical prayer. The writings and biographies of the mystical saints are full of what have been somewhat cumbrously called the psycho-physical concomitants of mysticism. These include, besides what are usually known as visions and auditions, such phenomena as trance, bodily ecstasy, and all abnormal illnesses, such as

<sup>1</sup> See below, p. 86.

occurred so frequently in the lives of St Teresa and St Catherine of Genoa. Most readers cannot avoid questioning themselves how far these are supernatural and how far purely natural. They are, indeed, another prominent rock in that great reef, the problem of the supernatural, through which all who approach mysticism must navigate as best they may; but the winds and currents are peculiarly dangerous here, and no adequate chart has yet been made of the channel. Here, fortunately, there is no need to go deeply into the subject. All the great mystical authorities, and pre-eminently St John of the Cross, are agreed that the essence of contemplation does not consist in these things, but in the vision of God in the light of faith. On the other hand, it is impossible to reduce all these phenomena to a merely natural level. Long meditation on a fixed idea, a keen sense of the existence of the divine or the absolute, an inability to recognize the uprush of a subliminal self, hypnotic and dream phenomena—all these may serve as partial or occasional explanations, but they cannot be used as *a priori* arguments to dispute the possibility of supernatural communication through the senses or the imagination. The angelic visitations of the New Testament will at once occur to the mind as against such views, and a few modern apparitions, in particular those of our Lady to Bernadette at Lourdes, rest upon such a firm basis of evidence and have been followed by consequences so important, that an assertion of their authenticity and supernatural origin would seem to be the duty of all loyal children of the Church. But apart from these rare cases, which have the guarantee in practice of the highest ecclesiastical authority, we are free, with all due reverence, to accept, to explain, and to criticize as best we may.

A judgement, in the last resort, must be based on the moral and intellectual character of the subject, and on the content, circumstances, and consequences of the alleged communication. Such a judgement will naturally be particular and personal. Where evidence is lacking or has disappeared, the case must be left as an unsolved problem. With the English mystics, as we shall see, such phenomena are not general, but they exist in the case of Dame Julian, and in a less degree of Richard Rolle.

One more point remains to be discussed before we leave these concomitants of mysticism. Perhaps nothing so distinguishes religious writers and critics of to-day from those of previous centuries as their respective attitudes towards alleged intrusions of a diabolical agency into the sphere of spiritual experience. Catholic mysticism of past ages has sometimes been accused of being little more than a record and catalogue of grossly material combats with the powers of darkness.<sup>1</sup> A glance at the history of the more earnest branches of Protestantism both in this country and abroad—and in particular among the Covenanters and the Quakers—will show an equally strong sense of the continual presence of the Enemy in the tabernacles of the just. Such visitations are unquestionably distasteful to modern sentiment, whether within the Church or without. In an age when the resources of civilized life are available over a large proportion of the globe, and when vast distances are no barrier to the passage of messages transacting financial business or conveying opera music, we like to think that the clear light of human reason has scattered all lingering darkness and terror.

Certainly it would be unwise, as well as distasteful,

<sup>1</sup> See especially Inge, *Christian Mysticism*, Introduction.

to over-emphasize the local, almost material action of evil spirits to a modern audience, just as it would be unwise to preach to a general congregation a sermon on Hell with a medieval wealth of detail; but personal agencies of evil must remain an integral part of the Christian outlook. The Christian is pledged to a belief in their existence and activity against Christ's members, and here once more we must take our stand apart from those who disagree with us. While we desire to minimize as far as possible the part played by diabolical visitation in the spiritual life for the same reasons that make us desire to limit the visionary element, we cannot escape admitting that some of the most balanced mystical writers have experienced such attacks. The great name of St Teresa comes immediately to the mind, and we shall see that one of the English mystics, Dame Julian, had a like experience.





## PART II

### I

#### THE EPOCH OF THE MYSTICS

**B**EFORE we enter upon a detailed consideration of the English medieval mystics, it may not be out of place to review in brief the times in which they lived and the influences at work in the world about them. The spiritual writers whom it is proposed to discuss are five in number : the author of the *Ancren Riwele* (circa 1200), Richard Rolle (1290-1349), the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* (circa 1350), Dame Julian of Norwich (1342-1413), and Walter Hilton (1330-1396). These, together with a few others of their school, complete the list of English mystical writers before the Reformation whose works are accessible at the present day, and it is worth remarking that all, with the unimportant exception of the author of the *Ancren Riwele*, lived and wrote in the fourteenth century. When we remember that within this century, or upon its outskirts, lived Eckhart († 1327), Tauler († 1361), Bl. Henry Suso († 1366), Ruysbroeck († 1381), St Mechtilde of Hackeborn († 1298), St Gertrude the Great († 1302), St Bridget of Sweden († 1373), Bl. Angela of Foligno († 1309), St Catherine of Siena († 1380), and Gerson († 1429), and that Thomas à Kempis was born about the year that St Catherine died, we cannot avoid pausing for a moment to wonder if it is possible to give any plausible reason for this rich blossoming of mystical life.

In answering this question, those who maintain that the practice—as opposed to the description—of mystical prayer is nothing more than a development of the Christian life preached by our Lord in the Gospels, will differ from those who hold a genius for mystical experience to be a psychological gift comparable to a genius for painting, sculpture, or music. The latter may search for causes of the prevalence of mysticism in the fourteenth century, as they would search for the causes of the development of painting in North Italy, or of the birth of English Elizabethan literature, though indeed the ultimate causes of such peculiar and unparalleled achievements of the human mind lie deeper than we can at present pierce. We who take the other view of mysticism will not readily admit that any of the Christian centuries or countries are without a multitude of contemplatives whom no man can number, in religion or out of it, though it may well be that at some epochs of history many, or most, of them have remained silent and unknown. Still, there remains even for those who hold this opinion the further problem as to why at certain periods, such as the fourteenth century, and again in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth, so many contemplatives should have left us records of their experience and instructions in their practice.

It is somewhat tempting to say—and it has often been said—that a wave of mystical expression comes over the world immediately after an epoch of scientific progress. Thus the mystical fourteenth century succeeded the scholastic and legalistic thirteenth; the mysticism of St Teresa, Boehme, and the English Quakers followed a period of controversial theology, during which a vast territory of hitherto uncultivated land had been fenced by dogmatic formulas and new canons and rubrics; and

finally, the cult of mysticism in our own day is consequent upon an era of scientific method and discovery in the world at large, and of criticism and research in the world of religion and ethics. Such a theory as this is tempting, as are many sweeping generalizations in the philosophy of history; it is probably true, in so far as an age of precise and strictly scientific thought both gives birth to a reaction tending to lay emphasis on other mental processes and forges the weapons for such a reaction to use; but it cannot be taken as a complete explanation. Leaving aside for a moment medieval mysticism, the mysticism of the counter-Reformation was little more than one department of the general religious awakening of the times, and the modern interest in mysticism, which is not distinguished by any great practising mystics, is only one among the myriad interests and fashions of the modern world. Moreover, the supporters of this theory would rank together as mystics such varying types as Eckhart and Hilton, Donne and St John of the Cross, Wordsworth, Browning, and Charles de Foucauld; and thus, as we have seen, the issue as to what mysticism really is becomes confused. In estimating the claims of any given epoch to be mystical, we should surely separate those who claim mystical experiences for themselves from those who describe the experiences of others.

Yet when all has been said, the list of mystical writers given at the beginning of this chapter is so imposing when compared with that furnished by most other centuries, that it is hard not to wish for an explanation, and perhaps a partial one may be found in the following considerations:

From about the middle of the eleventh century a stirring of life had been taking place in Europe. This stirring was the first movement towards an intellectual coming of

age among the new peoples of the North who had swept across the ruins of the Roman Empire six centuries before. It continued without perceptible slackening for more than four centuries, and when it ceased medieval times had given place to modern. In its later stages this movement became what is known as the Renaissance, or the rediscovery of the wisdom and beauty of the ancient world. Unfortunately, the characteristics of this Renaissance were so marked, and it was followed so soon by the cataclysm of the Reformation, that there has been a tendency, especially in England and Protestant Germany and post-Revolutionary France, to ignore the fact that both Renaissance and Reformation were mere incidents in a gradual coming of age, and to consider everything before the Italian Renaissance as medieval, totally opposed in spirit to all that came after it. This tendency of thought is doubtless decreasing; but English historical consciousness is still so possessed with the idea that the Reformation is an event round which history revolves, so saturated with the tradition of writers such as Froude, Macaulay, Carlyle, Acton, Ranke, and Gregorovius, so influenced by writers of another order such as J. A. Symonds, Walter Pater, Robert Browning, and Swinburne, so moulded by the great classical training of the public schools and universities, that the wisdom and achievements of the Middle Ages appear as those of a civilization totally different from that of modern Europe or ancient Rome.

Nor is this view of history at all combated by the large number of thinkers who, in protest against the religious or economic or artistic views of the last century, have stressed the contrast between the nineteenth and fourteenth centuries to the advantage of the latter. Modern Catholic apologists for scholasticism, supporters of the

guild system of labour or the work of master-craftsmen, romanticists such as Scott, admirers of Gothic architecture such as Ruskin, have all, by emphasizing the difference between pre-Reformation and post-Reformation times, obscured the unity that lies behind European history. In no department of human life is this unity so apparent as in the history of religious thought, and the point is worth making at some length because it bears very directly on the attitude we adopt to the medieval mystics. There is nothing childish or primitive about their view of life, nor does their spirituality or even their method of prayer differ greatly from that of the great saints of the counter-Reformation. They are the children of a highly organized and developed system, which was now for the first time attaining a measure of self-expression.

To denote this period of awakening, the cumbrous but useful name of proto-Renaissance or first Renaissance has been devised. This proto-Renaissance may be reckoned as beginning at the height of the Norman power with Romanesque architecture and the Crusades; these are followed by the stirring of life in the Church, the growth of the Cistercians under the inspiration of the first religious genius of the modern world, and the foundation of the friars by the first European romanticist. The religious orders are followed by the great theologians, Albertus Magnus, St Bonaventure, St Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus, and together with them comes the miracle of Gothic architecture. In Italy, where the degrees of this proto-Renaissance, as also of the later classical Renaissance, are more clearly cut, we can trace the movement without a break for four centuries, from St Francis, St Thomas, Dante, Giotto, and Petrarch to Fra Angelico,

Aldus Manutius, Raphael, Bramante, and Michelangelo. In France, England, and Germany, the proto-Renaissance, arriving late, moved more slowly; but the Cistercian abbeys, the cathedrals and friaries and great universities, were succeeded on the one hand by the first birth of living literature in the old French fabliaux and romans and the Ballades of Villon, and on the other by the outbreak of mystical and religious literature, not only or even supremely in the carols and moralities and mass-books, but in the far greater mystics, who must rank with Gothic architecture and scholastic theology as the supreme and final product of the age.

This view of the Middle Ages, if correct, would suggest that the religious writings which came in such depth and abundance during the fourteenth century were due to the coming of a fresh spring to Europe. The young peoples of the North had felt the influence of the Church for six centuries, but only now had her civilization made them for the first time articulate, and it was natural that the early attempts at self-expression should be directed towards interpreting the spirit which had given them life. It may not be wrong to consider Gothic architecture, scholastic theology, and medieval mysticism as three of these attempts.

The considerations put forward above have been intended as an explanation of the appearance of such fully developed writers on religion all over the Continent. It remains to say a few words about the peculiar circumstances of contemporary England, and here again we must note that many are inclined to exaggerate the savagery and incoherence of English medieval history. Some general causes for this tendency have already been suggested, but there are some particular reasons affecting

England alone. There is, first, the sudden emergence of the country out of chaos into the world of religious and imperial politics under the early Tudors. This has had the effect of throwing all before the Tudors into very deep shadow. Next, the incoherence of political history under the Plantagenets and Lancastrians, caused by barons' revolts, incompetent kings, pestilences, and sporadic French and civil wars, makes it hard for the reader to grasp the unity and continuity that lies beneath. Finally, this incoherence is thrown into strong relief by the usual and perhaps inevitable treatment of English history by reigns and dynasties, and by the lack of any primary and contemporary authorities who viewed any part of the period as a whole. This last reason, added to a revulsion among modern critical historians from the picturesque school of the pre-Acton period, has tended to make many modern works—even such able narratives as those of Sir James Ramsay—little more than a cento of facts gleaned from pipe rolls, wills, chronicles, parliamentary lists, and wardrobe accounts. Thus it has happened that the history of literature and of architecture is almost entirely divorced from that of politics and economics in modern books dealing with the English Middle Ages, and many educated Englishmen would probably find some difficulty in bringing the French wars of Edward III into relation with the *Canterbury Tales*, Dame Julian's *Revelations*, and Winchester Cathedral; whereas Shakespeare, Hooker's *Ecclesiastical Polity*, and Longleat House would form part of any general impression of the reign of Elizabeth. In the pages which immediately follow, it is intended to outline the condition of fourteenth-century England by giving, after some general remarks, a short sketch of the political, artistic, literary, and religious setting of the times.

The century of the mystics was one in which developments of great importance were taking place in England. On the one hand, the sense of nationality was growing. The fusion of races, Norman and Saxon, had now produced a single people, and English rather than French was becoming the language, not only of the national literature, but also of much official business. English valour, too, and the English long-bow were being contrasted with the French and becoming the objects of pride to Englishmen in almost the same way as English seamanship was contrasted with Spanish at the time of the Armada and again with French in the days of Benbow and Nelson. The English universities of Oxford and Cambridge yielded to few in Europe. English architecture had broken away from that of Northern France and had produced a new variety of style. English literature, as opposed to the old Anglo-Saxon, had produced a great poet and several lesser ones.

On the other hand, at least till the Black Death, the contact with the Continent was still fairly close, owing partly to the maintenance of English interests in France and partly to English relations with the Holy See. The reader of Chaucer's *Prologue* will have been struck with the amount of foreign travel indulged in by so many of the characters, of high and low degree alike. The Knight has passed over most of the Mediterranean and Baltic lands on war, and has been followed by his Squire and Yeoman. The Shipman knows all waters from the Baltic to Portugal; the Wife of Bath has been to Compostella and Cologne, and no less than three times to the Holy Land; the Pardoner has been to Rome and doubtless to many other foreign shrines. Nor will readers of Chaucer have failed to notice how the poet stands in the European



tradition, not only by his frequent visits to France and his visit to Italy, but by his familiarity with the continental literature of the last century, with the French romances and with the works of Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch. In other respects, too, the contact with Europe was close. Two of the greatest scholastics, Duns Scotus and Alexander of Hales, were British, and if the English colony in Paris was large—and we shall see that Richard Rolle has been claimed as an alumnus by the Sorbonne<sup>1</sup>—so too was the colony of foreign students at Oxford and Cambridge, and it will be remembered that Dante certainly, and St. Thomas possibly, visited England.

But it will be said that, in spite of this commerce of travel and ideas, conditions of life in England were still extremely primitive, if not actually savage. It cannot, indeed, be denied that medieval life was in many respects near to barbarism; the almost complete lack of domestic comforts in even the great baronial houses, the general lawlessness, the lack of organization and control in any of the public services, the evil state of communications are commonplaces in every description of Plantagenet life. Yet it must be remembered that these things affect little more than the surface of life. They are the obvious differences between periods of history, as the presence of the railway, the petrol-driven vehicle, the electric light, and the telegraph is the obvious difference between our day and that of Napoleon. They are the obvious differences, and as such attract the attention of every reader on account of their picturesqueness. What is perhaps the best-known work on medieval manners, M. Jusserand's excellent *English Wayfaring Life*, is concerned with little else; but, brilliant and accurate as such a book may be,

<sup>1</sup> Dom Noetinger in the *Month*, January, 1926.

its readers must remember that there is very much else for them to be concerned with if they would form a just estimate of the mental outlook of the English mystics. If M. Jusserand, or the *Paston Letters*, or even Chaucer's *Tales* exhibit the extraordinary poverty of mechanical knowledge and practical resource in the Middle Ages, a glance at the spire of Salisbury Cathedral will remind us that, even from the purely material aspect, its builders must have been very far from resourceless; and a consideration of the medieval churches of England, rising in every hamlet from Northumberland and Norfolk to Radnor and Devon, so numerous that they sufficed for a growing population until the days of our grandfathers, so spacious that even now, if redistributed and eked out by the vanished religious houses, they would probably suffice for the religious needs of the country—one who considers all this will probably feel that the medieval village had much of art and spirituality, to compensate for the lack of elementary schools and motor-coaches.

When Richard Rolle, the earliest of the great mystical writers, was born, the long reign of the great king Edward I was drawing to a close. This king had won Wales for the English Crown, had kept a firm hand upon the powerful barons, had given to England a series of laws covering almost every department of social life, and had set up a model for the composition of future parliaments by the assembly of 1295. The opposition of the barons, and their divisions, which were to develop into the antagonism of York and Lancaster, continued throughout the reign of Edward II (1307-1327), and the hope of conquering Scotland was finally ruined by the disaster of Bannockburn. The long reign of Edward III (1327-1377) was

marked by several events that had a lasting effect on English history. The Black Death, which appeared in England first in 1348, and recurred in 1361 and 1369, not only carried off between a half and a third of the whole population (Richard Rolle was probably among the victims), but did much to hasten the change from feudalism to tenantry in England. Beyond this, it gave to the Church, in the persons of the clergy, regular and secular, a blow from which the monastic and mendicant orders never thoroughly recovered, and it sowed the seeds of the discontent which ripened into the Peasants' Revolt and the novel teaching of Wyclif.

In 1337 began the Hundred Years' War, which lasted with few intermissions till 1453. The original cause of the war was the desire of Edward III to keep the French possessions of the English Crown against the growing power and national feeling of France, but in the course of the struggle the claim of the kings of England to the throne of France was put in the foreground, and caused a prolongation of the contest in spite of the most advantageous French offers. The war was on the whole popular in England, and the English successes in the famous battles doubtless had a good general effect on the growing national consciousness, and certainly for a brief period in Henry V's reign made England renowned all over Europe; but the continual warfare had also a debasing effect on all engaged in it; it distracted several able kings from English affairs, and by creating a belt of ruin in Northern France helped to isolate England from the rest of Europe at the beginning of the fifteenth century. Dame Julian and Hilton lived beyond the reign of Edward III into that of Richard II, marked by the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 and the baronial intrigues which followed it; but as the works

of neither bear any impress of these events, it is unnecessary to follow them any further.

In the realm of letters, the fourteenth century is important as witnessing the rise of vernacular English to its position as the literary language of the country. From this point of view alone the English mystics would repay a more general study from the ordinary reader than they have yet received. Rolle justly occupies an important place in all histories of English literature, though rather on account of his ascetical poems in English than of his specifically mystical writings, which, for the most part, were composed in Latin; but the *Cloud*, Dame Julian, and Hilton, even in modernized dress, show a capability of this language to express shades of feeling and earnest persuasiveness for which it does not always get credit. Langland's poems, Wyclif's works, and the later *Paston Letters* have found many readers, but it may be doubted whether any of them surpass the mystics in literary interest. The *Piers Plowman* of Langland (1332-1400), just referred to, and the *Tales* of Chaucer (1340-1400) are too well-known to need description. We should go to them, rather than to any description of social or political England, if we would see our countrymen of the fourteenth century as they were. It must always remain something of a problem, not yet thoroughly solved, why the fifteenth century remained a century of silence after such a beginning, when a bailiff, a merchant, a hermit, and an anchoress could express their thoughts so eloquently.

But the greatest artistic achievement of the century was not in the realm of poetry or pure literature, but in that of architecture and the applied arts of design. Gothic architecture in England had its beginning towards the end of the twelfth century. The nave of Wells Cathedral

(*circa* 1175) is one of the earliest examples. During the thirteenth century the English style developed on similar lines to that of Northern France. This first period of Gothic architecture is usually known as the Early English, and it reached the height of its perfection in such masterpieces as Salisbury Cathedral (1272) and the Angel Choir at Lincoln (1260–1280). With the beginning of our century a change came, and the Decorated period began (1310–1370). In this the stonework became lighter and the design more free; the windows increased in size and carried more tracery, and every part of the building was ornamented with small and delicate carving. This was the typical architecture of the England of the mystics, and it may be worth while to review briefly a few of the most outstanding buildings which were being executed in the lifetime of Richard Rolle and Dame Julian.

At Salisbury, where the cathedral had been standing complete, but with a low tower, for fifty years, the tower and spire were built (1320–1330) which now dominate every view of the city, and which, more than any other monument of medieval times, seem to rise from the earth in their grace and their beauty and to take the mind with them to a city not made with hands. At Ely the Lady Chapel, now cold, white, and broken, was begun in 1321 and remains the loveliest memorial of the delicate craftsmen and designers in the summer of Decorated Gothic. A year after the Lady Chapel was begun at Ely the central tower fell and was replaced by the marvellous octagon of Alan of Walsingham. At Wells the central tower was built in 1321, and from 1326 onwards the retrochoir and Lady Chapel were springing up, in stonework which loses its rigidity and becomes alive here as nowhere else. Norwich received its stone spire soon after 1361—Dame

Julian may have seen it—and Chichester in its turn a spire in 1370. When we remember that Lichfield also was given its first spire about this time, this may well seem to be a century of spires.

All these works belong to Decorated Gothic, but in our century English architects and masons were elaborating a style of building as original and significant in the history of art as the Venetian school of painting or German opera. This was the so-called Perpendicular style, which was created in the transept and choir of Gloucester Abbey about 1330–1350 and carried to its most superb perfection in the nave of Winchester in 1360. Thus, only thirty years after Alan of Walsingham had designed his lantern at Ely, the Gloucester architect was drawing the fan vaulting of his cloisters (1351–1377). Few, if any, centuries of Christian architecture can point to greater or more varied achievement.

This selection of works may serve to show how the contemporaries of Richard Rolle could build. A few more dates may be given to prove that they could also furnish their churches within and without. The English woodcarvers have left many masterpieces in rood-screens and choir-stalls, and in the very front rank must stand the choir-stalls of Winchester (1305) and Lincoln (1350–1400). In stone furnishing an important place is taken by the bishop's throne and sedilia at Exeter (1316–1318). Finally, the glass of the west windows at York was put in about 1338.

These achievements of the English proto-Renaissance have been mentioned in some detail from among many others because it is only so that we can attain a mental impression of perfect form and beauty to counterbalance the grotesque if picturesque illustrations of everyday life

and society which crowd upon each other in missal and antiphoner and chronicle, and are reproduced with all their crude drawing in history textbooks. We are apt to judge the mental powers of an age by its achievements in self-expression; apt also, even if we are lovers of Gothic architecture, to forget the relation of its masterpieces to a particular reign or epoch. Too often the fourteenth century calls up a picture of manuscript homilies and psalters, of volume upon volume of formless writing in the Early English Text Society's publications or the Henry Bradshaw collection, of arid pipe rolls and Rymer's *Fœdera*. It is well to turn on occasion to other things. Critics may differ as to whether or no the earlier Salisbury Cathedral or the later church towers of Lincolnshire, Gloucestershire, and Somerset surpass the best Decorated and early Perpendicular work; but to many the decade which saw the octagon at Ely and the choir at Gloucester rising will seem the most marvellous of all, and we should not demand of a nation whose population was considerably less than that of modern London a greater variety of self-expression than lies in Gothic architecture and Richard Rolle.

In religious matters Edward III's reign was marked by a certain amount of anti-papal and unorthodox religious feeling. The activities of John Wyclif became most important towards the end of his life (1320-1384) and need not be described in detail. Immediately after the Black Death came the celebrated Statutes of Provisors (1351) and *Præmunire* (1353, reiterated with greater force 1393), the former preventing the Pope from presenting foreigners to English livings, the latter forbidding certain suits from being referred to the Roman courts, and later forbidding the obtaining of papal bulls. The moral

influence of the Papacy was, in fact, at a low ebb during the century, owing to the "Babylonian Captivity" of a series of French popes at Avignon (1305-1377) and the Great Schism which followed immediately upon it (1378-1417). The antipapal measures referred to, and others like them, and the teaching of Wyclif against transubstantiation and a professional clergy, have naturally been greatly emphasized by English Protestant writers who have paid little attention to the manifestations of orthodox religious feeling. It is, however, more generally realized nowadays that the dogmatic value of the English antipapal feeling was very small, and it is perhaps easier for Catholics than others to understand that in the days of the Church's power devotion to the doctrines underlying the institution of the Papacy might very well co-exist with a spirit of resistance to the quasi-temporal exactions of papal officials. In the same way, it is less common at the present time to insist upon the worldliness of the clergy and the formal nature of religion in general at this time, though it is admitted on all hands that the Black Death, wars, and the accumulated riches of the clergy had some relaxing effect, especially upon the friars and monastic orders. Langland's *Piers Plowman* is entirely orthodox, and his references to worldly ecclesiastics no more than may be found in any social reformer writing in an age when the Church is in full possession. Chaucer, especially in his *Prologue* to the *Tales*, has sometimes been brought forward as evidencing the lax condition of the clergy, but here again a Catholic will easily distinguish between a discontented innovator and a plain-spoken critic. He will realize, too, that throughout the *Prologue* Chaucer is aiming at a telling and high-coloured picture, that no portrait gallery could tolerate the inclusion



of five religious types of unblemished character, that the satire in the case of Monk and Prioress is very gentle, and that only three characters in the whole party escape all censure, of whom two are clerks. Such, in brief, were some of the social and political circumstances of the time. They are recalled rarely, if ever, in the writings of the mystics.<sup>1</sup> We may now turn for a moment to consider the spiritual heritage, the literary sources, of English medieval mysticism.

Every religious writer in the Christian tradition is indebted, in greater or less degree, to his predecessors, immediate or remote. Only in the rarest cases can an original genius, a St Teresa or a St Francis, impose what is apparently a new conception of the spiritual life on his contemporaries, and even in these rare cases there is always the solid basis of traditional doctrine and practice upon which the novelty rests. More often the debt is far greater to those who have gone before, either in every department, as with Father Baker, or in speculative thought, as with Dionysius, or in philosophic background, as with St John of the Cross. The English mystics, who form such a clearly defined group and for the most part avoid abstract thought, are found to depend for their conceptions on the scholastics and the Fathers, and the care with which this debt has been assessed in some recent editions<sup>2</sup> makes it possible to say with some certainty how far they were original and how far they reproduced traditional ideas of the supernatural life. An examination of their writings with an eye upon their literary sources will probably impress most readers with the unity of Western

<sup>1</sup> Almost the only reference to current life is Hilton's attack on Lollardy.

<sup>2</sup> Especially those of Dom McCann and Dom Noetinger.

thought from the earliest times to the epoch of the Reformation. Among the first in time of these sources is usually reckoned the nameless Syrian who chose to publish his writings under the name of Dionysius the Areopagite, the disciple of St Paul. They spread slowly, but in the ninth century a Latin translation by Eriugena became one of the most widely read of all spiritual books in France and England. Theologians, and in particular St Thomas Aquinas, quote frequently from them, and above all from the minute mystical treatise, the *Theologia Mystica*. This is a short practical direction to one attempting to reach the first stages of contemplative prayer, the first of a long series of mystical works to develop the metaphor of the light of faith in contemplation regarded as a ray of darkness. The author of the *Cloud* translated it into English and frequently quotes it, and Hilton borrows its terminology.

The first Father of the Church to treat of the contemplative life in any fulness was St Augustine,<sup>1</sup> and many passages throughout his *Confessions* and Commentaries on the Scriptures have been adopted as their own by contemplatives in every succeeding age. Indeed, his celebrated appeal at the beginning of the *Confessions*, "Thou hast made us for thyself, and our hearts are restless until they repose in thee," has been called the "mystic's postulate." His teaching has been so thoroughly analyzed in a recent study of Western Mysticism that nothing further need be said here, unless it be to remark that the English mystics, especially Hilton, seem to be familiar rather with his homilies and letters than with the *Confessions*. St Gregory the Great, the second Western

<sup>1</sup> For the teaching of SS Augustine, Gregory, and Bernard, see Abbot Butler, *Western Mysticism*.

mystical Doctor, has also been examined by Abbot Butler. Like St Augustine, he was familiar to priests and religious of the Middle Ages, if only through the extracts from his homilies which occur in the Office. Hilton, at least, had a wide knowledge of him, as of St Augustine, and quotes frequently. Of St Bernard, the third Doctor of Abbot Butler's review, the English mystics make little use.

Two more important influences must be mentioned as affecting what may be called the spiritual climate of the times. Scholasticism modified the mystical outlook in two ways. On the one hand, it helped to schematize and catalogue the degrees of prayer. This, however, was scarcely its most successful field of work. The two spiritual writers who take their style from the monastery of St Victor are the most representative and influential of their school, but though Rolle and the author of the *Cloud* translated the *Benjamin Minor* of Richard of St Victor, and though reminiscences of his language occur in the English writers, their doctrine is quite independent of his. In fact, his description of the stages of prayer is so bound up with allegory, and rests upon such arbitrary psychology, that he gave little help to the individualistic, unformal English mystics. The other influence of scholasticism was decidedly anti-mystical. This is not to say that the chief scholastic theologians were without a practical and theoretical acquaintance with advanced states of prayer. It is rather that their analysis of the processes of thought, and indeed the whole mental outlook of later scholasticism, was unsympathetic to vagueness of any kind and all confused perceptions of truth and beauty and value. It was doubtless this, added to the taste for dialectics and speculation given by the schools, that prejudiced most of the

medieval mystics, from St Francis to Thomas à Kempis, against theologians.

