

Richard Rolle

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Introduction

THANKS to the work of Horstmann in the last years of the nineteenth century,¹ followed by the groundbreaking and monumental scholarship on Rolle's corpus by Allen,² Richard Rolle stood as the better known and most influential of a group of authors of religious prose labelled as the Middle English mystics, which also included Walter Hilton, the *Cloud*-author, Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe.³ In addition, Chambers, in his influential piece on the continuity of English prose from the time of King Alfred to Sir Thomas More,⁴ gave Rolle a prominent place in the history of English prose, far above Wycliffe. Rolle's Middle English prose writings, although limited in number by comparison with his many major works in Latin, served nevertheless to demonstrate the use of the vernacular, in the dialect of Yorkshire, well before Chaucer turned English into a recognised and economically viable courtly literary language.

Chambers's project could not take into account Allen's significant discoveries of the Rolle corpus, which made of him a Latin author of considerable scope, who used the medium of Middle English, so to say, only incidentally. In a sense, the small number of works on which Chambers argued for Rolle's supreme place in the history of English prose made the claim look exaggeratedly inflated. From an altogether different perspective, a consideration of Rolle's entire corpus made the label 'mystical writer' much too tight a fit, for his contributions in Latin cover broad religious topics, in the form of pastoral manuals, theological tracts, scriptural commentaries and autobiographical mystical pieces. No longer able to fit into the garb that historical linguists, literary and theological scholars have meticulously woven for him, and never regaining the popularity that was his in the fifteenth century, the most popular of the mystical writers has now lost ground as a canonical author to the

¹ See Carl Horstmann, ed., *Yorkshire Writers: Richard Rolle of Hampole, an English Father of the Church, and his Followers*, 2 vols (London, 1895-6).

² See Hope Emily Allen, *Writings Ascribed to Richard Rolle, Hermit of Hampole, and Materials for his Biography* (New York, 1927).

³ For a study of the Middle English mystics as a group, see David Knowles, *The English Mystical Tradition*, 2nd edn (London, 1964); see esp. pp. 48-66 on Rolle.

⁴ See R. W. Chambers, *Introduction to Nicholas Harpsfield: The Life and Death of Sir Thomas More*, ed. E. V. Hitchcock and R. W. Chambers, EETS OS 186 (Oxford, 1932).

frequently anthologised *Revelation of Love* of Julian of Norwich and *The Book of Margery Kempe*.⁵ Although the literary canonisation of those female literary figures is amply justified, I would like to contend in this essay that a proper appreciation of the impact of Rolle's writings on late medieval religion in England (and on the Continent) illuminates our understanding of the religious culture in a unique way. For Rolle's eclectic corpus imposes a consideration that moves beyond the nicely labelled category 'mystic'. So, more directly, my question is: what do we gain in calling Richard Rolle a mystic? A non-partisan analysis of Rolle's oeuvre serves to show the multiplicity of approaches and genres that were available to medieval religious authors, and, more importantly, that the ease with which he moved from one genre to another, translating, transposing and adapting his material and his sources according to the genre and the particular audience that each entailed, makes him the like of a Chaucer in the field of religious literature.⁶ No other Middle English religious author tackles such a variety of genres, albeit in a rather short literary career. No other Middle English author reached the level of popularity of Rolle, with more than five hundred manuscripts or early printed editions containing whole texts or extracts.⁷ In our own time, when immediate recognition of an artist seems to be of primordial importance, we can acknowledge that Rolle, whatever the impulses or the more rational strategies that supported his textual production, was doing something right.

This essay is an attempt to understand Rolle's success story by situating his *opera* in the broad category of Latin and vernacular theologies. I shall look at his contributions as commentator, liturgist and contemplative writer, in order to highlight the wide variety of literary and theological strategies adopted by Rolle to communicate his message about the spiritual life. This essay therefore opens new ways of studying and teaching Rolle.

Commentator

Latin is the dominant language used by Rolle throughout his literary career. Out of the twenty-one pieces attributed to him, seventeen are written in Latin, with only *The English Psalter*, *Ego dormio* (I Sleep), *The Commandment*, *The Form of Living*, and some lyrical pieces, to attest to his input in the vernacular. Our desire to make Rolle a major vernacular religious author, one who, in addition, fathered the English medieval mystical tradition, has had the infelicitous effect

⁵ For a recent instance of such anthologising, see *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. H. M. Abrams and Stephen Greenblatt, 7th edn (New York & London, 2000).

