Desire and symbol

Two aspects of *The cloud of unknowing*

Robert W. Englert

THE CLOUD OF UNKNOWING AND SIX other works are attributed to a fourteenth-century English spiritual director who undertook the instruction of a disciple in the East Midlands (*c.* 1349–1395).[1] *The cloud* fits the medieval genre of a letter of spiritual guidance akin to William of St Thierry's *Golden epistle to the brethren of Mont Dieu.*[2] Such *epistolae* contained considerable theological reflection and *The cloud* was no exception. It was written probably by a Carthusian[3] to instruct a disciple in the way of 'contemplation', but it was a virtual compendium of medieval theology.

The author, who is anonymous, writes in the tradition of Thomas Gallus (d. 1246) whose 'new Dionysianism' thrived in thirteenth-century Italy and France.[4] The English author seems very familiar with Gallus' *Extract on the mystical theology* of pseudo-Dionysius.[5] He probably wove Gallus' teaching into that of the Dionysian Carthusians Hugh of Balma (Prior of Meyriat between 1298 and 1340), and Guigues de Ponte (author of *De contemplatione*, d. 1297), to create a homely fabric of instruction, fraught with alliteration and metaphor.[6] On the other hand, he and Hugh may also have a common source in Thomas Gallus. In any way of reckoning, alliteration and homespun metaphor belong to *The cloud* author himself. Take the good, gracious God, just as he is, without qualification, and bind him as you would a poultice to your sick self just as you are.[7]

One of *The cloud*'s strengths is its memorable alliterative prose, which places Pseudo-Dionysius in a new context. The surviving texts are a monastic weave of affectivity and Dionysian ascent.[8] In this journey away from cognitions (apophaticism), the movement towards God is presented as a retreat from images and our author views this retreat as one 'led by love'. The addressee is asked to follow love's call into the darkness of Sinai. In such a work, contemplative ascent is a matter of strong affectivity, rather than Neoplatonic preference. The purpose of this article is first to explore the dialogue between 'a simple

reaching out' to God – a 'nakid or blind intent' (*extensio*) – and those sudden stirrings (*sodeyn steryngs*), which follow a naked reaching out. While the cause of our desire is gratuitous and mysterious, it is followed by an 'upsurge' (*consurrectio*) or stirring that is equally mysterious. Understanding the author's 'theology of desire' will allow us to understand much about the reciprocity of call and response – reaching out and being drawn by love – in the *The cloud*'s thought. Always we are extending ourselves in a *nakid entent*; yet always we are responding to affective stirrings that are beyond our comprehension. We will thus attempt to assess the dialectic between human effort and spontaneous upsurge in our author's work.

The second purpose of this article is to study symbols (cataphatic theology), in a work which champions a dark, imageless meditation – 'beating with nakid intent upon a dark cloud of unknowing'.[9] Despite its emphasis on darkness ('Set yourself to rest in this darkness . . .'),[10] a renowned apophatic work is filled with metaphor, simile and alliteration, introducing its reader to the simple joys of vernacular verse. Monastic allusions to the Song of Songs,[11] games of hide and seek,[12] biblical metaphors for the passion,[13] clouds of Sinai's darkness, darts of longing love,[14] as well as conflated images of woman as sinner and contemplative[15] all abound. If *The cloud* author's disciple is to rest in darkness, his instruction in the task of resting is beautifully conceived and poetically expressed.

Far from being a detached protocol for contemplatives, the vernacular prose of *The cloud* is intended to immerse its reader in a sea of images which play upon the imagination, shaping the soul. The interaction between reader and image is as much the author's concern as is the instruction of a disciple in the way of dark meditation. This religious classic, a title well deserved by *The cloud*, endures as a provocation '. . . awaiting the risk of reading: to challenge our complacency, to break our conventions, to compel and concentrate our attention . . .'[16] It is only when we interact with a classic or a great piece of art that we experience '. . . surprise, release, confrontation, shock, often reverential awe, always transformation'.[17]

The young disciple would have found himself challenged by a formidable classic with a spiders web of images, drawing him in until he was dissolved in the process. The possibility of freedom lay in his willingness to enter a dialogue with the classic – to be transformed imaginatively by strange new symbols that transcended his present ways of living and acting.

