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Games of Faith

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Richard Rolle: The Form of Living

It is no accident that we know more about the lives of Richard Rolle and Margery Kempe than about the other three writers with whom this book is concerned. Biographical details are not relevant to what the *Cloud*-author and Walter Hilton have to say, and about Julian we know only those circumstances which immediately impinge on her visionary experience. The thrust of their work points away from the particularities of individuality to engage in different ways with the significance of the Incarnation which for them provides the ultimate pattern of meaning for all men. It may also be important that the two most impersonal writers of these three, Walter Hilton and the *Cloud*-author, were both almost certainly professional religious and thus already established in a tradition of self-effacement. The details of Julian’s life are not known, but it is highly unlikely that she was professed at the time of her visionary experience – if at all. It is interesting that although she does begin her account with biographical experience, her concern is with its theological import for all.\(^1\) Richard Rolle and Margery Kempe found their own routes, not without difficulty, to mystical understanding. Neither of them was in religious orders and, whether or not either of them aspired to sainthood,\(^2\) both clearly felt that sharing their ‘confessions’ was an important social act.\(^3\) For Margery they are the substance of her book – for Rolle they enter into some of his writing and illuminate his teaching. With both Rolle and Margery Kempe more is known precisely because both were articulate about adopting a life-style which answered to their spiritual needs. Margery followed her own adaptation of the tradition of the *mulieres sanctae* and Rolle was a hermit; each exhibited extraordinary qualities within his or her role.

Such was Rolle’s charisma during his life that his grave at Hampole Priory in South Yorkshire just west of Doncaster,\(^4\) became a centre of pilgrimage where miracles were recorded. The deaf, dumb, insane and dead were all said to be restored at his tomb. Sometimes it appears that the mere act of measuring them in order to manufacture a candle of corresponding dimensions to burn at the tomb was sufficient to effect the cure. For instance, it is recorded that one woman, Joan of Sproatborough, fell into a millpool and in spite of not being rescued for an hour was then revived by prayer and by being ‘measured for a candle’\(^5\).

Towards the end of the fourteenth century an Office for St Richard Hermit was written for the Priory in the hope of his canonisation. It recorded the main events of his life, and modern scholarship has in the main verified it from independent documentary sources as well as from Rolle’s own writings.\(^6\) The picture that emerges is of a man both maddening and engaging in his inner spiritual drive, and in his search for a way of living appropriate to its demands. He had the freedom of spirit to cut through convention and authority if he felt it to be an impediment to his calling. Such courageous integrity can look like arrogance since it apparently rejected the means to an understanding of the faith acquired by the tested traditions of academic and spiritual disciplines or social *mores*. Yet his writings witness to an inner toughness and honesty which complement his sensitivity and spiritual receptiveness, and balance his obvious volatility. They compel respect for his ‘venture’ life-style risking to win the realities of his faith and also, on occasions, make vividly accessible the mental furniture of his faith. He is more poet than academic, or professional religious, and it is precisely because of his wilful integrity and gift for language that he is able to share a sense of the actual process – frequently frustrating – of the practice of spiritual discipline which for all the mystics is the weapon in the battle against the forces of darkness that self-evidently threaten to destroy human fulfilment. The discipline is the only means by which these forces are consumed and thus destroyed.

In a consumer society, where wealth is synonymous with money and thus both the currency and final *desideratum* in a process of endless consumption, people are in danger of knowing the ‘price of everything and the value of nothing’.\(^7\) The mystics, however, joyfully recognise a congruity between price and value. The discipline which all of them write about with varying levels of emphasis and directness is the only means in every sphere of human
activity by which the desideratum of love is liberated and all pain finally destroyed. In his Latin work Incendium Amoris (The Fire of Love) Rolle talks of it as kindling for the 'fire which consumes everything which is dark' (Prologue.4), an element which he recognises as the final reality. There is, however, a touching gap between the grandeur of the issues he recognises and the comical or exasperating hit and miss practical manner in which he engaged with them.

