Fortunately, to arrest these incoherencies, or rather, to vary them, a haggard, inspired-looking man now approached — a crazy beggar, asking alms under the form of peddling a rhapsodical tract, composed by himself, and setting forth his claim to some rhapsodical apostleship.

(Herman Melville, The Confidence Man, chapter 36)
Richard Rolle and the Invention of Authority

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This series of critical books seeks to cover the whole area of literature written in the major medieval languages - the main European vernaculars, and medieval Latin and Greek - during the period c. 1100-1350. Its chief aim is to publish and stimulate fresh scholarship and criticism on medieval literature, special emphasis being placed on understanding major works of poetry, prose and drama in relation to the contemporary culture and learning which fostered them.

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
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INTRODUCTION

Contexts: three preliminary essays

1: READING MYSTICAL WRITING

Mystical writers have long been in a special category for the Christian Church. In their role as reporters of direct contact with the divine, they have necessarily been highly regarded, in so far as they help to validate the central mysteries of the faith. Yet they are also often seen as challenging the proper understanding of those mysteries, hence as constituting a threat to the theology and political structure of the Church. Since the Church is a hierarchic institution which as such has a vested and conservative interest in its own continuity, this negative view is inevitable and in a sense valid. Mystical writing fuses subjective experience and expression with absolute declarations as to the nature of truth; however submissive it may be in fact, it is thus heady and potentially uncontrollable, always in a position to lay powerful claims to an authority which lies outside and above ecclesiastical institutions, even to deny the authority which inheres in those institutions. Mystical writing – an individual’s report of a moment or moments of mediation between heaven and earth – is also by its nature complex; it has always been difficult even for those ecclesiastics who are well disposed to mysticism to determine what is being said, and then to decide whether it is consistent with orthodoxy. Thus it is not surprising that while there are many examples of successful relationships between visionaries and the ecclesiastical establishments of their time (St Catherine of Siena, St Bridget of Sweden), there are also cases in which the relationship has been difficult (John Ruusbroec, Meister Eckhart), or disastrous (Marguerite Porete). For the more daring of these writers, difficulties tend to persist; Eckhart’s confident ‘liberty of spirit’ still alarms as many readers as it excites, and for many of the same reasons that it alarmed some of his contemporaries.

Mystics are also in a special category for literary critics. Since most of the modes of literature that critics traditionally encounter are considered forms of fiction, the manner in which mystical writing fuses two categories which it insists we treat as fact, the personal and the transcendent, renders it especially problematic and interesting. On the verbal ‘surface’ of the text, the extreme difficulty of describing experience of the divine in human language challenges the mystical writer to adopt complex metaphoric and expository strategies. These in turn challenge the critic, who has the task of elucidating an
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The ambiguities of these claims derive in part from factors intrinsic to a mystic’s experience, in part from the difficult relationship such experience creates between a mystic and the ecclesiastical establishment. This last term must be understood broadly, as including (1) the ecclesiastical reader whose interests are those of the political hierarchy of the Church, (2) the tradition of Christian teaching expressed through the writings the Church accepts as authoritative and (3) (most important if also somewhat intangible) the psychic structure of the mystic’s own inner commitment to the Church as authority and comforter. Mystical experience itself may be more or less planned, or be a bolt from the blue. Either way, unmediated contact with the divine must affect all areas of a mystic’s life, for such contact both annihilates the pretensions of everything less than the divine and confers a special status on whoever has experienced it. The mystic’s inherited view of her or his relationship with the ecclesiastical establishment is hence threatened. That establishment must retain its role if the mystic is to remain committed to an orthodox stance; to abandon such a stance is to risk a loss of spiritual balance and a fall into spiritual anarchy, as well as the tangible perils that can result from falling foul of the ecclesiastical authorities. Thus the import of the experience may have to be defined forcibly in terms of Christian orthodoxy.

Yet conversely, and in spite of the risks, the authority of tradition and establishment will also have to be redefined in relation to the authority that the experience and its recipient now have. For a mystic to allow such redefinitions to occur is to allow the very fabric of her or his intellectual and emotional constitution to be challenged: perhaps painful, certainly a dislocating, process. The decision to proclaim mystical experience in a written form makes this process explicit, and thus even more problematic. The difficulty of mystical texts is not only a product of the ineffability of experience; it reflects the fact that, by writing, the mystic is making a bid to articulate and institutionalize a new self-understanding and a recreated attitude to the earthly Church in terms of mystical experience — and is doing so in front of an audience that always in principle includes the whole Church, earthly and heavenly. A host of inner doubts, political and spiritual fears, and anticipations of criticism flood in.

Not surprisingly, therefore, some mystical writers do not project a clear or consistent view of the status of their experience. They may still be in doubt not only as to their own status and that of the language in which they are proclaiming their experience of the divine, but also as to the kind of deference they owe to Christian orthodoxy. For example, can the recipient of mystical experience claim to be a soul chosen by God for perfection? Are the mystic’s words divinely inspired, or do they partake of the fallibility of all human discourse? Can the content of the revelations which the mystic is proclaiming be reconciled with the norms of Christian orthodoxy? The difficulties raised by such questions are intensified by the gulf between mystical experience and the mystic’s understanding, and made even more acute by the implied presence of a reader. The reader may be a disciple, in which case she or he

encounter between an inevitably limited and formal religious language and an experience which is at once of the utmost spontaneity (whatever the preparation that precedes it) and of absolute significance. It is quite as hard to analyse the literary ramifications of this encounter as it is to gauge its orthodoxy. For example, there are no literary criteria with which to assess the claims many mystics make that their depictions of eternal felicity are wholly inadequate. To take these claims seriously is to become involved with theological questions of the relationship between language and divine truth. But to fail to take them seriously — to call them ‘inexpressibility topos’ and leave it at that — is to resign any possibility of writing a real account of the text.

Much of the literary criticism that has been devoted to mystical writing starts from some such attitude of resignation, approaching the verbal surface of a text with a mixture of aesthetic and religious awe, and employing its own tropes of inexpressibility to avoid having to look any further: ‘We must leave these questions to practising mystics’, or worse, ‘What Mother Julian meant we cannot know in this life.’ More usefully, other commentators focus on the didactic structures of mystical texts and the responses they were intended to evoke, challenging the assumption, deeply embedded in the modern resurgence of interest in mysticism, that mystics are like Romantic poets obsessed with the desire to express their experience for its own sake. But the problem with any simple rejection of this anachronistic reading is that it is partly valid: mystics sometimes are rather like Romantic poets, and approaches that ignore this fact also ignore a vital feature of their writing: the highly charged relationship they have with what they write. Certainly we cannot account for all the processes through which mystics translate their experience into language, since their experience is ineffable. But the psychological events which lie behind any work of literature are ineffable, inasmuch as they must be expressed in the formal medium of language and can never be recovered by readers. Even where the nature of those events is important to our understanding of a literary work, or is one of its major themes (as in some of the poetry of Wordsworth), we can do no more than to indicate the ways in which experience is formalized and deflected by language. As literary critics, then, we can engage as seriously with mystical as we can with any other kind of writing — and do so (as I hope to show) on our own ground, without adopting the reductionism of either of the approaches I have mentioned. A theological reading of a mystical work may assess (for example) what doctrinal assertions the work makes and how these relate or contribute to Christian orthodoxy; sensitive theological readers like Edmund Colledge or David Knowles are preoccupied with the balance of doctrinal positions taken by mystical writers. The literary-critical equivalent of such a reading will focus instead on what we can call a mystical writer’s ‘predicament’ in formulating doctrinal positions, articulating an appropriately didactic discourse and describing mystical experience; it will look at the specifically mundane pressures that beset a mystical text, impelling it towards complex and ambiguous claims for its own status as an embodiment of truth.
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must be protected and edified. Or the implied reader may be a critic; anxiety as to the reaction of ecclesiastical authorities to what is said (or, as perhaps with Porete’s, *Miroir des simples ames*, a desire to mislead such authority) is a major cause of the ambiguity of mystical texts. Yet the most critical reader of all is likely to be the mystical writer, for whom every statement must be assessed in relation to its orthodoxy and usefulness, its confirmity to the inner truth of the revelations, and its effect on the writer’s own spiritual balance. To write a mystical work is to place in the demanding and vulnerable role of the prophet.

