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**Stirred, not Shaken: The Quest for Spiritual Transformation in *The Cloud of Unknowing***

While it is often associated to the work of people we would call mystics today, like Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe or Richard Rolle, *The Cloud of Unknowing* is a text with a slightly different intent. It is a devotional manual, a guide to a specific type of life centred on contemplation, in which one desires the naked being of God, hidden behind a cloud of unknowing, and forgetting everything else. Sometimes, if the readers are lucky enough to have been chosen by grace, they will unite their soul to God. Rather than recounting the alteration of their own conscience, the author instructs their disciple to do so. But the way to true contemplation is a complicated one to travel on: the risk of taking a monstruous wrong turn is always looming.

This is why the first thing we have to consider is how the author thinks their text should be approached. *The Cloud of Unknowing* is a very self-conscious work. It is marked by a strong awareness that it will be read by someone not very experienced in what it contains: the author describes the reader as a twenty-four year old tat has just begun this mode of life, and it is mostly agreed that the text was originally meant to be read in a monastic context. Most importantly, it displays an awareness that its duty will be fully completed only after its contents will be put to practice, in the concrete efforts to achieve contemplation. To emphasize the connection between these two moments, the author uses one specific distinction that will be the focus of this presentation:

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| Be wel ware þat þou conseyue not bodily þat þat is seyde goostly. [ch. 51, p. 52/31-2] | Be very careful that you do not understand in a bodily sense what is said spiritually. |

This injunction — thinking spiritually of spiritual things, not physically — works both for reading and acting out: the disciple is supposed to read the words of the text in a spiritual way, and perform contemplation in the soul. If these tasks are done without acknowledging the difference between the soul and the body, things are going to change for the worse.

To illustrate the need to balance out soul and body, the author then moves over to a long series of negative examples centred on figures not too different from their intended disciples: they are people that have begun the work of contemplation, but who are too arrogant to follow the instructions of their superiors or of their books. And work done under such hastiness is

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| Neiþer bodily worching ne goostly worching… it is a worching aȝens kynde… Þei rede & heren… þat þei schuld leue vtward worching wiþ þeire wittes, & worche inwards; &… þei turne þeire bodily wittes inwards to þeire body aȝens þe course of kynde… at þe laste þei turne here brene in here hedes. [p. 53/ 19-26, 29-38] | Neither bodily activity nor spiritual activity… it is unnatural work… They read and hear… that they should give up outward activity with their senses, and work inwardly; and… they turn their bodily senses inwards against the course of nature… at last their brains are turned in their heads. |

These contemplatives overlook the important fact that some words do not refer to the body but to the soul**,** and thus take the suggestion that contemplation is an inner work quite literally by looking inside of themselves with all the senses they have, perverting their original, external use. The result of their misinterpretation is that they become an easy prey for the devil, who tricks them into thinking they have undergone a spiritual transformation by satisfying each of these introjected senses, sending

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| Sum fals liȝt or sounes, swete smelles in þeire noses, wonderful taastes in þeire mowþe, & many queynte hetes & brennynges in þeire bodily brestes or in þeire bowelles, in þeire backes & in þeire reynes, & in þeire pryue members.  & ȝit in þis fantasie hem þink þat þei haue a restful mynde of þeire God wiþoutyn any letting of veyne þouȝtes. [p. 53/39-43, 54/1] | Certain false lights or sounds, sweet smells in their noses, wonderful tastes in their mouths, and many strange heats and burnings in their bodily breasts or bowels, in their backs and loins, and in their private parts.  Yet in this fantasy it seems to them that they are tranquilly thinking of God without any hindrance from distracting thoughts. |

We have thus an altered state of conscience brought about by the devil’s deception, but it is important to signal that for the author this transformation is not as interesting as it would appear: after all, it is still based on the outward, physical logic that regulates the approach to sensible experience. The soul is not really involved.