The Office tells us that he was born at Thornton Dale near Pickering in North Yorkshire. Such external evidence as there is points to his being the son of a fairly poor rural family who were tenants on the estate of the manor of Thornton Dale which, in 1335, was described as having:

a chief messuage worth in garden produce and herbage 13s 4d, arable lands and meadows, a watermill, a fulling mill, a common oven.

messuage: estate.

They managed to send Richard to school and at some time he attracted the notice of the lawyer-priest Thomas de Nevill, later Archdeacon of Durham, who gave him a grant to study at Oxford when he was about thirteen or fourteen years old. The first three years of his Oxford course of studies would have included grammar, logic and rhetoric (the trivium), after which the student had to attend formal sessions of dispute and argument before becoming a Bachelor of Arts and going on to the second part of the course, music, astronomy, geometry and arithmetic. There is no evidence that Rolle received his Bachelor's degree, and his frequent scathing remarks on the uselessness of scholarly argument as a means to the knowledge of God indicate that the intellectual training offered at Oxford would have been uncongenial to him. In The Fire of Love he writes:

Nowadays too many are consumed with a desire for knowledge rather than for love, so that they scarcely know what love is or what is its delight. Yet all their study should have been directed to this end, so that they might be consumed with the love of God as well. Shame on them! An old woman can be more expert in the love of God – and less worldly too – than your theologian with his useless studying. He does it for vanity, to get a reputation, to obtain stipends and official positions. Such a fellow ought to be entitled not ‘Doctor’ but ‘Fool’.

(5. 61)

Certainly he did not stay the full course which was seven years for the qualification of a Master's degree, the necessary precondition for further study of law, theology and medicine. He left when he was eighteen, presumably with the cry so often heard from those who look for instant wisdom in courses designed primarily to foster skills by which such discrimination may be attained: 'the course cannot give me what I am looking for'. The Office remarks that 'he desired rather to be imbued more fully and deeply with the theological doctrines of Holy Scripture than with the study of physical and secular science' which looks as if he left after the trivium. It continues:

In his nineteenth year . . . considering the uncertain term of human life, and the fearful end especially before the fleshly and the worldly, he took thought, by the inspiration of God, providently concerning himself (remembering his end), lest he should be taken in the snares of sin.

The Office, of course, was in the business of sanctification, but this account of Rolle's early passionate concern for a life-style which reflected his urgent sense of priorities is heard again later in his Fire of Love:

As adolescence dawned in my unhappy youth, present too was the grace of my Maker. It was he who curbed my youthful lust and transformed it into a longing for spiritual embrace. He lifted and transferred my soul from the depths up to the heights, so that I ardently longed for the pleasures of heaven more than I had ever delighted in physical embrace or worldly corruption. . . . Yet I was still living amongst those who flourished in the world, and it was their food I used to eat. And I used to listen to that kind of flattery which all too often can drag the most doughty warriors from their heights down to hell itself. But when I rejected everything of this sort to set myself to one purpose, my soul was absorbed with love for my Maker. I longed for the sweet delights of eternity, and I gave my soul over to love Christ with every ounce of my power. . . . From then on I continually sought quiet, and that although I went from one place to another. (15.91-2)

By the age of nineteen he was back at home, which was probably, by this time, in Yafforth about twenty-five miles from Thornton Dale, the way of development through the competitive channels of establishment institutions behind him, and his face turned
towards the alternative life-style of the recluse which he embarked on with a comically home-spun rite of passage.

Since it is clear that the vocation of hermit was officially recognised in the fourteenth century, the account of Richard's pursuit of his calling points to parental opposition and possibly a reluctance on Richard's part to commit himself to any officially supervised licensing. Certainly the Office states that he became a hermit 'without his father's knowledge and against his will . . . because he loved God more than his father in the flesh'. It looks as if he decided on a do-it-yourself habit modelled on those of Augustinian hermits who wore a basic white garment and scapulary which for outside wear were covered with a black cowl and hood tied round with a black leather thong. The Office tells us that he arranged for his sister to meet him in a nearby wood and to bring with her two of her over-dresses, one white and one grey, and his father's rainhoood. As soon as he got his hands on them he cut the sleeves off the grey dress and adapted those of the white one, then stripped off, and donned first the white dress and then the grey one as a sort of sleeveless cowl of a suitably penitential colour and finally the hood and 'thus, as far as was then possible to him, he contrived a confused likeness to a hermit'. As the implications of the purposes of this scarecrow figure dawned on her, his sister screamed out that he was crazy, and perhaps even threw herself at him to prevent his plan. The legend says that he 'drove her away from him menacingly' and took to his heels in flight from any possible prevention of his purposes by friends and family.

