

THE CLOUD OF UNKNOWING.

AN interesting group of manuscripts, now peacefully resting on the shelves of our English libraries, has scarcely received the attention which it deserves.¹ The treatises in question evince acquaintance with the writings of Dionysius called the Areopagite; they were probably impressed by the mysticism of Eckhart; and they present a distinct form of the doctrine of contemplation. With one exception,² they were never printed; but they received a very wide circulation in England during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries; in the words of an old writer, "they walked up and down at deer rates."

Of these tracts the most important are *Deonise hid Diuinite*, a free translation of the *Mystical Theology* of Dionysius; *The Clowde of Unknowynge*, a treatise of contemplation in seventy-five chapters; *A Pystle of Pryvate Councelle*; *A Pistle of Praier*; *A Tretyse of discrecion in knowyng of spirites*; *A Pystle of discrecion in styrrynges*. Of these the first four are certainly, the others probably, by the same hand. Tanner attributes *The Clowde of Unknowynge* to Walter Hilton and William Exmeuse, but it is evidently earlier: it marks a middle point between Rolle and Hilton. We may date this series after the middle of the fourteenth century.

When Rolle of Hampole, "burning in love to God," was itinerating Yorkshire, with the praises of Jesus upon his lips, Ambrose, a Cistercian monk, was diligently studying the *Mystical Theology* of Dionysius (at Fountains Abbey, as it would appear), and being dissatisfied with the renderings

¹ MSS. Harl. 674; Bibl. Reg. 17 C. 26; Univ. Coll. Ox. 14; Cam. Kk. vi. 26; etc.

² The *Cloud of Unknowing* has been edited as a manual of devotion by Father Collins.

of Erugena and Grosseteste, was turning it into good Church Latin.¹ Another monk from the same monastery, and of the same period, Lewis by name, afterwards influenced the young thought of Walter Hilton,² author of the *Scale of Perfection*, and chief of English contemplationists. It is probable that the sheaf of treatises to which we have now drawn attention proceeded from that northern House of Religion. The sons of St. Benedict have particularly devoted themselves to the life of contemplation. However that may be, the manuscripts before us mark the first undoubted tendency to pure mysticism in English theology.

Deonise hid Divinite is the first translation into English of any of the writings of the Areopagite. The author of the *Clowde of Unknowynge* appends it to that treatise as a certificate of orthodoxy. It is enough for him, enough too for his readers, that "Dionyse sentence will clearly affirm all that is written." He adds, "I have not set down the naked letter of the text, but for to declare the hardness of it, I have much allowed the sentence of the Abbot of St. Victor,³ a noble and worthy expositor of this same book." The "hardness of it" is very much softened in this interpretation, and Dionysius becomes a tolerably good Augustinian. He is represented as speaking in this strain :

Thou, friend Timothy, what time thou proposest thee by the striving of grace to the actual exercise of thy blind behoidings, see that thou forsake with a strong and lusty contrition both thy bodily wits, as hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting, and touching ; and also

¹ See MS. Linc. Coll. Ox. 49, "Absolvi Ambrosius Dionysii opuscula . . . anno . . . 1346." This Ambrose is not to be confounded with Ambrosius Camaldulensis.

² See MS. Lamb. 472, fol. 213b.

³ Hugh was teacher, Richard was prior ; neither was abbot of St. Victor. The reference is apparently to Richard.

thy ghostly wits, thus assorting thyself from the understandable working might of the soul, and from the objects of them ; that is to say, all the things in which they work. By this means thou shalt make thyself clean from all worldly, fleshly, and kindly liking in thine affection to the sovran substantial beam of the godlike darkness, to be one with Him that is above all being and all man's knowing ; and (in) that thou knowest nothing thou art made to be knowing above mind.

