

NOUGHT

BY

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IVE according to thy calling' is the advice given in the 2nd chapter of the *Cloud of Unknowing*, which is devoted to 'a short stirring to meekness'.¹ And in this the author sets the tone of the whole book, introducing in the first place this virtue of humility and leading thence to the full 'noughting' of oneself before God. For those accustomed to spiritual reading and spiritual exercises it is easy to spend time in considering what God is doing to the soul and so to begin to count his blessings and graces in prayer. This opens the door to a smugness and pride, which may well captivate anyone who is endeavouring to follow the instructions of *The Cloud*. So, he says, if the reader take the book seriously he must concentrate on the call, on that towards which he is progressing. If a man lives according to his calling he will begin to find the virtue of humility, for his eyes will never linger on himself except in seeing his tragic poverty, his wants and his needs:

Look now forwards and let the backwards be. And see what thou lackest and not what thou hast; for that is the readiest getting and keeping of meekness. (p. 10).

For anyone attempting the heights of the spiritual life there is a special need for the virtue which 'tempers and holds in the spirit lest it tends immoderately to high things', as St Thomas describes humility (II-II, 161, 1). No one will ever reach the heart of any truly spiritual writer unless he realises and practises this; but it is peculiarly true of *The Cloud* which lays such stress on the abandonment of self. Meekness and charity are the only two virtues of which the author considers it necessary to treat.

As thus may be seen in one virtue or two instead of all the other; and well may these two virtues be meekness and charity. For whoso might get these two clearly, he needeth no more: for why, he hath all. (c. 12. pp. 42-3).

But there are degrees of meekness and it is through descending the steps of the virtue that we reach the centre of this book. The author defines the virtue of meekness in terms of St Bernard's: 'Humility is the virtue whereby a man with the truest self-knowledge despises (*vilescit*) himself'. A man who really knows himself certainly

¹ p. 9 in Dom Justin Mc Cann's edition.

will not be puffed up by pride, and the clearer that knowledge is the meeker he becomes. Now, if we turn first to St Thomas's analysis of the twelve degrees of meekness according to St Benedict we shall find a good preparation for understanding this part of *The Cloud*; for he points out that although the virtue itself is a volitional thing to be found in the appetite it is regulated by knowledge. It is always valuable to be reminded that humility is a matter of will, because so many people are confused by the apparent necessity for making judgments and comparisons regarding themselves. It is in itself not an intellectual virtue assisting the mind to judge that the man himself is the worst of sinners, or that his next-door neighbour is a far better man, or that his good actions are really bad ones. Such mental contortions are the lot of those who do not realise that humility assists the will to desire God's honour in all things, particularly in the good things which God does or gives to the soul. And yet this desire is regulated by knowledge, not of other people, of their status or of their relation to self, but precisely in the knowledge of self in relation to God. For it is regulated, St Thomas says, by the knowledge that a man has in not thinking himself to be more than he is. (II-II, 161, 6).

The depths to which the knowledge of self penetrates will therefore regulate the extent of a man's meekness or humility. At first he will recognise

the wretchedness and the frailty of man, into which he is fallen by sin. (p. 44).

This awakens the first type of humility which should accompany a man throughout life, no matter how holy he may be. For not even the greatest saint can be without sin, and the greater the saint the more lowered will he be at the sight of any imperfection in himself. No amount of praying on his part nor yet on the part of the whole heavenly host will avail a man anything unless he first has this type of self-knowledge. (c. 14, p. 45). Nevertheless *The Cloud* calls the type of humility derived from this knowledge 'imperfect meekness'; for it is a negative consideration which brings it into being and regulates it, and it is concerned with self rather than with God. Such a meekness does not remain after death because it is too subjective and negative.

After death, and for the chosen soul at incidental moments during this life, a man will forget

all knowing and feeling of his being, not considering whether he have been holy or wretched. (p. 44).

Such a state of self-forgetfulness rises from the knowledge not of self, but of

the over-abundant love and the worthiness of God in himself; in

beholding of which all nature quaketh, all clerks be fools, and all saints and angels be blind. (p. 44).

