THE AUTHOR OF THE CLOUD OF UNKNOWING
MEDIEVAL ANONYMITY AND BARTHES’S DEATH OF THE AUTHOR

The Cloud of Unknowing, a fourteenth-century mystical work, is the most famous of the texts forming the Cloud corpus. The corpus consists of four treatises: The Cloud of Unknowing, The Book of Privy Counselling, The Epistle of Prayer, The Epistle of Discretion of Stirrings; and three translations: Deonise Hid Diwine (the translation of Pseudo-Dionysius’s De Mystica Theologia), The Study of Wisdom or Benjamin Minor (the translation of Richard of St Victor’s Benjamin Minor) and The Treatise of Discerning of Spirits (the translation of two of St Bernard’s sermons). Of these seven treatises, four with certainty, three with great probability are ascribed to the same author.

Since neither the Cloud nor any of the other six treatises attributed to the same author are signed, and the mystery always irritates the scholars, the problem of the authorship of The Cloud of Unknowing has been repeatedly addressed since the beginning of this century. In fact, the intense scholarly discussion concerning its authorship began in 1924 when Dom McCann argued in favour of the single authorship of The Cloud of Unknowing and The Scale of Perfection. He founded his assumption on the fact that a Carthusian James Grenehall (d.1529/30) ascribed the Cloud to Walter Hilton, and that both texts revealed similar dialectic and background scholarship. Differences between the texts concerning different mystical traditions were explained by different target audiences. And, indeed, there are many parallels between Walter Hilton’s Scale and The Cloud of Unknowing. In fact, it seems that the Cloud was in part a response to Hilton’s Scale I (completed by c. 1390), while the second part of Hilton’s diptych (Scale II, completed before 1396) was in turn influenced by the language and theology of the Cloud, without fully assimilating it.

In response to McCann’s claim there developed a group of scholars arguing against the ascription of the Cloud corpus to Walter Hilton: among them Dom

1 These are The Cloud of Unknowing, The Book of Privy Counselling, The Epistle of Prayer, Deonise Hid Diwine.

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Maurice Noetinger, Helen L. Gardner, Phyllis Hodgson, Louis C. Gatto and others. They all agreed that the Scale and the Cloud sprang from a comparable experience interpreted in the light of a common tradition of contemplative spirituality, including among its authorities especially the teachings of St Augustine, Thomas Gallus, the Victorine spirituality of Hugh and Richard of St Victor, St Thomas Aquinas, and the mystical theology of Dionysius Areopagite as understood in the Latin tradition. The similarities between these two texts, however, according to this group, did not seem to prove common authorship, merely indicated that they were the fruit of the same theological knowledge. In fact, each text seemed to lay emphasis on one of the two major traditions of mystical thought in Christian tradition: the Scale belonging to the Augustine, Victorine spirituality, where the soul can only love fully that which it knows, and the Cloud to the negative, apophatic mystical theology as developed by Dionysius Areopagite, which completely denied that human intellect had the capacity to comprehend God.

Besides these differences in tradition, also the dating of the works represented a problem if Hilton had indeed been the author of the Cloud corpus and of all the other works traditionally ascribed to him, then he would have become one of the most prolific prose writers of his age, the author of more than a dozen works, covering both main currents of contemplative thought in Christian mystical tradition, which seemed highly unlikely. Grenehall’s ascription was soon played down, when it was shown that medieval scribes and commentators were often fallible in attributing the work to a particular author. The Cloud corpus was compared to the other works traditionally ascribed to Hilton and many essential differences between them were discovered: for example, Hilton in his Of Angels’ Song criticized the Cloud’s notion of the naked being or the naked intent of God, which was in turn one of the basic tenets of the Cloud’s mystical ascent. While the Cloud author proclaimed the superiority of Mary’s way of life, Hilton in his Epistle on Mixed Life expressed his conviction that man must learn to live both the life of Martha and that of her sister Mary. And finally, Hilton’s work seemed much more Christocentric than the Cloud corpus. Thus in the last few years the majority of scholars have accepted the

6 M. Noetinger, ‘The Authorship of The Cloud of Unknowing’, Blackfriars IV (1924), 1457-64
anonymous of the author of the Cloud (e.g. Rosemary Ann Lees, John P. H. Clark, Marion Glasscoe, Barry Windeatt etc.).