All these complexities are evident in a work like Julian of Norwich’s *Revelation of Love*. Although it took well over twenty years to write, this work is still almost overwhelmed by the inexpressibility of the visions on which it is based. Julian overcomes her problems of expression only by giving readers the sense that the circumlocutions and repetitions which result from her difficulties are the most effective possible image of the distance between God and her own human understanding. But her predicament has other dimensions, too, for she is anxiously unclear as to the status of her visions, of her role as a visionary, and of her book, and has a lively sense of the dangers (which she regards as closely related) of succumbing to pride and succumbing to unorthodox statement. These things further deflect her intentions and modify the direction of the work that she writes – as is strikingly shown in the first version of her book, which suppresses all mention of what the second version sees as the most profound of her visions. Although she emphasizes the supreme importance of the experience she has been granted, she is anxious to avoid asserting her own importance; the showings, she thus insists, were sent to all, not merely to her. Yet this act of humility paradoxically places great emphasis on her own role as a writer. Only through her book can others apprehend the revelations for themselves; if God intended them for all, her book must be regarded as an authoritative vehicle for them. Thus her written Revelation assumes the transcendent authority of the one she received from God, and its author is thrown unwittingly into the very forefront of her work.

Such is one of several essentially circular processes that give Julian’s work a tension which coexists with her much admired serenity, and that show how difficulties and dangers persist in the articulation of her experience in spite of that serenity. Once one has recognized the existence of this tension, in the work of Julian or of another mystic, it becomes impossible to regard the mystic’s written utterance as the straightforward, if imperfect declaration of transcendent experience it is often thought to be. Mystical writing becomes (inter alia) the expression of an intricate predicament of an essentially ‘this worldly’ kind. Harold Bloom has made fashionable a Freudian view of the Romantic artist’s relationship with a literary ‘parent’ as governed by an ‘anxiety of influence’: a need to emphasize originality by concealing the artist’s deep affinities with one or more previous writers (Bloom 1973). Julian’s predicament would seem to be the inverse of this: an anxiety of originality or authority. Some such anxiety is fundamental to much mystical writing – and it is certainly so to the career of Richard Rolle.

Rolle wrote copiously in several different genres, the bulk of his work consisting of biblical commentary and didactic instruction, his preferred literary modes including apocalypse and satire. Yet all his writings are in important ways centred around his experiences as a solitary and as a mystic, even where these are not his overt subjects – for these experiences validate the rest of his life, as they validate his writing, and his belief in his own authority. He is a scriptural commentator because his union with God causes his interpretations to be inspired; he is a guide to the contemplative life because his own experience of it is exemplary and should thus be regarded as normative; he prophesies the end of all things, exhorts sinners to repentance and announces the love between God and humanity that can be attained on earth, because having attained such love himself he is of all humanity the one with authority to do these things. One could not easily find a mystical writer who generalizes from his particular experience to a greater extent, or with greater satisfaction, than does Rolle.

This process of generalization is so complete as to seem at first almost automatic and devoid of any sense of difficulty: as if Rolle, that most extroverted of mystics, merely declares the significance of his experience, with an apparent disregard for the constraints of authority. Of course this is not so, and could never be so for any medieval Christian, whether orthodox or heretical. In practice most of what Rolle wrote (at least in Latin) is permeated by his consciousness of real or potential opposition, by the need to balance assertions of authority with deference to others and by an acute, often shrill, vulnerability. Both as a result of this consciousness and of Rolle’s fundamental beliefs, his interpretation of his experiences is already shaped by Christian orthodoxy, as it is by his interpretations of the Bible and by the exemplary models he adopts. Throughout his work he presents himself in terms of existing personae: the Desert Fathers, the saintly king and psalmist David, the Apostle; the repentant sinner, the nightingale, the perfect soul, the solitary contemplative. These figures are intended to define his relation to the earthly and heavenly Church in such a way as to deflect criticism. On one level their deployment is thus a response to the difficulties he shares with other mystical writers; while their use is often didactic they form an important part of his assertion of his high status in the earthly Church – for such an assertion is necessary if his writings are to be accorded the authority he believes they merit.

But although Rolle’s overt claim to high status and enjoyment of his own spiritual importance distinguish him radically from Julian as a personality, they do not enable him to escape the ambiguities that beset her. In much of his writing similar ambiguities emerge as literary problems which reflect what are clearly personal uncertainties. These problems include an inconsistent view of the status of his words which parallels Julian’s uncertainty – except that in Rolle’s case, characteristically, the centre of greatest difficulty is not so
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much in how he views himself, but in how he thinks others will view him. How, for example, can he act to convince readers of his sanctity (the quality that is to mark him out as possessing true authority), when a deep and self-abnegatory humility is traditionally thought of as basic to the saintly personality? The sense of incoherence that problems like this create in the modern reader of Rolle has led some to regard him as self-obsessed to a point just this side of sanity; like Margery Kempe he has been subjected to a pseudo-psychoanalysis that attempts to label the ways in which he was 'abnormal' rather than to comprehend the nature of his difficulties. While he never comes to seem anything other than idiosyncratic, on closer inspection such difficulties turn out to be manifestations of a literary and personal predicament as complex, and perhaps as unavoidable, as Julian's.

Yet part of that predicament, for Rolle as not for Julian, is precisely his own unconsciousness of its details. In some of his most important works he seems imperfectly aware of the tense relationship between his assertiveness and his need to convince others of his humility, and fails to recognize the incongruity in the juxtaposition of his need to establish that his writings are authoritative with his necessary insistence that his authority does not require establishment, since it already exists. Such a lack of self-awareness suggests that it is almost as important to him that he should avoid thinking of his own writing in these strategic terms as that he should convince others of his straightforwardness. Many of his works thus have to manoeuvre their way towards a solution to his literary predicament without even their writer allowing himself to become conscious of what he is doing. Such works become clearer when we notice how Rolle's necessary unconsciousness of contradictions in his writing does not emerge merely negatively, in bald manifestations of his naivety; it operates positively and strategically, diverting both reader and writer from a naked perception of the latter's problematic position.

On this level of unarticulated intentions, Rolle is an unconsciously subtle writer – an oxymoron vital to reading him successfully – and here, if anywhere, he justifies the dislike that many of his readers feel for him. Yet here he is also, from a critical viewpoint, at his most interesting; for his works (which are overtly didactic and evangelistic) show a successful, and, in his own terms, successful, working out of difficulties such as those mentioned. This process involves a gradual comprehension, articulation and reconciliation of contradictions and difficulties, and the realizing of a literary persona that is largely in control of all of these difficulties, and finally even of the process of their articulation. This persona is the final stage in Rolle's prolonged attempt to manifest his authority; it justifies the whole enterprise of his life and writing, and proves, in the terms he has set up for himself, that his view of his own importance as a contemplative is correct. The argument here is as far as it could be from reiterating the prevailing view that after a period of instability Rolle 'settled down', for the mature works in which this persona is most loudly manifested, Melos Amoris and Super Lectiones Mor-

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...tuorum, are even more assertive than the less integrated works; indeed, in these works assertion becomes a basic literary device.

This study involves a reappraisal of the shape of Rolle's career through analysis of the structures of his works, and of his intentions – evangelistic, pastoral, apologetic – in writing them. As with all mystical writers, Rolle touches from time to time on the inexpressibility of his experience, evolving his own rhetorical music to overcome his difficulty of expression. As with all mystical writers, he is concerned with enhancing the spiritual lives of his readers, arguing a highly particular case as to what such enhancement involves. However, the thesis maintained here is that the most important organizing principle in Rolle's works is his attempt to develop an assertive yet exemplary persona, in response to a complex predicament at the heart of which is the problem of the mystical writer's authority.

To this point, my account of the relationship between mystic, establishment and the idea of authority has posed as ahistorical. While its examples have been taken from the fourteenth century, and the term 'mystic' has been used to describe a Christian operating within a broadly Catholic milieu, I have allowed the implication to stand that a similar structure of tensions and oppositions could be found in any period or religious context. To a limited extent this is probably true. Yet it is of course also true that the details of the predicaments of mystical writers vary fundamentally from century to century, place to place and even individual to individual, according to the ways in which the Church, religious authority, mysticism and writing itself are regarded. The rest of this introduction is accordingly concerned with a more historically contextualized approach to some of the matters already raised in general terms – authority, the nature of mystical experience, the relationship between authority and experience – which attempts to delineate parts of the scene on which Rolle's particular drama was played out.

