

The
Cloud
of
Unknowing

With an introduction by
Evelyn Underhill

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The text for this reprint edition was taken from the 1922 second edition, published in London, England. Spelling, language, grammar, and punctuation have been gently updated for the modern reader.

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Introduction

The little family of mystical treatises which is known to students as “the Cloud of Unknowing group,” deserves more attention than it has hitherto received from English lovers of mysticism: for it represents the first expression in our own tongue of that great mystic tradition of the Christian Neoplatonists which gathered up, remade, and “salted with Christ’s salt” all that was best in the spiritual wisdom of the ancient world.

That wisdom made its definite entrance into the Catholic fold about A.D. 500, in the writings of the profound and nameless mystic who chose to call himself “Dionysius the Areopagite.” Three hundred and fifty years later, those writings were translated into Latin by John Scotus Erigena, a scholar at the court of Charlemagne, and so became available to the ecclesiastical world of the West. Another five hundred years elapsed, during which their influence was felt, and felt strongly, by the mystics of every European country: by St. Bernard, the Victorines, St. Bonaventura, St. Thomas Aquinas. Every reader of Dante knows the part which they play in the *Paradiso*. Then, about the middle of the 14th century, England—at that time in

the height of her great mystical period—led the way with the first translation into the vernacular of the Areopagite's work. In *Dionise Hid Divinite*, a version of the *Mystica Theologia*, this spiritual treasure-house was first made accessible to those outside the professionally religious class. Surely this is a fact which all lovers of mysticism, all "spiritual patriots," should be concerned to hold in remembrance.

It is supposed by most scholars that *Dionise Hid Divinite*, which—appearing as it did in an epoch of great spiritual vitality—quickly attained to a considerable circulation, is by the same hand which wrote the *Cloud of Unknowing* and its companion books; and that this hand also produced an English paraphrase of Richard of St. Victor's *Benjamin Minor*, another work of much authority on the contemplative life. Certainly the influence of Richard is only second to that of Dionysius in this unknown mystic's own work—work, however, which owes as much to the deep personal experience, and extraordinary psychological gifts of its writer, as to the tradition that he inherited from the past.

Nothing is known of him; beyond the fact, which seems clear from his writings, that he was a cloistered monk devoted to the contemplative life. It has been thought that he was a Carthusian. But the rule of that austere order, whose members live in hermit-like seclusion, and scarcely meet except for the purpose of divine worship, can hardly have afforded him opportunity of observing and enduring all those tiresome tricks and absurd mannerisms of which he gives so amusing and realistic a description in the lighter passages of the *Cloud*. These passages

betray the half-humorous exasperation of the temperamental recluse, nervous, fastidious, and hypersensitive, loving silence and peace, but compelled to a daily and hourly companionship with persons of a less contemplative type: some finding in extravagant and meaningless gestures an outlet for suppressed vitality; others overflowing with a terrible cheerfulness like “giggling girls and nice japing jugglers;” others so lacking in repose that they “can neither sit still, stand still, nor lie still, unless they be either wagging with their feet or else somewhat doing with their hands.” Though he cannot go to the length of condemning these habits as mortal sins, the author of the *Cloud* leaves us in no doubt as to the irritation with which they inspired him, or the distrust with which he regards the spiritual claims of those who fidget.

The attempt to identify this mysterious writer with Walter Hilton, the author of *The Scale of Perfection*, has completely failed: though Hilton’s work—especially the exquisite fragment called the *Song of Angels*—certainly betrays his influence. The works attributed to him, if we exclude the translations from Dionysius and Richard of St. Victor, are only five in number. They are, first, *The Cloud of Unknowing*—the longest and most complete exposition of its author’s peculiar doctrine—and, depending from it, four short tracts or letters: *The Epistle of Prayer*, *The Epistle of Discretion in the Stirrings of the Soul*, *The Epistle of Privy Counsel*, and *The Treatise of Discerning of Spirits*. Some critics have even disputed the claim of the writer of the *Cloud* to the authorship of these little works, regarding them as the production of a group or school of contemplatives devoted to the

study and practice of the Dionysian mystical theology; but the unity of thought and style found in them makes this hypothesis at least improbable. Everything points rather to their being the work of an original mystical genius, of strongly marked character and great literary ability: who, whilst he took the framework of his philosophy from Dionysius the Areopagite, and of his psychology from Richard of St. Victor, yet is in no sense a mere imitator of these masters, but introduced a genuinely new element into mediaeval religious literature.