The other great movement of the time, the rising up of a new order of things, was probably a far weightier influence. The awakening of zeal which produced the Cistercians and the orders of friars was distinguished also by a note of freedom and imagination that took shape in an increase of devotion to the Passion and Heart of our Lord, to our Lady and her Sorrows, to the Holy Child and to all the details of our Lord's life upon earth. The early Franciscans embody this spirit more perfectly than any other group, with their intensely personal devotion to our Lord and their sympathy with nature and art; but it is present everywhere, in St Bernard as well as in Chaucer. Imaginative and romantic are much abused terms, and they are particularly treacherous when applied to religious sentiments; but the presence of a peculiar quality of deep imagination and devotion is one of the common traits in the widely diverse English mystics of the Middle Ages, and it is the distinguishing mark of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries as opposed to the fifth and sixth, of the *Little Flowers of St Francis* as opposed to the *Conferences of Cassian*.

The preceding pages have endeavoured to give a sketch, necessarily brief and inadequate, of the religious influences, written and oral, which helped to form the spiritual lives of those whose writings we are to consider. If they were to be recapitulated in the order of their importance, the last-named would probably come first. After the treasures of doctrine and sacrament that lie open to every Catholic of every age, the new spirit brought from Italy by the friars and perpetuated in a thousand carols and hymns and frescoes and meditations, with their romantic and

almost chivalrous love of the humanity of our blessed Lord, was surely the most precious possession of the medieval world. Next must come the solid background of strict theology and spiritual guidance given by the scholastics; an influence latent in Rolle, almost entirely absent from the *Cloud*, but present to an extraordinary degree in Dame Julian and Hilton. Thirdly, there is the common spiritual tradition of the Benedictine centuries, expressed in its old form by St Gregory and in its new by St Bernard. Finally, there is the influence of Dionysius, traceable in Hilton, and very deeply affecting the language, if not the thought, of the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*.

## II

### THE ANCREN RIWLE

THE earliest in date of the English religious writings which it is proposed to consider in some detail is the *Ancren Riwle*. Although this belongs, strictly speaking, to ascetical rather than to mystical literature, its early date, its intrinsic value, the light it throws upon a little-known type of religious life, and the fact that it was used by later contemplatives as a spiritual guide, combine to give it a right to be reviewed here. As its name implies, it was written to give a norm of life to ancesses. These were religious women living an eremitical or semi-eremitical life, though bound by no public vows of religion and under the control of no religious community or order. As in the early days of the Church it had been the custom for many to take the vow and receive the consecration of a virgin, while living at home or in retirement, so throughout the Middle Ages, besides the regular nuns, Benedictine or Cistercian dames, canonesses of St Augustine or Prémontré, and later tertiaries of St Dominic and Poor Ladies of St Francis, there existed a certain number of these recluses, living a strict and almost entirely im-mured life, dependent upon charity for support, and upon bishop or parish priest for spiritual direction. Only with the Council of Trent and its legislation regarding the enclosure of convents did the type disappear from Europe. These recluses lived as a rule in a cell built against the wall of the parish church, and there remain to the present day several examples of such buildings. As with hermits,

so with ancesses, it may have been the case that many who chose this extreme and somewhat unnatural life declined from its ideals; but no reader of the *Ancren Riwle* will fail to be struck with the deep sincerity of its author's belief in the excellence of the life he is describing, and the ability of those for whom he is writing to live it worthily, and before we pass from medieval mysticism we shall recognize in an ancess the deepest spiritual soul of the age.

The *Ancren Riwle* exists in many manuscripts and in three languages, English, French, and Latin, a circumstance which shows that, although written originally to guide two or three individuals, it soon became widely used by others in a similar way of life, and perhaps even more widely as a spiritual book.<sup>1</sup> This multiplication of the treatise in manuscript has made it a difficult task for modern students to assign to it a date, an authorship, and even an original language. When the text was edited for the Camden Society in 1852<sup>2</sup> the editor favoured the opinion that English was the original language and the author Richard Poore, Bishop of Salisbury 1217-1229, and this opinion held the field till recent years. Poore's claim to the authorship was based on a sentence in the Latin version of the *Riwle* which alludes to the anchorage as situated at Tarrent, identified with Tarrant Keynes in Dorset, where Poore died in 1237 and where an anchorage founded

<sup>1</sup> The problem of the authorship of the *Ancren Riwle* has recently been lucidly discussed with many references by Prof. R. W. Chambers in the *Review of English Studies*, vol. i, No. 1. See also G. C. Macaulay, the *Modern Language Review*, ix 70, and observations by Father Vincent McNabb, O.P., in other numbers of the *Review of English Studies*.

<sup>2</sup> By James Morton. The references follow his edition, as no definitive and accessible text of the *Ancren Riwle* has yet been published.

by him is known to have existed. This chain of argument, based on a passage in the Latin version which is now generally recognized to be an addition to the original *Riwle*, is so uncertain that it has no right to hold the field, and it has accordingly been abandoned by recent critics. With it has disappeared any clue as to the date and authorship of the treatise.

Yet this lack of knowledge may not be lasting, for within the last few years a number of able scholars in this country and in America have devoted their attention to the *Ancren Riwle*. As yet there is no agreement in any conclusions of importance, and the present position of the discussion may be fairly summed up by saying that the *Riwle* was almost certainly first written in English, and probably between the years 1190 and 1230. Author and place are entirely uncertain, though St Gilbert of Sempringham and Friar Robert Bacon have been suggested as authors, and Kilburn as the ancesses' cell. Fresh evidence or a more diligent consideration of that at present available may at some future date tell us more.

From the *Riwle* itself we can get a tolerably clear picture of its writer's mind. Two qualities will probably have impressed most readers of the book, his sanity of judgement and his wide acquaintance with Scripture and the ecclesiastical writers. His learning is indeed very deep, though unscholastic in form; but it is not so much his knowledge of the Fathers and of Scripture that is striking, as the temper of mind which his quotations reveal. Though not without a tendency to allegorize Scripture, he is far less inclined to do so than are most ecclesiastical writers of the early Middle Ages. His quotations from the sapiential books, from St Augustine and St Gregory, are almost always in the nature of deep moral utterances.



Indeed, dignity, the Roman *gravitas* of the early Church, is apparent not only in his quotations from the early Fathers but also in his love of the liturgy. He quotes frequently, not only from hymns and responsories of the Roman breviary, but from the collects of the Gregorian liturgy, whose solemn and classical cadences are a curious contrast to the uncouth, undeveloped language in which they are framed.

When we remember that the *Ancren Riwle* is addressed to contemplatives, it cannot but seem to us singularly unmythical in tone. By far the greater part is occupied with moral lessons and an enumeration of the temptations rising from the deadly sins. Sacramental confession is dealt with fully—indeed, almost with the method of a manual of moral theology.<sup>1</sup> Penance and charity are considered at length, and vocal prayer is carefully allotted through the hours of the day; but of mental prayer or any contemplative experience there is scarcely a mention, in strong contrast to the writings of the following century. The book ends with a number of detailed instructions for the daily life of the ancesses.

Of these recluses for whom the *Riwle* was written we are told little. They were three in number,<sup>2</sup> sisters,<sup>3</sup> and supplied by friends with all necessaries of life. They had maids to wait on them, go errands, and collect what was needed for the housekeeping.<sup>4</sup> Their cell was built against the church, with a window through which they could see the Mass and receive Holy Communion.<sup>5</sup> They went to Confession once a week, to Communion fifteen

<sup>1</sup> pp. 301-349.

<sup>2</sup> p. 116.

<sup>3</sup> p. 192.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> pp. 262, 268 (with an interesting reference to the Elevation of the Host).

times a year.<sup>1</sup> From September 14 to Easter they fasted strictly, during the rest of the year they had two meals, and at no time were they to reduce themselves to bread and water. In a like spirit of discretion, while their clothes are to be coarse and hard, they are not to use haircloth or hedgehog skins,<sup>2</sup> and though they scourge themselves, it is not to blood. They are to keep no cattle, but may have a single cat.<sup>3</sup>

It is difficult, without reading the whole book, to get an adequate idea of its author's spirituality, but a few quotations may show how impressive and how eloquent his words often are. He is speaking of silence.

“ ‘In silence and in hope shall be your strength.’ Observe how well he saith it; for whoso is very quiet and keeps long silence may hope with surety that when she speaks to God he will hear her. She may also hope that, through her silence, she shall also sing sweetly in heaven. . . . For what maketh us strong to bear hardships in God's service, and in temptations to wrestle stoutly against the devil's assaults? What, but hope of high meed? Hope keeps the heart whole, whatever the flesh may suffer or endure; as it is said, ‘If hope were not, heart would break.’ Ah, Jesus, thy mercy! How stands it with those who are there where is all woe and misery, without hope of release, and yet the heart may not break?’ ”<sup>4</sup>

And again on the blessings of adversity:

“Gold and silver are purified from their dross in the fire. If thou gatherest dross therein [*i.e.*, in the purifying fire] it is against nature. ‘Reprobate silver call ye them.’ The chalice that was molten in the fire and fiercely boiled, formed through so many beatings and polishings to God's

<sup>1</sup> pp. 344, 412.

<sup>2</sup> p. 418.

<sup>3</sup> p. 416. Presumably to keep down the mice, not as a pet.

<sup>4</sup> pp. 78-80.

service in so sweet a way, would it, if it could speak, curse its cleansing fire and its maker's hands? All this world is God's smithy, for to forge his chosen ones. Wouldst thou that God had no fire in his smithy, nor bellows, nor hammers?"<sup>1</sup>

And on the reverence due to our guardian angel:

"If the king had given his beloved son to one of his knights to guard, and enemies led away this child, his ward, so that the child himself made war upon his father with the enemies, would not the knight be sorry and sorely ashamed? We are all sons of God, the King of Heaven, who hath given each of us to an angel to guard. Sorry is he, as angels are sorry, when enemies lead us away, and when we war against God our Father by sin."<sup>2</sup>

He is throughout insistent that recluses are not safe merely because of their stone walls, and though he is writing for maidens living a life of almost unbearable austerity, his plain speech on the danger of temptations to impurity and waste of time is in strong contrast to the artificial and exotic spiritual teaching which is sometimes given to the nuns of to-day. Thus he warns them against gossiping.

"Now, my dear sisters, from all evil speech, which is thus threefold, idle, foul, and venomous, keep far your ears. Men say of ancesses, that almost every one hath an old woman to feed her ears: a gossip who gossips to her all the tales of the land; a magpie that chatters to her all that she sees or hears. So that men say commonly: 'From mill and from market, from smithy and from ancesses' house, men bring news.' Christ knows, this is a sorry tale: that an ancess's house, that should be the most solitary place of all, should be evened to those places in which there is the most idle talk."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> p. 284.

<sup>2</sup> pp. 310-312.

<sup>3</sup> p. 88.

And against idleness :

“ ‘ Judith shut up ’ as we are told in her book, ‘ led a very hard life, fasted and wore hair-cloth.’ Judith shut up betokeneth an ancess shut up, who ought to lead a hard life, as did the lady Judith, as far as she is able, and not as swine pent up in the sty to fatten and grow great against the blow of the axe.”<sup>1</sup>

And against temptations to impurity :

“ ‘ She fighteth truly . . . who refuseth to consent to it, though with reluctant heart, however strongly it pricketh her. She that thus doth is a follower of Jesus Christ, for she doth as he did hanging on the rood. ‘ Cum gustasset acetum noluit bibere.’ That is, he tasted the bitter drink, and anon withdrew himself, and would not drink it though he were thirsty. She is with God on his cross who doth so, although she thirsteth in the desire, and the devil offers her his sweet drink.”<sup>2</sup>

And against over-great business,

“ ‘ Ancesses shall not become schoolmistresses, nor turn their ancess-house into a children’s school. Her maid may, though, teach any little maids, of whom it might be doubtful whether they should learn among boys; but an ancess ought to think of God alone.”<sup>3</sup>

No reader of the *Rivle* can have failed to be struck by the wealth of picturesque similes used by the author. Their idiomatic form in English is a very strong argument that English was the original language of the book, and their tone, at once homely and forceful, not only gives us an insight into the character of the unknown writer, but places him at the beginning of the long list of those who have found in the sights and actions of English

<sup>1</sup> p. 126.

<sup>2</sup> p. 238.

<sup>3</sup> p. 422.

country life the jewels of a prose style. A few quotations may be allowed to show their variety.

“Wherefore let an ancess, whatsoever she be, hold her silent as much as ever she can and may; let her not have a hen’s nature. The hen when she hath laid cannot but cackle. And what getteth she thereof? Cometh the chough right anon and reaveth from her her eggs and eateth all that of which she should have brought forth her quick birds. . . . The wretched pedlar, more noise he maketh to cry his soap than a rich mercer all his dearworthy wares.<sup>1</sup>

“Foxes have their holes, and birds of heaven their nests. True ancesses are indeed birds of heaven that fly on high and sit singing merrily on the green boughs: that is, they think on the bliss of heaven that never fadeth, but is ever green, and sit on this green, singing right merrily.<sup>2</sup> Therefore [God] tied a clod of heavy earth to the soul, as men tie a cubbel to the swine that is too much raking and ranging about. . . . The flesh is here at home upon the earth, and therefore it is brisk and bold as men say, ‘The cock is brave on his own midden.’<sup>3</sup>

“You are over this world’s sea, upon the bridge of heaven. Look that you be not like the horse that is shy and blencheth at a shadow on the high bridge, and falleth down into the water off the high bridge. Too shy, indeed, are they who flee from a picture that seemeth to them grisly and terrible to see. Woe and pleasure in this world is all but as a shadow—is all but as a picture.<sup>4</sup>

“A woman that hath lost her needle, or a shoemaker his awl, he seeketh it right anon: and God lost by sin, shall lie unsought full seven days.<sup>5</sup>

“Young trees men fence round with thorns, lest beasts gnaw them while they are tender. You are young trees set in God’s orchard. Thorns are the hardships that I have spoken of, and it is need that you should be set about

<sup>1</sup> p. 66.

<sup>2</sup> p. 132.

<sup>3</sup> p. 140.

<sup>4</sup> p. 242.

<sup>5</sup> p. 324.

with them. . . . And be blithe in heart if you suffer insolence of Slurry, the cook's boy, who washeth the dishes in the kitchen.<sup>1</sup>

“After a brave knight's death, men hang in the church his shield in his memory. So is this shield, that is the crucifix, set in church, in such place that it may be soonest seen, that they may think thereby of Jesus Christ's knighthood, that he did on the rood.”<sup>2</sup>

“‘Can a mother forget her child?’ he saith, ‘and though she do, I can never forget thee,’ and then saith the reason why. ‘I have,’ he saith, ‘painted thee in my hands.’ So he did with red blood upon the rood. A man knits his girdle for to remember a thing; but our Lord, that he might never forget us, made a mark of piercing in both his hands.”<sup>3</sup>

To those interested in the history of religious sentiment the *Riwle* will always be of value. We have already noticed the references to Communion and to the Elevation of the Host. Equally significant is the vivid description of our Lord's sufferings in the Passion, one of the first instances of a motif that inspired so much devout writing and art in the English Middle Ages. Of methodical teaching on prayer there is, as we have said, none, and possibly this absence of any reminiscence of Dionysius or the Victorines in a man so learned in the Fathers and much subsequent theology may be urged in support of the theory which would attribute the *Riwle* to a very early date. Leaving this for others more qualified to discuss, we may suggest that the significance of the *Riwle* in the history of English mysticism lies in its emphasis on the need for a deep personal love of our Lord, and its insistence upon the necessity of the elementary Christian virtues as a basis for the contemplative life. Before

<sup>1</sup> pp. 378-380.

<sup>2</sup> p. 392.

<sup>3</sup> p. 396.

leaving the treatise for others which develop its teaching, we may be allowed to quote one or two passages which approach most nearly in spirit to the great mystics.

“ Our Lord, when he suffereth that we be tempted, playeth with us, as a mother with her young darling: she flieth from him and hideth herself, and letteth him sit alone and look anxiously about, and cry ‘ Dame ! Dame ! ’ and weep a while, and then with outspread arms leapeth forth laughing, and embraceth and kisseth, and wipeth his eyes.<sup>1</sup>

“ After the kiss in the Mass, when the priest consecrates, there forget all the world and there be altogether out of the body; there in sparkling love beclip our beloved that into our breast’s bower is alighted out of heaven, and hold him fast till he hath granted all that ever you will.<sup>2</sup>

“ A lady was there that was beset all about by her foes, and her land all destroyed, and she all poor, within an earthen castle. A mighty king’s love was, however, fixed upon her with such boundless affection that he for her love sent his messengers, one after another, and often many together, and sent her baubles many and fair, and succours and help from his noble army to hold her castle. She received them all as a careless creature, that was so hard-hearted that he could never come nearer to her love. What wilt thou more ? He came himself at last and showed her his face, as one that was of all men fairest to behold, and spoke most sweetly, and such merry words that might have raised the dead from death to life. And he wrought many wonders, and did many wonderful things before her eyes and showed her his might and told her of his kingdom, and bid for to make her queen of all that he possessed. All this helped nought. Was not this scorn marvellous ? For she was never worthy to be

<sup>1</sup> p. 230.

<sup>2</sup> p. 34. Consecrates. MS. has “ sacreth.” Does this mean simply, “ is saying Mass ” ? The kiss of peace follows the Consecration.

his scullion. Yet so, through his gentleness, love so overmastered him that at last he said: 'Lady, thou art attacked, and thy foes are so strong thou mayest nowise escape their hands, without succour of me, so that they may not do thee to shameful death. I will for love of thee take this fight upon me, and rid thee of those that seek thy death. I know forsooth that among them I shall take a death-wound, and I will do this heartily for to win thy heart. Now, then, I beseech thee, for the love that I show thee, that thou love me after I die that death, since thou wouldst not love me alive.' This king did all this; rid her from all her foes and was himself grievously treated and at last slain. . . . Would not this lady be of evil nature if she loved him not above all things after this?'<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> pp. 388-390.



### III

#### RICHARD ROLLE

**T**HE four writers who have now to be considered are very different in mental outlook one from another, and may to some degree be taken as the representatives in English medieval religious life of four distinct types of spirituality. Richard Rolle, the first, is a poet, almost a romanticist; a troubadour of God, spiritual brother of St Francis, throwing off conventional habits, and of an essentially simplifying, outgoing mind. However orthodox he may remain he is always and before all an individualist.

Rolle has had the good fortune to attract a series of able scholars both in this country and in Germany within the last half-century, and in consequence he occupies an honourable, and perhaps disproportionately great, place in histories and manuals of English literature. This is due partly to the varied interest and style of his writings, and partly to the great influence he exercised over others, which appears in the many poems and treatises once ascribed to him; but it is due above all to the simplicity and enthusiasm of his outlook on life. What may be said of Chaucer and Dame Julian may be said pre-eminently of Rolle, that he is of the springtime of English literature, and the early sunlight and fresh dew rest upon his words. It is true also that Rolle had the imaginative mind of a poet, if not a musician, and song and melody are as surely characteristic of his writing as he found them character-

istic of the working of grace. His words are always spontaneous and unreflecting; he "does but sing because he must," and such spontaneity, both of language and character, must always most powerfully attract in a world where so much is stale and affected and calculated and insincere.

Rolle wrote both in Latin and English, in verse and in prose. For students of English literature his English works and his verse are naturally most interesting, as are also his translations of parts of the Bible, especially the Psalms—a work in which he anticipated Wyclif, and has earned with some justice the title of father of English prose. Nevertheless, it is rather in his Latin prose treatises that he appears as a mystic, and it is with these that we are at present most concerned. Most of them were translated into English after Rolle's death by Richard Misyn.<sup>1</sup>

The story of Rolle's life has been told in almost identical words by all his editors, but it cannot be altogether omitted here. Its circumstances, in all their originality and picturesque details, which so nearly resemble the preconceived idea of a medieval hermit, have done much to concentrate attention upon him. The chief source for the external events of his conversation is the series of lessons drawn up for insertion in the office to be recited after his canonization.<sup>2</sup> According to this he was born near Pickering in Yorkshire (apparently about 1290), of well-to-do and perhaps gentle parents. It has been suggested that his father was in some way a dependent

<sup>1</sup> Misyn translated the *Mending of Life* and the *Fire of Love*, 1434-1435.

<sup>2</sup> See the *Fire of Love*, etc., ed. F. M. Comper, pp. xlv ff. The references in this chapter are to this edition.

of the great family of Neville; certainly it was a Neville, sometime archdeacon at Durham, who paid for his education at Oxford. There the influence of the scholastic movement was at its height, but Rolle, unlike Hilton, and even unlike the author of the *Cloud*, found little to attract him in the intellectual atmosphere of the day, if we may believe some of his writings. Recently, however, the attractive suggestion has been put forward that he crossed to France and spent some time at the Sorbonne.<sup>1</sup> This, if correct, would help to explain Rolle's references to his worldly past, which, if his conversion took place immediately after his Oxford days (and in the Middle Ages the university career was begun and ended at a much earlier period of life than now) must be taken as the self-deprecatory exaggerations of a saint. As it is, till this point is settled, and till many other questions of authenticity and chronology in his writings have been decided, no adequate appreciation of his indebtedness to his education can be attempted, since in some writings there is little method and a scarcity of quotation, whereas in others many of the Fathers and ecclesiastical writers of the Middle Ages are quoted.

His decision to leave home and become a hermit was taken without consulting his parents. The lessons tell us that he took two of his sister's tunics, which she brought to him in a wood, and made of them a dress like a hermit's. He then left home, and was supported for a time by Sir John de Dalton, a friend of his father's and himself the father of two boys who had been fellow-students with Rolle at Oxford. It was in this period of his life that the growth in spirituality took place which he has himself

<sup>1</sup> By that eminent authority on the English mystics, Dom Noetinger of Solesmes, in an article in the *Month*, January, 1926.

described. After several years spent near the Daltons' home he moved from place to place in search of solitude, living for some time in Richmondshire, where he was the friend and counsellor of the ancess Margaret of Anderby, for whom some of his treatises were written. Finally he moved to Hampole, a small village near Doncaster, not far from the field of Towton, and almost in sight of the Great North Road and the London and North Eastern main line to York.<sup>1</sup> Here he lived as director of a convent of Cistercian nuns, here he died in 1349, perhaps of the Black Death, and here his remains were venerated by the nuns and by an increasing number of people as those of a saint. Many miracles attributed to his intercession were recorded, and it is supposed that only the unsettled state of the country and the rise of Lollardy, whose supporters claimed Rolle as one of themselves, cut short the regular process of his cause.

It will thus be seen that both in the knowledge we have of his life, and in the bulk and variety of his writings, Rolle has the advantage over all the English medieval mystics. Yet it cannot be said that his additions to our knowledge of the contemplative life, either in theory or practice, are so significant as those of Hilton or the *Cloud*. Dom Noetinger may be simplifying the matter too much when he says that Rolle hardly does more than reproduce in words the impressions he receives,<sup>2</sup> but the error, if any error there be, is not great. Rolle is throughout intensely personal. All the stages of the spiritual life are described in terms taken from his own experience, and this would

<sup>1</sup> For a description of Hampole as it is to-day, see R. H. Benson, *A Book of the Love of Jesus*, p. 226.

<sup>2</sup> *Scala Perfectionis*, ed. Noetinger, Preface, p. 14. "Lors même qu'il discute ou enseigne, il ne fait guère qu'extérioriser ses impressions."

seem to have been singularly simple in form. The most typical works of Rolle which are available to the general reader are the *Fire of Love* and the *Mending of Life*. From them we can form a fairly complete idea of the manner of his growth in holiness. Like all those who have been converted to a contemplative life, he looks upon the time spent before his conversion as passed in sin; perhaps we should do well not to regard this as a mere refinement of humility, especially if we bear in mind the possibility of some years spent in Paris. He says:

“ Lord God, have mercy on me ! My youth was fond; my childhood vain; my young age unclean. But now, Lord Jesu, my heart is inflamed with thy holy love and my reins are changed; and my soul also will not touch for bitterness what before was my food.”<sup>1</sup>

After his conversion his growth in the mystical way was gradual. In an autobiographical passage he speaks of a sudden visitation that came to him for the first time, as it were a door opened.

“ The high love of Christ standeth soothly in three things: in heat, in song, in sweetness. . . . Forsooth 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 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. I was sitting forsooth in a chapel, and whiles I was mickle delighted with sweetness of prayer or meditation, suddenly I felt within me a merry and unknown heat. But first I wavered, for a long time

<sup>1</sup> *Fire*, Book I, ch. xii.

doubting what it could be. I was expert that it was not from a creature but from my Maker, because I found it grow hotter and more glad. Truly in this unhopèd-for, sensible and sweet-smelling heat, half a year, three months and some weeks have run out, until the inshedding and receiving of this heavenly and ghostly sound. . . . Whiles truly I sat in this same chapel, and in the night before supper, as I could, I sang psalms, I beheld above me the noise as it were of readers, or rather singers. Whiles also I took heed, praying to heaven with my whole desire, suddenly, I wot not in what manner, I felt in me the noise of song, and received the most liking heavenly melody which dwelt with me in my mind. For my thought was forsooth changed to continual song of mirth . . . and in my prayers and psalm-saying I uttered the same sound, and henceforth, for plenteousness of inward sweetness, I burst out singing what before I said, but forsooth privily. . . . Wherefore from the beginning of my changed soul unto the high degree of Christ's love, the which, God granting, I was able to attain . . . I was four years and about three months."<sup>1</sup>

This passage, which has been quoted at some length because it is so typical of Rolle, shows clearly enough the peculiarities of his spiritual experience. Unlike most of the great mystics, he almost always describes it, not in terms of knowledge or ignorance, nor even in terms of love and union, but by the two words, "heat" and "song," taken directly from sense-perception. Indeed, so emphatic is his repetition of these words that we are driven to some sort of enquiry as to the nature of the experience he wished to describe. At first sight—and possibly enquiry will not remove this impression—he seems to stand out of the tradition of the great mystical Doctors, who teach with unanimity that sensible devotion of any kind is to be

<sup>1</sup> *Fire*, Book I, ch. xv.

resisted, and that the permanent grace of contemplation is almost imperceptible, and sometimes least perceptible when most undoubtedly present. Rolle, in opposition to this, writes at times as if during his whole life this "heat" and "song" were at his call; and that his influence was to some extent mischievous, as tending to make would-be contemplatives strive for some sensible realization of their prayer, is evident from the implied condemnation of Rolle in the *Cloud* and Hilton.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps it is best to acknowledge that Rolle, owing to peculiarities of temperament, lies somewhat outside the normal course. Modern critics are inclined to assume that this "heat" and "song" were auto-suggestions. In the somewhat ponderous terms of modern psychology, "psycho-sensorial parallelisms are set up . . . in certain temperaments," and as a result there may be induced "sense-automatisms, which may vary from the slightest of suggestions to an intense hallucination."<sup>2</sup> In the passage just quoted Miss Underhill proceeds to bring under the heading of sense-automatisms cases of stigmatization and visions. As we have seen, it is not necessary to follow modern psychology to such lengths in all cases, nor should we ever, in regard to such cases as Rolle, be too ready to transfer to a great and sane religious genius theories which modern psychology has only verified in morbid and insignificant personalities. Nor need we assume that a soul touched by powerful grace need follow the ordinary rules of psychology.

Yet even if we assume the immediate cause of Rolle's heat or fire to have been purely natural, this need not reflect on the value of his testimony. It may be that the impal-

<sup>1</sup> See below, pp. 99, 124.

<sup>2</sup> *Fire*, Introduction, pp. xv-xvi.

pable touch of the finger of God is thus translated into sense-perceptions. Rolle himself was surprised by his first experience of the heat, and though he is clear that there is nothing imaginary about it, his language suggests that it was in no sense an enlightenment of the intellect. He says:

“ More have I marvelled than I showed when, forsooth, I first felt my heart wax warm, truly, and not in imagination, but as if it were burned with sensible fire. I was forsooth amazed as the burning in my soul burst up, and of an unwont solace; oftentimes, because of my ignorance of such healthful abundance, I have groped my breast seeking whether this burning were from any bodily cause outwardly. But when I knew that it was only kindled inwardly from a ghostly cause, and that this burning was nought of fleshly love or concupiscence, in this I conceived it was the gift of my Maker.”<sup>1</sup>

However, we have to remember, in our attempts to rationalize Rolle's words, that he is committed to visions and diabolical visitations.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, in spite of the recurrence of “ heat ” and “ song,” the chief impression gained from reading Rolle is not that of unusual experiences, but of the deeply loving and pure nature which was the basis and the result of his holy life. The love of God, not the knowledge of divinity, is the one thing needful.

“ Alas, for shame ! ” he says, quoting St Augustine. “ An old wife is more expert in God's love, and less in worldly pleasure, than the great divine whose study is vain.”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Fire*, Prologue, p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> *Minor Works*, ed. Hodgson, p. 53.

<sup>3</sup> *Fire*, Book I, ch. v.



That he may have this love is his continual prayer.

“And yet I come not to as great love of God as mine elder fathers, the which have also done many other profitable things; wherefore I am full greatly ashamed in myself, and confused. Therefore, O Lord, make broad my heart that it may be more able to perceive thy love.”<sup>1</sup>

For God alone can satisfy the soul.

“Man’s soul is the taker of God only; anything less than God cannot fulfil it: wherefore earthly lovers never are fulfilled.”<sup>2</sup>

This life but delays the moment when the lover shall meet his beloved.

