RICHARD ROLLE was born about the year 1300 at Thornton-le-dale in Yorkshire. He studied at Oxford until he was nineteen and left without a degree. Back in Yorkshire he ran away from home after making a rough and ready hermit’s habit out of his father’s rain-hood and two of his sister’s frocks. The next day he found a patron in the Constable of Pickering Castle, John de Dalton, who gave him food and anchorage. But his mystical extremes aroused the hostility of the local clergy and monks, whom he roundly rebukes in his *Judica me, Deus* and *Melos Amoris*. He seems never to have been ordained or licensed as a hermit, but his influence was wide and his writing prolific. A certain testy independence steered him through many a change of friend and protector. But as he matured so he mellowed, and before his death on Michaelmas Day 1349 he had become the spiritual director of the Cistercian nuns at Hampole, near Doncaster. He was the author of a rich and varied body of writing in the vernacular and his *Fire of Love*, composed in 1343, is the best known of his works. Soon a cult of ‘St Richard Hermit’ had grown up, and some thirty years after his death a succession of miracles were reported at his tomb. Although never officially recognized as a saint he continued to be so revered until the Reformation.

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The
FIRE
of
LOVE

RICHARD ROLLE

Translated into modern English
with an introduction by
CLIFTON WOLTERS

Penguin Books
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INTRODUCTION

Few books of medieval devotion can have got off to a more intriguing start than *The Fire of Love*. One can still sense the surprise passing into delight that seized Richard Rolle as he ran his hand over his chest to see if he were actually on fire. Yet this was no calculated trick designed to trap a reluctant reader to go on with what would do him good even if it bored him in the process, but an expression of what was to Richard a fact. The whole book is a defence of the phenomenon, supplying the reasons for an experience, but not perhaps a real explanation of his temperature.

For Rolle had no need of literary devices to draw attention to his books. He was a prolific writer in both Latin and English, and had a wide circle of readers. He was a pioneer of writing in the vernacular, and it is with some degree of accuracy that he has been called ‘the true father of English literature’. Such was his reputation that apart from those works known to be genuine (they cover commentaries, treatises, scriptural translations, and smaller pieces) many other manuscripts mostly anonymous were ascribed to him by medieval enthusiasts.

*The Fire of Love* is an untidy sort of book, repetitive, enthusiastic, dogmatic, and heart-warming. Whatever Rolle wrote he wrote with verve and energy. He had a feel for words, and he loved using them. His story is that he has had, and is still having, profound mystical experiences, and as his prologue says he ‘would stir up by these means every man to love God’; so he writes them down, not once or twice but again and again. This makes *The Fire* difficult to analyse, for the book goes on in great circular sweeps, saying much the same thing each time, and yet adding a

1. C. Horstmann, *Yorkshire Writers: Richard Rolle and his followers*, volume 2, p. xxv.
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little here, a little there, catching it all up into the next swinging movement.

Yet for all his repetitiousness Rolle is rarely tedious. There are at least four reasons for this:
(i) His skill in the choice of language and the variety with which he sets it out. (ii) His knack of bringing in something new the next time round. (iii) The vastness of the theme he is patently trying to get over. (iv) The artlessness with which he writes. For all his mastery of words one gets the impression that he is writing as his heart dictates and not his head. He is one of the great medieval poets, and not all poets can write prose plain and unadorned. And when he is writing of the mysteries of the spirit, deeply felt and known, it is impossible for him to be flat, whether he is using Latin as here, or, as so often, English. In some ways his style can be compared to that of a great symphony in which the melody is introduced, and reintroduced in a variety of ways as each movement develops and fresh themes are taken up.

The Fire of Love, as has just been implied, an English translation of Rolle's most famous work, Incendium Amoris. Its widespread popularity is shown in the abundance of surviving manuscripts, for there are over forty copies of the Incendium still in existence, none later than the early fifteenth century. It survives in two versions, one three-fifths the length of the other. The shorter is demonstrably an abridgement of the longer, and has cut out all the autobiographical and specifically theological sections. In some instances the short manuscripts have been combined with Rolle's commentary on the Canticles (or Song of Songs) in a confusing series of permutations. The short version is thought to have been prepared by a religious, and, as it stands, gives a concise summary of the hermit's teaching on the contemplative life. This present translation is based on the longer text.

2. The British Museum has five, Cambridge six, Oxford nine, and the rest of the country seven. There are a further fourteen copies in Continental countries.

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But if a broad analysis of The Fire is wanted, few would quarrel with Dr Margaret Deanesly when she thus describes it:

It is rather a series of discourses on subjects connected with the life of a solitary than a complete didactic scheme. In the prologue, Rolle states his own desire to prove to others the joy of the life he has chosen; the next eleven chapters are devoted to considerations preliminary to the undertaking of such a life; then come two chapters where he passes from advice to autobiography. The remaining chapters are mainly a series of discourses stringed together with no particular plan, on the various difficulties of the contemplative life.

The Writer

More is known about Richard Rolle than about any other English mystic of the fourteenth century. Even so it is little enough. But whereas in the case of Mother Julian and Walter Hilton we depend on scattered contemporary references, and the occasional autobiographical details they give, for Rolle there are not only these sources, but also the Legenda compiled by the nuns of Hampole against the day of his canonization, a labour of love that somehow got lost. More than most Rolle wrote himself into his works and they supply further information. Yet with it all it still does not amount to very much, even though for his period it is generous, and more than might be expected.