II: THE STRUCTURE OF THE PERFECT LIFE

By the early fourteenth century, a number of large developments in late medieval religiosity had come to maturity, several of which are of particular relevance for contemporary concepts of religious authority. These can mostly be seen as outgrowths of what Brian Stock depicts as the increasing dominance of texts and textuality in the eleventh and twelfth centuries: the period in which 'oral discourse effectively began to function within a universe of communications governed by texts... [which] thereby emerged as a reference system both for everyday activities and for giving shape to larger vehicles of explanation' (1983, p. 3). The first and most general of these developments can be called the 'bureaucratization' of religion: the enormous extension of the Church's power and articulation of its structure from the eleventh century on – encompassing (inter alia) the growth of a more centralized and powerful papal government, and the formation of new
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monastic and fraternal orders in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, as well as the drive to reform the secular clergy and laity initiated by the fourth Lateran Council in 1215. This process was responsible for the production of a huge and ever-increasing quantity of writing; indeed, the ecclesiastical structure that emerged was so complex that it could only have been sustained by writing. In principle, however flexible the situation was in practice, the late-medieval Church defined the position of each one of its members, and the relationships that existed between them; thus it claimed political, legal and social authority. It also aimed to define the boundaries of thought, to distinguish between a realm of orthodoxy and one of heterodoxy; increasingly, by attempting to formalize and refine its own canonization procedures, it tried to reserve to itself the right to decide which individuals lived such holy lives that they were worthy of veneration (Vauchez 1981); it safeguarded its own future, by bestowing more authority on the voices of some of its members than others, and by placing great emphasis on the moral worth of an attitude of obedience to its dictates. Thus it attempted to enter the minds of its members in a more intimate way than before, in order to realize, as fully as possible, its responsibilities as the body of Christ on earth. Hence in the late Middle Ages a religious issue was also an ‘ecclesiastical’ one, almost inevitably impinged upon by some part of the vast network of assumptions, arguments and definitions that constituted the weighty textual presence of the Church.

Even if he had been more isolated, intellectually and physically, than he was, Rolle could not have embarked on any part of his project without being conscious of this network, and without trying to accommodate it. It provided a structure, a discourse, in which his sense of his identity could be developed and through which he could communicate it to others. It is true that his writings often express indifference to the earthly Church, as though he located himself outside its forms. But these gestures do not stand up to examination; indeed, they provide good instances of the way in which, far from being aloof from the late-medieval Church, Rolle’s entire career is an attempt to claim his place within the network of ecclesiastical relationships. For example, Incendium Amoris (caps. 31–32) claims that although Rolle is still alive, he is a participant in the songs of the angels in heaven, and can therefore take little part in the earthly song of liturgical worship; he continues to attend Mass when he must, but does not necessarily participate in the chanting of plainsong, and will not—in spite, one gathers, of having a fine singing voice—join the choir. (The passage is quoted and discussed in detail on pp. 136–137.) On the face of it, these chapters look like an assertion of freedom from the constraints of ecclesiastical norms by an anti-establishment mystic absorbed in an untrammeled communion with heavenly reality. But the gesture of refusal they make depends on Rolle’s awareness of a pressure of obligation, which he here asserts he can and should sidestep. Such pressure is a sign of his continuing involvement with the very structure he claims to have transcended. For he does not simply engage in angelic communion: he writes about it, in order to explain why it is better than liturgical communion, and, by writing, reaffirms his engagement with the Visible Church on a new level, the level of discourse. His apologia places the Church’s liturgical worship and his experience of song in opposition to one another, as mutually exclusive ideals (the sound of one blotting out the other); at the same time, a cross-current of remarks in these chapters cautiously notes that he continues to fulfill his ecclesiastical obligations of attendance at Mass. More important, the structure of opposition he employs is itself part of a reassuringly learned tradition of argument by contraries. Thus the reader is confronted not with an expression of anti-establishment mystical experience, but with a hierarchy of rules and ideals, which occupy far more of the foreground of these chapters than the harmonious pleasures of angelic communion. Rolle’s engagement in the affairs of the Church, which the text pretends is a thing of the past, immediately re-enters by a back door. What he claims is an experiential relationship with religious truths, which can only occur outside the ecclesiastically appointed means for communion with God, proves to be permeated by a characteristic awareness of texts and normative structures.

Many of these ‘normative structures’ are invoked in the following chapters, as Rolle’s life and writing touches on them, or reflects a sense of their presence; for example, part of Chapter 1 assesses his career in relation to hagiographic models of behaviour, while several chapters take note of his sense of the boundaries of orthodoxy. But one such set of structures is of sufficient importance and complexity to merit preliminary attention: those that have to do with the definition of the highest form of the religious life. Medieval thinkers produced several models for determining what constituted, in an essential rather than an individual sense, a better, or ‘more perfect’, form of life than any other. Although these models are always constructed on formal and idealistic principles, the life they eventually uphold as the highest tends to be that represented by the section of the Church from which they emanate; thus Dominicans stress preaching, Carthusians contemplation, Benedictines a secluded but communal existence, and all these mutually contradictory models exist side by side, often scarcely affecting each other. Rolle in turn upholds his way of life, and it is vital to his programme to show that hermits of his own type are the most perfect of all. But the development of his model does not take place without reference to its rivals; on the contrary, much of this study bears witness to how hard he works to incorporate as many of them as he can into his own structure of thought.

The oldest and most important model for deciding on the best form of human life originated in patristic commentaries on Luke 10.38–42, the story in which Christ commends Mary’s rapt attention to his words more highly than Martha’s conscientious concern for domestic details. Drawing on a broad distinction between one sort of lifestyle and another that goes back as far as Pythagoras, Origen and almost all later commentators treated Martha as a
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representative of the 'active' life, Mary of the 'contemplative'.'² It followed from this analysis that Christ was praising a way of life that was centred on attention to himself as the 'pars optima' (see Luke 10.42), the best way to live. The manner in which such attention might best be bestowed was at first open to discussion. Christians in late antiquity naturally identified this life with the otium liberale of the scholar, and with any period of prayer and reading, as well as with the more extreme retirement of the Desert Fathers. As a result, the contemplative life was not initially identified as the property of any particular group within the Church; all Christians could contemplate, and all—as was stressed by both Augustine and Gregory—ought to be prepared to leave contemplation from time to time for the life of service to others.³ However, in time the term 'contemplative life' came to be used more and more as a professional designation for monks, nuns, anchorites and hermits who had the leisure (otium again) to give their whole attention to God. Those who did not—lay Christians and the secular priests who ministered to them—were thought of as living the active life, and the two kinds of life, as distinct professions, were regarded as for the most part mutually exclusive.⁴ The practice of the corporal works of mercy, obedience to moral and divine law, and, in the case of priests, the exercise of the office of preaching defined the limits of the active life; the life of prayer and continuous devotion to God was the preserve of the contemplative. Coenobites and solitary Friars were thus assumed to be essentially superior to others in their way of life. Such a conclusion suited the earlier medieval Church, which was dominated by monks, and was still accepted by many until the end of the Middle Ages and beyond. The late fourteenth-century Cloud of Unknowing, for example, is confident that the path to perfection leads through the 'common' or lay life, to the 'special' life of the monk, to the 'singular' one of the solitary, and thence to the practice of the highest forms of contemplation (cap. i).⁵

The continuing dominance of this model of thought in some circles can be seen in a group of quaestiones which build another model upon it, by asking: 'Is the solitary life more perfect than the life lived in community?'⁶ The question is important only because those who ask it assume that the eremitic and the coenobitic life are the two forms of the 'pars optima', the better of which can be considered the best life of all. While some disagreed with the conclusions of these quaestiones—a scribe even wrote at the end of one, 'Explicit de reclusis exemplar falsum et incorrectum' (Oliger 1934, p. 219)—the answer given was always that the solitary life was highest. Benedict had ruled that a monk could not leave his monastery for the world, but could to become a hermit; Cuthbert would not have become an anchorite after living as a monk had the solitary life not been superior (p. 256). To become perfect, the coenobitic life is best; to practice a perfection achieved, the solitary life—which, according to Augustine, is also the most beneficial to others (p. 247)—is superior. This is the conclusion assumed by the Cloud author, and widely accepted in principle. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, Peter Damian, his hero Romualdus, and many others struggled to cut themselves off from the

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world in this belief; a certain glamour still attached to the eremitic life generations later. It seems likely that, had he wished to, Rolle could have operated entirely within the assumptions of these two models: that the contemplative life is better than the active; that the solitary life is a higher form of the contemplative life than the coenobitic; and thus that the solitary life is the most perfect of all the modes of Christian existence.

