The English Mystics

Bernard McGinn

The English mystics and spiritual writers of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries are too varied to form a school. A certain individuality—in some cases we might even say English eccentricity—marked the four great writers of the fourteenth century, Richard Rolle, Walter Hilton, the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and Julian of Norwich. Nonetheless, these mystics shared common values and approaches, as well as a typical late medieval desire to express traditional Latin spirituality in the vernacular. They are perhaps the greatest English prose writers of their age, and their masterpieces remain unsurpassed among spiritual works written in the English language.

There had, of course, been earlier English contributions to medieval spirituality in the Latin writings of Bede and Aelred of Rievaulx or in such vernacular works as the eight-century poem “The Dream of the Rood” and the *Ancrene Riwle*, a thirteenth-century guide for women recluses. The remarkable flowering of spiritual literature in late medieval England was part of a European-wide phenomenon, but there is no evidence that the major English authors were influenced by their continental contemporaries in any decisive way.

The historical roots of this English “Golden Age” are too complex to be easily summarized. Some were shared with the continental movements, especially the important new role taken by the laity. The fourteenth century was the first time in the history of medieval spirituality when the possibility that lay people living in the world could reach the heights of perfection was seriously entertained. Another important factor was the role of the religious orders, especially the Carthusians, in both the guidance of souls and in the production and dissemination of religious literature. A factor distinctive of England was the special role played by the eremitical or solitary life. By and large, however, the English writers were shaped by the same situation and drew upon the same rich background of Augustinian, Cistercian, Victorine, mendicant, and modified Dionysian piety that the continental mystics did. The English originality lies in what they did with this heritage.

The mystical writers who will be our concern here are the best-known part of a large body of spiritual literature produced in late medieval England. This involved not only translations of the Bible into the vernacular (unfortunately closed off in the wake of the condemnation of Wycliff) and a wealth of sermonic material but also important instructional manuals for parish priests. The practical character of the English mystics is not unrelated to this emphasis on the importance of sound instruction in living the Christian life. A wide range of vernacular devotional literature, both in prose and in poetry, demonstrates the spread of concern for spirituality on every level of society. Perhaps the greatest monument of this literature is the late-fourteenth-century poem “Piers Plowman,” whose central message of redemption through the love of Christ is not different from that of the mystics:

*Conseille me, Kynde [Nature],* quod I, “what craft be best to learn?”
“Lerne to love,” quod Kynde, “and leef alle outhere.”
B Text, Passus XX, lines 207-8

Since all the English mystics place love at the heart of their message, it has been customary to speak of affectivity as one of the distinguishing features of English mysticism. Similarly, the mistrust of contemporary scholastic theology expressed by Rolle and the author of *The Cloud* (and even Hilton) and the “unlearned” nature of the teaching of Julian and later of Margery Kempe have led to English mysticism’s being described as anti-intellectual. Such broad terms are not really very helpful, however, in grasping the distinctive teaching of the English mystics. No Christian mystic has ever denied love a crucial role in the path to God (however differently they may have conceived this), and almost all the great mystics of the fourteenth century could be described as affective mystics. Likewise, mystics have always been in the forefront of those who are most conscious of the limitations and pretensions of academic speculation about God. The following account will try to get at something of the special nature of the English mystics not only by highlighting the individual major themes of each author but also by comparing their attitudes on some issues that are central for the history of Christian mysticism: the role of Jesus in his humanity; the place of the “dark night,” or the experience of the withdrawal of God; the relation of love and knowledge in the mystical life; and the connection between action and contemplation.
Richard Rolle

Rolle was born in Yorkshire about 1300 and spent time at Oxford before he rejected the world in rather bizarre fashion by cutting up two of his sister's tunics and his father's rainhood to construct a makeshift hermit's garb. The wandering young hermit's acerbic personality is at times a disconcerting presence in his early writings. Nevertheless, he persevered in the life, and the interior and exterior difficulties he underwent brought him a mature wisdom and discretion that allowed him to serve as a valuable spiritual guide in later life. He was a prolific author both in Latin and in the vernacular and was widely read in the late Middle Ages. Rolle died in 1349, probably a victim of the Black Death. Although he wrote a number of poems, the Yorkshire hermit is more distinguished as a prose writer. Rolle was one of the first major English translators of the Bible, but it is in the Latin works that we find the essence of his teaching.

