



THE
CLOUD
OF
UNKNOWN

Anonymous

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The Cloud of Unknowing

A Spiritual Guide to Contemplative Prayer

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INTRODUCTION

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The little family of mystical treatises which is known to students as “the Cloud of Unknowing group,” deserves more attention than it has hitherto received from English lovers of mysticism: for it represents the first expression in our own tongue of that great mystic tradition of the Christian Neoplatonists which gathered up, remade, and “salted with Christ’s salt” all that was best in the spiritual wisdom of the ancient world.

That wisdom made its definite entrance into the Catholic fold about A.D. 500, in the writings of the profound and nameless mystic who chose to call himself “Dionysius the Areopagite.” Three hundred and fifty years later, those writings were translated into Latin by John Scotus Erigena, a scholar at the court of Charlemagne, and so became available to the ecclesiastical world of the West. Another five hundred years elapsed, during which their influence was felt, and felt strongly, by the mystics of every European country: by St. Bernard, the Victorines, St. Bonaventura, St. Thomas Aquinas. Every reader of Dante knows the part which they play in the *Paradiso*. Then, about the middle of the 14th century, England—at that time in the height of her great mystical period—led the way with the first translation into the vernacular of the Areopagite’s work. In *Dionise Hid Divinite*, a version of the *Mystica Theologia*, this spiritual treasure-house was first made accessible to those outside the professionally religious class. Surely this is a fact which

all lovers of mysticism, all “spiritual patriots,” should be concerned to hold in remembrance.

It is supposed by most scholars that *Dionise Hid Divinite*, which—appearing as it did in an epoch of great spiritual vitality—quickly attained to a considerable circulation, is by the same hand which wrote the *Cloud of Unknowing* and its companion books; and that this hand also produced an English paraphrase of Richard of St. Victor’s *Benjamin Minor*, another work of much authority on the contemplative life. Certainly the influence of Richard is only second to that of Dionysius in this unknown mystic’s own work—work, however, which owes as much to the deep personal experience, and extraordinary psychological gifts of its writer, as to the tradition that he inherited from the past.

Nothing is known of him; beyond the fact, which seems clear from his writings, that he was a cloistered monk devoted to the contemplative life. It has been thought that he was a Carthusian. But the rule of that austere order, whose members live in hermit-like seclusion, and scarcely meet except for the purpose of divine worship, can hardly have afforded him opportunity of observing and enduring all those tiresome tricks and absurd mannerisms of which he gives so amusing and realistic a description in the lighter passages of the *Cloud*. These passages betray the half-humorous exasperation of the temperamental recluse, nervous, fastidious, and hypersensitive, loving silence and peace, but compelled to a daily and hourly companionship with persons of a less contemplative type: some finding in extravagant and meaningless gestures an outlet for suppressed vitality; others overflowing with a terrible

cheerfulness like “giggling girls and nice japing jugglers”; others so lacking in repose that they “can neither sit still, stand still, nor lie still, unless they be either wagging with their feet or else somewhat doing with their hands.” Though he cannot go to the length of condemning these habits as mortal sins, the author of the *Cloud* leaves us in no doubt as to the irritation with which they inspired him, or the distrust with which he regards the spiritual claims of those who fidget.

The attempt to identify this mysterious writer with Walter Hilton, the author of *The Scale of Perfection*, has completely failed: though Hilton’s work—especially the exquisite fragment called the *Song of Angels*—certainly betrays his influence. The works attributed to him, if we exclude the translations from Dionysius and Richard of St. Victor, are only five in number. They are, first, *The Cloud of Unknowing*—the longest and most complete exposition of its author’s peculiar doctrine—and, depending from it, four short tracts or letters: *The Epistle of Prayer*, *The Epistle of Discretion in the Stirrings of the Soul*, *The Epistle of Privy Counsel*, and *The Treatise of Discerning of Spirits*. Some critics have even disputed the claim of the writer of the *Cloud* to the authorship of these little works, regarding them as the production of a group or school of contemplatives devoted to the study and practice of the Dionysian mystical theology; but the unity of thought and style found in them makes this hypothesis at least improbable. Everything points rather to their being the work of an original mystical genius, of strongly marked character and great literary ability: who, whilst he took the framework of his philosophy

from Dionysius the Areopagite, and of his psychology from Richard of St. Victor, yet is in no sense a mere imitator of these masters, but introduced a genuinely new element into mediaeval religious literature.

