

# THE WAY OF PERFECTION IN THE ENGLISH MYSTICS

By

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## II.—THE HISTORICAL SETTING.

The thirteenth century is universally recognized as the peak of the later medieval period; by the middle of the fourteenth Christendom was well on in the decline which led to the Renaissance and the Reformation. There are many causes of the decline and amid the mounting miseries of war, pestilence, and corruption it is often difficult to distinguish cause from effect. The tale is well known: the Black Death carried off the flower of Europe as no war could have done. The Hundred Years War began towards the middle of the century and brought with it increasing desolation and poverty to the lower classes. In England the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 revealed the unhappy state of the populace, and similar disturbances occurred in France, Germany, and other European countries. The common people, then as now, had to bear the brunt of the wars, and, then as now, it led to a great deal of unrest and impatience both with Church and State.

The Church herself was on the sick list during the fourteenth century with the Pope a tool of the French monarchy throughout the 70 years' Babylonish Captivity, and with a weak and irresolute clergy from the Pope down to the local curés. In England the French character of the Papacy led to the anti-Papal legislation of the Statute of Provisors (1351), prohibiting the appointment of English Bishops by the Holy See, and the Statutes of Praemunire (1358 and 1393) putting a stop to appeals to Rome. But it was more than political degeneracy; simony, lechery, and sacrilege of all sorts, in spite of their gravity, were common in the Church of God. St Catherine's Dialogue does not make pleasant reading on this subject; and though her language may be rather violently coloured, there is no doubt that there was great corruption at that time. And all this was leading to the final *denouement* when the Pope did eventually return to Rome and the French and Roman factions broke asunder into the Great Schism.

The life of the Church was indeed at a low ebb and her decadence produced the inevitable crop of reactionary heresies such as Wycliff and the Hussites. And while these powerful preachers appealed to the goodwill of the people, the learned men of the Church contented themselves for the most part with unreal and over-formal discussions, which were the dry bones of the glorious scholastic body of the preceding century. The intellectual life of the Church shared in the general ebb of the tide of culture and

civilisation. All these decomposing elements are vividly described by Langland in *Piers Plowman*; but, curiously, none of the other writers we shall have occasion to discuss have more than a brief mention of such disturbing elements as Lollardy.

Every corruption is at the same time a generation. New life rises from the old carcass. And in this decline in Europe new and increasingly powerful movements began to flourish. Here is no place to enlarge on the rise of nationalism among the European states, as the medieval unity began to break up. It was still a movement within Christendom, however, and did not as yet break away from the ancient stock. The students and writers of the time travelled freely from one centre of learning to another; and their restlessness was only rivalled by the pious pilgrims whose devotion and lust for sight-seeing led many of them as far as Jerusalem and Mount Sinai. Such a going and coming of the learned and the devout prevented an exclusive nationalism—though towards the end of the 100 Years War, beyond our present period, England became more isolated, partly owing to the devastation of Northern France. It was during the period of decadence that the national literature really blossomed in Chaucer and all the masters of the Middle English whom many are only just re-discovering at the present day. Among these writers of a national language in England our own English mystics are to be classed with the highest.

It was in the language of the people that the strange bubbling forth of profound mysticism made itself known in the fourteenth century. In the midst of this desolation and disease rose these sweetest flowers of Christian sowing. Not only in England, but in France, Italy, Germany, and particularly in Flanders, the voice of the people was raised not only in bitter reproach and demand for their rights, but in the gentlest tones of contemplation, expressing love and tenderness in the onehead of God. We need only glance at a list of the contemporary names: the Dominicans Eckhart (+1327), Tauler (+1361), Suso (+1366), and Catherine of Siena (+1380); Ruysbroek dying (1381) a year after the birth of Thomas à Kempis; at the very beginning of the period the holy women Mechtilde of Hackeborn (+1298), Gertrude the Great (+1302), and Angela of Foligno (+1309); in England those generally described as 'The English Mystics' are enclosed in the fourteenth century, Rolle born perhaps ten years before it opened and Mother Julian some ten years after it closed. The garden of God's Church, with such a sweet-smelling harvest of chosen blooms, was not so overgrown and run to seed as at first might appear.

It must be recognised that in many ways this spiritual movement bears the marks of the age in which it appeared. It is no sudden, unrehearsed return to an earlier period of Christian living. It shows, particularly perhaps in England, the first traces of

individualism, if not subjectivism, which in other ways was to lead to the climax of spiritual pride in the doctrine of Private Judgment. Despite the goings and comings of the learned and the pious, despite the sense of Christian solidarity entailed in those journeys, the gradual rise of nationalism went hand in hand with a new self-consciousness which bears, surely, some kinship with the self-consciousness of the first parents after they had eaten of the tree of knowledge. In England after the Conquest the educated classes, the clerks and ecclesiastics, spoke and corresponded in Latin, the nobility, proud of their descent from those who came over with the Conqueror, all conversed in French. The English romances and poetry were for the common laity, verse being a convenient form for an illiterate people to learn. The vernacular was the language of the uneducated. During the fourteenth century, however, English and Norman became more closely knit. The laity became more educated and the English tongue gradually worked its way into the higher circles of society. But the women of the time were the true champions of the native tongue. The nuns and anchoresses, the pious dames who had some leisure, were the occasion of a great burst of vernacular literature on the spiritual life. Although comparatively well-educated, they spoke English so that their directors wrote in English and those who themselves experienced the heavens opening, like Mother Julian, wrote also in English. It is thus that the English language marks the first stirrings of the self-conscious element in the history of the spirituality of the country. It is a symbol of the new element in Catholic piety.