In his exuberance, dedication to the language of love, and innocence of apophatic mysticism, Rolle is reminiscent of a near contemporary whose works he seems not to have known, Ramond Lull (1232–1316). Rolle is controversial both to his immediate successors and to his modern interpreters. Both Hilton and the Cloud author felt that his emphasis on manifestations of God's presence through physical experiences was at best ambiguous and sometimes even a dangerous confusion of the true meaning of mysticism. Modern scholars like David Knowles have agreed in judging that "of purely mystical prayer and experience Rolle knows little or nothing." But Thomas Merton has questioned whether Knowles's definition of mysticism based on John of the Cross is adequate for appreciating a witness like Rolle, who shows more parallels with the hesychast experience of divine light or with aspects of the patristic tradition common to East and to West than to the Spanish Doctor.

Rolle's The Fire of Love and The Mending of Life provide us with the most direct access to his thought. He is far from being a systematic thinker; most of his works are discursive meditations on the experience of loving God. The Mending of Life was his most general and best-known book. The first ten chapters discuss such essential ascetical values and practices as poverty, tribulation, prayer and meditation—the means by which the converted soul is led to the love of God and contemplation (chaps. 11–12). The treatment of divine love is based upon a distinction of three stages of the love of Christ adapted from Richard of St. Victor—insuperable love, inseparable love, and singular love.

Rolle's love for the incarnate Jesus shines through all his works. "Therefore, may Jesus Christ, whom we love for his own sake, be the beginning of our love, and may he be its end" (The Mending of Life, chap. 11). In The Fire of Love, his most powerful work, Rolle declares, "I have found that to love Christ above all things will involve three things: warmth, song and sweetness" (chap. 14). Rolle considered these three experiences, especially the last, as the height of Christian perfection, a foretaste of the vision of God, which he insisted could only be fully enjoyed in heaven. His lyrical descriptions of the physical manifestations of heat, melody, and sweetness (e.g., The Fire of Love, chaps. 15, 19, 22, 31, 33–34, and 40; and The Melody of Love, passim) were the source of later suspicions about the authenticity of his mysticism, although in The Mending of Life he insists that sanctity is not in the roaring of the heart, either in tears or in external acts, but in the sweetness of perfect love and heavenly contemplation (chap. 12). Because of the absence of anything corresponding to the terrible ordeal of the "dark night" of divine withdrawal, Rolle has frequently been denied the title of true mystic, but his teaching regarding the divinely infused nature of the higher stages of the experience of love and his distinction of two kinds of rapture (The Fire of Love, chap. 37) argue that it is more just, with Thomas Merton, to see him as a different kind of mystic.

The Yorkshire hermit so concentrates on the language of love that he gives little consideration to the role reason plays in the path to God. He is also less than clear on the relation of action and contemplation in the life of Christian perfection. The Fire of Love (chap. 21) denies that the active and contemplative lives can really be combined, but The Mending of Life (chap. 12) seems to suggest that they can. One does not go to Richard Rolle for careful discriminations about difficult issues, but for the forcefulness and tenderness of his language of love.

Walter Hilton

Hilton, who died in 1396, lived as a hermit before becoming an Augustinian canon. Theologically, he was the most careful of the English mystics. Although he differed from Rolle in many ways, he shared with him the insistence that all true experience of God in this life can come only through the love of Jesus. Hilton wrote his major works in the vernacular; his masterpiece is The Scale (or Ladder) of Perfection. He was also a translator (his free rendering of a popular work of Franciscan piety known in English as The Goal of Love is another major source of his thought). Hilton lived in the troubled times of the Lollard heresy, and his sharp reaction to theological error must be seen in this light.

