

Goostly Coumforte in God:
The Rhetoric of Mysticism in the *Cloud of Unknowing*

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements of the degree of

Master of Arts
in
English

by

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at the Dominican House of Studies, 2013

December 2023

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Abstract:

In this paper I analyze the rhetoric of the *Cloud of Unknowing* by an anonymous fourteenth-century English Catholic mystic. First, I situate the *Cloud* in its tradition, both spiritual and rhetorical. Then, after analyzing the linguistic arts employed, I engage in a sustained examination of the *Cloud's* rhetorical technique. Ultimately, I conclude that the author of the *Cloud* succeeds in his rhetorical goals, even if some of his strategies are less successful than he perhaps believes, and that he does so through the use of concrete language and an appeal to the *ethos* of Christian monastic friendship.

Keywords: *Cloud of Unknowing*, rhetoric, mysticism

Introduction

Aristotle defines rhetoric as “an ability, in each case, to see the available means of persuasion” (I.2, 37). This implies that the more difficult the task of persuasion, the skill in rhetoric is required to see available means. It hardly requires a master of rhetoric to convince a hungry woman to eat. But sending a timid man to war would call for a defter rhetorical art. To move someone to an action that is both contrary to their character and in conflict with their apparent good is no easy task.

What rhetoric, then, is required to convince someone to abandon thought itself? To silence the senses, to strip the will, to bury the world, to rest in utter darkness, with no compensatory joy, or measurable effect, or societal support? To get a young man to abandon spiritual lights and great works and beat against an inner darkness that you assure him he must do at every instant – a darkness which you tell him, honestly, will never be parted as long as he lives? That rhetoric, that immeasurable art, that magnificent skill of persuasion, is the rhetoric of mysticism in *The Cloud of Unknowing*. It is my contention that the *Cloud* is a deliberate work of rhetoric, with rhetorical strategies which can be analyzed – strategies which are exemplary for a rhetoric of Christian mysticism as such.

In what follows, I will first offer an overview of the *Cloud* for those who may be unfamiliar with the work. Then I will move through five sections: 1. Theological Inheritance, 2. Rhetorical Inheritance, 3. Literary Art and Linguistic Effects, 4. Rhetorical Analysis, and 5. Exemplary Rhetorical Strategies. The first three sections aim to show that the *Cloud* is a deliberate work of art. The last two uncover and evaluate the *Cloud*'s rhetorical strategies. Through it all I will aim to show that the Cloud Author (hereafter CA) crafted a skillful work of rhetoric. In the literature that I have consulted, this has mostly been overlooked. Many pages are devoted to CA's concern with language, or his possible connection to Eastern mysticism, or his

relevance for a modern world alienated from God. (After all, the title of his major work could be rendered *The Cloud of Agnosticism*.) But I have not encountered any sustained rhetorical analysis of the *Cloud*, and I hope to remedy that lack here.

Overview

Though it may be unknown to readers outside of a certain niche, the *Cloud* has had more popularity in modern culture than one might expect. It is, after all, an anonymous work of fourteenth century Catholic mysticism, not a comic book or children's novel. A casual search of Amazon returned a dozen different renderings into modern English accomplished over the past few decades. It has influenced movements such as centering prayer and transcendental meditation. It was even referenced in several episodes of the recent science fiction series *Battlestar Galactica*. This seems a rather outsized influence, and may be a result of faddishness. However, it may also be simply giving the work its due, because it is "the most notable single treatise of mystical theology ever written in English" (Gatta 91).

Who wrote such a masterpiece? This remains unknown. We can, however, say quite a bit *about* the author, even without knowing who he is. He wrote seven works that have survived to this day. Three are free Middle English translations of classic works of spirituality: one each by Pseudo-Dionysius, Richard of St. Victor, and Bernard of Clairvaux. Of the other four, the *Cloud* undoubtedly holds pride of place. A second work, *The Book of Privy Counseling*, is a companion work to the *Cloud*, like a long appendix. The other two are *An Epistle on Prayer* and *An Epistle of Discretion of Stirrings*, and reveal CA's predilection for the epistolary genre.

Can we say anything else? The dialect is from the East Midlands, so we know he lived and worked in the wide vicinity of Nottingham. It seems clear that he was in some dialogue with

his contemporary Walter Hilton. There appears to be a mutual influence, with Hilton's *Scale* being influenced by the *Cloud*, and *The Book of Privy Counseling* being influenced by the *Scale* in turn. However, neither cites the other by name, so while such an influence is both highly likely and widely accepted, it cannot be held as absolutely certain. Beyond this we have merely hypotheses, though well-founded ones. I follow here the common opinion, that "the *Cloud* author was a priest (and therefore male). He was clearly a man of both general and theological learning, and may have been a monk, possible a Carthusian" (Spearing x). I would go beyond Spearing's carefully hedged statements and assert a bit more forcefully that CA was a Carthusian. The *Cloud* is well within the current of fourteenth-century Carthusian spirituality, and the anonymity of the author may also point to a Carthusian profession. It is the common practice of Carthusians to remain anonymous in their writings as an aid to humility, though it must be said that such a practice was not as universally followed in the Middle Ages as it is today.

What is the *Cloud* about? It is not a general didactic work of mysticism as might be found among the works of Richard of St. Victor or Bonaventure. CA does not write about the spiritual life in general at any length. He only does so in passing, to set apart his main concern. And what is that main concern? A certain "werk." And in this work one must "bete evermore on this cloude of unknowyng that is bitwix thee and thi God with a scharpe darte of longing love" (*Cloud* 12, 43).¹ The whole book focuses on this "werk," a work in which one proceeds by blocking out everything from one's mind except a single word, then using that word as a tool to rise to the ineffable God. This focus can easily be seen if one looks at the structure of the book.

¹ In parenthetical citations of the *Cloud* I will give first the chapter and then the page number. I follow this procedure because there are so many editions and translations of the *Cloud* that a simple page number would, I believe, prove very unhelpful for those seeking to find the reference. I leave citations in the Middle English, because every modernization I have found obscures the text in various ways. In cases where the ME is not apparent, I will provide translations of terms taken from my edition in brackets.

I have divided the *Cloud* into nine sections. The work itself is divided by the author into seventy-five chapters with a prologue. The text itself is very fluid, not something common in works of medieval mystical theology, which normally are clearly partitioned. Without the chapter titles the text would flow from one topic to the next as naturally as bends in a river. As pleasing as this is to read, it can make analysis difficult. Nevertheless, in my nine sections I believe I have been faithful to CA's own implicit division of his work.

- I. Introduction (prol-c.1)
- II. This Werk (c.2-9)
- III. Sin and Humility (c.10-16)
- IV. Active and Contemplative Lives (c.17-26)
- V. The Aspiring Contemplative (c. 27-34)
- VI. The Contemplative Task (c. 35-44)
- VII. Deceptions (c.45-59)
- VIII. Anthropological Reflections (c. 60-70)
- IX. Persons and Roles (c. 71-75)

For those familiar with similar works on the topic, it is evident from this outline that CA deals with a number of the traditional themes of mysticism. The relationship between the active and contemplative lives, the need for humility and the fight against sin, false mysticism and diabolical deceptions, the nature and activity of the powers of the soul – all of these themes can be found in works of mystical theology from the third to the twenty-first century. But in CA's hands they function somewhat differently. Instead of treating each of them topically as individual subjects, they are all of them related to the "werk." The *Cloud* is both traditional and revolutionary. It is traditional in mentioning these topics; it is revolutionary in how it uses them. As an analogy, imagine a work on education that reduces all teaching to a single technique, and then relates every major topic of pedagogy to this one technique. This is what the *Cloud* does.

For mysticism, it is a life hack *avant la lettre*. To set this out more clearly I will examine the theological forebears of the *Cloud*, those dialogue partners with whom CA engaged, to reveal where both his originality and his deliberate selection may be found.

Section I: Theological Inheritance

CA was obviously an educated man. This is unsurprising for an ordained monk. It is impossible to know what was in his library, and which books he had read, but reasonable suppositions can be made. Some influences are obvious: Dionysius and Richard. Large swathes of the *Cloud* are veritable commentaries on their works, and he translated a work by each, after all. Some influences are obviously not present. Very little scholastic doctrine appears in his work, and he is utterly uninterested in the theological debates that dominated such places as Oxford and Paris. (Grammatical and astronomical debates are another matter.) Here I want to look at four influences and one notable lack of influence. I will begin with that notable lack.

No Western Mysticism. The *Cloud* is all but empty of traditional Latin mystical theology, that which Dom Cuthbert Butler called “Western Mysticism.” (It should be noted that “Western” here means Western Christianity as opposed to Eastern Christianity – Latin culture as opposed to Greek culture – not European as opposed to East Asian.) This is the mystical theology of Augustine, Gregory the Great, and Bernard of Clairvaux. Butler describes it as “pre-Dionysian, prescholastic, non-philosophical; unaccompanied by psycho-physical concomitants, whether rapture or trance or any quasi-hypnotic symptoms; without imaginative visions, auditions, or revelations; and without thought of the Devil” (Butler 195). That is not to say that the big three of Western Mysticism are completely absent in the *Cloud*. That would be as impossible as a modern physics textbook being completely free of Newton. But Newton provides a telling

example – should we hold everyone who discusses gravity or inertia as a professed Newtonian? Or have these concepts so permeated culture that reference to them is made completely without thought of Newton or familiarity with his work? I would assert the latter.