“Thou, Lord Jesu, 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<sup>3</sup> thou not him that desires thee? Who is enough to think thy sweetness, that art the end of sighing, the beginning of desire, the gate of unfailing yearning? Thou art the end of heaviness, the mark of labours, the beginning of fruits, the gate of joys. Behold I grow hot and desire after thee: if thou come I shall forthwith be safe. . . . I pray thee tarry not mickle; from me abide not long! . . . Now grant, my best Beloved, that I may cease; for death, that many dread, shall be to me as heavenly music.”<sup>4</sup>

No one who reads Rolle and knows the circumstances of his life will accuse him of laxity or softness, but they will scarcely fail to be struck by his insistence—comparable to that of the great St Augustine—on the claims of the heart.

<sup>1</sup> *Fire*, Book I, ch. ix.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, Book I, ch. xi.

<sup>3</sup> Halse = embrace.

<sup>4</sup> *Fire*, Book I, ch. xvi.

“ I dare not say that all love is good, for that love that is more delighted in creatures than in the Maker of all things, and sets the lust of earthly beauty before ghostly fairness, is ill and to be hated; for it turns from eternal love and turns to temporal that cannot last. Yet peradventure it shall be the less punished; for it desires and joys more to love and to be loved than to defile or be defiled.<sup>1</sup>

“ Therefore if our love be pure and perfect, whatever our heart loves it is God.<sup>2</sup>

“ A soul can not be reasonable without love whiles it is in this life; wherefore the love thereof is the foot of the soul, by which, after this pilgrimage, it is borne to God or the fiend.”<sup>3</sup>

Once or twice, also, he speaks almost with sadness of the lack of one to stand with him.

“ But would to God thou hadst shown me a fellow in the way,”<sup>4</sup> he exclaims.

And again:

“ I wot not soothly by what unhap it now befalls that scarcely or seldom is found a true friend . . . from God it truly is that amid the wretchedness of this exile we be comforted with the counsel and help of friends, until we come to him. Where we shall all be taught of God, and sit in eternal seats; and we shall be glad without end in him that we have loved, and in whom and by whom we have friends.”<sup>5</sup>

And in another place, for once sounding the depths scanned by Dame Julian, he says:

“ Wherefore when they [sinners] shall be deemed they shall see Christ sharp and intolerable to their eyes because

<sup>1</sup> *Fire*, Book I, ch. xvii.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, Book I, ch. xix.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, Book I, ch. xxiii.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, Book II, ch. v.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, Book II, ch. ix.

in this life they never felt him sweet in their hearts. . . . Such truly as we now are to him, such a one shall he then appear to us; to a lover certain lovely and desirable, and to them that loved not, hateful and cruel. And yet this change is not on his part but on ours.”<sup>1</sup>

But his natural inclination is to the sunshine.

“ Therefore the life that can find love and truly know it in mind shall be turned from sorrow to joy unspoken, and is conversant in the service of melody. Song certain it shall love, and, singing in Jesu, shall be likened to a bird singing to the death. And peradventure in dying the solace of charitable song shall not want—if it happen to him to die and not go swiftly to his love. . . . There shall be halsing of love, and the sweetness of lovers shall be coupled in heart, and the joining of friends shall stand for ever. . . . Therefore let us love burningly, for if we love we shall sing in heavenly mirth to Christ with melody, whose love overcomes all things. Therefore let us live and also die in love.”<sup>2</sup>

These last quotations have shown Rolle at his best, in the full stream of a deep and direct current of feeling that has rarely found purer expression and that overleaps all the barriers between the modern world and the Middle Ages. The book ends on the same passionate level.

“ In the beginning truly of my conversion and singular purpose I thought I would be like the little bird that languishes for the love of his beloved, but is gladdened in his longing when he that it loves comes, and sings with joy, and in its song also languishes, but in sweetness and heat. It is said that the nightingale is given to song and melody all night, that she may please him to whom she is joined. How mickle more should I sing with greatest sweetness to Christ my Jesu, that is spouse of my soul<sup>n</sup> through all this

<sup>1</sup> *Fire*, Book II, ch. viii.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, Book II, ch. xi.

present life that is night in regard to the clearness to come, so that I should languish in longing and die for love.”<sup>1</sup>

The contemplative life, as Rolle saw it, or at least as he has recorded it, is singularly joyful. His fellow-countrymen of the fourteenth century, joyful and far from morbidity as they are, yet suggest a far more arduous and complex scheme of things. Yet even they, taking them as a body of feeling, may be set against too many modern mystics, whose days have been spent in darkness and sorrow and self-reproach. Even St Teresa, who is optimistic in spite of, or owing to, her desire for suffering, shows us a very different outlook on life, and the distrust and introspection of St John of the Cross, Father Baker, and a host of modern saints is too well known to need further indication. How far these apparent differences of view resolve themselves into different aspects of the same view seen by varying tempers of mind, how far either may err on the side of simplicity or complexity, how far, finally, the later and sadder outlook is a child of the sadder and less simple age that has followed upon the Renaissance, is a question too large for these pages. Here it is sufficient to quote a few words of Rolle which show that we may be wrong in assuming that with him was always the sunlight.

“ And if it sometimes happen that sweet easiness be not to thee in praying or in good thinking, and that thou be not made high in mind by the song of holy contemplation, and thou canst not sing as thou wast wont: yet cease not to read or pray.”<sup>2</sup>

As with almost all contemplatives whose life has been passed in men's eyes, Rolle was driven by outward attack

<sup>1</sup> *Fire*, Book II, ch. xii.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, Book I, ch. x.

and inward certainty alike to an apology for his form of life, and it is couched in a well-known and valid form of argument.

“Man is not holier or higher for the outward works that he does. Truly God that is the beholder of the heart rewards the will more than the deed. The deeds truly hang on the will, not the will on the deeds. For the more burningly that a man loves, in so mickle he ascends to a higher reward. . . . God forsooth has foreordained his chosen to fulfil divers services. It is not given truly to ilk man to execute or fulfil all offices, but ilk man has that that is most according to his state. . . . Yet there are many active better than some contemplative; but the best contemplative are higher than the best active.”<sup>1</sup>

Only on one point does he seem to be opposed to the common teaching of the saints. In one place he asserts that the less holy are sometimes better fitted for the office of ruling souls,<sup>2</sup> but his exact meaning is not clear, as another passage contradicts what he has said before.

Contemplation is God’s free gift:

“But it is given soonest especially to those who have not lost that thing which is most pleasing to God, by their way of living, that is the flower of their youth.”<sup>3</sup>

Rolle nowhere gives a set description of contemplative prayer, but in many places he describes the life of a soul in the state of perfection as a continuous prayer.

“We can forsooth, if we be true lovers of our Lord Jesu Christ, think upon him when we walk, and hold fast the song of his love whiles we sit in fellowship; and we may have mind of him at the board and also in tasting of meat and drink. . . . And if we labour with our hands, what

<sup>1</sup> *Fire*, Book I, ch. xxi.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Minor Works*, p. 151.

lets us to lift our hearts to heaven and without ceasing to hold the thought of endless love? And so in all time of our life, being quick and not slow, nothing but sleep shall put our hearts from him.”<sup>1</sup>

He agrees with Hilton (if it is not the latter who follows Rolle) in saying that illness, fatigue, or too great exertion make actual contemplative prayer impossible, and the contemplative should therefore be discreet.

“Thêrefore it behoves him that will sing in God’s love, and in singing will rejoice and burn . . . not to live in too mickle abstinence.”<sup>2</sup>

He also holds, with many of the great contemplative Doctors, that the perfect contemplative is without fear of falling.

“Nevertheless I trow that there is a degree of perfect love, the which whosoever attains he shall never afterwards lose. For truly it is one thing to be able to lose, and another alway to hold, what he will not leave although he can.”<sup>3</sup>

Rolle has been called a free-lance in the religious life of his time, and there is much to justify such an opinion in the circumstances of his life—for he belonged to no religious order and was never a priest—and in his intensely personal outlook. At the risk of stressing what is obvious to all readers, it may be remarked that his originality did not extend to doctrine, and that there is nothing in his writings to suggest that he was in any way dissatisfied with the theological position or the ordinary religious practices of the Middle Ages. His temperament and outlook were unusual, but he was neither an innovator

<sup>1</sup> *Fire*, Book II, ch. x.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, Book I, ch. xi.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, Book I, ch. xix.

nor a reformer. The following passage shows alike his originality and his conservatism.

“ Because in the kirk of God there are singers ordained in their degree, and set to praise God and to stir the people to devotion, some have come to me asking why I would not sing as other men when they have oftentimes seen me in the solemn masses. They have stood up against me, because I fled the outward songs that are wont in the kirks, and the sweetness of the organ that is heard gladly by the people, only abiding among these either when the need of hearing mass—which elsewhere I could not hear—or the solemnity of the day asked it on account of the backbiting of the people. Truly I have desired to sit alone that I might take heed to Christ alone that had given to me ghostly song, in the which I might offer him praises and prayers. They that reproved me trowed not this . . . but I could not leave the grace of Christ and consent to fond men that knew me not within.”<sup>1</sup>

Another curious characteristic of his contemplative prayer—to which a parallel may be found in Father Baker’s *Confessions*—is his preference for a sitting position while engaged upon it.

“ And I have loved for to sit : for no penance, nor fantasy, nor that I wished men to talk of me, nor for no such thing : but only because I knew that I loved God more, and longer lasted within the comfort of love, than going, or standing, or kneeling. For sitting I am most at rest, and my heart most upward. But therefore, peradventure, it is not best that another should sit, as I did and will do to my death, save he were disposed in his soul as I was.”<sup>2</sup>

It is not easy to form a judgement on Rolle’s prose style. Apart from the question of authenticity, which

<sup>1</sup> *Fire*, Book II, ch. i.

<sup>2</sup> *Form of Perfect Living*, ed. G. Hodgson, ch. x, p. 71.

puts several treatises under suspicion, and the large amount of modernization necessary to make him intelligible to the ordinary reader, there is the further difficulty that the greater part of his work, other than translation, is in Latin. Hence many of the extracts given above are specimens of Misyn's prose style, not of Rolle's. A few passages, however, too striking to be passed over, may be quoted from his English Corpus.

“Alas! for shame, what can we, who are sinful and foul, say if we consider ourselves good, when they who are most clean and most love God consider themselves most sinful and most vile and most unworthy. . . . For, get who get may, this world is wide enough and good enough to win heaven in; and it is rich enough and pleasant enough and sinful enough to win hell with, flee who flee may. . . . Prayer freely beflowes our souls with flowers of sweetness, with the fairness and sweetness of the fruit falling into meek hearts, which is freely to behold the fairness of God, in all meek virtues, lighting with the beams of his brightness all clean consciences and all meek hearts.<sup>1</sup>

“When thou hast gathered home thine heart and its wits, and hast destroyed the things that might hinder thee from praying, and won to that devotion which God sends to thee through his dear-worthy grace, quickly rise from thy bed at the bell-ringing: and if no bell be there, let the cock be thy bell: if there be neither cock nor bell, let God's love wake thee, for that most pleases God. And zeal, rooted in love, wakens before both cock and bell, and has washed her face with sweet love-tears; and her soul within has joy in God with devotion, and liking, and bidding him good-morning.”<sup>2</sup>

Rolle's sources have not as yet, I believe, been thoroughly explored by any editor, and for this again a

<sup>1</sup> *Minor Works*, p. 153.

<sup>2</sup> *Form of Perfect Living*, etc., p. 116.



canon of his writings is necessary. Thus, to take an example, in the *Daily Work* the Fathers of the Church and of the Desert are quoted plentifully, whereas in the *Fire of Love* the obvious quotations are very few. Nevertheless, certain influences can be discerned at work throughout Rolle. Richard of St Victor is traceable, as also are St Augustine, St Bernard, and St Gregory.

Like his followers in English religious life Rolle had a very deep devotion to the holy Name and to the Passion. Indeed, his meditation on the Passion, which has often been printed and quoted, though it is only a development of a theme found elsewhere—as in the *Ancren Riwele*—is perhaps the finest expression of that theme in English, and one of the best examples of Rolle's style. It is worth comparing this little treatise with the many similar meditations on the Passion which have been written since his day. Of the merely pictorial ones few, if any, are superior to his, for Rolle is always successful in avoiding false or strained sentiment, insignificant realism, and far-fetched symbolism.

The general reader will find Rolle at his best and most typical in the *Fire of Love* and *Mending of Life*. Of the minor works the little essay on Prayer is very attractive, as is also, in a different way, the *Meditation on the Passion*. The *Form of Perfect Living*, written for the nun Margaret Kirkby, is very like the *Mending of Life*. *Our Daily Work*, though interesting in many respects and spiritually valuable, has little mystical teaching, and, indeed, little of Rolle's genuine flavour. It is far more like the *Ancren Riwele*, to which it would seem to have been indebted.

#### IV

#### THE CLOUD OF UNKNOWNING

WE have now to consider the writings of a religious genius who has attracted far less notice than Rolle, but who has some claims to be considered as the most subtle and original spiritual writer in the English language. The *Cloud of Unknowing*, the most considerable of a group of treatises which it is usual to attribute to a single author, bears neither in itself nor in its manuscript tradition any precise indications as to the name, date, calling, or dwelling-place of its author. As regards his name, no single suggestion has yet been made which has the slightest degree of probability—a somewhat extraordinary circumstance, when the power and immediate popularity of the work are considered, and one which lends some countenance to the suggestion that the writer desired of set purpose to remain unknown. As regards his date, while on the one hand the language and possible references to Rolle,<sup>1</sup> would seem to preclude an earlier date than 1300, the other limit is fixed by the existence of the treatise in a fourteenth-century manuscript, and by reminiscences of its matter being found in Hilton, who died in 1396. Consequently, the *Cloud* is commonly assigned to the early part of the second half of the fourteenth century, after Rolle, and before Hilton.<sup>2</sup> The writer's calling is equally unknown. There is no decisive internal

<sup>1</sup> Dom Noetinger, *Le Nuage de l'Inconnaissance*, Preface, p. 7. The reminiscences are of Rolle, *Fire of Love*, ch. xiv ff., and are found in ch. xl and ch. xlviii of the *Cloud*.

<sup>2</sup> See below, p. 124.

evidence to show that he was a priest—though this is generally and probably rightly assumed—or that he was a religious—though this also is usually taken for granted. His latest English editor favours the view that he was a country parson.<sup>1</sup> With such a dearth of evidence no theory can do more than reflect a personal feeling, and if any opinion must be given here, it would be that some passages of the *Cloud* could only have been written by one who was living or who had lived among a religious community. Such vague and negative conclusions are very unsatisfactory when the authorship of such a work of genius is in question, and it may be hoped that the systematic examination of the manuscripts in libraries throughout the country which is year by year proceeding will in time produce some definite documentary evidence.

When we turn from the external circumstances of the unknown writer's life to his spiritual and mental characteristics, we are brought face to face with a very striking figure. The *Cloud* and its companions are, at least on the surface, and have always been hailed as being, an example—and the only English Catholic example—of the classical intellectual mysticism of Plato, Plotinus, and Dionysius.<sup>2</sup> It is not merely that one of the treatises is a translation of the *Mystical Theology*, and that Dionysius is continually appealed to and quoted. Besides this, all the language and the whole conception of prayer is, at least on the surface, Dionysian. All this is very true, and has often been said. Nevertheless, it may be that this aspect of the *Cloud* has been over-emphasized, and that a verbal resem-

<sup>1</sup> Dom Justin McCann, the *Cloud of Unknowing*, Introduction, p. xii. Burns Oates and Washbourne, 1924.

<sup>2</sup> Vide E. Underhill, the *Cloud of Unknowing*, Introduction, p. 5. Watkins, 1912.

blance has too often been assumed to carry with it a kinship of thought.

Naturally, on such a question, much will depend on the view we take of Dionysius and his mysticism; but here we can only assume as correct the point of view outlined in a previous chapter. There we suggested that the fundamental difference between Platonic mysticism and Christian contemplation lay in the former being exclusively concerned with the intelligence, while the latter assigned a large part to the activities of the will. To the neo-Platonist the temporal can be annihilated by the mind's vision of the eternal, and all can be seen good. The contemplative can rise by his own powers, and with assured success, away from the common crowd. The vision is attained, not given. It is attained by the mind in abstraction, not by the pure and loving heart; it is aristocratic, seen by the philosopher, not by the simple Christian; it attains to God the Absolute and disregards our Lord: it is in a way almost a secret, almost a trick, not the spontaneous work of the whole personality. With what truth could this be said of the doctrine of the *Cloud*?

It may, indeed, be granted that the language, and therefore the thought, of the *Cloud* is in places so difficult to follow, at least at the first reading, that we can hardly escape asking ourselves whether this is not because the doctrine contained in it is novel or esoteric. Does not the *Cloud* suppose and encourage the existence—as Plato and Denis had done—of an inner circle of finer minds, an intellectual aristocracy? The answer surely is that the *Cloud* supposes nothing of the sort. The writer makes no such claim for himself, and his writings are capable of a simple interpretation. And first, in the *Epistle of Privy Counsel*, written, as has been pointed out, as an apology for

the *Cloud*, the author is emphatic that there is nothing intellectually difficult in his teaching, and that the scholars of his day who found him deep were, in fact, reading into his words a philosophical meaning that he never intended them to bear. His defence cannot be given more clearly than in his own words.

“ This [*i.e.*, his teaching] is little mastery for to do or to think, if it were bidden to the lewdest man or woman that liveth in the commonest natural wit in this life, as me-thinketh. And therefore softly, and smilingly, and mourningly I marvel me sometimes when I hear some men say—I mean not simple lewd men and women, but clerks and men of great knowledge—that my writing to thee and to others is so hard and so high, so curious and so quaint, that scarcely it may be conceived of the subtlest clerk or witted man or woman in this life, as they say.”<sup>1</sup>

These words are weighty enough, but he goes on to say that the intellectual effort demanded of his disciples is little more than that which is “ plainly proper to the lewdest cow or to the most unreasonable beast.”<sup>2</sup> Here surely is no gnostic or platonizer speaking.

Next, it is clearly his intention that his teaching shall—though with caution—be scattered broadcast like seed, “ get it whoso get may.” Many, nay most, will be unable, but some will hear and understand the words which are meaningless to others, and it may even happen that when they read the *Cloud* the touch of grace will come.

“ And since it is so that God of his goodness stirreth and toucheth divers souls diversely . . . who dare then say that God stirreth not thee in this writing or any other like unto thee that it shall either read or hear ?”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Epistle of Privy Counsel*, ch. i. The references in this chapter follow McCann, *op. cit.*

<sup>2</sup> *Epistle of Privy Counsel*, *loc. cit.* (lewd = ignorant).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. vii.

The only condition is grace, and that works upon no natural endowment. Why then is the doctrine of the *Cloud* difficult to grasp at a first reading? The answer to such a question would seem to raise issues of wide range, covering much Christian mystical literature, which can only be briefly indicated here. It is, first, of supreme importance for Christians to remind themselves, and for others to realize, that the special ways of God's providence are incomprehensible to those who have had no experience of its working. The spiritual man, and he alone, discerneth all things; though it is sometimes possible for others to describe and analyze what he tells of, it is only by guesswork and by following a shadow of reality. This is reiterated, not merely by every mystical writer throughout the centuries, but by all Christian theologians. If it seem to some a begging of the question, inasmuch as it assumes the existence of God and the possibility of his working in uncommon ways, I can only answer that it is one of the assumptions that must ever divide the believer from the unbeliever when a matter of theology is under discussion.

Secondly, there is the difficulty of language. It is an historical fact that, whatever the origins of speech may have been, words are created or adopted to suit ideas. A spoken or written word has no intelligible value as a medium between two minds unless there is a previous agreement on an idea which that word represents. It is easy to show how the growth of a science, an art, a philosophy or a literature has created and given precision to a vocabulary, which is ultimately able to indicate shades of meaning to a layman which could hardly have been put into words by a proficient fifty years before. Clearly, mysticism is at a great disadvantage here as compared with the most complicated science. Mystics claim—and few will deny their claim—

that they have passed through something very different from any ordinary intellectual experience, whether or no their ecstasy be regarded as supernatural. Yet when they try to express themselves they must use common words or no words at all, and of what use are words to which they attach one idea, and to which those who are without their experience attach another? Moreover, the number of those who have attained even the lowest grades of contemplation is small; the number of those who have endeavoured to communicate their experience smaller still, so small, in fact, that they could be enumerated without any great difficulty. Yet they are the only writers who are competent to develop the technical language of their science, and, in fact, all the technical terms used by writers on mysticism are borrowed from the writings of half a dozen celebrated saints. The synthetic study of mysticism, so common to-day, and the multiplication by printing of the books of the great medieval mystics, may in time bring it about that future saints will agree in attaching fixed concepts to fixed terms. The process has already begun, and almost all Western contemplatives, at least within the Church, express themselves in the terms hit upon first by St John of the Cross; but the process is slow, and of course had not begun in the Middle Ages. This poverty of terms, and the natural tendency in an uncritical age to borrow from any previous writer who had described experiences at all similar, will, I believe, go far to explain many seemingly Platonic or pantheistic expressions in the writings of Catholic contemplatives.

Lastly, there is the weakness of the human intellect to reckon with—that is to say, of the strictly logical or ratiocinative powers as opposed to the other faculties of the mind. The act of intellection, as St Thomas pointed out,

is different from that of reasoning.<sup>1</sup> The latter is a means to an end, a weaker way; and words, written or thought, are more clumsy instruments still. The inadequacy of reasoning to attain ultimate truth is emphasized by almost all modern schools of philosophy; indeed, many would go far further in this than a Catholic could follow. We should, however, be willing to use the terms intuition and experience to express mental processes which sometimes take the place of discursive reasoning, and though their results may be tested and judged by reason, their actual operation cannot be expressed in words. Of such a kind, beyond all others, is the mystical experience. Even if it is not admitted that it surpasses the natural powers of a created soul, yet it is certainly on a plane of cognition where forms of reasoning and words based on these forms are inadmissible.

Yet even if all this be granted, it is still permissible to make what we can of the doctrine of the *Cloud*, for we have seen that it was intended for all of good will, though its author adds a warning to stop the mouths of those who do not understand.

“ My meaning is good : if thou canst not understand it, lay it beside thee till God come and teach thee. Do then so, and hurt thee not.”<sup>2</sup>

The *Cloud of Unknowing*, then, and its companion treatises, deal primarily with an advanced state of prayer. Ascetical and dogmatic theology are scarcely treated of at all. The prayer they describe is not for all.

“ I charge thee . . . thou neither read it, write it, nor speak it, nor yet suffer it to be read, written, or spoken, by any other or to any other . . . unless . . . to such a one

<sup>1</sup> St Th., *Cont. Gent.*, I, cap. 57.

<sup>2</sup> *Cloud*, ch. xxxiv.



as hath in a true will and by a whole intent purposed him to be a perfect follower of Christ. And that not only in active living, but also in the sovereignest point of contemplative living.”<sup>1</sup>

Yet the few for whom it is written need no qualification besides a deep desire to follow Christ.

“ If thou ask me who shall work thus, I answer thee: all that have forsaken the world in a true will and also that give themselves not to active life, but to that life that is called contemplative life.”<sup>2</sup>

If they do their part, God will do his.

“ Do on then fast, I pray thee. Look now forwards and let the backwards be. . . . And if thou be willing to do this, thou needest but meekly to set upon him with prayer, and soon will he help thee. Set on then: let see how thou bearest thee. He is full ready, and doth but abide thee.”<sup>3</sup>

Lest there should be any misunderstanding, he adds in the *Epistle of Privy Counsel* the signs by which a soul may know whether the call has come to her.

The first step and its consequences are extraordinarily similar to the teaching of St John of the Cross.

“ And do that in thee is to forget all the creatures that ever God made and the works of them, so that thy thought or thy desire be not directed or stretched to any of them, neither in general nor in special. . . . At the first time when thou dost it, thou findest but a darkness and, as it were, a cloud of unknowing. . . . This darkness and this cloud, howsoever thou dost, are betwixt thee and thy God.”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Prologue to *Cloud*, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Ch. ii.

<sup>2</sup> *Cloud*, ch. xxvii.

<sup>4</sup> Ch. iii.

Any comparison between one mystic and another is apt to be mistaken, but the similarity between this state of the soul and that described as the Dark Night of the Senses by St John will strike every reader. In the *Cloud* it is quite clear that not the intellectual abstraction, but the purified action of the will, is the goal to be aimed at.

“ For why, he may well be loved, but not thought. By love may he be gotten and holden, but by thought never.”<sup>1</sup>

In fact, the illumination of the speculative intellect is hardly suggested throughout the *Cloud*.

When engaged in this prayer, or this “ work,” as the author of the *Cloud* always prefers to call it, as if anticipating an outcry against Quietism, the thought of any creature, even the holiest, is to be rejected, not because it is in itself evil, or incapable of raising thoughts that would at another time be good, but because it hinders the purity of this kind of prayer. Beginners are given some hint how they may banish such imaginations.

“ Try to look as it were over their shoulders, seeking another thing: the which thing is God, enclosed in a cloud of unknowing. . . . Cower then down under them as a caitiff and coward overcome in battle, and think that it is but folly to strive any longer with them; and therefore thou yieldest thyself to God in the hands of thine enemies. . . . This . . . meriteth to have God himself mightily descending . . . so as to take thee up, and cherishingly dry thy ghostly eyes, as the father doth his child that is on the point to perish under the mouths of wild swine or mad biting bears.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ch. vi.

<sup>2</sup> Ch. xxxii.

Instead of them the true contemplative is to lift himself up in blind stirrings towards God. Just as

“ a man or a woman, affrighted by any sudden chance of fire, or of a man’s death . . . suddenly in the height of his spirit he is driven in haste and in need to cry or to pray for help—not in many words . . . [but] he bursteth up hideously with a great spirit, and crieth but one little word of one syllable: such as is this word FIRE, or this word OUT !”<sup>1</sup>

So the soul will cry to God, conscious of its sin and its nothing, “ Sin, sin, sin, Out, out, out !”<sup>2</sup> Yet such a prayer is not made with the lips, but with unspoken desires of the heart, flying up to God as sparks fly from the burning coals, and as many and swift as they.

He is very insistent—and rightly so, for in things that must be described in material figures of speech it is very necessary to safeguard against their being understood in a material or psychological sense—that there is nothing bodily about his teaching. The abstraction and the concentration and the uplifting of the soul are not acts of the bodily or mental powers.

“ And therefore for God’s love beware in this work, and strain not thy heart in thy breast over-rudely nor out of measure . . . surely such rude strainings be full hard fastened in the fleshliness of bodily feeling, and full dry from any wetting of grace . . . and therefore beware of this beastly rudeness, and learn to love listly with a soft and demure behaviour, as well in body as in soul. And abide courteously and meekly the will of our Lord, and snatch not over-hastily, as it were a greedy greyhound, though thou hunger never so sore.”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ch. xxxvii.

<sup>2</sup> Ch. xl.

<sup>3</sup> Ch. xlvi.

In the same way, any reference to lifting the mind up, or to the use of definite words in prayer, is not to be taken in a material sense.

“ And therefore lean meekly to this blind stirring of love in thine heart. I mean not in thy bodily heart, but in thy ghostly heart, which is thy will. And beware that thou conceive not bodily that which is said ghostly. [Young disciples] read and hear well said that they should leave outward working with their wits, and work inwards: and because they know not which is inward working, they work wrong. For they turn their bodily wits inwards into their body against the course of nature; and they strain them, as though they would see inwards with their bodily eyes.”<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, too, all sensible devotion is to be distrusted and referred to a director.

“ Thou shalt in nowise give full credence to them [sensible sweetness] until thou be certified of them, either within wonderfully by the Spirit of God, or else without by counsel of some discreet Father.”<sup>2</sup>

Two short passages describe what the writer of the *Cloud* means by prayer better than any analysis.

“ Look that nothing remain of thy working mind but a naked intent stretching unto God, not clothed in any special thought of God in himself, how he is in himself, or in any of his works, but only that he is as he is.<sup>3</sup> And well is this work likened to a sleep. For as in a sleep the use of the bodily wits is ceased, that the body may take his full rest in feeding and strengthening of the bodily nature: right so in this ghostly sleep the wanton questions of the wild ghostly wits and all imaginative reasons be fast bound and utterly voided, so that the silly soul may

<sup>1</sup> Ch. li.

<sup>2</sup> Ch. xlviiii.

<sup>3</sup> *Epistle*, ch. i.

softly sleep and rest in the lovely beholding of God as he is in full feeding and strengthening of the ghostly nature.”<sup>1</sup>

It would seem clear that the state of prayer described here is the same as that called the Prayer of Quiet by St Teresa, and in part, but in part only, the same as Father Baker’s Prayer of Aspirations. In modern spiritual writers it is usually known as the Prayer of Simplicity. In the scheme of St John of the Cross, it would be the prayer corresponding to the Dark Night of the Senses. Although the author of the *Cloud* gives no subdivisions of the “work,” three stages are indicated clearly enough. There is, in the first place, a degree that has not left active contemplation far behind. The beginner is told to beat upon the cloud of darkness, and though, as in the extract above, we are warned not to take materially what is written spiritually, some degree of conscious effort is surely intended. This stage is succeeded by the one described in the last quotation, where all effort of mind and will has apparently ceased, though in reality it is only that these efforts have reached a simplicity which renders them imperceptible. Finally, some kind of mystical experience and illumination of the intellect is rarely hinted at.