On the other hand, a smaller group who supported Hilton’s authorship of the Cloud corpus was also formed: besides Dom McCann, who lost and regained his faith in the common authorship of the Scale and the Cloud, there were Dorothy Jones, C. S. Nieva and Wolfgang Riehle. Their assumption was based on the authority of the Grenehagh ascription and the linguistic similarities between the Scale and the Cloud, whereas the differences in doctrine were usually explained by there being different addressees.

Not only the name, also the vocation of the author remains unknown. Various claims have been made; for example, Phyllis Hodgson was convinced that he was a priest and a trained theologian. David Knowles argued that he was an ex-religious, ‘preferably a Dominican’ because of his dependence on the Rhinelands school of spirituality and his technically orthodox Thomism. However, the majority of the scholars associated the author with the Carthusian order. This assertion was based on the fact that the Carthusian order proved to be the most likely environment in which the Cloud author might have been exposed to Dionysian theology. The Cloud was easily circulating in manuscript form by the Carthusians; it stood apart from other contemplative works written in the vernacular during this period; and it expounded the theology which in the fourteenth century in England was primarily associated with the Carthusians.

Nevertheless, this assumption was not universally accepted: Wolfgang Riehle in his Middle English Mystics expressed his doubts about the theory of Carthusian authorship. As his counter-arguments have not been properly assessed, I think they deserve to be looked at more closely. He claims that the Cloud gives the impression of having been written for laymen, since there are no Latin quotations in the text, the author never mentions any vows, and teaches that contemplation should be coupled with active charity. According to him, the recipient might not have been a recluse in the strict sense, because in the Cloud author’s description of daily activities there is also ‘renne & ride’, which according to Riehle, could imply a secular way of life.

First, the lack of Latin quotations in the Cloud could be explained by the fact that the original recipient was a novice in a monastic order, who had just started his theological education, including Latin. Despite the fact that boys inclined to religious education received some instruction in Latin at school, it is doubtful that their level of knowledge was high enough to read and understand complex theological treatises like the Cloud (if it had been written in Latin), where any misunderstanding could have been fatal for their spiritual growth. In fact, there are some hints in the text which might indicate that both the author and the disciple belonged to a special class of contemplatives. Accepting the hypothesis that the first recipient of the Cloud was a Carthusian novice at the beginning of his studies, the change of style in the continuation of the Cloud, i.e. in The Book of Privey Counselling, which contains some Latin quotations and more specialist vocabulary, could then be explained by the fact that the changes are the result of a more advanced stage of the disciple in his knowledge of Latin and theology in general.

As far as the Cloud author’s conviction of the necessity of joining contemplation with active charity is concerned, this teaching could hardly be considered as good enough evidence that the work was written for the lay public. Almost all Christian contemplatives always emphasized the obligation of contemplation has towards his fellow man in distress. In fact, a Carthusian Father, who in principle is not allowed to baptize or hear confessions, to administer the Last Sacraments to the dying, or to bury the dead, is nevertheless obliged to do all these things if he is assured that the circumstances are such that the services of no other priest can be obtained. It is obvious that an active life of...

15 Dom McCann, with Miss Evelyn Underhill accepted the anonymity of authorship in their modernized editions of The Cloud of Unknowing which appeared in 1912 and 1924 respectively. In the sixth edition of The Cloud Dom McCann, however, returns to his original ascription of The Cloud to Hilton. See Just McCann, introduction to The Cloud of Unknowing (London, 1952), vii-xi.
19 Phyllis Hodgson, introduction to The Cloud of Unknowing and the Book of Privy Counselling, p. vii.
22 It was a Carthusian Richard Meithey, who first translated The Cloud into Latin in the fifteenth century, and two five centuries later Carthusian manuscripts (B. M. Add 3704 [ff 87b-89b] and B. M. Add 37790 [ff 234a-236d]) give evidence that the Carthusians in the fifteenth century read and studied Hugh of Balma in conjunction with The Cloud of Unknowing; it was the Carthusian commentator James Grenehagh, who ascribed The Cloud to Hilton. See Lees, Negative Language, pp. 432, 443.
24 For in his blindly beholding of þi nakid byeng, þus ongild to God as i telle þe, schalt þou do al þat þou schalt do: ete & drink, sleep & wake, go & sit, speke & be stille, ligge & rose, stonde & knele, renne & ride, transile & rest (The Book of Privy Counselling, EETS OS 218, p. 147.)
25 Riehle, Middle English Mystics, p. 17.
27 The Cloud of Unknowing, chap. 73, EETS OS 218, p. 129; and chap. 47, EETS OS 218, p. 88.
charity was not the main aim of the Carthusian order, being primarily a contemplative community, but this does not mean that they were not obliged to help their fellow Christians in distress. Contemplation comes first, and this seems to be the message of the Cloud as well, but because of it, the contemplative should not remain insensitive to the misery of his brothers and sisters.