A return to Augustine was one of the major movements in fourteenth-century thought, and Hilton is a good example of this in mystical theology.
No other mystic of the late Middle Ages is so Augustinian, especially in the central role that he gives to the restoration of the damaged image of God in each human person. The first book of *The Scale* takes as its announced theme the three degrees of the contemplative life: “knowledge of God and of spiritual matters . . . through the use of reason”; “loving God that does not depend on intellectual light”; and “the third degree of contemplation, which is the highest attainable in this life, . . . of both knowledge and love” (*The Scale* 1.4–8). In the third stage “the soul becomes united to God in an ecstasy of love and is conformed to the likeness of the Trinity” (1.8). The major theme of the latter part of book 1, however, shifts to the contrast between the image of Christ and the image of sin in the human soul. Book 2 differs in audience and in depth of theological tone, taking as its explicit theme the two stages in the reformation of the divine image: reformation in faith and reformation in faith and in feeling (e.g., 2.13–20, 28–35). Hilton consistently opposed giving rapturous experiences like those of Rolle any essential role in the path to perfection; the “feeling” in his reformation in faith and in feeling is fundamentally “God’s gracious presence revealed to a pure soul” (2.41). Hilton also insists that the process of reformation is the joint work of both love and knowledge: “love derives from knowledge and not knowledge from love; consequently the happiness of the soul is said to derive chiefly from this knowledge and experience of God, to which is joined the love of God . . .” (2.34). In the highest stage of the reformation in faith and in feeling, “the soul, as far as it may be in this life, contemplates the Godhead united to manhood in Christ” (2.30). Recollection of the “precious Humanity and Passion of Jesus Christ” (1.92) is the necessary way to God, and mystical experience in this life is never possible apart from the person of the God-man. Thus, the reformation of the image is its conformity to the likeness of Jesus (e.g., 1.51–53, 86; 2.24).

Despite his emphasis on the mutuality of love and knowledge in the path to God, Walter Hilton stressed the language of love and longing for Jesus throughout his works, though usually without the erotic imagery found in Rolle. Like Rolle, but with far greater theological precision, he emphasized the infused character of the higher stages of the contemplative life (e.g., 2.35). Unlike Rolle, he had a place for the painful experience of the “dark night,” in which sin and its vestiges are purged by the action of grace (e.g., 2.24, 28), and he at times used apophatic expressions (e.g., 2.27, 40). In general, however, Hilton remained strongly in the Augustinian camp in his emphasis on positive language in describing the love of Christ and in his preference for speaking of the experience of the immediate presence of God in Christ as the height of perfection (e.g., 1.89; 2.21, 27, 41).

The first book of *The Scale* implies that someone involved in the active life cannot be expected to reach the heights of perfection; but the second book (e.g., 2.18, 40) and other works of Hilton, especially *The Goad of Love* (chap. 16) and *The Epistle on the Mixed Life*, show that this does not represent his mature thought, which held that contemplation, as the growing expression of the love of God, marks all the stages of the Christian life and that true perfection is possible in any state. In advancing this new and more democratic notion of Christian perfection, Walter Hilton takes his place beside such other fourteenth-century mystics as Meister Eckhart and Julian of Norwich in marking a new stage in the history of Christian spirituality.

**The Cloud Author**

Some have claimed that Hilton was the author of the treatise known as *The Cloud of Unknowing* and its related shorter works, but theological and stylistic differences make this unlikely. All we can say about the unknown author is that he was a contemporary of Hilton who lived as a solitary, possibly a Carthusian. He had received a good theological education, and of his genius as a guide to the spiritual life there can be no question. Besides *The Cloud* itself, his corpus includes *The Book of Privy Counselling* (a major work on mystical union), *The Epistle of Prayer, The Epistle of Discretion, Of Discerning Spirits*, and two translations, *Hid Divinity*, a version of Pseudo-Dionysius’s *Mystical Theology*, and an adaptation of Richard of St. Victor’s *Benjamin minor*.

The author’s praise for Pseudo-Dionysius (e.g., *Cloud*, chap. 70) has sometimes obscured the true nature of his relation to his sources. It is true that the anonymous Englishman makes much use of the Dionysian writings, but his Dionysianism is of a special western type that was primarily dependent on Thomas Gallus (d. 1246) and the Carthusian Hugh of Balma (d. 1340). This form of Dionysianism reinterpreted language about the limitations of reason in terms of the supremacy of affectivity to all forms of knowing in the ascent to God. Of course, the *Cloud* author is a man of more than one book, as his use of Bernard of Clairvaux and the fathers shows, but his affective Dionysianism is important for understanding his differences from the other great English mystics.