The author is also interested in proving how the body reacts to these transformations on the outside. To put it shortly, the unexperienced contemplatives give too much importance to the body: they turn their senses inside, but also perform contemplation physically. Thus, from the perversion of the soul originates a series of monstruous distortions of the body:

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| Som sette þeire iȝen in þeire hedes as þei were sturdy scheep betyn in þe heed, & as þei schulde diȝe anone… Som pipyn when þei schuld speke, as þer were no spirit in þeire bodies; & þis is þe propre condicion of an ypocrite. Som crien & whinen in þeire þrote, so ben þei gredy & hasty to sey þat þey þink; & þis is þe condicion of heretikes. [p.54/13-23] | Some have their eyes fixed in their heads as if they were staggering sheep knocked on the head and soon about to die… Some pipe feebly when they have to speak, as if there were no energy in their bodies: and this is the true characteristic of a hypocrite. Some are so greedy and hasty to say what they think, that they cry and whine in their throats; and this characterizes heretics. |

It seems that since the soul is degraded in being treated like the body, the body as well, in response, is degraded and begins resembling lesser forms of life. Curiously, though, the voice is a means through which an intellectual, and thus human, trait can still be recognized. Speech is no longer clear and simple, but rather constantly mediated and complicated, with interferences by organs that usually have nothing to do with it:

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| Som, when þei schulen speke, poynten wiþ here fyngres, or on þeire fyngres, or on þeire owne brestes, or on þeires þat þei speke to… Som rowyn wiþ þeire armes in tyme of here spekyng, as hem nedid for to swymme ouer a grete water. Som ben euermore smyling & leiȝing at iche oþer worde þat þei speke, as þei weren gigelotes & nice japing jogelers lackyng kontenaunce. [p. 55/4-12] | Some, when about to speak, point with their fingers or at their fingers, or at their own chests, or the chests of those they are addressing… Some row with their arms as they are speaking, as if they needed to swim over a great stretch of water. Some are always smiling and laughing at every word they speak, as if they were flirtatious girls or silly juggling jesters in search of attention. |

These people feel the need to supplement their words with other unnecessary elements, which are physical signs of the soul’s corruption.

The series of negative examples reaches its climactic conclusion with a description of the devil himself, courtesy of the testimony of some necromancers. Even this figure seems to submit to the idea that the physical and the spiritual are somewhat connected. He is a spirit, and if he takes up a physical form it must carry the sign of his true nature:

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| In what bodily licnes þe feend appereþ, euermore he haþ bot o nose-þerel… & he wil gladly kast it up, þat a man may see in þerate to his brayne vp in his heed. Þe whiche brayn is not ells bot þe fiir of helle... & ȝif he miȝt make a man loke in þerate… he schuld lese his wite for euer. [p. 57/20-26] | In whatever bodily likeness the Devil appears, he always has only one nostril… and he will gladly raise it, so that a person can see through it up into his brain in his head. This brain is nothing other than the fire of hell… and if he is able to make someone look in it… that glance would make him lose his wit for ever. |

The single nostril has two functions, then: it reveals who the devil is, but also the destiny of the person who sees it, who is condemned to madness — yet another altered state of conscience, but not one the author aims at.

To the author this frightening negative example is an occasion to further their teaching. The devil’s single nostril is a perversion of the two nostrils of man, who have that form because a lesson can be learned from them:

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| þat staunson þat is in a mans nose bodely… bitokeneþ þat a man schulde haue discrecion goostly, & kun disseure þe good fro þe iuel. [p. 57/35-38] | The division that exists in one’s nose bodily… symbolizes that one should have spiritual discrimination, and be able to distinguish good from bad. |

The author concludes this passage on what Spearing renders as “spiritual discrimination” but the text intends as “discretion”: the awareness of the difference between soul and body with which the readers can make their way through these errors and arrive to a genuine understanding of contemplation. It also seems that discretion could be the ability that allows the author to recognize these errors and group them together.

