



## THE CLOUD TEXTS AND SOME ASPECTS OF MODERN THEORY

This essay experiments with applying ideas selected from later twentieth-century theory to *The Cloud of Unknowing* and associated writings. The aim is to discover whether the ideas can shed light on the social positioning of these texts, beyond the insights achieved by traditional textual, theological and literary approaches. The ideas are selected from the body of theory that I know, based on resonances produced when the ideas are read in association with the texts.

First I would like to consider concepts of liminality originating in Arnold van Gennep's book, *The Rites of Passage*, first published in 1908, and developed in the late 1960s and the 1970s by Victor and Edith Turner. According to this theory, *limina* or transitional sites derived from individual rites of passage, such as birth, initiation, pilgrimage, monastic life and marriage, contain experimental models for future social transformations. *Limina* allow the suppression of deviation enforced by conservative societies to be circumvented. They thus become the means by which societies progress to new modes of thinking and conduct. In temporal terms, *limina* are moments experienced as marginal to conformist discursive pressures.

The title metaphor of the *Cloud* texts can be related to these ideas. Commentary has traced many Biblical and post-Biblical sources for the metaphor of the cloud of unknowing. However, the anonymous author introduces shifts in significance and intensifies the dimension of paradox already present in works such as Richard of St. Victor's *Benjamin Major* (*The Mystical Ark*). Initially the cloud appears as a barrier between the contemplative apprentice and God (*Cloud*, pp. 16/19-17/5; p. 47/17-20).<sup>1</sup> After practice and through grace, it becomes a ground of meeting, pierced by God, who sends out "a beme of goostly lȳȳ" (p. 62/14-15). Then, in an unprecedented leap, the cloud is identified with contemplative experience. This is outwardly Nothing, but to true inner perception it is the All; it is felt to be God (p. 123/21). The paradox is satisfying as a literary device because of its dramatic quality. From the viewpoint of the author's message, however, it is anti-literary, or at least meta-literary, since it jolts the reader into recognizing the metaphorical nature of the preceding accounts of activity and



experience in the cloud. The reader is challenged to abandon the deceptions wrought by language in favor of "goostli" working. This is confirmed by the author's reiteration of the fundamental paradox, that, whatever the apprentice experiences in the cloud, he will always find it to be "a cloude of vnknoowyng pat is bitwix hym & his God" (p. 123/22-23). Apart from its inevitable, and undoubtedly experiential, association of transcendence with the divine, the transient, never-completed meanings generated by the title metaphor in *The Cloud of Unknowing* are an accurate poetic representation of a *limen*.

To move from anthropological to linguistic theory, in an essay first published in 1975, Hélène Cixous built the notion of binary oppositions on Jacques Lacan's premise that language is essentially phallogocentric—that is, that the phallus, identified as the child first acquires language with lack, or repressed desire for an initial unitary identification with the mother and the world, is the central, divisive sign in language. Cixous developed Lacan's theory by arguing that, stemming from the split, phallus/lack, the hierarchized pair, Man/Woman, is the foundation for a system of exclusive dual relationships occupying all of language and hence all aspects of culture and society (Cixous 1980, 90-98). In 1984 Luce Irigaray postulated a site of interchange, never complete and occluded in discourse, between the binaries. Her descriptions of this site, designated "that which stands *between*" (Irigaray 1993, 21), resonate with the shifting significances of the cloud-metaphor in the author's hands. In fact, the cloud of unknowing never ceases to be what Irigaray describes as the third term, "that permits progression: from poverty to wealth, from ignorance to wisdom, from mortality to immortality" (1993, 20-21). This unending state of passage heals duality and undoes linguistic certainty. "All entities, substantives, adverbs, sentences are patiently and joyously called into question" (1993, 22). Irigaray was attracted to accounts of ecstatic vision, or of descent into the nothingness, the abyss of the heart, in the writings of female mystics. She saw such experiences as exceeding all representation (Moi 1985, 136-37). Resonances produced when Irigaray's theories are read in the context of the *Cloud* texts suggest that these texts are similarly driven to escape from the closed world of binary logic.