⁶ This essay takes into consideration points recently developed by Watson, especially the following works: Nicholas Watson, *Richard Rolle and the Invention of Authority*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature 13 (Cambridge, 1991); 'Censorship and Cultural Change in Late-Medieval England: Vernacular Theology, the Oxford Translation Debate, and Arundel's Constitutions of 1409', *Speculum* 70 (1995), pp. 822–64; 'The Middle English Mystics', *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 539–65.

⁷ See Watson, *Richard Rolle*, p. 31.

of putting aside several of his Latin contributions.⁸ Rolle, writer of epistles addressed to women religious, has become a major figure for our understanding of the development of female mysticism and the kind of male patronage and guidance that they underwent. According to some critics, Rolle, known for his misogyny in some of his earlier Latin writings, came to recognise the value of the feminine and then began a career as spiritual adviser for women later in his life.⁹ Although one can contend with some aspects of this depiction, there is no denying that Rolle's Middle English writings are an important testimony to the rise of female religious practice and reading in late-medieval England.¹⁰ However, articles and doctoral dissertations on Rolle still focus essentially on the Middle English material, a reflection of current academic trends, and attest to difficulties in gaining ready access to readable editions of Rolle's Latin pieces, without, of course, considering the impenetrability of several of them. Despite that, Rolle is first and foremost a Latin author.

His Latin writings can be organised generically, even though one needs to be wary of Rolle's own idiosyncratic use of generic conventions. For instance, his use of the commentary genre serves multiple functions. His degree of deference to the traditional form of the commentary can be gauged by considering the extent to which the primary text remains the central object of his attention. In the case of his early scriptural commentaries ((?) *Super Symbolum Athanasi*, *Super Symbolum Apostolorum*, *Super Orationem Dominicam*, *Super Apocalypsim*, *Super Threnos*, *Super Mulierem Fortem*, *Super Magnificat* (On the Athanasian Creed, On the Apostles' Creed, On the Lord's Prayer, On the Apocalypse, On Lamentations, On 'The Strong Woman', On the Magnificat)), all very much modelled on the *Glossa Ordinaria*, Rolle fully endorses the role of the commentator, and passages from the Scriptures remain central.¹¹ If viewed as the production of a formative moment in Rolle's career where '... Rolle, as a young contemplative writer might naturally learn his trade by gaining experience in the unlocking of scriptural doors, beginning, cautiously, with the standard gloss as his guide',¹² these early works fail perhaps to highlight Rolle's masterful versatility in shaping traditional genres to suit a multiplicity of purposes. For Rolle, although he had not completed his university studies at Oxford, may nevertheless have wished to establish his academic

⁸ *Incendium Amoris*, a mystical and autobiographical treatise, proves to be the exception, with a critical edition and a Penguin modern English translation. See Richard Rolle, *Incendium Amoris*, ed. Margaret Deanesly (Manchester, 1915); see also Richard Rolle, *The Fire of Love*, trans. Clifton Wolters, 3rd edn (London, 1988).

⁹ See Ann W. Astell, *The Song of Songs in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca & London, 1990), esp. pp. 104–18; see also by Astell, 'Feminine Figurae in the Writings of Richard Rolle: A Register of Growth', *Mystics Quarterly* 15 (1989), pp. 117–24; for a reassessment of this view, see Denis Renevey, *Language, Self and Love: Hermeneutics in the Writings of Richard Rolle and the Commentaries of the Song of Songs* (Cardiff, 2001), see esp. pp. 68–73.

¹⁰ For a study of late-medieval reading and book ownership, see Mary C. Lerner, *Women, Reading, and Piety in Late Medieval England*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature 46 (Cambridge, 2002).

¹¹ For a translation of some of those commentaries, see Richard Rolle, *Biblical Commentaries: Short Exposition of Psalm 20, Treatise on the Twentieth Psalm, Comment on the First Verses of the Canticle of Canticles, Commentary on the Apocalypse*, ed. Robert Boenig, Salzburg Studies in English Literature, Elizabethan and Renaissance Studies 92/13 (Salzburg, 1984).