However, by the fourteenth century, other models were in existence, which regarded at least some of the traditional features of the active life, notably preaching, as integral parts of what it meant to live perfectly. Speaking generally, these models returned to the roots of the traditional active-contemplative dichotomy, in order to challenge some of the ways in which it had ossified, and to emphasize matters which it ignored. Augustine and Gregory, who regarded the active and contemplative lives as states which no Christian should neglect, sometimes mentioned a third state, which combined both lives and was better than either; this was the life of the preacher, sometimes known in the late Middle Ages as the 'mixed' life.⁷ For Gregory, the ideal preacher is a holy man, advanced in contemplation, who 'imparts to others in the active life what he has received in the contemplative' (Steele 1979, p. 141). A contemplative pastor does wrong if he neglects to take preaching seriously (Butler 1927, p. 257, citing Regula Pastoralis 11.7). Preaching is in its way a nobler office than contemplation alone: 'Preachers do not only restrain themselves from vices, but also inhibit others from sin, lead them to faith and instruct them in good behaviour' (Homilia in Ezechiel 11.iv.6, quoted in Steele 1979, p. 45). Even though the origins of the two approaches are the same, this kind of language encourages interpretations of the perfect life that differ markedly from the model in which the professional contemplative Mary is by definition superior to the secular Martha.⁸

Such a treatment of the perfect life was bound to appeal to at least two groups in the late Middle Ages. The friars practised a way of life which could not be confined by stereotyped portraits of the contemplative, since they moved about (thus attracting charges from conservatives that they were girovagi, wandering monks), preached and performed works of mercy. Secular priests were also preachers, and were made increasingly conscious of the dignity of this office by the mass of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century pastoral material which stresses its importance, defining who it is that can preach, and the characteristics they must possess.⁹ Pastoral and preaching manuals often point out that only priests who have the cure of souls, and others with a legitimate licence, are allowed to preach; Rolle's contemporary, Robert of Basevorn, follows canon law when he writes in his Forma Praedicandi (1322) that nobody, lay or religious, may preach unless permitted to do so by a bishop or the Pope (pp. 241-242). Manuals also elevate the office of preaching by stressing that it is to be distinguished from teaching (Gillespie 1980 explores this distinction in detail). Thus the first chapter of the early fifteenth-century Speculum Christianum states:
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A Grete differens es be-twene prechynge and techyngye. Prechynge es in a place where es clepyng to-geydr or folowyng of pepyl in holy days in chyrches or other certeyn places and tynpes ordeyned ther-to. And it longeth to hem that been ordeyned ther-to, the whych haue inurection and aurctorie, and to noon otheyr. Techynge es that ech body may enforme and tech e hyss brotyr in eyeru place and in conable tyme, os he sees that it be spedful. For this es a gostly almes-dede, to whych eyeru man es bounde that hath cunynge.

(2.5–13) 

Teaching was an office which anyone competent could and should practise in private when appropriate and necessary; according to Henry of Ghent’s late thirteenth-century Summa Questionum, ‘even’ women, though barred from any kind of preaching, could teach other women in private (cited in Minnis 1986, p. 90). Teaching was a spiritual work of mercy, which might on occasion save souls. Preaching, on the other hand, was a public and officially sanctioned office, the specific and constant aim of which was the salvation of the souls of its hearers. In the thirteenth-century discussions of the magisterium of the preacher (see Leclercq 1946), preaching, as Minnis states, ‘was described in the most fulsome of terms. According to [the Dominican] Humbert of Romans ... the office of preaching is apostolic, angelic and divine; its foundation, which is Holy Scripture, excels all other sciences’ (Minnis 1986, p. 89, citing similar statements in preaching manuals by Alan of Lisle, John Bromyard and pseudo-Aquinas). Accounts of the rewards of the blessed sometimes claim that preachers will be given a special aureole (golden crown), similar to that to be given to virgins (who include religious and secular priests) and martyrs. Book vii of Hugh of Strasburg’s Compendium Theologice Veritatis (caps. 29–30), a work well known to Rolle, states that as martyrs overcome the world and virgins the flesh, so preachers overcome the devil, ‘whom they expel not only from themselves but from the hearts of others’. This aureole is not reserved exclusively for preachers, but it is closely associated with them.

With the office of preaching restricted to professionals and praised in these terms, it is not surprising that high expectations should be had of its practitioners, and high claims made on their behalf. In the context of the pragmatic discussions of the officium praedicatoris analysed by Leclercq and Minnis, these were often tempered by a clear sense of the gap between the lives of many actual preachers and the dignity of the office they filled. Yet the first chapter of Speculum Christiani is uncompromising in demanding from its pious readers sufficient religious knowledge, purity of life, and conscientiousness in teaching the articles of faith; those who fail to measure up are said (in words taken from Gregory) to be worthy of damnation. And in the more theoretical contexts of discussions of the states of life, the office of the preacher is sometimes outrightly treated as the highest of religious callings, combining, as it does in Gregory’s writings, the best features of active and contemplative states. In his tortuous treatise on the states of life (Summa Theologica ii.i, q.q. 179–189), Thomas Aquinas moves close to this view, stating that prelates are more perfect than religious, since they are in the position of perfecters, rather than seekers after perfection (q. 184, art. 7, referring specifically to preaching). This claim depends on an earlier argument (q. 182, arts. 1–3) that the prelate combines active and contemplative lives, and that both can be practised without mutual hindrance; the life of the prelate is thus ‘mixed’.

Again, Steele (p. 242) quotes a remark by Jacob de Voragine (from the Sermones Sancti) which sums up a standard position: ‘There is active life, which is the “good part”, contemplative life, which is the “better part”, and a life composed of both, which is the “best part”’. This is the life which Piers Plowman (at least in the A text) calls ‘Dobest’:

Dobest is a-boue bothe [Dowel and Dobet] and bereth a bisschopes crosse,
Is hoket atte ende to holden hem in good lyf.
A pyk is in that potent to punge a-doun the wikkede,
That wayten eny wikkednesse Dowel to teone.
(A. ix.86–89)

Although questions still remain, there is little doubt that, as Langland originally conceived them, Dowel, Dobet and Dobest were meant as equivalents of active, contemplative and ‘mixed’ lives; that he saw the last of these, in which action and contemplation are combined, as the highest form of the spiritual life; and that, like Aquinas, he associated it with the life of bishops.

Finally, Richard of St Victor’s De Quatuor Gradibus Violentiae Caritatis describes what seems to be a version of ‘mixed’ life as the highest degree of love, in which the soul is so insatiable for God, and so aware that she cannot have him wholly in this life, that she ‘descends beneath herself’ (177.11–12), and ‘humbles herself’ (173.5–6) by serving others. After her espousal, marriage and union with Christ, in this fourth stage she undergoes confinement (puerperium), and delivers her offspring (153.20–29). Preaching is not mentioned as central to this fourth stage, but puerperium is clearly a metaphor for evangelism: the fourth degree of love seems to be an affective version of the ‘pars optima’ of ‘mixed’ life (Pankhurst 1976, p. 207).

