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Fantasy and Language
in The Cloud of Unknowing

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THE CLOUD OF UNKNOWING is a treatise on contemplation, dating probably from the later Fourteenth Century. In it the anonymous author sets out to instruct a young ‘spiritual friend’ in the via negativa, a way of contemplation associated with the mystical writer known as pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. His teaching, baldly summarized, is as follows. God himself is unknowable. There lies between him and the human soul ‘a darkness, and as it were a cloud of unknowing, thou wost never what’. This darkness is perpetual, except that God may ‘sumtime paraventure send oute a beme of gostly light, perusing this cloude of unknowing that is bitwix thee and him, and schewe thee sum of his priveté’ (62). Such moments provide the supreme rewards of the contemplative life; but the author says that he dare not attempt to describe them, and would not wish to do so even if he dared. His subject is not what God, but what man can do: the ‘work’ of the contemplative. This work is two-fold. The via negativa first requires the contemplative to ‘foryste ale the creatures that ever God maad and the werkys of hem’ (16). The author expresses this idea in the image of a ‘cloud of forgetting’, a cloud which, unlike the cloud of unknowing, lies underneath the soul of the contemplative, cutting him off from all thoughts of created things. To forget these things is his negative work. His positive work is to strive to pierce the darkness above him ‘and smite apon that thick cloude of unknowing with a scharp darte of longing love’ (26). Man cannot know God; but
he can love him, with a ‘nakid entente directe unto God for himself’ (58). So, by the action of will rather than mind, he may hope to pierce the darkness in which God is enclosed, and achieve the mysterious goal of contemplation.

The author, writing with a certain informal frankness for the benefit of his friend, insists throughout upon the extreme difficulty of this contemplative work, even for those who are ready to devote themselves to it. The difficulties have their root in the very nature of the human mind, which the author expounds in one of the few systematic sections of his book (Chapters 63 to 67). The soul, he says, has four active powers (‘worishing mightes’): Reason, by which we may distinguish good from evil; Will, by which we may choose the good and love God; Imagination, by which we ‘portray alle images of absent and present thinges’; and Sensuality, by which we ‘have bodely knowing and feling of alle bodely creatures’. Since the chief source of the difficulties discussed in The Cloud lies in the ‘imagination’, the chapter devoted to this power (Chapter 65) is of special interest. Before the Fall of Man, we are told, imagination was ruled by reason. ‘Bot now it is not so. For bot yf it be refeinid by the light of grace in the resoun, elles it wil never sese, sleping or waken, for to portray diverse unordeined images of bodely creatures; or elles sum fantasye, the whiche is nought elles bot a bodely conceite of a goostly thing, or elles a goostly conceite of a bodely thing. And this is evermore feine and fals, and aneste [joined] unto errorr’ (117). This passage, upon which my whole discussion is founded, asserts that the disordered imagination feeds the mind with ‘fantasies’—that is, either physical apprehensions (‘conseites’) of spiritual things, or else spiritual apprehensions of physical things. I shall return later to the mysterious counsel against the ‘goostly conceite of a bodely thing’, after having first considered the less puzzling kind of fantasy: ‘a bodely conceite of a goostly thing’.

II

The ‘bodely conceite of a goostly thing’ presents any contemplative with a problem which is simple to state but difficult to surmount. The via negativa, expounded here in the two cloud images, requires him to ‘forget all the creatures that ever God made’ and see God blind, as it were, without any attempt to ‘conceive’ him in creaturely terms. But the nature of the fallen imagination is such that, even if we successfully stop thinking about created things, we will still go on thinking with them. The author allows, admittedly, that this difficulty may be overcome ‘by the light of grace in the reason’; but such grace is not to be counted on, and in its absence the contemplative faces an endless struggle to transcend bodily ‘fantasies’ arising from his disordered imagination. ‘Al the whiles that the soule wonith in this deedly body, evermore is the scharpeness of oure understanding in beholding of alle goostly thinges, but most speicaly of God, medelid with sum maner of fantasie; for the whiche oure werk schuld be unelene, and bot if more wonder were, it schuld lede us into moche errore’ (33).