“Then will he [God] sometimes peradventure send out a beam of ghostly light, piercing this cloud of unknowing that is betwixt thee and him, and show thee some of his secrets, the which man may not and cannot speak. Then shalt thou feel thine affection inflamed with the fire of his love, far more than I can tell thee, or may or will at this time. For of that work that pertaineth only to God dare I not take upon me to speak with my blabber-

<sup>1</sup> *Epistle*, ch. vi.

ing fleshly tongue: and shortly to say, although I durst, I would not.<sup>1</sup>

“ It may be said in a manner that in this time God and thou be not two but one in spirit—insomuch that thou or another that feeleth the perfection of this work may, by reason of that onehead, truly be called a God, as Scripture witnesseth.”<sup>2</sup>

Such allusions are, however, few in number. The *Cloud of Unknowing* is not concerned to any extent with the highest experiences of the mystical life.

There is always a danger that mystics may underrate, or at least understate, the importance of institutional religion. Still more often do interested critics charge them with such understatements. Hence it is important to make it clear that the author of the *Cloud* everywhere takes for granted a doctrinal and sacramental basis to religion. He assumes that all contemplatives will begin by receiving sacramental absolution.

“ But if thou ask me when they shall work in this work, then I answer thee and say: Not till they have cleansed their conscience of all their special deeds of sin done before, according to the common ordinance of Holy Church.”<sup>3</sup>

Elsewhere passing references to the Redemption and to purgatory<sup>4</sup> show that all the framework of the Christian scheme of things is presumed, though it must be granted that he is not Christocentric in his piety in the way in which the other English mystics of his century are.

This attitude of mind is doubtless largely owing to his wish to compile a monograph, so to speak, on a particular

<sup>1</sup> *Cloud*, ch. xxvi.

<sup>3</sup> Ch. xxviii.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. lxvii.

<sup>4</sup> Ch. iii.

state of the spiritual life. Only very occasionally does he give some hint that he has been at all preoccupied by the great problems that have perplexed so many mystics. The author of the *Cloud* is no pantheist. All his exhortation is to lift up our being to God, who is an entirely separate being. Nor does he err at all in the direction of acosmism. The world is not evil.

“ Yet in all this sorrow he desireth not to un-be: for that were devil’s madness and despite unto God. But he liketh right well to be.”<sup>1</sup>

Nor is the body evil.

“ Truly I meant not thus, and God forbid that I should separate what God hath coupled, the body and the spirit. For God would be served with body and with soul, both together, as seemly is, and reward man his meed in bliss both in body and in soul.”<sup>2</sup>

Nor is there any confusion of essence between man and God. This point is made in the clearest manner possible, as if to forestall objections.

“ For he is thy being, and in him thou art what thou art, not only by cause and by being, but also he is in thee both thy cause and thy being. And therefore think of God in thy work as thou dost on thyself, and on thyself as thou dost on God: that he is as he is and thou art as thou art; so that thy thought be not scattered nor separated, but oned in him that is all; evermore saving this difference betwixt him and thee, that he is thy being and thou not his.”<sup>3</sup>

Very few readers who have a taste for serious religious thought and an appreciation of style can have failed to be deeply impressed by the language of the *Cloud* and the

<sup>1</sup> Ch. xliv.

<sup>2</sup> Ch. xlvi.

<sup>3</sup> *Epistle*, ch. i.

austere beauty of the mind that finds expression there. The treatise and its companions are, indeed, a masterpiece of deep thought expressed in dignified words. Of the two longest works, the *Cloud*, composed some time before the *Epistle*, is perhaps its superior in originality and incisiveness, but there is a mellowness and warmth about the later essay, and an entire absence of that singularity, to call it by no harder name, which occasionally makes itself felt in the *Cloud*. Only very rarely are we reminded when reading that the writer is medieval, and in almost every case passages which we feel to be tedious or harsh are found to be borrowings from older books. In this respect, as in many others, his latest English editor has done his author good service. He shows that the somewhat artificial divisions of the spiritual life are from Richard of St Victor, and that the description of the antics of those who go about to be contemplatives without any real call, which not unreasonably offended Miss Underhill,<sup>1</sup> is equally the result of borrowing.<sup>2</sup> From Richard of St Victor comes also the long and forced allegorizing of the making of the ark by Moses, Aaron, and Beseleel. Indeed, almost the only undignified passage that has hitherto not been traced to an older source is the curious paragraph on necromancy.<sup>3</sup> What the unknown writer does not borrow is his style, and to appreciate this the whole book should be read. A few extracts may be given.

“ Take good, gracious God as he is, plat and plain as a plaster, and lay it to thy sick soul. Or, if I shall say otherwise, bear up thy sick self as thou art and try for to

<sup>1</sup> *Cloud*, ed. Underhill, p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> *Cloud*, ed. McCann, pp. 128, 149.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. lv.



touch by desire good, gracious God as he is, the touching of whom is endless health, by witness of the woman in the Gospel, saying thus, ' If I touch but the hem of his clothing, I shall be safe.' Much more then shalt thou be made whole of thy sickness by this high heavenly touching of his own being. Step up then stoutly and taste of that treacle.<sup>1</sup>

" The which natural wit, be it never so subtle and holy, may be called (in comparison of this high ghostly wisdom) but feigned folly formed in fantasy, and far from the very certainty when the ghostly sun shineth, as the darkness of the moonshine in a mist at midwinter night from the brightness of the sunbeam in the clearest time of midsummer day."<sup>2</sup>

Such passages, though they may give some idea of the range of the *Cloud*, and show that constantly recurring device, borrowed from a previous century, of alliterative consonants, cannot show the peculiar force of the short phrases that come again and again, with almost startling suddenness; but a few of them can be isolated from their context.

" For virtue is nought else but an ordered and a measured affection, plainly directed unto God for himself. . . . As thus, for example, may be seen in one virtue or two instead of all the other; and well may these two virtues be meekness and charity. For whoso might get these two clearly, he needeth no more: for why, he hath all.<sup>3</sup>

" And if a man will but see written in the Gospel the wonderful and special love that our Lord had to her [Mary Magdalen] . . . he shall find that our Lord might not suffer any man or woman—yea, not her own sister—to speak a word against her, but that he answered for her

<sup>1</sup> *Epistle*, ch. ii (treacle = medicine).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. v.

<sup>3</sup> *Cloud*, ch. xii.

himself. Yea, and what more? He blamed Simon the Leper in his own house, because he thought against her. This was great love: this was surpassing love.<sup>1</sup>

“And this I say in confusion of their error who say that it is not lawful for men to set them to serve God in contemplative life, except they be secure beforehand of their bodily necessities. For they say that ‘God sendeth the cow, but not by the horn.’ And truly they say wrong of God, as they well know.”<sup>2</sup>

Most moving of all, perhaps, are the words with which the *Cloud of Unknowing* ends.

“For not what thou art, nor what thou hast been, seeth God with his merciful eyes, but what thou wouldst be.”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Cloud*, ch. xxii.

<sup>2</sup> Ch. xxiii.

<sup>3</sup> Ch. lxxv.

## V

## WALTER HILTON

THE author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*, who was widely read throughout England in the generation which succeeded Richard Rolle, was in his turn followed by a spiritual writer of a very different temper. When reading the *Cloud* we feel that we are coming under the influence of a strong, original, and independent personality; Hilton is far gentler and less aloof. Although no one without very deep and varied spiritual experience could have written the *Ladder of Perfection*, we do not feel when reading it that we are hearing the details of a single life, any more than we do when reading the *Imitation of Christ* or the *Introduction à la Vie Dévote*. We think rather of the wisdom and holiness of the writer's spirit, and of the care which has gone to the moulding of the whole. The *Cloud* flows on, we almost imagine, as the thoughts first came to the mind; the *Ladder* is strictly methodical, and is the outcome of deliberate planning.

Walter Hilton, it would seem certain, was a canon of Thurgarton in Nottinghamshire, and died on March 24, 1395-6.<sup>1</sup> It was long thought that he was a Carthusian, but this view has been abandoned as resting on no firm evidence and as contradicted by what small evidence exists. He is called a Carthusian in some manuscripts,

<sup>1</sup> Noetinger, *Scala Perfectionis*, Preface, p. 8. For an interesting description of Thurgarton as it is to-day, see Miss Underhill's edition, p. viii.

probably owing to his admiration for Carthusians, and to the appreciation of his works which is known to have existed in various Charterhouses from an early date. Indeed, this popularity of his writings is most striking, for some of his works reached the south of France in the century following his death, passed on and copied from Charterhouse to Charterhouse.

Hilton, like Dame Julian, who was probably familiar with his writings, was thus a contemporary of Chaucer, and like her should be studied by those who consider that in the pictures of the Parson, the Monk, and the Friar, and in the moral teaching of the Parson's Tale they have sounded the depth and breadth of contemporary religion. Besides the *Ladder of Perfection* he wrote many other spiritual works, and treatises by him, or ascribed to him, exist in manuscript in college libraries of Oxford and Cambridge, in the British Museum, and in several libraries in France. Beyond this, his fame and abilities have caused him to be put forward as an English candidate for the authorship of the *Imitation of Christ*, though the arguments for the attribution are so slender that this view can never be said to have held its ground, especially since the date of his death has been ascertained. It may be that some of his unpublished writings would add to his reputation, but as most of them are still inaccessible, and as we shall probably be right in assuming that the immediate popularity of the *Ladder* above all the rest was not due to any other cause than its superiority, the review of his teaching to be attempted here will be confined to the *Ladder* and the small treatise *To a Man of Secular Estate* usually appended to it in modern editions.

The *Ladder of Perfection* was originally written, like the *Cloud* and much of Richard Rolle, for the guidance of a

single friend of the author, though, as is clear enough, Hilton was aware that his words would go further. This friend was apparently an anchoress, though she is called a religious and is bound to the breviary and lives in a monastery.<sup>1</sup> Most probably she was a nun who had proceeded to the stricter life of an anchoress. The *Ancren Riwle* shows us that many came to seek advice from such recluses, and Hilton gives instruction how she is to behave herself in such conversations.<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting what a high level of spiritual endeavour this supposes in the world at the time, as it is also noted by many how often the conversation tended to become mere gossip. But if the *Ladder* is thus, like the *Cloud*, a book of advice written for one already in religion and anxious to progress, the resemblance goes no further. The *Cloud* is almost a monograph on a special state of prayer, and even this single state is treated with such individuality as to appear almost as a creation of the writer. The *Ladder* is an attempt to embrace the whole extent of the spiritual life and its duties; the acquiring of virtues by mortification, and the infusion of virtues by God's action. Hilton is heir to all the wisdom of the Church in the ages before him: the Old and New Testaments, the great Western Fathers St Augustine and St Gregory, St Bernard, and, above all, St Thomas and the scholastics. On the other hand, he is almost the first to give a methodical and reasonable analysis of the contemplative life and the preparation needful for it, entirely free from arbitrary divisions of the powers of the soul and allegorical inter-

<sup>1</sup> *Scale of Perfection*, Book I, chs. xvi, xxvii, and lv: Burns Oates and Washbourne, 1927. The references in this chapter are to this edition.

<sup>2</sup> Book I, ch. lxxxiii.

pretations of the Old Testament. We have seen that in the *Cloud* are recognizable the Prayer of Aspiration of Father Baker and later writers, and the Dark Night of the Senses of St John of the Cross. Hilton anticipates the great Spanish mystics even more strikingly. His map of the approach to Jerusalem, the vision of peace, and his treatment of the various temptations that occur are extraordinarily similar to St John's account of the Ascent of Mount Carmel. Perhaps this is not to be wondered at, for they are both striving to describe the growth of the soul in holiness, and there is no reason to suppose this to be of a different character in widely separated ages and countries, but St John and St Teresa are often spoken of as not merely having cast new light on the spiritual life—for this they certainly did—but as originating a type of spirituality as novel as was the theological system of the early scholastics.

We have compared the *Ladder* to the *Introduction* of St Francis of Sales, but the resemblance is in the dispassionate tone of the whole, not in the subject-matter. The *Introduction* was written primarily for those who desired to live a devout Christian life in the world; the *Ladder* is written entirely for contemplatives, and in spite of much moral teaching which may go to the heart of all Christians, and of much else that is not at first sight mystical, does, in fact, contain a considerable amount of what may be called technical contemplative doctrine. The book is divided sharply into two parts. These two parts deal with two different stages in a soul's progress towards perfection, two stages in its reformation into the divine: the first, to quote the phrase that Hilton has made his own, the "reformation in faith"; the second, the "reformation in feeling." The phrases used have been

superseded by more significant ones in later spiritual writings, and it is not at first clear to the reader what precise shade of meaning Hilton himself attached to them, but it is probably not straining his meaning to say that they correspond very closely to the degrees described by St John of the Cross in his *Ascent of Mount Carmel* and *Dark Night of the Soul*. Indeed, so near is the resemblance, not only in matter but often in words as well, that had Hilton been a Spaniard he would surely have been quoted as a primary source for St John.<sup>1</sup>

In order to arrive at an understanding of his division of the spiritual life we may consider his own words.

“ This reforming is on two manners; one is in Faith only, another is in Faith and Feeling. The first may be had easily and in short time, the second not so, but through length of time and much spiritual pains. The first is only of beginning and profiting souls and of active men. The second is of perfect men and of contemplative souls.”<sup>2</sup>

This first reform in faith is, in fact, that accomplished by the soul in actively ridding itself of vices by the help of grace. In this process the struggle is regarded by Hilton as active and largely external. All Catholic theologians hold that the growth of perfection is the growth in union between the human will and the divine. The human will as such—that is to say, in so far as it is freely acting distinct from the divine will—is sinful and

<sup>1</sup> Book II, ch. xxvii. Miss Underhill, in her valuable Introduction, adduces manuscript evidence to show that Book I was written some time before Book II and under different circumstances. Research will probably add further to this evidence in the near future, but I have not thought it necessary to differentiate Hilton's earlier and later teaching in my sketch.

<sup>2</sup> Book II, ch. v.

nothing. Thus the human soul, once justified and thereafter acting with nothing but the divine *concursum*, is bound to act displeasingly to God, and it is therefore correct to say that a human action in which no divine element can be traced is a deordination. With this doctrine in mind, it is permissible to say that the more meritorious an action is, the less is it the action of a human will, though of course from another point of view the actions of a perfect soul are more intensely willed than are the most selfish and concentrated acts of the imperfect. Hilton takes up this train of thought and speaks of the early stages of the soul's struggle towards perfection as if it were a struggle of the naked human will. Hilton certainly neither intended to be, nor was, a Pelagian; it is the sharp division of the spiritual progress into two parts, while the reality may be as continuous as time, that causes the trouble. The reformation in faith is looked upon as the attempts of a soul aided by grace to conform itself to what it believes, but sees not; the reformation in feeling is that accomplished when the soul is possessed by God who then works in and upon it, so to say, not through or by it. As he says,

“Thou must understand that there be two kinds of humility; one is had by working of reason; another is felt by the special gift of love. Both are of love, but the former love worketh by and with the reason of the soul, and the latter love worketh by itself. The first is unperfect, the other is perfect.<sup>1</sup>

“There are some lovers of God that make themselves to love God as it were by their own might. . . . [But] a soul that hath the gift of love through gracious beholding of Jesus . . . thinketh herself to be right nought, and

<sup>1</sup> Book II, ch. xxxvii.



that she can do right nought of herself; but as it were a dead thing, only depending and borne up by the mercy of God.”<sup>1</sup>

Hilton's division of the spiritual life might at first sight appear to be no more than a separation of two common types of religious experience. Many, perhaps most, devout Christians live their lives in accordance with God's commands, both in the religious and moral order, but they are on the earth and God is in his heaven. They are moulding themselves after a pattern seen as something quite distinct from themselves. For others, it is this world that has almost ceased to have a reality of its own. They feel it and themselves to exist only as the handiwork of their divine Lord. He is to them far more real than those nearest them. Their ideal is not separate from them, but present within them.

These two classes, however, do not fully correspond to Hilton's divisions. His language makes it abundantly clear that those whom he calls reformed in feeling are more technically mystics or contemplatives than are the second class of religious persons alluded to above. They are those who have attained to at least the first degree of mystical prayer, where the soul's activity ceases to be perceptible and its place is gradually taken by the divine activity, at first unseen in the dark night, but realized more and more as the soul advances. Hilton's reform in faith seems, in fact, to be what St John of the Cross calls active purgation. With these considerations as preface, we may go on to consider what is implied by reformation in feeling. Hilton describes it briefly by the following comparison:

“ I shall show these three manners of reforming of a soul by example of three men standing in the light of the

<sup>1</sup> Book II, ch. xxxv.

sun. Of the which one is blind, another can see, but hath his eyes stopped, the third looketh forth with full sight. The blind man hath no manner of knowledge that he is in the sun, but believeth it if an honest man tell him so. . . . That other man seeth a light of the sun, but seeth it not clearly what it is. . . . The third man [the soul in heaven] believeth it not, for he seeth it fully."<sup>1</sup>

Here it might seem that the "feeling" of which he writes would be expressed more clearly by the word "realization," and that he means not what we should call experimental or mystical knowledge of divine things, still less everything that would be comprehended by the modern phrase "religious experience," but a settled conviction rooted in something more intimate than an act of faith. I say that he might not seem to mean knowledge acquired by the mystical experience, but his words elsewhere make it clear that it is to this that he refers. More than once he uses language which is strikingly similar to that of other mystics when they are speaking of knowledge acquired in the passive union. Thus he writes of the man reformed in feeling:

"He seeth him not what he is, for that can no creature do in heaven nor in earth. Nor seeth him as he is, for that sight is only in the bliss of heaven. But he seeth him that he is an unchangeable being. . . . This seeth a soul . . . not . . . through might of his naked reason; but he seeth him in understanding, that is, comforted and lighted by the gift of the Holy Ghost. . . . This sight, though it be but short and little, is so worthy and so mighty, that it draweth and ravisheth all the affections of the soul from beholding and minding of all earthly things

<sup>1</sup> Book II, ch. xxxii. The three manners are the active, contemplative, and heavenly.

to itself. . . . Some have it little, short, and seldom; and some longer, clearer, and oftener; and some have it, best of all, clearest and longest, according to the abounding of grace, and yet all these have the gift of Contemplation. . . . This manner of knowing of Jesus, as I understand, is the opening of heaven to the eye of the soul, of which holy men speak in their writings.”<sup>1</sup>

And again:

“A sighing soul to see the face of Jesus, when it is touched through especial grace of the Holy Ghost, it is suddenly changed and turned from the state that it was in, into another manner of feeling. It is wonderfully separated and drawn first into itself . . . and then it is clean from all the filth of sin . . . so that there remains no middle thing or impediment betwixt Jesus and the soul, and then it is in spiritual rest. . . . Of this silence it is said in the Apocalypse thus: Silence was made in heaven as it were half an hour. By heaven is meant a pure soul lifted up through grace from earthly love to heavenly conversation, and so it is silence. But forasmuch as that silence cannot last whole continually by reason of the corruption of bodily nature, therefore it is compared to the time of half an hour.”<sup>2</sup>

A recent editor of Hilton has suggested that his two degrees of the Christian life are comparable to, if not derived from, the Alexandrian division between faith and gnosis as found in Clement and Origen.<sup>3</sup> I cannot think that this is so. The peculiar teaching of those two great Fathers—which has not been received into the general tradition of the Church—was based upon the great part attributed by them to the speculative intellect

<sup>1</sup> Book II, ch. xxxii.

<sup>2</sup> Book II, ch. xl.

<sup>3</sup> Noetinger, *op. cit.*, Book II, p. 75.

in the Christian's life. Greek philosophy was regarded by them as a component part, together with revelation, of the complete deposit of doctrine. That is to say, the intellect—the active intellect—was regarded as capable of an indefinite advance towards ultimate truth, and a soul's progress towards holiness could be judged by its progress in gnosis. It is not here intended to criticize such a view, but only to record a conviction that it has nothing in common with Hilton's. Hilton does, indeed, occasionally speak of the contemplative soul understanding Truth, but nowhere does he give the impression that knowledge is virtue.

It is interesting to consider Hilton's chart of the spiritual life from a slightly different point of view, suggested by himself. Like all his countrymen in the fourteenth century, with the possible exception of the author of the *Cloud*, he is profoundly Christocentric.<sup>1</sup> The suggestion has sometimes been made that a mystic's attitude towards God made Man may be taken as one of the touchstones by which to test the genuineness of his contemplation, and some words of our Lord are quoted as leading towards such a mode of thought.<sup>2</sup> Hilton would certainly have subscribed to such an opinion. Our Lord Jesus is the centre of the contemplative's prayer as he is of the prayers of the least of those reformed in faith. The progress is merely one from a natural affection for his manhood to a supernatural realization of his divinity.

<sup>1</sup> Miss Underhill, in her Introduction, holds that Hilton's original standpoint was less Christocentric, under the influence of the *Cloud* and its companions, and that his devotion to the humanity of our Lord is a later corrective added to his earlier work.

<sup>2</sup> John xv 5-6.

“ The love of God is in three manner of ways. . . . The first cometh only through faith, without gracious imagination or spiritual knowing of God. . . . The second is that which a soul feeleth through faith and imagination of Jesus in his Manhood. The third love that a soul feeleth through spiritual sight of the Godhead in the humanity, as it may be seen here, is the best and most worthy, and that is perfect love.

“ I say not that we should refuse the Manhood of Jesus, and separate God from man; but thou shalt in Jesus Man behold, fear, admire, and love spiritually the Godhead, and so shalt thou, without separating them, love God in Man, and both God and man spiritually and fleshly.”<sup>1</sup>

Such a conception of the spiritual life is of course not original to Hilton, and although he clearly makes it his own, it is not so fully a part of his system as is the two-fold reformation; but it keeps him a long distance on the safe side in a clear insistence on personality, both human and divine, and far away from Pantheism or Deism.

Hilton, like Rolle and the *Cloud*, is emphatic that there is a great gulf between active and contemplative prayer, though, with St Gregory, he describes a “ mixed ” life. The necessary preparation for contemplation is reform in faith by the active acquiring of virtues, and to this, accordingly, Hilton devotes half his treatise. In language reminiscent of the *Cloud* he speaks of the necessity of destroying the image of sin in the soul.

“ And in doing thus [*i.e.*, lifting the mind to God], thou shalt find somewhat, but not Jesus whom thou seekest but only a naked remembrance of his name. But what then shalt thou find? Surely this: a dark and ill-favoured image of thine own soul. . . . This image,

<sup>1</sup> Book II, ch. xxx.

if thou behold it heedfully, is all inwrapped and clothed with black, stinking rage of sin, as pride, envy, anger, covetousness, gluttony, sloth, and luxury. This is not the image of Jesus, but the image of sin, which St Paul calleth a body of death.”<sup>1</sup>

He insists on the need for inward virtue, not outward acts merely.

“ It is no mastery to watch and fast till thy head ache; nor to run to Rome or Jerusalem on pilgrimage upon thy bare feet . . . nor to build hospitals. . . . But it is a mastery for a man to love his neighbour in charity.”<sup>2</sup>

All through he is exceedingly methodical, as in his definition of venial and mortal sins, his way of dealing with a scrupulous conscience,<sup>3</sup> with various divisions of prayer, and the means of resisting temptation, and he reiterates the necessity for solid virtue in words which all dilettante mystics should take to heart.

“ Whoso thinketh to attain to the working and to the full use of contemplation and not by this way—that is, by perfection of virtues and taking full heed thereto—cometh not in by the door, and therefore as a thief he shall be cast out.”<sup>4</sup>

In the course of his account of the spiritual ascent there occurs a stage deserving closer attention, the “ dark night.” As this expression has been rendered classic by St John of the Cross as one of the regular states of the higher contemplative life, it will be well to consider how far Hilton’s dark night may be equated with his, and first Hilton may be allowed to describe it in his own words. His first description of it comes immediately after the

<sup>1</sup> Book I, ch. lii.

<sup>3</sup> Book II, ch. xi.

<sup>2</sup> Book I, ch. lxv.

<sup>4</sup> Book I, ch. xcii.

well-known chapter where the soul's progress is compared to the stages of a pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

“ And now, what man perceiveth and seeth the love of this world to be false and failing, and therefore will forsake it and seek the love of Jesus, yet may he not for all that presently feel the love of him, but he must abide awhile in the night, for he cannot suddenly come from that one light to that other—that is, from the love of the world to the perfect love of God. This night is nought else but a forbearing and a withdrawing of the thought and of the soul from earthly things by great desire and yearning for to love and see and feel Jesus and spiritual things. . . . But this is a good light, and a light darkness . . . and it is an approach of the true day. . . . A soul may through grace be gathered into itself freely and wholly, and not be driven against its will, nor drawn down by force for to think or like or love, with cleaving of affection . . . to any earthly thing vainly; then thinketh the soul just nought, for then it thinketh of no earthly thing cleavingly. This is a rich nought, and this nought and this night is a great ease to the soul that desireth the love of Jesus; it is in ease as to the thoughts of any earthly thing, nevertheless it is full busy to think on him.”<sup>1</sup>

In this darkness there is an ever-increasing purgation from sin.

“ As death slayeth a living body and all its fleshly senses, right so the desire of the love of Jesus felt in this darkness slayeth all sins, all fleshly affections, and all unclean thoughts for the time, and then dost thou haste to draw near to Jerusalem.”<sup>2</sup>

It is necessary for all who would come to contemplation.

“ There may be many sundry ways and several works letting and leading sundry souls to contemplation; for

<sup>1</sup> Book II, ch. xxiv.

<sup>2</sup> Book II, ch. xxv.

according to divers disposings of men and after divers states . . . are these divers exercises in working. Nevertheless there is but one gate; for whatsoever exercise a soul useth, unless thereby he come to this knowing, and to an humble feeling of himself, and that is, that he be mortified and dead to the world, as to his love of it, and that he may feel himself sometimes in this restful darkness . . . he is not yet come to the reforming in feeling, nor hath he contemplation fully.”<sup>1</sup>

Yet this dark night is only a stage, and is followed by a daybreak, fitful at first, but growing clear and bright.

“Thou art not there [*i.e.*, at Jerusalem] yet, but by some small sudden lightnings that glide out of small caves from that City, thou shalt be able to see it afar off ere thou come to it.”<sup>2</sup>

“Thou that truly forsakest the light of all worldly love, and hidest thy thought in this darkness, lightness of blessed love and spiritual knowing of God shall spring up in thee, and thy darkness shall be as midday. . . . And then shall our Lord fulfil thy soul with shinings . . . and he shall fill all the powers of thy soul with beams of spiritual light.”<sup>3</sup>

It is impossible to resist the conclusion that this state is the same as that described by St John under the name of the Dark Night of the Senses, though Hilton, it must be admitted, although by far the most methodical of medieval mystical writers, is not so scientific in his exposition as is St John, even if he has all the latter’s impersonality, nor does he attempt to explain the dark night in terms of strict theology and philosophy. There is even a suggestion<sup>4</sup> in Hilton of St John’s postulate, received by all subse-

<sup>1</sup> Book II, ch. xxvii.

<sup>3</sup> Book II, ch. xxvii.

<sup>2</sup> Book II, ch. xxv.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*



quent writers, that this darkness is caused by excess of light; but there is not the twofold division of the Dark Night found in St John. There is far less of that insistence on stripping the soul of every rag of knowledge and affection, and of its agony when left naked, which is so relentlessly pictured by the Spaniards; but it is an axiom that no two souls travel the same path to perfection, and that no writer can describe any course but his own; and when we bear in mind how extremely sunny and simple is the road trodden by all the English mystics, we may feel that the difference of emphasis and tone is no more than the difference between individuals and races. The dew was still on the grass of England when Hilton and Chaucer were writing, but St John of the Cross lived in an age when the sun had withered the early green.

After the night the soul is in a settled state of contemplation—that is, the eye of the soul is directed to God as its normal object during its whole existence.

“The Holy Ghost . . . openeth the eye of the soul to see and love Jesus, and He keepeth the soul in that sight restfully and securely; and he slayeth all the stirrings of pride wonderfully, and privily, and softly, and the soul knoweth not how.”<sup>1</sup>

This calm attention to God is, in Hilton's opinion—and here he is in agreement with other mystics, especially Rolle—so valuable and dear to God that all ordinary precautions should be taken to preserve it unbroken. Bad health and corporal mortifications may break it, and they are therefore to be avoided. It is easy to criticize this teaching as tending to laxity or self-deception; as in other instructions for contemplatives, it is of course assumed that souls arrived at such a height will have the

<sup>1</sup> Book II, ch. xxxvii.

gift of perfect discretion. Even this high state, however, is not without its desolations, when the soul can no longer see.

“When he hideth himself it [the soul] cannot see him, for the soul is dark. . . .

“And nevertheless our Lord maketh strange, and cometh not, cry I never so fast; for he is sure enough of his lover, that he will not turn again to worldly loves quite.”<sup>1</sup>

Hilton is, however, careful to point out (and here again his wisdom is evident), that there is a great difference between these desolations and those of a beginner, as also the prayer of this state is different.

“And the soul is set, as it were, in the spiritual presence of Jesus. The soul is then turned all into the fire of love. And therefore every word that it secretly prayeth is like a spark rising out of a burning fire, which heateth all the powers of the soul, and turneth them into love, and enlighteneth them so comfortably, that the soul listeth ever to pray and to do nothing else.”<sup>2</sup>

Hilton throughout the *Ladder* so clearly presupposes a background of Catholic theology and devotional practice that it is perhaps unnecessary to point out how thoroughly he is penetrated with the great truths of revelation. In his case, at least, it would be absurd to suggest, as has been suggested in other cases, that a mystic stands to current theological dogmas in some such relation as a poet to current literary fashions and conventions. Any who wish to see his standpoint in greater detail should read

<sup>1</sup> Book II, ch. xli. There is no emphasis in Hilton on St John's Dark Night of the Soul.