Unresolved transition is a feature also of the *Cloud*-author's discussions of traditional hierarchies of spiritual life. These emphasize, not the static determinism of the levels, but rather the permeability of the boundaries which separate them, as well as the possibilities for ascent and (less often) for descent.



The first of the hierarchies, of common (or active), special (or contemplative), singular (or solitary) and perfect (or unitary) life, is confined for its expression to the first two chapters of *The Cloud*. The focus is on the crossing of boundaries. The disciple's love of God, in itself the gift of grace, has drawn him through to the third level, so that he can now learn to step towards the fourth. The close of chapter 1 leaves him in a condition of open-ended *betweenness* (p. 14/12-15) which, as it transpires, is maintained for the whole book, as the disciple is encouraged to work in the undefined area *between* the equally undefined clouds of forgetting and unknowing.

When, in *The Book of Privy Counselling*, the author responds to a reader's question about how to judge whether a calling to contemplative life is genuine, he again focuses on the permeability of the boundary between the common (or active) and special (or contemplative) states, the crossing of which is at the free disposal of grace (pp. 164/15-168/9, *passim*). In attempting to cross, the apprentice figuratively enters, "be goostly see ... schpping ouer fro bodelines into goostines" (p. 167/15-16). The phrase resonates both with the incomplete transition of the *limen*, and with the continuing interchange of Irigaray's "that which stands *between*."

The discussion in *Privy Counselling* is discursively significant in that it opens up, if only experientially, the dichotomy privileging contemplative over active, which is ancient and perennially renewed in Western cultures (Steele 1995, 2-53). An opening of this binary is already present in *The Cloud*, when the author expounds the upper degree of active life and the lower degree of contemplative life as a third term, negotiating the space *between* the lives, and an indispensable aspect of both (p. 31/6-14, p. 47/10-12). The author inventively ties his tripartite concept of spiritual life to Jesus's validation of Mary's "best part," through a literal exposition of the use of the superlative. He is thus able to reassure readers of his compliance with doctrine: "þe lyses ben þei not, for Holi Chirche makþ no mynde bot of two—actyue lif & contemplayue lif" (p. 53/4-5). The presence of this explanation betrays tension, and it is significant that St Gregory the Great, the central figure in the evolving tradition of the lives, offers a different resolution: "Nor does he say that Mary has chosen 'the good' part, but 'the best,' that Martha's part may also be shown to be good" (*Homilies on Ezechiel* 2, ii, trans. in Butler 1927, 247).



In *The Cloud* the intermediate third term ultimately resolves the traditional dualism into a continuum: "In his partye is contemplatyue lif & actyue lif coupled togeders in goostly sibreden & maad sisters, at be ensample of Martha & Mary" (p. 53/19-21). Of course, the acknowledgment that the two lives are ultimately unified, in Christ, the law of love, and the institutional church (Beale 1975, 393), was not novel in the 1390s, when the author, according to the latest dating (Clark 1995a, 92), produced his works. What is new in the *Cloud* texts, as opposed to Walter Hilton's *Mixed Life*, which was probably written in the late 1380s and is more closely attuned to St Gregory,<sup>2</sup> is the attention the author pays to intermingling and transition in the space *between* the active and contemplative lives. Cixous's observation, that an interleaving of the fundamental dichotomies is essential for creating the future (1980, 97-98), resonates with the author's approach.