Many manuscripts say that he died on Michaelmas Day, 1349, and it is conjectured that he was a victim of the appalling plague then decimating Europe, the Black Death. But when he was born can only be guesswork. The year 1300 or thereabouts is the one most favoured. In his Melos

3. Incendium Amoris, p. 41.

1. After his death, and perhaps before, Rolle was regarded as a saint, and in preparation for his canonization an office was drawn up. The Legenda were the edifying lessons, nine in number, to be read at Mattins on his feast day.
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Amoris he describes himself as a young man. In this book there is, some scholars suggest, a reference to the infidelities of Queen Isabella with Roger Mortimer. This royal scandal was more than a talking point of 1325-6. It involved national disaster, the abdication of Edward II, and his murder. If there is a reference here to current affairs then the turn of the century or a few years earlier might be the natal period. There is no reliable alternative.

Whatever may be thought about the date of his birth there is a strong likelihood that we know where it took place. The ‘village of Thornton near Pickering in the diocese of York’, says the Legenda, and though Yorkshire has sixteen villages so named, that of Thornton-le-dale has always claimed the honour. From the same source it is learned that his father’s name was William. Presumably he was not a wealthy man, for Richard was sponsored at Oxford by Thomas Neville, Archdeacon of Durham. There he stayed till he was nineteen, ‘making great progress in study’. The course at Oxford in his day lasted seven years for a Master’s degree, and the inference is that he came down without one, having removed himself lest he should get his values mixed and his priorities wrong. Clearly at university Rolle, like many another undergraduate, faced, perhaps for the first time, the fundamental ‘why’ of existence, and the fact of sin, and took action in reply.

Back in Yorkshire, he literally ran away from home to become a hermit. The strange story of his fashioning a rough-and-ready hermit’s habit out of his father’s rain-hood and two of his sister’s frocks (more difficult today!) has often been told. It is worth bearing again, and here it is in the pious language of the hagiographer, who possibly tolerated this earnest, light-fingered charade because of its outcome:

After he had returned from Oxford to his father’s house, he said one day to his sister, who loved him with tender affection: ‘My beloved sister, thou hast two tunics which I greatly covet, one white and the other grey. Therefore I ask thee if thou wilt kindly give them to me, and bring them tomorrow to the wood near by, together with my father’s rain-hood.’ She agreed willingly, and the next day according to her promise, carried them to the said wood, being quite ignorant of what was in his brother’s mind. And when he had received them he straightway cut off the sleeves from the grey tunic and the buttons from the white, and as best he could he fitted the sleeves to the white tunic, so that they might in some manner be suited to his purpose. Then he took off his own clothes with which he was clad and put on his sister’s tunic next his skin, but the grey, with the sleeves cut out, he put over it, and put his arms through the holes which had been cut; and he covered his head with the rain-hood aforesaid, so that in some measure, as far as then was in his power, he might present a certain likeness to a hermit. But when his sister saw this she was astounded and cried: ‘My brother is mad! My brother is mad!’ Whereupon she drove her from him with threats, and fled herself at once without delay, lest he should be seized upon by his friends and acquaintances.

There was more melodrama to follow. He fled to a nearby church to pray. It could have been Dalton, a score of miles away over the moors; it might have been Pickering – both villages were associated with him – and near Thornton. It was the eve of the Assumption. Unwittingly (can one be quite sure of this?) he knelt in the place customarily occupied by the lady of the manor, and either because he was excited or, more likely, rapt in prayer, did not notice when she came in with her sons for Vespers. Her servants were for moving him, but she would not have his prayer disturbed, and he was left in possession. After Vespers the young men recognized him as a fellow Oxonian.

It is not known where he spent the night. Had it been in vigil the Legenda would have been delighted. But they are silent. Probably it was with the parish priest, for in the morning Rolle is found in church again, surpliced, and singing Mattins. And at the Mass, after the Gospel, with the celebrant’s blessing, he mounts the pulpit and preaches a sermon of such sincerity and beauty that ‘the multitude

2. Legenda. Lesson 1; translated by Miss F. M. M. Comper in her Life of Richard Rolle, p. 302.
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Margaret Kirkby, are followed by an excerpt from *The Fire* (chapter 15) describing the spiritual gifts of heat, sweetness, and melody.

The *Legenda* seem to play down the troubles Rolle describes in the autobiographical parts of his writings. Perhaps he felt them at the time more keenly than later reflection saw them to be: in any case he himself seems to have contributed to their provocation, for his earlier writings reveal him as a fiery young man, seeing things as black or white, and possessing a certain power of invective. At that time he found it difficult to offer the other cheek; he tended to hit back. In the *Judica Me* and the *Melos Amoris*, for example, both products of his youth, he expresses himself freely on the local clergy and monks and on his detractors generally — rarely to their advantage. This they did not find endearing, and understandably he met with considerable opposition and criticism. It is likely that his attacks were justified, but the tender years of the self-appointed scourge (who in any case stood outside the system) did not help his case.

It seems that his hermit life began irregularly, for there is no record of his having been licensed or blessed by a bishop either at the beginning or at any time after. We may assume that this omission was ultimately rectified, for the last years seem to have been passed in peace and approval.