So it is with such concepts as “heart,” or “desire,” or the active and contemplative lives. These ideas do find their way into the *Cloud*, but they are so ubiquitous, so common, so much the basic discourse of medieval mystical theology as to be impossible of exclusion. The only place in the *Cloud* where there seems to be any lengthy engagement with Augustinian or Gregorian works is the commentary on Martha and Mary (c.18-22). But even this is such an omnipresent theme in any mystical theology as to be unconnected to the actual texts of Augustine and Gregory. (This is still the case – many a preacher comments on the active and contemplative lives when discussing Martha and Mary who have no clue that this theme originated with Augustine and Gregory.) CA does mention Augustine and Gregory towards the end of the work, but in doing so it only becomes the more apparent how absent they have been up to that point.

Why do I make such hay out of an exclusion? Because I believe it is deliberate. CA is advancing a Dionysian spirituality as *the* spirituality. This is not simply a product of his times. Walter Hilton is filled from beginning to end with classical Western Mysticism. Richard Rolle is eclectic. Even Julian of Norwich, innocent of sources as she appears, is definitively in the tradition of Augustine and Gregory. CA was certainly familiar with the works of classic Western Mysticism; to assert otherwise is like believing an Elizabethan expert had never read a page of Shakespeare. It is a preposterous thought. If Western Mysticism is absent, that is deliberate, not accidental. But if Western Mysticism is almost completely absent from the *Cloud*, then what is present?

Pseudo-Dionysius. Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, that anonymous Syrian monk whose writings took the High Middle Ages by storm, is the major source for the *Cloud*. Even the name of the book comes from Dionysius: “But then he breaks free of them, away from what sees and is seen, and he plunges into the truly mysterious darkness of unknowing” (*Mystical Theology* 137). The scene being described is Moses entering into the pillar of cloud on top of Mount Sinai – thus, he enters into a dark cloud of unknowing. Whole passages of Dionysius’s work are the silent dialogue partner with which CA engages throughout his work.

Dionysius writes in the persona of Dionysius the Areopagite, the convert of Paul mentioned in the seventeenth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles. This role-play was widely accepted as literal fact in the Middle Ages, and was not disproved until the Renaissance. This is why he bears the accusatory tag “Pseudo-Dionysius.”² This assumed role gave his work a great authority. But the work itself is also worthy of attention. It is an ambitious reworking of pagan Neoplatonism, especially that of Iamblichus and Proclus, into a mighty Christian synthesis. As such, the Dionysian corpus was of immense interest to the scholastics in their own project of reconciling faith and philosophy. Too few today acknowledge that the quality of the work itself mattered at least as much to the medievals as the weight of supposed authority.

Five of Dionysius’s works survive: *The Divine Names*, *The Mystical Theology*, *The Celestial Hierarchy*, *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, and some *Letters*. Of the five, only the *Letters* had limited influence. Albert the Great (c.1200-1280) wrote commentaries on the other four books. Thomas Aquinas used Dionysius as his most foundational source after Augustine and Aristotle (cf. Fran O’Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas*.) Bonaventure calls Dionysius the chief authority in spiritual theology (45). Closer to CA’s home, Robert

² I call him “Dionysius” for ease and elegance, without in any way asserting that he was actually the disciple of Paul.

Grosseteste also wrote commentaries on Dionysius. And anonymous textbooks of commentary on the Dionysian corpus are today in the process of being edited and published.

But all of this points to a telling fact: Dionysius is a collegiate authority, not beach reading for the commoner. Granted CA wrote a century after the deaths of Albert, Thomas, and Bonaventure, yet nevertheless there had not been any wide diffusion of the Dionysian corpus in parish churches and simple monasteries throughout Europe. Dionysius was a scholar's saint – and even today the complexity and eccentricity of his style drive away all but the most dedicated. Yet CA dared to translate one of Dionysius's most complex works into Middle English. Whatever protestations against academia CA might have made (and the *Cloud* contains several), his level of scholarship is unquestionably high. No one other than a trained scholar could have known Dionysius well enough to translate him.

And what is Dionysius's doctrine? He has two overriding concerns. The first is the ordered rhythm of the universe going forth from God in creation and returning to God through contemplation. The "order" in this ordered rhythm comes from the hierarchies. (Dionysius in fact coined the term "hierarchy.") "In my opinion a hierarchy is a sacred order, a state of understanding and activity approximating as closely as possible to the divine" (Dionysius, *Celestial Hierarchy* 153). This theme is of less concern to CA, though I will argue below that a passage from *The Celestial Hierarchy* stands behind his striking literary art.

The other theme is that God is above all names and concepts. "And so it is that as Cause of all and transcending all, he is rightly nameless and yet has the names of everything that is" (Dionysius, *The Divine Names* 56). This is the major concern of CA. But where did Dionysius himself get it from? Certainly, deep Platonic roots are there, reminiscent of the Allegory of the Cave. But there is a more proximate source for Dionysius's concern.

In the fourth century, the Cappadocian Fathers – Basil the Great, Gregory Nazianzen, and Gregory of Nyssa – faced a radical challenge to early Christianity: the Eunomians. Without getting into the details of Arianism and Eunomian trinitarian theology, suffice it to say that the Eunomians were strict rationalists, who believed that the divinity was as intrinsically comprehensible to the human intellect as math or science. But what could be more incomprehensible, thought Eunomius, than a divinity that was simultaneously three and one? This attack on the Trinity struck right at the heart of early Christian rhetoric, which portrayed the faith as the rational person’s answer to the silly superstitions of paganism. Now Eunomius threatened to undermine it all by portraying Christianity as a silly superstition itself.

The Cappadocians responded by asserting that some truths, without contradicting logic, went beyond logic. The youngest of their number, Gregory of Nyssa, turned this bald theological assertion into a full spirituality. In his *Life of Moses* Gregory of Nyssa uses Moses’ ascent into the pillar of cloud as an allegory for faith transcending intellect. “[L]eaving behind everything that is observed, not only what sense comprehends but also what intelligence thinks it sees, it keeps on penetrating deeper until by the intelligence’s yearning for understanding it gains access to the invisible and incomprehensible, and there it sees God” (95).

The relevance of Gregory’s work for Dionysius’s project should be obvious. Dionysius was clearly working from a Cappadocian stance, using some of the greatest theologians of the previous century to interpret and integrate the works of Neoplatonism into Christianity. But this is theology as such, a speculative project, and not a manual of piety or prayer. Dionysius never says *how* one attains a knowledge of God beyond knowing, or what the ramifications for the spiritual life may accrue from such a procedure. To find answers to this, CA had to turn to more recent authorities: the Victorines.

The Victorines and Affective Dionysianism. Dionysius's words are alluring and sophisticated. But what do they actually mean? This was a pressing question for the Middle Ages, not least because they had no access to Dionysius's sources, whether Neoplatonic or Cappadocian Christian. When it came to the question of mystical union with God, the theologians ultimately fell into two schools: intellective and affective Dionysianism.

Intellective Dionysianism asserted that mystical theology is first of all *theology*, and therefore an act of the intellect. Albert the Great is the founder of this approach, and it bore fruit in the Rhineland mystics such as Meister Eckhardt, John Tauler, and Henry Suso. Albert argues that "seeing by not-seeing" in Dionysius means that "in the case of God all our natural ways of knowing, which are the basis of systematic understanding, lapse. [...] This is why it is said God is seen by not-seeing: he is seen by the absence of natural seeing" (172). Albert contends, quite sensibly, that what Dionysius means by "seeing by not-seeing" is nothing other than supernatural faith. In considering Dionysius's sources, it must be fairly acknowledged that Albert is simply correct. Superrational faith is exactly what Dionysius is getting at.

Intellective Dionysianism, however, was not to win the day. A more attractive option was on the table: affective Dionysianism. This is the assertion that the union that comes above reason is not merely a different mode of intellect but rather a union of love. This was the teaching of the Victorines. The Abbey of St. Victor outside of Paris produced a number of great scholars and mystics. On this particular topic, Hugh of St. Victor (1096-1141) hinted that mystical union might be through love in his *Commentary on the Celestial Hierarchy*. But it was Thomas Gallus (1200-1246), also a son of St. Victor, who fully launched affective Dionysianism (Lawell 379). Here love is seen as a superrational power that accomplishes what knowledge cannot. The relevance for the *Cloud* is apparent: "And therefore I wole leve al that thing that I can think, and chese to

my love that thing that I cannot think. For whi He may wel be loved, bot not thought. By love may He be getyn and holden; bot bi thought neither” (6, 36). But of all the Victorines, the one who perhaps held the most influence over CA was Richard of St. Victor (d. 1173).