This piety, in spite of the corruption of the Church, was fairly widespread among the common people, and it was warm-blooded, almost passionate. It had first been nourished by the friars, and in particular the Franciscan friars, in the preceding century. The attention of the devout had become centred on two points of deep spiritual feeling, the Passion of our Lord, and his Holy Name. The particular type of spirituality had been set in motion largely by St Bernard, though his influence on these English writers was not direct. The humanity of Christ, and especially his suffering humanity, had become the object of a strong personal worship of the Incarnate Word; one might almost call it a 'photographic' devotion, in so far as the emphasis lay on the human nature as manifested in the historic figure of Christ and his dramatic deeds. Richard Rolle is most expressive of this warm-hearted love of the Man Christ.

White was his naked breast and red his bloody side.

Wan was his fair face, his wounds deep and wide.

The Jews would not wane to pine him in that tide.

As (the) stream does of the strand, his blood gan down glide.

(*Wand*: hesitate, fear; *pine*: hurt, cause to suffer; *gan*: did.)

Or again:

In mirth he lives night and day, that loves that sweet Child;  
 It is Jhesu, forsooth I say, of all meekest and mild:  
 Wroth fra him would all away, though he were never so wild;  
 He that in heart loved him that day fra evil will him shield.<sup>1</sup>

Not only were these spiritual lyrics read and learnt by many up and down the country, but with them went the more profound and truly mystical works of Rolle and the others. An intense, personal, and chivalrous love of our Lord in his human nature led these English people to the heights of contemplation, where imagination, sensitive feelings of love and sorrow had to be left behind in their life of Union with the One and Triune Divinity. There was, complementarily, less attention paid to the Mystic Christ, to the liturgical, hieratic figure hanging serenely on the Cross, or sitting as High Priest and Judge surrounded by a stately and formal nimbus. They seem to have forgotten the full significance of the sacramental life of the Church. Indeed such things always seem to fade in a mystic era; or rather they are taken for granted, as the foundations performing their essential function unseen.

We may observe the same tendency in the art of the day, particularly in the architecture. The supreme age of Gothic had passed and now the artists were intent on embellishing and decorating. It was a time of spires, tracery, and detailed carving up and down the church, ushering in the perpendicular style with such fan tracery as may be seen at Gloucester (1330-1350). This art has a graceful beauty, but it is more personal and less hieratic. The churches are broadened and flooded with light from splendid glowing windows, and the people in church stand out as separate individuals instead of the indistinguishable mass of worshippers in the mysterious twilight of the earlier churches.

This brief historical background raises one profound question which should be faced before proceeding to the actual teaching of these 14th century writers. What was the cause of this sudden flood of mystical writers in the midst of such a turbulent setting? How was it that all over Europe they should have been writing these great spiritual classics just when holiness and civilisation were both falling away from the peak of the thirteenth century? Surely that earlier century should have called them forth?

We have seen that the period was one of decline and widespread distress, that the atmosphere was not one of peace in which a high degree of contemplative life might flourish. But it may be that one of the chief causes of the appearance of this host of mystics lay in the very distress and turmoil of the times: the desert and thorns were a necessary counterpart to the blooming of the rose. Only when the cross lies heavily does the spirit soar;

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<sup>1</sup>*Life and Lyrics of Richard Rolle*, by Comper, pp. 243 and 258.

these physical ills act as the purgation of the spirit and persecution calls forth the noblest in man. At a period of physical comfort and well-being, when prosperity fills purse and belly with the good things of the world, we do not look for mystics. The spirit, overburdened by the weight of the body, rises listlessly; to rest on the earth seems the only way to exist. When the earth loses its attraction the soul, liberated, may rise unencumbered to be caught by the invisible hand of God. In the history of Greek philosophy it has been pointed out that the science did not burst into flower until the decline from the point when Greece was at the height of her power and prosperity. And it has been suggested that since then philosophy has only flourished when disillusionment in the world's promises and good things has come to turn men's minds to things beyond the superficial appearances to seek the hidden basis of all reality.

It may be that this psychological fact forms the basis of the spiritual one that suffering enobles the soul, that the Cross calls for the Resurrection. This would explain the mystical movement in the fourteenth century. On the other hand it may be that at peak periods in Christian civilisation there are many mystics but few mystical writers. A desire for self-expression in the form of autobiography is the mark of decline when the mind naturally harks back to the time, now passed, of peace and perfection. Mystical writings are usually either autobiographical and historical accounts of mystical experiences, or abstracts made from such experiences, either Mother Julian or Walter Hilton, either St Teresa or St John of the Cross. In all this there is no need to draw attention to the close parallel between our own age in the twentieth century and that of the fourteenth. We are in full decline, and although most of it is abortive we do not lack a 'mystical movement'. What we look for today are St Catherines, Mother Julians, Walter Hiltons to give purpose and form to the mystical unrest in men's souls.