This short extract is enough to show the immense distance which stretches between the ascetic theologians of the fourteenth century and the theosophists of the Syrian cloister. In at least three points of the first importance the "interpreter" of Dionysius qualifies his author. Both agree that the itinerary of the mind towards Deity is along the way of negation ; but to the scheme of the northern monk (a) the ascent of the soul becomes possible, not through simple volition but by grace ; (b) the mystic purgation is not from sense but from "worldly liking" ; (c) the vision opens not to pure thought but to holy affection. Thus, while this professed disciple of Dionysius reports him as saying that the scale of perfection may be surmounted only in a manner that is "invisible and ungraspable," his doctrine does not greatly differ from the dictum of Pascal that "the heart has reasons of its own which reason cannot read."

The *Clowde of Unknowynge* is an application of the Dionysian teaching, thus qualified, to the practice of contemplation as enjoined by the Victorines. One may say that the text of the treatise is the assurance of Dionysius that "the most godly knowing of God is that which is known by unknowing." Near the end of his book the author indicates the chief source of his instruction : "And truly, who would so look St. Denyse books, shall find that his word will thereby affirm all that I have said, or shall say, from the beginning of this treatise to the end."

There are two callings in the Christian life, one to salvation, one to perfection. If thou art called of God to perfection, yield Him thy thanks. What hast thou deserved that thou shouldest be chosen of all His sheep to be special unto Him? But who are they who may travel in this gracious work? Those who have been lawfully cleansed in conscience of all their special deeds of sin; those who have made full special and long use in common grace; those who have departed from mixed life, and have devoted themselves to contemplation.

God giveth His grace freely without means, and perfection may not be come to by means: nevertheless, a contemplative prentice may be occupied with these—Lection, Meditation, Orison. Of these thou mayest learn in another man's work¹ more than I can tell thee. Yet these are only helps towards the work itself. The work of perfection is the shortest work of all that man can imagine: it is neither longer nor shorter than is an atom. It is a swift piercing act, an act of direction, a naked intent of the will fastening itself upon God. For the substance of all perfection is nought else but a good will.

It is needful for thee to bury in a cloud of forgetting all creatures that ever God made; that thou mayest direct thine intent to God Himself. The naked knowing and feeling of thine own being must likewise be destroyed. But this can only be by special grace. The manner in which grace works I shall now tell thee: Let a man be filled with sorrow, not only of what he is, but also that he is; then let a sharp dart of longing love be directed to God; and in the great joy of loving Him there will be taken from that man all knowing and feeling of his own.

Therefore lift up thine heart unto God with a meek striving of love, and be thou loth to think on ought but on Himself; so that nought work in thy wit nor in thy will but only Himself. When thou dost next begin in this work thou wilt find but a darkness—a cloud of unknowing—between thee and thy Lord, so that thou art able neither to see Him clearly by light of understanding in thy reason, nor feel Him in sweetness of love in thine affection. Yet if ever thou shalt see Him or feel Him—in the measure in which it is possible in this life to do—it behoveth thee always to abide in this cloud and darkness. When thou enterest this cloud, peradventure thou feelest far from God; but thou art nearer Him than formerly: He hath set a darkness between thee and all creatures that ever He made. If any

¹ *A Ladder of foure rones by the which men mowe wele clyme to heaven* (MS. Cam. Ff. vi. 33), a translation of the *Scala Claustralium*, or *Scala Paradisi*, attributed to Abbat Guerrius and Guigo Carthusiensis.

thought, therefore, should come between thee and thy God, then (even though it seem to thee most holy) tread it down with a stirring of love, and say, "It is God whom I covet, whom I seek." Take thee a sharp, strong word of prayer: with this word thou shalt beat down all thoughts under thee. Even to think of God's kindness or worthiness would hinder thee in this work. For though it be good to muse on the perfections of God, and to praise Him therefore, it is far better to think on the native substance of Him, and to love and praise Him for Himself. But now thou askest me, "How should I think on Himself, and what is He?" Unto this I cannot answer thee. I wot now that thou hast brought me into the same cloud of unknowing that I would thou wert in thyself. But this will I say, "By love He may be gotten and holden, but by thought never."