Richard can be said to provide all the material for affective Dionysianism, though the full formulation of it must still be attributed to the later Thomas Gallus. Richard himself seems to prevaricate. In some places he puts the highest union in the intellect, or in the intellect and will together. “Now we call those things above and beyond reason, the existence of which seems to contradict all human reason. They are such things as what we believe concerning the unity of the Trinity and many things concerning the body of Christ that we hold on the indubitable authority of the faith” (Richard, *Benjamin Minor* 145). Here it is clear that the ultimate transcendence is depicted as an act of faith, not love – an act of intellect, not will, though certainly not exclusive of will. *Benjamin Minor* is the very work which CA translated, and so we know that he was confronted with this thesis. He rejected it.

In another work, however, Richard locates ecstasy in love. “Therefore, if we crave to overflow with this inebriation, and make frequent use of this contemplative ecstasy of mind, we must endeavor to love our God intimately and supremely and cling at all hours with supreme longing to the joy of divine contemplation” (*Mystical Ark* 289). Though CA translates *Benjamin Minor* and not *The Mystical Ark*, it seems plain that it is the latter that is more influential on the *Cloud*. Chapters seventy-one to seventy-five of the *Cloud* are a direct reworking of the first chapter of the fifth book of *The Mystical Ark*. But even beyond this, callbacks to the *Mystical Ark* are frequent throughout the *Cloud*. (A full textual comparison of the two works would be very beneficial, but is unfortunately beyond the scope of this thesis.) It is probable that Dionysius’s use of the figure of Moses directed CA to *The Mystical Ark*. (The Ark referred to is

Moses' Ark of the Covenant.) By blending together Dionysius's *Mystical Theology* with Richard's *Mystical Ark*, CA arrived at the deep core of his doctrine, which is one of the most pointed and eloquent expressions of affective Dionysianism in history, rivaled only by the end of Bonaventure's *Itinerarium* and the later works of John of the Cross.

Carthusians and contemporaries. A brief word should be said about other influences. The first is the mystical traditions of the Carthusians, an order to which CA probably belonged. The naked intent of the will to which CA frequently recurs matches nicely with the concrete practice of the Carthusians, who celebrated their liturgies in as stripped-down a version as possible, removing everything celebratory and extraneous, leaving only naked worship (Martin 4). The language of CA finds an echo in the works of previous Carthusians. Here I can only offer comparison to Hugh of Balma (mid-to-late thirteenth century). Hugh describes the perfection of contemplation as "pushing to transcend natural limits by outstretched love, [the soul] is united in an ecstatic upsurge of love to the very one from whom she came" (108). Affective Dionysianism indeed. Or again, "we note first the state of the person surging up – *through unknowing*; then we see that the injunction, *surge up*, indicates an extensive, that is, outstretching, upsurge" (149). Hugh's language is so close to CA's in so many places that I only hesitate to ascribe him as a direct source because his major theme – the purgative, illuminative, and unitive ways, which will have such huge influence in later mystical writings – is completely absent from the *Cloud*. It is better to regard them both as examples of a common Carthusian spirituality.

CA was less influenced by his contemporaries. A relationship with Walter Hilton certainly exists, but that influences *Privy Counseling* rather more than the *Cloud*, though CA seems to allude to Hilton at two points in the *Cloud* (chapters 35 and 48.) More influential, at least as an adversary, is Richard Rolle. CA seemed to detest Rolle, and all his works, and all his

empty promises. Where CA preaches silence, darkness, abnegation, and ineffable love, Rolle boiled with sensation, emotion, and hallucinatory experience. CA has little use for such.

Addressing them, CA says, “And yit, paraventure, thei wene it be the fiir [fire] of love, getyn and kyndelid by the grace and the goodnes of the Holy Goost. Treuly of this disceite, and of the braunches therof, spryngyn many mescheves [mischiefs]: moche ypocrisie, moche heresy, and moche errour” (45, 73). It should be remembered that one of Rolle’s most popular works was entitled *Incendium Amoris* – the fire of love. The criticism is direct and clear.

Section II: Rhetorical Inheritance

The *Cloud* is unlike its predecessors in its rhetorical constitution. Many mystical theological works had gone before, but for the most part there were objective didactic treatises or commentaries on Scripture. The *Cloud*, however, is filled with rhetorical appeals, and is addressed to a single person, though with an eye out for a broader audience. As T.J. Morris says, the *Cloud* takes a “rhetorical stance,” in order to sustain “an intimate relationship,” and is cast in “the epistolary mode of exposition” (13). I will go beyond this. The *Cloud* is more than a work with a rhetorical stance. It is a rhetorical work *tout court*, and has been artfully conceived as such. This is alluded to by CA, in identifying himself neither with Moses nor with Aaron, but with Bezalel, the artist who created the Ark of the Covenant. “Lo! goostly freende, in this werk, thof [though] it be childly and lewdely spoken, I bere, thof I be a wreche unworthi to teche any creature, the office of Bezeleel, makyng and declaryng in maner to thin handes the maner of this goostly arke” (*Cloud* 73, 99). Richard had already said that Bezalel represented teachers in *The Mystical Ark*, so this may not be surprising. But CA spends more time meditating explicitly on the craftsmanship and artistry of Bezalel than Richard. His own conception of the *Cloud* is as a

carefully constructed work of art, not merely a casual letter that takes on a “rhetorical stance.” I have already given the background of the subject matter of the *Cloud*, and in this section I will strive to give the background of the *Cloud’s* rhetorical form.

This is less easy to accomplish. Whereas CA clearly alludes to his theological sources, he nowhere even hints at his rhetorical training or which manual he followed. This is hardly surprising; few works written in English today make direct reference to *The Elements of Style*, howsoever many have been shaped by its rules. It would, in fact, be hard to draw direct lines from Strunk and White to any single English work, yet their manual certainly sets the tone for the contemporary Anglophone milieu much more than Cicero’s *De Inventione* or Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*. So, I would argue, contemporary or near-contemporary manuals of rhetoric can at least establish the basic rhetorical techniques, concerns, and forms of CA. This will be an aid in performing a fuller rhetorical analysis.

The Three Artes. Ever since the majestic work of James J. Murphy, it has been a commonplace to divide the branches of medieval rhetoric into three: the *ars poetriae*, the *ars praedicandi*, and the *ars dictaminis*. (That would be the arts of poetry, of preaching, and of letter-writing.) Medieval rhetoric was broader than this, and included such things as commentaries on Cicero (Camargo, “Defining” 27). But for my purpose here, the three *artes* provide a rough and ready guide to the rhetorical milieu in which CA was immersed.

The first, the *ars poetriae*, included all of grammar, the majority of what we call “literature,” and the rhetorical construction of poetry proper. One of the best – and most popular – guides to the *ars poetriae* in the Middle Ages was by Geoffrey of Vinsauf (early-to-mid thirteenth century). Possibly from England, and a transplant to Paris, Geoffrey’s work had a huge impact on the literary arts of the high Middle Ages. Of particular relevance are his long

discourses on amplification and abbreviation. Geoffrey proposes that to abbreviate, one first gathers all the properties one wishes to discuss, and then reduces them to a single term, as one “adapts meanings to the names through study” (54). Readers familiar with the *Cloud* will surely detect a clue here, for CA’s own procedure for prayer is to reduce complex thought to a single term. “And yif thee list have this entent lappid and foulde[n] in o [one] worde, for thou schuldest have betir holde therapon, take thee bot a litil worde of o [one] silable; for so it is betir then of two, for ever the schorter it is, the betir it acordeth with the werk of the spirite. And soche a worde is this worde *God* or this worde *love*” (7, 37-8).

But CA also amplifies. For example, instead of simply saying, “think of sin as a lump,” he says: “Bot holde hem alle hole these wordes; and mene synne a lump, thou wost never what, none other thing bot thiself. Me think that in this blynde beholdyng of synne, thus conjelyd in a lumpe (none other thing than thiself) it schuld be no nede to bynde a woder thing then thou schuldest be in this tyme” (36, 65). The repetition, the verbal forms, the circumlocutions – all of them point to a deliberate expansion, forcing one to consider an unpleasant topic through many words. And this, in a passage insisting that one focus on a single word! But Geoffrey has a passage exactly on this, how to turn a single word into a passage by spelling out the process implied in the word (55). CA may not have read Geoffrey, but he was clearly trained in abbreviation and amplification.

Robert of Basevorn wrote a manual of preaching in England half a century before the *Cloud* (c. 1322). In it he lists twenty-two “ornaments” or elements of a good homily (132). Listing all twenty-two here would be needlessly tiresome. I will simply remark that a few cannot be found in the *Cloud*, because they are about oral delivery (modulation of voice and appropriate gesture.) Some do not belong to the *Cloud*, and most clearly show that it does not belong to the

genre of the sermon. These are the theme and the division. It was standard practice that medieval sermons commented on a single biblical verse, parsing it closely, and dividing the sections of that homily by that parsing. Mystical works could be made this way – John of Avila’s *Audi Filia* two centuries later is a prime example – but the *Cloud* is not structured this way. However much CA might have had a broader audience in mind, and however smooth his delivery might be, the *Cloud* is not an extended sermon.