And finally, the description of daily activities: Riehle suggests that running or riding would not be included in the usual activities of the monk. And he is partly right: the author and the recipient, if we accept the assumption that they were members of the Carthusian order, would have to obey the strict rules of the order, and stay within the boundaries of the monastery. However, even the Carthusians had to travel: the prior of every house (or his proctor) had to travel once a year to the general chapter at Grande Chartreuse in France, but very often those from the more distant provinces, of which England was one, were bound to make an appearance only every leap year. In the fourteenth century the English Carthusians also travelled from one charterhouse to another: for example, Beauvale charterhouse in Nottinghamshire (founded in 1343), i.e. in the area where the Midland dialect was spoken (which is also the dialect of the Cloud), was presumably inhabited by monks from Hinton and Witham. Thus their rule even defined their clothes for the journey: on going abroad the priors were to ride in black capes and the converses in grey.

Up to now sufficiently convincing evidence to establish the identity of the author of the Cloud corpus has not been produced, and Walter Hilton no longer seems to figure as one of the possible candidates for the authorship. As far as the vocation of the author is concerned, in spite of the fact that it has not been possible to assert with certainty that the author of the Cloud was a Carthusian himself, it has been at least impossible to contradict such an assumption.

The name and vocation of the author of the Cloud thus evade identification and all attempts to fix and determine the text and its meaning. The anonymity of its author apparently leaves the text open, standing on its own, without the authority of its author’s name, which would define the text and its meaning. Could this deliberate medieval anonymity be compared to authorial disappearance, which has been accepted by the structuralist and poststructuralist critics almost as an article of faith? If this anonymity indeed opens the text, would it be possible to draw a parallel between the (post)structuralist claim that the writing manifests the death of its author and the practice of medieval monks to conceal their names? Or are there completely different issues at stake, caused by the different realities from which the two lines of thought sprang?

Roland Barthes, one of the most influential literary critics of the twentieth century, in his essay ‘The Death of the Author’ denies the central position the author has held in critical art since the Renaissance and instead places the reader and the reader in the focus of our critical attention. The text stands on its own and thus destroys the authority of the intentions and ideas of its author:

... writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing.

No doubt it has always been that way. As soon as a fact is narrated no longer with a view to acting directly on reality but intrinsically, that is to say, finally outside of any function other than that of the very practice of the symbol itself, this disconnection occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins.

Traditionally, according to Roland Barthes, the author was always conceived of as the past of her/his book, s/he seemed to nourish the book, to exist before it, think and suffer for it. The authority of the author thus gave the impression that the text can be ultimately explained, i.e. that we can reach and define the ‘real’ meaning of the text through the identification and determination of the author.

And, if we are to believe an English grammarian William Whetel (fl. 1309-16) in the introduction to his course of lectures on the De disciplina scholari in the fourteenth century the scholars also considered the determination of the author of the text as one of the most important issues when approaching a particular piece of writing. Although the author was not regarded as the key to the meaning of the text, s/he was nevertheless considered the guarantee that the writing is worthy of the reader’s attention; in fact, according to Whetel, it was very useful to know the name of the ‘efficient cause’ or writer of the book, because authentic statements, i.e. statements which could be attributed to a named authority, were more worthy of diligent attention and deserved to be committed to memory; hence works of unknown and uncertain authorship were believed to possess an authority far inferior to that of works which circulated under the names of auctores. The truth of the text was thus attested by the great authority of the author, therefore it is not surprising that James Gringhaff attributed the Cloud to Walter Hilton and that many scholars in the twentieth century repeated his claim – Hilton as an auctor would represent the

reveal many poststructuralist thoughts but at the same time also remains essentially structuralist. To mark this intermediate stage I chose to use brackets in using the term poststructuralism, when referring to the ideas expressed in Barthes’s article.


Ibid., 144.


Ibid., 11.
source of auctoritas needed for the Cloud and ensure the orthodoxy and truthfulness of the work.