The theory of contemplation unfolded in the *Clowde of Unknowynge* works itself out along the main lines laid down by the doctors of the School of St. Victor. But the author has borrowed from Dionysius more than he can rightly express in Christian phraseology. His acceptance of the untempered doctrine of passive union leads him up to the very margin of Catholic instruction: he is saved from passing it only by a certain inconsistency, and by frequent retractions.

The other treatises in this group (let us except for the moment the *Pystle of Pryvate Councelle*) confirm and supplement the teaching of the *Clowde of Unknowynge*. The doctrine expounded in them is in substance as follows.

The ascent of the soul is rendered possible by faith—"Let belief be thy ground." The severance of the soul from God is not natural distance, it is the consequence of sin—"All men were lost in Adam, who departed from the oneing affection." Hence it is that the attainment of perfection becomes possible only through the goodness of God—"It is not by price, but by grace." God is the principal in working, and man only consentor and sufferer—"Wherefore put on Him by prayer; He is full ready." The union

of man with God does not secure oneness of essence—“God is in Himself; that is onehede in kind: thou art in God, that is onehede in grace. . . . He is thy being, but thou art not His.” It is a moral and spiritual oneness—a union “in lovely meekness and in perfect charity.” It may be termed deification—“If thou love God, thou art God.” But the mystic creed has been pressed into the mould of Church doctrine—man does not become essential God, but only “a God in grace.” Mystical union is ecstasy, ravishment, vision, but always under this proviso—“As it may be here.” It reveals itself not merely in transport, but in symmetrical and far-shining goodness, in illustrious excellence—“in fulhede of love and of virtue’s liking.”

The *Pystle of Pryvate Councelle* should be read along with the *Clowde of Unknowynge*. It is a senior lesson in the school of contemplation: it is addressed to “those who have profited” in the divine life. In this very important treatise the author passes more lightly over the means which contemplative prentices” may use, and endeavours to explain more intimately the nature of “onehede with God.”

When thou comest by thyself forsake as well good thoughts as evil thoughts, and pray not with thy mouth. See that nothing move in thy working mind but a naked intent stretching on to God, not clothed in any special thought of God, how He is in Himself, or in any of His works, but only that He is as He is. This naked intent, freely fastened in very belief, should be nought else to thy thought and thy feeling but a naked thought and a blind feeling of thine own being. Lift up thy naked blind being to the blissful being of thy God. So shall thy ghostly affections be filled with the fulness of God’s liking. The ground of thy spirit and its pureness are found in Him. This is not a long work: it shall be done suddenly, lustily, and graciously, without business or travail of thyself. In this thou shalt henceforth find thine all, for in the blind beholding of thy naked being, now united to God, thou shalt do all that thou doest—eat and drink, sleep and wake, go and sit, speak and be still, lie and rise. Thus shalt thou every day offer up unto God as thy

most precious offering thy soul fully meekened in noughting of itself.

In the beginning of this work I enjoined thee, because of thine unskilfulness, to lap and clothe the feeling of thy God in the feeling of thyself. But when thou dost attain to greater clearness of spirit thou shalt make spoil and utterly unclothe thyself of all manner of feeling of thyself; so shalt thou be clothed with the gracious feeling of God Himself. This is the true condition of a perfect lover, this is the work of love which none may know, this is that attainment which thou shouldest covet straitly. Yet this is not to unbecome—that were madness; nevertheless, it is to forgo the witting and the feeling of thy being. In this thou both seest thy God, thy love, and nakedly feelest Him also by ghostly oneing to His love in the sovran point of thy spirit, as He is in Himself, but blindly—as it may be here—utterly spoiled of thyself, and nakedly clothed in Himself, as He is.

Go forth, therefore, in meek and fervent desire unto perfection. God's grace will guide.