The author is acutely aware of how the readers of his own book may fall into this kind of error through an ‘unclean’ response to what he has written: ‘Be weare that thou conceive not bodily that that is seide goostly. For trywely I telle thee that bodely and fleschely conseyes of hem that han curious and imaginaty wittis ben cause of moche errore’ (94). ‘Curious’ here implies a love of abstruse speculation for its own sake—a quality which the author regularly associates with ‘imaginativeness’ when sketching the kind of reader he does not want. The right kind of reader, by contrast, approaches spiritual mysteries in humility, not looking for exact or literal formulations; but even he will need constant warning and guidance. Thus, the author explains how metaphors drawn from physical experience occur in the discussion of sacred subjects. Christ, for example, cannot literally be said to ‘stand’ in heaven. ‘By stonding is understonden a redyness of helping. And herefore it is seide comunely of oo frend to another, whan he is in bodely bataile: “Bere thee wel, felaw, and fight fast, and yve not up the bataile over lightly; for I schal stonde by thee.” He meneth not only bodely stonding, for paraventure this bataile is on hors and not on fote, and paraventure it is going and not stonding’ (109). Here the author does no more than point out, in his
customary downright style, an everyday metaphor which may occur in spiritual discourse. But spiritual discourse differs from its everyday counterpart in being radically metaphorical throughout. Even simple little words like ‘up’ and ‘down’, ‘in’ and ‘out’, are to be understood by the contemplative in transferred, spiritual senses (114). For the via negativa transcends all physical categories—sensory, spatial, motor, and the rest—and leads, in terms of ordinary language, ‘nowhere’. The author expresses this uncompromising truth in a memorable passage towards the end of The Cloud: ‘When another man wolde bid thee gader thy mightes and thy wittes holiche within thyself, and worship God there—thof al [though] he seye ful wel and ful trewly, ye! and no man trewlier, and he be wel consev’d—yit for feerde of disseite and bodely conceiving of his wordes, me list not bid thee do so. Bot thus wil I bid thee. Loke on no wise that thou be within ythe thyself. And schortly withoutin thyself wil I not that thou be, ne yit aboven, ne behinde, ne on o side, ne on other. “Wher than,” seist thou, “schal I be? Nowhere, by thy tale!” Now trewly thou seist wel; for there wolde I have thee’ (121). The masterly timing of this last exchange illustrates how the author’s concern to engage with his reader serves to animate his prose.

Those who, despite such warnings, fall victim to the ‘bodily conceiving’ of spiritual words enter a realm of fantasy. The author dwells upon this with a certain dry humour. It is a dim and ridiculous region lying between, or outside, the two real worlds of the body and the spirit. Its errors or ‘deceits’ are sometimes quite simple, as when young disciples, hearing that men should lift their hearts up to God, stare up into the sky: ‘As fast they stare in the sterres as they wolde be aboven the mone, and herkin when they schul here any aungelles singe oure of heven’ (105). It is easy enough to explain, as the author duly does, that God is not there to be seen in the sky; but that is not the end of the matter. A disciple may be weaned away from naive physical literalism and still fall victim to ‘fantasies’ of a more insidious kind. Thus, in Chapter 52, the author gives a vigorous account of how conscientious contemplatives may misapply the physical notion of