In (post)structuralist criticism the authority of the author was undermined. A different position of the author was above all the result of the new concept of the text, which was granted a new and independent life, not defined by its environment and its creator. According to Barthes, no author had power over his/her creation, thus every attempt to limit the meaning of the text through the authority of the author was just an illusion and a myth. The text would always resist whatever monistic efforts to curtail its multiple significations. Thus Roland Barthes emphasized the essential unknowability and unstable character of every text, which revealed the language as a web of signifiers bound up in an endless play of signifieds. The author could not guarantee the ‘right’ meaning of his/her writing, since no text could be explained or finally deciphered, in fact, each text revealed the eternal play of signifieds, the elusiveness of the presence of meaning. The death of the author thus metaphorically indicated the displacement of the author from the centre of the critical act – the author had to disappear, since s/he provided an illusion of imposing a limit on the text, furnishing it with a final signified, closing the writing, and thus constraining and repressing the plurality of the text. Barthes was convinced that with the death of the concept of the author, the powerful potential in the text was released.

In some points the Cloud author’s position could be paralleled with that of Barthes; in particular as far as the elusiveness of the meaning and the essential intertextual nature of the text is concerned. He would agree with Barthes that the text is ‘a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture’. The Cloud author had no intention of hiding the intertextual character of his text from his readers; in fact he, like many other medieval writers, unscrupulously re-used the interpretations, classifications and metaphors developed by other authors (e.g. Philo, St Gregory of Nyssa, Dionysius Areopagite, Hugh and Richard of St Victor, etc.). Like Barthes he was also convinced that no human author could express the ‘final’ meaning – his conviction, however, contrary to that of Barthes, stemmed from the long tradition of negative theology, where the final truth nevertheless exists in non-existence, mysteriously hidden to everyone beyond the cloud of unknowing. In fact, following the teachings of great apophatic fathers, he claimed that the mind of the contemplative, i.e. of the reader, had to become eventually devoid of any mental activity, even of consciousness in order to understand what cannot be understood. Although the final message of the text exists, it eternally evades discursive reason and could therefore be expressed only with anānoia sīṃbola, unlike symbols which startle and perplex the mind.

For the Cloud author no meaning was fixed and well defined, since the language could never express the ‘true’ meaning, which always escapes our attempts to fix it. While for Barthes the ‘true’ meaning of the text never existed, and could therefore never be expressed, for the Cloud author it exists, but its meaning is bestowed only on those who devote their lives to contemplation and are granted access to divine wisdom.

The deliberate anonymity of the author of the Cloud (an anonymity which was not unusual in the Carthusian environment), does not manifest the (post)structuralist wish to leave the text open, emphasizing its autonomy and the essential independence of the intentions of its author. When Barthes proclaims the victory of the writing over the authority of the author, he attacks, in fact, the cult of the author and his/her authoritative claim of possessing the meaning of the text. With this claim Barthes was urging the necessity of breaking the traditionally strong institutional hold of the author in the French academies, still nurturing the critical praxis typical of the Renaissance, classicism and romanticism. By studying the life of the author, the critic gained a false impression of certainty and the possibility of defining once and for all the ‘real’ meaning of the text: and this is what Roland Barthes revolted against.

On the other hand the Cloud did not need the critic to remove the auctoritaria-

ty, to tear the author from the text, since the author himself deliberately hid and removed his name from the book. The Cloud author might have influenced the reader with the authority of his person being a righteous man, perhaps a recluse, with his reputation of an expert in spiritual theology, and thus fix the meaning of the text, defining its single legitimate message. Although he refused to be auctoritas, i.e. someone who is at once a writer and an authority, someone who is to be read, respected and believed, at the same time he did not deny his writing’s auctoritas, i.e. its veracity and sagacity that is worthy of belief. Obviously, the Cloud author did not believe that auctorial authority alone could neutralize all differences and conflicts and cancel the polysemy of the text. However, he did not want to leave his text open to an unlimited variety of interpretations and its original meaning overrun by innumerable significative possibilities, therefore he tried to define it by other means.

First, in The Book of Privy Counselling the author referred to his other texts, mentioning The Epistle of Prayer, The Cloud of Unknowing and Deonise Hid Diuinite, in the prologue to Deonise Hid Diuinite he named The Cloud of Unknowing as his earlier work. By connecting the works together, he broadened the horizon of understanding shared by his readers. The works complemented each other by approaching a similar problem from more than one direction, and thus lessened the possibility of misinterpretation. Secondly, he mentioned some authoritative authors; among them Dionysius Areopagite in the 70th chapter, St Gregory the Great and St Augustine in the 75th chapter of the Cloud, and derived auctoritas from their names. And finally, the Cloud author

