Paradox upon Paradox: Using and Abusing Language in *The Cloud of Unknowing* and Related Texts

Cheryl Taylor

The author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* warns his disciple of the deceptiveness of ‘bodily’ language applied to spiritual instruction. Innovation is accordingly to be found in aspects of his writing that constrict language use. These include his choice of English over Latin; strategies that imitate the movement of the mind in contemplation from a ‘reality’ mediated by words into transcendental freedom; colloquial immediacy; responsiveness to his reader’s changing needs; and long negative explanations that expand into brief positive formulations. The interweaving of constrictive language with expansive (rhetorical) passages occurs on three levels of composition: structure, imagery, and style, including paradox.

The many treatises and commentaries by fourteenth-century English contemplatives, including Richard Rolle, Walter Hilton, the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and Julian of Norwich, elicit scholarly interest as literature, as sources for linguistic study, and as repositories of culture. From the later nineteenth century, when these writings first resurfaced into public knowledge, readers have also turned to them for spiritual uplift – a motive that accords with their authors’ intention. Groups and individuals, including non-Christians, resort especially to Julian’s *Showings*, to *The Cloud of Unknowing* and to the same author’s *Book of Privy Counselling*, as textbooks on meditation. Selected passages form a basis for dialogue or for experiments in prayer. In this essay, which focuses on the *Cloud* texts, I suggest that a cause for the longevity of the author’s teaching is his development of a language that in some respects imitates and embodies his contemplative methods.

In an emphasis derived from his mentor, the Pseudo-Dionysius, the author frequently expresses doubts about language because it presents the spiritual in

---

physical terms. While other patristic and medieval writers, including Hilton, are aware of ineffability when explaining contemplation in relation to its divine source and goal, The Cloud’s sustained stress on language’s deceptiveness is unprecedented. A noteworthy paradox in respect of the Cloud corpus therefore concerns its intellectual history, namely that works by an author holding such unique reservations about language should have been studied in the twentieth century as literary prose and source texts for a vernacular tradition. Phyllis Hodgson, the leading editor of the corpus, and respected commentators like John Burrow and Alastair Minnis have studied rhetorical devices and imagery as pervasive textual features. Yet the author may not have subscribed to rhetoric’s advocacy of amplification, or to the suggestion that images (figurae) were to be used primarily for this purpose. A second, deeper paradox is consequently to be

---

2 He writes, for example: For þof al þat a þing be neuer so goostly in it-self, neuerþeles zif it schal be spoken of, siþen it so is þat speche is a bodely werk wrou t wiþ þe tonge, þe whiche is an instrument of þe body, it behoueþ alweis be spoken in bodely wordes. Bot what þerof? Schal it þerfore be taken & conceyuid bodely? Nay, it bot goostly. (Cloud, p. 114, ll. 6–10). Page and line references are to Phyllis Hodgson’s EETS editions of The Cloud and Privy Counselling (OS 218, 1944, rev. 1958), and of Denis’ Hidden Divinity, The Study of Wisdom, An Epistle of Prayer, Discretion of Stirrings and Discretion of Spirits (Deonise Hid Diuinite. OS 231, 1955, rev. 1958).

3 Of the seven works edited by Hodgson, the Cloud-author is unlikely to have written The Study of Wisdom (see Roger Ellis, ‘Author(s), Compilers, Scribes and Bible Texts: Did the Cloud-Author Translate The Twelve Patriarchs?’, in The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England, ed. Marion Glasscoe. Exeter Symposium V (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1992), pp. 193–221; and ‘Second Thoughts on the Authorship of “A Tretyse of þe Stodye of Wysdome”’, Neuphilologische Mitteilungen, 95 (1994), 307–17. Hodgson argued that Discretion of Spirits was the author’s because of doctrinal, stylistic and structural similarities with works he acknowledged (Deonise Hid Diuinite, pp. 140–43; The Cloud of Unknowing and Related Treatises, ed. Phyllis Hodgson, Analecta Cartusiana 3 (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universität Salzburg, 1982), pp. 200–02). However objections continue to be raised, most recently by Annie Sutherland in ‘The Dating and Authorship of the Cloud Corpus: A Reassessment of the Evidence’, Medium Aevum, 71 (2001), 82–100 (pp. 91–92).

found in *The Cloud*’s articulation of scepticism about language in a rhetorical prose that draws on the physical imaginative properties of some images.

This paradox forms the basis of my approach to the author’s most characteristic writing. Like breathing out and breathing in, his deployment of rhetoric and of English prosodic devices is repeatedly restrained by a constrictive or minimizing use of language. This manifests in his choice of English as a medium for instruction, in the organization of *The Cloud*, in stylistic features including paradox itself, and in imagery. In their constrictive strategies *The Cloud, Denis’ Hidden Divinity*, and *Privy Counselling* function as textual imitations of the effort made in the author’s contemplation by unknowing. In this practice the aspirant seeks freedom from chains of sequential thinking and strives to venture through grace into an expanded state beyond the ‘reality’ shaped by words and images that refer to the physical world and to concepts. The constrictive strategies elicit attention also because they substitute a homely, vigorous, and experiential utterance for rhetoric as the accomplishment and marker of an educated elite.  