The next episode reported in the Office has the same eccentric opportunist quality. Whether by design or accident, Richard went to 'a certain church . . . where the wife of a certain worthy esquire . . . named John de Dalton, was accustomed to pray'. John Dalton was the younger son of a Lancashire family who feathered his nest by dubious means while carrying out the office of agent for the Earl of Lancaster as constable of Pickering Castle, a position he lost in 1322 as a result of the unsuccessful rebellion of the earl who was subsequently executed. Dalton was, however, granted his own estates again which included land at Pickering and further east near Snainton, first at Foulbridge and then at Kirkby Misperton. There is no certainty as to which church and manor house the account in the Office refers to, but it is highly probable that they were at Pickering. If this is correct Rolle was putting some distance between himself and his father but returning to territory known in childhood. In the church Richard fell to prayer with such absorption that Lady Dalton forbore to disturb him when she entered, but her son recognised him as a former Oxford student. The interest he attracted was greatly increased when, with the consent of the priest-in-charge, Richard preached at Mass with such charism that the congregation were moved to tears. He was subsequently invited home to dinner by the Daltons. His behaviour at the visit seems to suggest that he was a disturbing presence, since he did not turn up in the Great Hall as expected, but disappeared into a derelict and disused part of the house from whence he had to be fetched. At dinner he was utterly silent and tried to leave as soon as he had eaten sufficient but before the table was cleared. John Dalton eventually elicited the truth of his identity from him and offered him sanctuary as a hermit in his own home (perhaps Richard had been reconnoitring in his disappearance before dinner) and at his own expense. John Dalton’s action seems to have been very near in time to the crisis in his own life when he was temporarily imprisoned for his support of the Earl of Lancaster. The acceptance of Dalton as his patron by the uncompromisingly idealistic Richard seems odd, though he may not have realised the character of the man at this stage. Certainly both the account in the Office of his later career and the remarks he let drop in his own writings point to a friction in his situation which ultimately led him to leave the Daltons to seek a quiet place elsewhere. In The Fire of Love he lashes out at those who have spent 'their youthful energy in getting hold of others' property by hook or by crook' for their own worldly security and who use their authority aggressively (30.139–40). His own situation as a tame hermit to be shown off to guests by the lady of the house can hardly have suited him. The account in the Office of one such episode makes pious capital from the situation:

and a remarkable incident is recounted. We are told that the hermit was once sitting alone in his cell after dinner when there came to him the lady of the house . . . and many persons with her, and found him writing rapidly. They begged him to desist, in order to give them some words of edification, and for two consecutive hours he proceeded to give them excellent exhortations, while at the same time never ceasing his writing – and all the while what he was writing was not the same as what he was speaking.
devotion she broke out into the words ‘Gloria tibi Domine’, and the blessed Richard completed the verse which she had begun.  

There are difficulties about the dating of this episode. The *Office* continues with a description of a relapse of Margaret’s illness from which she was cured when Rolle promised her that she should never again suffer from it as long as he was alive. After several years, therefore, when the illness recurred, Margaret sent after Richard only to learn that he had died at the hour she was afflicted. Although the *Office* describes her as a recluse at the time of her cure, there is a discrepancy here between the date at which she was enclosed (1348) and the fact that several years elapsed between the cure and the relapse of her illness when Rolle died, since many manuscripts attest to Rolle’s death in 1348. Perhaps her cure took place while she was still at Hampole and the *Office* refers to her as a recluse because that is what she later became, or perhaps she had become an anchoresse while still at Hampole.

Rolle died at the height of the plague, but his reputation as a loved spiritual counsellor survived him — probably furthered by his disciple William Stopes who seems to have been a young religious and acted as Rolle’s literary executor after his death. There is doubt as to whether he is that ‘William’ for whom Rolle wrote, at the end of his life, the Latin treatise, *Emendatio Vitae*, translated into English in the sixteenth century.