‘inwardness’. ‘They reden and heren wel sey that they schul leve utward worching with their wittes, and worche inwarde; and forth that they knowe not whiche is inward worching, thorefor they worche wronge. For they turne their body wittes inwarde to their body ayens [against] the cours of kinde; and streinin hem, as they wolde see inwarde with their bodyly iyen, and heren inwarde with their ieren, and so forthe of alle their wittes, smellen, tastype, and felin inwarde. And thus they reverse hem ayens the cours of kinde, and with this coriousté they travaile their imaginacion so undiscreetly, that at the laste they turne here braine in here hedes’ (96). Such well-meaning attempts to internalize ‘outward workings’ lead to a form of inward activity which, attempting to be both physical and spiritual at once, succeeds in being neither. Men who try to ‘see inwards with their bodily eyes’ will not see at all, either physically or spiritually. They ‘feine a maner of worching, the whiche is neither bodily ne goestly’ (23, cf. 96). Such activity is against the course of nature (cf. 23, 124) and results only in an unnatural ‘straining’ (cf. 85, 89, 91 etc.) both of the spirit and of the body. In tracing these abortive internalizations of sensory and motor experiences, the author shows considerable perception. His discussion of how the words ‘in’ and ‘up’ may be misconceived (Chapters 51 to 61), in particular, explores some of the obscure processes by which the mind adopts spatial categories in thinking about non-spatial matters.

However, the discussion of ‘bodily conseites of a goostly thing’ in The Cloud is not entirely negative. A contemplative cannot be always ‘nowhere’. Fantasies are inevitable, and not always distracting. Some may even be recommended, if only to beginners, as positively helpful. The author first suggests this in his discussion of two ‘goostly sleightes’, or spiritual tricks, in Chapter 32. If a contemplative finds difficulty in controlling his thoughts of sin, he should try to ‘loke as it were over theire schuldrres, seching another thing; the whiche thing is God, enclisid in a cloude of unknowing’ (66). The second trick is more subtle: ‘When thou felist that thou maist on no wise put hem doun, koure thou doun under hem [the thoughts of
sin] as a cheitif and a coward overcomen in bataile, and think that it is bot a foly to thee to strive any lenger with hem: and therfore thou yeeldest thee to God in the handes of thin enmyes' (66-7). Here the author substitutes for the familiar fantasy of spiritual warfare a fantasy of capitulation which, as he goes on to explain, can lead to self-knowledge and humility and so to God. Hence his striking paradox: 'thou yeeldest thee to God in the handes of thin enmyes'. In a later chapter he suggests another device of the same sort. Instead of trying to show God how much he desires him, the contemplative may think of himself as trying to hide his desire, 'right as thou on no wise wildest lat him wite how faine thou woldest see him and have him or fele him' (87). The author apologises for suggesting such a childish trick. He wishes, he says, 'by soche a hid schewing byn thee oute of the boistousté [grossness] of bodely feling into the pureté and deppness of goostly feeling' (88). The fantasies of hiding and capitulation are (or may be) less 'physical' than those of showing or fighting—less likely, that is, to be misconceived in a physical sense. 'For thou and I, and many soche as we ben, we ben so abil to conceve a thing bodily, the whiche is seide goostly, thot paraventure, and I had boden thee schewe unto God the stering of thin herte, thou schuldest have maad a bodely schewing unto him . .' (90).

III

Above everything else the author of The Cloud of Unknowing prizes 'pureté and deppness of goostly feling'; and he is poignantly aware, as we have seen, of how 'bodily conceits' always threaten to contaminate this purity of feeling, in himself as much as in his readers: 'we ben so abil to conceve a thing bodily, the whiche is seide goostly'. However, such 'bodily conceits' are not the only sort of fantasy thrown up by the workings of the disordered imagination. The author's formal definition of 'fantasye', quoted earlier, includes two varieties: 'a bodely conceite of a goostly thing, or elles a goostly conceite of a bodely thing'. The first limb of this definition is undoubtedly the more important, so far as concerns the spiritual purpose of The Cloud; but the second has significance too—especially, as I shall suggest later, for an understanding of the book's style.