¹² See Watson, *Richard Rolle*, p. 98.

credentials by working within the genre of the scholastic commentary, and with no precise intention at that point of expounding a contemplative doctrine. There is assuredly an evolution in the writing career of Rolle, leading to the 'more contemplative' writings of his late period. However, rather than putting emphasis on this chronological thrust, it is perhaps time now to go back to his entire corpus and to consider each of Rolle's contributions as a (Latin or vernacular) theology in its own right, without imposing aesthetic and/or spiritual value judgement upon his works by invoking explicit comparison with his later, more contemplative pieces.¹³ A close analysis of those early commentaries, in the light of the scholastic commentary tradition, may yield useful information about Rolle's familiarity with the genre, his readiness to follow authorities, his development of a personal voice and his need to make that voice heard or not within that traditional literary setting. A similar approach has been used to understand better Rolle's rapport with the Song of Songs and its commentary tradition.¹⁴ At this point in Rolle's career, however, the commentary genre becomes a fertile ground for the writing of an altogether different theology. Again, one needs to turn one's gaze beyond Rolle's own corpus in order to understand how the sub-genre of the mystical commentary serves for the embedding of important autobiographical and spiritual information, and also how Rolle moves away from the style of the pointed perorations to the deity favoured by twelfth-century commentaries that had a clear bearing on his own works.¹⁵ While the tradition leaves important marks on Rolle's own output, *Super Canticum* and *Melos Amoris* (On the Song of Songs and The Song of Love) figure a self both intent upon union with God, and trying to express its situatedness in relation to the practices of the church and the more general cultural context of the period.¹⁶ A historicising of his writings in the light of the broader theological and cultural horizons of the fourteenth century discloses the fact that his writings, far from being preciousely kept in the hands of select and prospective mystics, enjoyed – considering medieval means of textual transmission – a quick circulation among the secular clergy, the laity and more specialised religious individuals.

¹³ I am suggesting here an approach that runs countercurrent to what Watson does in his monograph on Rolle, where the new chronology that he is able to establish serves for the development of his thesis on the invention of authority. I am not denying the usefulness of such an approach, but I think that further research on Rolle needs now to map broader horizons. My own *Language, Self and Love* takes also into account a chronological and progressive movement upward to the more contemplative pieces, even though it effects a change from previous scholarship by setting Rolle within the exegetical tradition.

¹⁴ For more information on Rolle as commentator of the Song of Songs, see my *Language, Self and Love*.

¹⁵ See E. Ann Matter, *The Voice of My Beloved: The Song of Songs in Western Medieval Christianity* (Philadelphia, 1990); see also Denys Turner, *Eros and Allegory: Medieval Exegesis of the Song of Songs*, Cistercian Studies Series 156 (Kalamazoo, 1995).

¹⁶ For an edition of *Super Canticum*, see Elizabeth M. Murray, ed., 'Richard Rolle's Comment on the Canticles: Edited from MS. Trinity College, Dublin, 153', unpublished Ph.D. thesis (Fordham University, 1958); see also Richard Rolle, *Le Chant d'Amour (Melos Amoris)*, 2 vols. ed. François Vandenbroucke, Sources Chrétiennes 168–9 (Paris, 1971).

Liturgist

My brief case study here of Rolle's *Expositio Super Novem Lectiones Mortuorum*, hereafter *Expositio* (Commentary on the Nine Lessons from the Office of the Dead) brings to light the difficulties inherent in a categorisation based on generic variety.¹⁷ The *Expositio* is written in the form of a commentary while, at the same time, it shows a broad concern for liturgical practice, in this case the Office of the Dead, and the broader cultural implications of that Office. Such a study shows how Rolle fed on new devotional trends, especially the rise in lay ownership of Books of Hours, which included the Office of the Dead as one of their central elements; it also witnesses to the privileged status of his solitary life, which gave him access to the distinctive social category of one dead to the world but still living in it: the position of the anchorites of late-medieval England.¹⁸

The *Expositio* is found extant in forty-four manuscripts, which make this piece one of the most copied of Rolle's works, and the most popular of his exegetical pieces. There are also two manuscripts of large-scale *excerpta*, and three compilations of Rolle's work that make extensive use of the *Expositio*. One of the central concerns of the *Expositio* is the theme of the contempt of the world (*De Contemptu Mundi*), which had been developed in the *De Misericordia Humanae Conditionis* (On the Wretchedness of the Human Condition) of Innocent III, the Pseudo-Bernardine *Meditationes Piissimae* (Most Pious Meditations) and the *Speculum Peccatoris* (The Mirror of the Sinner), all of which serve as sources for the *Expositio*.¹⁹ It is worthwhile noting here that Rolle and Chaucer share a common source in Innocent's work, since Chaucer also translated the *De Misericordia*, and made significant use of it for the writing of the *Pardoner's Tale* and the *Prologue to the Man of Law's Tale*.²⁰ Studies in the early ownership of the *Expositio* point to readers among the educated secular clergy, and, in particular, a York Cathedral group devoted to Rolle's writings in general, and at the University of Oxford and major religious houses: the Brigittine foundation of Syon Abbey, the Charterhouses of London and Sheen.²¹ The *Expositio* throws some light on the manufacture of Rolle's popularity as a religious writer. Indeed, death, the subject matter of this treatise, evidently had an immediate appeal to Christians in general. Its ownership by the secular clergy makes plausible its use as a pastoral manual. However, in addition to this ongoing interest, it is not impossible that Rolle acted as a bridge in transmitting aspects of anchoritic culture to the more general public by investing the liturgy of the Office of the Dead with a semantic load inherited from the use of that Office as part of the official ceremony of enclosure that anchorites had to