Desire in the works of our author

The cloud corpus is characterized by a medieval theological preference for 'longing love' or *desiderium*. Almost all medieval commentators who chronologically followed Gregory the Great were influenced by his notions of *desiderium* or love in the absence of the beloved.[18] If *amor* indicated joy in the presence of the beloved, *desiderium* indicated a 'compunction' or longing for an absent love.[19] Gregory viewed compunction as being 'pierced through' (*cum-pungere*) with yearning for a love not yet realized.[20] The more such longing is exercised, the more its appetite is stimulated, never quite exhausting itself in this life. Our author tells his disciple, '. . . so with his great grace he (God) kindled your desire, and fastened to it a leash of longing . . .'[21] Tied to God by a cord of desire, the disciple was '. . . to beat with a sharp dart of longing love' upon a cloud of unknowing.[22]

In Gregory's mind there were two kinds of sorrow or compunction: *compunctio paenitentiae* (sorrow for sin) and *compunctio cordis* or desire of the heart.[23] Both are a matter of 'sighing', 'longing', 'panting', 'clinging', or 'yearning'; but *compunctio cordis* is more concerned with groaning after God, than it is with groaning over sin. For our author, as well as Hugh of Balma and Guigues de Ponte, yearning is a textual commonplace. Of love's ardour (the *affectus*), Hugh of Balma tells us,

> . . . it (love's ardour) takes place in the fire of the Holy Spirit sent down from on high, as the soul *aspires in flaming affections to God alone, yearning only to be more intimately united to him with tighter cords of love.*[24] (emphasis mine)

Guigues de Ponte also wrote of,

> ' . . the human spirit's *yearning, unitive clinging in which she gently burns for God* . . . With love growing from her own fervor, she opens herself to receive and in receiving is set on fire. Then *with great longing* she gazes wide-mouthed at celestial things and in some wondrous way *tastes what she seeks to have* . . .'[25] (emphasis mine).

In these words of Guigues, we discover the erotic pining of the soul as bride, which characterizes the Song of Songs tradition; but we also find the *compunctio cordis* doctrine. For Gregory the Great, the soul that desires God already has an obscure possession of God: 'Whoever desires God with the whole heart already has the one he loves.'[26] Put

another way, erotic longing of the soul for God is already an obscure presence; 'the aspiring soul tastes what she seeks to have'.[27]

'Nakid entent and sparcles from the cole'

Following an earlier Carthusian tradition of Guigo II's *Ladder of monks*, *The cloud* author defines prayer as '. . . a devout reaching out (*deuoute entent*) directly to God, in order to attain the good and do away with evil'.[28] At the same time, this 'nakid entent' is the result of grace: '. . . it is the easiest exercise of all and most readily accomplished when a soul is helped by grace in this felt desire . . .'[29] The contemplative stretches out to God (*extensio*), but he or she also is aware of '. . . a sudden impulse, one that comes without warning, speedily flying up to God as the spark flies up from the burning coal'.[30] What are we to make of the soul reaching out (*nakid entent*) under the influence of grace, while it also responds to *sodeyn steryngs* in its depths? We might begin our explanation by referring to *The cloud* author's recommended practice of 'wrapping' or enfolding desire in a 'little word': 'A simple reaching out directly toward God is sufficient . . . If you like, you can have this reaching out, wrapped up and enfolded in a single word.'[31] Such a 'little word' as 'God' or 'love' may be chosen as a 'shield' or 'spear' to strike down every kind of thought or cognition. It is to be 'fastened to the heart' so that it will never go away.[32]

In a similar fashion, *The cloud*'s precursor, Hugh of Balma, tells us:

> Led by meditation and by means of the aspirative prayer (verbal aspirations like 'Father', 'Hallowed be Thy Name') discussed here, the *affectio* of love is kindled little by little. Just as a bit of tow (flax) is first exposed to the sun so that it can dry out and can be suddenly ignited, so by means of these aspirative prayers that call forth the Beloved, one's spirit is more affectedly elevated.[33]

In other words, the prayers of aspiration or, in *The cloud*'s case, desire wrapped in a little word, like 'God' or 'love',[34] prepare the wick of the soul for sudden upsurges of flame ('sparks from the coal'). Fastening a little word to one's heart, as the envelope of desire, dries the wick of the soul so that it is ready for an outburst of firey affection. Aspiration and upsurge are thus two moments in a continuum of anagogic prayer, in which the bridegroom is importuned to visit the soul. The sudden stirrings, which leap up like sparks, follow upon aspirations. These stirrings shear off every cognition and come without any previous

cause. Their lifting of the soul is the momentary *unio mystica*, which follows upon a naked reaching out, cutting off every rational thought, and allowing the loving power to take hold of the person. After a moment of 'being held' by love, cognitions return, but the soul is not the same, because love has had its way.

Having looked at Hugh's aspirations and *The cloud*'s little words that wrap desire, naked intent may be viewed as an aspirative desire that prepares the way for *sodeyn steryngs* or the upsurge (*consurrectio*) of love. Such a view allows us to reconcile reaching out to God with a following of those sparks which leap up from the coal.

Imagery and symbolism

The works of *The cloud* canon are wonderful examples of late fourteenth-century vernacular English prose. They are written in the dialect of the East Midlands and are replete with arresting parallels and comparisons; for example, heretics are likened to 'wild men, who after drinking from a beautiful cup, throw it against the wall and break it'.[35] Pseudo-contemplatives are accustomed 'to sit with their mouths open as though they were catching flies'.[36] When compared to spiritual wisdom, natural understanding is considered, '. . . mere fool-ishness formed and devised in illusion; as far removed from the real truth seen in the light of the spiritual sun as is the dark light of the moon, shining through the mist of a midwinter's night, from the brightness of the sunlight at the height of a mid-summer's day'.[37] Always the comparisons are drawn from the everyday, affording the young disciple alliteration, visualization and humour.

Ludus amoris

The author's fertile imagination prompts him to make extensive use of certain images. One of these is the poignant *ludus amoris* or love tryst with the bridegroom, Jesus, as this derives from the Song of Songs tradition. This image of approach and flight, intimacy and disappearance is as ancient as the Song of Songs itself, and is perhaps one of the most pervasive depictions of *The cloud* canon. The lover, Jesus, flies if he is sought too greedily, but he always returns at the moment when the bride (soul) is most in need of love. In Guigo II's *Ladder of monks*, we read

> Do not fear, bride of the spouse, do not despair, . . . if for a little while He turns His face away from you . . . He withdraws Himself, so that

> He is not despised for being too attentive so that when He is absent He may be desired the more . . .[38]

As Jesus withdraws from the soul, the soul languishes more, but Jesus can never be held too tightly by the aspiring soul: '. . . wait patiently on the will of our Lord with courtesy and humility, and do not snatch at it hurriedly, like a greedy greyhound, no matter how hungry you may be.'[39] Always we are to play a game with God as a child would play with his or her Father. We are to conceal our boisterous movements of spirit until the father comes to play with us, kissing and embracing us.[40] If we are patient and allow desire to heighten, the game of withdrawal and cuddling becomes one of aspiration and release. For those who wait, giving themselves up to God,[41] it is quickly discovered that

> . . . this humility merits to have God himself coming down in his power to avenge you against your enemies, to take you up, to cherish you and to dry your spiritual eyes, as the father does for the child that was in danger of death under the mouths of wild boars or mad, biting bears.[42]

The father comes to minister mercy, just as our resources are spent. Mercy is the essential component of the *ludus amoris* and it is precisely the failure of the child's effort to survive that opens the way to the father's tender regard.