Along with these negative examples, the author also offers positive occasions for the reader to discern between what pertains to the soul and what concerns the body. The tricks they suggest are all marked by a counterintuitive limitation of physical and spatial action and thought to foster spiritual development. For instance, the perfect display of love to God is the one in which the love is hidden, so that it can only be expressed in the depth of the spirit. But the most radical proposition is the overturning of what the author expects to be the reader’s frustration:

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| “Wher þan,” seyst þou, “schal I be? Noȝwhere, bi þi tale!” Now trewly þou seist wel; for þere wolde I haue þee. For whi noȝwhere bodely is euerywhere goostly. Loke þan besily þat þi goostly werk be noȝwhere bodely. [pp. 67/37-40, 68/1-2] | “Where shall I be, then?”, you ask. “Nowhere, by what you tell me!” Now truly, you are right: that is where I would have you, because nowhere in the body is everywhere in the spirit. Take care, then, that your spiritual work is nowhere in the body. |

The true space of contemplation is not even truly a space: when the quest for spiritual transformation reaches its peak of intensity, it is not a progress through space but rather a spiritual one, in which the contemplative must patiently grow accustomed to a new plane with new rules. This involves abandoning the rules and expectations of the physical world for one in which emotion becomes the seat of change:

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| Wonderfuly is a mans affeccion varied in goostly felyng of þis nouȝt when it is nouȝwhere wrouȝt. For at þe first tyme þat a soule lokiþ þerapon, it schal fynde alle þe specyal dedes of synne þat euer he did siþen he was borne… peyntid þerapon. […] Somtyme in þis trauayle him þink þat it is to loke þerapon as on helle; […] He þat abidiþ… haþ som hope of perfeccion; for he feliþ & seeþ þat many of his fordone synnes ben in grete partye by help of grace rubbid awey. […] & þerfore he clepiþ it nouȝt helle bot purgatory. […] somtyme hym þink þat it is paradis or heuen, for diuerse wonderful swetnes & counfortes, ioyes & blessed vertewes þat he fyndeþ þerin. Somtyme hym þink it God, for pees & rest þat he findeþ þerin. [pp. 68/23-7; 31-5; 39-40; 69/1; 3-4; 7-10] | Your feelings will vary extraordinarily as the spiritual experience of this nothing is undergone nowhere. The first time a soul looks at it, he will find pictured upon it all the specific sinful deeds... that he has ever committed… since he was born. […] In this torment it seems to him at times that to look at it is like looking into hell. […] Anyone who endures feels some comfort at times, and has some hope of perfection, for he feels and sees that many of the specific sins he has committed are, by the help of grace, largely rubbed away. […] So he calls it not hell but purgatory. […] Sometimes it seems to be paradise or heaven, because of the many wonderful sweetnesses and comforts, joys and blessed virtues, that he finds in it. Sometimes it seems to be God, because of the peace and rest that he finds in it. |

What the author considers an acceptable, even desirable alteration of conscience is the long affective states that wash over the contemplative’s mind when memory, hope and despair are projected onto an outside that has no dimension.

What of the body, then? Is it completely abandoned? It does not seem to be the case. It seems that for *The Cloud of Unknowing* the work of contemplation is complete only when the body is also involved in a balance with the soul, although as a subordinate. Its presence is accounted for, although it is articulated in very subtle ways. During contemplation, for instance, it moves:

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| For what tyme þat a soule disposeþ him effectuely to þis werk, þan as fast sodenly —vnwetyng himself þat worcheþ — þe body… by vertewe of þe spirit schal set it vpriȝt, folowyng in maner & in licnes bodely þe werk of þe spirit þat is maad gostly. & þus it is moste *semely* to be. [p. 63/13-19] | For when a soul earnestly applies itself to this activity, all at once, unnoticed by the contemplative himself, the body… will straighten itself through the power of the spirit, following in bodily likeness the activity of the spirit on a spiritual level. And it is entirely *suitable* that this should be so. |