If ‘mixed’ life had been as well defined as the active and contemplative states, the model of perfection for which it represents the highest ideal might well have ossified in the same way the straightforward Martha–Mary model did; in that case, preachers would have been enshrined at the top of one hierarchy of the states of life, as solitaries were at the top of another. As should by now be evident, there are signs that some such process did take place. But in practice ‘mixed’ life, which had no firm biblical basis for existence, and was defined merely as a combination of features of the other two lives, was too fluid and vague a concept to take a firm hold in any one form. Indeed, it is far from clear how widespread or specific medieval knowledge of the concept was. For all their interest in the dignity of preachers, preaching and pastoral manuals show so little interest in the Gregorian notion of the preacher as contemplative, or in the active-contemplative model in general, that it is doubtful that most preachers thought of themselves as practising the ‘mixed’ life. The term itself is relatively rare – to the extent that its Middle English equivalent, ‘medled lyf’
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may not have been used until it was popularized, at the end of the fourteenth century, by Walter Hilton (Steele 1979, pp. 218-219, borne out by MED’s article on ‘medled’). It is true, on the other hand, that contemplatives sometimes describe themselves as blending contemplation with action (as we shall see shortly). But it is not always clear whether they are thinking explicitly in terms of a triadic model of active, contemplative and ‘mixed’ lives, or whether we are in the presence of some other model. For example, writings about contemplation often refer generally to its utilitas to humanity. In the quaestio about monks and solitaries by Aquinas mentioned earlier, Augustine is quoted as stating that hermits greatly benefit humanity by their example and their prayers (Oliger 1934, p. 247; see Augustine’s De Moribus Ecclesiae 1.31). In The Cloud of Unknowing we find the same claim made (with doubt-defying vagueness) for the spiritual exercise the author is enjoining on his eremitic disciple: ‘Alle men leyng in erpe ben wonderfuli holpen of his werk, pou wost not how’ (9.22–23). It is easy enough to discern a general relationship between this topos and the idea of ‘mixed’ life, but it would require extensive research to determine precisely what that relationship is. ‘Mixed’ life is only a single strand in a varied tradition of thinking about spiritual utilitas.

Given this fact, it is not surprising to find discussions of ‘mixed’ life which (for all Gregory’s praise) do not regard it as the highest form of the spiritual life. A good example is to be found in the brilliant variations which Hilton performs on ‘medled lyf’ in his English epistle Mixed Life, drawing widely on the literature of the lives (as Clark 1979 shows) for the unusual purpose of persuading a layman, who wished to leave his home and his dependents in order to live as a contemplative, to stay where he was.14 Just as prelates and opire curates, he says, divide their time, ‘sumtyme to ye sen werkes of actif lif, in help and sustenane of hem sylf and of here sugettes ... and sumtyme for to leuen al manere bisynesse outeward, and 3eue hem vnto priaeeres and meditacions’ (145–152), so some ‘temporal men’ must do the same, whatever their inclinations. Those who follow this ‘medled lyf’ do as Christ did (177–195), and follow the ‘ordre of charite’ (166). But while it is necessary for some, ‘mixed’ life is of less absolute value than the contemplative (223–237), just as labour at Christ’s feet is of less ultimate value than labour at his head (273–310). The relatively low status Hilton accords the activity of priests and ‘temporal men’ is of special significance in this epistle, where he is trying to praise their state as highly as he can, in order to give his correspondent some outlet for his spiritual ambitions. We find essentially the same view expressed in the Carthusian Nicholas Love’s translation of pseudo-Bonaventure’s Meditationes Vitae Christi, the Miroir of the Blessyd Lyf of Jesu Christ; here preaching is described as merely the higher part of the active life (p. 159, cited in Steele, pp. 138ff.). In spite of their sensitivity to the needs of those in the world, the long-standing monastic ideal of the contemplative life was still potent for these writers.

There is, then, no clear definition of the ‘mixed’ life, and no single answer to the question of whether it corresponds to the ‘perfect’ life. Steele (1979) finds so many different applications of the concept that it sensibly comes to no general conclusion about its status, suggesting that it remains, on the whole, the designation of a professional activity: ‘An acceptable summary of the evidence might suggest that “medled lyf” was thought to be not, indeed, the exclusive, but the special preserve of those officially charged with the spiritual care of the faithful’ (p. 224). This is my general conclusion also. Yet counter-examples present themselves in response even to this cautious formulation. The Consuetudines of Guigo, which lay down the rule of life of the Carthusian order, places great emphasis on copying books: ‘So that, since we cannot do so with our mouths, we may preach the word of God with our hands’ (cap. 28.3, discussed in Gillespie 1980). Here the most secluded of the contemplative orders lays claim to a special kind of preaching role, acknowledging a duty to engage in activities of more tangible spiritual utilitas than their daily round of prayer and asceticism. It seems that ‘mixed’ life was a concept of such plasticity that almost all could regard themselves as sharing in its rather uncertain prestige.

This sketch of medieval models of the perfect life, and of the prestige attached to various forms of the religious life, has had to raise many issues and invoke a substantial body of religious literature. It is interesting, then, that while it is often hard to map his precise position on this multi-dimensional graph, Rolle’s writings do not manifest an abiding preoccupation with the whole range of subjects mentioned here: definitions of perfection, positions as to the legality and ideology of preaching, and questions about its status in relation to action and contemplation. Indeed, he addresses many of these issues explicitly, and in formal, semi-scholastic language.

His discussion of the active and contemplative lives in Incendium Amoris, cap. 21 is a case in point, for without being strictly a quaestio, it is a serious discussion of its subject, sharing many of the procedures, and some of the terminology, of Aquinas’s treatment of the lives in Summa Theologica (ii. ii, q. 182). The relative status of the two lives is introduced as a matter of doubt: ‘Dubitatur autem a quibusdam que sit magis meritoria et nobilior, scilicet, contemplativa vita an activa’ (204.20–21: ‘But some are in doubt which is nobler and of greater merit, the contemplative life or the active’). As in a quaestio, the wrong answer is considered first: some think that good works and preaching give active life the edge. But this is quickly denied (Rolle never expounds in detail any case he opposes): those who think it is ignorant of the contemplative life.15 Active life can boast works of mercy and preaching, but these ‘pertain to an accidental reward, which is joy of created good’ (205.12–13: ‘Talia opera pertinent ad premium accidentale, quod est gaudium de bono creato’); contemplative life is superior because its reward is a ‘premium essenciale’ (204.29), the joy of uncreated good: again, the language can be paralleled in Aquinas (ii. ii, q. 182, art. 2, reply obj. 1). Rolle’s analysis of the two lives goes on to discuss the fact that contemplative angels...
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(seraphim) are higher than active ones (archangels), and to insist that to live is better than to preach — the major emphasis of the second half of the chapter is, indeed, on the status of preaching. We are told, in concessory style, that there are several ways to please God, one (in an interesting echo of Guido’s Consuetudines) being to manifest one’s preaching by writing (206.20–21). Lastly it is reiterated that combining active and contemplative lives is almost impossible; Christ and Mary did so, but ordinary mortals can combine preaching only with the lower forms of contemplation. Here Rolle is in disagreement with Aquinas, who claims that contemplative and active lives can be combined (Summa Theologica ii.i.1, q. 182, art. 3). Steele’s analysis of this chapter (1979, pp. 214–216) suggests that its use of Christ and the Virgin is polemical, since both were usually taken as models of ‘mixed’ life. If this is so, this chapter displays a firm grasp of the principles and topoi of treatments of the lives, while pursuing a thoroughly conservative line of opposition to ‘mixed’ life.

Rolle is also interested in and knowledgeable about the question of whether the coenobitic or the solitary life is to be preferred — agreeing, of course, with the traditional answer, and arguing his case several times and with some vehemence. Emile Arnould has shown that one such argument, in Melos Amoris, cap. 47, again follows much of the form of the quaestio (1937); the same is true when the issue is raised in Super Canticum Canticorum (pp. 20–29), and to an extent in the discussion of solitude in Incendium Amoris, caps. 13–14. In Melos Amoris, Rolle proceeds by argument and counter-argument, quoting an authority against his position (Anselm), refuting him out of Matthew’s gospel (11.11), and showing that Augustine’s words about monks do not imply that he thought them superior to solitaries; here he brings all the apparatus of scholastic debate to bear on the issue. The passage in Incendium Amoris is looser, but many of the authorities mentioned also occur in quaestiones on the solitary life. Cap. 13 opens by quoting Ecclesiastes 4.10, ‘Woe to one who is alone’, and glossing the phrase in words Margaret Deanesley suggests (note on 180.2–3) are adapted from Hugh of St Victor: ‘Ille enim solus est cum quo Deus non est’ (180.2–3: ‘For someone is alone only when God is not with him’); verse and gloss occur in one of the quaestiones printed by Oliger (1934, p. 250). Two of these same quaestiones use the career of St Cuthbert, who was bishop, monk and finally hermit, as an example to prove their case (pp. 253, 256); Rolle also writes of the saint leaving his bishopric for an anchoritic life as proof of the superiority of the latter (181.11–12: ‘Beatus Cuthbert ab episcopatu ad anchoriticam vitam transivit’). Such points of contact suggest that he knew quaestiones on the subject of solitaries and monks, and wanted to indicate that he was working within a previously defined tradition.16

Rolle’s position on the contemplative life is therefore traditional, indeed old-fashioned; ‘mixed’ and monastic lives get short shrift when set against the eremitic life, which is the highest form of the spiritual life. Super Canticum Canticorum sums his whole case up in a long sentence:

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Cum ergo constat vitam contemplativam digniorem esse et magis meritoriam quam activa vita, et omnes viros contemptionem solituidinem amantes et precipue in amore divino ferventes, liquet profecto quod, non monachi vel alii, quicumque ad congregacionem collecti, summi sunt, aut maxime Deum diligunt, set solitarii, contemplacione sublimati, qui, pro magno eterni amoris gaudio quod sicient, in solitudine sedere incessanter concupiscunt. (26.26–27.7)

[Thus, since it is established that the contemplative life is woe of a meriter than the active life, and that all contemplative men love solitude and burn pre-eminent in the divine love, it is surely clear that neither monks nor any others who are gathered together as a congregation are the highest, or love God the most; rather, it is solitaries, lifted up into contemplation: who, for the great joy in eternal love that they feel, desire to sit unceasingly in solitude.]