¹⁷ For an edition of this work, see Malcolm R. Moyes, *Richard Rolle's Expositio Super Novem Lectiones Mortuorum*, 2 vols. Analecta Cartusiana 92/12 (Salzburg, 1988).

¹⁸ This argument is developed in more detail in 'Looking for a Context: Rolle, Anchoritic Culture, and the Office of the Dead' in *Medieval Texts in Context*, ed. Graham Caie and Denis Renevey (Routledge, forthcoming).

¹⁹ See Moyes, *Expositio*, vol. 1, pp. 68–104.

²⁰ See Derek Pearsall, *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer: A Critical Biography* (Oxford, 1992), pp. 216–17.

²¹ See Moyes, *Expositio*, vol. 1, pp. 75–81.

undergo, in which the Office of the Dead was a central text. One needs to remember the importance Rolle himself places on the solitary life, and the fact that, in the last years of his life, he provided support to female anchorites. In view of the recent discoveries made of the importance of *Ancrene Wisse* with regard to the lay use of Book of Hours,²² it is not incongruous to explore the ways in which Rolle might have been a significant transmitter of anchoritic practices to the secular clerical society of North Yorkshire. The liturgical bent of the *Expositio* leaves room also for passages where Rolle can expound his most important points of doctrine, and so turn scriptural exegesis into an occasion for him to model himself on, and claim the status of, the Old Testament prophet Job. My contention, thus, is that Rolle wrote this commentary in order to elevate his own status as a solitary, but also in order to offer to his growing public a way into anchoritic practice, into the modes that made Job, labelled by Rolle as the first solitary, a perfect interlocutor with God. Although much of what I write is hypothetical, one can understand that in an age when private forms of devotion competed, in terms of their salvific potential, with communal liturgical practice, the desire to make anchoritic practices accessible to the laity must have been irresistible to Rolle.²³ Obviously, Rolle is not offering an account of the anchoritic mode of life, but, by choosing to write on the nine lessons from the Office of the Dead, he must have been aware that he was touching the core of its practice. Here, as already noted, is a text chosen to accompany the official ceremony of enclosure for the consecrated anchoress, a text that will support her in her daily and repetitive practice, all alone with God, and symbolically dead to the world.²⁴ For those who sought an accommodation between their worldly affairs and the betterment of their soul through private forms of devotion, anchoritic practice must have been regarded as the supreme and ideal form of Christian life.²⁵ For that matter, if Job suited Rolle as an exemplary solitary, he could also easily appeal to a more secular readership. After all, Job himself lived in the world, had children and lived in prosperity, until God granted Satan the right to test him. Ill, misunderstood by friends and family – they blame him for all his misfortunes – and stripped of all his material goods, Job remains steadfast in the face of adversity. After a long period of hard testing, Job receives everything back from God, and returns to live in the world.

²² See Bella Millett, 'Ancrene Wisse and the Book of Hours', in *Writing Religious Women: Female Spiritual and Textual Practices in Late Medieval England*, ed. Denis Renevey and Christiana Whitehead (Cardiff & Toronto, 2000), pp. 21–40.

²³ For an exploration of what Erler calls the 'permeable partitions' between the two poles represented by the wife and the nun, and the general notion of enclosure, see Lerner's *Women, Reading, and Piety*, pp. 7–26.

²⁴ For information on ceremonies of enclosure, see Otmarr Doerr, *Das Institut des Inklusen in Süddeutschland*, Beiträge zur Geschichte des Alten Mönchtums und des Benediktineordens, vol. 18 (Münster in Westf., 1934); see also R. M. Clay, *The Hermits and Anchorites of England* (London, 1914), esp. Appendix A (p. 192) which offers a translation of an Office for the enclosing of an anchoress, according to the Use of Sarum; see also Ann K. Warren, 'The Nun as Anchoress: England 1100–1500', in *Distant Echoes: Medieval Religious Women*, vol. 1, ed. John A. Nichols and Lilian T. Shank, Cistercian Studies Series 71 (Kalamazoo, 1984), pp. 197–212.