40 See ibid., 147.
41 Barthes, ‘The Death of the Author’, p. 146.
43 For example, a French romantic critic Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve emphasized the importance of the author’s life and intentions on the production and definition of the work of art.
44 The Book of Privy Counselling, EETS OS 218, p. 154.
46 In The Book of Privy Counselling he mentions St Bernard, in Deonise Hid Diuinite Thomas Gallus and in The Epistle of Prayer St Thomas Aquinas.
insisted on defining the readership of his text. The book begins and ends with the definition of the audience that is to be given the book. He demanded that the work be read only by those who have decided for contemplative life, i.e. by the most radical Christians, and that it be read from the beginning to the end and not only in fragments which may leave certain issues vague and prone to misinterpretation. The author of the Cloud believed that his text did not remain open to endless interpretation, since his intended message would be accessible only to those who share with him the same experience of mystical ascent.

The Cloud through the elusiveness of the identity of its author and its insistence on the inadequacy of discursive reason, revealed that there exists (at least in this medieval contemplative horizon of understanding, which has to be shared by his reader) the final, transcendental signified, ensuring the meaning, which may be hidden and incomprehensible to human reason but is nevertheless existent. The text invites its readers to abandon everything, their feelings, attachments, reason and understanding, even their own self and to enter the cloud of unknowing, where there is no reason, no language, no writing. This message of the text is guaranteed by the faith shared by the author and his readers, by their common faith in the hyper-essential God, who is beyond reason and emotions, beyond language, and who reveals Himself in the language through His absence. And if in the poststructuralist world 'the absence of the transcendental signifies the domain and the play of signification infinitely', the presence of the Transcendental God, of the divine actus, the source of auctoritas, ensures the meaning, if the creator and the receiver of the text share the same horizon of understanding and faith.

Although the Cloud author is aware of the fact that the meaning is not stable, in fact, he even emphasizes the essential incapacity of the language to ultimately explain the unknowable mystery, however, his anti-authorism differs from that of (post)structuralists. The reasons for the authorial disappearance are essentially different in the two cases; while Roland Barthes proclaims the death of the author because he wants to announce the birth of the reader and above all that of the critic with his/her own interpretation of the text, the medieval author of the Cloud conceals his name because he thinks that his authority is needed, and that the shared experience with the reader of his book will grant access to the divine transcendental authority, which bestows meaning on the text.

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‘THERE’S SCARCE A THING BUT IS BOTH LOVED AND LOATHED’: THE CHANGELING I.i.91-129

One of the most striking occurrences in the early scenes of Middleton and Rowley’s The Changeling is Beatrice’s extraordinarily vehement reaction to her father’s servant, De Flores. Let us briefly consider what leads up to her first attack on him.

Alsemoro has already fallen in love with Beatrice when the play starts, and he cancels his planned trip to Malta as a result. Beatrice, more unusually, thinks of him as ‘the man was meant me’ (I.i.84) even though only five days before she had agreed to become betrothed to Alonzo de Piracquo. Alsemoro and Beatrice are presented as besotted with each other when we first see them together in I.i, and Alsemoro’s friend Jaspereino decides he might as well forget about further travel and instead try to seduce Beatrice’s waiting-woman Diaphanta. It is at this sexually charged moment that De Flores enters.

De Flores addresses Beatrice with ‘Lady, your father ...’, obviously intending to say more, but is immediately interrupted by Beatrice with the words ‘Is in health I hope’ (I,i.91). From De Flores’s aside a little later (99-106) it seems clear that he tries to get physically close to Beatrice as often as he can, but when we hear Beatrice’s ‘Is in health I hope’ we do not, as an audience, know anything other than that De Flores appears to be offering perfectly reasonable information to Beatrice about her father, Vermandero. Beatrice’s interruption seems rude and quite beside the point. De Flores answers with ‘Your eye shall instantly instruct you lady. / He’s coming hitherward’ (93-4).

This answer does not need to be interpreted as indicating anything negative about De Flores. He may, in effect, be saying: ‘He is indeed in fine condition, as you yourself can verify when he comes here in a moment — in fact, I was trying to tell you of his imminent arrival’. There is no evidence that Vermandero actually instructed De Flores to announce his coming, but the audience may readily see the servant as helpful, both to Vermandero and Beatrice, in doing so. Yet Beatrice reacts with

What needed then
Your duteous prefance? I had rather
He had come unexpected: you must stand
A good presence with unnecessary babbling.
And how welcome for your part you are
I’m sure you know. (94-9)

46 The Cloud of Unknowing, EETS OS 218, pp. 1-3 and 129-30.