The "cloud of unknowing," the "mirk of ignorance," is of course the *νέφος ἀγνωσίας* of Dionysius. It is a commonplace with the mystics of the East that the eyes which behold the objects of sense and of intelligence must be closed ere spiritual sight can be unsealed. This is the simple meaning of Dionysius "divine dark." Above things seen and known the spiritual world rises, and there the organ of vision is not sense nor reason, but spirit. There the naked spirit of man gazes upon the pure essence of God, is united to Him in immediate contact and adhesion, is filled with the eternal life, is merged in God.

The foundation thought of Dionysius' *Mystical Theology* is that God Himself is the ground of the soul. When in perception or by discourse the soul reaches forth towards creature-existence, it turns from God. But when, by an act of "holy introversion," it renounces the creature and sinks into the fathomless abyss of Deity, it finds its true being. Sense and reason grow blind in the white light of God. The strife of intellectual operations is hushed in the quiescence of undiverted contemplation, and in

“ that simplicity of thought which is devoid of all thinking ”
the soul is restored to oneness with God.

Dionysius finds his way out from this unutterable isolation, not by passing on to the contemplation of all things in the One Being—that was the signal achievement of the Church mystics, under the guidance of St. Paul—but by retracing his steps. He goes back from the contemplation of God to the consideration of creature-existence, from absolute knowledge to relative. It is, he assures us, in this region—of relative knowledge—that the doctrines of Christianity lie. He maintains that these doctrines are true in their degree, but that we must continue to regard them as inadequate. Yet he states them without reserve. He terms Jesus the head and perfection of all Hierarchies ; in Him the truth and fulness of all things are spiritually discerned. He speaks frequently of Christ’s coming, under the impulse of love, from the life of God ; taking to Himself the lowliness of our humanity ; made like to us, yet suffering no deprivation of His Divine excellence ; incarnate, yet uncompounded ; eternal, yet born in time ; transcending all things, yet dwelling in our nature. He affirms that the incarnation, though it surpasses thought or speech, is the most illustrious fact of theology. For, though we may not know how it came to pass, we know well why it was : Christ became flesh for our sakes. His work in seeking the lost sheep, in dying as a victim offered on our behalf, in uniting us to His own being, in leading us onward to His own perfection and glory, is the goodly work of God towards mankind. In Christ God has been manifested to the world for its salvation. All these things, he would say, are true, but the sense-informed reason is unable to apprehend them rightly. Between the two spheres, therefore, in which the faith of the Church operates there is a belt of darkness. By ingress into God

the soul is led into the realization of utter truth, into "the ray authentic of sovran light." By regress to creature-existence we are made aware of truth as it is imaged forth in scripture terms and ecclesiastical formulas. By this continual rhythm between absolute being and finite existence personality is preserved, but the personal life is cleft asunder. So long as the soul which has been "transfused" into God can awake to perception and discourse, annihilation is unthinkable. On this point Dionysius rejects the teaching of his "initiator," Hierotheos. The safe-guarding of personality is the first arrest which Christianity lays on the unrelieved mysticism of the ancients.

But from this arrest there ensues a schism in the personal life.

One question emerges from the bewilderment of words which perplexes the commentators of Dionysius. Is there any organ of intellectual apprehension which awakes only in the slumber of sense and reason? Pachymeres, the like-minded disciple of Dionysius, defines the mystical theology of his master in these terms: "Mystical theology is not perception or discourse, not a movement of the mind, not an operation, not a habit, nothing that any other power which we possess will bring to us; but if, in absolute immobility of mind, we are illumined concerning it, we shall know that it is beyond anything cognizable by the mind of man." It may at once be confessed that it is purely impossible to detect in any of its workings an organ whose operation evades all intellectual tests. But we may ask, Can the soul, returning from the depths of God, bring with it any elucidation of the mysteries which attach to finite being? Dionysius' doctrine of regress is a tacit confession that it cannot. The soul withdraws itself from that transcendent radiance, and the vision darkens. In the reawakening of sense and reason the

soul becomes disabled from the apprehension of pure being, and even memory refuses to retain that which eludes the comprehension of intellectual energies. Pure knowledge is therefore in no way to be distinguished from pure ignorance, and the "ineffable ray" which enlightens is—darkness.