²⁵ For a piece that argues for the influence of anchoritic practices on Margery Kempe's own religiosity, see Denis Renevey, 'Margery's Performing Body: The Translation of Late Medieval Discursive Religious Practices', *Writing Religious Women*, pp. 197–216.

In the ceremony of enclosure for the attention of postulant anchorites, it is the penitential character of Job and his long-standing fight against the devil, the world and the flesh that are stressed.²⁶ Even if strictly factual details about Job are absent from the ceremony, penitential elements and notions of deprivation, together with qualities such as patience, humility, perseverance and a determination to uphold spiritual truth, make Job a model for the good solitary. Job is dead to the world in his expectation of eternal judgement.

One can point to the importance of the Book of Job for *Ancrene Wisse*, in which it is cited fifteen times. Several of the qualities attributed to Job (guardian against the eyes (Job 31: 1), spiritual seeker (Job 32: 1), practitioner of ascetic disciplines and secret performer of good deeds) are those expected of the female anchorites. The correspondences are too many to believe that Rolle was not aware of the impact his text would have when read or heard by an audience eager to imitate at home the formidable practices of the solitary life. Rolle fashions a treatise therefore that will allow for the adoption and adaptation of anchoritic practices by amateurs. In addition, the *Expositio* testifies to Rolle's understanding of the spiritual content of anchoritic practices, which may have helped him to receive some kind of *approbatio* (approval) as a competent spiritual guide, a role to which he testifies in *The Form of Living*, written, shortly after the *Expositio*, for the professed anchoress Margaret Kirkby.²⁷

One of Rolle's idiosyncrasies, and a feature of his Chaucerian talent as a religious writer, is the remarkable way in which almost each of his pieces defies the genre in which it has been couched. Indeed, the *Expositio*, best labelled as liturgical exegesis, is nevertheless replete with passages depicting the mystical life, sometimes with obvious autobiographical touches. Rolle's manipulation of the first person pronoun blurs our perceptions of the different personae inscribed in the narrative voice. Job, Rolle or the ideal solitary seem to think with one mind. Recognition of one's sins, penitence and awareness of earthly life's transitoriness loom large in this piece. Rolle makes those points his by considering the sight of his own corpse at the time of his death:

Sed bonum est, fratres, humiles esse, miseriam nostram recogitare, dicentes cum beato Iob: *In puluerem reduces me. Necesse est michi mori & in puluerem reduci, quia omnes morimur & quasi aqua delabimur in terram.*²⁸

(But it is good, brothers, to remain humble, to ponder over our misery, saying with the blessed Job: *You will bring me back to ashes. It is necessary for me to die and to be brought back to ashes, because we all die and like water we descend into the earth.*)

²⁶ For an account of a late-medieval ceremony of enclosure performed by a German Augustinian provost, see Johannes Busch, *Chronicon Windeshemense und Liber de Reformatione Monasteriorum*, ed. Karl Grube (Halle, 1886), pp. 657–8.

²⁷ For an edition of the Middle English writings, see S. J. Ogilvie-Thomson, ed., *Richard Rolle: Prose and Verse, edited from MS Longleat 29 and related manuscripts*, EETS 293 (Oxford, 1988).

²⁸ Moyes, *Expositio*, vol. 2, pp. 182–3.

Devotional, more particularly anchoritic, practices seem to have had a deep influence on the ways in which Rolle set out his own devotional project. It may be that we need to investigate more deeply the impact of the liturgy and general devotional culture to assess his own contributions.²⁹ An assessment of Rolle's oeuvre within the parameters described above makes possible an evaluation of some of what we might call his theologies: which, because they lack any consistent expression of single-minded mystical intention, have received so far very little critical attention.

Contemplative Writer

I have so far stressed non-mystical characteristics in Richard Rolle's work, and I believe that only a careful assessment of his textual practices within the parameters of each genre discloses the multivocality with which the call to the divine is made by Rolle. One needs to track down the intensity of that call by assessing it as part of the modulations that generic variation makes possible for Rolle. That being said, and since this essay aims only to point to new areas of investigation, I would like to turn briefly to the pieces called *Meditation A* and *Meditation B* by looking at how a devotional and para-liturgical stance translates into contemplation.