<sup>2</sup> Book II, ch. xlii.

such passages as those on obedience to the ordinances of the Church, on original sin (where he is too severe),<sup>1</sup> on heretics (where he clearly has the Lollards in mind and is therefore almost excessively strict),<sup>2</sup> on the sacrament of Penance (where again he is thinking of the Lollards),<sup>3</sup> and on the angels. Nor with Hilton do we feel for one moment, as we may have occasion to feel when reading Father Baker, that his spirituality is at all out of sympathy with some aspects of institutional religion.

Hilton was a theologian and a man of learning. It is therefore natural enough to find that he derives his methods of thought and expression from various predecessors. Dom Noetinger has rendered a valuable service by indicating a great number of these sources. Richard of St Victor was familiar to him, as was also St Thomas Aquinas, and many of his opinions on original sin and grace come from St Augustine and St Anselm. St Gregory also is quoted, and it is interesting to note Dom Noetinger's suggestion that the writings of St Catherine of Siena had been brought to England by her English disciples, and that the quaint simile of the flies on the caldron's edge is hers.<sup>4</sup> None of these authorities, however, are responsible for the typical mystical doctrines of Hilton; of greater importance are his own countrymen.

<sup>1</sup> Book I, ch. lvi.

<sup>2</sup> Book I, ch. lviii.

<sup>3</sup> Book II, ch. vii. *Vide* Noetinger, *ad loc.*

<sup>4</sup> Book II, ch. xlii. *Vide* Noetinger. Miss Underhill (*loc. cit.*) is, so it seems to me, a little hard on Hilton when she says: "It would be a mistake to consider him a learned man." She had presumably not seen Dom Noetinger's edition, which appeared in the same year as hers. His mistake in Book I, ch. iv (p. 8, Underhill), is very excusable. *Architriclinus* is not a Latin word, and occurs nowhere except in this chapter of St John.

Rolle's writings he knew well, but it is not so clear that he fully appreciated his teaching. Hilton's more critical and methodical mind, full of scholastic theology, is apparent in his discussion of the sensible phenomena of contemplative states, and he emphasizes what has always been the teaching of the Church, that such phenomena are not prayer and in themselves have no value. When we remember how often song and heat form part of Rolle's description of his experiences, it is hard not to see in Hilton's pointed words a condemnation, at least of Rolle's language and insinuation that his experiences are essential to all contemplation.<sup>1</sup> Equally pointed is his careful explanation that those who say that certain sensible affections and devotions are essential must not be taken too literally.<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere, however, his language is reminiscent of Rolle, and he follows his teaching.<sup>3</sup>

It is probably no exaggeration to say that Hilton owes more to the *Cloud of Unknowing* than to any other source that has yet been indicated. Though he is entirely free from the slightly exclusive style of the *Cloud*, Hilton took much practical doctrine from the book, and in the more mystical part he takes his phraseology directly from the *Cloud*, especially where concerned with the dark night. Just as he warns his readers against some expressions of Rolle, so he commends some of the *Cloud*.<sup>4</sup>

Hilton was an older contemporary of Dame Julian, and as towards the end of his life he must have become a well-known figure in religious England, and especially

<sup>1</sup> *Vide* Book I, ch. xxvi, and Noetinger, Book I, ch. x, *et al.*

<sup>2</sup> Book I, ch. xliv.

<sup>3</sup> *Cf.* Book I, ch. lxxv, Book II, ch. xli, and Noetinger's notes *ad loc.*

<sup>4</sup> *E.g.*, Book II, chs. xxiv, xxxii, xxxiii, xxxv, etc.

in that East Anglia of which both were natives, it is usually supposed that Dame Julian had read the *Ladder*. Dom Noetinger, who points, at first sight very convincingly, to a passage where Hilton seems to be refuting a too literal interpretation of one of Dame Julian's visions, puts forward the view that each was familiar with the other's writings, each seeing the earlier portion or redaction of the other's work. There are, however, difficulties in the way of supposing Hilton to have read the *Revelations*, and in our present state of uncertainty as to the date of the versions of Dame Julian's book it is perhaps impossible to come to any decision on the point.<sup>1</sup> Finally, there is one place, at least, where Hilton seems to have a passage of the *Ancren Riwle* in his mind.<sup>2</sup>

It remains to say a few words on the special characteristics of Hilton's mind and style. His discretion and moderation will have been already made apparent, but it is worthy of notice that he is not at all distrustful of joy, however anxious he may be to make it clear that sensible fervour is not contemplation. Some of his first words at the opening of the book suggest that the contemplative life is, without any reserve, one of gladness, and that he is not so thoroughly suspicious of sensible devotion as many post-Reformation writers have been.<sup>3</sup> Other traits which impress the reader are his great knowledge and apt quotation of the Scriptures and his devotion to the Holy Name. Hilton—at least, in the mangled versions of modern reprints<sup>4</sup>—cannot pretend to the idiomatic

<sup>1</sup> Book II, ch. xxx, and Noetinger's note, *ad loc.*

<sup>2</sup> *Treatise to a Devout Man*, ch. ix, *ad fin.* Cf. *Ancren Riwle*, pp. 382 and 409. Both, however, may be quoting St Gregory.

<sup>3</sup> Book I, ch. v.

<sup>4</sup> This criticism does not apply to Miss Underhill's text, though this, too, is partly modernized.

and picturesque English of the author of the *Cloud* and Dame Julian, nor to the poetic imagery of Rolle, and very few sentences or phrases of his remain impressed on the memory. An example of his style at its best is his well-known series of chapters, so excellently paraphrased by Father Baker, comparing the spiritual life to a pilgrimage to Sion.<sup>1</sup> Another passage may be quoted to show his peculiarly vivid way of commenting on a piece of Scripture.

“ ‘ Make mirth with me and melody, for I have found my groat which I had lost.’ This groat is Jesus which thou hast lost, and if thou wilt find him, light up a lanthorn, that is God’s Word, as David saith, ‘ Thy Word is as a lanthorn to my feet!’ . . . If thou do so, thou shalt see all the dust, all the filth and small motes in thy house (for he is light itself)—that is to say, all fleshly loves and fears in thy soul. I mean not perfectly all; for as David saith: ‘ Who knoweth all his trespasses?’ As who should say, no man. Thou shalt cast out of thy heart all such sins, and sweep thy soul clean with the besom of the fear of God, and wash it with thy tears, and so shalt thou find thy groat, Jesus; he is thy groat, thy penny, thy heritage. This groat will not be found so easily as ’tis thought, for this work is not of one hour, nor of one day, but many days and years, with much sweat and swink of body and travail of soul. If thou cease not, but seek busily, sigh and sorrow deeply, mourn stilly, and stoop low, till thine eyes water for anguish and for pain, for that thou hast lost thy treasure Jesus, at the last (when his will is) well shalt thou find thy groat Jesus. When thou hast found him, as I have said—that is, when in purity of conscience thou feelest the familiar and peaceful presence of that blessed man Jesus Christ, at least a shadow or glimmer-

<sup>1</sup> Book II, ch. xxi ff.

ing of him—thou mayest, if thou wilt, call all thy friends to thee, to make mirth with thee, for that thou hast found thy groat Jesus.”<sup>1</sup>

In spite of his lack of any great charm of style, and in spite of the deep, if not always obvious, mystical teaching which runs through his work, Hilton became, more than any of his predecessors, a well known and widely read writer, and helped to form many of the most religious souls in the stormy century that followed his death. Owing, no doubt, to his sober and methodical presentation of the spiritual life, he was a devotional classic when first printing was introduced to England, and as such was printed by Wynkyn de Worde in 1494. It is from the dedication to this edition that we learn that the *Ladder of Perfection* was often in the hands of that saintly lady, mother of Henry Tudor and friend of Cardinal Fisher, *felix opportunitate mortis*, whose benefactions to learning have made her name and character known to many generations of those who have lived upon her foundations.

<sup>1</sup> Book I, ch. xlviiii (swink=labour).

## VI

### MARGERY KEMPE AND DAME JULIAN

WE have already in an earlier chapter considered a spiritual writing which had for its end the direction of ancesses. We have now to examine the writings of two holy women who followed this life of solitude, Margery Kempe of Lynn and Dame Julian of Norwich; and though we have only a few pages to tell us of the first, whereas the second has left us a book of considerable length, there is a very striking agreement of spirit between them.

Of Margery Kempe little need be said. All that survives of her "Book" is a small number of selections, preserved for us in one of Wynkyn de Worde's printed books, and we know nothing of her besides. It is, however, usually assumed that she lived early in the fourteenth century. Her little treatise for the most part takes the form of a dialogue between herself and our Lord speaking "in her mind." Several passages remind us of Dame Julian.

" ' I assure thee in thy mind,' says our Lord, ' if it were possible for me to suffer pain again, as I have done before, me were lever to suffer as much pain as ever I did for thy soul alone, rather than thou shouldest depart from me everlastingly.' "<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Cell of Self Knowledge*, ed. Gardner, p. 51.



And it is clear from others that she was advanced in contemplative prayer.

“ Daughter, for to bid many beads, it is good to them that can not better do, and yet it is not perfection. . . . I have often told thee, daughter, that thinking, weeping, and high contemplation is the best life in earth, and thou shalt have more merit in heaven for one year thinking in thy mind than for an hundred year of praying with thy mouth.”<sup>1</sup>

In her devotion to the Passion of our Lord she is a true daughter of her century.

“ When she saw the Crucifix, or if she saw a man had a wound, or a beast, or if a man beat a child before her, or smote a horse or another beast with a whip . . . she thought she saw our Lord beaten or wounded.”<sup>2</sup>

We are more fortunate in possessing the whole book of her sister in East Anglia, for Dame Julian of Norwich reveals herself to us as a singularly lovable personality. As we shall see, besides her eloquent presentation of the divine goodness, she has much to say on moral questions, and her thoughts on the problems of predestination and the nature of evil show a depth of speculation greater than is found in any other English mystical writer before the Reformation. Nevertheless, the impression she leaves with us is not that of a powerful mind, nor of an original and elusive personality, but of a heart that has loved much and that has succeeded well in the hard task of showing to others fresh beauty in the object of its love.

At the outset of any examination of Dame Julian's *Revelations*, the reader has to make up his mind upon

<sup>1</sup> *Cell of Self Knowledge*, ed. Gardner, p. 52.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

a very important point of interpretation. The other English mystics of our review, though they treat of unusual ways in the spiritual life, do not speak of their experiences as having any source outside themselves beyond the invisible and inaudible touching of the soul by the grace of God. Dame Julian, on the other hand, clearly reveals a type of sanctity which has probably always existed in the Church, and which has attracted a great deal of attention among devotional writers and hostile critics. The characteristics of this type, which perhaps is more common among women than men, are certain morbid conditions of body combined with a claim to have heard or seen supernatural manifestations. In the words of Catholic practice, they have seen visions, heard locutions, and fallen into ecstasies quite distinct from the *alienatio mentis* of such a mystical experience as is hinted at by the author of the *Cloud*.

As we have seen, once granted the possibility of such supernatural manifestation, there still remains the task of judging in each particular case whether the individual is to be believed in his assertion that he has experienced this touch of the finger of God. In the case of many of the saints, the Church, in the person of her rulers and theologians, has pronounced a verdict of credibility, but her decisions can be based on nothing but an estimate of the character of the subject, the purport of the communications, and their moral effect on the soul. For this purpose, the testimony of contemporaries is of the highest value. Consequently, Dame Julian can never hope to be erected to a place beside her great sisters, the two St Catherines, of Siena and of Genoa, and St Teresa. Their actions, their conversation, their prayer even, was watched and judged by competent witnesses who were often the

chief authorities of the Church; they themselves have received the supreme stamp of the Church's approval, and their doctrine has passed into common use. In the case of Dame Julian, we have nothing on which to base a judgement save her one piece of writing.

Yet probably all who read the *Revelations* will be convinced, not only of the virtue and sincerity of their author, but of her sanity and orthodox faith. Even if we allow, as most of her editors are unwilling to allow, that she was possessed of considerable culture, she was certainly no professional theologian, nor is there any reason to suppose her well read in theology; yet she passes with a step that is almost always unerring through some of the most pathless tracts of thought, and while she is as original as a Christian writer well can be, yet she is entirely without a touch of that self-assertive and rebellious spirit which is so common in those who claim to be seers of visions when in reality they are but dreamers of dreams. Her *Revelations* do not present new truths to a chosen few; they impress the truth and meaning of old teaching upon her mind and heart and, through her, on the minds and hearts of others.

We know nothing of Dame Julian beyond what she tells us herself and what the early copyists of her manuscript tell us. From the latter we learn her name and dwelling-place and condition of life (which is also apparent from her writing), and the interesting fact that she was still alive when an unknown scribe was writing in 1413.<sup>1</sup> From herself we learn that on the eighth day of May, 1373,<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Introduction to Amherst MS.

<sup>2</sup> The MSS. disagree as to the date of the month. Dom Meunier (*Révélation de l'Amour Divin*, footnote, p. 6) points out that the Feast of St John of Beverley fell on the seventh of the month. This makes the eighth the most likely date.

she was thirty and a half years old, thus giving the date of her birth as 1342. Of her station in life we know nothing directly, but it is surely not absurd to conjecture that she was born of prosperous, if not gentle, parents. Ancestresses, and in particular those, like her, who entered upon the life when still young, were in general girls of the upper class, for only these could easily obtain the permission, promise of support, and lodging which were necessary. Besides this, in spite of her self-depreciation the book is not that of a totally uneducated mind. The cell in which she lived was built against the Church of St Julian in Norwich; its foundations may still be seen, and the window through which she could watch the priest at Mass. This anchorage was in the gift, so to say, of the neighbouring Benedictine nunnery of Carrow, and this fact has given rise to a suggestion that Dame Julian was originally a nun of that convent. Such a suggestion is, of course, based on no positive evidence, but it is worth remarking that the only clear citation of a known author by Dame Julian is a passage from St Gregory's *Life of St Benedict*.

Her motive in writing was to relate a spiritual experience which she clearly regarded as a crisis of her life. This experience was not primarily a union of her will with God, but the communication of knowledge on certain spiritual matters. The communication took three forms, as Dame Julian herself tells us.<sup>1</sup> First, there was bodily—that is, sensible or seemingly sensible—sight; secondly, there were comprehensible words spoken, as if to her

<sup>1</sup> *Dame Julian*, ed. Dom Hudleston, ch. ix: Burns Oates and Washbourne. The references throughout this chapter are to this edition. The division of chapters is not entirely in agreement with previous editions.

ears; thirdly, there was a formless intellectual enlightenment.<sup>1</sup> This last is very similar to that described by St Teresa and other contemplatives, and took the form of an illumination on some deep point of doctrine which is made clear to the recipient, but which cannot readily be comprehended in words, and which therefore may be more fully explained according as fresh grace or natural acquisition of knowledge assists. In Dame Julian's case, the visions and locutions took place on a single day, but her meditation on them lasted for many years—twenty at least<sup>2</sup>—and in some cases was assisted by lights and locutions similar to the original ones. Her book in its fullest form was written at least twenty years after her great experience, but a shorter form exists containing little but an account of the first visions. This latter has been taken to be either an abbreviation from the longer account, or an earlier version written before she had evolved her final thoughts. The latter alternative was chosen by the first editor of this manuscript,<sup>3</sup> and he is surely right. All the "showings" except one are in the shorter version, and that one may most probably have been omitted for reasons to be suggested below. This version stops at points where no abbreviator could have had any reason for stopping; there is no mention of the exceedingly beautiful "word" which would surely have commended itself to an anthologist, but which we know to have been spoken fifteen years after the great day of revelation.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> It is perhaps worth noting that this third kind of vision usually accompanies a very high degree of mystical prayer. We have thus indirect evidence that Dame Julian's visions were not isolated favours, but were intimately bound up with her spiritual progress.

<sup>2</sup> *Revelations*, ch. li, p. 135.

<sup>3</sup> *Comfortable Words for Christ's Lovers*, ed. Rev. D. Harford, 1911.

<sup>4</sup> *Revelations*, ch. lxxxvi.

The long and complicated Fourteenth Revelation is omitted altogether, and on the supposition that the short version is the earlier this can easily be explained. This particular revelation, as Dame Julian tells us, was not understood by her till supplemented twenty years after; it would therefore be natural to omit it when writing before the further revelation had been received. Finally, there are several minute personal details in the shorter version which do not occur in the longer. We are told that the priest who came to assist Dame Julian was accompanied by a "child," and that Dame Julian's mother was present in the cell with her.<sup>1</sup>

The experience of the eighth of May is told at some length. Dame Julian had some years before desired three things—a "bodilie sight" of our Lord's sufferings, that her compassion might be the greater; a painful bodily sickness, even unto death, which might help her to realize the last truths and act upon them afterwards; and "a wilful longing to God." The first two, as she tells us with extreme sanity, she asked for "with a condition" that they might be the will of God. The third she asked "mightilie without any condition." She also tells us, and we must believe her, that the two first desires passed from her mind.<sup>2</sup>

At the age of thirty she was visited by a sickness of the kind she desired. Some of the most sympathetic of her admirers have taken this as a proof that the illness was produced by auto-suggestion. Such a line of argument is clearly based, not on any critical reasoning, but on an assumption that the supernatural or rather the miraculous, in the Christian sense, does not exist. Dame Julian's original prayer had been strictly conditional; it was not

<sup>1</sup> *Comfortable Words*, ch. x.

<sup>2</sup> *Revelations*, ch. ii.

the whole-hearted persuasion of suggestion. During her illness she had no refuge against the fear of death in the thought that her illness would pass. She even seems to have forgotten that she had ever prayed for an illness. It is useless to speculate on the nature of her disease. Those who attribute it to suggestion have set it down as primarily mental, whereas Julian herself, almost significantly, always alludes to her "bodilie sickness." Whatever its nature, it lasted a week, and both herself and her attendants thought her on the point of death. She says:

"On the fourth night, I tooke all my Rites of Holy Church, and weened not to have liven till daie. And after this I lingered on two daies and two nights, and on the third night I weened oftentimes to have passed, and so weened they that were with me.<sup>1</sup> . . . And they that were with me sent for the parson my curate to be at mine ending. He came, and a child with him, and brought a cross."<sup>2</sup>

She looked upon the cross, but for the moment there was no change in her state. The first unusual symptom was a sudden feeling of ease, and it occurred to her to desire the wound of compassion for our Lord's sufferings. She expressly tells us that she desired no vision, but suddenly the crucifix held before her eyes changed.

"And in this, sodeinlie I saw the red blood trickling down from under the garland [of thorns] hott and freshly and right plenteouslie . . . like to the drops of water that fall off the eaves of an house after a great shower of rain . . . and for the roundness, they were like to the scale of herring."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Revelations*, ch. iii.

<sup>2</sup> *Comfortable Words*, ch. ii.

<sup>3</sup> *Revelations*, chs. iv and vii.

Henceforth, the "showings" succeeded one another; as far as we can gather from her words, the sight of our Lord's head on the crucifix was present to her all the time, while to her mind came "words" and "ghostly showings" or illuminations. These revelations took a considerable time.

"The first began early in the morning about the hour of four; and it lasted showing by process full fair and steadily, each following other till it was nine of the day overpassed."<sup>1</sup>

The last revelation took place in the following night, and when it ended her feeling of illness returned. The return of pain weakened her mind, and for a moment she lost faith in the reality of what she had seen.

"Then came a religious person to me, and asked me how I fared. I said I had raved that day."<sup>2</sup>

She fell asleep, and while asleep saw, or dreamed, that she was assaulted by the devil. It is noticeable that she distinguishes the manner of this from the other visions.

"And in my sleep *methought* the fiend, etc. . . . This ugly showing was made sleeping, and so was none other."<sup>3</sup>

We might put this down as a dream, were it not for what follows. After she waked,

"Anon a light smoke came in the door, with a great heat and a foul stench; I said, 'Benedicite Dominus, it is all on fire that is here!' And I weened it had been a bodily fire. I asked them that were with me if they felt any stench; they said nay, they felt none; I said, 'Blessed be God,' for that I wist well it was the fiend that was come."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ch. lxxv.

<sup>2</sup> Ch. lxxvi.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*



This also, it is to be noticed, she saw in a different way from the showings. Though invisible to others, it appeared to her as visible smoke, whereas the showings impressed themselves upon her mind at once as supernatural. Needless to say, this diabolical visitation is not to the taste of modern non-Catholic writers. It has been explained as a valueless working of auto-suggestion, and as the emergence of old desires into the mind's consciousness, clothed in terrifying images.<sup>1</sup> Yet it is hard to see how Dame Julian could have been clearer in her account, and if we distrust her testimony here, there seems no valid reason for trusting it elsewhere.

Immediately after this visitation she made an act of faith in the revelations which had been made to her, and which she had for a time doubted. On the same evening she had the final vision, and it was followed by more diabolical assaults, which lasted for most of the night and till about nine in the morning. Then the supernatural showings ceased, though she was confirmed in the truth of what she had seen.

“ On the same day that it was showed . . . as a wretch I forsook it. . . . Then our Lord Jesu of his mercy . . . showed it all again within my soul with more fulness, saying . . . ‘ Wit it now well, it was no raving that thou sawest this day.’ ”<sup>2</sup>

As far as we can gather from her writing, Dame Julian had no further visions. We are, however, told that her questioning as to the meaning of one of the showings was answered fifteen years later “ in ghostly understanding,” and one of the visions, the fourteenth and hardest, was made clear to her twenty years less three months from the

<sup>1</sup> So Thouless, *The Lady Julian*.

<sup>2</sup> Ch. lxx.

original revelation. These two passing references show that the happenings of the eighth of May were for her an abiding and unreplaced source of meditation—one more indication of their external and non-subjective nature. She herself says:

“As for the bodily sight, I have said as I saw, as truly as I can. And as for the words formed, I have said them right, as our Lord showed me them. And as for the ghostly sight, I have said somewhat; but I may never fully tell it.”<sup>1</sup>

When we are thus addressed by one who claims to have had communications from another world, it is natural for us to ask what was the content of those communications, and to judge the genuineness of the revelation by the weight of what has been revealed. We cannot at times banish a feeling that even the greatest seers of things hidden—St Teresa or St Catherine—have told us nothing new, nothing that we might not have discovered by the light of ordinary reason assisted by grace and working on the content of the revelation. It is only a step further to debate the need for such useless revelations. Yet perhaps such a method of argument is unsound. It would undoubtedly be a cogent method in certain circumstances, as, for instance, when the claims of spiritualism or other occult religious practices were being canvassed. The supporters of such practices claim that they are worthy to supplant or supplement Christianity; Christians are therefore justified in asking what the new teaching may be that is derived from such sources. If it is occupied entirely with trivialities, or contains nothing that was not previously known and realized, we may

<sup>1</sup> *Comfortable Words*, ch. xxiii.

reasonably doubt both the value and the authenticity of the revelation. The case is different with revelations within the Christian body. Even if it were lawful for Christians to look for a further revelation than that given in the New Testament, it would not seem *a priori* likely that the Divine Founder, who so copiously taught his apostles and who has spoken at such length by the Holy Spirit, would reserve a momentous pronouncement for centuries, and then make it to a private person. There are, indeed, many speculative points of theology of which the human mind has always longed for a fuller knowledge, but they are precisely the points upon which the silence of revelation and tradition is most significant of the divine will. Further, if it be objected that the words of our Lord to St Teresa or Dame Julian are moral exhortations, conveying little or nothing that is new, the objection may be returned by pointing out that by far the greater part of our Lord's words, recorded or unrecorded, taken merely as so many words, are neither new nor methodical. Their value lies in the unique force and spirit which they convey, not as isolated sayings, but as a body of teaching of a unique personality, and just as they have exerted a boundless influence over the world, so the kindred words spoken to saints have had a great influence for good over fields very varying in extent. Once again, if a "revelation" be considered as a development of the touch of grace in the soul, many of the difficulties which the common view of its nature causes will disappear.<sup>1</sup>

The revelations of Dame Julian may be divided into two classes. In the one she saw the sufferings of our

<sup>1</sup> We must remember that mystics insist that what has been revealed is ineffable. Their words are pale shadows of reality.

Lord on the Cross, and occasionally heard words, and the result of these was to deepen her realization of our Lord's sufferings.<sup>1</sup> As the passages about to be quoted show, the "bodily showing" in these cases was very vivid, and she is perfectly clear that the words were not her own. She says:

"This showing was quick and lively, and hideous and dreadful, sweet, and lovely.<sup>2</sup> . . . I saw his sweet face as it were dry and bloodless, with pale dying, and later more pale, dead, languoring, and then turned more dead unto blue . . . also his nose clogged and dried to my sight.<sup>3</sup> And St John of Beverley our Lord showed him full highly in comfort to us for homeliness and countrey sake: and brought to my mind how he is a kind neighbour, and of our knowing: and God called him plainly St John of Beverley, as we do."<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, the vision does not seem to have conveyed to Dame Julian the impression that she was watching the Crucifixion.

"The hot blood ran out so plenteously . . . and when it came where it should have fallen down, then it vanished."<sup>5</sup>

In this respect—and it is an important one—she differs from many medieval and modern ecstasies, such as Catherine Emmerich. Their visions derive what value they may possess from their claim to be glimpses of the Crucifixion;

<sup>1</sup> I have here treated together the corporeal and imaginative visions of theologians.

<sup>2</sup> *Revelations*, ch. vii.

<sup>3</sup> Ch. xvi.

<sup>4</sup> Ch. xxxviii. Dame Julian was picturing heaven to herself before this showing, and it was natural that she should think of St John, whose feast had fallen on the previous day.

<sup>5</sup> Ch. xii.

with Dame Julian the material showing is no more than a taking-off point for the words and meditations.

The other class of vision is different.<sup>1</sup> In these the showing was concerned with some abstract point of theology, and was often far more inexpressible. Thus she relates:

“ And after this, I saw God in a point; that is to say, in my understanding: by which sight I saw that he is in all thing.”<sup>2</sup> . . .

Occasionally we are told the three stages of a vision.

“ And in this he showed a little thing, the quantitie of a hazel-nutt, lying in the palme of my hand. . . . I thought, ‘ What may this be ?’ and it was answered . . . ‘ It is all that is made !’ In this little thing I saw three properties. The first is that God made it: the second, is that God loveth it: the third is that God keepeth it.”<sup>3</sup>

It was for visions such as these that the meditation of years was employed to draw out their meaning, and it is these that constitute for many the chief interest of the book. We may, indeed, wonder at the deep things that filled the mind of this secluded woman, and at the strength of intellect which strives to explain them.

Among the speculative problems that have occupied the minds of thinkers in the Christian centuries, perhaps none has caused greater difficulty than the problem of the existence of evil. It has always pressed peculiarly hard on mystics, for the mystical temperament naturally desires to see unity and goodness in all things. Consequently,

<sup>1</sup> This is the class of vision known to theologians as intellectual—*i.e.*, not produced in the senses, but by an infusion into the intellect.

<sup>2</sup> Ch. xi.

<sup>3</sup> Ch. v

mystics both within and without the Church have tended towards Monism, and have ignored evil or considered it a quality of an inferior state of being. In the case of Dame Julian, we can see this tendency at work, though it is checked both by her extreme deference to orthodox teaching and by her strong practical sense. She is throughout a strong optimist, and passages such as the following abound:

“ And then [in heaven] shall verily be made known to us his meaning in those sweet words, where he saith, ‘ All shall be well; and thou shalt see thyself that all manner thing shall be well.’ . . . Then shall none of us be stirred to say in any wise, ‘ Lord, if it had been thus, it had been full well. But we shall say all with one voice, ‘ Lord, blessed mote thou be, for it is thus: thus it is well.’ ”<sup>1</sup>

In the face of this belief in the ultimate goodness of all that is, there rises up the problem of the existence of sin, which may at the last resort be taken as the origin of all evil. She puts this problem herself.

“ Methought, if sin had not been, we should all have been clean and like to our Lord as he made us. And thus, in my folly . . . often I wondered why, by the great foreseeing wisdom of God, the beginning of sin was not letted, for then methought all should have been well.”<sup>2</sup>

Her answer to it is as follows, in part an insistence on sin as being nothing positive, in part a submission to God’s wisdom.

“ But I saw not sin; for I believe it had no manner of substance, nor no part of being, nor could it be known

<sup>1</sup> Chs. lxiii and lxxxv.

<sup>2</sup> Ch. xxvii.

but by the pain that it is cause of. Jesu . . . answered . . . and said, 'Sin is behovely, but all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.'"<sup>1</sup>

But there remains the further difficulty of the origin of sin. She says:

“ ‘ Ah, good Lord, how might all be well for the great hurt that is come by sin ?’ . . . To this our blessed Lord answered . . . that Adam’s sin was the most harm that ever was done, or ever shall be . . . [and said] ‘ sithen that I have made well the most harm; then it is my will that thou know thereby that I shall make well all that is less.’ ”<sup>2</sup>

That is to say, the power and goodness of God could not be shown to better effect than by his ability to take Adam’s sin as an occasion for bringing about a greater good. That he did this in the Incarnation and Passion of his Son is generally taught by theologians, and the Church exclaims in her liturgy, “ O felix culpa !”

“ This atonement-making is more pleasing to God, and more worshipful, without comparison, than ever was the sin of Adam harmful.”<sup>3</sup>

So far, Dame Julian stands in the common way. More original is her mystical identification, somewhat after the manner of St Paul, of our Lord with Adam, and her vision that our Lord’s suffering is so closely bound up with Adam’s sin, that the latter is lost sight of in the joy with which God regards the former. This part of the *Revelations* is exceedingly deep, and may be recommended

<sup>1</sup> Ch. xxvii. Behovely = it behoved there should be sin.