What, then, were his special characteristics? Whence came the fresh colour which he gave to the old Platonic theory of mystical experience? First, I think, from the combination of high spiritual gifts with a vivid sense of humour, keen powers of observation, a robust common-sense: a balance of qualities not indeed rare amongst the mystics, but here presented to us in an extreme form. In his eager gazing on divinity this contemplative never loses touch with humanity, never forgets the sovereign purpose of his writings; which is not a declaration of the spiritual favours he has received, but a helping of his fellow-men to share them. Next, he has a great simplicity of outlook, which enables him to present the result of his highest experiences and intuitions in the most direct and homely language. So actual, and so much a part of his normal existence, are his apprehensions of spiritual reality, that he can give them to us in the plain words of daily life: and thus he is one of the most realistic of mystical writers. He abounds in vivid little phrases—"Call sin a *lump*": "Short prayer pierceth heaven": "Nowhere bodily, is everywhere ghostly": "Who that will not go the strait way to heaven, . . . shall go the soft way to hell." His range of experience is a wide one. He does not disdain to take a hint from the wizards and necromancers on the right way to treat the devil; he draws his illustrations of divine mercy from the homeliest incidents of friendship and parental love.

A skilled theologian, quoting St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, and using with ease the language of scholasticism, he is able, on the other hand, to express the deepest speculations of mystical philosophy without resorting to academic terminology: as for instance where he describes the spiritual heaven as a “state” rather than a “place”:

“For heaven ghostly is as nigh down as up, and up as down: behind as before, before as behind, on one side as other. Insomuch, that whoso had a true desire for to be at heaven, then that same time he were in heaven ghostly. For the high and the next way thither is run by desires, and not by paces of feet.”

His writings, though they touch on many subjects, are chiefly concerned with the art of contemplative prayer; that “blind intent stretching to God” which, if it be wholly set on Him, cannot fail to reach its goal. A peculiar talent for the description and discrimination of spiritual states has enabled him to discern and set before us, with astonishing precision and vividness, not only the strange sensations, the confusion and bewilderment of the beginner in the early stages of contemplation—the struggle with distracting thoughts, the silence, the dark—and the unfortunate state of those theoretical mystics who, “swollen with pride and with curiosity of much clergy and letterly cunning as in clerks,” miss that treasure which is “never got by study but all only by grace”; but also the happiness of those whose “sharp dart of longing love” has not “failed of the prick, the which is God.”

A great simplicity characterises his doctrine of the soul’s attainment of the Absolute. For him there is but one central

necessity: the perfect and passionate setting of the will upon the Divine, so that it is “thy love and thy meaning, the choice and point of thine heart.” Not by deliberate ascetic practices, not by refusal of the world, not by intellectual striving, but by actively loving and choosing, by that which a modern psychologist has called “the synthesis of love and will” does the spirit of man achieve its goal. “For silence is not God,” he says in the *Epistle of Discretion*, “nor speaking is not God; fasting is not God, nor eating is not God; loneliness is not God, nor company is not God; nor yet any of all the other two such contraries. He is hid between them, and may not be found by any work of thy soul, but all only by love of thine heart. He may not be known by reason, He may not be gotten by thought, nor concluded by understanding; but He may be loved and chosen with the true lovely will of thine heart. . . . Such a blind shot with the sharp dart of longing love may never fail of the prick, the which is God.”