*The Cloud of Unknowing* is a specialist document, addressed to a young man pursuing the contemplative life under monastic obedience. It takes its name and central theme from the author’s insistence upon “a sort of cloud of unknowing . . . [which] is always between you and your God, no matter what you do, and it prevents you from seeing him clearly by the light of understanding in your reason, and from experiencing him in sweetness of love in your affection” (chap. 3). Although this cloud of unknowing can
never be dispersed, this does not prevent loving union with God in this life. The path to God must follow the dark road of unknowing and of inner suffering. The “dark night” experience is central to the Cloud author, albeit differently expressed from the later formulations in the Spanish mystics.

The Cloud author does not disparage the preparatory roles of reading, reflecting, and praying (e.g., chap. 35), but these practices do not really penetrate the cloud. The lower stage of the active life, which consists of good works, and the higher stage, which is concerned with meditation, are both merely preparatory (see chaps. 8, 21). Real progress begins only in the higher stage of contemplation and consists in a twofold strategy: first, in invoking another cloud, the “cloud of forgetting,” which one must put between oneself and all creation (chaps. 5, 43); and second, in smiting “upon that thick cloud of unknowing with a sharp dart of longing love” (chap. 6).

This “sharp dart of longing love” is central to the Cloud author's teaching. As a “blind impulse of love” (chap. 12), it finds expression in prayers of simple ejaculation that surpass any form of discourse (chaps. 39–40). The union that such prayer leads to is the result of a strictly operative grace—God’s work and not our own (chaps. 26, 34). In this the Cloud author—and, indeed, all the fourteenth-century English mystics—stands in line with a generally Thomistic understanding of the nature of grace. The Cloud attempts to express the mystery of union with God in the form of paradoxes and apophatic language unusual for the English mystics (e.g., chaps. 68–69).

Chapter 71 judiciously distinguishes between two kinds of union possible in this life: one of intermittent rapture; the other of the permanent possession of God.

*The Book of Privy Counselling* analyzes the “naked intent” that leads to God and the nature of the union possible in this life. Noting that pure existence is the most proper name of God, the author insists that God is the being of the soul, “evermore saving this difference between you and Him, that He is your being and you are not His.” Some of the language used here is reminiscent of the Rhineland mystics, but the Cloud author, like the other English mystics, never allows abstract terminology to dominate, as when he orders his reader: “Take good, gracious God as He is, plat [flat] and plain as a plaster, and lay it to your sick self as you are.” What *The Book of Privy Counselling* adds to *The Cloud*’s teaching is a detailed reflection on the cloud of forgetting as the oblivion of our own being in order to center on the being of God: the work of love is total forgetfulness of self.

The contrast sometimes asserted between the Christocentric Hilton and the theocentric Cloud author is a dangerous half-truth. Christ plays an essential role in the Cloud author’s works; meditation on Jesus’ passion begins the way to God. *The Book of Privy Counselling*’s claim that thoughts
on the passion pertain to common grace, not to the higher special grace of contemplation, needs to be understood in the light of the traditional distinction between the “carnal” love of Christ’s humanity and the higher “spiritual” love of the Godhead made manifest in him.12 Still there is a difference in tone and emphasis between the language about Christ found in the Cloud author and that of the other great English mystics, and his emphasis on the “naked intent” seems to have been criticized by Walter Hilton.

On the relation of love and knowledge in the path to God, the dominant note of the Cloud author is well expressed in this statement: “it is love alone that can reach to God in this life, and not knowing” (Cloud, chap. 8). But the anonymous mystic did not lack appreciation of the role of rational knowledge; there are passages in The Book of Privy Counselling and The Epistle of Prayer that show he agreed with a long tradition in Christian mysticism that recognized a form of transcendent knowledge in the experience of loving union, however much he weights the balance on the side of love.13 Where he does differ from earlier authors is in his failure to stress the subsuming power of love to draw up all human knowing into the higher awareness of God.

The Cloud author’s teaching on union with God is eminently orthodox, carefully avoiding any suggestion of union of identity or indistinction and adhering to traditional formulas based on the notion of unitas spiritus found in 1 Cor 6:17. For him, the mystical union was achieved by Moses who entered the dark cloud “to feel in experience the presence of Him that is above all things.”14 This experience, however, seems open only to those who lead the contemplative life under a religious rule (Cloud, chap. 21).