His first patron, John de Dalton, was also not without his own worries. He was caught up in the political turmoils and intrigues of those unsettled days, and though he retained his head when Lancaster’s rebellion failed he lost his post as Constable of Pickering. His strong personality and Rolle’s could clash head on, and it might be reasonable from chapter 15 of *The Fire* to infer that they did.

But apart from these highlights Rolle’s life seems to have been peaceful and uneventful, though at times it was very rough. Such is the overall impression given by his writings. Grace and nature softened the prickles and modified the earlier traits, and the later mystic was a much more mellow and balanced person, as the reading of the works of his
maturity (for example *The Fire*) will demonstrate. But at every stage, even at his most callow, he was capable of great tenderness and devotion as well as of vigour and reforming zeal.

Towards the end of his life he moved his cell to Hampole, close to Doncaster. Here he directed with much love and patience an anchoress, Margaret Kirkby, who was enclosed at Ainderby, a near-by village, and the sisters of the small Cistercian nunnery at Hampole itself. No trace remains today either of the two cells or of the convent. After his death these same nuns compiled an office in the hope of his canonization, supporting their case with the account of many miracles which were attributed to his intercession or took place at his tomb. But the place of this tomb too has vanished from human memory. There is no record that their plea for the official recognition of his sanctity ever reached Rome. The times were too unsettled. But there is some evidence that until the Reformation a cult of 'St Richard Hermit' existed, and for two hundred years he was widely revered, and his writings were treasured by religious and layfolk alike.

**THE HERMIT**

Mother Julian was an anchoress, Richard Rolle a hermit. In popular estimation they were doing much the same thing. Yet the difference in fact between the two lives was considerable. All they had in common was that they were *solitaries*.

3. So the *Legenda*. The researches of Miss R. M. Clay and Miss H. E. Allen suggest that the Hampole nuns have telescoped events. It seems that Margaret Kirkby was a nun of Hampole originally, and was enclosed at East Layton in 1348, the year before Rolle died. She was transferred to Ainderby in 1356–7, and later moved back to Hampole round about the 1380s, the time when miracles at Rolle's tomb began to happen. If the evidence of various wills refers to her, she died between 1401 and 1405. The whole matter is discussed with great detail and diligence (and some conjecture) by Miss Allen in her monumental *Writings ascribed to Richard Rolle*, pp. 502–11.

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The solitary life or *Eremitism* (to give it its real name) is not a form of living reserved for the unsociable few; most people experience a genuine need to 'get away from it all' from time to time, and that for various reasons. It may be the self-centredness of a Rousseau who wanted solitude 'pour être pleinement moi et à moi', but it may be that of a David who wanted to 'be still and know' the mystery of God. It is not difficult to see how this natural desire can in some cases develop into an attitude that affects the whole life. There can be irreligious hermits as well as religious.

Most of the great religions have made room for the eremitical life. In Christianity the basic impetus surfaced in the fourth century, when the hostile pressure of the government began to ease, and so most forms of hermit living look back to St Antony, the first hermit to acquire wide fame, or past him to a more shadowy St Paul of Thebes. These two heroic solitary have fathered a rich brood of successors so varied in nature as to defy classification and almost to deny relationship. Yet classification there must be, and the most commonly accepted one is that of Nicolas Boerius, who in his *De Statu et Vita Eremitarum* divided them up under four headings: (i) members of religious communities which bore the title 'hermit', (ii) members of small groups of hermits, living outside the religious state, but whose existence and organization were recognized by episcopal authority; (iii) hermits living in solitude, and licensed as such in the diocese, who often enough undertook some small service in the neighbourhood; (iv) hermits independent of all ecclesiastical recognition and relying upon themselves for everything. This analysis, for all its inadequacy, serves the canonist who can use it to assess whether any particular form of hermit is to be regarded as a member of the religious state or not.

One would like to linger with Boerius' second definition for it has some surprising and most interesting developments in, for example, Italy and Spain in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and in France in the seventeenth. But it is

1. 251(?)–356. 2. d. 340. 3. 1469–1539.
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with the third category that this book must be concerned, for it is to this group that the title and office of hermit most properly belongs. Within this definition there was (and is) a wide range of interpretation, and this made for considerable variety.

There was, for example, the anchorite attached to a monastery or convent, living the solitary life in his cell, near or within the enclosure. He would be living under rule, and conforming as much as possible to his community’s observances. Most communities at some time or other have had solitaries of this kind. Not all anchorites, however, were affiliated to religious orders, for many were ‘free-lance’, under the direction of the local bishop or his nominee. The anchorage was invariably attached to a church or a religious building where the recluse would be able to assist at Mass, and to receive Holy Communion.

Popular fancy imagines the anchorage to be a tiny room ventilated by a small window and a church-ward ‘squin’. This was not so, for in these matters medieval man was both realistic and humane. Nearly all anchorages were big enough to contain two or three rooms, and were surrounded by their own walled gardens. There was a surprising degree of freedom, and there are records of anchorities having their own servants, receiving visitors, entertaining staying company, and doing a variety of things that show how tolerable and elastic within their limits were the terms of their immurement. They even moved their anchorage on occasion. But it was nonetheless a severe life, and normally the greatest care was taken by ecclesiastical authority to see that only the fit, the self-supporting, and the truly called, were admitted to it by the simple, but dramatically drastic, service that sealed them in for life.