'A goostly conceite of a bodely thing': it may seem strange that this sort of fantasy should be coupled with the other, in a work such as The Cloud, as a potent source of deception, falseness and error. Spiritual apprehension of physical things does not, after all, sound like a danger for contemplatives. One might even expect them to cultivate it. However, the implication of the author's double definition seems to be—must be, indeed—that the physical world has its own necessary and proper integrity as well as the spiritual world, and that to conceive either world in terms of the other imperils the integrity of both. The author nowhere states the matter in quite this form; but his real respect for what I have called the 'integrity' of the physical world appears unmistakably in many places in his work.

One such place is the beginning of Chapter 48. Here the author anticipates, as he often does, a misunderstanding. His warnings against 'bodily showings' of the heart to God do not mean, he says, that a contemplative should never express his devotion in audible words, 'God fordebe that I schuld departe that God hath couplid, the body and the spirit; for God wil be servid with body and with soule, bothe togeders, as seymly is, and rewarde man his mede in blis bothe in body and in soule' (90). Body and soul are both the creation of God, and both will participate in the joys of heaven after the general resurrection. Such ideas represent an orthodoxy established very early in Christian tradition. Only heretics, such as the Manicheans, rejected the body in the interests of the soul. God created 'bothe togeders', and their coupling does not—or should not—impair the integrity of either. The author's sense of this two-fold integrity appears even in his repetition (which might otherwise seem merely rhetorical) of small function-words: 'the body and the spirit', 'with body and with soule', 'in body and in soule'.

But what does it mean for God to be served 'with body and with soule, bothe togeders, as seymly is'? Other passages in The Cloud make the author's ideal of
'seemliness' quite clear. A discussion of the 'bodily bearing' of contemplatives, in Chapters 53 and 54, is particularly illuminating. The author here describes an amusing variety of eccentric habits: wild gestures, staring eyes, piping voices, gaping mouths, and the like; and he expresses his disapproval of them in no uncertain terms: 'but if God schewe his merciful miracle to make hem sone lewe of, they schul love God so longe on this maner that they schul go staring wood to the devil' (98). Such 'unsemely and unordeinde contenandes' (99) are either simple hypocrisy or else they derive from the fantasies of the disordered imagination. For just as spiritual activities can be disturbed by bodily things, so bodily activity can be disturbed by spiritual things. The attempt to act physically in a 'spiritual' way leads to absurdity, to madness, or even to damnation. The true contemplative, by contrast, will respect the distinction between the bodily and spiritual realms, and observe the differing proprieties of each: 'Whoso had this werk [sc. of contemplation], it schuld governe him ful semely, as wele in body as in soule' (100). Such a man will avoid ostentatious 'spiritual' eccentricities; but he will not necessarily be soft-spoken or unobtrusive. Like later anti-puritan satirists, indeed, the author of The Cloud regards soft or 'piping' utterance with some suspicion, as a possible sign of hypocrisy. 'Semely' behaviour is essentially natural behaviour. So if a man has a naturally loud voice, then he should speak out, not 'poorly and pipingly' but 'in hoelness of voice' (101). The author goes so far as to assert that a true contemplative will always have a certain fulness of physical presence: 'His chere and his wordes schuld be ful of goostly wisdam, ful of fire and of frute, spoken in sad sothfastnes, withouten any falsheeth, fer fro any feining or piping of ypopcrites' (100-1).

Another ringing affirmation of the integrity of the physical world occurs a little later, in the author's discussion of visions and revelations. He starts by explaining that bodily visions such as those of St Martin or St Steven are not to be understood literally. Their true significance is spiritual. 'And therefore late us pike of the rough bark [shell], and fede us of the swete kyrel' (107). The metaphor of nutshell and kernel is a commonplace in exegetical tradition: the nutshell is the literal sense, the kernel the inner spiritual sense. But the author fears that he may be misunderstood. Nutshells, after all, have no value at all; they are simply broken and thrown away. To treat the physical world like that would be heresy. Heretics 'ben wel loked to wode men having this custome, that ever when they have drokken of a faire cup, kast it to the walle and breke it. Thus schul not we do, yf we wil wel do. For we schul not so fede us of the frute that we schul dispise the tree; ne so drinke that we schul breke the cuppe when we have drokken'. The similitudes of tree and cup certainly suggest, what the author later states, that 'alle bodely thing is sogete unto goostly thing' (113); but they also affirm the indispensibility of the physical world, and even its beauty. The cup is a 'faire cup', and it is madness to smash it against the wall.