<sup>2</sup> Ch. xxix.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

to a most careful meditation. Beyond this, Dame Julian goes perhaps as far as human thought may in explaining the anger of God at sin, and how *a parte Dei* there is not, and cannot be, change. It is we who change, and depart from him.

Having thus dealt with the metaphysical aspect of sin, she proceeds to examine the process of sin. Here it should be noted that Dame Julian holds—in common with some other mystics<sup>1</sup>—a view which is, at least as it stands and if words are to have their usual meaning, unorthodox. This is the opinion that there is a supreme point in the soul that never sins, or, as Dame Julian puts it, that the predestined never really sin.<sup>2</sup> Her utterance on this subject is not very clear. Thus she says once, recording a vision,

“ In which showing I saw and understood full surely, that in every soul that shall be saved is a godly will that never assented to sin, nor ever shall.”<sup>3</sup>

This is dangerous doctrine, and it is interesting to see that when she is giving her own reflections she modifies it.

“ We shall verily see in heaven without end, that we have grievously sinned in this life. And notwithstanding this, we shall see that we were never hurt in his love, nor were never the less of price in his sight.”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Above all, the great Eckhart (1260-1327). It is hard to believe that this passage does not reflect his teaching.

<sup>2</sup> Dom Hudleston, *op. cit.*, pp. xxxiii and 251, has excellent notes on this passage, in which he asserts Dame Julian's fundamental orthodoxy. He quotes a striking parallel from St Bernard, which I had not seen when I wrote my chapter on Dame Julian.

<sup>3</sup> Ch. liii.

<sup>4</sup> Ch. lxi.



Later, this is still further explained.

“ And thus [in sin] we are dead for the time from the very sight of our blissful life. But in all this I saw soothfastly that we be not dead in the sight of God . . . but he shall never have his full bliss in us till we have our full bliss in him. . . . Thus I saw how sin is deadly for a short time in the blessed creatures of endless life.”<sup>1</sup>

Akin to this is her manner of speaking of sin as if it were an accident; thus St John of Beverley is spoken of as having more joys in heaven than if he had never sinned; and in the “ showing ” of Adam,

“ The servant not only he goeth, but suddenly he starteth, and runneth in great haste for love to do his lord’s will. And anon he falleth in a slade, and taketh full great hurt . . . then saith this courteous lord . . . ‘ Lo, lo, my beloved servant, what harm and disease he hath taken in my service for my love, yea, and for his good will. Is it not reason that I reward him, his frey and his dread, his hurt and his maim, and all his woe ? ’ ”<sup>2</sup>

Of such language it may be remarked, first, that such words should probably not be taken *au pied de la lettre*, but as the words of love welcoming back the Prodigal, or the greater joy in heaven for one sinner doing penance; and secondly, that even if from the sinner’s point of view a mortal sin in St Mary Magdalen is the same as one in Judas, yet from the point of view of God, so to speak, there is all the difference between a sin that will be cancelled and one that will remain for ever. Further than this we cannot go, nor can we admit that, all else being equal, a sinner will be more rewarded than one who has preserved his innocence, as a wounded man might be

<sup>1</sup> Ch. lxxii.

<sup>2</sup> Ch. li (slade=ravine; frey=fright).

rewarded more than his fellow who had fought the campaign without a scratch. This Dame Julian herself realizes elsewhere.

“ If any man think, ‘ If this be true, then were it good to sin, to have more meed ’ . . . beware of this stirring, for truly, if it come, it is untrue, and of the enemy.”<sup>1</sup>

So far optimism has been triumphant, even if at times strict theological accuracy has suffered. Sin is merely the absence of God; Adam’s sin brought a greater good into the world; the sins of the predestined are not fully sins. There remains the supreme problem of the eternally lost. How can they be all well? Here at last Dame Julian is silent. She never doubts the existence of evil spirits, but she does not explain it. The damned she has tried to compass, but in vain.

“ What time that we by our folly turn us to the beholding of the reprovèd, tenderly our Lord toucheth us, and blisfully calleth us, saying in our soul, ‘ Let me alone, my dear worthy child; intend to me, I am enough to thee.’”<sup>2</sup> And yet in this I desired as I durst, that I might have full sight of hell and purgatory. . . . And for aught that I could desire, I could see of this right naught ”<sup>3</sup>

It has been suggested that some inaccuracies of language in the *Revelations* may be explained by reading Dame Julian’s words as the language of love. This is, indeed, the ground of all her words, and in her eager, almost passionate response to the divine love, and in the extraordinary delicacy of her perception of the depths and shades of feeling, she is unique among English spiritual

<sup>1</sup> Ch. xl.

<sup>2</sup> Ch. xxxvi. I here follow Father Cressy’s reading.

<sup>3</sup> Ch. xxxiii.

writers. Probably some who have little sympathy with her faith, and little interest in her perplexities, will have been moved almost to tears by the tender grace of her words, fragrant as ointment poured out.

“What? wouldest thou wit thy Lord’s meaning in this thing? Wit it well: love was his meaning. Who showeth it thee? Love. What showed he thee? Love. Wherefore showeth he it thee? For love.”<sup>1</sup>

These words she heard “in ghostly understanding” fifteen years after her great vision, but they told her nothing new. In the first revelation she had said:

“There is no creature that is made, that may wit how much, and how sweetly, and how tenderly our Maker loveth us.”<sup>2</sup>

And already she returned the love.

“Then had I a proffer in my reason. . . . ‘Look up to heaven’ [away from the crucifix]. . . . I answered inwardly with all the might of my soul, and said, ‘Nay, I may not; for thou art my heaven.’”<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, many of the words of our Lord which she records are of an exquisite and piercing beauty.

“Then said our good Lord Jesus Christ, ‘Art thou well apaid that I suffered for thee?’ I said, ‘Yea, good Lord, gramercy; yea, good Lord, blessed mote thou be.’ Then said Jesu our kind Lord, ‘If thou art apaid, I am apaid: it is a joy, a bliss, an endless liking to me, that ever I suffered passion for thee: and if I might suffer more, I would suffer more.’”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ch. lxxxvi.

<sup>3</sup> Ch. xix.

<sup>2</sup> Ch. vi.

<sup>4</sup> Ch. xxii.

And again :

“ ‘ My dear darling, I am glad thou art come to me in all thy woe; I have ever been with thee, and now seest thou me loving, and we be oned in bliss.’ ”<sup>1</sup>

These passages may have served to show not only the warmth of Dame Julian's love, but also the simplicity and absence of all that is false or artificial in her expression of it. It is also worth remarking, that her solitary life, her lonely meditations, and the closeness of her communion with God in no way emancipate her either from obedience to the Church or from an abiding sympathy with her neighbour. Her submission to the Church is apparent throughout. The Church is the test of her revelations and must be believed where private revelation ceases. The sacraments and devotion to our Lady and the saints are taken for granted. Still more clear is her love for her neighbour, and here she is at one with the apostles and early Christians in feeling that the whole Church is the body of Christ, and we, members of each other.

“ If any man or woman depart his love from any of his even-Christians, he loves right naught, for he loves not all. And so at that time he is not safe, for he is not in peace.”<sup>2</sup>

“ What may make me more to love mine even-Christian, than to see in God that he loveth all that shall be saved, as it were all one soul ? ”<sup>3</sup>

“ For if I look singularly to myself, I am right naught; but in general I am in hope, in one-head of charity with all my even-Christians; for in this one-head standeth the life of all mankind that shall be saved.”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ch. xl (quoted from Cressy's version).

<sup>2</sup> *Comfortable Words*, ch. vi.

<sup>3</sup> *Revelations*, ch. xxxvii.

<sup>4</sup> Ch. ix.

The extracts given in this chapter have, perhaps, sufficiently illustrated the style of the *Revelations*. Two passages may be added to show Dame Julian's command of words; the one is from her vision of God and Adam, the other her conclusion.

“ [The Lord's] clothing was wide and side, and full seemly, as falleth to a lord: the colour of the clothing was blue as azure, most sad and fair: his cheer was merciful; the colour of his face was fair, brown, white, with full seemly countenance; his eyes were black, most fair and seemly showing, full of lovely pity. . . . [The servant's] clothing was a white kirtle, single, old, and all defaced, dyed with sweat of his body; strait-sitting to him, and short as it were an handful beneath the knee; bare, seeming as it should soon be worn out, ready to be ragged and rent.<sup>1</sup>

“ And I saw full surely in this and in all, that ere God made us, he loved us; which love was never slacked, nor ever shall be. And in this love he hath done all his works: and in this love he hath made all things profitable to us; and in this love our life is everlasting; in our making we had beginning: but the love wherein he made us was in him from without beginning. In which love we have our beginning. And all this shall we see in God without end. Which may Jesus grant us.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ch. li.

<sup>2</sup> Ch. lxxxvi.

## VII

### FATHER BAKER

**T**HE lack of method and the diversity of policy in many departments of official religious life, which mark the century before the Protestant Reformation, had their effect on the spiritual writings of the time, especially in Northern Europe. In strong contrast is the century following the Council of Trent, which witnessed the movement of true reform known as the counter-Reformation. During these years, not only was the spiritual life systematized in the works of the great theologians, Jesuit, Dominican, Augustinian, and Franciscan, but the Church was adorned with a series of contemplative saints, whose lives and writings did more to justify and explain their way of life than any scientific treatise could have done. Pre-eminent among them was the group of Spanish mystics led by St Teresa and St John of the Cross, who were fortunate beyond their medieval predecessors in living in the days of the printing-press. Within a few years their writings were available to the whole world, and could be tested by comparison with traditional and scholastic teaching, and the result could be published for the advantage of the universal Church.

As a consequence, the contemplative life, especially in its more advanced stages, was no longer an unknown continent from which rare adventurers might bring back travellers' tales, but a land surveyed and mapped with a precision which made it possible for those who had

never been there to check the journeys of others. Such a comparison must not be pushed too far, for there had not been wanting in any century those who could guide chosen souls; but the work of the theologians of the counter-Reformation in applying scholastic principles to ascetical and mystical theology was very great. A comparison of the writings of Rolle or Suso with those of St John of the Cross and later writers shows how vast had been the gain in clearness and accuracy. Yet these very qualities were not without their effect in taking from subsequent writers some of the medieval spontaneity. Rolle and his fellows wrote out of the fulness of their heart, and though they might be influenced by a few earlier saints and doctors, the stream of their personality remained for the most part clear and original. Father Baker, on the other hand, was an educated and highly trained scholar, and had read almost all the available literature on the subject of prayer and the interior life. In the case of many writers of his time, such possession of a store of knowledge tended to concentrate the attention on the miraculous or seemingly miraculous elements of mysticism, to the neglect of the simpler and broader issues. It is precisely because Father Baker, both in study and in practice, went behind his contemporaries to the old English mystics, that he is so valuable as a guide and a fitting companion to those who have already been reviewed.

Dom Augustine Baker was one of a group of remarkable men who gave distinction to the rebirth of the English Benedictine Congregation at the end of the reign of Queen Elizabeth. A convert to the Church, he had been educated at Christ's Hospital and at Oxford, and had studied law. Soon after his reception into the Church

he entered the Benedictine noviciate at the celebrated monastery of S Giustina at Padua, and during his year's probation made great advance in the spiritual life. Owing, however, to a failure in health, brought on, perhaps, by errors of judgement, he did not at the time make his profession, but returned to England, where he was subsequently professed by a Cassinese Benedictine. He lived for some years in retreat in England, where he again devoted himself to prayer and rose to contemplation, but once more abandoned his attempts. Ultimately, about the year 1610, he went abroad to Rheims and was there ordained priest. Thence he passed to London, where he worked at historical and legal research, without as yet having finally entered upon a stable life of prayer. In 1620 he was appointed chaplain to a Catholic family in Devon. Here, remote from the world and with but few duties, he gave himself fully and finally to contemplation, and perfected for himself that course of life which he was soon to teach so well to others. After another period of study in London he was recalled to France, and for nine years (1624-1633), was chaplain to the newly founded house of English Benedictine dames at Cambrai. It was for them that he wrote most of his treatises, for them that he endured a rigorous examination of his doctrine at the hands of his superiors, and among them that he found and saved the troubled soul of Dame Gertrude More. In 1638, after five years at St Gregory's, Douay, he was once more sent on the Mission into England, and lived much in London, never abandoning his contemplative prayer, rather, indeed, going forward in it till his death. He died in London in 1641, possibly of the plague, at a time when he was being harassed by the attentions of pursuivants.



This sketch of his life will have shown that Father Baker, though for thirty-five years a professed monk, spent little time in his own, or any other, monastery. This circumstance may go far to explain his somewhat unsympathetic attitude to many essential features of Benedictine life. He himself had found his way while living apart, and he knew that the early years of the revived English Benedictine Congregation had been stormy. Yet even apart from this, there is evidence, both in the anecdotes preserved in early congregational records and in the tone of his writings, that he was by nature somewhat aloof and ungenial. When we consider his writings we shall have occasion to note this and other impressions that they give.

Father Baker, especially in his Cambrai days, was a voluminous, if somewhat unmethodical, writer, and his manuscript treatises, covering every aspect of the spiritual life, are extant in great quantities not only at Downside, Ampleforth, Colwich, and Stanbrook, but at Oxford, the British Museum, and elsewhere. So valuable did his teaching seem to those of his day, that one of the ablest of the monastic generation that followed his undertook to reduce the mass of manuscripts into some shape. This monk, Dom Serenus Cressy, had had a career of extraordinary variety. Born of Protestant parents, he had been as a young man a Fellow of Merton College, Oxford. Subsequently he was chaplain to two of the most remarkable men of their age, Lord Wentworth and Lord Falkland, and afterwards became Dean of Leighlin in Ireland. His conversion was due in large part to the conversations he had with Dom Cuthbert Fursden, a son of the house where Father Baker had been chaplain, and himself a chaplain to Lady Falkland. After his conver-

sion, Father Cressy lived abroad for some time and became a monk of St Gregory's, Douay, but after the Restoration was for a period at Somerset House, where he was well known as a director of souls. He was throughout his life a distinguished figure, and both before and after his conversion was the friend of well-known English scholars, and among others of the great antiquary, Anthony à Wood. His friends, we are told, noticed a great change in his behaviour upon his return to England as a monk. His genial spirits, they said, had become soured.<sup>1</sup> This judgement may, indeed, be no more than a piece of anti-Catholic feeling; but if it is true, it would help to explain the slightly ungenial tone which we shall have occasion to notice in *Sancta Sophia*. It was during his early years as a monk at Douay that he worked upon Father Baker's manuscripts, and the result of his labours, when he had, as he puts it, "methodically digested" the doctrine contained in them, was the ascetical classic, *Sancta Sophia*, published in 1657.

Besides this large volume, upon which Father Baker's reputation must always principally depend, some smaller treatises have from time to time been edited, and as they bear more directly on the life and character of their writer than does *Sancta Sophia*, it may be well to consider them first.

*Sancta Sophia*, as all readers must remark, is impersonal to a quite exceptional degree, but it happens that we have in the *Secretum sive Mysticum*, a treatise recently printed for the first time, an intimate account of Father Baker's spiritual life written by himself.<sup>2</sup> The *Secretum* is an

<sup>1</sup> *Dictionary of National Biography*, s.v. Cressy.

<sup>2</sup> The *Secretum* was first printed by Dom J. McCann in 1922, with the title *Confessions of Father Baker*. References follow the pages of his edition.

accompanying treatise to the *Cloud of Unknowing*, which Father Baker had caused to be transcribed for the use of his disciples the nuns of Cambrai. Much of it is concerned with comments on the text of the *Cloud*,<sup>1</sup> and this part has little interest save as showing that Father Baker identified the prayer taught by the author of the *Cloud* with the "aspirations" of his own system. By way of introduction, however, he describes the various states of prayer given in full in *Sancta Sophia* and illustrates them by his own personal experiences, scarcely veiled by their attribution to a "scholar" of his. According to his account, he, in the thirty-second year of his age, was "converted" and "arrived to contemplation [*i.e.*, passive union] within sixteen months' space."<sup>2</sup> He describes this contemplation at some length.

"And now as touching his passive contemplation itself he can little say in description of it, partly because it being a mere spiritual work is not explicable in words, and partly for that it is now out of his and my memory, being so many years since it was acted. But as far as memory serveth I say that it was a speaking of God to the soul. . . . The said contemplation fell to our scholar in the forenoon, about eleven of the clock, and before he had eaten anything. He had—according to his wont—spent the forepart of that morning in his mental prayer that had been somewhat long and continued, and having given it over, then the spirit of prayer came upon him—as it was wont to do—once or twice afterwards in that same morning. And the last time was a little before the said eleven of the clock, whereupon he was raised to the

<sup>1</sup> This part is printed by Dom McCann in his edition of the *Cloud of Unknowing*. See Bibliography.

<sup>2</sup> *Confessions*, p. 52. It is worth noting that the *Secretum* does not mention his first attempts at prayer at Padua.

said contemplation. This I tell you that you may know my observation and opinion to be that such contemplation comes not usually in a man till after he has been long at his prayer and be come to the height of it, being so far and so high that he can go no farther nor higher. And being come to such case God becometh the sole worker, as he is in all such passive contemplations; the which I suppose that they do not come upon a man at the forefront of his prayer. I mean for his first passive contemplation. The same contemplation of our scholar lasted not, I think, above the space of half a quarter of an hour, or at the most, but for one quarter of an hour. And it was with alienation from senses; I mean, in a rapt."<sup>1</sup>

Several good effects followed this experience.

“ Three alterations to good, yea, to the best, the work effected and left in the soul. The first was a far purer prayer. . . . The second was illumination. . . . The third was a greater subjection of sensuality to the superior will than before.”<sup>2</sup>

This illumination was followed by a great desolation, and this, through lack of knowledge and help in such matters, led to his becoming discouraged and abandoning his attempts at prayer. When, more than ten years later, he resumed the practice of serious internal prayer, he passed once more through the regular stages from the beginning. Arriving at last at the exercise of aspirations—which, as will be remembered, he identifies with the prayer expounded in the *Cloud*—he was still in this practice nine years later at the time of writing the *Secretum*; but this prayer, though still active, not passive, contemplation, had some physical features which caused him some

<sup>1</sup> pp. 60-61.

<sup>2</sup> pp. 67-69.

bewilderment.<sup>1</sup> It is at first somewhat disconcerting that the teacher who is elsewhere so impersonal, and who insists so strongly on the action of the bare will, should go to the lengths of description found in these passages, which should be read by those interested in such things; but we may note that Father Baker is throughout extremely diffident as to the accuracy of his description, and in no case suggests (nor did he think) that they were in any sense miraculous or marks of the divine favour. He regarded them merely as by-products, the spiritual overflowing into the sensible.

In another place he tells how the time spent in prayer varied as his spiritual life developed, and how he ended by spending little time in actual recollection, but much in spiritual instruction and the writing of religious books. Indeed, it was during this period of his life that he produced the voluminous treatises which survive, and which were to serve as raw material for Father Cressy.

“ At the first, whilst he used meditation and acts, he spent therein only one hour in the morning and another in the evening; but after that he was called to aspirations it came to be four or five hours in the morning and one in the evening. . . . Afterwards it came so that almost the whole forenoon he spent in his said exercise, and two hours in the evening; so that in the whole four and twenty hours’ space he came to spend therein seven, eight, or nine, or ten, yea, sometimes perhaps eleven hours’ space. . . . After that . . . our scholar’s exercise grew to be so short that it was not much more—if fully so much—than one hour’s space, putting all the time he spent in it together in the whole day, and thereof the best part was in the saying of Mass, which he performed aspiratively.

<sup>1</sup> *e.g.*, p. 115 *et al.*

. . . But yet that little time seemed to him to be as profitable to his soul as were his former exercises.”<sup>1</sup>

During the whole of his time at Cambrai, and in fact during almost the whole of his religious life, Father Baker was entirely his own master as regards the disposition of his time, for he was not living in community. This solitary life undoubtedly helped to tinge his teaching, and took from it warmth and breadth of outlook, and in this respect Father Baker has some likeness to those mystics who have given countenance to the opinion that mysticism is a revolt from institutional religion. We shall have occasion to remark, when considering *Sancta Sophia*, that he seems to have regarded religious superiors as trials to the faithful. It is an extraordinary position for a son of St Benedict to adopt, having before his eyes his founder’s ideal of the Abbot; but two quotations from the *Secretum* will show that the expressions just used are not exaggerated. Speaking of the advantages he himself enjoyed when progressing in prayer he says:

“ He lived not with any superior and so had the greater liberty for it.”<sup>2</sup>

And later, speaking of the advantages over himself that his nuns may reasonably expect to have, he says:

“ Also you may hope to have a good cross superior, if you pray hard for having such a one. But such commodity our scholar [*i.e.*, himself] had not.”<sup>3</sup>

To the student of mysticism, perhaps the most interesting point of his autobiography is the total loss of ground after the first passive union. Unfortunately, this part

<sup>1</sup> pp. 106-108.

<sup>2</sup> p. 106.

<sup>3</sup> p. 132.

of the narrative is not altogether clear. Father Baker gives us to understand that the cause of his backsliding was his failure to keep heart during the period of desolation, added to scruples which led to a kind of despair of further advance. It would seem that he was passing through what he called the Great Desolation when erecting his system in *Sancta Sophia*, and what St John of the Cross calls by the name of the Night of the Spirit. In this, in a way inexplicable and unintelligible to those who have not experienced it, the action of God takes the place of the action of the soul, thereby withdrawing the prayer entirely beyond anything perceptible by the senses or mind. The soul, as yet lacking the spiritual sight to realize the divine presence, is in reality flooded with what Dionysius calls the ray of darkness; she is blinded with excess of light; but the experience is so novel, and all that was before familiar has passed away so utterly, that she feels herself to be abandoned and outcast of God. It is the supreme crisis of the contemplative life, when the courage may fail and the soul return for comfort once more to sensible things. This Father Baker did in part, and it was long before he recovered the ground lost. Indeed, he never again seems to have attained to a passive union unless in the last months of his life, when he wrote to his "most dear spiritual daughters and disciples" to let them know that "God be blessed he was now his 'in passionibus,' and that one dram of suffering was worth more than a hundred pounds of doing."<sup>1</sup> Father Leander Pritchard, the bearer of this message to Cambrai, apparently understood it in a material sense, whereupon Father Baker "signified to him that the passions he meant were the

<sup>1</sup> See McCann, Introduction to *Confessions*, p. xxxix.

greatest tastes of heaven that his life was capable of, his prayer being now wholly passive."

In many respects, with the exception of a fierce thrust at a religious order whose methods displeased him,<sup>1</sup> the *Secretum* is far less magisterial and more gentle in tone than *Sancta Sophia*. There are some strokes of autobiography that will be welcomed by those who have long been familiar with the larger work. He thus describes the pleasure he received from hearing some lute music at the time of his first conversion.

"The music was but an ordinary lute, whereon he that played had but ordinary skill. But yet our scholar was in soul thereby so disposed that the same music did move him towards God and further his devotion for the time, with much delight also to nature—yea, unspeakably far more—than ever did any music before, or did since his foresaid fall, or doth at this present. Music was ever to him—as it commonly always is to others, though never so imperfect—some delight with stirring of some little more devotion than would otherwise have been in the soul."<sup>2</sup>

And he tells us later:

"Ever after dinners or suppers for a competent time he ceased from all serious employment. Sometimes he was in the humour of making verses of spiritual matters, albeit he had not formerly much used versifying, nor did he long continue in the said humour."<sup>3</sup>

Certainly we should not expect versifying to have been a pastime of Father Baker, yet this passage may explain the tolerance he extended to Dame Gertrude More's pedestrian muse.

<sup>1</sup> p. 96.

<sup>2</sup> p. 70.

<sup>3</sup> p. 125.



Equally illuminating, as indications of Father Baker's mind, are the flashes of Elizabethan English, which are occasionally caught in the pages of the *Secretum*. Thus he says, referring to his passive contemplation in the past,

“The same contemplation is to put him in mind of his present poverty and darkness, and is to breed in him the more humility, indifferency, and resignation, and make him the more careful hereafter to take heed of losing or decaying that which he had very dearly bought and lost as lightly and foolishly: bought with old gold and lost for an old song.”<sup>1</sup>

And when he describes himself “as it were a bellwether, or a king-leader to you of the spiritual dance,”<sup>2</sup> we cannot help feeling that such phrases would not have remained alive after Father Cressy had been over the ground.

The other treatise already referred to is the life of Dame Gertrude More.<sup>3</sup> The circumstances of Dame Gertrude's life were, as Father Baker realized well enough, a supreme justification of his method and doctrine. This nun, a descendant of the martyred Chancellor and one of the original community of English Benedictine dames at Cambrai,<sup>4</sup> had been professed some years before she met Father Baker, but had found no spiritual peace, and was, indeed, in a state bordering on despair. Her heart, she said, had become as hard as a stone as regards God and the exercise of virtue.<sup>5</sup> Almost as a last hope, she set herself to follow Father Baker's instructions, which before she had ridiculed, and from

<sup>1</sup> p. 149.

<sup>2</sup> p. 150.

<sup>3</sup> Edited by Dom B. Weld-Blundell (see Bibliography). References are to his edition. See also Appendix C.

<sup>4</sup> They are now at Stanbrook.

<sup>5</sup> Vol. i, p. 24.

that moment till the day of her death, which came early, she went forward towards sanctity. In consequence, a description of her life and attitude of mind shows Father Baker's teaching translated into practice. As regards contemplative prayer, there is little in the Life of Dame Gertrude which is not to be found in *Sancta Sophia*; but the picture of Dame Gertrude herself, with "her quick-witted tongue and her spirited character," whether "mocking and jesting in her gifted way"<sup>1</sup> at her future director, or thanking him on her deathbed, is very sympathetically drawn, and the whole book, like the *Secretum*, has a warmth and ease not found in *Sancta Sophia*. Yet it is this last-named book which gives an interest and value to the smaller remains of Father Baker's writings, and it is undoubtedly one of the spiritual classics of the English language.

The leading theme distinguishing *Sancta Sophia* is the importance of internal prayer in the life of the soul. Prayer is everything. This may seem nothing novel in a book of spiritual direction, but a moment's thought will probably recall that most spiritual books which are at all impersonal either treat prayer as one of the many departments of the religious life or prescind from any methodical consideration of it at all. With Father Baker prayer is all in all. It is the aim and end of all labour, all mortification, and all recreation. It is the great moulder of conduct, it is the supreme test of spiritual progress and worth.

*Sancta Sophia* begins by a statement of the excellence of a life of prayer and a description of its stages and difficulty. An external director is at first necessary, but

<sup>1</sup> p. 27. For additional notes on Dame Gertrude, see Appendix.

the practice of prayer will obtain for the soul a light that will render human counsel unnecessary.

“Many changes she [the soul] must expect; many risings and fallings; sometimes light and sometimes darkness; sometimes calmness of passions, and presently after, it may be, fiercer combats than before; and these successions of change repeated, God knows how oft, before the end approacheth.”<sup>1</sup>

Yet a soul need not be anxious if she is doing her best.

“For it is enough for a soul to be in the way, and to correspond to such enablements as she hath received; and then in what degree of spirit soever she dies, she dies according to the will and ordination of God, to whom she must be resigned, and consequently she will be very happy.”<sup>2</sup>

The second treatise is occupied with mortification. Here again Father Baker is extremely sane, and when we make allowance for the circumstance that he was writing for enclosed nuns, we may say that his analysis of the self-discipline of the soul aiming at perfection is almost complete. Again, his broad-minded chapters on scrupulosity, with their reminiscences of the *Cloud of Unknowing*, are as valuable now as when they were first written.

The third treatise is concerned with prayer, and it is here that Father Baker's clarity shows to best advantage. It is well known that the methodical analyzing of the psychological stages of prayer was first thoroughly achieved in the sixteenth century. The success of the leaders of the counter-Reformation in this respect, and

<sup>1</sup> S. S., p. 48.

<sup>2</sup> p. 51.

the abandonment of the liturgy for what may be called devotional religion, had resulted in meditation occupying a somewhat disproportionate part in religious life of the period. Elaborated as a system of prayer for those living in the world, it was pressed upon religious men and women throughout Europe. Father Baker's reiteration that meditation is not all may seem to Catholics of to-day and to most non-Catholics superfluous and trite; but a glance at the shelves of any old Catholic library, with its rows of volumes of meditations, and a knowledge of the customs of religious houses only a few decades ago, when a set meditation was read and prepared in common by the whole community, will remind us what oppression such a system might bring to the life of an enclosed nun, devoid of any spiritual director save a priest either devoted to meditation or in no sense of the word a man of prayer at all. To such a one, *Sancta Sophia* alone would suffice to teach prayer and free her soul.

Prayer, he insists, is the action of a will directed towards God. This may be a truism, but Father Baker is unique in his insistence on a corollary not usually noticed, that prayer may be aimed at first, and that as it is perfected, virtues necessarily grow with it. The understanding, he holds, can do no more than set the will, find the target, and calculate the range. When this has been done, it must retire. Prayer proper,<sup>1</sup> as opposed to meditation, consists of acts of the will—that is, acts of love of God. These may be either directly acts of love, or acts of resignation acquiescing in contradictions to self-will or promising virtuous behaviour in the future. Father Baker rightly emphasizes the superior value of acts of

<sup>1</sup> By prayer here only ordinary, active prayer is meant.

resignation, but leaves it to the soul to choose for herself, and it is worth recalling that his favourite daughter, Dame Gertrude, chose direct acts of love. The book ends with a short description of higher states of prayer, admirably impersonal, and for the most part based on the teaching of the Spanish mystics.