A hermit too was licensed to his calling by a service of dedication, but the emphasis was different, and the life to which it admitted even more so. Solitary he might be and remote from habitation in his cell, yet the hermit was not tied to it in the sense the anchorite was. He could roam at will, and often he did. He could move house whenever he wanted, though to do so too often was a bad sign, and might incur ecclesiastical censure and even revocation of the licence. Apart from the ideal of prayer which he shared with the anchorite, the hermit could practise good works impossible to the other and live a totally different sort of life. There are instances of hermits acting as unofficial lighthouse-keepers, in a day when a lighthouse service was unthought of; of hermits keeping bridges in repair, or mending roads, or guarding town gates, or ministering to lepers in lazare-houses, or acting as guides in difficult terrain, or collecting for charity, or being the recognized do-gooder of practical works in a district. There were few things they could not turn their hands to. Basically of course they prayed, and counselled and advised. A hermit could even marry, seemingly without prejudice to his standing, though the terms of his licensing normally carried the requirement that he should live chastely.

For neither anchorite nor hermit was there a shortage of human contact, but obviously one was much more able than the other to make and sustain it. Both were dependent on the charity of their fellow Christians, which in the fourteenth century was readily forthcoming. Probably as many women as men were in reclusion, but hermits were invariably male.

The general practice was, as we have seen, that either form of living was approached by the way of the monastic life. The Rule of St Benedict, the father of Western monasticism, specifically provides for this, for from the first it was recognized that it was the discipline learned by living in community which prepared the would-be solitary for the rigour of his new life. But this was not necessarily the case, as the example of Richard Rolle shows. One of the criticisms of Rolle was that he had never submitted to such ordering, but had precipitated himself headlong into the life. Hindsight suggests that he might have written more temperately about the lives of religious and caused less embarrassment.

4 Regula Benedicti, chapter 1.
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to himself and others had he first lived the life he criticized so strongly.

There are anchorites and hermits in all branches of the Catholic Church, though in very small numbers. Public reaction, once it has got over its surprise that such folk still exist, would seem to be a mixture of amused tolerance, complete ignorance, and slightly condescending pity. The medieval world would have understood what it was all about. The ideals of the life were well known, the spiritual benefits both to the solitary and to the community generally were taken for granted, and the totality of self-giving in response to God's call was accepted.

Various reasons have prompted men to retire into a hermitage. The secular priest, aiming at spiritual perfection, might seek it here after years of apostolic labour in a parish. Others might use it as a temporary pick-me-up, living a life of prayer alone for a period, and then returning to parochial work, refreshed and refurbished; there was nothing to prevent them from retiring again into solitude for further strengthening and more service. Some used their hermit vocation as a protest against prevailing clerical laxity, seeking by their own particular witness to challenge others to renewed piety. Some became hermits to expiate their sins. The motives for heeding a call to solitude were many.

There were simpler, more human reasons too to account for the popularity of the solitary life. Medieval life was intolerably public. Towns and villages huddled together for mutual protection and support, and there were very few human functions that could be performed without some eye seeing. To mention but one matter which is probably different from the circumstances of any reader of these notes: everybody slept in the same room, beds (where they existed) could take up to six people, night attire was unknown, and one neither slept in one's clothes or in none at all. One can let one's imagination rove widely over this single fact; it will not go far beyond the bounds of possibility. Nor did the parish churches offer a haven of quiet. In addition to their daily religious use they served as the medieval equivalent of a town hall cum community-centre cum parish hall, and within the hallowed walls many different activities were conducted. Justice was administered, courts were convened, contracts made, plays staged, 'church ales' held, and even fairs were accommodated either inside the building or in the churchyard. The whole of life was unbelievably crude and rough for the common man. To sensitive souls the only escape into any sort of privacy must often have seemed an anchorage somewhere, a hermitage, or a religious house. It is understandable that solitaries were numbered by the hundred in the fourteenth century.

Rolle the Mystic

Mysticism is a word with various meanings, which accord with the viewpoint of the person using it. Most Christian theologians, however, would subscribe to that given by Dom David Knowles in his *English Mystical Tradition.* We can have knowledge of God, as our Maker and Governor, he says, 'by a natural process of reasoning; this is natural theology. To this we add what Jew and Christian have learnt from God's own revelation of Himself through the inspired writers of scripture, and above all from the words and works of His Son, Jesus Christ.' Beyond these two kinds of knowledge there is a third by which God and the truths of Christianity can not only be believed and acted upon, but can in varying degrees be directly known and experienced ... This knowledge, this experience, which is never entirely separable from an equally immediate and experimental union with God by love, has three main characteristics. It is recognized by the person concerned as something utterly different from and more real and adequate than all his previous knowledge and love of God. It is experienced as something at once immanent and received, some-

1. pp. 2 and 3.
thing moving and filling the powers of mind and soul. It is felt as taking place at a deeper level of the personality and soul than that on which the normal processes of thought and will take place, and the mystic is aware, both in himself and in others, of the soul, its qualities and of the divine presence and action within it, as something wholly distinct from the reasoning mind with its powers. Finally, this experience is wholly incommunicable, save as a bare statement, and in this respect all the utterances of the mystics are entirely inadequate as representations of the mystical experience, but it brings absolute certainty to the mind of the recipient. This is the traditional mystical theology, the knowledge of God, in its purest form.

As a terse, comprehensive description of what the Church believes about mysticism this could hardly be bettered, though one might wish that the reference to the need for love could have been sharper and more definite. The sine qua non of any growth in mystical prayer is a love for God, and a continuing longing for him: without it there can be no union, and indeed the experience can have little abiding significance.