His *Epistle of Stirrings* demolishes a different set of binaries, again through drawing attention to "that which stands *between*." The work professes to answer a question from a disciple on whether or not he should engage in a list of self-chosen asceticisms. The author's argument is simultaneously playful and hard-hitting, arriving at illumination through benevolent trickery. His close consideration reveals the erroneous basis of the question, and sequentially breaks down the "web of words" in which the disciple is enmeshed. The epistle's opening repeats the list of choices five times, miming the questioner's state of being caught in dichotomies of language and logic (p. 62/2-5, 6-10, 18-20; p. 63/3-6, 6-10). A masterly discussion leads to the suggestion that the disciple should find, through his heart's love, the thing hidden *between*: that is, God, who is the source of all free choice (p. 71/8-11, 22-4).<sup>3</sup> The tedious dichotomies are fused in oxymorons at the same instant that stasis dissolves in flow: "Cheese bee him, and pou arte silently spekyng & spekingly silent, fastyngly eiyng and eiyngly fasting; and so forþ of alle be remenant" (pp. 71/26-72/2). *Discretion of Stirrings* goes on to explain how "a reuerent stering of lastyng loue" (p. 75/11) continuously maintained in the will guides the contemplative in decisions about outward austerities (pp. 75/15-76/5), and in fact "schal gouerne bee discretly in al þi leuyng withouten any errouer" (p. 75/16-17; cf. *Cloud*, pp. 81/2-8, 92/14-16). By implication, the contemplative who fosters "þis meek steryng of loue" (*Cloud* p. 93/12) will be led moment by moment in a spontaneous appropriateness in all activities.



Freedom from the anxiety which is a powerful instrument of social coercion appears as a goal elsewhere in the *Cloud* texts. It is particularly clear in the notion of play. This enters the texts in a variety of shapes, supported by traditions which have been traced by John Clark (1996, 175-77). The author encourages the use of stratagems ("sleigz"), which he has invented in the course of his own spiritual practice: the apprentice should appear not to desire God, to pretend to cower to spiritual foes, but in reality to surrender to God's care (*Cloud*, chapter 32). As well as play in the form of pretence, the *Cloud* texts recommend playing like a child. *Dennis' Hidden Divinity* imbues even the standard concept of contention with a sense of enthusiastic discernment, by attaching the adjectives, "sleig" (wise, sensible) and "listi" (eager), not found in the sources (p. 3/1). The spontaneity and joy of contemplative play in relation to the divine is seen further in metaphors appearing throughout the *corpus*. For example, "Lat hem sit in here rest & in here play, wip þe prid & þe best partye of Marye" (*Cloud*, p. 55/5-6); "Bot euer whan reson defaileþ, þan list loue live and lerne for to play" (*Discretion of Stirrings*, p. 72/22); and "þi list is likyng to playe wip a childe," describing divinely-given enthusiasm for the "werk" (*Privy Counselling*, p. 167/3). Finally, there is a longer moving simile in *The Cloud*:

þis is childly & playyngly spoken, þee þink, paraventure. Bot I rowe who-so had grace to do & fele as I sey, he schuld fele good gamesumli play wip hym, as þe fadir dop wipþe childe, kyssyng & clippyng, þat weel were him so. (p. 88/1-4)

The link in the *Cloud* texts between play and contemplation, and the author's play with language as a means of illumination, as in the dissolution of dichotomies in *Discretion of Stirrings*, resonates with aspects of D. W. Winnicott's psychoanalytic theory, first published in 1951. This proposes that infants develop their subjectivity by using *transitional objects*, perceived simultaneously as external to the self and as an aspect of inner experience (Winnicott 1971, 5). Play with such objects occurs in the liminal psychic time between mother and baby. This "intermediate area of experience," also designated "potential space," is the foundation of healthy development and creative living (Winnicott 1971, 41). The metaphors of play in the *Cloud corpus* may therefore be understood as use of primary memory to convey the essence of spontaneity in contemplative practice.



It seems, from the analyses conducted so far, that concepts selected from several branches of theory, such as are routinely applied to non-medieval, non-contemplative literature, do produce new emphases in interpretation when they are applied to the *Cloud* texts. Principally, the concepts bring into relief the repeated indications in the texts of spaces between or beyond the hierarchical categories and divisions which are fundamental to discourse. The texts and the theories are alike in their fascination with such spaces, but differ in their understanding of them. For the *Cloud* texts liminal or transitional spaces expand inexhaustibly and unimaginably into divine transcendence; for the theories, they are sites for freedom, creativity and innovation, both for individuals and for society. The theorists and the *Cloud*-author agree in their apprehension of the duplicity of language, and both seek escape. For the theorists, however, the distrust is based on the fundamental post-structuralist recognition that language discursively constructs both the subjective and the social orders, so as to preserve and reproduce differences in power between groups and individuals. By contrast, the author understands the duplicity of language as stemming from, and reciprocally promoting, confusion between "goostli" and "bodili" meanings.