Whatever the uncertainties of the precise dates, events and social connections in Rolle’s life it is clear from external and internal evidence that he felt increasingly compelled towards a solitary life because it facilitated contemplative inner life which was for him the reality to be cultivated above all other. To those who urged the perennial claims of the virtues of community living and quoted Ecclesiastes 4:9 “Woe to him who is alone when he falls; for he has not another to help him up”, Rolle answered:

> they do not define ‘alone’ as being ‘without God’ but understand it to mean ‘without company’.

*(Fire of Love, 13.82)*

While he condemned as pride the solitary life-style which arises from self-reliance rather than faith in God (14.87) he countered his opponents with another Scriptural quotation from Osee (Hosea) 2:14 interpreted as referring to the relationship between God and
the soul: 'I will lead her into solitude, and I will speak to her heart' (13.83). His whole life was a search for quietness in which the voice of God could be heard (see 15.92). While he recognised that the essence of this quietness is an inner condition, saying of those who know it:

many of their number, although they live physically among people, are mentally remote from them; they never falter in their heavenly longing, because in spirit they are far removed from a sinful way of life,

(13.83)

yet for him such remoteness had to be physical as well as spiritual. Perhaps his own impatient temperament made this especially essential in his case:

I myself fled to the wilderness when it proved no longer possible to live harmoniously with men, who, admittedly, were a frequent obstacle to my inner joy. Because I did not do the kind of things they did, they attributed waywardness and bad temper to me.

(27.128)

Certainly he believed that his inner feeling of being most alive, most engaged with real issues, in his contemplative experience, was a gift from God and that his whole integrity depended on his furthering a life-style which he believed enabled him to receive the gift, however strong the opposition he encountered:

Above all else I have always longed to sit and concentrate on Christ, and him alone. . . . But those who argued with me did not share this opinion, and tried to make me conform to their pattern. But I could not possibly desert the grace of Christ and accept the views of foolish men who were completely ignorant of all that was going on within me. I put up with all their talk, and I did what I had to do according to the state in which the Lord had placed me.

What he had to do was to 'live apart from men, as far as the needs of the body allow . . . continually upheld by him whom I love' (31.142).

CONTEMPLATIVE EXPERIENCE

In *The Fire of Love* Rolle gives a vivid account of his spiritual life as a progress from intellectual knowledge of the faith to 'kynde knowynge' — a progress to which all the mystics witness. Rolle can only talk about it in figurative terms. First comes the inner experience of a spiritual reality described as a door opening to reveal not only the face of the Beloved but a way of love by which he can be reached (15.92). Then Rolle describes two further stages in which his experience is illuminated as the truths of God on which he meditates are felt inwardly. First he feels what he calls heat which seems to be associated with creativity: 'an unusually pleasant heat. . . . from none of his creatures but from the Creator himself'. This leads to a sense of eternal harmony 'and I knew the infusion and understanding of heavenly spiritual sounds, sounds which pertain to the song of eternal praise and to the sweetness of unheard melody' (15.93).

In his account of the final stage, it is as if the unheard melody of which he had some intimation suddenly becomes audible and transposes all his experience into its terms:

In my prayer I was reaching out to heaven with heartfelt longing when I became aware, in a way I cannot explain, of a symphony of song, and in myself I sensed a corresponding harmony at once wholly delectable and heavenly, which persisted in my mind. Then and there my thinking itself turned into melodious song, and my meditation became a poem, and my very prayers and psalms took up the same sound. The effect of this inner sweetness was that I began to sing what previously I had spoken; only I sang inwardly, and that for my Creator.