To him who has so loved and chosen, and “in a true will and by an whole intent does purpose him to be a perfect follower of Christ, not only in active living, but in the sovereignest point of contemplative living, the which is possible by grace for to be come to in this present life,” these writings are addressed. In the prologue of the *Cloud of Unknowing* we find the warning, so often prefixed to mediaeval mystical works, that it shall on no account be lent, given, or read to other men: who could not understand, and might misunderstand in a dangerous sense, its peculiar message. Nor was this warning a mere expression of literary vanity. If we may judge by the examples of possible

misunderstanding against which he is careful to guard himself, the almost tiresome reminders that all his remarks are “ghostly, not bodily meant,” the standard of intelligence which the author expected from his readers was not a high one. He even fears that some “young presumptuous ghostly disciples” may understand the injunction to “lift up the heart” in a merely physical manner; and either “stare in the stars as if they would be above the moon,” or “travail their fleshly hearts outrageously in their breasts” in the effort to make literal “ascensions” to God. Eccentricities of this kind he finds not only foolish but dangerous; they outrage nature, destroy sanity and health, and “hurt full sore the silly soul, and make it fester in fantasy feigned of fiends.” He observes with a touch of arrogance that his book is not intended for these undisciplined seekers after the abnormal and the marvellous, nor yet for “fleshly janglers, flatterers and blamers, . . . nor none of these curious, lettered, nor unlearned men.” It is to those who feel themselves called to the true prayer of contemplation, to the search for God, whether in the cloister or the world—whose “little secret love” is at once the energizing cause of all action, and the hidden sweet savour of life—that he addresses himself. These he instructs in that simple yet difficult art of recollection, the necessary preliminary of any true communion with the spiritual order, in which all sensual images, all memories and thoughts, are as he says, “trodden down under the cloud of forgetting” until “nothing lives in the working mind but a naked intent stretching to God.” This “intent stretching”—this loving and vigorous determination of the will—he regards as the central fact of

the mystical life; the very heart of effective prayer. Only by its exercise can the spirit, freed from the distractions of memory and sense, focus itself upon Reality and ascend with “a privy love pressed” to that “Cloud of Unknowing”—the Divine Ignorance of the Neoplatonists—wherein is “knit up the ghostly knot of burning love betwixt thee and thy God, in ghostly onehead and according of will.”

There is in this doctrine something which should be peculiarly congenial to the activistic tendencies of modern thought. Here is no taint of quietism, no invitation to a spiritual limpness. From first to last glad and deliberate work is demanded of the initiate: an all-round wholeness of experience is insisted on. “A man may not be fully active, but if he be in part contemplative; nor yet fully contemplative, as it may be here, but if he be in part active.” Over and over again, the emphasis is laid on this active aspect of all true spirituality—always a favourite theme of the great English mystics. “Love cannot be lazy,” said Richard Rolle. So too for the author of the *Cloud* energy is the mark of true affection. “Do forth ever, more and more, so that thou be ever doing. . . . Do on then fast; let see how thou bearest thee. Seest thou not how He standeth and abideth thee?”

True, the will alone, however ardent and industrious, cannot of itself set up communion with the supernal world: this is “the work of only God, specially wrought in what soul that Him liketh.” But man can and must do his part. First, there are the virtues to be acquired: those “ornaments of the Spiritual Marriage” with which no mystic can dispense. Since we can but behold that which we are, his character

must be set in order, his mind and heart made beautiful and pure, before he can look on the triple star of Goodness, Truth, and Beauty, which is God. Every great spiritual teacher has spoken in the same sense: of the need for that which Rolle calls the “mending of life”—regeneration, the rebuilding of character—as the preparation of the contemplative act.

For the author of the *Cloud* all human virtue is comprised in the twin qualities of Humility and Charity. He who has these, has all. Humility, in accordance with the doctrine of Richard of St. Victor, he identifies with self-knowledge; the terrible vision of the soul as it is, which induces first self-abasement and then self-purification—the beginning of all spiritual growth, and the necessary antecedent of all knowledge of God. “Therefore swink and sweat in all that thou canst and mayst, for to get thee a true knowing and a feeling of thyself as thou art; and then I trow that soon after that, thou shalt have a true knowing and a feeling of God as He is.”

As all man’s feeling and thought of himself and his relation to God is comprehended in Humility, so all his feeling and thought of God in Himself is comprehended in Charity; the self-giving love of Divine Perfection “in Himself and for Himself” which Hilton calls “the sovereign and the essential joy.” Together these two virtues should embrace the sum of his responses to the Universe; they should govern his attitude to man as well as his attitude to God. “Charity is nought else . . . but love of God for Himself above all creatures, and of man for God even as thyself.”