In a *Letter of private direction*, our author knits the image of Jesus' apparition in the Galilean sea storm to that of the *ludus amoris*.[43] He tells us that as we move from sensible devotions to resting in darkness, neither the devotions of the past nor the new ways of silence comfort us. We have in fact 'fallen between two stools', and find ourselves on the spiritual ocean (*goostly see*), '. . . being shipped across from the active state to the contemplative.'[44] We are blown about like the disciples alone in a *bareyn bote* on the Galilean Sea.

'It can happen that great storms and temptations will arise during a time like this, and you will be at a loss where to run for help.'[45] When experiencing peril, '. . . trust lovingly in our Lord . . . for he is not far off',[46] but comes quickly, as does the Father or the bridegroom. The disciple is '. . . left flat in (his) boat, tossed about and floundering now hither, now thither, not knowing where you are nor where you are going . . . But do not be dismayed; he shall come, I promise you, as soon as it is his will, to relieve you and mightily to free you from all your trouble, far more wonderfully than he ever did before.'[47] Once again, Jesus will

arrive when we are least in control, mercifully delivering us from threatening storms. He completes the *ludus amoris* when we are least able to care for ourselves.

Jesus' passion: paradigm of the contemplative life

In an apophatic, Dionysian work, our author presents us with a cataphatic image of Jesus, exemplar of the contemplative life. This paradigm is derived from a Nicene Christology and a reading of John, chapter 10 (the Good Shepherd parable). In a succinct christological statement, he paraphrases John 10 (*Ego sum ostium*, 'I am the door'):

> 'I who am almighty by my Godhead can lawfully, as doorkeeper, let in whom I will and by what way that I will. But because I want there to be one clear way for all, one open entry to all that wish to come in, and in order that none can plead ignorance of the way in, I have clothed myself in the nature common to all men, and have made myself so open that by my manhood I am the door; and whoever enters by me shall be safe.'[48]

Jesus is the threshold whose divinity is open to all that is human, but Jesus remains the suffering Jesus: 'They enter by the door who contemplate the passion of Christ and mourn for their wickedness which is the cause of that passion. Then they lift up their hearts to contemplate the love and the goodness of his Godhead . . .'[49] One cannot pass through the door (Jesus) without contemplating the suffering of Christ since medieval theologians viewed meditation on the passion as the first step of the soul's *itinerarium* (inner journey).[50] Moreover, contemplation of the cross leads us 'to lift up our hearts' (*sursum corda*) or to reach out to God with naked intent, disdaining any thought of self. While the passion calls us to lift ourselves to God, preoccupation with self remains the pain of the human condition.

What is the cross but 'disdaining to think of one's own being'? Of course, '. . . this naked feeling of your blind being will always press in above you, between you and your God. Then it is that the burden of yourself will seem so heavy and so painful.'[51] 'It is then that you are yourself a cross to yourself.'[52] The cross is a liberative path, but it is also the isolated feeling of our own aloneness, which keeps us from reaching out to God in naked intent. The cross is at once the threshold to God, and the necessary step of purification in which 'we disdain all thought of self' in order to see God.

In the Dionysian tradition, the passion is not so much a reflection on the sacred humanity as it is a disdain for our own thoughts. Our author adapts a commonplace of Christian tradition in order to explain his own apophatic teaching on prayer.

Conclusion

My purpose in writing this paper was first to underscore the author's fascination with the desire with which we are 'leashed' to God. In doing so, we are most aware of the dialectic of 'reaching out' to God and responding to 'sudden stirrings' in our depths. My second purpose in writing was to emphasize that our young disciple was exposed to a religious classic – a melange of religious symbols, which were themselves transformative. It is too simplistic to view *The cloud* canon as an introduction to apophatic prayer, since it is also an exposure to symbol which shocks and transforms the soul. The most naked and blind intent is always coupled to the art which surrounds it, and the simplest reaching out is carried on in the context of enormous sensory input. *The cloud* disciple was drawn to rest in silence, but he was also exposed to one of the most ornate descriptions of silence ever to be fashioned.