(15.93)

The extent to which the senses actually play a role in Rolle's spiritual experience has been argued. Certainly later writers warn against mistaking unusual sense phenomena for genuine spiritual enlightenment. What does seem to be the case is that Rolle had an experience of what he understood as divine reality which transfigured his ordinary perception and that he could only express this in terms of the way men respond to the arts of music and literature. His meditation became a poem, his thinking became a song. Poems order experience and share it; understanding them and writing them involves an act of creativity, and in both activities there is a kind of joy involved when the order of words, or insight into the effect of that order, corresponds with the way things are. Bonaventura saw human craftsmanship (which included poetry) as an image of the creativity of God revealed in the Incarnation — 'for the Son of God is the “art of the Father”' — and known in the
contemplative union of the soul with God. The work of the craftsman is to realise an inner idea in a way that is beautiful, useful and enduring, and as his work is the object of his satisfaction and delight (‘if it were in his power to produce an effect which would know and love him, this he would assuredly do’), so man is created for God who alone satisfies his nature. The idea points to a kind of dynamic joy of understanding between creator and creation; that it is not constantly felt is due to sin. 34 Rolle seems to witness to an experience where the barrier to the direct experience of that joy is lifted; the Word that informs all words, the harmony behind all music, becomes real to him; ‘my meditation became a poem . . . I began to sing what previously I had spoken’ (15.93).

It is small wonder that he sought quiet and freedom from external pressure to follow his inner vision. His search for a style of living which would enable him to cultivate his contemplative gifts led him to equate, perhaps sometimes confuse, an interior state with the external mode of achieving it. 35 Certainly he seems to define active life in terms of outward works and to see it as inferior to the inward experience of contemplation:

Some people are doubtful as to which life is the more meritorious and excellent, the contemplative or the active. To many of them the active life seems more deserving because of the amount of good works and preaching it performs. But this is the mistake of ignorance, because they do not know what the contemplative life stands for. True there are many actives who are better than some contemplatives. But the best contemplatives are superior to the best actives. So we say therefore that the contemplative life, taken in itself, is sweeter, nobler, worthier, and more meritorious in respect of its fundamental principle, which is delight in uncreated good; in other words it is because this is the life which loves God more ardentely. Therefore, the contemplative life, if it is properly lived, issues in a greater love of God, and demands more grace, than the active life. . . . Actives to be sure, serve God with their toil and outward activity, but they spend little time in inner quiet. And the result is that they can only rarely and briefly know spiritual delight. On the other hand contemplatives are almost always enjoying the embrace of their Beloved.

(21.109-10)

For Rolle, because God looks on the heart and not the outward appearance, and judges the will not the deed, it seems self-evident that the contemplative life, seeking to be one with God’s love,

must be preferred, because actives are too distracted by what they do.

But if he sometimes tends to distinguish active from contemplative life in terms of life-style, he is also aware of the strenuousness of contemplative life and stresses that solitude alone will not yield the fruits of contemplative life. In The Fire of Love he pinpoints the experience witnessed to by all mystics of a strenuous inner effort which although it is the precondition of contemplative experience cannot actually produce it. As the Cloud-author might say, contemplative understanding comes from nowhere and is experienced as a gift:

We must not be surprised if a man does not attain the heights of contemplation or experience its sweetness at the beginning of his Christian life. It is quite simple: to acquire contemplation means much time and hard work, and it is not given to anyone any time anyhow, even though its possession brings unspeakable joy. It is not within man’s power to achieve it, and however great his efforts they will be inadequate. But God is generous, and it is granted to those who truly love him, and who have sought Christ beyond what men consider possible.

(31.142-3)

THE FORM OF LIVING

The events of Rolle’s life as given in The Fire of Love and the Office illustrate his growing discoveries in his game of faith. Rolle was a prolific writer in Latin about his mystical theology. 37 His English texts which almost certainly belong to the last ten years of his life relate to his role as a spiritual counsellor, and they are consistent with what we know of him – their strength lying not in systematic exposition but in his skill with language to illuminate the goals of spiritual life and so awake his readers to their reality. It is as if they might be responses to requests to ‘write up’ exchanged conversation and counsel – some are lyrics and short prose poems on the nature of contemplative life. 38 This chapter will introduce Rolle’s qualities as an English writer about mystical experience by concentrating chiefly on two kinds of text. The first, The Form of Living, is a treatise which Rolle wrote for Margaret de Kirkeby to explain the shape of contemplative life to which it is an excellently manageable introduction. It is characteristic of Rolle’s mystical theology, and it