Meditation A treats the Passion incidents as part of a para-liturgical piece. Each moment provides for the equivalent of a lesson, each distinguished from the others by the framing Latin prayers borrowed from liturgical offices.³⁰ Its arrangement, together with the provision of advice by the author at the end of the meditation, suggests use of this piece, as part of a daily spiritual programme, by a contemplative beginner, possibly a solitary or a recluse. The interplay between the Latin and the vernacular points to Rolle's masterful use of existing frames, which serves to give credibility to his own creative input. The liturgical origin of the Latin fragments, certainly identifiable by contemporary readers, presumes an orthodox and communal dimension for the piece, and allows Rolle to offer a variation on the theme in the vernacular. However, such variation is limited in scope in *Meditation A*, and affective identification with the Passion narrative being presented is made possible thanks to the breathing rhythm imposed on the reader by the concatenation of short, powerful sentences:

Sythen how mekeli he toke þis comfort of his disciple, and sithen how he come to his disciples and bad hem slepe and rest, and sithen how he come to hem and bad hem rise and wake, and sithen how he met Iudas þat traitour, and sayde, 'Frende, werto commes thou?' and mekely kissed him.³¹

²⁹ For an assessment of *Judica Me*, a piece not discussed here, but which nevertheless participates in Rolle's pastoral and devotional concerns, see Watson, *Richard Rolle*, pp. 75–95; see also his 'Richard Rolle as Elitist and Popularist: The Case of *Judica Me*', in *De Cella in Seculum: Religious and Secular Life and Devotion in Late-Medieval England*, ed. Michael Sargent (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 123–44.

³⁰ See Ogilvie-Thomson, *Richard Rolle*, p. 212.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 65, ll. 56–60.

Each clause introduced by 'sithen' refers to an historical event, to be used as a meditative cluster on which the imagination may pause. The regular flow of events allows the contemplative to screen the whole Passion episode in one reading. Request for the recitation of Psalm 51 (Vulgate, 50), one of the Seven Penitential Psalms, nevertheless demonstrates that this text does not encourage too imaginative an engagement with the Passion incidents. The horizon of expectation is limited to a consideration of as accurate as possible an historical presentation of those events.

The two Passion meditations attributed to Rolle are good cases in point if we wish to appreciate the transition from a penitential to a more contemplative mode. *Meditation B* differs significantly from the preceding text by its marked attention to the general state of the narrator, whose desires and mental preparation are clearly explicated. The reader, who is invited to endorse the point of view of the narrator, is frequently and forcefully led to consider his position with the deity, and to measure the distance which separates him from God. In short, the Passion appears as a most generous deed, performed willingly by God, and one for which endless words of thanks ought to be pronounced:

Swet Ihesu, I thank þe, lord, with al my hert for þou profered þe to þat place where þou wist þy deth ordeyned; and I þank þe, lord, for þer þou shewedest wel þat þou was willy to dey for vs, and so I beleue, lord, þat þou chese þe day and þe tyme when þou woldest dey, and euery poynt of þy passioun was done at þy ordynaunce, and I beleue, lord, þat þou laide þy soule when þou wold, and, when þou woldest, tak hit ayeine.³²

Although the Passion material is still central to this text, and Latin prayers, borrowed, in this instance, from the *York Hours of the Cross*, provide a liturgical context as well, the repeated use of formulae ('Swete Ihesu') and the use of the present tense effect an affective bond that allows for a more subtle engagement with the historical material of the Passion: the gap between the narrative voice and the Passion is deleted by the internalisation and re-enactment of the Passion within the self.³³ Focus on how the inner state of the 'I' voice is shaped by the incidents of the Passion is the real concern of this piece. It makes *Meditation B* a significant witness to the shift from the devotional to the more contemplative stance.

Chapter 8 of *Emendatio Vitae* (The Emending of Life) insists similarly on the importance of meditation on the Passion: 'Est autem meditacio bona de passione Christi et morte, et sepe recordari quantas penas et miseras sponte suscepit pro nostra salute' (It is gude meditacion of cristis passion & his deed,

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 69–70, ll. 32–7.

³³ For a discussion of the Passion in Richard Rolle, see Marion Glasscoe, 'Time of Passion: Latent Relationships between the Liturgy and Meditation in two Middle English Mystics', in *Langland, the Mystics and the Medieval English Religious Tradition*, ed. Stanley S. Hussey and Helen Phillips (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 141–60; on Rolle and affectivity, see Vincent Gillespie, 'Mystic's Foot: Rolle and Affectivity', in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England II*, ed. Marion Glasscoe (Exeter, 1982), pp. 199–230.