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NOTES

1 This dating places the *Cloud* between Richard Rolle and Walter Hilton, an approximate date.
2 See Bernard McGinn, 'The growth of mysticism' in *The presence of God: a history of western Christian mysticism* vol II (New York: Crossroad, 1994), p 228.
3 See Introduction to *The cloud of unknowing*, edited with an introduction by James Walsh, preface by Simon Tugwell (New York: Paulist, 1981), pp 2–9. (Henceforth referred to as CU.)
4 See Bernard McGinn, 'The flowering of mysticism, men and women in the new mysticism (1200–1350)' in *The presence of God: a history of western Christian mysticism* vol III (New York: Crossroad, 1998), pp 78–87.
5 See James Walsh, Introduction to CU, pp 47–51.
6 See Walsh, *ibid.*, pp 19–26.
7 *The book of privy counselling* in *The cloud of unknowing and related treatises*, ed Phyllis Hodgson (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, universität Salzburg, 1982), p 77. (Henceforth referred to as ME.) Modern English trans 'A letter of private direction' in *The pursuit of wisdom and other works by the author of 'The cloud of unknowing'*, trans, ed and annotated James Walsh, preface by George A. Maloney (New York: Paulist, 1988), p 222. (Henceforth referred to as LPD.)

8 See McGinn on Gallus' blend of affectivity and Dionysianism, *The flowering of mysticism*, pp 78ff.
9 CU, VI, p 131.
10 CU, III, p 121.
11 LPD, note 191, p 244.
12 CU, XXXII, p 181.
13 LPD, VIII, p 234–237.
14 CU, VI, p 131.
15 CU, XVff.
16 David Tracy, *The analogical imagination: Christian theology and the culture of pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), p 115.
17 *Ibid.*, p 114.
18 See Jean Leclercq, *The love of learning and the desire for God: a study of monastic culture*, trans Catherine Misrahi (New York: Fordham University Press, 1961), pp 31ff.
19 *Ibid.*, p 38.
20 *Ibid.*
21 CU, I, p 116.
22 CU, VI, p 131.
23 J. Leclercq, *The love of learning*, p 38.
24 Hugh of Balma, 'The roads to Zion mourn' in *Carthusian spirituality: the writings of Hugh of Balma and Guigo de Ponte*, trans and introd Dennis D. Martin (New York: Paulist, 1997), p 162.
25 Guigo de Ponte, 'On contemplation II' in *Carthusian Spirituality*, pp 209–210.
26 Gregory the Great, *In Evangelia*, 30.1, in Jean Leclercq, *The love of learning*, p 40.
27 Guigo de Ponte, 'On contemplation II', pp 209–10.
28 CU, XXXIX, p 195.
29 CU, III, p 120.
30 CU, IV, p 126.
31 CU, VII, pp 133–134.
32 *Ibid.*, p 134.
33 Hugh of Balma, *Roads*, 47:104.
34 CU, VII, p 134.
35 ME, CU, LVIII, p 39.
36 ME, CU, LVII, p 59.
37 ME, PC, 82.16.
38 See note 191 in LPD, p 280.
39 CU, XLVI, pp 208–209.
40 CU, XLVI, p 209.
41 CU, XXXII, p 181.
42 *Ibid.*, p 181.
43 LPD, XII, p 244.
44 *Ibid.*, p 244.
45 *Ibid.*
46 *Ibid.*
47 *Ibid.*
48 *Ibid.*, IX, p 238.
49 *Ibid.*, p 238.
50 See Bonaventure, 'Prologue to the soul's journey into God' in *Bonaventure: the soul's journey into God, The tree of life, and The life of St. Francis*, trans and introd Ewert Cousins, preface by Ignatius Brady (New York: Paulist, 1978), p 55.
51 LPD, VIII, p 236.
52 *Ibid.*, p 237.