It is not within the scope of these pages to follow in detail Father Baker's words, but three points of his teaching may be selected as being pre-eminently valuable; indeed, on these three points he may be said to be the *locus classicus*, at least among English writers. The three points are his internal inspirations, mortification, and the prayer of forced acts.

When Father Baker wrote, the directive movement was at its height in Catholic Europe. It was indeed the golden age of the confessor, and readers of history will recall what great influence, even over the Throne, the great directors of the day were thought to have. The ordering of the spiritual life by the great Jesuits, under the influence of their founder's most celebrated book, the new wine which had been poured into the Church by the Spanish saints, and, most important of all, the jealous care which inspired the official leaders of the counter-Reformation—all these combined to give the professional director of consciences a place in the religious life of the times which would have astounded the religious communities of the Middle Ages, and would not a little gall those of to-day. Father Baker, following St John of the Cross, opposed this system, especially when applied unthinkingly to convents of enclosed religious. It is the keystone of his doctrine that to a soul of goodwill who lives apart from the noise of the world, God's Holy Spirit speaks without the sound

of words, and leads in a way most suited to its individual needs.

“ [The director is] not to teach his own way, nor indeed any determinate way of prayer, but to instruct his disciples how they may themselves find out the way proper for them. . . . In a word, he is only God’s usher, and must lead souls in God’s way, and not his own.”<sup>1</sup>

Thus the triumph of such a director was to set a soul on a path where it should no longer need his guiding hand, and there are few passages in his *Life* of her more touching than that which describes Dame Gertrude More on her deathbed, in the belief that Father Baker was at hand in the convent, saying that she desired not to speak with him. “ Then they asked if she would have God, and she said, ‘ Yea.’ ”<sup>2</sup>

In effect, Father Baker’s teaching amounts to little more than that a sincere soul in a state of grace will always have an abiding assurance that her duty lies in this way and not in that; but it is a deep truth, not seldom ignored by other writers, and still more often obscured in practice. It was only to be expected that such a voice raised for freedom of spirit would not be suffered to pass unchallenged, and in the letters and approbations prefixed to *Sancta Sophia* we can catch the echoes of the tempest it raised. It was objected that such a doctrine would dangerously relax religious obedience. Father Baker’s defence, even at the time, was triumphant; and it is perfectly clear that he was in harmony with all the great saints in warning his readers that in practice the command of the superior is God’s most certain word to the subject, before which all private inspiration must bow. Never-

<sup>1</sup> p. 85.

<sup>2</sup> *Inner Life*, i, p. 279.

theless, it is not surprising that some of his contemporaries disapproved of Father Baker, for he, on his side, displays at times an undoubted spirit of pugnacity. The impression gained from *Sancta Sophia* is that superiors are responsible for most of the ills that have befallen religious observance, and not uncommonly blunder when they have to do with internal livers. They must be suffered gladly, and so will not harm the proficient, though to the beginner they may do irreparable harm.

“ But withal the disuse of the said obligation [of confessing faults to the superior] we are to impute: (1) Partly to the tepidity of subjects. . . . (2) But principally to the incapacity and insufficiency of superiors. . . . Surely this most excellent practice had never been brought into disuse, or would again be restored, if superiors had continued, or generally were now: (1) Themselves practised in a spiritual course, etc. [Father Baker enumerates four other respects in which they fall short.]<sup>1</sup>

“ Whether the disuse [of obeying elders as prescribed by St Benedict] has proceeded from want of humility and simplicity in the younger sort, or from imperfection and want of discretion and gravity in the more ancient, or perhaps from jealousy and love of being absolute in superiors, it is hard to say.”<sup>2</sup>

Doubtless Father Baker's personal characteristics and the circumstances of his life combined to give him this somewhat bitter view; it is of a piece with his cold outlook, which never suggests that God may give his best graces through the warm sympathy of an elder or the inspiring example of a commanding personality. In this he falls far short of St Benedict; but on the radical value of religious obedience he is perfectly orthodox.

<sup>1</sup> p. 322.

<sup>2</sup> p. 330.

His second great contribution to ascetic science is his accurate definition of mortification, and his convincing statement that its essence for contemplative souls is to be found in its necessity; that is, mortification lies in suffering God's will to be done in all things, not in devising of one's own choice a scheme of external austerities. To make his point clear he divides mortifications into the voluntary and the necessary, including as necessary many that the ordinary reader—or writer—would classify as voluntary. Here he may seem at first sight to use words somewhat arbitrarily, but his real meaning is clear enough: that the inevitable happenings of life—sorrows, sufferings, irritations, humiliations—are the great purifiers of the soul, not the accidental austerities which may well give some secret satisfaction; and of these real mortifications no one need ever complain of a lack. Father Baker is nowhere saner than when he gives a large freedom to the contemplative or scrupulous soul, and here certainly there is little of the Puritan about him; but anyone who supposes that the way of life he proposes is easy will find by more attentive consideration that his teaching, like that of the gentle St Francis of Sales, is austere and searching enough, if not at all spectacular.

Yet perhaps his greatest addition to Catholic mystical literature is his sane and lucid instruction in the first stage of contemplative prayer, acts of the will and aspirations. Indeed, in the fulness of his analysis of the first degree, acts of the will, he stands alone. No other spiritual writer, uninspired by him, is so clear and helpful. His division of acts of the will into acts of resignation and of love, his insistence upon the value of the former in moulding character, his doctrine that the repeated acceptance of difficulties and humiliations in prayer will



infallibly result in an exercise of virtue in practice, his reiteration that the exercise of such prayer drives out all voluntary sin from the soul—in all this Father Baker is admirable, and may be recommended as the best and surest guide to prayer for all who seriously seek after God.

It is perhaps a little curious that a writer who is so prolix on other subjects, who was steeped in the writings of autobiographical mystics such as Suso, Ruysbroeck, and St Teresa, and who himself had had high supernatural experiences in prayer, should be so brief in his treatment of the mystical experience. Elsewhere, as we have seen, he breaks silence a little. In the treatises of *Sancta Sophia* he was, of course, writing rather for beginners than for proficient. He was a man, moreover, of profound humility. Visions and ecstasies, as we might expect, occupy but a few pages; demonology still less; but there is hardly a word of those supreme stages which the writings of St Teresa and St John of the Cross have made familiar under the names of the Spiritual Espousals and Marriage. In effect, he simply summarizes what has ever since the age of St Teresa been the common teaching of all Catholic theologians. Only when he is speaking of the Great Desolation, which commonly follows the first passive union, does an emotion make itself felt in his words which conveys the impression that he is speaking of his own experiences.<sup>1</sup> When finally he comes to speak of the mystical experiences of the state of perfection he is still less definite. To describe the union of the perfect soul with God he uses the Dionysian phrase, "Union of nothing with nothing," but his explanation of the words, while orthodox and intelligible, has none of the metaphysical implication of the original author, and indeed has very

<sup>1</sup> p. 537.

little philosophical or theological value. Father Baker, in short, is not primarily a thinker, and metaphysics mean little to him. Although at first sight his concept of religion is over-intellectual, in fact, the severely practical and realistic bent of his mind neutralized altogether any such tendency. Cold as his words at times may seem, his spirit is never abstract, and Father Leander Norminton was in substance correct when he declared that *Sancta Sophia* taught that

“ To Pray is not to talke, or thinke, but love.”

*Sancta Sophia* is not an easy book to read. Though such a voluminous writer must have taken some pleasure in his work, Father Baker never wrote for publication, nor with any idea of producing a single book, or a number of books, which should be a manual of the spiritual life. Consequently, he is extraordinarily diffuse; to use his own phrase, he “ discourses largely ”; and his diffuseness is all the more remarkable because his processes of thought are never slipshod, and there is always a single clear idea before the reader. Even after his treatises have passed through the methodical digestion of Father Cressy, the resulting volume covers five hundred pages of close print, exclusive of the most necessary appendix, a hundred pages long, which illustrates the various states of prayer. Yet for its whole length the book moves forward with an impersonal steadiness of aim. There are no digressions, no chapters that can be isolated from the rest; Father Cressy in this, at least, has done his work to perfection; *Sancta Sophia* is an organic whole.

Nor is the length at all relieved by the literary form. The style in the printed book is singularly pure, and devoid of conceits and mancrisms, and on occasion rises

to eloquence; but it is entirely colourless, and carries no reminiscence of the highly adorned prose of Milton, nor any promise of the idiomatic style of Bunyan and Dryden. The cup of medicine is without a drop of honey to make it palatable. Doubtless Father Baker and Father Cressy in his later years would have despised mere ornament, but the absence of any personal references, and a still more striking absence of any illustration drawn from history, literature, or ordinary life, and even an absence of scriptural quotation, combine to put a severe strain on the attention of the reader.

These difficulties, however, are merely external, and would not deter the "discreet, well-minded soul" so dear to Father Baker's heart. Such a one might more conceivably be discouraged by the prevailing tone of the book. *Sancta Sophia* is not the outpouring of a poet—indeed, it is at the opposite pole of expression—nor is it the personal record of a great soul's experience. It is directive and magisterial, and as such resembles Hilton and St Francis of Sales. It falls short of them, and still more of such a book as the *Imitation of Christ*, in its entire absence of warmth. Undoubtedly the greatest power which resides in the words of our Lord as recorded in the Gospels, in the utterances of the prophets, and in the *Imitation of Christ*, is the directness with which they force the heart of the reader to God. Of such direct and moving touches there are few, if any, in Father Baker.

Yet even so all has not been said. Father Baker lived at a period when several of the forces stirred up by the Renaissance and the Reformation were still developing. A distinguished historian of our day, in some of the most brilliant pages of his long work on religious sentiment in France, has characterized the first half of the seventeenth

century as the flowering time of devout humanism.<sup>1</sup> The Renaissance, which for so long had given little more than a veneer of culture to cover barbarism or luxury, had at last sunk deep into the mind of Catholic Europe. The theologians of Trent were humanists, and the generation that followed them saw the birth of St Francis of Sales. To him and to his numberless disciples the world, with all its treasures of beauty and knowledge, seemed as new and as delightful as the Roman poet imagined it in the first morning of creation. Man to them was the crown of God's work, and they saw him as Miranda saw him on the enchanted island.<sup>2</sup> They could look steadily upon the face of beauty, and pass beyond to the beauty uncreated. Trust and not suspicion, hope and not fear, a world of grace thrown open to all, seemed to them the best interpretation of our Lord's teaching.

On the other hand, the reaction which had followed the first feelings of emancipation after the breach with Rome, and the very principles of the Reformation itself, had produced a distrust of the world and of man, first among the Calvinists, later in their English counterpart, Puritanism, only fully developed after Elizabeth's death, and last of all, in the religious movement begun within the Church at Port Royal and continued in the various sects of Jansenism. In all these a rigid restriction of the possibilities of grace gave birth to an aristocracy of the elect. The world became an abode of shadows set about with traps and pitfalls; man was incapable of generosity in any of his dealings; his best acts were done under the influence

<sup>1</sup> The Abbé H. Bremond, *Histoire du Sentiment Religieux en France*, vol. i.

<sup>2</sup> Bremond aptly quotes the *Tempest*, "How beauteous mankind is!"

of an overmastering delectation. God and his gifts were not to be profaned by contact with the unworthy. Beauty was a snare and wisdom a delusion.

Such divisions of sentiment are naturally clear and exclusive only on paper, though the two currents of thought are obvious to the most casual observer of the period. In the individual, though one may be preponderant, yet elements of both will most commonly be found. With these reservations, and some more shortly to be made, we may say that Father Baker, though he lived in the age of St Francis of Sales and died before the publication of Arnauld's epoch-making book on Frequent Communion, was a rigorist rather than a humanist. Although he was a mystic in the commonly accepted sense of the word, and therefore might be expected to be spiritually akin to Donne and Crashaw and Herbert, and although his editor was a High Church divine who had been in the households of Falkland and Strafford, there is nothing in the book that suggests the wide sympathies of the great Cavaliers. Father Baker appears rather as the Puritan, a little distrustful of friendship, beauty, and happiness. He is not a theologian or a speculative mystic, and there is not a word in any of his writings to suggest that he would have had any sympathy with the doctrinal aspects of Jansenism or even with its rigorism, still less with the doctrines of Quietism. Still, it may not be mere imagination that feels rather than sees in *Sancta Sophia* something of the cold logic that repels, even while it fascinates, in the great Arnauld or the Catholic de Rancé, and that regrets the absence of Dame Julian's tender words of love. The Humanity of our Lord, the personal union with him in prayer and the Holy Eucharist, the blessed Christian familiarity with Sacraments and sacramentals that hedges

round and visibly hallows the daily life of a Catholic—these, so emphatically presented by medieval mystics, are only implied and suggested in *Sancta Sophia*. St John of the Cross, whose doctrine he so closely follows, not infrequently terrifies us with his austerity. The ascent of Carmel is indeed made across desert places where no water is. But the lilies are never far away, nor the cedars and the song of the nightingale. With Father Baker there is rarely this background. His language recalls rather to the mind those cold and windswept moors where the stern saints of the Covenant testified, and where their bones rest beneath the grey stones and the heather.

Father Baker's teaching has been spoken of as cold, and I think that most Catholic readers, and still more those who have been surrounded from the cradle by the multitudinous devotions of Catholic piety, will have found themselves a little pained by the scarcity of references in *Sancta Sophia* to the Sacraments and the Office, the Mass and the Bible, and even to the Humanity of our Lord. Even the most unbiased judgement will probably suggest that Father Baker, writing as he is for imperfect souls, does not allow sufficient place in his system for sacramental grace as a source of holiness, nor to the solemn praise of God in common as a supreme act of Christian fellowship and a great instrument of personal sanctification. Further than this no critic should go. Father Baker was a convert to Catholicism from Elizabethan Protestantism, and it may be permissible to suggest that the mental climate in which his early life had been spent was unfavourable to the growth of the full devotional and liturgical life.

There is nothing in *Sancta Sophia*, as there is in some of the German mystics, and in older platonizing writings,

that sets the reader wondering whether the basic doctrine is orthodox. Father Baker, we must also remember, was writing for nuns who, in the ordinary course of their lives, enjoyed to the full all the treasures of Catholic devotion; he himself went on the mission in England at a date when the saying of Mass and the giving of the Sacraments was punishable by death. The careful reader will also note, again and again, that the Catholic background in the lives of those he is addressing is taken for granted. It is unnecessary to do more than indicate his casual references to the Rosary,<sup>1</sup> our Blessed Lady, the Gospels, holy water<sup>2</sup> and the rest, as evidence of this. If this is not enough, a comparison between the spirit of *Sancta Sophia* and that of such an ancient writer as Dionysius in his *Divine Names*, or a modern such as Dean Inge, will sufficiently indicate the difference between doctrinal and temperamental variations from Catholic expression.

These defects—if defects they be—in Father Baker's work have been detailed at some length, because they spring to the mind of almost every reader, and must have repelled many who went to him to learn. A comprehensive judgement on his work can afford to take them into account, for it must be the considered opinion of most students of the book that *Sancta Sophia*, as a work of practical spiritual direction, is superior to any other in the language. *Excudent alii*. . . . Others have written, and written well, of the general practice of virtue, of the moral effects of certain doctrines and devotions, and even, though less frequently, of prayer. Father Baker stands alone in the completeness with which he gives the principles which must guide a soul in all her outward and

<sup>1</sup> pp. 272, 444.

<sup>2</sup> p. 300.

inward actions on the way to God. Exteriorly he may seem narrow and his ways unlovely; but his doctrine is all love, and he gives as a guide God's Holy Spirit.

The style of *Sancta Sophia*, largely Father Baker's own, but not without a considerable tinge of its editor's, is in its severe way pure enough, as we should expect from a scholar's work, revised by a man of Cressy's intellectual distinction. Those who would see it at its best should read the excellent abbreviation of Hilton,<sup>1</sup> and the last chapter of the book. It is rarely vivid or picturesque, and only in a few places are we reminded by its quaintness that the writer was almost a contemporary of Burton and Browne. It is throughout earnest and weighty; the following is perhaps a favourable specimen.

“ Our supreme happiness is not receiving but loving; all these favours, therefore, and all these sufferings, do end in this: namely, the accomplishment of this love in our souls. . . . There are, therefore, in a spiritual life, no strange novelties or wonders pretended to. Divine love is all; it begins with love and resignation, and there it ends likewise. All the difference is in the degrees and lustre of it; love, even in its most imperfect state, is most divinely beautiful, which beauty is wonderfully increased by exercise; but when by such fiery trials and purifications, as also by such near approaches as are made to the fountain of beauty and light in passive unions, this love is exalted to its perfection, how new, how admirable and incomprehensible to us imperfect souls is the manner of the exercising of it! . . . If God, by the means of our prayers, give us the grace and courage to proceed *de virtute in virtutem*, according to these steps and these directions, we shall, without doubt, sooner or later arrive unto the top of the mountain, where God is

<sup>1</sup> p. 58 ff.



seen: a mountain, to us that stand below, environed with clouds and darkness, but to them who have their dwelling there, it is peace and serenity and light. It is an intellectual heaven, where there is no sun or moon, but God and the Lamb are the light of it."<sup>1</sup>

A passage of such lofty eloquence as this may fittingly close these remarks on Father Baker. If the criticisms of some points of his teaching seem unfair or trivial, it should be realized that they are made with the full conviction that Father Baker is great enough to bear them. He is not a philosopher, nor a revealer of personal experience, and for this reason will be of little interest to those who look upon the mystics as revealers of truth, or who go to them for literary pleasure; but for those who wish to seek God in spirit and in truth he is perhaps the best guide of all who have written in our language.

<sup>1</sup> pp. 542, 546.

## VIII

### CHARACTERISTICS OF THE ENGLISH MYSTICS

FATHER BAKER is the last in the direct succession of English mystical writers, and with him this brief summary must cease. However arbitrary it may seem to select as a typical and final representative of English mysticism a figure unknown to literary history, when we are concerned with a century which produced Donne and George Herbert and Vaughan and Traherne, and felt the influence of George Fox and the Cambridge Platonists, the difference between these and the medieval mystics is too profound to admit of reconciliation. Some of these poets and thinkers may have been mystics in the Catholic sense of the term—that is to say, experts in contemplative prayer—but their language is largely that of poetry or philosophy or revolt, and they tell us nothing of the mystical way as understood by the Church. In any case, they are the typical children of a new England, the England of the completed Renaissance and Reformation. No formula is sufficiently elastic to comprehend them and the medieval contemplatives. These latter form a school of their own, imitated and interpreted by Father Baker and his nuns, and as such susceptible of analysis and comparison.

Still less is it possible to include, as other writers have done,<sup>1</sup> Blake and Wordsworth, Shelley and Browning, Tennyson and Jefferies. If the traditional view of

<sup>1</sup> In particular, Dean Inge.

supernatural mysticism that has been stated earlier in this book has any truth in it, we cannot allow these names, eminent as they are, to be spoken in the same breath with those of saints of the Church. Their experience has great value for all, and by denying the extraordinary supernatural action of God upon them we do not suggest that they have not as much to tell of reality as the scientist or the philosopher; but they do not claim for themselves, nor can we claim for them, that union with God in the will, that action of God upon their whole being, that we claim for the saints. And these latter, though perhaps not rare in England, have for the most part been silent since the days of Father Baker.

It remains, at the end of this survey, to look back for a moment on the writings left by the English medieval mystics, to notice what traits they have in common, and to gather what help we can from them in ordering our spiritual life to-day. Of the many family resemblances and individual excellences that might be noticed, I will here dwell upon a few only.

I. The English mystics, as a body, give most valuable illustrations of the various degrees of the contemplative life. From their writings an almost continuous commentary could be made upon the scheme of St John of the Cross. Father Baker, besides his other excellences, deals most thoroughly with the stage, so often long in duration though shortly described, between the prayer of acts of the will and the beginnings of "active" contemplation. His aspirations fill a gap in St John's scheme, or rather expand a point that he treats of very summarily. The borderland between "active" and "passive" contemplation and the Dark Night of the Senses which precedes them are fully developed in the *Cloud of Unknowing*

and the *Epistle of Privy Counsel*. The Dark Night of the Soul appears in Father Baker as the Great Desolation, and it is worth noting that his testimony has great value, as he himself, it appears, fell away from his endeavour twice, first at the Dark Night of the Senses in Padua, and again at the Dark Night of the Soul in England. Hilton gives us the whole of the progress from meditation to contemplation. Finally, in Dame Julian, we have clear examples of the three kinds of vision—corporeal, imaginative, and intellectual—catalogued first by St Augustine, and described so minutely by the Spaniards. Indeed, unless it be in Rolle, there is hardly any passage in the English mystics that cannot be readily fitted into the normal scheme of St John.

Perhaps a personal impression may be permitted to appear here. Before I approached the task of appreciating them I had read the English mystics disjointedly, and with no intention of comparing one with another or any with later writers. I had a vague opinion that the great sixteenth-century mystics reduced a chaos into order, brought light where darkness had been. This, no doubt, they did, by their methodical and complete traversing of the ground; and also, by the accident of their origin in the country which led the van of the Counter-Reformation, their terminology was imposed without difficulty upon Catholic Europe; besides this, St John and St Teresa are giants of sanctity and vivid personality. Yet a repeated reading of the English mystics, followed by a re-reading of the Spaniards, has impressed upon me that essential unity of experience and expression lie behind all, and that Hilton and the *Cloud* are nearer to St John than they are to St Bernard.

II. The second characteristic has already been noticed in passing. It is that atmosphere of clear light, of warm sunshine, which pervades the landscape they draw for us. Anyone who is at all familiar with the lives of the saints who have lived since the Reformation will have been impressed with the dangers that surround, with the gloom that seems to enfold, the heights of perfection. Once the firm ground of common piety has been left behind, the contemplative seems to be cut off from all that is sane and familiar. He is no longer on the plane of ordinary life. He is the mark alike for the arrow that flies by day, and for the business that walks abroad by night; for the onrush of evil, and for the noonday devil. His values seem to be utterly changed, and all that before he judged most dear and precious now seems a mockery. A thousand fall at his side, and ten thousand at his right hand. Illness, desolation, dereliction, are his portion; he must hold on his way shaken by doubts and scruples, over a dry earth and under a black heaven.

However little this description may accord with the inmost experience of many holy souls, it is scarcely an exaggeration to say that it is the picture which many have drawn of the contemplative life after reading some modern books of Catholic spirituality, and it would be useless to deny that incidents in the lives of many saints, not excluding St Teresa and St John of the Cross, cause moments of repulsion to readers at the present time. We forget the Temptation and the Agony in the Garden, and would have our saints always as balanced, and their sufferings always as objective, as was the case with a Charles Borromeo or a Thomas More.

How far the common modern conception of the ways of perfection is due to an undue emphasis upon accidental

and individual features in the character of a few outstanding mystics; how far it is based on the psychological characteristics of the Latin nations from whom, almost alone, have sprung Catholic saints since the Reformation, how far, finally, it is due to the dissatisfied, distrustful, self-questioning spirit that has been abroad since the Renaissance, and has made each of us find in Hamlet something of himself—such questions may be asked and answered in a hundred different ways. Here it is sufficient to say that our English medieval mystics on the whole point out a path of light. There are some shadows, no doubt; but the general impression left by Rolle and Hilton, as well as by the *Cloud*, is that the contemplative may go from strength to strength, without finding enemies in his path of a totally different nature from the passions of self-interest that stand in the way of all, even the meanest, who hunger and thirst after justice.

III. The English mystics are essentially sane and comprehensible. When we turn from them to other familiar names often taken as typical of mysticism—to Proclus, to Erigena, to Eckhart, to Boehme, to William Blake—we feel that we are in another world of thought. There is scarcely a sentence in the English mystics, unless it be a rare one in Dame Julian, that gives such an impression. Perhaps the most striking evidence of this sanity of outlook throughout medieval England may be found in the comments of an unknown translator of the French mystical treatise, the *Mirror for Simple Souls*. The *Mirror*, written by a Frenchman at the end of the thirteenth or beginning of the fourteenth century, does not seem to have had any influence on English mysticism. It is concerned almost entirely with a description of a soul in the highest mystical

degree. It is often hard of comprehension and sometimes borders on extravagance. Yet wherever the translator ventures an explanation we cannot escape a feeling of admiration at the wisdom and clarity of his words.<sup>1</sup>

IV. Fourthly, there is the strong love of all the English medieval mystics for our blessed Lord. This has been remarked earlier in these pages, and may seem at first sight to be nothing distinctive. It is, however, only too common at the present day among non-Catholics to regard as the ideal, not only of the mystic's prayer, but of his life, a concentration on the pure Deity or even mere Being. Quite opposite is the teaching of the English mystics, and, it may be added, of the great Spaniards who followed them. We are, indeed, to pass, as Hilton says, from Christ as man to Christ as God; but there is no suggestion that a soul who aspires to contemplative prayer need seek for a purer foundation on which to build than our Lord, nor that she need do more than increase in love for that personal Saviour, God and Man, who came upon this earth to be a model for all. Neither the *Cloud* nor Father Baker is an exception. They both suppose this devotion to our Lord to be part of the practice of their disciples, and here again they may be profitably compared with the *Mirror for Simple Souls*. The English mystics give no hint that preparation for contemplation is an intellectual process, the monopoly of an aristocracy of the mind, who can afford to dispense with the prayers and beliefs of the many. For them, contemplation is a growth within the framework of the normal Christian life.

V. There remains the comparison between the active and contemplative lives which may be found, expressed

<sup>1</sup> The *Mirror* is, I believe, shortly to be published in the Orchard Series by Messrs. Burns Oates and Washbourne.

or implied, in all mystical writers. It is an important question, and it may be worth while to set out the common theological teaching on the point, though perhaps most of the controversies about it have arisen from an ambiguous use of the word contemplative, and from a confusion of the life of contemplation with that lived in the contemplative orders.

The only source of supernatural merit, and therefore of our worth before God, is charity, or a supernatural love of God. All actions, whether of direct worship of God, or of help to our fellow-creatures, or of themselves purely indifferent, derive all their worth from the motive of charity behind them. Growth in purity of prayer is in proportion to growth in charity, at least up to the degree of ordinary or active contemplation. It is the more common opinion that the extraordinary states of prayer—passive unions, the Dark Night of the Soul, etc.—do not necessarily imply a greater charity than may be possessed by those who have not experienced them, though for the individual contemplative a growth in contemplation implies a growth in charity. Even for the contemplative, with the possible exception of the few who attain to the highest degree of the Spiritual Marriage, the moments of contemplation are few in comparison with the extent of his life, and the intervals are occupied with active work whether directly religious, or merely domestic, as in the case of so many contemplative nuns.

The practice of contemplation, therefore, is not restricted to those within a contemplative order, nor are all these latter contemplatives, though it is probable that most of them attain sooner or later to "active" contemplation. Every soul called by God to perfection has to identify her will with God's so as to exclude all love



of, or attachment to, created things for their own sake. For most this can only be achieved by a physical separation from "the world" and an abandonment of all entangling active works. Hence the solitude and renunciation which are a distinctive feature of the "contemplative" orders. But though the internal detachment implied in this external renunciation is always necessary, some souls, while still engaged in active works, and within the framework of an active life, are able to reach a degree of perfection both of charity and prayer as great or greater than that of many engaged in a "contemplative" course of life. Moreover, when once a settled degree of perfection has been attained the contemplative can turn to activity without in any way ceasing to advance, though his actual experiences in prayer may be less luminous. St Gregory the Great and St Teresa come to the mind immediately among the many examples of this that could be given.

With these considerations in mind we can examine the teaching of the English mystics. They are not altogether in agreement. Rolle is an individualist, and in a certain sense he is, throughout his mystical treatises, asserting and protesting the excellence of contemplation to a perverse generation. He is rather an advocate than a judge. We have seen that he is in substantial agreement with common doctrine on many points, but it is probable that he imagined a wide gulf existing between the active and contemplative lives.

The *Cloud* and its companions are professedly treatises for those, and for those alone, who are called to contemplative prayer, and who are at a certain stage of their progress. Their doctrine on the contemplative life is not intended to cover every aspect of the case, but only to

justify those called to retirement and contemplation as against those ignorant of any state higher than that of ordinary Christians.

Hilton, characteristically, approaches the question with a wider outlook, and in his *Epistle to a Devout Man* he defines the active, contemplative, and mixed lives in the traditional manner inherited from St Gregory and St Augustine. In the *Scale* he is describing a soul's progress to contemplation for a religious, perhaps an anchoress, and he assumes the excellence of contemplative prayer and the practice of virtue arising from it as opposed to the prayer and exercises of ordinary Christians.

Father Baker, perhaps, approaches more nearly to what has been called the "oriental" conception of a contemplative state of life separated by a wide gulf from the active life and far better than it. His references to "active lives" are nearly always disparaging, and there is no suggestion in *Sancta Sophia* of a mixed life, or of a return from contemplation. The chapters on "The Exercise of Prayer in Distractive Offices" and "The English Mission" are not altogether satisfactory.

But if the English mystics are not fully in agreement on the adjustment of the active and contemplative lives, they are in perfect agreement, both with one another and with Catholic tradition, on the hardships and nobility of the way of contemplation. Contemplation is not an art or an accomplishment which may be acquired easily and which will add to the fulness and happiness of life. It is not for the dilettante or the connoisseur; it is not even for the artist or the poet. It is for men of good will, who take up their cross with Christ, who leave father and mother and fields, who lose their life that they may find it. Few in the world, few priests, few religious even, live a

life sufficiently silent and austere to attain to it. Yet if the mystics are under no illusion as to the bitterness of the conflict, they are eloquent in their declaration that their prize exceeds all that it has entered into the heart of man to conceive.