Two “ornaments” in particular *do* apply to the *Cloud*, however. The first is correspondence, which Richard defines as “the express agreement of the parts among themselves” (188). This would seem to be what CA is doing when he engages in the long point-by-point comparison between the story of Martha and Mary and contemporary actives and contemplatives. The second is opportune humor, which Richard says is when “we add something jocular which will give pleasure when the listeners are bored, whether it be about something which will provoke laughter, or some story or anecdote” (212). While the *Cloud* is a serious work, I do believe CA uses humor at some points. My favorite is when he comments on the misunderstanding of some less educated who think that lifting “up” your mind or heart means to engage in a space voyage worthy of Captain Kirk. “For yif it so be that thei outhere rede, or here redde or spoken hou that men schuld lift up here hertes unto God, as fast thei stare in the sterres as thei wolde be aboven the mone [moon], and herkyn when thei schul here any aungelles synge oute of heven. Thees men willen sumtyme with the coriousté of here ymaginacion peerce the planetes, and make an hole in the firmament to loke in therate [there at]” (*Cloud* 57, 84).

But of the three *artes*, undoubtedly the best fit for the *Cloud* is the *ars dictaminis*. This even explains to some degree his stern warnings of secrecy at the beginning and end of the *Cloud*. One of the functions of letters that was mentioned in many a medieval textbook was the

ability to conceal secrets (Camargo “Brief,” 6-7). It also explains the sense that auditors beyond the addressee would be present: “The private reading of a written text was not the normal mode of reception for medieval letter. More typically, the letter would have be read in public” (Camargo “Brief,” 4). So even though CA writes the *Cloud* to a certain young man, he is aware that his words will have a greater audience, and he is careful to articulate who may or may not profit from hearing this work. The prologue is stark: “neither thou rede it, ne write it, ne speke it, ne yit suffre it be red, wretyn, or spokyn, of any or to any, bot yif it be of soche one or to soche one that hath (bi thi supposing) in a trewe wille and by an hole entent, purposed him to be a parfite folower of Criste” (21).

A popular manual of letter-writing from twelfth century Bologna, however, shows that the *Cloud* is not a letter by-the-book. For example, medieval letters were supposed to have elaborate and finely tuned addresses. This work, for example, lists seventeen possible salutations, to be followed to the letter (Principles 10-15). But there is no salutation in the *Cloud* beyond to a “Goostly freende in God” (1, 28). The recipient remains as anonymous as the sender. Surely this is an inefficient way to address a letter, with neither the sender nor the recipient identified? But CA pushes letter form more than this. Letters are supposed to have five parts: salutation, *captatio benevolentiae*, narration, petition, and conclusion. Beyond the missing salutation, the *Cloud* has no *captatio* either. If it has a petition, it is not clearly stated, or is at least interspersed throughout the whole work. What would the petition be? That the addressee practice the “werk”? I cannot find any other major request in the work – an anomaly, since the petition was regarded as the central part of the letter. Narration and conclusion are present, but it is hard to regard them as part of the fivefold structure of a letter when three of the five parts are missing.

And yet the *Cloud* is undoubtedly in the form of a letter. Or rather, no genre better fits the *Cloud* than that of epistle. Why would it not follow more closely the *ars dictaminis*? First, it is entirely possible that CA does in fact follow a manual of letter writing, but that it is simply not one I have access to. Camargo would suggest this is a possibility: “Hundreds of *artes dictandi* and *summae dictandi* survive, along with equally numerous collections of model letters and documents” (“Pedagogy” 65). I utilized the one from Bologna as a representative case according to experts (Martin Camargo, James J. Murphy, etc.), but it is entirely possible that CA’s own textbook had a more fluid approach to epistolary composition. For example, an early fourteenth-century *Compendium Rhetorice* from Paris, while in essence an *ars dictaminis*, nevertheless borrows widely from the other two *artes*, allowing for a much more flexible and inclusive compositional technique (Murphy 236). (The author of *Compendium Rhetorice* was even a monk, and this may have appealed to CA.)

But it is also possible that CA, while familiar with and influenced by the *ars dictaminis*, nevertheless deliberately chose to follow another model. The reason for this might well be that dictaminal manuals were becoming more specifically aimed at legal correspondence. They showed a “continuing interest in legal forms and documentary formats” (Murphy 243). If the *Cloud* only imperfectly follows the laws of the *ars dictaminis*, this may well be by conscious choice. In that case, we might have to look elsewhere for CA’s literary models.

Spiritual Letters. The letter has played a decisive literary role in Christianity since its inception. The New Testament contains twenty-seven books. Twenty-one of them are letters, and a twenty-second (Revelation) contains seven letters within it. This epistolary bent did not soon fade; most of the earliest postcanonical Christian writings we have are also letters (Clement, Ignatius, Polycarp, pseudo-Barnabas). The patristic era was no different; to give one example,

the preserved collection of Basil of Caesarea's correspondence runs to four volumes in translation. It is hardly an anomaly in Christian history to write spiritual letters like the *Cloud*.

The question, however, is how much this history would have been available to CA. The Bible, certainly; but it is unlikely that a medieval writer would have considered Paul, or the New Testament in general, as a literary source. Murphy notes that Paul's letters are almost completely ignored by the dictaminal manuals – they do not even pay him lip service (215). And it might appear galling to a medieval monk to view himself in the literary company of the Apostles. Other examples exist, of course; almost the entirety of Peter Damian's corpus is epistolatory (but his work was unpopular north of the Alps), and Dionysius also wrote some epistles (but these are so brief – less than a page each – that they can hardly serve as real models for a full book.) But two classic sources, popular enough that CA may well have known them, and lengthy enough that they could serve as real models, present themselves. The first is Augustine's Letter 130, to Proba, and the second is Jerome's Letter 22, to Eustochium.

Both of these are of sufficient length that they could serve as real models. Augustine's letter runs to fifteen pages in translation, and Jerome's to forty-five. Both are addressed to individuals. This is also true of the *Cloud*; it may be addressed anonymously, but it is clear CA has a real young man "of foure and twenty yere age" in mind (*Cloud* 4, 33). Both serve as full expositions of spiritual theology, and were used as such. Augustine is focused on prayer, and Jerome gives fuller guidance for the spiritual life, but both are topically similar enough to the *Cloud* to be potential models. And there is a similar basis in intimacy founded on spiritual mentorship. Augustine writes to Proba with "joy" (184), and asks for her "sisterly prayers" (199). Jerome was Eustochium's spiritual guide; she moved from Rome to Palestine to be with him; she is buried in Bethlehem next to where he was. The letter strives for a formal style, but

often dips into chattiness and intimacies. And, of course, CA writes to his correspondent as his “goostly freende in God” six times by my count.

However, it may be that more contemporary examples had greater weight. Richard Rolle wrote spiritual treatises cast as letters, such the *The Form of Living* and *The Emending of Life*, but given CA’s generally dim view of Rolle it is unlikely that he looked to him for inspiration. If he did, it was only in order to correct him. More likely, if he was looking for contemporary antecedents, CA would have found one in Walter Hilton, always supposing that “another book of another mans werk” (*Cloud* 35, 63) is indeed a reference to Book 1 of *The Scale of Perfection*. This first half of the *Scale* is cast as a letter to an anonymous “Spiritual Sister in Jesus Christ” (77). It is possible that this was CA’s model, or some work like it which has not survived the centuries, but the general rhetorical tone of the *Cloud* is very different from the *Scale*, so it is uncertain. Or it may be, of course, that CA had no conscious models at all. Nevertheless, experience with Augustine, Jerome, Rolle, and Hilton would have provided subconscious models licensing his work.

In this discussion we see exactly how difficult it is to correctly triangulate the influences on an anonymous author at an unknown monastery with an unrecorded education. Nevertheless, I have thought it both important and helpful to make the attempt, because it is in understanding CA’s literary milieu that we can best judge his originality.

Section III: Theory and Art of Language

CA shows a profound interest in how language works. He lived in a linguistic age. Though it is not a comparison I have encountered elsewhere, it is apparent to me that the Late Middle Ages underwent a linguistic turn analogous to the shift in recent times from modernism

to postmodernism. Writers of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries often sound more like Wittgenstein or Saussure than like Anselm of Canterbury or Bernard of Clairvaux. This shift was implicit already in the profound attention paid to the modes of logic in the high scholastics, but becomes explicit in the writings of the Modistae. Around the year 1270, proximate to the deaths of Bonaventure and Thomas Aquinas, Martin of Dacia and Boethius of Dacia made the bold claim that grammar, linguistics, could be an abstract science just like metaphysics. They attempted to formulate abstract rules of language that would apply to *every* language, not just Latin. “In their works we find a coherent linguistic theory, in which every grammatical feature treated is fitted into a single descriptive framework, based on expressly formulated premises” (Pinborg 255). They were soon to be responded to by the new wave of scholasticism:

Nominalism. Debates over Nominalism and their terministic ontology – almost an arbitrary linguistic metaphysics, which ultimately dissolves metaphysics into linguistics – dominated the fourteenth century, especially in England. One figure to which I will quickly return is Walter Burley, who it seems had a strong influence on CA.

The *Cloud* has its own technique of prayer, and that technique is linguistically described. “And yif thei ben in wordes, as thei ben bot seldom, than ben thei bot in ful fewe wordes; ye, and in ever the fewer the betir. Ye, and yif it be bot a lityl worde of o silable, me think it betir then of to, and more acordyng to the werk of the spiryte; sithen it so is that a goostly worcher in this werk schulde evermore be in the highest and the sovereynest pointe of the spirit” (37, 65). This idea, that it is not merely the fewest possible words in which one must make prayer, but only *one* word, and that of *one* syllable, recurs frequently in the *Cloud*. CA uses the word “silable” ten times in the brief treatise. Surely this level of grammatical fixation is not what one would expect

of a medieval mystical treatise. The *Cloud* is a work of postmedievalism analogous to a mysticism of postmodernism.