Since Rolle was a hermit, this is the position we would expect him to adopt. However, he also displays less predictable interests and attitudes. For example, while cap. 21 of Incendium Amoris gives preaching a relatively low status, some of his other works show a special interest in preaching. Judica Me, a work he wrote for a secular priest, contains two model sermons, and indicates his awareness of the laws and responsibilities governing the magisterium of a preacher. Thus he states that a secular priest must have ‘bona vita, scientia recta, predico discret’ (Judica Me 20.8–9: ‘A good life, correct knowledge, proper preaching’), a list of qualities typical of those expected of the preacher (as outlined in cap. 1 of Speculum Christiani; see also Minnis 1986, pp. 89–91); and he is aware, indeed regretfully so, that as a hermit who is not in religious orders he is not allowed to preach but must confine himself to teaching (Judica Me 18.18–20). In Melos Amoris he complains that people are being licensed to preach who do not possess the requisite knowledge: ‘Sed errant nunc undique miseros mittentes qui oraculam ignotam clause Scripture... ac prohibent preces quos preliberes sermones’ (Melos Amoris 152.17–19: ‘But now [bishops] err, sending everywhere wretches who are ignorant of the secrets of the Scriptures; they prohibit the pre-eminent ones from professing sermons’). Again the note of regret is clear. His interest in preaching also causes him to mention, both in Melos Amoris and Emendatio Vitae, the aurole that the preacher will receive in heaven. Melos Amoris declares: ‘Predicador perfectus puerus parturit ad pacem portandam, et capiet coronas quia captivos convertit coram Cunctipotente’ (152.12–14: ‘Perfected as a preacher, he brings forth boys to bear peace and will capture crowns in the presence of the Omnypotent for converting captives’); here the ‘coronas’ are aureoles, while the phrase ‘pueros parturit’ is a reminiscence of Richard of St Victor’s use of the term puerperium to describe the fourth degree of passionate love. Emendatio Vitae states that contemplatives who continue to preach will merit an aureole (f. 142r. 4–5: ‘caeteris operibus aureolum proper suam praedicationem merentur’). As we shall see, both works display a far more sympathetic attitude to the ‘mixed’ life than we found in Incendium Amoris — and in both, we again find Rolle well up on a complicated subject.
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Rolle’s eremitic career was thus enacted within his awareness of a series of conflicting views of the best way to live, and he thought of his life, and the lives of those for whom he wrote, in terms of these views. But the formal question of his status as a hermit was not the only thing affecting his claim to authority. As a mystical writer whose materia was his own experience, he was also deeply aware of contemporary notions about the relationship between such experience, the attainment of sanctity, and the wielding of spiritual and literary authority; indeed, throughout his life he was more concerned to extol his own experience than to assert the supremacy of the eremitic life. By way of rounding off this contextualization of Rolle’s career, it will thus be useful to sketch some of the issues associated with those key late medieval terms, auctoritas and experientia, after first looking at the genealogy of the particular kinds of religious experience Rolle spent his life celebrating.

III: AFFECTIVE EXPERIENCE AND SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY

If one tendency of late medieval religious culture was, as I stated, an increasing institutionalization, another current of equal importance ran in a different direction: towards a greater emphasis on affective experience. Signs of this are omnipresent, but among the earliest and most significant was a radical shift in the way Christ was depicted, described and addressed. From the late eleventh century on, the old image of a victorious warrior God who was to be feared and rendered loyal homage began to be replaced by that of a humanized crucified Saviour, whose death should evoke violent feelings of grief, compassion and love. Such feelings were cultivated in what may have been a new practice, Passion meditation, an individual and often exclusively affective exercise in imagining, and imaginatively responding to, the events of Christ’s death in the minutest and most painful detail. By the end of the fourteenth century, written meditations and longer affective biographies of Christ were established genres of Middle English literature. But the Latin sources of this literature are older: portions of Anselm’s Orationes sive Meditationes (c. 1100), or of meditations that came to be attached to Anselm’s (such as those of John of Fécamp and Aelred); dozens of passages lovingly culled from the works of Bernard (d. 1153) and various ‘Bernardine’ writers; and several remarkable thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century works, such as the Stimulus Amoris (by James of Milan) and the Meditationes Vitae Christi (probably by John of Caulibus), both of which were attributed to Bonaventure. Rolle knew most or all of these writings, and shared their assumptions about the vital role of affective experience as an agent of spiritual regeneration. He was probably the author of the most elaborate and arguably the best of the English Passion meditations (Meditation B), and his recommendation of the practice of meditating on Christ’s life and death at various phases of the spiritual life may have had a significant impact on the development of Middle English devotional literature, and assuredly did on the spiritual lives of thousands of medieval readers. He was also a celebrated exponent of a related but more abstract devotion to the humanity of Christ, the ‘devotion to the Holy Name of Jesus’, and wrote copiously in Latin and English in praise of that name (as oil poured out, medicine for the soul, honey for the mouth and music in the ears), in terms which show him both fully engaged on a personal level and well aware of the sources of this devotion: passages of Bernard’s Sermones super Cantica Canticorum (especially number 15), the great Bernardine hymn, Dulcis Ihesu Memoria (c. 1200), and an elaborate thirteenth-century poem by John of Hoveden, the Philomena. Rolle drew on these works because they spoke to his experience; Christ was evidently in some sense present to him, and the experience of intimacy with Christ was of great significance to his spiritual life, as it is to many of his writings.17