What, then, were his special characteristics? Whence came the fresh color which he gave to the old Platonic theory of mystical experience? First, I think, from the combination of high spiritual gifts with a vivid sense of humor, keen powers of observation, a robust common-sense: a balance of qualities not indeed rare amongst the mystics, but here presented to us in an extreme form. In his eager gazing on divinity this contemplative never loses touch with humanity, never forgets the sovereign purpose of his writings; which is not a declaration of the spiritual favors he has received, but a helping of his fellow-men to share them. Next, he has a great simplicity of outlook, which enables him to present the result of his highest experiences and intuitions in the most direct and homely language. So actual, and so much a part of his normal existence, are his apprehensions of spiritual reality, that he can give them to us in the plain words of daily life: and thus he is one of the most realistic of mystical writers. He abounds in vivid little phrases—"Call sin a *lump*": "Short prayer pierceth heaven": "Nowhere bodily, is everywhere ghostly": "Who that will not go the strait way to heaven . . . shall go the soft

way to hell.” His range of experience is a wide one. He does not disdain to take a hint from the wizards and necromancers on the right way to treat the devil; he draws his illustrations of divine mercy from the homeliest incidents of friendship and parental love. A skilled theologian, quoting St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, and using with ease the language of scholasticism, he is able, on the other hand, to express the deepest speculations of mystical philosophy without resorting to academic terminology: as for instance where he describes the spiritual heaven as a “state” rather than a “place”:

For heaven ghostly is as nigh down as up, and up as down: behind as before, before as behind, on one side as other. Insomuch, that whoso had a true desire for to be at heaven, then that same time he were in heaven ghostly. For the high and the next way thither is run by desires, and not by paces of feet.

His writings, though they touch on many subjects, are chiefly concerned with the art of contemplative prayer; that “blind intent stretching to God” which, if it be wholly set on Him, cannot fail to reach its goal. A peculiar talent for the description and discrimination of spiritual states has enabled him to discern and set before us, with astonishing precision and vividness, not only the strange sensations, the confusion and bewilderment of the beginner in the early stages of contemplation—the struggle with distracting thoughts, the silence, the dark—and the unfortunate state of those theoretical mystics who, “swollen with pride and

with curiosity of much clergy and letterly cunning as in clerks,” miss that treasure which is “never got by study but all only by grace”; but also the happiness of those whose “sharp dart of longing love” has not “failed of the prick, the which is God.”

A great simplicity characterizes his doctrine of the soul’s attainment of the Absolute. For him there is but one central necessity: the perfect and passionate setting of the will upon the Divine, so that it is “thy love and thy meaning, the choice and point of thine heart.” Not by deliberate ascetic practices, not by refusal of the world, not by intellectual striving, but by actively loving and choosing, by that which a modern psychologist has called “the synthesis of love and will” does the spirit of man achieve its goal. “For silence is not God,” he says in the *Epistle of Discretion*,

nor speaking is not God; fasting is not God, nor eating is not God; loneliness is not God, nor company is not God; nor yet any of all the other two such contraries. He is hid between them, and may not be found by any work of thy soul, but all only by love of thine heart. He may not be known by reason, He may not be gotten by thought, nor concluded by understanding; but He may be loved and chosen with the true lovely will of thine heart. . . . Such a blind shot with the sharp dart of longing love may never fail of the prick, the which is God.

*** *Pages 17-30 not available in free sample* ***

Prologue

Here Beginneth the Prayer on the Prologue

GOD, unto whom all hearts be open, and unto whom all will speaketh, and unto whom no privy thing is hid. I beseech Thee so for to cleanse the intent of mine heart with the unspeakable gift of Thy grace, that I may perfectly love Thee, and worthily praise Thee. Amen.