Thus, after knowing self, one learns to know God in himself and thus to proceed from imperfect to perfect meekness. Whenever one is 'self-conscious' in his knowing and loving God he will remain in imperfect meekness; so that this degree is the normal type during earthly life. It would be pride for a man to think that he was growing into a *perfectly* humble man when first this imperfect type began to appear, and consequently he would be throwing away what little of the virtue he had so far obtained. Perfect meekness only comes

as oft and as long as God vouchsafeth to work it. (id).

And at best it will only last 'a full short while', because it is proper to eternal life in which the chief and overwhelming cause and rule of humility, namely the knowledge of God in himself, will then never cease to dominate all other knowledge.

It might be argued that such a perfect meekness is in fact impossible in this life; and in the 15th chapter the author refutes 'this error'. He admits that most, including himself, have been customary sinners at one time and that they must come by way of self-knowledge of sinfulness, humbling themselves thus

till the time be that the great rust of sin be in great part rubbed away. (p. 48).

But there are some who have lived almost innocent lives, going early into a contemplative state and sinning only 'through frailty and unknowing'. And above all there are the outstanding examples of the sinless Mother of God and of her divine Son. These latter never knew sin and yet our Lord presents himself as the perfect example of the virtue of meekness. Knowledge of self, then, the rule of meekness, need not in fact be concerned with sin—and this may be true even of a great sinner like St Mary Magdalene. Although she carried all through her life the great burden of her former evils, yet that which caused her even greater humility was the knowledge of her present desire springing from her 'lacking of love'. Loving much, she yet knew she could love more,

for it is the condition of a true lover that the more he loveth, the more he longeth to love. (p.51).

So that it was the greatness of her love which caused her the greatest yearning and therefore the greatest humility without direct reference to her sins at all.

In this way *The Cloud* seems to suggest the gradual perfection of meekness, growing first from knowledge of personal sins, then from that of 'lacking of love' (both of which are still imperfect meekness'), and finally from the direct knowledge of the goodness and love

of God without respect to sin or self. There seems to be a suggestion of a state of life almost without sin in this perfect meekness.

And therefore travail busily about perfect meekness; for the condition of it is such, that whoso hath it and while he hath it, he shall not sin; nor yet much after. (p. 47).

This at first sight may appear a dangerous doctrine, but the previous warning about the pride of those who think they have perfect meekness should be recalled. Moreover, other mystical writers refer to something similar in the heights of the spiritual life. St John of the Cross describes in similar terms the final stages of transforming union when the soul is said to be joined with her heavenly Spouse in mystical wedlock: 'My soul is now stripped, detached, alone and far removed from all created things both above and below, and has entered so far into interior recollection with thee, that none of the said things can come within sight of the intimate joy which I possess in Thee—that is, none of them by their sweetness can move my soul to desire them, nor by their wretchedness and misery to dislike and be troubled by them'. And, after describing how the devil cannot approach and how the passions are ordered and directed Godward, the saint finally concludes the Spiritual Canticle with these words: 'All these perfections and dispositions the Bride sets before her Beloved, the Son of God, with the desire to be translated out of the Spiritual Marriage to which God has been pleased to bring her in this Church Militant to the glorious Marriage of the Church Triumphant'. (Peers edition ii. 404-6). It is clear from such descriptions as these that the mystical writers are treating not of an impossibility, an immunity, from sin, but rather of the *fact* that in such a high stage of the spiritual life deliberate sins are in fact more or less unknown. It would be impossible to be so united and at the same time troubled by sins and preoccupations with self. The author of *The Cloud* makes this quite clear in his *Epistle of Prayer*, when he writes of the same union as in the passages quoted from St John of the Cross

Though all that God and he be two and sere in kind, nevertheless yet in grace they are so knit together that they are but one in spirit; and all this is for onehead of love and accordance of will; and in this onehead is the marriage made between God and the soul, the which shall never be broken, though all that the heat and the fervour of this work cease for a time, but by a deadly sin.²

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This process of humiliation which comes from the more and more perfect knowledge of self and of God shows the way into the un-

² Edmund G. Gardner: *The Cell of Self-Knowledge*, p. 88. Italics mine.