However, as we shall see in more detail in Chapter 2, Rolle’s experiential spirituality was not in fact centred around the humanity of Christ, but around his own sensations of passionate love for God, which he took as manifestations of the presence of the Holy Spirit in his soul, and (it seems, though he is not clear on this point) of his union with God. It will become clear that there is much in his depictions of the symptoms and effects of divine love that is untraditional. But in general terms his discussions of love themselves belong to well-defined literary and mystical traditions, which developed alongside the devotion to the humanity of Christ (often overlapping with it) but are distinct from it. Rolle held that the soul’s ascent to God takes place through the ordering of the faculty of love, the affectus, so that it turns its back on its former, secular, objects, and pours itself out in a measureless desire for God, a desire which is equivalent to mystical union. The theological positions underlying this general type of mysticism were fully articulated in the thirteenth century by Bonaventure, whose affective psychology, as Gillespie shows (1982), can be a useful tool in analysing Rolle’s didactic procedures. Yet Rolle himself may not have been more than dimly aware of Bonaventure’s thought (see Moyes 1988, vol. 1, pp. 2–4). The discussions of love and its role in uniting the soul with God on which he most clearly draws are from the twelfth century, and share with his own writing an elaborately rhetorical approach to their subject that, coupled with a daring sense of theological possibilities, makes for reading which is in itself (as it is clearly meant to be) an affective experience. Two of the discussions I am alluding to, the account of the four degrees of love in Bernard’s De Diligendo Deo and the whole of Richard of St Victor’s De Quattuor Gradibus Violentiae Caritatis, follow much the same pattern, being descriptions of the way the soul ascends to God by successive transformations of the affective faculty. Bernard’s version of these transformations is precise: first we love ourselves for our own sake; next we come to love God, but still for our own sake; then we ascend to love God for the sake of his innate attributes; and in the fourth and final stage, unattainable in this life except in brief moments of mystical union, we love ourselves only for the sake of God. Richard takes elements of this pattern from Bernard, but his degrees of ‘violent’ love (insuperabilis, insep-
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It is that love loves is often almost forgotten. In some of the works inspired by Richard, like the anonymous *Tractatus ad Severinum de Gradibus Caritatis* or Gerald of Liège’s *Quinque Incitamenta ad Deum Amandum Ardenter*, the emphasis on love as an experience in and of itself is even more marked, and the line of thought is constantly being interrupted by affective exclamations or carefully wrought tropes of inexpressibility. I have found no evidence that Rolle knew these later works, but like them he often seems to think of love as an experience in its own right, and like them his writing lacks the underlying theological clarity of Hugh and Richard. His own passages in praise of love, somewhat in the style of Hugh, are often very fine, but are oddly detached from any sense of the larger place love occupies in the Christian universe. When he writes of his mystical experiences of heat, sweetness and song, he has the habit of treating them essentially as inner sensations which, while they have considerable metaphysical implications and are often said to have been sent by God, can be described with only cursory reference to the fact that the sole purpose and condition of their existence is to be directed back to God. In theological and conceptual terms, this is no doubt a bad thing, and may well account for much of the modern criticism that has been directed at Rolle by theological scholars (see, e.g., Knowles’s influential critique in *The English Mystical Tradition* (1961), chapter 4). But in affective and rhetorical terms it is, if anything, an advantage, for it enables Rolle to communicate a remarkably tangible sense of his experience, making it manifest to us in a way which leaves Hugh’s account of love (though hardly Richard’s) seeming cold by comparison. Besides, if we see this aspect of Rolle’s works as situated within a late-medieval tradition of writing about passionate love for God, it becomes clear that he is doing little more than exploiting affective possibilities latent within an existing literary mode which almost from the start had tended to be more celebratory than analytic.18

When Rolle writes of his highly original experiences of mystical love he does so with at least the general sanction of earlier writers such as Bernard and the Victorines, and hence within a set of assumptions he could have expected much of his audience to share, or at least recognize. This is important to bear in mind when confronting the experiences themselves and the fact that they seem to have no significant predecessors in mystical tradition, for it implies that Rolle’s early readers may have been less startled by (and less suspicious of) the experiences than we might expect them to be, or indeed be ourselves. In practice, the complexities of his predicament as a writer seem to have little to do with the originality of his mystical subject-matter in itself; they reside, rather, in his continuing determination to argue that his experiences can legitimately be seen as normative, and thus as possessing authority, both over the reader and in the context of an affective mystical tradition some of whose tenets they challenge. Rolle writes explicitly in order to change the way people think about and engage in affective mysticism, and does so on the basis of his interpretation of a particular set of events in his own life. Yet it is not the events themselves, but the claims they make on his readers – and indeed
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on the Church as a whole – that (as we shall see) set alarm-bells ringing in work after work.

That such claims, however problematic they are, are even possible, has to do with a complicated late-medieval sense of the ways in which contemporary personal experience interacts with the normative structures handed down by tradition, within both religious and secular cultures. The idea of authority has been seen in various lights as I have sketched different contexts for Rolle’s career during the course of this introduction. It has appeared as the Church; as a formal attribute of the office of the preacher; as an implied attribute of the most perfect state of human life (whatever that is taken to be); and, in the first part of this final essay, as something inherent in a spiritual or literary tradition, especially in the writers who are considered its founding auctores or auctitores. In the present context, authority is something quite different: it is a potential attribute of human experience itself, if such experience is (or can be described in such a way as to make it seem) genuine, powerful, meaningful and important enough to merit serious consideration. It would be unwise to underestimate the weight of significance accorded certain forms of personal experience during any part of the Middle Ages (as the perpetual vitality of the hagiographic tradition forcibly reminds us). But in the fourteenth century, this sense of significance was reserved especially for private and affective experiences, which, under the proper conditions, could come to be regarded as having importance for everyone, and thus as contributing to (perhaps even modifying) the tradition from which they sprang. Some of the clearest examples of this process at work are provided by late-medieval visionaries. As we saw, Julian of Norwich wrote her book on the understanding that her revelation was not in a true sense ‘private’ at all, but was sent by God to the whole Church. Thus not only was it incumbent on her to publicize it, it could be used as a yardstick with which to conduct a re-examination of the whole of Christian doctrine as it pertains to the nature of God. At one point, worrying over apparent discrepancies between her revelation and received Christian doctrine, she even distinguishes the two as respectively ‘the hygher dome [that] God shewed hym selfe in the same tym[e] [of the revelation]’ and ‘the lower dome [that] was lernyd me before tym[e] in holy chyrche’ (p. 488, 45.23–25). In a different vein, The Book of Margery Kempe provides numerous examples of an uneducated laywoman struggling to show that her intimacy with God makes her a figure of spiritual authority, both during her life and throughout the momentous process of the composition of her autobiographical saint’s life itself (Lochrie 1986). What is notable is how often she succeeds in gaining respectful notice, whether from other women or from many of the ecclesiastics she or her book encountered, from Archbishop Arundel himself, to the priest who acted as her amanuensis, to the Carthusians who respectfully annotated their copy of her work, to whoever it was who persuaded Wynkyn de Worde to print portions of it. Caroline Walker Bynum’s fine study of the spirituality of medieval women, Holy Feast

and Holy Fast (1987), shows that the positive attention Kempe at least sometimes attracted was itself a dim reflection of the greater power wielded by her Continental predecessors, whose intimacy with the reality of God made them objects of veneration in their own lifetimes. For their admirers (to adapt the opening of The Wife of Bath’s Prologue) it seemed as if these women knew truth by ‘Experience, though noon auctoritie were in this world’ – hence as if they were themselves authoritative embodiments of the truth. And though this view was contestable in particular instances – as her book testifies, many people (lay and cleric) regarded Kempe’s somewhat lurid manifestations of her religious experiencia as evidence that she was deluded, possessed, or mad, rather than divinely inspired – the principles underlying such deference to experiencia were widely accepted. An immediate predecessor of Julian and Margery Kempe, St Bridget of Sweden, is a good example of what was possible, for her revelations were treated as genuine during her own lifetime, were translated into Latin (albeit in an edited form), duly publicized (see Colledge 1996), and as a result were able to make a real impact on the way late-medieval people thought of heaven, hell and purgatory. In the career of St Bridget, we see experiential knowledge formally recognized and brought within the structure of institutional truth.

The increased prestige of personal experience of this kind is, of course, part and parcel of the rise of an affective and personally oriented devotion outlined above. One of the theoretical bases of this devotion, which forms an invaluable coordinate in plotting the somewhat shadowy notion of the authority of experience, can be traced in a distinction made by late-medieval thinkers between two kinds of knowledge: intellectual knowledge (scientia, or in some contexts scientia et scientia) and affective knowledge (sapientia, or scientia et sapientia). A.J. Minnis’s Medieval Theory of Authorship (1984, chapter 4) shows how this distinction was refined by and helped to structure discussions of the difference between human science, whose end is the acquisition of knowledge, and the divine science revealed in the Scriptures, the purpose of which is to convert the will to God. According to some theologians (notably Franciscan ones), the Scriptures are written in a variety of affective literary modes, because readers experience these more immediately and intimately than they do rational arguments. As Bonaventure says in the prologue to the Brevisioquium (cap. 4), ‘the affectus is moved more by examples than by arguments, more by promises than by reasons, more by devotions than by definitions’ (see Minnis 1984, p. 127). Thus Scripture itself aims to give its readers experiencia of the truths it articulates, and rewards those who look at it for wisdom rather than merely for knowledge. This way of thinking about the Scriptures both relies on and supports a number of assumptions about human psychology (in medieval terms, the structure of the soul), and about mystical theology (or in what form, and with which of its faculties, the soul is to be united with God). As a result, the distinction between scientia and sapientia easily came to be applied not only to literary modes but to the kinds of understanding possessed by individual Christians.
Richard Rolle and the invention of authority

So much is clear from the following passage, taken from a fourteenth-century translation (one of several) of Friar Lorens d’Orléans’s Somme le Roi (itself dated 1279): 

pe zifte of wisdom, pat clerkes clepen sapience ... is non ope r ping pan a sauersour knowynge, pat is a good sauvour and a grete delite in pe herte. For ope-rie wise knowhew pe wyne pe seep it in a faire pece or verre, and ope-rie wise he pat seep he, drynekep it, and sauoure it. Many philosophres knowen God bi pe creatures, as bi a myrour wher pei loked as bi resoun and bi vnderstandyng ... but pei ne feled neure ne ping bi taste of rigt loue ne bi deuociou. Also pe be many cristen, clerkes and lewedek, pat knowen hym wel bi billeue and bi pe bokes; but for pei han pe sauvour mysordayned bi synne, pei moyve no ping fele, no more pan a seke man may fynde sauvour in good mete. 