From passages such as these we can see that the author's double definition of 'fantasie' is not just a neat formal antithesis. It corresponds to a kind of doubleness, or dialectic, in his thinking about 'goostly things' and 'bodely things'. The dialectic starts from a presumed position of naive literalism, which understands even statements of spiritual truths in a physical sense. The first and main movement is then to correct such erroneous physical fantasies: 'consewe not bodily that that is seide goostly'. The movement from physical to spiritual, however, will itself lead into erroneous fantasies of a different kind—the 'spiritual' fantasies of heretic or hypocrite— if it is carried too far. So it is checked by a second, opposite movement from spiritual to physical. This phase in the dialectic is marked by warnings against 'goostly conceites of bodely thinges' and by affirmations of the integrity of the physical world.

IV

This zig-zag, to-and-fro dialectic between physical and spiritual may be observed in many places throughout The Cloud. It is one of the most characteristic movements of the author's thinking. Naturally, in a mystical treatise, the first movement of the dialectic (physical to spiritual) gets
more stress than the second (spiritual to physical); but the latter, I want now to suggest, has a special interest for literary students of *The Cloud*. For the author's affirmations of the integrity of the physical world help us to make sense of certain features of his language and style which might otherwise seem incongruous.

Since the *via negativa* requires a contemplative to 'foryste alle the creatures that ever God maad and the werkes of hem', we may expect any exposition of it to display some uneasiness with the language in which it is of necessity expressed: for language is itself the chief instrument and repository of all those creaturely ways of thinking and seeing which the contemplative must attempt to transcend. The author of *The Cloud* expresses this dilemma most clearly in the following passage: 'Beware that thou conceive not bodely that that is mente goostly, thof al it be spokin in bodely wordes, as ben theees: UP or DOUN, IN or OUTE, BEHINE OR BEFROE, ONSIDE or ON OTHER. For thof al that a thing be never so goostly in itself, nevertheless yt yf yt schal be spoken of, sithen it so is that speche is a bodely werk wrought with the tonge, the whiche is an instrument of the body, it behoveth alweys be spoken in bodely wordes' (114). The phrase 'bodely wordes' has a double meaning here. It refers to the fact that language is a physical activity (a 'werk wrought with the tonge'), and also to the fact that language expresses ideas in physical terms ('up', 'down', etc.). The implication seems to be that the one fact follows from the other: i.e. that it is *because* language is a physical activity that it can only express ideas in physical terms. Perhaps the author did not mean anything quite so specific. In any case, the passage clearly expresses his awareness of an intrinsic unsuitability in human language for the expression of spiritual things.

A spiritual writer may respond to this difficulty by attempting in one way or another to change language. He may, that is, try to create special forms of expression more suited to his purposes than the customary 'bodily words'. From time to time the author of *The Cloud* seems to be doing this, when he employs unusual negative formations: 'unfele' (15), 'unbe' (84), and 'unknowing' itself. It should be noticed, however, that such negative formations appear to have enjoyed something of a vogue during the Fourteenth Century: Chaucer's Troilus speaks of 'unloving' Criseyde. 'Unfele' and 'unbe' may therefore not have seemed as strange to the original readers of *The Cloud* as they do to us. In any case, the author only rarely attempts such innovations. He is rather more inclined to another stratagem, which might be described as a minimizing of language. Thus in Chapter 7, he recommends for purposes of meditation such short, preferably monosyllabic, words as 'God' or 'love': 'for ever the shorter it is, the betir it acordeth with the werk of the spirite' (28). He returns to the same theme in Chapters 36-40, where the two words 'God' and 'sinne' are recommended as suitably brief for meditations and also for prayer. In prayer, he says, the fewer words the better.