knowingness of the *Cloud*. The 'Cloud of forgetting' which disposes the soul to enter the other more 'positive' Cloud is simply the application of a man's humility to his relations with creatures. The more perfect type of humility does not so much place the soul at the feet of all creation as lead it to forget all creatures in a spirit of perfect detachment. Already in the first few chapters of the book the author has outlined this way of blinding oneself to *all* creatures when a man is called to, and takes upon himself, 'this work'. Everything created and all their effects and works must be excluded, so that the Christian remains in darkness simply crying for God. Not only should he forget entirely about himself, but he must be ready to exclude the physical effects which God sometimes produces in the prayer. God is not felt or seen. He remains in himself the absolute spirit for which the soul yearns with all its being. This is, of course, not the sum total of 'spirituality' for a man at this stage. He remains a human person with body as well as soul in a wholesome unity, so that there are times when things created will be a help to him in reaching his goal in God. But in the time of this work

it profiteth little or nought to think of the kindness or the worthiness of God, nor on our Lady, nor on the saints or angels in heaven, nor yet on the joys of heaven: that is to say, *with a special beholding to them*, as though thou wouldst by that beholding feed and increase thy purpose. (c. 5, pp. 22-3; italics mine).

In other words even the specific conception of God's deeds in creation (his kindness and worthiness) is not God himself, and therefore in the Cloud of Unknowing it would provide a medium of knowledge which for the time the soul is being called to transcend. She must not even be seeking virtues specifically and deliberately (c. 12). For all these things are in the realms of means, whereas in this absolute humiliation of self before God, he is all and the soul is nothing so that no medium stands between the two. The only self-awareness in this darkness is

that thou feelest in thy will a naked intent unto God. (p. 12).

The light of understanding, the sweetness of love in the affection, these things are gone for now; and the will faces God alone, stripped of every accidental, of everything which is not God. The 'naked intent' is directed towards the 'naked being' of God, and the mind and will begin to praise God for himself alone.

To the question 'How can I think on God and what he is', the author can merely answer, 'I know not'. For to give a precise formula or method would destroy the darkness of the cloud and bring the soul down to the dim light of human reasonings. (c. 6).

Of God himself no man can think. (p. 23).

Hence if a man is to approach the naked being of God, now that even the works of God form a distraction, he must abandon all thoughts. If he begin to think 'What is God?', his active reasoning will be stirred up and he will begin to try to embrace God in a series of concepts and so return from the naked being to his own ideas. Even unwilling thoughts which escape the control of the spirit will disturb this union and break up the cloud.

A naked thought of anything under God, pressing against thy will and thy willing, putteth thee further from God than thou shouldest be if it were not, and hindereth thee. (c. 9, p. 36).

Not that such thoughts are evil; but they disturb the darkness into which the soul has for the time allowed itself to be drawn by God's grace.

Yet if thoughts are a distraction, the will has the power to gain direct access to God. The mind is always groping as in glass darkly in its faith, but the will leaps forward into the very depths of God's naked being by charity.

Therefore I would leave all that thing that I can think, and choose to my love that thing that I cannot think. For why, he may well be love, but not thought. By love may he be gotten and holden; but by thought never. (p. 23).

This is the 'blind stirring of love' the pre-eminence of which in the way of union with God is undeniable. This is indeed true, infused contemplation in a more permanent form; the being of the creature in complete dependence is drawn up to the all-pervading being of God and bound to it by love with no intermediary between.

Knit to God in spirit, in oneness of love and accordance of will (p. 32).

And it is this 'accordance of will' which is called later 'the substance of all perfection' (p. 118). That is the naked willing of goodness to God which St Thomas distinguishes as 'benevolence' from the mutual possession of God and the soul by the affection of love. Benevolence is more naked, less possessive; and upon it the love of charity is built. (cf. II-II, 27, 2). But the author of *The Cloud* adds the notion of the 'according will unto God'

a manner of well-pleaseness and a gladness that thou feelest in thy will at all that he doth. (id).

This is the fulness of love, the '*redamatio*'; the give and take of perfect union.