Connected to this, though not immediately evident to the modern mindset, is CA's engagement with astronomy. In the Middle Ages the astronomy faculty was the place where scientific studies on the nature of time were carried out. CA turns to the astronomers for a definition of an instant or "athomus" [atom] of time: "This werk asketh no longe tyme er it be ones treulich done, as sum men wenen; for it is the schortest werke of alle that man may ymagyn. It is neither lenger ne schorter then is an athomus; the whiche athomus, by the diffinicion of trewe philisophres in the sciens of astronomye, is the leest partie of tyme" (4, 31). CA goes on to explicitly connect the astronomical measure of the briefest unit of time with the psychological movement of the will. "For even so many willinges or desiringes -- and no mo ne no fewer -- may be and aren in one oure [hour] in thi wille, as aren athomus in one oure" (4,31). The unit of the stars is the unit of the soul, and both are connected to a fundamental unit of grammar: the syllable. This groundwork of scientific connection between astronomical time, volitional acts, and grammatical units is one of the bedrocks of the rhetorical argument of the *Cloud*, and I will return to it in the next section.

Just as speculative grammar, scientific astronomy was alive in the British air, especially through the work of the Mertonian Calculators. Of these, one in particular demands our attention: Walter Burley. Not only was Burley a grammatical and ontological theorist in opposition to Ockham, he was a natural philosopher laying the groundwork for the scholars of Oxford on the science of time, and even has a work (*De primo et ultimo instanti*) explicitly dedicated to the physics of temporal instants (or athomus). It discussed "whether in a given case there would be a last instant of non-existence or a first instant of existence" in a change, implicitly including a

change of will (Sylla 554). Burley was simultaneously a grammarian and a physicist. The connection between physics and semantics was part of the academic discourse of the time, especially in England.

It is fair to ask whether CA would have had knowledge of such abstruse academic debates, including the writings of Burley. But the indications seem to be in the affirmative. The late fourteenth century was a time of popularized academia in England. University scholars were no longer seeking mere ivory tower existence, but were itching to make their influence felt on policy and practice in the civic workforce. “[T]he most immediate consequence of this development was the overflow of university debates on theological and ecclesiological questions into the public domain” (Canto 117). And though CA was almost certainly a Carthusian, his exile from the world did not necessitate an exile from ideas; Carthusian monasteries served as publishing houses in late medieval England (Canto 126). If anything, he may well have been better informed about ongoing debates than many nonmonastic scholars. It is possible he could have perused the works of Burley and others at leisure.

Jordan Kirk writes expertly about CA’s theoretical linguistic concerns. He too notes the connection between Burley and the correlation between syllables and instants (79). But Kirk dives further into the notion of syllables available to CA. Quoting Priscian, Kirk argues that syllables are elements of voice, of a single accent and a single breath (81). (It is interesting to me that Priscian, as quoted by Kirk, defines a syllable as happening “uno spiritu,” which certainly means “by one breath,” but could easily be misread to mean “by one movement of the spirit.” Did CA misunderstand here, and is it the core of his doctrine?) It is this *elemental* aspect of one word of one syllable that appeals to CA. It contains a meaning whole, without any division.

But Kirk goes on to lay heavy emphasis on the fact that the *Cloud* says this word can be any word you like, as long as it is one word of one syllable. He asserts that this is important because the point of the “werk” is to take a meaningful word and make it meaningless by repeated utterance, so that one transcends meaning into the cloud of unknowing. “The technique of the *Cloud* thus works as follows: its repetition of the syllable-word and produces a null-word, in whose terrifying noise the intellect become suspended as a null-thought which is the knowledge of God” (Kirk 94). For this, any word will do, but it has to be a *word*. Mere nonsignifying utterance will not accomplish this effect. As Kirk helpfully summarizes, “Put negatively, the *litil worde* is not silent, not a sigh or a wail, not a phrase or series of phrases, not any particular word, not one belonging to an unknown or invented language, and not a word of two or more syllables” (85-6).

I am reluctant to follow Kirk fully here, however. It is true that the *Cloud* leaves the choice of which little word of one syllable one uses to the choice of the one using it. “Cheese [Choose] thee whether thou wilt, or another as thee list [as you like]: whiche that thee liketh best of o silable” (7, 38). But is it truly arbitrary? For Kirk, yes; what matters is the action akin to self-hypnosis by which a meaningful word becomes meaningless. But is that really all that is going on in the *Cloud*? He acknowledges that his examples are merely examples, not necessary terms, but it is indicative, I think, that all his examples are explicitly connected to spirituality. CA offers God, love, sin, out [in reference to sin], and fire as examples. Would nonreligious words of one syllable really accomplish his purpose? If one approached the cloud of unknowing saying “bird, bird, bird,” or “car, car, car,” or “green, green, green,” would it really be a prayer any longer? It satisfies CA’s demand for being a single word of one syllable, but does it satisfy

everything else he says, about this work being the perfection of the contemplative life and the instrument of mystical union? I think not.

It appears to me that Kirk has missed the boat in making the “werk” an act of self-hypnosis, which is explicitly prohibited by the *Cloud*. CA says of those who misunderstand this work that “in a curiousté of witte thei conceyve thees wordes not goostly, as thei ben ment, bot fleschly and bodily, and travaylen there fleschly hertes outrageously in there brestes. And what for lackyng of grace, that thei deserven, and pride and curiousté in hemself, thei streyne here veynes and here bodily mightes” (45, 72). CA explicitly denies that this “werk” is something that one does to oneself. It is not self-hypnosis. It is a gift of grace. Few mystical writers go to such length to distance themselves from the oddities that arise when prayer is mistaken for self-hypnosis – the discussion stretches for several chapters in the *Cloud*. CA was well aware of the danger of misunderstanding here, a misunderstanding which I think Kirk has fallen into. But if the words are not completely arbitrary, what is their function? Here we come to the practice of literary art in the *Cloud*.

Wolfgang Riehle wrote one of the seminal works on Middle English mysticism, and he is one of the first to point out the irony of what happens in the actual text of the *Cloud*. For a work explicitly concerned with transcending language and imagery, it uses some absolutely striking language and imagery. The *Cloud* is a masterclass in using concrete words to describe abstract ideas, of which “cloud” itself is an example. “[T]he author of the *Cloud*, despite his skepticism towards the use of metaphors in mysticism, [has a remarkable ability] to use verbs with an active content and apply them figuratively to spiritual situations” (Riehle 74).³ It is true. The *Cloud* veritably *abounds* in active verbs and concrete language, whether in describing the contortions

³ I had to rework Riehle’s syntax in order to fit in context here, but the words are his.

false mystics make with their bodies, the image of a man crying for help when his house is on fire, or describing the devil as having a single nostril in his nose. What is going on here?

I agree with Kirk (n 7) that the process at work here is a particularly skillful use of Dionysian anagogy. In the *Celestial Hierarchy*, Dionysius explains why Scripture uses so many odd metaphors in describing God: “It does so, firstly, by proceeding naturally through sacred images in which like represents like, while also using formations which are dissimilar and even entirely inadequate and ridiculous” (149). He goes on to explain that the ridiculous imagery is no less appropriate than more elevated terms, because God infinitely surpasses *every* term. Elevated language lifts up our minds to noble conceptions; ridiculous imagery reminds us that God infinitely surpasses even the most exalted conceptions. It helps us in the process of anagogy, lifting our minds above limited human conceptions.

I would hold that this is exactly the thought behind CA’s literary process. He uses incredibly concrete words while demanding we bury concrete images and thoughts beneath a cloud of unknowing. The concreteness of his language is actually a help to this, not a hindrance. In the first place, it makes for delightful reading – the *Cloud* is certainly a more aesthetic treatise on the mind’s approach to God than, say, Duns Scotus’s *De Primo Principio*. But take a moment to think about this: is it not easier to realize that images of single-nostriled fiends should be dismissed as limited imagery than language such as “ontology of being” or “light of truth?” The more abstract the terms, the more likely we are to believe they are compatible with the “werk.” But no terms are compatible – or, better, *commensurable* – with this work. No word is big enough to hold God.

Yet even the ridiculous terms are still terms that describe *God*. They are not arbitrary. The distance between my palm and the tip of my finger is miniscule compared to the distance of

the star at which I am pointing. One knows the eye must travel far further to see the star which my finger indicates. Yet my finger is still pointing *at the star*; I cannot very well tell you to behold the star while pointing at a trashcan. In the same way, the literary imagery of the *Cloud* and even the little word of one syllable is absolutely meant to be utterly surpassed – here I agree with Kirk – but it has to be surpassed in the correct direction. The finger has to point at the star, and the word has to point to God, even while being utterly surpassed.