Such passages suggest the possibility of a special 'language of the spirit', distinguished from ordinary discourse by an extreme and challenging brevity and by abnormal formations such as 'unbe'. But this is not the language of *The Cloud of Unknowing*. So far from negating or minimizing ordinary language, indeed, *The Cloud* accepts and exploits it so fully that a modern reader may well be struck by the positively unspiritual manner of the book. The author often addresses his young friend in a highly idiomatic and colloquial fashion: 'They schul love God so longe on this maner that they schul go staring wood to the devil'. Nor does he show any inclination to avoid the 'bodily words' of ordinary language. On the contrary, sensory and physical images play an important part in his work. This is most obvious in the first part of the book, which is dominated by the two cloud images, each with its associated imagery. There is the 'cloud of unknowing' itself, upon which the contemplative is to 'smite' or 'beat' with his 'dart' of love; and there is the other cloud of forgetting, under which the contemplative is to 'cover' the creaturely thoughts which he has 'cast' or 'trodden' down. These two powerful image-clusters admittedly almost disappear in the later part of the book (after Chapters 31 and 32); but the author continues to use, as he has from the start, a rich variety
of more casual, unfixed imagery. Metaphors abound throughout, some of them commonplace, like the 'fire' of God's love, but many of them strikingly vivid and physical. Thus we read about a 'lyame' (leash) of longing (14), and a 'scharpe double-eggid dreeful swerde of discrecion' (68). Sin is a 'rust' (43), a 'foule stinking fen and donghille' (46), and a 'lumpe' (73). The soul may spring up to God 'as sparce fro the cole' (22); or fix its gaze on God 'as the iye of a schoter is apon the prik that he schoteth to' (24); or take God's word as its 'mirour' (72); or snatch at God's grace 'as it were a gredy grehounde' (87); or 'wreichidly and wantounly weltre, as a swine in the mire' (119).

I should like to make a brief digression here. Imagery such as I have just illustrated—we may call it 'homely', or 'physical', or 'concrete'—occurs in practically all Middle English writings. So widespread is such imagery, indeed, that one may well wonder whether an English author of this period could possibly have avoided using it, even if he had wanted to. It seems to have been a characteristic of Medieval English itself, of the language at large. If this is indeed so, then it cannot be enough simply to demonstrate, as criticism often does, that this or that writer exhibits the inevitable down-to-earth characteristics in his style. Such qualities may simply represent the English of the day, in which case they are better left unmarked by any special comment. Otherwise, the whole critical problem is to determine how, in a particular work, the idiomatic language functions or is accommodated. The concreteness is significant, in fact, only when it is made significant, as part of an author's whole effort to realize a story or explore an idea; and the nature of its significance can be understood only in this whole context. In Middle English styles, concreteness has no single, because no intrinsic significance.

It might appear at first sight that the 'bodily words' of Middle English, however appropriate they might be for the purposes of popular preaching, could only impede and subvert an exposition of the via negativa. In The Cloud the contradiction seems blatant: on the one hand, the author insists upon the need to 'forget all the creatures that ever God made' in the work of contemplation; on the other, his own exposition of this work teems with unpurged and creaturely imagery of a very solid and physical kind. However, this very solidity and physicality, which seems to exasperate the contradiction, in fact points towards its resolution. The author of The Cloud, as we have seen, believed that all human language expresses ideas in physical terms. There is therefore no question, for him, of escaping into a purely spiritual language. The task is rather to express spiritual things in such a way that the 'bodily words' do not become confused with their spiritual referents. To avoid such confusion, it is best that the inevitable physical imagery should be clearly recognised for what it is: physical. Thus the author's deep concern to uphold the spiritual character of 'goostly things' serves also to guarantee the physical character of the 'bodily things'. There is in his style no 'interfusing' of the spiritual and the physical, to use Wordsworth's term—still less, the kind of 'spiritualization' of the physical world associated with the poets of the later Nineteenth Century. The Cloud of Unknowing has nothing in common with the Celtic Twilight.