Not even this binary, however, which the author constantly asserts, is permitted to function in the texts themselves without qualification. As in the complexities of the cloud-metaphor already analyzed, the dialectics of the text alternate between a skilful deployment of the resources of "bodily" language, and a series of retreats into warnings and denials. For example, in chapters 51 to 61 of *The Cloud*, the author develops a vivid group of negative and positive *exempla* in order to warn his readers against importing the bodily meaning of prepositions into spiritual practice. These retrospectively restrict the meaning of "up," "down," "above," and "below," which are frequently applied to spiritual working in preceding chapters. They also qualify in advance the extended application of such terminology in chapter 62, which explains that all bodily things are beneath and outside the apprentice's soul; that souls, angels and the powers of the soul are within and on the same level; and that only God is above. Other linguistically expansive passages near the end of *The Cloud*, including the climactic references to Moses' ascent of the mountain (pp. 126/25-127/2, p. 28/3-5), further exploit the bodily denotations of prepositions. Such self-corrections, which operate forwards and backwards across the whole work, recall Toril Moi's application of the term, "deconstructive," to a form of writing which "engages with and thereby exposes the duplicitous nature of discourse" (1985, 9). This is to approach

Kevin Hart's argument in philosophy, that negative theology is a form of deconstruction (Hart 1989, 45), from a perspective of textual analysis.

In proclaiming language's inability to express spiritual experience or the divine transcendence, the author follows his mentor, the Pseudo-Dionysius, as well as more accessible sources such as Hilton. However, his own writings drive the principle of language's duplicity, resulting from its immersion in bodily existence, much further. Reservations about language emerge in mundane contexts, such as the author's self-censoring in *Privy Counselling*: "Lo! Here many wordes & lilyl sentence" (p. 164/7),<sup>4</sup> and in the connections he regularly makes between speaking and sin or folly: "he wil þus jangle euer more & more til he bring þee lower..." (*Cloud* p. 27/6-7); "my blaþryng fleischely tonge" (*Cloud* p. 62/20).

Further evidence of a fundamental distrust of language is the encouragement frequently given to the reader in the *Cloud* texts to pass through the written words into contemplative practice (cf. Tixier 1997, 136). The ending of *Dennis' Hidden Divinity*, considered in relation to its sources, demonstrates this vividly. Sarracenus's Latin translation of the Pseudo-Dionysius's *Mystical Theology*, closely imitated by Gallus's Paraphrase (*Extractio*), concludes with a climactic overstraining of language in the effort to express transcendence. The ensuing silence is eloquent, both with language's failure and with an implied suprarational perception:

Ipsam neque ponimus neque auferimus; quoniam et super omnem positionem est perfecta et unitiva omnium causa, et super omnem ablationem est excessus ab omnibus simpliciter absoluti et super tota. (Hodgson 1958, 99)

[That we neither assert nor deny; since the perfect and unique cause of all is above every assertion and above every denial, being that which, transcending all, is simply itself and above all things.]

The *Cloud*-author's translation further over-burdens expression by repeated explicit references to the failing of the intellectual powers, so that the silence which follows is even more persuasive:

Hym we mowe neiper set ne do away, *ne on any understandable manner afferme him, ne denie him*. For þe parfite & þe singlar cause of al most nedelynges be wiþoutyn comparison of þe moost hiȝe heigt abouen alle, boþe setting & doying away. And his not-



*understandable* ouerpassyng is *vn-understandabely* *abouen alle affermyng and denynge*. (p. 10/17–23; repetitions and additions unsourceed in Sarracenus or Gallus are italicized.)