**Julian of Norwich**

On the night of 13 May 1373, a thirty-year-old dying woman received fifteen “showings” or revelations from God. Later that day she was granted one further revelation confirming the truth of the previous manifestations. The young woman became an anchoress in a cell attached to St. Julian’s church in Norwich, and she based her long life of prayer, contemplation, and spiritual teaching on these visions. Twice she either wrote or dictated accounts of the visions and their meaning, so her Book of Showings comes down to us in an early “Short Text” and a theologically more developed “Long Text,” which was finished about 1393. Julian was still alive as late as 1416.

Dame Julian is the great original among the English mystics. However much she may have been familiar with earlier spiritual authors, her message is an intensely personal one based on her efforts to understand the meaning of her visions.15 The conclusion of the Long Text summarizes the central message:

And from the time that it was revealed, I desired many times to know in what was our Lord’s meaning. And fifteen years after and more, I was answered in spiritual understanding, and it was said: What, do you wish to know your Lord’s meaning in this thing? Know it well, love was his meaning. Who reveals it to you? Love. What did he reveal to you? Love. Why does he reveal it to you? For love.

Julian was the most Pauline of the fourteenth-century mystics; her essential concerns, like Paul’s, were rooted in the mystery of sin, grace, and redemption in the love of Jesus. Like the apostle, she found a key to some grasp of the mystery in the solidarity of all humanity in Christ.

Julian wrestled long with the meaning of her visions, not least because she sensed a conflict between the message of universal love revealed to her in the figure of the crucified Jesus and the “common teaching” of the church regarding sin, divine wrath, and damnation. Over and over again she pondered the meaning of the words “I may make all things well, and I can make all things well, and I shall make all things well; and you will see yourself that every kind of thing will be well” (Long Text, chap. 31; cf. Short Text, chap. 14). For Julian the solution to the dilemma was given in the vision of the lord and the servant (Long Text, chaps. 51–63). In this allegorical parable she sees a loving lord send out a dutiful servant on a mission. Despite his good intention, the servant falls into a ditch, suffers grave injury, and is unable to fulfill his lord’s wishes, though the lord never ceases to look upon him “with great pity and compassion.” Julian goes on to explain that the servant is, first of all, Adam, but from another perspective Christ himself who “fell into” human nature and in whom all humanity will be restored to God. The anchoress’s shifting perspectives in the parable do not provide us with a simple rational solution to the paradox of divine goodness and human sinfulness; nor are they meant to. They are a mystical revelation that God’s ways are not our ways (Long Text, chap. 32). Julian does not engage in theoretical discussions of the relation of love and knowledge, like Hilton and the Cloud author, but her teaching is that the mystery of love surpasses the antinomies of reason.

It is from this point of view that two difficulties in Julian’s thought must be approached. The first is the universalism that seems implied in the revelation that God will make all things well. Julian carefully avoids asserting that all human beings will be saved. She does say that God performs two great deeds which will fulfill his promise: a deed that is begun in this life but completed in the next (Long Text, chap. 37), and a hidden, eschatological deed.
“which the Blessed Trinity will perform on the last day” (Long Text, chap. 32). The second problem area is related to this—the issue of the meaning and seriousness of sin. The anchorites had a clear sense of the shamefulness of sin, and they insisted that in some way it clouded the whole course of human life. How then could she assert that “sine be behoue,” that is, necessary (Long Text, chap. 27), or claim that “in every soul which will be saved there is a godly will which never assents to sin” (Long Text, chap. 37)? Again, the answer seems to be one of perspective. Sin separates us from God, but, from the viewpoint of divine love, the pain that sin causes us is a necessary part of the purgative process of falling and rising that we must undergo throughout this life. As the parable of the lord and servant suggests, from the perspective of the Father’s good pleasure in his Son, who has taken all humanity to himself, there is indeed a godly will that has never consented to sin: “we have all this will whole and safe in our Lord Jesus Christ” (Long Text, chap. 53; cf. Short Text, chap. 23).

Julian expresses her theology of love in terms of a threefold distinction: “The first is uncreated charity, the second is created charity, the third is given charity” (Long Text, chap. 84). The uncreated charity that is God is the source and goal of all. Julian’s thought has a strong trinitarian dimension, though she insists that all that we can know about God is revealed to us in the person of Jesus. This means that the mystical life here on earth can never depart from the image of the crucified Jesus.