To the nature of this 'naked intent' upon God we shall have to return in a future article; here it is only necessary to outline the way towards it by the complete meekness which rises to a divine self-

forgetfulness. But it is necessary to avoid too promptly summarising this mode of prayer and union or being anti-intellectual; for, although the author lays much stress on the need to suppress thoughts *about* God, he is equally concerned that in the cloud of unknowing we should find the ghostly *meaning* of God. A man should not think about God in a discursive and meditative way but he should mean God with a simple intent. The same doctrine may be found in *The Spiritual Canticle* of St John of the Cross where he writes of the union of love achieved: 'The soul is moved in love, and thus the faculties have ceased to work, for when they reach their goal all medial operations come to an end. Thus that which the soul does at this time is to wait lovingly upon God, which is to love in continuation of unitive love. . . . Let the will alone appear. . . .' (St xvi, Peers ed. ii 280). In previous articles we have seen how meditation is overpowered by contemplative prayer, and *The Cloud* is simply describing this detachment from meditation; for the latter must precede this work, but can form no essential part of it. Thoughts now, the author often says, are dissipating, and succeed only in scattering and separating of thee and of thy mind both from thee and from thy God. (*Priv. Couns.* c. 5, p. 200).

This work keeps the soul 'whole and unscattered' in giving the apex of the soul the fullest freedom it can reach in this life.

This process of humiliation which includes the treading down of the thoughts of creatures is therefore a strict asceticism of the will which prepares it for the mystical work of God in love. The work of purification in this very absolute and fundamental sense is *the* preparation for infused contemplative prayer, and it is described in *The Cloud* as becoming 'nought'. The author says that the process does in fact lead 'nowhere',

nowhere bodily is everywhere ghostly. . . . And although thy bodily wits can find there nothing to feed them on, for they think it nought that thou dost, yea! do on then this nought, and do it for God's love. (c. 68, p. 159).

And a few lines later he speaks of 'wrestling with that blind nought'. In this the reader is reminded strikingly of Walter Hilton's teaching when describing the same heights of union: 'Then thinketh the soul right naught, for then thinketh it of none earthly thing cleavingly. This is a rich naught. And this naught and this night is a great ease for the soul that desireth the love of Jess' (*Scale*, bk 2, c. 24. Orchard series p. 26). The doctrine stands directly in the Dionysian tradition, so that we find Father Augustine Baker in his commentary on *The Cloud* summing up the whole teaching of the book in the words of the pseudo-Dionysius: 'Leave the senses and sensible exercises, and

all sensible and intelligible things, keeping them under and suppressing them with a strong endeavour of thy mind, and rise up unknowingly to union with God, who is above all substance and knowledge'. (McCann's edition of *The Cloud*, p. 403).

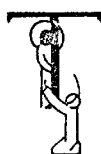
Those who have experienced this type of prayer will know how involuntarily drawn they are to it, and yet how useless, almost futile, it seems. The mind appears almost as a blank, thoughts are impossible, nothing 'concrete' of any value is to be taken away in the form of pious thoughts or even resolutions. It seems to leave the intellect starved so that the lack of nourishment threatens to atrophy its living powers. What use can such blankness be to God or man? This indeed, if we are to follow the teaching of *The Cloud*, is one of the great hardships of the union of love. A man has to be ready to abandon, at least in this sense, even the use of his faculties. He has to nought himself to such an extent that he may appear a fool before men, unable to keep abreast with them intellectually. Of course it will not be so since he rests in his love at the very source of being; but he has to have the preparation of soul by which he might so abandon himself. This noughting is the greatest of humiliations and makes him perfectly meek.

Meekness . . . is subtly and perfectly comprehended in this little blind love set on God, when it is beating upon this dark *cloud of unknowing*, all other things being put down and forgotten. (c. 24, p. 68).

PILGRIMAGE TO EINSIEDELN

BY

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HE small local train from Lucerne winds its way up the wooded mountains to the famous medieval shrine of our Lady of Einsiedeln. There is no official pilgrimage going on at the moment, only a few peasants and hikers. The pilgrim from England looks out of the window at the grandiose lines of the mountains, with the Rigi in the distance, and wonders what he will find at this sanctuary of our Lady, once as renowned throughout Europe as Lourdes is today. Now the abbey comes into view; and at once the note is struck that will sound again and again during these thirty-six hours; the note of contrast, of dissonance: the rich, overladen baroque building set within the