The style of The Cloud is thus characterised by a sharp definition of physical imagery which, so far from merely reflecting the English of the day, reflects the author's earnest and sustained thought about the relationship between physical and spiritual realities. The physical world is 'sogette unto goostly thing'; but it has its own integrity. Indeed, the author's sense of this integrity sometimes leads him into explanations which may strike a modern reader as almost comically literal-minded. We have already seen an example of this, in the passage explaining how a promise to 'stand by' a companion in battle is to be understood metaphorically: He meneth not only bodely stonding, for paraventure this bataile is on hors and not on fote, and paraventure it is going and not stonding. The two pairs of alternatives, 'on hors and 'on fote', 'going' and 'stonding', cover all the possibilities with the easy authority of a man who knows what real battles are like. Another passage shows how even the two prime spiritual symbols of cloud and darkness retain, on the literal level,
their full physical reality: 'Wene not, for I clepe it a
darkness or a cloud, that it be any cloude congled of
the humours that flee in the aire, ne yit any darkness soche
as is in thin house on nightes, when thy candel is oute'
(23). What he means, he says, by darkness is a 'lacking
of knowing', and by the cloud a 'cloude of unknowing, that
is bitwix thee and thi God'. These characteristic explana-
tions present the reader with a strongly marked contrast
between tenor and vehicle: on the one side, a fully
physical cloud 'congealed of the humours that flee in the
air' and an equally physical darkness 'such as is in thine
house on nights, when thy candel is out'; on the other side,
fully spiritual states of 'unknowing'. The author's uncom-
promising insistence that he means the one and not the
other may strike a modern reader as rather primitive:
for we are accustomed, especially in post-romantic poetry,
symbols which seem to carry something of their physical
reality over into the realm of the spirit. But this is pre-
cisely what the author of The Cloud does not want. Such
symbols, to his thinking, would encourage readers to
'feine a maner of worching, the whiche is neither bodily
ne goostily'. The two realms of the 'bodily' and the 'ghostly'
have been joined by God: but that is no reason for
confusing (or interfusing) them one with the other. Physical
images are unavoidable in all human language; but we
must constantly struggle to keep them distinct from the
spiritual realities about which they enable us to speak.
And that, paradoxically, means keeping them physical.
It is dangerous to attempt to 'spiritualize' them. 'Ghostly
conceits of bodily things', we recall, are among the
fantastic products of the disordered imagination of fallen
man.

V

All readers of The Cloud will see the difficulty of
summing up the author's attitudes towards the relation-
ship of physical to spiritual things. It would be easy to
credit him with nothing more than a rather conventional
'wisdom'—a relaxed awareness that both physical and
spiritual have their due place in the scheme of things.
Such orthodox truisms do little justice to the living quality
of the author's thought, the energetic tautness of his mind.
Yet he does not go in much for formal, intellectually
articulated exposition. It is as if, having submitted himself
to the prolonged discipline of meditation, he feels no call
to submit to the lower scholastic discipline of consecutive
argument. He seems to trust his own developed sense of
what is true and 'seemly' to save him from any errors
into which his disjointed exposition might otherwise lead
him.

Instead of a summary, then, let me conclude by looking
briefly at a section of The Cloud which illustrates the main
points I have been trying to make in this essay. I refer to
the treatment of the story of Mary and Martha, in
Chapters 17-21. The author adopts the traditional inter-
pretation of this story (Luke 10, 38-42), according to
which Mary and Martha are types—or, as he says,
'ensamples'—of the contemplative and active lives
respectively. Following Christ's words, which he translates
as 'Marye hath chosen the best partye', the author stresses
the superiority of the contemplative life, and warns
'actives' against judging what they cannot understand:
'Ye wote not what hem eileth. Lat hem sit in here rest
and in here pley' (55). Yet he is scrupulously fair to
Martha and her complaint to Jesus: 'For me thinketh that
schel shuld be ful wel had excusid of hir plente, taking
reward to the time and the maner that schel seide it in.
For that schel seide, hir unknowing was the cause. And
no wonder thof schel kneve not that time how Marye was
occupied: for I trowe that before schel had litil herde of
soche perfeccion. And also, that schel seide it was bot
curtesyly and in fewe wordes. And therefore schel shuld
alwayes be had excusid' (50).