Section IV: Rhetorical Analysis

It should be clear to this point that the first contention of my thesis, which is that the *Cloud* is a deliberate work of rhetoric, has been established. It is a work intimately in conversation with a long mystical tradition, a long rhetorical tradition, and a very lively and contemporary linguistic tradition. Furthermore, CA was not only a deliberate stylist, he was a deliberate stylist working out of an overriding theory of language. Anagogy is for him what unreliable narrators are for modern writers. The language itself indicates it must be transcended. None of this is accidental. The *Cloud* is a conscious work of art.

The second part of my thesis, however, is that the *Cloud* is exemplary for a rhetoric of mysticism as such, and to explore that it is necessary to engage in a rhetorical analysis of the work. I will first provide an analysis of the argument of the *Cloud*, and then detail some of the rhetorical strategies in which CA engages.

The fundamental argument of the *Cloud* is tightly laid out by Bernard McGinn in three components (401). First, God transcends all concepts. Second, union with him therefore requires a complete abnegation of self. Third, the way to accomplish this is the “werk.” I will develop each of these in turn.

The first premise, then, is that God transcends all concepts. This is the chief Dionysian precept. The upshot of this is that God is perceived as darkness; he is perceived as unperceivable. “[T]hou fyndest bot a derknes, and as it were a cloude of unknowyng, thou wost never what, sayng that thou felist in thi wille a nakid entent unto God. This derknes and this cloude is, howsoever thou dost, bitwix thee and thi God, and letteth thee that thou maist not see Him cleerly by light of understanding in thi reson, ne fele Him in swetnes of love in thin affeccion” (3, 31). The theological underpinning on this rests on the divine infinity and the divine simplicity. In short, God cannot fit in the limited human mind, and he cannot be subdivided so that one part of him might fit therein. He is not large like an ocean, where a part of it can be contained in a cup; instead, like an instant, God himself is an atom, literally indivisible.

Therefore, God is incomprehensible. But he is not unlovable. That is because comprehension demands a certain containing within, and love demands a certain pouring out. This is ecstasy in the Dionysian sense. God cannot be brought whole into us, but we can go whole into him. “And oure soule, bi vertewe [by virtue] of this reformyng grace, is mad sufficient at the fulle to comprehende al Him by love, the whiche is incomprehensible to alle create knowable might, as is aungel and mans soule” (4, 32). No intellect, whether human or angelic, can comprehend God. But love can grasp him. And this is not an emotional love – sweetness of affection had already been ruled out in the quotation above – but rather a subpsychological or supermental naked intent of the will.

Does this imply two levels of knowledge and love? William Johnston seems to think so (97). But I do not think this is warranted by the text, at least if this is envisioned as two layers, like oil sitting on top of water. The whole point here is that it is the one power of knowing that has to be stripped and inverted by beating on the cloud of unknowing, and one power of loving

that has to be utterly free of every other captivation, even for an instant, to have a naked intent unto God.

This brings me to the second premise: this requires radical self-abnegation. CA describes this as the cloud of forgetting. “And yif ever thou schalt come to this cloude, and wone and worche therin as I bid thee, thee byhoveth, as this cloude of unknowyng is aboven thee, bitwix thee and thi God, right so put a cloude of forgetyng bineth thee, bitwix thee and alle the cretures that ever ben maad” (5, 35). This cloud of forgetting makes one closer to God, even if the cloud of unknowing still stands between you and God. As I have read this, I have always had the image of being in an airplane, looking out the window as I fly between two layers of cloud. The cloud layer above makes it clear that there is still atmosphere and all the infinite abyss of space above. In seeing clouds above, the person flying is in relatively the same position as a person on the ground. But the layer of cloud below proves otherwise. Everything on earth is not only below, but even miles below, the person in the plane. The airborne and the earthbound are not in the same position after all. If CA had this image, I believe he would have used it, because it is exactly the point he is making. Forgetting every created thing lifts you above them, transcending them by the cloud of forgetting, and therefore necessarily putting you closer to God in the cloud of unknowing, even if you cannot perceive it.

This cloud of forgetting takes a lot of work. It is a true ascetical discipline. If any thought whatsoever should arise in one’s mind, it must be firmly rejected, no matter how holy it might seem. “And therefore sey: ‘Go thou down agein.’ And treed him fast down with a steryng of love thof [though] he seme to thee right holy, and seme to thee as he wolde help thee to seke Hym” (7, 37). CA goes on to give a marvelous description of the logic of distraction and dissipation. First the thought tells you that the God whom you are seeking is good, “and if thou here him, he

coveiteth no beter [and if you listen, the distraction likes nothing better].” From there, the distraction reminds you that the goodness of God is shown best in the crucifixion of Christ. If you nod along, the distraction reminds you that Christ died for your sins, to show you love. Having you now by the nose, the distraction reminds you of exactly *which* sins you committed for which Christ died. And then there you are, relishing memories of past transgressions and licentiousness, all when you had set out to pray. The personification of distraction here is magnificent, and the literary skill is part of the point. Is CA not trying to do exactly the opposite as the distraction? To lead the reader by anagogy in the opposite direction? The same ladder goes up and down. CA personifies distraction so that he might have a good rhetorical opponent (though it be made of straw). All thought must be eliminated and trod down, and any fixation of the will on anything but God, even for a moment, will be judged. “And therefore take good keep into tyme, how that thou dispendist it. For nothing is more precious than tyme. In oo [one] litel tyme, as litel as it is, may heven be wonne and lost” (4, 32-3). But how can one keep thought underfoot and volition laser-focused? This brings us to the third premise: the “werk.”

I have already discussed this “werk” in some detail. It is the focused repetition of the little word of a single syllable. But here it snaps into its logical place. This word, without analysis, gives the intellect the slightest thread to hold onto so that it is not swept away into the rushing river of distraction. It cannot be analyzed or meditated upon. It must be kept whole, but at least it is not *nothing*. Everyone knows how impossible it is to think of nothing. A mind that thinks of nothing will think of everything; the mind bound to one word of one syllable is caught, and cannot take rational steps at all. And in fixation of the intellect, focus of the will follows.

“This worde schal be thi scheeld [shield] and thi spere, whether thou ridest on pees [peace] or on

werre. With this worde thou schalt bete on this cloude and this derknes aboven thee. With this worde thou schalt smite doun al maner thought under the cloude of forgetting" (7, 38).

Such, then, is the basic argument of the *Cloud*. Those gazing at the citations will note that the entire argument is contained in the first few chapters. Why do any more chapters follow? Because CA needs to provide clarification and answer objections. I will turn to those objections shortly, but first I want to provide at least a little evaluation of the argument in question.

The first premise is unobjectionable, at least within orthodox Christianity (or Judaism and Islam, for that matter). The mystery of God, his essential incomprehensibility, has been a standard belief from the time of the Scriptures themselves, though not everyone fully follows the logic of it. The second premise is perhaps more objectionable. Why should God be accessible to the will, but inaccessible to the intellect? I have given the arguments above, but this at least is debatable. It is, in fact, the whole difference between intellectual and affective Dionysianism. What prevents the intellect from being as purified as the will is, and therefore united to God, albeit in a mental ecstasy? CA does not so much argue against it as baldly assert it is impossible – one might as well ask why a circle cannot have corners. But does that hold up? Is the intellect's incapacity simply unquestionable? Obviously not, since many writers before CA, such as Albert the Great and the Rhineland Mystics, asserted otherwise. CA's argument here has a vulnerability that undermines the rhetoric of strict necessity he is attempting to craft in the first few chapters.

If the second premise has a crack, then the third premise is on a shaky foundation. If the utter negation of the intellect is perhaps not necessary for mystical union, then the "werk" as the single mystical exercise is radically called into question. And make no mistake; CA does equate the "werk" with all valid mysticism. There is no valid mystical activity outside or beyond it. It is not merely one technique among many. But that limitation, that constraint, rests wholly on the

second premise. If the second premise is questionable, then the value of the “werk” becomes relative. And if the “werk” is relativized, if it is only one tool among many, then the main force of the rhetoric of the *Cloud* is completely sapped. Instead of being a forceful and fiery treatise of mysticism, it becomes a book of polite spiritual advice.

It is noteworthy, I think, that CA thinks the unique value of the “werk” has been established by Chapter 8. To the best of my knowledge and recollection, he never defends it against other paths of mystical union. It is the “werk” or nothing; other techniques are not even considered. It is true that CA says, “And yif thee think that this maner of worching be not acordyng to thi disposicion in body and in soule, thou maist leve it, and take another savely with good goostly counseile withoutyn blame” (74, 99). But the meaning of that would seem to be that one can validly pursue another goal than high mystical union, not that one can pursue such union by another path. Indeed, if you cannot pray *this* way, then go do something besides the contemplative life. Do not try to attain the height of contemplation in another way; you cannot. It seems that *this* is what CA is saying. The irreplaceable nature of the “werk” is the whole point of the argument of the book. If the “werk” is an optional path to the same goal, the whole *Cloud* is excoriated. So CA does not even entertain the idea.

Instead, he focuses on other objections, of which I will list three: this “werk” makes one useless, it destroys the whole practice of the Church, and it is tantamount to heresy. I will briefly look at his responses to these objections.