Here Beginneth the Prologue

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost! I charge thee and I beseech thee, with as much power and virtue as the bond of charity is sufficient to suffer, whatsoever thou be that this book shalt have in possession, either by property, either by keeping, by bearing as messenger, or else by borrowing, that in as much as in thee is by will and advisement, neither thou read it, nor write it, nor speak it, nor yet suffer it be read, written, or spoken, of any or to any but if it be of such one, or to such one, that hath by thy supposing in a true will and by an whole intent purposed him to be a perfect follower of Christ not only in active living, but in the sovereignest point of contemplative living the

which is possible by grace for to be come to in this present life of a perfect soul yet abiding in this deadly body; and thereto that doth that in him is, and by thy supposing hath done long time before, for to able him to contemplative living by the virtuous means of active living. For else it accordeth nothing to him. And over this I charge thee and I beseech thee by the authority of charity, that if any such shall read it, write it, or speak it, or else hear it be read or spoken, that thou charge him as I do thee, for to take him time to read it, speak it, write it, or hear it, all over. For peradventure there is some matter therein in the beginning or in the middle, the which is hanging, and not fully declared where it standeth: and if it be not there, it is soon after, or else in the end. Wherefore if a man saw one matter and not another, peradventure he might lightly be led into error; and therefore in eschewing of this error, both in thyself and in all other, I pray thee for charity do as I say thee.

Fleshly janglers, open praisers and blamers of themselves or of any other, tellers of trifles, ronners and tattlers of tales, and all manner of pinchers, cared I never that they saw this book. For mine intent was never to write such thing unto them, and therefore I would that they meddle not therewith; neither they, nor any of these curious, lettered, or unlearned men. Yea, although that they be full good men of active living, yet this matter accordeth nothing to them. But if it be to those men, the which although they stand in activity by outward form of living, nevertheless yet by inward stirring after the privy spirit of God, whose dooms be hid, they be full graciously disposed, not continually as it is proper to very contemplatives, but now and

then to be perceivers in the highest point of this contemplative act; if such men might see it, they should by the grace of God be greatly comforted thereby.

This book is distinguished in seventy chapters and five. Of the which chapters, the last chapter of all teacheth some certain tokens by the which a soul may verily prove whether he be called of God to be a worker in this work or none.

Glossary

Beholding

Regard, consideration

Boisterous

Rough, violent, unskillful, crude

Clergy

Learning

Con

To know, or be able

Counsel

Spiritual adviser or director

Doomsman

Judge

Even-christian

Neighbor

Fairhead

Beauty

Forsobbed

Soaked or penetrated

Forsunken

Immersed

Let

To hinder

Lewd

Unlettered, or ignorant

Namely

Specially

Onehead

Union

Out!

Alas

Pincher

A covetous or niggardly person

Ravishing

Ecstasy

Reckless

Indifferent

Ronker

A whisperer

Ronner

A gossip or tale-bearer

Swink

To labor

Witting

Knowledge

Wode

Mad, furious

*Here beginneth a book of contemplation, the which is called the
Cloud of Unknowing, in the which a soul is oned with GOD.*

GHOSTLY FRIEND IN GOD, I pray thee and I beseech thee that thou wilt have a busy beholding to the course and the manner of thy calling. And thank God heartily so that thou mayest through help of His grace stand stiffly in the state, in the degree, and in the form of living that thou hast entirely purposed against all the subtle assailing of thy bodily and ghostly enemies, and win to the crown of life that evermore lasteth. Amen.

HERE BEGINNETH THE FIRST CHAPTER

*Of four degrees of Christian men's living; and of the course of his
calling that this book was made unto.*

Ghostly friend in God, thou shalt well understand that I find, in my boisterous beholding, four degrees and forms of Christian men's living; and they be these, Common, Special, Singular, and Perfect. Three of these may be begun and ended in this life; and the fourth may by grace be begun here, but it shall ever last without end in the bliss of Heaven. And right as thou seest how they be set here in order each one after other; first Common, then Special, after Singular, and last Perfect, right so me thinketh that in the same order and in the same course our Lord hath of His great mercy called thee and led thee unto Him by the desire of thine heart. For first thou wottest well that when thou wert living in the common degree of Christian men's living in company of thy worldly friends, it seemeth to me that the everlasting love of His Godhead, through the which He made thee and wrought thee when thou wert nought, and since that time bought thee with the price of His precious blood when thou wert lost in Adam, might not suffer thee to be so far from Him in form and degree of living. And therefore He kindled thy desire full graciously, and fastened by it a leash of longing, and led thee by it into a more special state and form of living, to be a servant

among the special servants of His; where thou mightest learn to live more specially and more ghostly in His service than thou didst, or mightest do, in the common degree of living before. And what more?

Yet it seemeth that He would not leave thee thus lightly, for love of His heart, the which He hath evermore had unto thee since thou wert aught: but what did He? Seest thou nought how Mistily and how graciously He hath privily pulled thee to the third degree and manner of living, the which is called Singular? In the which solitary form and manner of living, thou mayest learn to lift up the foot of thy love; and step towards that state and degree of living that is perfect, and the last state of all.