If we look at Rolle's teaching in The Fire we will see how closely it agrees with Dom Knowles's criteria, and the editorial rider.

On nearly every page there is an emphasis on the need for loving God and longing after him. Thus, 'there must be a serious intention ... to long continually for the love of God.' God the Holy Trinity is to be loved for himself alone. "It behoves us to make sure that the love of Christ is in us." "No creature can love God too much." It is unnecessary to multiply instances: in this single work the loving of God is mentioned over 800 times.

Though a great deal of hard work, penance, and ascetic discipline are the required preliminaries for mystical experience, together with the fact that the whole business involves a matter of years rather than hours – Rolle recog-

2. All references to Rolle's doctrine will be drawn from The Fire:


nizes that there may be exceptions – contemplation itself is not the fruit of this grind, but is unequivocally the gift of God. 'It is obvious to those who are in love that no one attains the heights of devotion at once, or is ravished with contemplative sweetness. In fact it is only very occasionally – and then only momentarily – that they are allowed to experience heavenly things; their progress to spiritual strength is a gradual one ... perfection is acquired after great labour.' This finds many echoes throughout the book, as does the stress that God himself gives the vision. 'No one can do good, or love God ... unless God enables him to do so.' 'God infuses them with the calm of holy desires.' 'Wonder seized me that ... God should give me gifts, the like of which I did not know I could ask for ... from which I deduce that they are not given for merit, but freely to whomsoever Christ wills.' "He shows himself voluntarily to each man as he wills." Moreover the contemplative becomes 'aware of a heavenly secret infused into his sweet love, and known only by himself." Indeed God himself is the love which unites the soul to him.

Rolle is clear that he has received this precious gift, for which he has prepared himself by wholehearted, total, love for God, and throughout The Fire he speaks of the warmth (physical as well as spiritual), sweetness and melody (both spiritual) he has enjoyed, and continues to enjoy, as the result of his contemplative praying. He knows of locations – for the heavenly harmonies and the celestial choirs are such – and he has a much heightened sense of the spirit world, if we are to take his frequent angel references seriously. The effect of contemplation is joy and wonder beyond power to describe, and in his struggle to find words he calls it 'intoxi-


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not the wit to describe this shout [of joy] or its magnitude, or even the pleasure it gives just to think of it. 18

As with other writing mystics Rolle sees that the vision of God makes it impossible to sin. He does not deny that a contemplative may sin, but it cannot happen when he is delighting in God, or is recalling such delight. Theoretically possible, it is most unlikely, for the contemplative ‘ought to be willing to lose the great reward of heaven rather than to commit a single sin however venial’. ‘Those who love Christ with such fervour...never...want to sin again.’ 19

Rolle writes with confidence, and one feels that he knows what he is writing about. It is unfortunate that he had not the benefit of the careful classifications of later centuries, but in spite of this real drawback (as we see it) the warmth, gusto, and evident sincerity of his writings make him the most widely read of all the English masters up to the time of the Reformation.

In the light of all this it is surprising that some modern theologians have criticized and rejected him as a mystic, and would recognize him primarily as a man of letters. His description of contemplation, they say, shows it not to have been on the same pure, high level of those who came after him. That is probably true, even if at times one suspects that the later mystics were speculating where they had not experienced. But one does not restrict the word ‘mountaineer’ to those who have climbed Mount Everest, nor the word ‘mystic’ to those whose intellectual appreciation is keener than Rolle’s. A mystic by definition is one who has been taken into some sort of deep union with God, and who knows it while he cannot adequately describe it.

One of the difficulties undoubtedly is caused by the temptation to fit the medievals into the categories of later theologians. When, for example, Rolle is speaking of rapture in chapter 37, and distinguishing between ‘rapture out of the senses’ and ‘rapture in the senses’ is he describing what St Teresa later taught us to call the Prayer of Full Union or is it her Prayer of Quiet, or what? Rolle explains that being ‘rapt out of the senses’ means that the person undergoing rapture becomes oblivious to all that goes on around him, unfeeling and unseeing, and presumably (though he does not say so) rigid. This clearly is some form of ecstasy, and so Rolle terms it. The second rapture, which Rolle prefers, is a seizure of the mind only, which leaves the body free and able to cope with circumstances.

According to the Spanish saint the soul in the Prayer of Full Union is united to God, not only through the will, but also through all the interior faculties – a highly desirable state according to most experts, though embarrassing to the spectator as well as to the visionary, because neither the times nor the venues of these visitations can be predicted. But is the Englishman referring to the same experience? He disapproves of this particular form of rapture because on occasion it is experienced by evil men too. Maybe he is merely suffering from the lack of modern insight which can distinguish between ecstasies which are physical and those which are psychological or mystical.

At first glance the preferred rapture ‘in the senses’ looks like the Prayer of Quiet, regarded by St Teresa and most teachers since as being on a lower level. It is still supernatural, in that the soul cannot acquire it by its own efforts; only God can produce it. The joys and delights and the sense of the divine presence are indescribable, and produce, for example, ‘a love of penance and of crosses, humility and contempt for worldly joys’, all of which tally with Rolle. But the garment only fits where it touches, and the careful reader of Rolle will find that being ‘rapt in the senses’ adds up to more than the Prayer of Quiet. If we have to squeeze Rolle into a Teresan definition it is more likely that her subsequent distinction (which she seemingly was the first to make) between two forms of Full Union is the right one. One is ecstatic, one non-ecstatic; they are different only in the intensity of the union, not in the essence. In ecstasy the

19. p. 66.
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union is much greater. It does not matter very much. Rolle, largely self-taught in the fourteenth century, could not be expected to guess the refinements of the sixteenth.