First, there is the entirely reasonable objection that sitting in place and beating against a transcendental darkness by the repetition of a monosyllabic word is not the most effective use of one’s time. If anyone feels stirred by grace and good counsel to begin this activity, immediately “theire owne brethren and theire sistres, and alle theire nexte freendes, with many other that

known not their sterynges ne that maner of levyng that thei set hem to, with a grete pleynnyng [complaining] spirite schal ryse upon hem, and sey sharply unto hem that it is noht that thei do” (18, 49-50). It can easily be imagined that this is a judgment not limited to the people of the Middle Ages; if anyone would today set out on the path of the *Cloud*, they would be met with similar objections.

CA’s answer to this is remarkably subtle and respectful. He acknowledges that, indeed, many people who have set out to be mystics have instead become crazy. But this, he holds, is because he refused to listen to good advice – the exact kind of good advice his work was written to provide. So what might have been a valid objection before the *Cloud* is answered by the existence of the *Cloud* itself. But leave aside fallen mystics; is not the whole mystical path itself a worthless pursuit?

This was an active and agitated question at the time of the *Cloud*, so CA cannot merely wave it away. Instead, he answers subtly and somewhat indirectly in a prolonged exegesis of the story of Martha and Mary (Luke 10:38-42). This is a classical *locus* for the defense of the contemplative life. Busy Martha asks Jesus to reprove her sister Mary, who sat listening to Jesus instead of engaging in the necessary work of hosting a guest. Jesus gently reproves Martha instead, asserting that Mary had chosen the superior path. Those engaged in contemplative monasticism had long pointed out that they had taken the path of Mary, and that businessmen and those in pastoral ministry had taken the path of Martha.

CA follows that general rhetorical commonplace, but with a notable exception. In his translation, Jesus does not say, “Mary has chosen the better part,” but rather “Mary has chosen the *best* part.” CA pounces on this. “What meneth this: ‘Marye hath chosen the best?’ Wheresoever the best is set or nemnyd, it asketh bfore it these two thinges -- a good and a

beter, so that it be the best, and the thryd in noumbre” (21, 52). There are not two options; there are three: active life, contemplative life as it is generally practiced, and then the height of contemplative life as described by the *Cloud*. Not only is the “werk” not useless; it is literally the best possible thing one can do. CA turns the rhetorical commonplace on its head; yes, contemplative life is superior to active life, but *this* is superior to other forms of contemplation as well. As he had already said in Chapter 3, “This is the werk of the soule that moste plesith God. Alle seintes and aungelles han joie of this werk, and hasten hem to helpe it in al here might. Alle feendes [fiends] ben wood whan thou thus doste, and proven for to felle it in alle that thei kun. Alle men levyng in erthe ben wonderfuli holpen of this werk, thou wost not how. Ye, the soules in purgatori ben esed of there peine by vertewe of this werk” (30). The “werk” is not useless; it is a panacea! It must be said that only CA’s deep sincerity prevents him from sounding like a snake oil salesman.

The second objection is that if one need only focus on a single word to be united to God, then all the Scriptures, all the sacraments, all the commandments, all preaching – in short, the entire work of the Church – is rendered useless. Not so, says CA. Instead, no one can attain to this work unless he or she has already passed through the ministry of the Church. The *Cloud* is postdoctoral mysticism; elementary education is still important. “And fro the tyme that thou felist that thou hast done that in thee is lawefully to amende thee at the dome [according to the juedgment] of Holy Chirche, then schalt thou sette thee scharply to worche in this werk” (31, 60). Without a doubt, no one should think that advanced mystics, even in the bosom of the Church, have to continue to meditate on their childhood catechism. But is this approach to the Church entirely safe? Is the Church merely a classroom for schoolchildren to be surpassed, howsoever implicitly, by advanced mystics?

This leads to the third objection, also one very alive in CA's day – that this “werk” might lead to heresy. Mystical heresy was all the rage in the fourteenth century. The Council of Vienne (1311-12) had taken up questions of mystical heresy, which is exceptional. It is the only ecumenical council (the supreme magisterial tool of the Church) to deal at any length with questions of mysticism. In 1329 Pope John XXII condemned Meister Eckhart's teaching, an incomprehensibly shocking act, that one of the Parisian masters of theology should be found guilty of mystical heresy. (It would be analogous to a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff being accused and convicted of treason against the United States.) In CA's own day, John Wycliffe and the Lollards had started a heresy that sounded at least superficially similar to many of the *Cloud's* own assertions about the superiority of inner mystical experience to ecclesiastical structures and sacraments.

It is therefore the objection of heresy that CA takes most seriously. Fifteen chapters of the work are given over to discussing deceptions – i.e., heresy – and differentiating the “werk” from them. In sum, “I telle thee trewly that the devil hath his contemplatyves, as God hath His” (45, 73). The full defense of CA against heresy is too extensive to discuss here, but it will suffice to give some indications. False contemplatives are hypocritical in their wild gesticulations and contorted faces; true contemplatives become gentle and useful to all mankind (46, 73). They refuse to walk the difficult path set by the Church, and so follow the heretics, since they promise an easier life (56, 84). And they are sensual and barbaric: “Not as thees heretikes done, the whiche ben wel licned [likened] to wode men havynge this custome, that ever whan thei have dronken of a faire cup, kast it to the walle and breke it” (58, 86).

It should be noted that CA's description of heretics is not abstract and theological. He does not say they deny the Council of Nicaea or follow the opinion of the Cathars. Instead,

heresy is for him a behavioral and sociological category. It is not merely that heretics are wrong on a point of doctrine; they are sensual, insane, barbaric, hypocritical, seeking shortcuts and spectacular visions. This is a rhetorical depiction of heresy, not a theological one.

This brings us to the last movement of this section, which is a brief evaluation of CA's rhetorical appeals. He has made his argument. He has also answered objections to it. But how has he tried to persuade the reader? His persuasive strategies are what separate the *Cloud* from many a dry work of speculative mystical theology.

The first rhetorical strategy I wish to highlight is that of *elitism*. It is not merely that the "werk" itself is superior; those who practice it become superior by extension. It is like the modern rhetoric surrounding electric vehicles: not only are they a better kind of car, they are driven by a better kind of person. So also the one engaged in the "werk" is not merely the beneficiary of a superior technique; they also become a superior Christian in the bargain. This is a bold claim, and CA must keep it implicit, because there are many ways in which it is manifestly untrue. Young contemplatives engaged in the "werk" are certainly full of imperfections and callow judgments. But they are still set apart from "[f]leschely janglers, opyn preisers and blamers of hemself or of any other, tithing tellers, rouners and tutilers of tales, and alle maner of pinchers" (prol., 22). They are indeed in the highest point of the highest life beneath heaven, all because of this "werk." (1, 28-29) The reader of the *Cloud*, from the very beginning, is encouraged to view himself or herself among the elite. While there is no formal *captatio benevolentiae* at the beginning of the work, surely this high assessment of potential readers renders them susceptible to the *Cloud's* seductions.

This is connected to the second strategy, which is *militarism*. The reader is dropped right in the middle of a war of which they may well have been blissfully unaware before cracking the

cover of the book. As already seen, the “werk” gives one a shield and spear to ride forth. One is surrounded on all sides by heckling actives and false contemplatives, and one has the enemy of distraction hiding right within one’s own mind. And that is not even to mention the devil and his demons. Right at the beginning of the work, the reader is told to “stonde stifly agens alle the sotil assailinges of thi bodily and goostly enemyes, and winne to the coroun of liif that evermore lasteth” (prol., 28). By my count, the word “enemy” and its derivatives occur six times in the work, but the occurrences are spread throughout. To this must be joined the verbs “bete” (three occurrences) and “put” (which, when used in the sense of “thrust,” “charge,” or “push,” appears about thirty times by my count.) The reader has stumbled into a firefight; thank goodness CA is prepared to offer arms and training!

The third strategy is *intellectual anti-intellectualism*. The obvious challengers for the crown of mental superiority in the late medieval period are the university scholars. They were immensely learned men, and widely regarded as the peak of what the human mind could accomplish. If CA wants the crown of elitism to pass to the mystics, he has to take it from the scholars. He does not shrink from the task. He distinguishes “meek scolers and maystres of devinite or of devocion” from “proude scolers of the devel and maysters of vanité and of falsheed” (8, 39). Scholarship is not rejected as such; CA himself is obviously a learned man. But it is no longer definitive. Scholarship counts for nothing. What counts is whether one is meek or proud. But if scholarship counts for nothing, does that not make it a waste of time? It seems that CA takes “a strong position against the intellectual forces” (Chartrand-Burke, 124). This has led to an “anxiety” (117) on behalf of those attempting to defend CA from the charge of anti-intellectualism. But that anxiety is exactly the edge of the rhetorical strategy. It makes readers ask, “Did he really just mock the most celebrated men of our age?” The answer is

ambiguous, and the ambiguity demands engagement. It is a rhetorical cliff-hanger, driving the reader through the argument of the book.