Similarly, the ending to *An Epistle of Prayer* brusquely curtails textuality in favor of contemplative practice:

No more at his tyme, bot Goddes blessing have þou & myne.  
Reed ofte; forgete it not; sett þee schapely to be profre; and fle  
alle letyng and occasion of letyng, in þe name of Iesu. Amen. (p.  
59/14–15)

Encouragement to the reader or hearer to move quickly through *logos* and into *Logos* is given also in *The Cloud*. The opening prayer initiates a method of *lectio divina*, recommended by Guigo de Ponte, a thirteenth-century Carthusian writer on contemplation, under the term, *degiustatio* (Tixier 1987, 6, note 2 and 13–14; Martin 1997). This invites the apprentice to ponder the text deeply in short bursts (“rumination”), and to practice briefly any contemplative exercise described, as a means of awakening love (Tixier 1987, 15; cf. Leclercq 1974, 90). The carefully formulated chapters and detailed, prefaced tabulation, as well as the many brief, rhetorically-structured units which *The Cloud* contains,<sup>5</sup> imply and support this method. This is another instance of liminality, as the *Cloud* texts cross and re-cross the border between words and the “werk.”

I do not wish to minimize or elide the differing assumptions, already discussed, which separate *The Cloud* and related writings from the theories which I have experimentally applied to them. These differences are fundamental and far-reaching: Nevertheless the resonances produced when the texts and theories are read together, as well as the author’s views on language just summarized, reveal the recalcitrance of the *Cloud* texts in relation to what Lacan referred to as the Symbolic Order, and their passionate striving to penetrate beyond this order. Such interpretations and analyses may support an assessment of the texts as being themselves liminal to discourse and to the “reality” which it mediates. Furthermore, in the light of a post-structuralist premise, that ideological change is only possible (if it is possible at all) through resistance to deep-rooted linguistic structures, such as binaries and fixed hierarchies, these same interpretations and analyses may support the claim of the *Cloud* texts to a place among the more radical and innovative writings of their historical period.

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## NOTES

This paper was presented at a conference, “Metamorphoses—Peoples, Places, Times,” sponsored by the Australian and New Zealand Association for Medieval and Early Modern Studies (ANZAMEMS), at the University of Western Australia, Perth, on 5–8 July 2001.

1. Quotations from *The Cloud of Unknowing* and *The Book of Privy Counselling* are taken from Hodgson 1973. Quotations from *Denis: Hidden Divinity*, *An Epistle of Discretion of Shirrings*, and *An Epistle of Prayer* are from Hodgson 1958. Parenthetical references are to the page and line numbers of these editions.
2. Joy Russell-Smith nevertheless points to the innovatory attention which Hilton pays in *Mixed Life* to the active life of good deeds in relationship to contemplative life, to his opening of such a life to actives, and to his innovative application of St. Gregory’s concept of mixed life, reserved for pastors and prelates, to contemplative laymen (1959, 135–37). This opinion is endorsed by later writers: “[Hilton] is ostensibly traditional and conservative, but he can also be creative and apply old principles in a new way, as in his teaching on the scope of the ‘mixed life’” (Clark 1991, 34–35).
3. Hilditch shows that in *Discretion of Shirrings* the emphasis on discretion as the gift of grace diverges from the source in Richard of St. Victor, who presents discretion as painfully maintained by human effort (1987, 72–75).
4. The justification which follows reveals that this exclamation is sincerely intended, not a merely rhetorical flourish (*diminutio*), or a humility *topos*.
5. The author takes particular delight in small-scale parallel structures. For example, chapters 13 and 24 contain a *distributio*, or division of the argument, into two parts: respectively perfect and imperfect acquisition of humility, and love of God and love of fellow Christians. Chapter 32 parallels the spiritual stratagems being taught with humility and charity, following a long discussion which balances these virtues against each other; and chapter 40 offers parallel discussions of “sin” and “God” in prayer. Some chapters, e.g. 24, 46, and 61, conform to the standard plans of rhetorical argument (*dispositio*), which instructors like Robert of Basevorn (c. 1322) developed from Cicero’s *Rhetorica ad Herennium*. The formal triads on reading, meditation and prayer in chapter 35 are a restrained version of elaborate parallels in the *Scala Claustralium*, written by Guigo II, the ninth prior of the Grande Chartreuse (d. 1188).





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