But there are two other grounds which cause modern disquiet. One is Rolle's stress on the emotional concomitants of contemplation, his warmth (calor), sweetness (dulcor), and melody (canor). The other is the absence of any reference to the bitter spiritual experience generally known as 'the dark night', or to the higher levels of contemplative prayer. Something may be said in Rolle's defence.

(i) That there is a place for emotion in religious experience few would care to deny. Yet the continuing denigration of it since the time of St John of the Cross is no help to some who are engaged in the mystic quest. There are real dangers, too obvious to describe, in unbridled, uncriticized emotion, but it does seem that for some (though not all) in their closely integrated personality the deep awareness of the presence of God in their innermost spirit expresses itself in physical and mental ways. They are joyful and feel joyful. Richard Rolle is one such person. He is not unique in feeling physical heat as the result of spiritual experience. On one occasion St Thérèse de Lisieux experienced something similar. She felt herself 'suddenly pierced with a dart of fire... I cannot explain this transport, nor can any comparison express the intensity of this flame. It seemed to me that an invisible force immersed me completely in fire.'

A Western Christian discovers to his surprise that the Orthodox Church both expects and encourages a physical reaction to mystical prayer. Unless one is prepared to dismiss the Eastern as being incapable of this sort of prayer, then Rolle gets powerful support from them. A quotation taken almost at random from the recent Orthodox anthology, The Art of Prayer, will show this. The

22. Chapters 14 and 15.

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writer, Theophan the Recluse, is writing of the Jesus Prayer. A

How does the Jesus Prayer help us in this? Through the feeling of warmth which develops in and around the heart as the effect of this prayer. The habit of prayer is not formed suddenly, but requires long work and toil. The Jesus Prayer, and the warmth which accompanies it, helps better than anything else in the formation of the habit of prayer.

The question now arises whether this warmth is spiritual. No, it is not spiritual. It is ordinary physical warmth. But since it keeps the attention of the mind in the heart, and thus helps the development there of the spiritual movements described earlier, it is called spiritual — provided that it is not accompanied by sensual pleasure, however slight, but keeps the soul and body in sober mood.

Theophan is quite alive to the dangers of false emotions and warns against them. The point is that, like most other Orthodox theologians, he allows them a proper and even prominent place in spiritual development. No Orthodox is surprised that the writer in the Way of a Pilgrim, addicted as he is to the Jesus Prayer, finds his heart grow warm, physically warm, as he offers this prayer over and over again. Rolle's devotion to the Holy Name, a practice which he never fails to commend to others, suggests that his own experience, uninfluenced by Greek ascetic theology, is a demonstration beyond reasonable doubt that for some, if not for all, a burning love for our Lord, with the frequent repetition of his Name, produces psychosomatic reactions. The two other strong characteristics of Rolle's praying, sweetness and melody, have no physical expression, and must be understood as basically spiritual.

25. A devotion to the Name of Our Lord. In practice it is the continual repetition of the sentence, 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'
27. The frequent, and to modern ears rather irritating, references to 'sweetness' must be seen in the contemporary setting. In Rolle's
(2) Not unrelated to the matter of 'feelings' is the 'dark night'. This desolating time has been variously named by Western theologians, but basically all are agreed that it is a period of purgation in which the senses and the spirit are cleansed of every shred of self-interest so that God, and God alone, and God wholly, is the concern of the mystic. The pain that this stripping causes can be very grievous indeed, and may last for a long time, for the soul is generally embedded in the world and in its self-interest. This 'night' which makes the soul live by a faith that is stark and naked, yet does not quench its persistent longing for God, is not unbroken gloom. For when God wills the clouds part, and a ray of ineffable light streams out, to illumine for a moment the countryside, the goal, and the pilgrim himself. Then the clouds close in again, and the journey plods onward and upward. There is very little of the honeyed sweetness, heat and melody which continually excite Rolle, but rather a very great deal of hard slog over difficult terrain, through fog and dark, and at times without any awareness of a Presence at hand to help. But when the purgation is over the reward is apparently fantastic. It cannot be described, alas, for those who are there or nearly there know no words to tell of the humanly unattainable. But outwardly one can discern a certainty of God, a serenity, a beauty, a humility, a rock-likeness, which are strangely impressive and attractive.

But Rolle in his buoyancy bypasses this purgative discipline. His occasional references to toil and labour do not amount to recognition of its need. For him it does not seem to exist. He is not necessarily wrong, though to Western eyes his doctrine may appear lopsided.

The Orthodox Church, again a salutary check in these matters, knows nothing of dark nights, though obviously some of her spiritual giants have endured them. But as a day sweetness was highly valued because of its comparative rarity. People knew nothing of sugar cane, sugar beet, or saccharin. Such sweetening as they had came from honey.