(The Book of Vices and Virtues, 272.6-273.2)

Here, sapiencia is the salvific knowledge of God that comes through personal experiencia of his good wine, which pagan philosophers and learned sinners lack; the distinction between the two modes of knowing is close to being treated as synonymous. It is not far from such language to an attitude which is suspicious of learning itself, and which exalts the ignorant for their intuitive love and understanding of God: an attitude which Rolle exemplifies in his dedication of Incendium Amoris to the ‘rudibus et indoctis’ (who prefer to love God than to seek presumptuously to understand him, like the ‘magnis theologis size mystici questionis implicatis’, 147.10–11); which is evident in certain parts of The Book of Margery Kempe; and which we find embodied most consciously (if also somewhat ambiguously) in the figure of Piers Plowman, the rustic who knows Truth ‘as kyndely as clerke doth hise bokes’ (B v.545). The pivotal role Langland gives to Piers in the development of his great didactic poem is a remarkable example of the authority that could be accorded experiential knowledge, even when it was unsupported by any large measure of scientia. For although it is Reason who (in passus V) preaches to the people, dressed as a bishop, it is Piers who then directs their activities and wins them Truth’s pardon, just as it is Piers who later ‘impugns’ Clergy and sets ‘alle sciencies at a sope save loue one’ (xviii.124), who gives Will (here an embodiment of the human affectus) his long tasting of the ‘apple’ of the Redemption (xvi–xviii), and who becomes identified (xviii.22–25) with the human nature of Christ. If Mary Davlin (1981) is right in claiming that the ‘kynde knowynge’ which Will seeks during the course of Piers Plowman is Langland’s translation of the term sapiencia, then Piers himself, as the poem’s richest and most moving embodiment of what such knowing involves, should be seen as a different kind of translation of the same concept.

Piers has authority within the dream world of Piers Plowman because he has personal experience of the truth. In an analogous way, the poem itself has a claim to didactic authority because its author can write of his personal experience of the series of events ordered and made meaningful by Piers. It was no doubt largely in order to make this chain of authority-through-experience clear that Langland framed his poem as a series of dream-visions interspersed with waking episodes in which the narrator reflects on what he has seen and heard. The third of these episodes (at the end of B vii), which occurs after Piers has torn the pardon he received from Truth and squabbled with the priest, acknowledges the poet’s dependence on Piers with especial force by implying that the latter’s incomprehensible and apparently misguided actions undercut Langland’s entire project, the elucidation of Will’s dreams. When the narrator quotes from the Disticha Catonis (11.31), “Sompnia ne cures” (alluding to the whole distich: ‘Take no account of dreams, for while asleep the human mind sees what it hopes and wishes for’) he is introducing the threatening possibility that the poem should not after all be regarded as an account of a true vision, but of a lesser kind of dream, a mere phantasm – and thus that the poem should be seen as no more than an entertainment, whose author is laying claim to a far greater degree of authority than is proper (vii.150, see also xii.23). While the episode as a whole seems to stand behind Piers (if a little doubtfully), it is not surprising that in the waking episode in passus vii the poem veers off to consider the scientia Piers has challenged, abandoning its hero for five whole passus (to xiii.123) and betraying a degree of nervousness and anxiety which is surely authorial as well as narrative. Only after Langland has investigated and in a certain sense exposed the pretensions of scientia in the third vision can he return the poem by degrees to a world in which the radical figure of Piers is again seen as possessing unchallengeable authority.

As a literary visionary who is writing a poem with theological pretensions, Langland is in much the same situation as that of any mystical visionary, in that formally the authority he would like his work to possess is dependent on the authenticity of literary material which coincides (whether fictionally or not) with his own experience. Yet this situation is by no means unusual among late-medieval poets, any more than it is among the mystics. It can be paralleled in the work of the other great medieval poet-theologian, Dante, especially in the Commenda itself, the authority of which at least ostensibly depends on our acceptance of a fictional premise: that Dante really went where he said he went. In a more general sense, it is analogous to the situations of all the writers, both religious and secular, who as the Middle Ages drew to a close found themselves more and more aware of the importance of their imaginative experientia, and of the awkward relationship between their own status as moderni and the weighty authority of the writers of the past, the ‘ancients’. Here it is useful to refer back to Minniss’s Medieval Theory of Authorship, which traces the evolution of attitudes to authors and authority between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries, taking as its overarching theme the ways in which two related processes contributed to the self-consciousness which was integral to the situation of the late-medieval author. (In both processes we can glimpse the omnipresent influence of affective spirituality.) The first was that whereby ‘uctoritas moved from the divine realm to the human’ (1988 edition, p. viii), as biblical commentators increasingly focussed on the multiplicity of the ways in which the Holy Spirit speaks to humanity through the Bible – hence on the distinctive
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characteristics of each individual book, and eventually on those of the human author or authors through whom the Spirit chose to communicate the truths contained in each book. Thus David, Solomon, Paul and John came to be treated more as individuals, less as mere mouthpieces of divine truth (and in their wake, increasing interest was also shown in the personal traits of secular authors such as Aristotle, Cicero or Ovid). The second concomitant process was that whereby auctoritas shifted ‘in some measure from the past to the present’ (ibid.), as modern writers laid progressively more confident claim to an authority in some sense equivalent to that of the ancients, sometimes appropriating the terminology and the methodology of biblical commentary to achieve their ends. Thus in the Vita Nuova and the Convivio Dante writes commentaries on his own poetry; in The Life of Dante Boccaccio treats a modern writer as an auctor whose status is equivalent to that of the ancients (just as Dante enrols himself among the great writers of Greece and Rome in Inferno iv); and in his ‘familiar letter’ to Cicero, Petrarch addresses a great auctor as a colleague of whom it is possible to make a respectful but critical appraisal (ibid., pp. viii–xiii, 211–217). In the late twelfth century Walter Map grumbled that in the eyes of his contemporaries ‘the only good auctor was a dead one’ (p. 12, Minnis’s paraphrase). By the end of the fourteenth century, this kind of attitude, though still alive, was in slow retreat. Yet the extraordinary alternations of ambition and self-doubt discernible in Langland’s poem, like the more poised ambiguities of Chaucer’s narrative persona, are a measure of the complicated situation in which educated writers found themselves not long after the death of Rolle: impelled to take themselves and their own experience as fourteenth-century moderns seriously, yet anxiously aware of the limits of their own authority and the ways in which it might be challenged. Rolle is far from being alone in having to ‘invent’ his own authority. While there are enormous differences of tone and context, the puzzled musings over what is to be his mater that afflict the Chaucerian poet-dreamer in The Parliament of Fouls and The House of Fame nonetheless have a real relationship with Rolle’s ostentatiously confident declaration, at the opening of Melos Amoris, that his subject-matter is the holiness of the moderns and how it equals that of the saints of long ago. In practice neither writer can assume the mantle of auctoritas untroubled by their awareness that their own experience has far less immediate weight than the continuing presence, in their respective traditions, of their great predecessors.

In this sketch of the problematic idea of the authority of experience, we have in a sense returned to the starting-point of this introduction, the difficult relationship that tends to exist between the inspired individual and the establishment. What is new is that in this specifically late-medieval context the ‘inspired individual’ need not necessarily be a mystic, and the ‘establishment’ need not correspond to the ecclesiastical institution; the model proves also to apply to the relationship between poets and their authoritative literary forebears, and may have other analogues as well. We will come back
to this point in the epilogue to this study, where I argue that an understanding of Rolle’s career has implications for the way we read many late-medieval writers, not only the mystics. For the present, however, it is time to begin our examination of that career, and of the laborious process whereby Rolle discovers, develops and elevates an interpretation of his own experiences and a self-conception based on those experiences.