If the chaotic displays of unorganized faith were the signs of the spiritual disarray of the bad contemplatives, this modest, imperceptible movement reflects the balance achieved by those who have a firm grasp of contemplation. This last quotation also contains a term used throughout *The Cloud of Unknowing* to signify the alignment between body and soul: “semely”, a word as central as it is difficult to translate with modern terms, since Spearing uses “suitable” here but “becoming” in other passages. Its roots might be the old Danish, Icelandic and Norse term “*semen*”, from which originates the modern verb “seem”; as Kerilyn Harkaway-Krieger reports, it also “has a range of meanings in Middle English; Middle English Dictionary entries include both ‘visually pleasing’ and ‘pleasing to senses other than sight,’ but also ‘good for a purpose, suitable, appropriate, fitting’” (Harkaway-Krieger 2021, p. 48). It seems that all of these meanings concur in the description: the balance between the body and the soul is, ethically speaking, the right thing to do, but it is also aesthetically pleasing. It is the key adjective to describe the ideal contemplative:

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| Whoso hade þis werk, it schuld gouerne him ful *semely*, as wele in body as in soule, & make hym ful favourable vnto iche man or woman þat lokid apon hym… It is sittyngly & *semely* to hem þat ben meek wiþinne for to schewe meek & *semely* wordes & contenaunce wiþoutyn, acordyng to þat meekness þat is wiþinne in þe herte. [p. 55/25-7; 56/18-21] | The work of contemplation will have a favourable effect on the body as well as the soul of anyone who practices it, and make him agreeable to everyone, man or woman, who sees him… it is suitable and *becoming* for those who are inwardly humble to show humble and *becoming* words and behaviour outwardly, in keeping with humility that dwells within the heart. |

The body is still useful for contemplatives. It provides the means to express the effect of contemplation in the world to the others, to form a community; but it also offers metaphors to articulate the practice and the effects of contemplation in teaching. As Denys Turner points out, in *The Cloud of Unknowing* “In the perspective of the 'inner' person there is no distinction at all between 'inner' and 'outer'. The inner self is free, free from the dualism between 'inner' and 'outer' itself.” (Turner 1995, p. 208). The distinction between soul and body, that is, is only the first stage of a work that will culminate in a more complete understanding of the human constitution, and in particular of the interconnectedness of the spiritual and physical planes.

And this freedom from operating too harsh a cut between inside and outside emerges perhaps more evidently in one of the key terms used in *The Cloud of Unknowing* to indicate what prompts contemplation:

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| Lift up þin herte vnto God wiþ a meek *steryng* of loue; & mene himself, & none of his goodes. [p. 9/12-3] | Lift up your heart towards God with a humble *stirring* of love; and think of himself, not of any good to be gained from him. |

Tibor Fabiny argues that the best way to translate “steryng” might be “affection”, but he also notes how the term is sometimes also used in hendiadys with “moevinge”, moving (Fabiny 2013, pp. 32-33). It is etymologically linked with the old English word *stiren*: it is a prompting and a stimulation that is often referred to organs, body parts and living things.

The author has to ensure that their readers, who are only beginning this work, avoid thinking of contemplation as a physical action, but the contribution of the body is present from the very beginning of the text. This might be the sign that for an advanced contemplative the relationship of the body and the soul, in which each mirrors and signifies the other, is essential to communicate the totality of their work. This relationship is not unlike the conventional image used to indicate forms of speech in which words or image indicate another meaning, such as metaphor or allegory. From late antiquity to the Renaissance, allegory is presented as “a truth hidden under a beautiful fiction”, an appealing shell of words concealing a kernel of meaning; something similar could be said of metaphor. While interpretation must seize the latter, it would be foolish to deny the importance of the former. To the author, the value of miracles lies in a relationship between outside and inside that is not unlike the one we have seen in the previous cases:

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| Ȝif þei ben trewe & contynen in hem goostly frute, whi schuld þei þan be dispisid? For men wil kysse þe cuppe, for wine is þerin. (p. 60/8-12) | If they are true and contain spiritual fruit, why should they be despised? — for people will kiss the cup because there is wine in it. |

The container deserves respect because it allows to access the contained, be it a long-awaited spiritual transformation or the drink of mystical inebriation — stirred, not shaken, please.

**Texts Quoted**

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