S H O R T E R  N O T E S

Alliterative Artifice

This simple Introduction does not warrant a discussion on the author's Latinity and style. It has been called 'polyphonic prose', and many-voiced it is indeed. In both languages Rolle makes full use of various literary devices: assonance, antithesis, balance, rhyme, rhythm, and, above all, alliteration. This last feature, outstandingly characteris-

28. Evelyn Underhill (Mysticism, p. 318), writing of the Prayer of Quiet, made a distinction between types of mystics which seems valid for all stages of prayer. In its description, all mystics will be found to lean to one side or the other, to the affirmative or negative element which it contains. The austere mysticism of Eckhart and his followers, their temperamental sympathy with the Neoplatonic language of Dionysius the Areopagite, caused them to describe it - and also very often the highest state of contemplation to which it leads - as above all things an emptiness, a divine dark, an ecstatic deprivation. They will not profane its deep satisfactions by the inadequate terms proper to earthly peace and joy: and, true to their school, fall back on the paradoxically suggestive power of negation. To St Teresa, and mystics of her type, on the other hand, even a little and inadequate image of its joy seems better than none. 'To them it is a sweet calm, a gentle silence, in which the lover apprehends the presence of the Beloved: a God-given state, over which the self has little control.'
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It is difficult to avoid the impression that at times Rolle is so ‘ebriated with the exuberance of his own verbosity’ that his alliterations have obscured his thought – and made life unnecessarily hard for the reader. It would not be true, however, to say that he is merely playing with words, for nearly always they have some bearing on his theme, remotely if not directly. But it is a bad habit in a serious writer, restricting and exaggerating. Rolle never freed himself from it, and presumably never wanted to; in any case the medievals admired it.

Rolle’s Englishness

Despite the existence of four outstanding English mystics of the fourteenth century, there is nothing that would justify their being classified as an ‘English School’. They were all highly individual in their approach, and though it could be said that in fundamental doctrine they do not contradict each other – except on those occasions when Hilton and The Cloud of Unknowing warn against an emotionalism of Rolle’s type – it cannot be truthfully asserted that they depend on or develop each other.

They have certain superficial characteristics in common, however. Their individualism expressed itself not only in their mystical approach but also in their manner of life, for they all had to do with the solitary life. Rolle was a hermit, Mother Julian an anchoress, The Cloud was written by one recluse for another, and Walter Hilton wrote primarily for solitaries, and is thought to have been one himself.

Also, much of what they wrote was in the vernacular. This was a new thing, due partly to the fact that some of their works were written for religious women, but due primarily to the changing pattern of national life when at last English was coming into its own as a respectable and worthy channel of communication. In the writings of each there are splendid passages in the mother tongue, revealing not only their mastery of it, but also its complete adequacy

Peccatores lugebunt quando pauperes portabuntur ad pacem perhennem et delectabuntur in deliciis deitatis vivificantis, Christi vultum veraciter videntes, qui venusti erant virtutibus et in fervore spirituali feliciter floruerunt quamvis cum sublimibus huius seculi nequaquam sumpserunt solacium, nec inter sapientes insanos seminaverunt superbum, sed sustinuerunt angariae ab iniquis, et temptaciones exterminaverunt a throno Trinitatis ut in tranquilitate tenentur.\(^1\)

Hinc est utique quod sine merore moruntur, immo cum gaudio gradientes ad tam grandem gradum elevantur in eternis honoribus, et consistunt coronati in copiosissima Creatoria contemplacione, concinentes cum choris clarissimis, qui eciam ardens anhelant in essenciam ipsam omnibus imperantem.\(^2\)

If modern taste finds this practice generally unacceptable, what would it make of the Melos Amoris, which because of its excessive alliteration is tedious to read and impossible to translate – but for a still young Rolle great fun to write?

Frustra fundantur falsi fideles quia funditus finietur fiducia fenerantis, et fumo inferni ficti ferientur et omnes utique ubera honoris operi ut appareat in aulis avaris. Fervebunt feteantes formidine futura; formosus et fortis in feno falluntur etideo imbuti impio instinctu fervore felici numquam fructuar quia federati fuerunt in factis falsorum ut fixi in fervore finienti falsior feruntur cum furibus facibus frementes: horum fornax feitudus fauces lam fringet, nam fugiunt sidem famamque fugant; Sic ilii ferores formantur forterior ut fundum furencium penetrant post paucar et penas percipiant perpetuo perdurantes. (Melos Amoris, chapter 17).

1. p. 59.  
2. p. 60.
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for expressing the deepest truths hitherto hidden beneath the Latin.

But there is also a robust note of common sense about them all, not least in Rolle. Of the four he would seem the most unlikely to champion moderation, for he was an enthusiast with a sharply defined sense of right and wrong, and with a poet's eye and power of expression. But he is as balanced as any, and this is a factor to be remembered when assessing his teaching. Whether he is writing English or Latin matters little: there is the same note of caution against excess. In The Fire, for example, he says some very wise things about fasting. No fanatic could have written this:

Yet the abstinence in which he [the contemplative] lives should not be excessive, nor on the other hand should he display too much extravagance. . . . The true lover of Christ, one who is taught by him, does not worry overmuch whether there is too much or too little. . . . I myself have eaten and drunk things that are considered delicacies; not because I love such dainties, but in order to sustain my being in the service of God, and in the joy of Christ. For his sake I conformed quite properly to those with whom I was living lest I should invent a sanctity where none existed.1

This moderation is typical of The Fire of Love, with the exception of one outstanding instance. Like many medievales and celibates he regards women as a sex with the gravest doubt and suspicion. Most of his writings exhibit this quirk. In The Fire he makes no bones about it. He refers to the danger explicitly in many places (chapters 23, 24, and 30, will serve for example) and implicitly in such phrases as 'carnal pleasures', 'worldly corruption', 'flesh', 'worldly vanity', and the like. It seems to be always at the back of his mind. Yet at one time, faithfully reported in chapter 12, he showed an undue familiarity towards four of them, and one by one their merited rebukes warned him off effectively and enduringly. Offsetting his harshness and fear it must be recalled that in his maturity he directed faith-fully and well the anchoress, Margaret Kirkby, and acted as if he were chaplain to the nuns at Hampole Convent.2 His early bark was worse than his mellowed bite.