The fourth strategy is *friendship*. The theme of spiritual friendship has a long history in monasticism. It can be argued to have reached its apogee in the twelfth century, but it was still alive and well in the fourteenth century. It was not called into question until the fifteenth century (McGuire, 408). CA uses both the terminology and the attitude of friendship to make his message more attractive. The word “freende” and its derivatives appear nineteen times in the work. The address to the “goostly freende” – that is, “spiritual friend” – appears six times, and is one of the most popular phrases in the *Cloud*, likely because of the prominent framing of those occurrences. But CA also speaks in a deliberately fatherly way. His language is conversational and casual, like a dialogue between friends. This includes permission to ask for clarification or even correction: “And yif thee think that ther be any mater therin that thou woldest have more openid than it is, late me wetyn whiche it is and thi conceyte therapon; and at my simple kunnyng it schal be amendid yif I kan” (74, 99). This rhetorical attitude of friendship is akin to persuasion by *ethos*. I have no reason to question the sincerity of the attitude, but I do note the persuasive efficacy of it.

The fifth strategy is *imagery*. I have already discussed the *Cloud*'s singular use of language. But it should be pointed out that the concrete language of the book, from fires to clouds, from the exempla of Martha and Mary to the descriptions of the false contemplatives, serves to be profoundly persuasive. The primary recipient of the *Cloud* is a young man. It would be quite easy for him to dismiss the work as abstract word games. The concrete imagery, the literary skill present on every page, prevents such a thing from happening. Artistic skill itself persuades; beauty itself seduces. It is hard to fully estimate the persuasive power of depicting the

devil with one nostril, a nostril which he raises so that one might gaze direct upon his brain, which brain is itself the fire of hell (55, 83). I cannot conceive of a reader capable of reading those words without immediately imagining what they signify, perhaps with a delicious shudder. In fact, the concrete imagery is so important to the appeal of the *Cloud* that the only place the work really drags is in Chapters 60-70, where CA has to put aside his incisive style to discuss the abstract faculties of the soul. The imagery makes the “werk” conceivable, even familiar, and that itself is a persuasive reason to give it a try.

Section V: Exemplary Rhetorical Strategies

The *Cloud* is a masterpiece of mystical literature, but celebration and analysis are not all I have in mind. Though I must be brief, I want to address the question of how the *Cloud* can be a model for other mystical rhetoric. Works of spirituality are still being written, and models are still necessary. In what way can the *Cloud* serve as guide not merely for practicing mysticism, but for writing it?

It must first be said that the *Cloud* contains some strategies that are no longer useful. The strong attacks on heretics, for example, would play poorly in the modern world. A criticism of scholarship, and depicting oneself as an expert in spite of, rather than because of, university approval, is a very common rhetorical technique today, but it may not garner the kind of audience CA was interested in. He was not interested in those expert in their own eyes, but rather in willing students. A rhetoric of mysticism cannot be a rhetoric of heroic folk wisdom against the consensus of the learned, not least because mysticism requires the sure guidance of specialists, as CA himself admits. Again, equating false mysticism with what we would call mental illness would seem, on the face of it, to be unacceptable in today’s *weltanschauung* –

though the idea that some practices can endanger mental health is an idea many are open to, and that is CA's overriding concern anyway. It is not that false mystics are mad; it is that false mysticism engenders madness. Still, with a greater perceived distinction between psychology and spirituality than CA's contemporaries, such a rhetorical approach might require more justification than it provided help. The cost/benefit analysis is off.

But what about ways in which the *Cloud* can serve as a model? There are many. In order to organize my treatment of them, I will group them by the Aristotelian *ethos/pathos/logos* scheme. Starting with *ethos*, the rhetorical positioning as a friend is very persuasive. The fact that both the author and addressee are anonymous allows that relationship of friendship to become inclusive rather than concrete and exclusive. It is not a common practice, but others have done similar. For example, Francis De Sales, in his *Introduction to the Devout Life* and *On Loving God* creates a fictive addressee so that he can benefit from this phenomenon. The appeal of feeling like one is simultaneously listening-in on an intimate conversation and partaking in it is real. But more to the point, in terms of *ethos*, it establishes the character of the author as one of disinterested benevolence. It is not a matter of the lecture of an expert or the pitch of a salesman, but rather the advice of a friend who cares for you. Such a person is worth listening to.

A second appeal through *ethos* is that of implicit learning and experience. CA is a master of this. He never states that he has attained mystical union; to do would be intolerable *braggadocio*. But on every page the reader has to take for granted that CA is, in fact, an experienced mystic. If he were not, how could he write with such familiarity? The overall effect is one of quiet competence, which in itself is magnificently persuasive. The same is true of CA's learning, though here the effect is a bit more strained. After citing Dionysius, he says he will cite no one else. Why? "For somtyme men thought it meeknes to sey nought of their owne hedes,

bot yif thei afermid it by Scripture and doctours wordes; and now it is turnid into coriouste and schewyng of kunnyng” (70, 96). It used to be humility to cite authorities, but now it has been turned into a mark of pride. The clear implication here is that CA *could* have cited a bevy of books, and thus demonstrated his vast learning, but he thought it more humble not to do so. This rather spoils the effect. But it is nonetheless true that anyone reading through the *Cloud* is left in no doubt that CA is learned, without him ever having to demonstrate it explicitly. If experience and learning are missing, one has no reason to listen to the author. But if experience and learning are demonstrated too explicitly, the author loses credibility in a field where humility is the first prerequisite. Therefore a literary game in which experience and learning are alluded to but never full revealed is the order of the day. Implicit expertise is the most persuasive kind for a mystical rhetorician.

In terms of *pathos*, I first have to return once again to all that magnificent concrete language. Perhaps, to the reader unexperienced in mystical treatises, I should provide two counter-examples from CA’s sources. First, from Dionysius’s *Mystical Theology*: “The Cause of all is above all and is not in-existent, lifeless, speechless, mindless. It is neither a material body, and hence has neither shape nor form, quality, quantity, or weight. It is not in any place, and can neither be seen or touched. It is neither perceived nor is it perceptible” (141). Next, Richard of St. Victor in his *Benjamin Minor*: “Compared to the height of such contemplation, any knowledge possessed by the creature is limited and lies in the depths and scarcely occupies the space of a point, as does the quality of the earth with respect to the heaven” (133). Now, look at the *Cloud* on the same topic. He begins not with an assertion, but with imagined dialogue: “But now thou askest me and seiest: ‘How schal I think on Himself, and what is Hee?’ And to this I cannot answeere thee bot thus: ‘I wote never’” (6, 36). He continues: “For thou hast brought me

with thi question into that same derknes, and into that same cloude of unknowyng that I wolde thou were in thiself. For of alle other creatures and their werkes -- ye, and of the werkes of God self -- may a man thorou grace have fulheed of knowing, and wel to kon thinke on hem; bot of God Himself can no man thinke.” No longer is God “incomprehensible;” he is in darkness, in a cloud of unknowing, and of him no man can think. Where Dionysius and Richard are abstract, CA is concrete, sensual, provocative, and that makes all the difference in the world. Anyone writing about mysticism should resist the siren song of flighty abstractions and wispy philosophical technicalities and cling to the beef and beer of the English mystic’s muscular prose.

Another useful rhetorical strategy in the realm of *pathos* is the sense of struggle which CA evokes. Every spiritual writer says the spiritual life requires discipline. Every one of them says it will be a struggle. Few make their enemies come to life as well as CA does. Contorting heretics, heckling families, seductive distractions, and mishappen fiends create a much sharper call to combat than “concupiscence” or “impurity of heart.” CA’s spiritual enemies leer like Hollywood villains. If you are calling someone to war, it helps to portray the adversary in threatening aspect. CA does this. The *Cloud* feels less like an instruction manual for an enlightened hobby and more like a survival guide in the face of existential threat. Temptations have nerves and pulse and hot breath in the pages of the *Cloud*. They are alive, and all the more readily resisted because of it.

In terms of *logos* the *Cloud* is persuasive because its argument is crisp, clear, and tight. Even where it can be disputed, it can be disputed exactly because it is clear. CA does not bury the lead. His compositional technique of saying everything essential in the first few chapters and then letting the rest of the work serve as almost a commentary upon them is instructive. A reader

is not left perplexed. The core of the argument is right out in front. There are those who assert that the *Cloud* is deliberately unsystematic (e.g., Malinovskaya 45), but I disagree strongly. It is true that the *Cloud* is not written in the same tight style as used by the scholastics, but a comparison with Rolle, Hilton, or Julian of Norwich will show just how profoundly systematic CA is. The *Cloud* is not a random collection of spiritual gems. It has an argument, that argument is tight, and it drives the entire work. Sections following the first chapter may seem happenstance to modern eyes, but CA deliberately walks through every major contemporary topic of mystical theology, even while letting his transitions be subtle for the sake of literary pleasure.

That argument is important. If one is going to engage in this singular “werk,” presumably for the rest of one’s life, then one needs *reasons*, not merely trust and inspiring words. Too many spiritual works neglect to give reasons, hoping that flowery language and floating vagaries will be enough. They are not. Mysticism requires real sacrifice, and so the rhetoric of mysticism requires real logic. Persuasion and seduction are not enough. One must be convinced with solid reasoning one can point to in cooler moments. And that is what the *Cloud* does, or at least attempts to do. It is a work of art, meticulously conceived, strategically planned, expertly written. It is no mere jotting of a bored monk. It is the literary opus of a confident master. *The Cloud of Unknowing* is a deliberate creation of rhetorical skill, and it has much to teach us about the rhetoric of mysticism.

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