“ For they have God, in whom is all plenty ; and whoso hath him, he needeth nought else in this life.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Cloud*, ch. xxiii.



## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX A

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

##### I. MYSTICISM IN GENERAL

**B**OOKS on the various aspects of mysticism are so numerous that it is impossible to give even a representative selection here. Most Catholic writers have confined themselves to an exposition of the degrees of mystical prayer. Besides the works of St Teresa and St John of the Cross, the mystical teachers *par excellence*, perhaps the best work readily accessible to the English reader is that of Père Poulain, S.J., *The Graces of Interior Prayer* (English translation, Kegan Paul, 1910). The theory and practice of the first stages of mystical prayer are lucidly expounded in three minute treatises:

*Prayer and Contemplation.* A Catholic Truth Society reprint of an article by the late Bishop Hedley of Newport.

*The Prayer of Simplicity.* A C.T.S. reprint of a section of Père Poulain's work already referred to.

*Contemplative Prayer.* By Père de la Taille, S.J. (English translation, Burns Oates and Washbourne, 1927.) This is a short statement by one of the greatest theologians of our generation, and is admirably clear.

I have not attempted to give any account of books on mysticism published abroad, but I may be permitted to mention the following:

J. MARÉCHAL, S.J. *Études sur la Psychologie des Mystiques*. (Paris, 1924.) (Eng. trans., *Studies in the Psychology of the Mystics*, London, Burns Oates and Washbourne, 1927.)

M. BLONDEL. *Cahiers de la Nouvelle Journée : Qu'est-ce que la Mystique?* (Paris, 1925.)

And, with a somewhat different outlook:

H. BREMOND. *Prière et Poésie*. (Paris, Grasset, 1926.) (Eng. trans., *Prayer and Poetry*, London, Burns Oates and Washbourne, 1927.)

Catholic philosophers and theologians have only recently devoted themselves to an analysis of the mystical experience, and hitherto their treatment has been entirely esoteric—that is, they have discussed it with reference to Thomist philosophy and the theology of grace. The present state of some of the most important controversies is well summed up by Abbot Butler in *Western Mysticism* (second edition, Constable, 1926). No authoritative work exists (at least in English) on mysticism as part of what is commonly known as religious experience; among books by Catholics may be mentioned:

*Mysticism, its Nature and Value*. By Fr. A. B. Sharpe. (Sands, 1910.)

*The Philosophy of Mysticism*. By E. I. Watkin. (Grant Richards, 1920.)

Baron von Hügel's monumental work, *The Mystical Element in Religion* (Dent, 1908 and reprinted), though likely to become a religious classic and full of luminous and unflinching thought, is too deeply tinged with the

critical and philosophical prepossessions of its author to be taken as the normal Catholic presentation.

Among books by non-Catholics I have consulted most frequently:

*Christian Mysticism.* By W. R. Inge (later Dean Inge). (Methuen, 1899.)

*Mysticism.* By Evelyn Underhill. (Methuen, first published 1911, now in its tenth edition.) This contains an excellent bibliography.

*Practical Mysticism.* By E. Underhill. (Dent, 1914.)

*The Life of the Spirit and the Life of To-day.* By E. Underhill. (Dent, 1922.)

*The Mystics of the Church.* By E. Underhill. (London, James Clarke, 1925.)

*The Mystic Way.* By E. Underhill. (Dent, 1913.)  
I confess I did not understand this book.

For a longer list, reference should be made to the bibliography of Miss Underhill's *Mysticism*. Especially numerous are the books by psychologists, of which one of the most influential is William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Longmans, 1902 and reprinted). An interesting examination of James's theories from a Catholic standpoint is:

*Psychology and the Mystical Experience.* By J. Howley. (Kegan Paul, 1920.)

## II. THE ENGLISH MYSTICS

### (a) *General.*

So far as I am aware, only three studies of the English mystics as a group exist, apart from articles in encyclopedias. These are:

*Studies of the English Mystics.* By W. R. Inge. (J. Murray, 1907.)

*The English Mystics.* By G. Hodgson.

*The Mystics of the Church.* By E. Underhill.

Dean Inge's book, a series of discourses delivered at St Margaret's, Westminster, deals also with Law, Wordsworth, etc., and only a section of Miss Underhill's book is concerned with England.

(b) *Particular.*

THE *ANCREN RIWLE*.—1. Text, edited by J. Morton for the Camden Society, 1853, with a translation into modern English.

2. Morton's translation reprinted by the De la More Press, 1905.
3. Morton's text, modernized by Abbot Gasquet. (Burns and Oates, 1905.)
4. French translation, by Dom Meunier, O.S.B., to appear shortly (Tours, A. Mame).

For the problem of authorship, see the *English Review* articles, referred to above, p. 63. The *Cambridge History of English Literature* (vol. i, ch. xi), has a short account of the *Riwle*.

RICHARD ROLLE.—1. *English Prose Treatises*, edited by G. G. Perry. (Early English Text Society, 1866.)

2. *The Fire of Love and Mending of Life*. Translated by R. Misyn; edited by R. Harvey. (E.E.T.S., 1896.)
3. *Richard Rolle*. Edited by C. Horstman, 2 vols. (Swan Sonnenschein and Co., 1895-6.)
4. *The Form of Perfect Living*. Edited by G. Hodgson. (T. Baker, 1910.)
5. *Fire of Love and Mending of Life*. Done into modern English by F. M. Comper; Introduction by E. Underhill. (Methuen, 1914.)



6. *Incendium Amoris*. Text edited by M. Deanesley. (Manchester University Press, 1915.)
7. *Minor Works*. Edited by G. Hodgson. (Watkins, 1923.)
8. *The Amending of Life*. Edited by A.P. (London, Burns Oates and Washbourne, 1927).
9. *Œuvres Choisis*. (Shortly; Alfred Mame, Tours).

For a list of Rolle's non-mystical works and editions of them, see Horstman's bibliography. There is a good short appreciation of Rolle's place in literature in the *Cambridge History*, vol. ii, ch. ii, and an article in the *Dictionary of National Biography*. Dr. Horstman published in two volumes all the works of Rolle written in English or translated into English in the Middle Ages. It was intended that these volumes should be followed by a third containing the Latin works, but this has unfortunately not appeared. The great intrinsic value of Dr. Horstman's work is considerably discounted for the general reader by the difficulties created for all except students by the spelling and dialect of Middle English, by the entire absence of amenities such as an index and table of contents (which, no doubt, would have appeared with the third volume), and an intemperance of judgement in the introductory matter. Horstman undoubtedly overestimates the literary and intellectual value of Rolle, and his remarks on mysticism will find many dissentients. Fortunately, the labours of Miss Comper, Miss Deanesley, and Miss Hodgson have presented most of Rolle's best work in a readable form, and Miss Allen is at present at work on the establishment of a canon.

- DAME JULIAN.—1. *Revelations*. Edited by Dom S. Cressy, 1670.
2. Cressy's edition, reprinted. (Leicester, 1843.)
  3. *Revelations*. Edited by Father Collins. (Richardson, 1877.)
  4. *Revelations*. Edited by G. Warrack. (Methuen, 1901.)
  5. *Revelations*. Cressy's edition reprinted, with introduction by Fr. Tyrrell, S.J. (Kegan Paul, 1902.)
  6. *Comfortable Words for Christ's Lovers* (an earlier version of the *Revelations*). Edited by Rev. D. Harford. (Allenson, 1911.) The latest edition of Mr. Harford's book bears the title *The Shewings of the Lady Julian*.
  7. *The Revelations of Divine Love*. Edited by Dom Roger Hudleston. (Orchard Books, No. 11. Burns Oates and Washbourne, 1927.) An excellent edition, with good introductory matter.
  8. *Révélation de l'Amour Divin*. A French translation by Dom Meunier. (Alfred Mame, Tours, 1910 and 1925). With an interesting introduction.

A study of Dame Julian has recently appeared, *The Lady Julian*, by R. H. Thouless (S.P.C.K., 1924), and there is a short criticism in the *Cambridge History of English Literature*, vol. ii, ch. xii.

- THE CLOUD AND COMPANION TREATISES.—1. *The Divine Cloud*. Edited by Fr. H. Collins. (Richardson, 1871.) An incomplete edition.
2. *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Edited by Evelyn Underhill. (Watkins, 1912 and reprinted.) Only the *Cloud* is included in this edition, which is excellently printed and produced.

3. *The Cloud, The Epistle of Privy Counsel*, and the translation of the *Mystical Theology* of Dionysius. Edited by Dom Justin McCann. (Orchard Books, No. 4. Burns Oates, etc., 1924.) An excellent edition, with notes and references which, together with the inclusion of the essential *Epistle*, render it the best that has yet appeared.
4. *Le Nuage de l'Inconnaissance*, etc. A French translation, with good introduction and notes, by Dom Noetinger. (Alfred Mame, 1925.)
5. *The Epistles on Prayer, on Discretion, and The Discernment of Spirits* have been reprinted from Pepwell's 1521 edition by E. Gardner in *The Cell of Self-Knowledge*. (Chatto and Windus, 1910.)

An interesting commentary on the *Cloud* is contained in Father Baker's *Secretum sive Mysticum*, the greater part of which was printed for the first time by Dom McCann at the end of his edition of the *Cloud*.

- WALTER HILTON.—1. *The Scale of Perfection and Letter to a Devout Man of Secular Estate*. Edited by Dom Ephrem Guy. (Derby, Richardson, 1869.)
2. *The Scale of Perfection and Letter*, etc. Edited by Fr. Dalgairns. (London, J. Philp, 1870.)
  3. *Scala Perfectionis*. A French translation by Dom Noetinger and Dom Bouvet. (Alfred Mame, 1923.) This has excellent notes and references, together with a good index, and is undoubtedly the best edition, though it does not contain the *Letter to a Devout Man*.
  4. *The Scale of Perfection*. Edited with introduction by Evelyn Underhill. (Watkins, 1923.) The best English text.

5. *The Scale of Perfection*. Reprinted from the edition by Wynkyn de Worde, with an introduction translated from the French of Dom Noetinger. (Orchard Books, No. 13. Burns Oates, etc., 1927.) A good text, with the same introduction as the French edition. Unfortunately, it has not been found possible to include Dom Noetinger's notes or references; even those attached to his introduction have been omitted. This, and the absence of the valuable *Letter to a Devout Man*, make this volume of the Orchard Books a far less satisfactory edition than those of the *Cloud* and Dame Julian, referred to above. As a book for devotional purposes, it is, of course, adequate enough.
6. *The Song of Angels*, the only other certainly Hiltonic treatise, has been reprinted from the old edition in the *Cell of Self-Knowledge*, referred to above.

There is an account of Hilton in the *Cambridge History of English Literature*, vol. ii, ch. xii, and an article in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, and Vacant, *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique*.

MARGERY KEMPE.—Her fragment has been printed by Gardner, *op. cit.*

THE MIRROR FOR SIMPLE SOULS.—Extracts from this have been printed by Miss Underhill. An edition is in preparation for the Orchard Series.

FATHER BAKER.—1. *Holy Wisdom*. Reprinted from Dom Cressy's edition of 1657, with notes by Abbot Sweeny, O.S.B. (Burns and Oates, 1876, 1911, and since.)

2. *Secretum sive Mysticum*. This consists of two sections, the first largely autobiographical, the second a commentary on the *Cloud*. Both have recently been printed by Dom Justin McCann, O.S.B.: the former under the title *Confessions of Father Baker* (Burns Oates and Washbourne, 1922), the latter in his edition of the *Cloud of Unknowing*.
3. *Inner Life of Dame Gertrude More*. Printed for the first time by Dom Weld-Blundell, O.S.B. (R. and T. Washbourne, 1910.) Two volumes: the first containing Father Baker's *Life*, the second a reprint of an old edition of Dame Gertrude's *Confessions* and other remains.

The late Bishop Hedley wrote an excellent appreciation of Father Baker as a review of Abbot Sweeney's edition. This was reprinted, as stated above, by the C.T.S., with the title *Prayer and Contemplation*. See also Abbot Butler, *Benedictine Monachism*.

## APPENDIX B

### DEAN INGE AND MISS UNDERHILL

A GLANCE at the Bibliography in Appendix A will have shown that non-Catholic writers have taken a great interest in the English mystics. Their books are frequently read by Catholics, and not seldom form the first introduction to the subject. In particular this is the case with the works of two writers of diverse gifts but a somewhat similar outlook whose names are well known to the reading public. Their opinions on many questions of theology necessarily differ from Catholic teaching, and it has been suggested to me that it would be desirable to have some indication where these differences may be found.

The first of these writers is an extremely familiar figure. Dean Inge, indeed, occupies a unique place in the estimation of his countrymen. As scholar, as thinker, as stylist he is indubitably of the first rank, and despite the obscure topics with which he has dealt, and a certain despondency in his outlook which has become proverbial, he must be counted among the most widely read authors of the day. From the first he has directed his attention to mysticism. One of his earliest considerable works was the series of Bampton Lectures on *Christian Mysticism*, and a few years later he treated of the English mystics in some detail in a course of addresses at St Margaret's

Church, Westminster. From that time to his recent pronouncement on *The Platonic Tradition in English Religious Thought* many of his books have dealt with various aspects of the subject.

Dean Inge has ever been outspoken, and his opposition to the Roman Church and some of her most cherished ideals is so determined as to need no remark. This should not be allowed to prejudice the Catholic mind too deeply against all that the Dean writes; it may be questioned if his words are more violent than many of Newman's expressions written only a few years before becoming a Catholic. There are, however, some theological opinions expressed in his books which are less crudely antagonistic to traditional Catholic belief, and it may be well to point them out. If the references are frequently to a book nearly thirty years old, it is because this book is still a much consulted authority, nor is there any reason to suppose that the author has published, or would wish to publish, a recantation.

Dean Inge would seem to have little sympathy for faith, considered as the adherence to a body of revealed truth handed down from the apostles and preserved intact by the Church, or for theology, considered as the development and interpretation of that revelation. He finds "the seat of authority" in religious matters to be "experience, the seven gifts of the Spirit bestowed on those who are worthy to receive them."<sup>1</sup> The infallible Church and the inspired Book must alike give place; "the impregnable rock is neither an institution nor a book."<sup>2</sup> He is a Platonist, and no enemy of the reason, but he maintains that divine truth is apprehended not by

<sup>1</sup> *The Platonic Tradition in English Religious Thought*, p. 16.

<sup>2</sup> *Christian Mysticism*, p. 330.

the mere understanding or reason, but by "the higher reason, which we distinguish from the understanding because we mean it to include the will and feelings, disciplined under the guidance of the intellect."<sup>1</sup> Thus based, a man can approach all the recorded literature of religious experience as so much *materia religionis* which may be accepted as helpful or rejected as useless. "Spiritual things are spiritually discerned and spiritually proved."<sup>2</sup> Hence the value of theological mysticism, which is the ever-new testimony of those who have seen. The religious seer can tell us more of God than can tradition; consequently, the less he is bound by tradition the better, and we shall do well to look to the free-lances rather than to such hampered minds as St Teresa and St John of the Cross. The life of Christ is a manifestation of the divine mind and work which it is the duty of successive generations to probe, develop, and interpret. This can best be done by the free intellect, but by an intellect guided and moved by the whole personality, which takes into full consideration religious experience and a sense of values.

Indeed, the mystics to Dean Inge are not primarily saints who show a way of life, but philosophers who give to such Christians as have ears to hear a higher system of religious thought, almost a gnosis. "Christian mysticism as I understand it," he says, "might almost be called Johannine Christianity."<sup>3</sup> A few pages earlier he had written: "Christian mysticism appears in history largely as an intellectual movement, the foster-child of Platonic idealism."<sup>4</sup> Here in truth we have his credo,

<sup>1</sup> *Personal Idealism and Mysticism*, p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> *The Platonic Tradition*, p. 114.

<sup>3</sup> *Christian Mysticism*, p. 44.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.



from which he has never departed. He preaches it in his latest lectures on the Cambridge Platonists, and only a few years ago he wrote: "I trace back to Plato . . . the religion and the political philosophy of the Christian Church and the Christian type of mysticism."<sup>1</sup> Mysticism is consequently "the attempt to realize the presence of the living God in the soul and in nature."<sup>2</sup>

How far grace or strictly supernatural help enters into such a scheme is very hard to say. Dean Inge detests the term supernatural. He wishes to protest against "the unscriptural and unphilosophical cleft between natural and supernatural,"<sup>3</sup> and by supernatural he would seem to understand the internal and invisible workings of grace as well as such phenomena as levitation, though he lays emphasis on the latter. His interpretation of the Logos doctrine of St John, and his keen sense of the workings of the Word of God that enlighteneth every man that cometh into the world, seem to lead him to a belief in the divine immanence, which leaves little place for supernatural grace. "The life, death, and resurrection of the Word of God [are] exemplified in little in every human soul among the elect [? who are these elect]; it is in the highest sense of the word *natural*, for to those who can understand Scotus Erigena's words: 'Be assured that the Word is the nature of all things,' nothing is 'supernatural.' The best that God can give us, the gift of his own presence, is all part of his original scheme, part of the inviolable laws under which we live."<sup>4</sup> At the same time, Dean Inge would certainly maintain that the Holy Spirit and the "living Spirit of

<sup>1</sup> *The Legacy of Greece*, section on "Greek Religion," p. 29.

<sup>2</sup> *Christian Mysticism*, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143.

<sup>4</sup> *Personal Idealism*, p. 82.

Jesus<sup>1</sup> were present in the soul of the Christian and *a fortiori* of the Christian mystic; but he would probably deprecate any conception of grace as a gift exceeding the due of human nature or as a physical impulse to action. It is hard to resist the impression the Dean Inge has not given the same attention to the great grace controversies of Pelagian and Lutheran and Jansenist days that he has given to the pre-Nicene questions, and that he misconceives the traditional Catholic attitude.

However this may be, he shows little interest in mysticism as the art of prayer, or in the highest experience of the saints. "I regard," he says, "these experiences as neither more nor less supernatural than other mental processes."<sup>2</sup> This is not to say they are without any value. They may give us a clearer knowledge of reality, they may be even "true illuminations," but they are in no sense revelations. Moses on Mount Horeb, St Peter on the housetop at Joppa, saw things differing in degree, not in kind, from those seen by Wordsworth on the hills above Tintern Abbey, or Jefferies on the downs behind Swindon.

Clearly, then, there will be much in Dean Inge's presentation of the mystics that a Catholic will be compelled to revise, but when these reservations have been made, he will find in *Christian Mysticism* and the other books a great deal of acute and very stimulating thought. Dean Inge takes nothing, unless it be his conception of Catholic piety, at second hand. He seldom, if ever, presents himself as a *chef d'église*, as did many of the great Anglican divines of past centuries—a Hooker, a Butler, even a Liddon—but he has always an original and consistent view of every subject with which he deals.

<sup>1</sup> *Platonic Tradition*, p. 115.

<sup>2</sup> *Christian Mysticism*, p. 17.

Among authorities on mysticism at the present day few names are better known to the general reader than that of the authoress who continues to publish her books under the name of Evelyn Underhill. Miss Underhill, besides having to her credit a body of verse of considerable distinction, has excellently edited the *Cloud of Unknowing* and the *Scale of Perfection*, and has written several books in which she endeavours to harmonize for the ordinary man the claims of mysticism and of the practical life. Her chief work, however, and one which the repeated demand for fresh publication has shown to be of permanent value, is the substantial volume on *Mysticism*. In this book, which covers many aspects of religious life and is illustrated, as are all Miss Underhill's writings, by an almost embarrassing number of quotations from a wide range of mystical writers, we can find the leading principles which are contained implicitly in her other works. Catholics have always to remember that it is often exceedingly difficult to gauge with precision the creed of non-Catholics, and both in her more recent works and in her devotional poems it is possible to see a nearer approach to what is called orthodox Christianity than is apparent in *Mysticism* and *The Mystic Way*. There is, perhaps, something of that difference that exists between a treatise founded on research among books, and a theory developed under the conditions of actual life.

Miss Underhill is in some sense a disciple of Dean Inge, and shares many of his theological opinions. She is not, however, a theologian, nor is she deeply interested in philosophy; on the other hand, she is more attracted than is Dean Inge to practical psychology, and she has an affection for ritual which sometimes leads her in the direction of theosophy. Like Inge, she includes in her

definition of mysticism almost all religious experience or speculation. "Mysticism," she says, "is the expression of the innate tendency of the human spirit towards complete harmony with the transcendental order, whatever be the theological formula under which that order is understood."<sup>1</sup> We have already considered some reasons for and against accepting the term so widely. The supernatural, in the sense which it has always borne for Christian theologians, figures very little in Miss Underhill's scheme. Mysticism for her represents the natural, and more or less successful, attempt of the spirit of man to get into touch with the Absolute. There is a hierarchy in these efforts, but the difference is of degree only. There is no barrier between God and man, beyond which man has no right to go save in the merit and by the grace of Christ. "The mystics" are considered as a class of "naturally gifted minds, closely related to all possessors of genius of any kind, all potential artists." In fact, all poets and artists have by glimpses the "intuition of the Real" as opposed to the sensible world; the difference between them and the mystic is that in the latter "such powers transcend the merely artistic and visionary stage, and are exalted to the point of genius."<sup>2</sup>

This is not very clearly put, and it is hard to see how Blake or Boehme (to take an example) could be said to have reached a point of genius unattained by Beethoven; but it is clear enough to show that when Miss Underhill advocates mysticism for all, she is advocating something very different from the mysticism of Père Garrigou-Lagrange. Her mysticism, in fact, includes all intense

<sup>1</sup> *Mysticism*, Introduction, p. x.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.

realization—the splendid intuitions of first love, the loveliness of spring foliage, the beauty of a kitten's fur. If mysticism is no more than this, no impassable gulf separates the saint from the artist. Miss Underhill is consistent here, and maintains that “romantic literature, and especially the romantic revival, mark the intrusion of the mystical element into the secular literature of the world.”

Further than this, it would seem that the mystical way—the way of giving rather than the way of getting—is the only lawful way in which the individual soul can enter into relation with “the Absolute.” This is doubtless profoundly true if understood rightly, but it apparently leads Miss Underhill to a conviction that any kind of intercessory or impetrative prayer is magic. “All formal religion,” we are told, “is saturated with magic,” and “orthodox persons . . . unwittingly conform to many of these [magical practices] whenever they go to church.”<sup>1</sup> “Sacraments, too . . . always tend . . . to assume upon the phenomenal plane a magical aspect. Those who have observed with understanding the Roman rite of baptism . . . must have seen in it a ceremony far nearer to the operations of white magic than to the simple lustrations practised by St John the Baptist.”<sup>2</sup> It should, however, in fairness be added that magic here is clearly used in the most innocent sense of which the word is capable; in fact, it is of the nature of a psychological technical term. I do not wish for a moment to imply that Miss Underhill is contemptuous of the rites and Sacraments of the Church. Still, at the back of these opinions there would seem to be an unwillingness to admit

<sup>1</sup> *Mysticism*, p. 182.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 197.

that spiritual, non-human agents can act upon the soul either for good or bad.

In fine, the impression with which her presentment of mysticism leaves us is of a progress of the mind—in the best cases moral and ascetical—towards a reality which it is of itself perfectly capable of attaining. Practising mystics have “intuitions of a Truth that is for them absolute.”<sup>1</sup> Here she would seem to go further than Dean Inge in giving to the reality attained by mystics a higher value than that attained by the reason. This is an important admission. She is also more explicitly emancipated from dogma, for if, as all will grant, those who claim to have had such intuitions are of the most varied creeds, this Truth that they apprehend must be Absolute, whereas the various theological systems of mankind are only relative, and “attempts to limit mystical truth to the formulæ of any one religion are . . . futile.”<sup>2</sup> She does, indeed, imply elsewhere that in practice the individual mystic cannot achieve the ideal abstraction from familiar associations, but must clothe his thoughts and mould his life on some great religious system, and that Christianity, and in particular the Catholic Church, has shown itself more sympathetic and more capable of the noblest mysticism than any other religion. Yet this is scarcely satisfactory, and when all has been said Miss Underhill will be found to represent mysticism as resting on a far broader basis than the doctrines of Christianity.

It is more pleasant to speak of the many excellences of her work. She is not, and would probably not claim to be, an original thinker; her strength lies in presentation and interpretation. She has from the first aimed at freeing mysticism from the charges of futility and disease, and

<sup>1</sup> See, *e.g.*, *Mysticism*, p. 98.

<sup>2</sup> *Mysticism*, p. 115.

her work in this respect has borne abundant fruit. If Inge, von Hügel, and others have defended mysticism among the learned, Miss Underhill has given to a wide and originally unsympathetic public an opportunity of knowing and loving the greatest contemplative saints of the Catholic Church. Even if it is at times distasteful to find non-Catholic writers quoting St Teresa along with Emerson and Boehme and Rufus Jones and John Gamble, it is worth remembering that hundreds of our fellow-countrymen to-day, whose forbears in the last century would scarcely have known her name, go to St Teresa for refreshment and guidance. Nowhere when she is dealing directly with the mystics do we feel that she is ignorant, or unfair in her treatment, of the evidence afforded by their writings. More than this, there is very little in her description of the mystical experience that a Catholic would wish to quarrel with, and much of it is written with a method and lucidity and width found in no other English writer on the subject.

## APPENDIX C

### DAME GERTRUDE MORE AND FATHER BENET FITCH

**D**AME GERTRUDE MORE deserves, perhaps, more notice in a record of English mysticism than can be given in an account of Father Baker's doctrine. Her ancestry, as well as her spirituality, which was entirely derived from Father Baker and the older mystics, set her in the medieval tradition rather than in that of the French Church of her own century. Her *Confessions* contain many passages of great beauty and depth of religious feeling, and some that show Dame Gertrude to have enjoyed definitely mystical experiences. Thus she writes:

“ Nothing can bring us to this sight [of God] but love. But what love must it be? Not a sensible love only, a childish love, a love which seeketh itself more than the Beloved. No, it must be an ardent love, a pure love, a courageous love, a love of charity, a humble love, and a constant love, not worn out with labours, not daunted with any difficulties. . . . I could not in my nature abide to be disloyal to one whom I found to be a faithful friend to me, and can I endure to remember my disloyalty to God? I could with joy undergo disgrace and difficulty for a friend, and can I endure nothing for my God? The absence of a dear friend was intolerable to me, and can I abide to see myself cease at any time to sigh and long after my God? . . . Art thou ignorant that my soul, having had through thy sweet mercy a taste of thee, cannot find comfort in anything but in enjoying thee?”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Inner Life*, ii, p. 84 ff.



And again, more clearly:

“ Thus, my God, even sensual and unreasonable love transporteth a reasonable soul. . . . What shall I say of a soul that hath tasted how sweet our Lord is? Verily she, yet living, dieth a thousand deaths because she seeth herself so far from possessing thee, my God. . . . And although thou dost admit her, longing and sighing after thee alone, to I know not what, nor can I express the unspeakable joy and delights which I say thou sometimes admittest her to . . . yet out of thy care for her thou suddenly turnest away thy face; whereat, till she love thee for thyself, she will become troubled and impatient in the delay which thou makest of returning to her again.”<sup>1</sup>

The seventeenth century witnessed a very important mystical movement in France, and I hesitated for some time before deciding to omit an English mystic of considerable fame, whose writings were widely read in the country of his exile. Fr. Benet Fitch, or Canfield, as he was called from his English home, was a contemporary of Father Baker, and is familiar by name to all readers of *Sancta Sophia*. Born at Canfield in Essex, in 1563, of an old landed family, he entered the Capuchin order in France in 1586, returned to England as a priest in 1589, and was arrested not long after. He was examined by Walsingham himself, and imprisoned first in the Tower, and subsequently at Wisbech and Framlingham castles. He was ultimately released at the petition of Henri IV and became novice-master in Orleans and Rouen. He died at Paris in 1611.<sup>2</sup> Unlike Father Baker, Father Fitch rather leads the van of the French mystics than brings up

<sup>1</sup> *Inner Life*, ii., p. 64. I am indebted for these references to a notice by Abbot Butler in the *Downside Review* on the occasion of the first appearance of this book.

<sup>2</sup> See article in *Dictionary of National Biography*.

the rear of the English. M. Bremond, indeed, considers him to have exerted a paramount influence on contemporary French sentiment. "Maître des maîtres eux-mêmes," he writes, "de Bérulle, de Mme. Acarie, de Marie de Beauvillier, de tant d'autres, c'est lui, je le crois du moins, qui, plus que personne, a donné à notre renaissance religieuse le caractère nettement mystique que ce mouvement va prendre sous nos yeux."<sup>1</sup> This influence upon French thought, and the inaccessibility of his most famous book, which, so far as I know, has not been reprinted since the century of its appearance, were decisive considerations against including him in the group of English mystics. A further objection could be found in the condemnation of his book the *Rule of Perfection*, or rather a translation of it, during the Quietist controversy. It seems clear, however, that his doctrine is entirely orthodox, and suffered for a few careless expressions at a time when the searchlight of a triumphant anti-Quietism was playing over the religious literature of the century. This, at least, is M. Bremond's opinion.

It is to be hoped that this Elizabethan who so deeply influenced Catholic thought outside his own country—"ce grand homme," as Bremond calls him—will in the near future find an apologist to rescue his name from oblivion, redeem his good repute at Rome, and reprint his book. Besides the *Regula Perfectionis* and other treatises, a Life of him exists, containing a portrait reprinted by M. Bremond. A translation of his *Tractatum de Voluntate Dei* was reprinted by Fr. Collins in 1878.

<sup>1</sup> Abbé H. Bremond, *Histoire du Sentiment Religieux en France*, ii, pp. 152-168.







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