& oft to recorde qwhatt payns & wrechidnes frely he toke for our hele).³⁴ This late piece, surviving in more than 110 manuscripts, and thus Rolle's most often-copied text, one certainly appealing to a large variety of readers, is revealing of Rolle's achievement as a Latin and vernacular theologian.³⁵ The twelve-chapter division neatly describes a spiritual journey, one perhaps most appropriate to a solitary. However, just as, I argued, the *Expositio* constructs a general Christian model based on aspects of anchoritic culture, *Emendatio Vitae*, I contend, participates in the same desire for universalisation of the solitary life, one that was admired and imitated by lay readers, clergymen and coenobites. Rolle's own example boosted interest in the solitary life only because it was part of a much larger phenomenon, visible and often tangible to the great majority in the late-medieval period.³⁶ Thus, if the progress from conversion to the summits of contemplation described in the *Emendatio* may have applied best to a life of solitude, it may also have helped readers of or listeners to the treatise to situate themselves on their own spiritual journeys. The treatise, written in the epistolary mode, a genre much favoured by Rolle in his later career, borrows material from his previous Latin works. Insistence is put upon devotional and para-liturgical practices, considered to be appropriate for contemplatives. The twelve-chapter frame offers a progressive account of the religious life, with a penultimate chapter on the love of God, and a final, more technical one on contemplation, described as a process marked by *lectio*, *oracio* and *meditacio*. When pondering over the nature of the contemplative experience, Rolle, with genuine hesitation, it seems to me, offers a tentative account based both on Latin authorities and on his own experience:

Si queratur quid sit contemplacio, difficile est diffinire. Dicunt quidam quod contemplatiua uita nichil aliud est quam rerum latencium futurarumque noticia, siue vacacio ab omnibus occupationibus mundi, siue diuinarum studium litterarum. Alii dicunt quod contemplacio est libera perspicacia in sapientie spectacula cum admiratione suspensa. Alii dicunt quod contemplacio est liber et perspicax animi intuitus ad vires perspicandas circumquaque diffusus. Alii dicunt, et bene, quod contemplacio est iubilus supernorum. Alii dicunt, et optime, quod contemplacio est per subleuate mentis iubilum mors carnalium affectionum. Michi uidetur quod contemplacio sit iubilus diuini amoris, susceptus in mente suauitate laudis angelice. Hec est iubilacio, que finis est oracionis perfecte et deuocionis summe in via. Hec est exultacio mentis habita pro eterno dilecto in spirituali canora uoce prorumpens.

(If it be asked qwhat is contemplacion: it is hard to defyne. Sum says, contemplatyfe lyf is not ellis bot knowlegis of pingis to cum & hyde, or to be voyde fro all wardly occupacion, or study of godis lettyrs. Odyr

³⁴ See Richard Rolle, *Emendatio Vitae. Orationes ad Honorem Nominis Ihesu*, ed. Nicholas Watson, Toronto Medieval Latin Texts 21 (Toronto, 1995), p. 51. For the Middle English translation, see *The Fire of Love and The Mending of Life or The Rule of Living*, translated from the Latin of Richard Rolle Richard Misyn, ed. Ralph Harvey, EETS OS 106 (Oxford, 1896), p. 119.

³⁵ See Watson, *Richard Rolle*, p. 210.

³⁶ For an account of the social and economic dimensions that regulated anchoritic practices, see Ann K. Warren, *Anchorites and their Patrons in Medieval England* (Berkeley, 1985).

says þat contemplacion is free sight in þe spectakyls of wysdom, with a full he meruayll. Odyr says þat contemplacion is a boke [*read: free*], & wys behaldyng of þe saule, spred all abowt to behald his myghtis. Odyr says, & well, þat contemplacion is Ioy of heuenly pingis. Odyr says, & best, þat contemplacion is deed of fleschly desyres be Ioye of þe mynde raisyd. To me it semys þat contemplacion is Ioyfull songe of godis lufe takyn in mynde, with swetnes of aungell lovyng. Þis is Iubilacion, þat is end of parfit prayer & of he deuocion in þis lyfe. Þis is the myrth in mynde had gostely for the lufar everlastyng, with grete voys oowt brekand.)³⁷

Rolle resorts to an affective mode when offering his own view on the contemplative life, going back to a style reminiscent of his previous Latin treatises on contemplation. However, the contemplative part of *Emendatio Vitae*, as well as that of his Middle English epistles, also written in his late career, belongs to a greater scheme, which comprises all the steps one has to make in the spiritual life from the very inception of a life dedicated to spiritual matters.