Created charity is our soul in God, that is, the mystery of how we are “oned” in Christ to become partakers of the divine nature. This theme draws us back again to the central vision of the Lord and the servant. In seeking to express the bond between the uncreated charity manifest in Jesus and the created charity of the soul, Julian turned to the image of the motherhood of God, especially the motherhood of Christ as God (Long Text, chaps. 52–63). Julian did not invent this language, which had a long tradition, but she brought it to a height of theological sophistication beyond anything found in earlier literature. Christ is our mother not only because the image of a mother’s love helps us to overcome our fear of God, but more fundamentally because it explains the nature of our bond with Christ and the source of his constant solicitude for us.

Julian’s “given charity” is the life of virtue by which the Christian returns love for love given. Her teaching here centers on the great values of faith and charity, prayer and contemplation, contrition and compassion, and not on particular practices or forms of life. Despite her life as an enclosed contemplative, Julian, like Hilton, does not restrict her teaching to a group of contemplative adepts. One might argue that she goes beyond Hilton and others, quietly leaving to one side the traditional distinctions between the active and contemplative lives in directing her message to all who form one body in Christ.

Later Stages

The flood of English spiritual literature did not dry up at the end of the fourteenth century, though later productions do not reach the level of Julian, Hilton, or the Cloud author. The most interesting (and sometimes disconcerting) work is The Book of Margery Kempe, the first autobiography in English. Margery (ca. 1373–ca. 1440) was a wife and the mother of fourteen children; her call to a higher life led her not out of the world but to special ascetical and devotional practices, including a mutual vow of chastity with her husband, the gift of tears, and much ecstatic groaning and shouting. Her dictated Book is a lively, if disjointed, account of her pilgrimages, visions, and interior and exterior trials. Margery’s devotional life centered on Jesus in his passion and was enriched with considerable erotic imagery. Recent studies have highlighted the difficulties that Margery faced in trying to live a life of perfection as a married woman in the world and have shown that the models for her piety must be sought among the ecstatic women saints of the Continent.

Among the other important spiritual works of the fifteenth century were the Carthusian Nicholas Love’s The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ (ca. 1410), an influential rendering of The Meditations of the Life of Jesus Christ falsely ascribed to Bonaventure. Another Carthusian, Richard Methley, translated The Cloud into Latin and wrote several independent treatises.

The great age of English spiritual literature was largely over by 1500, though both John Fisher and Thomas More produced ascetical and devotional works of merit. The story of Anglican and Puritan spirituality will be told in another volume. After the Reformation, the English Recusant Catholics kept the earlier literature alive, both in England and on the Continent, by copying manuscripts—and, in the case of Augustine Baker (1575–1641), even of writing a commentary on The Cloud. The Recusants produced a valuable spiritual literature of their own, of which The Rule of Perfection by Benet of Canfield (1562–1610) is the most notable example. In summary, the great English mystics of the fourteenth century and their successors form a distinct and important moment in the history of Christian spirituality, not only for their linguistic descendants, who make use of the English language in trying to express the mystery of God, but also for all their spiritual descendants throughout the world.
Notes


10. Illuminating comparisons between the language of the English mystics and that of their continental counterparts may be found in Wolfgang Riehle, *The Middle English Mystics*.


15. Julian’s classification of her various kinds of showings (e.g., Short Text, chaps. 4, 7, 23; Long Text, chap. 1) show her acquaintance with the Augustinian tradition.


17. This is as close as Julian comes to something like a “dark night” (see Long Text, chap. 64).


19. In chap. 19 of the Long Text, Julian resists the temptation to look above Christ crucified toward the naked Godhead.

20. Julian speaks of the Trinity as our mother (Long Text, chap. 54), and of God in general as mother (Long Text, chap. 52, 52), but the dominant theme is Christ as mother. See Paula Barker, “The Motherhood of God in Julian of Norwich’s Theology,” *Downside Review* 100 (1982) 290–305.

Bibliography


Clark, J. P. H. The best studies on Walter Hilton may be found in the series of articles by J. P. H. Clark published in *Downside Review* from 1977 on.