Dionysius left to his successors the task of repairing the cleft which he had struck through the personal life.

The solution which was indicated by the Victorines, approved by the "columnar doctors" of the Church, and accepted by the English contemplationists is in brief:—

Building upon the foundation of Plotinus, the Church mystics taught that the soul has two "faces"; it looks God-ward and creature-ward. The two soul-relations meet in the "phantasy," the faculty which receives sense-impressions from the lower soul, and lifts them up into the region of spirit. By some mysterious energy of control, infused into the mind through grace,¹ perception and representation are transmuted into acts of the superior soul—acts of understanding, affection, will. These again are taken up into one "pure act" of adherence to God. A "pure act" is an "act without potentiality"; that is to say, an act in which the whole nature is engaged. That which unites to Deity, therefore, is not thought in its simplicity, nor mere affection, nor isolated volition, but all—understanding, love, and will (three flames within the one light)—gathering themselves into a burning point, and soaring upwards to God.

A question of the first importance in the mystical scheme concerns itself with the relation of the normal acts of the superior soul to that "pure act" which secures union with Deity. It is inevitable that reason, affection,

¹ The Church mystics are vague in their statement of this operation of grace.

and will should co-operate in this "blind impulse" of adherence. But how? The true answer lies in the consideration of our relation to God. He may be regarded as either Absolute Essence, the First Cause, or the Father of Mercies. The Syrian mystics reaching forth to the Absolute Essence sought to attain union by pure thought. The German mystics endeavoured by the annihilation of the will to merge themselves in the Creator and Preserver of all. The English contemplationists teach that, as in great heat smoke is turned to flame, so, in the uplifting of the mind, "love absorbs all the acts of the soul."¹

Our author, as befits a Catholic mystic, bars the road by which thought would rise: "No man knoweth the Father save the Son, and he to whom the Son willeth to reveal Him." But he seems to lay the emphasis indifferently on love and will; and here, perhaps, his indebtedness to the school of Eckhart becomes most evident. Careful consideration will show, however, that he gives the pre-eminence to love; it is union with the Father of mercies which he seeks. In a word his scheme is, Understanding embraces the doctrines of the Faith, thereafter the will raises the affections towards God, and love enters into union.

To recapitulate: the teaching of this fourteenth century mystic is in substance:—

(a) The "mirk of ignorance" is in the first instance the entrance of the soul into itself; thereafter it is the entrance of the soul, within itself, into God.

(b) That region of the soul in which God dwells is removed in stillness beyond the intrusion of the perceptive or discursive faculties. But as the senses are the Levites

¹ This is the bridge which Grosseteste flings across the chasm in the personal life. See MSS. Linc. Coll. Ox. 101; Cam. Kk. iv. 4; *Opera Dionysii* (Argent. 1503, 2), pp. 264-271.

who wait upon the energies of the superior soul, so these energies are as the attendant priests who minister to the hierarchic spirit to whom alone has been given the right of entrance through the veil into the holiest.

(c) When the spirit enters the unveiled presence of God, the tumultuous activity of the soul—feeling, longing, knowing—is hushed. The recognition of self and the distinctiveness of Deity die away; the soul adheres to God in pure passivity; amid silence, emptiness, darkness, He stands revealed, and the soul sinks in its nothingness into God. Thought and affection cease, understanding and emotion are merged in one subconscious impulse which falls into quiescence when the affective, thinking subject becomes identified with Him who transcends distinction. Thus the spirit unclothes itself of the “witting and feeling” of its own being, and is clothed upon with God. And as in the Tabernacle of Witness the uncreated glory filled the house in such wise that the white-robed ministrants “could not stand to minister because of the cloud,” but were driven out before it, so the interior presence of God compels the cessation of all activity of the natural powers, and the soul entering into perfection is made one with Him.

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