Conclusion

Rolle is much more than a mystic, a modern label that fails to grasp the extent of his output in the larger field of devotional and theological literatures. His insistence on the devotion to the Name of Jesus, the manifestation of the presence of the divine in the form of celestial symphonies or other sounds, his interest in the gradation of the degrees of love, and the terminology of *dulcor*, *calor* and *canor* (sweetness, heat and song), most famously popularised in his *Incendium Amoris* (Fire of Love), should alert us to the ways in which devotional and theological antecedents shaped his own understanding of the spiritual life and its mystical manifestations, and helped him devise a system for the use of a larger audience, in the Latin or the vernacular.³⁸ It is not my aim to deny here the usefulness of studying Rolle's idiosyncrasies, but there is perhaps more to be gained in trying to understand how those idiosyncrasies were shaped, and how tradition contributed to making Rolle one of the most successful writers of the late-medieval period: one who, thanks to the careful construction of subtle and diverse theologies, made possible for some the hearing of the divine voice calling them back to their eternal abode. That Rolle's success was ongoing is attested further by the ways several of his pieces were anthologised and compiled in the fifteenth century to suit new religious tastes.³⁹ This is perhaps

³⁷ See Richard Rolle, *Emendatio Vitae*, p. 63; *The Mending of Life*, p. 127, ll. 15–28.

³⁸ On Rolle and the Holy Name, see my 'Name Above Names: The Devotion to the Name of Jesus from Richard Rolle to Walter Hilton's *Scale of Perfection I*', *The Medieval Mystical Tradition: England, Ireland and Wales*, ed. Marion Glasscoe Exeter Symposium VI (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 103–21; see also my 'The Name Poured Out: Margins, Illuminations and Miniatures as Evidence for the Practice of Devotions to the Name of Jesus in Late Medieval England', in *The Mystical Tradition and the Carthusians*, vol. 9, *Analecta Cartusiana* 130, ed. James Hogg (Salzburg, 1996), pp. 127–47.

³⁹ See, for instance, Eddie Jones, 'A Chapter from Richard Rolle in Two Fifteenth-Century Compilations', *Leeds Studies in English* 27 (1996), pp. 139–62.

one of the most promising areas – indeed, a key area – for further studies on Rolle. It is evidence that, as Rolle appropriated the voices of the *auctores* and the genres in which they were couched, the intensity of his own was deemed authoritative enough to find itself in its turn absorbed into anthologies and compilations which made possible for readers, religious or lay, to hear and dialogue with the divine voice.

6

Language and its Limits:
The Cloud of Unknowing and Pearl

A. C. SPEARING

WHEN I was a student reading English at Cambridge, I had the good fortune to be taught by a great medieval scholar and inspiring teacher, Elizabeth Salter, one of whose special enthusiasms was the Middle English mystics. She had been a student of Phyllis Hodgson, the editor of the standard scholarly edition of the *Cloud*-author's work, and that was doubtless how I came to read *The Cloud of Unknowing* for the first time, when most of my contemporaries were more likely to be reading *Sons and Lovers* or *A Passage to India*. But Elizabeth Salter saw the writings of the medieval mystics as works of literature, to be read alongside the poetry of their age, the poetry of Chaucer and Langland and the *Pearl*-poet. In 1966, for example, she wrote in an essay on Chaucer's greatest single poem, the story of the passionate and tragic love of Troilus and Criseyde,

It is both a sad and a triumphant fact that the only medieval writings on love which rival the grace and intensity of Chaucer's language in Book III of *Troilus* are religious treatises, and Chaucer had to win the full release of his imaginative powers for this difficult subject by religious means.¹

With Elizabeth Salter's encouragement, I read the *Cloud* as a literary text alongside other literary texts; that is, as a text whose meaning is not on the other side of its language, but is created *in* its language. More than ever, I continue to find that a profitable way of reading it. As a student I found the *Cloud* enormously difficult and enormously impressive, but I did not go back to it in a serious way until quite recently, when I was commissioned to produce a new translation of the *Cloud* and some of the associated texts for the Penguin Classics series. I had never before translated anything of comparable length, and I knew no better than to agree. If I had realized what a gruelling task the translation would be, I am not sure that I would ever have started it. For better or worse, it was completed and published,² and labouring at it forced me to think further about

¹ 'Troilus and Criseyde: a Reconsideration', in *Patterns of Love and Courtesy: Essays in Memory of C. S. Lewis*, ed. John Lawlor (London, 1966), pp. 86–106, at p. 103.

² *The Cloud of Unknowing and Other Works*, translated with an introduction and notes by A. C.