Genuine Writings

Rolle was a prolific writer and has left behind him a large body of works recognizably his, both in Latin and English. Such was his influence and popularity that he has been credited with many other writings not so certainly from his pen. Much research has been given to the matter, and the great authority of the American scholar, Miss Hope Emily Allen, gives as his genuine writings, and in some cases their conjectured dates, the following:

Early Works: Canticum Amoris (before 1322); Judica me, Deus (before 1322); Melos Amoris (1326/7); Job (1327/30); Canticles (before 1330).

Scriptural Commentaries: Super Threnos; Super Apocalypse; Super Orationem Dominicam; Super Symbolum Apostolorum; Super Mullerem Fortem. (All these are thought to have been written before 1340, and after 1330.)

Commentaries on the Psalter: De Dei Misericordia; Latin Psalter (early, about 1327/30); Super Psalmum XXm. (Everything so far has been in Latin, but now he begins to write in English as well.)

1. Was he ordained by then? There is no record of his having received Holy Orders, though his later writings sometimes read as though he were a priest. Dr Hodgson, who once committed herself to the belief that Rolle was always a layman, later retreated, influenced by the French scholar, Dom Maurice Noetinger. In The Month for January, 1926, he quotes a sentence from the Melos Amoris which seems to imply priestly status: 'nisi sanguinem Salvatoris mihi in subsidium semper sumpsissem' which means 'unless I had always received the Saviour's Blood for my strengthening'. In the fourteenth century layfolk no longer received the chalice, nor indeed did they often go to Holy Communion at all. (G. Hodgson, Office Psalms, 1931.)
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Super Magnificat (in Latin and English); English Psalter (1340/49); Psalms 90 and 91 (English).

Latin Treatises: Contra Amantes Mundi; Incendium Amoris (1343); Emendatio Vitae.

English Epistles: Ego Dormio (English, despite its traditional title – 1343); The Commandment; The Form of Living (1348/9).

Short English Prose Pieces: The Bee; Desyre and Delit; Gastly Gladnesse (after 1343); The Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit; English Commentary on the Ten Commandments; Meditations on the Passion.

Miscellaneous English Lyrics.

With this list the English expert, Dr Geraldine Hodgson, would be in broad agreement, but with her greater sympathy she would accept as genuine some works over which Miss Allen had reservations.

Books by, and about, Rolle

Though Richard Rolle enjoyed a considerable vogue in the early years of this century, few of the books which then popularized him have survived in print. It is perhaps time that his image was refurbished and his work reassessed. Most of the books below can be obtained without difficulty through local library services.

Richard Rolle's Writings

C. Horstmann, Yorkshire Writers (Richard Rolle of Hampole and his followers), two volumes, London, 1895. From this work stems our current interest in Rolle. By no means have all of Horstmann's theories proved acceptable to modern scholars.


R. Misyn, The Fire of Love and the Mending of Life, London, 1896. This translation was made in the fifteenth century.

F. M. Comper, The Fire of Love and the Mending of Life, London, 1914. This is a gentle modernization of Misyn's text.


M. Noetinger, Le Feu de l'Amour, Le Modèle de la Vie Parfaite, Le Pater, Tours, 1928.


Selections from Rolle's Writings


Books about Rolle

The York Breviary, Surtees Society, volume 75, ii, appendix v, London, 1882. This gives the Latin text of the Legenda, a translation of which will be found in Miss Comper's book below.


English Writings of Richard Rolle, Oxford, 1931.

G. Hodgson, The Sanity of Mysticism, London, 1926. These two ladies are the acknowledged authorities on
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Rolle. The diligent and untiring labours of Miss Allen produced what is by common consent the most complete reference book on the hermit, and no serious student can afford to ignore it. It is almost magisterial, but it has to be read with caution, as Miss Allen tends to treat her often brilliant conjectures as if they were facts, and to go on from there. She may well be right in most cases, but not in all. Dr Hodgson, too, has a great devotion to Rolle, and her scholarly insight may be thought a little safer than Miss Allen’s intuitions.


Background Reading

Most books which have to do with Christian mysticism give Rolle generous treatment. The books listed below do, with the exception of the last four, which are ‘background’ only.


(These two books contain poems by Rolle.)


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Pronunciation

It is sometimes asked how the surname Rolle is pronounced. Most people call it ‘roll’ as if it were a piece of bread. Others rhyme it with ‘dollar’, believing that each syllable was sounded and that the ‘o’ was short in medieval times. An opinion received from the appropriate department of Newcastle University suggests that either could be right, but that the former is more probable: ‘Conservative speakers would give it two syllables, but in that part of the country [Yorkshire] it would be more likely to have one syllable with a long vowel.’