HERE BEGINNETH THE SECOND CHAPTER

A short stirring to meekness, and to the work of this book.

Look up now, weak wretch, and see what thou art. What art thou, and what hast thou merited, thus to be called of our Lord? What weary wretched heart, and sleeping in sloth, is that, the which is not wakened with the draught of this love and the voice of this calling! Beware, thou wretch, in this while with thine enemy; and hold thee never the holier nor the better, for the worthiness of this calling and for the singular form of living that thou art in. But the more wretched and cursed, unless thou do that in thee is goodly, by grace and by counsel, to live after thy calling. And insomuch thou shouldest be more meek and loving

to thy ghostly spouse, that He that is the Almighty God, King of Kings and Lord of Lords, would meek Him so low unto thee, and amongst all the flock of His sheep so graciously would choose thee to be one of His specials, and since then set thee in the place of pasture, where thou mayest be fed with the sweetness of His love, in earnest of thine heritage the Kingdom of Heaven.

Do on then, I pray thee, fast. Look now forwards and let be backwards; and see what thee faileth, and not what thou hast, for that is the readiest getting and keeping of meekness. All thy life now behoveth altogether to stand in desire, if thou shalt profit in degree of perfection. This desire behoveth altogether be wrought in thy will, by the hand of Almighty God and thy consent. But one thing I tell thee. He is a jealous lover and suffereth no fellowship, and Him list not work in thy will but if He be only with thee by Himself. He asketh none help, but only thyself. He wills, thou do but look on Him and let Him alone. And keep thou the windows and the door, for flies and enemies assailing. And if thou be willing to do this, thee needeth but meekly press upon him with prayer, and soon will He help thee. Press on then, let see how thou bearest thee. He is full ready, and doth but abideth thee. But what shalt thou do, and how shalt thou press?

HERE BEGINNETH THE THIRD CHAPTER

*How the work of this book shall be wrought, and of the worthiness
of it before all other works.*

Lift up thine heart unto God with a meek stirring of love; and mean Himself, and none of His goods. And thereto, look the loath to think on aught but Himself. So that nought work in thy wit, nor in thy will, but only Himself. And do that in thee is to forget all the creatures that ever God made and the works of them; so that thy thought nor thy desire be not directed nor stretched to any of them, neither in general nor in special, but let them be, and take no heed to them. This is the work of the soul that most pleaseth God. All saints and angels have joy of this work, and hasten them to help it in all their might. All fiends be furious when thou thus dost, and try for to defeat it in all that they can. All men living in earth be wonderfully holpen¹ of this work, thou wottest not how. Yea, the souls in purgatory be eased of their pain by virtue of this work. Thyself art cleansed and made virtuous by no work so much. And yet it is the lightest work of all, when a soul is helped with grace in sensible list, and soonest done. But else it is hard, and wonderful to thee for to do.

Let not, therefore, but travail therein till thou feel list. For at the first time when thou dost it, thou findest but a darkness; and as it were a cloud of unknowing, thou knowest not what, saving that thou feelest in thy will a naked intent unto God. This

¹ A past participle of help.

darkness and this cloud is, howsoever thou dost, between thee and thy God, and letteth thee that thou mayest neither see Him clearly by light of understanding in thy reason, nor feel Him in sweetness of love in thine affection.

And therefore shape thee to bide in this darkness as long as thou mayest, evermore crying after Him that thou lovest. For if ever thou shalt feel Him or see Him, as it may be here, it behoveth always to be in this cloud in this darkness. And if thou wilt busily travail as I bid thee, I trust in His mercy that thou shalt come thereto.

HERE BEGINNETH THE FOURTH CHAPTER

*Of the shortness of this word, and how it may not be come to by
curiosity of wit, nor by imagination.*

But for this, that thou shalt not err in this working and believe that it be otherwise than it is, I shall tell thee a little more thereof, as me thinketh.

This work asketh no long time or it be once truly done, as some men think; for it is the shortest work of all that man may imagine. It is never longer, nor shorter, than is an atom: the which atom, by the definition of true philosophers in the science of astronomy, is the least part of time. And it is so little that for the littleness of it, it is indivisible and nearly incomprehensible. This is that time of the which it is written: All time that is given to thee, it shall be asked of thee, how thou hast dispended it. And

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