This passage illustrates how far the author's devotion to
spiritual things is from an unbalanced fanaticism. Mary's
total absorption represents the 'perfection' of the con-
templative life; but Martha is not merely 'imperfect. 'Lord,
dest thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve
alone? bid her therefore that she help me', Martha com-
plains because she has 'little heard of' the perfection of
Christian contemplation; and she cannot be blamed for
that, at a time when Christ himself is still on earth. Also,
her complaint is expressed 'courteously and in few words'. Both these 'excuses' illustrate the author's typical fair-mindedness towards non-contemplatives. They also illustrate his concern for the literal or historical sense of the biblical narrative. The events carry spiritual significance without losing their integrity as physical events. Indeed, their 'time and manner' are fully present to the author's imagination. We can see this again in his interpretation of Christ's reply to Martha's complaint: 'Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things...'. The author suggests that Christ realised that Mary was too 'fervently occupied' to answer on her own behalf, and therefore 'courteously' answered for her. Martha appealed to him as a judge, but he answers as an advocate; and he begins by naming Martha twice, 'for he wolde that sche herd him and take hede to his wordes' (52). In this way, the author develops the brief biblical account into a little drama, amplifying the part played by each of the persons involved. The whole section shows medieval exegesis at its rare best, exploring at the same time general spiritual truths and a particular dramatic situation. In such an interpretation, 'spirit' and 'letter' both flourish, each in its own way. Here, as throughout his work, the author of The Cloud is true to his ideal of man serving God 'with body and with soule, bothe togeders, as seemly is'.

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NOTE

1All quotations from The Cloud of Unknowing and the Book of Privy Counselling ed. P. Hodgson (Early English Text Society, o.s. 218, revised 1958), to which page numbers refer. Spelling has been slightly modernized.

Day and Night in Kipling

JANET MONTEFIORE

KIPLING spoke for the English imperialist middle classes. His conception of the world, particularly in the Indian stories, corresponded to the ideology of rulers who had to believe, and make others believe, that their rule was for the benefit of all classes. Here his fiction is enormously successful. If George Orwell is to be believed, colonialists did find in his stories the image of themselves that they wanted to see. But as Kipling was a highly intelligent and sensitive writer, he managed to construct a complex, imaginative and coherent world-view out of the needs of his class's ideology. The essence of his view lies in the division of life into two worlds, one of action and one of dream. In the Indian stories, this division corresponds roughly to the dichotomy between day and night, and white men and native Indians. It is remarkable, even on a literal level, how many of the stories dealing with natives have night-time settings. (The second half of The Bridge Builders takes place at night, in an opium dream. Very many scenes in Kim, and almost all the scenes with Ameera in Without Benefit of Clergy, are set at night. Out of the stories collected in In Black and White [Collected prose and verse of Rudyard Kipling, Macmillan, 1897], In Flood Time and The Finances of the Gods are set at night; The City of Dreadful Night is a description of a hot-weather night in Lahore, and most of the action in On the City Wall takes place at night.) The creation of these worlds depends mainly, however, on language and style. In the interplay of styles—'dialects' is perhaps a better term—the relationships of the two worlds are established and Kipling's preoccupation with what words can mean and what their limitations are, and with what human beings can achieve and imagine, is articulated.

Few writers rely on understatement more than Kipling. His language constantly gestures towards the unsaid or the unsayable. The 'daytime language', Kipling's 'normal speech', commonly invokes the unsaid; that is, it gestures