That the *Cloud*-author was a skilled Latinist is demonstrated by his translation of the medieval interpretations by Johannes Sarracenus and Thomas Gallus of the Pseudo-Dionysius’s *Mystical Theology*. Latin was the authorized medium for teaching in the Carthusian circles where he probably moved. His decision

---

5 Of the *Cloud*-author’s probable works, *An Epistle of Prayer* and *Discretion of Stirrings* use constrictive strategies less often than his defining texts. Powerful brief assertions nevertheless create a climax in *An Epistle of Prayer*: ‘Þis is chaste loue. Þis is parfite loue’ (p. 55, l. 13), while brevity of expression and colloquial English rhythms resume in the closing sentences (p. 59, ll. 9–17). In *Discretion of Stirrings* analogies of the ship of the soul (p. 64, ll. 7–20) and of the turrets of the *fleur-de-lys* on the crown of life (p. 66, ll. 4–10) counterpoint a passage of vigorous non-rhetorical assertion: ‘And all þis I sey to late þee se hou fer þou arte þit fro þe trewe knowyng of þin inward disposicioun, and þerafter to þeue þee warnes not ouersone to þeue stede ne to folow þe singulere sterynges of þi zong hert for dred of disseite. Alle þis I sey for to schewe vnto þee my conseite þat I haue of þee & of þi steringes, as þou hast askid of me. For I conseiue of þee þat þou arte ful able & ful gredely disposid to soche sodein steringes of singulere doynges, and ful fast to cleue vnto hem when þei ben resceyued; and þat is ful perilous’ (p. 67, ll. 3–11). Similar passages follow: p. 68, l. 24–p. 69, l. 1; p. 73, ll. 7–14; p. 74, ll. 11–14; p. 77, ll. 9–15.
Innovative works by English contemplative writers epitomize the fourteenth-century transition to vernacular prose. Rolle, who died in 1349, wrote prolifically in both languages, but predominantly in Latin. Hilton’s corpus (c. 1381–96) is equally divided. The English works of Rolle, Hilton, and the Cloud-author set a precedent for Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe. When Latin hegemony was further undermined during the fifteenth century, most contentiously through Wycliffite Bible translations, the Cloud-author’s works facilitated the change in the narrower setting of monastic life. However as late as the 1490s a need was felt for Latin translations of The Cloud. The probability that the Carthusian Thomas Methley commenced his translation because ‘theological writings in English had not yet achieved full respectability in conservative circles’ (James Hogg, ‘The Latin Cloud’ in The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England: Papers Read at Dartington Hall, July 1984, ed. Marion Glasscoe (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer, 1984), pp. 104–15, p. 107), renders the Cloud-author’s choice of English a century before even more distinctive.

Presumably the author translated the Mystical Theology for readers who did not know the principles of apophatic contemplation because they could not understand Sarracenus’ and Gallus’ Latin versions. In The Cloud he distinguishes his apprentice from ‘pees greet clerkis, & men & wommen of oþer degrees þen þou arte’ (p. 86, ll. 26–27), and in Privy Counselling defends his teaching against scholarly detractors, again differentiated from his reader: ‘my writyng to þe & to oþer’ (p. 137, l. 9). Denis’ Hidden Divinity, Discretion of Spirits and The Cloud stand out among contemporary contemplative writings except for Hilton’s The Scale of Perfection Book 1 in their scrupulous avoidance of Latin. They present Biblical and other quotations wholly in translation, and even explain: ‘Lesson, Meditacion, & Oryson … to þin vnderstandyng þei mowe be clepid: Redyng, þinkyng & Preiing’ (Cloud, p. 71, ll. 12–14).
Using and Abusing Language in The Cloud of Unknowing

and so are not accessible to the imagination. These lead to assertions: ‘when I sey derknes, I mene a lackyng of knowyng...& for þis skile it is not clepid a cloude of þe eire, bot a cloud of vnknowyng þat is bitwix þee & þi God’. 8

Recognition of this paradigm illuminates authorial structuring in The Cloud and Privy Counselling. Some commentators have traced a linear development through sections in The Cloud, 9 while others have seen its structure as indeterminate. 10 I find that The Cloud meets the minimal prescriptions of the rhetorical text books by a linear plan of sections that would match a view of contemplation as a progression through stages. 11 However, the instruction in fact concentrates on the unitive way, in which the whole ‘werek’, the offering of love to God, is accomplished in an ‘athomus’ of time coterminous with each impulse of the will. 12 Consequently a lively confrontational structure following the paradigm described recurrently interrupts the linear program.

Each of the four main sections of the rhetorical linear plan ends by referring to progress or perfection. Exhortations in Chapters 2 and 26 mark the limits of Section One: ‘Put on þan; lat see how þou berest þee’ 13 and ‘Do on þan fast, lat se how þou berest þee’, 14 and a climax suggests that ‘þe beme of goostly liþt’ will penetrate the cloud. 15 Section Two (Chapters 27–44) begins by reconsidering the

---

8 Cloud, p. 23, ll. 13–24.
11 In the Cloud-author’s and Hilton’s circle, such rhetorically accomplished works as St. Bonaventure’s Itinerarium Mentis in Deum, which describes an orderly series of ascending steps incorporating the purgative, illuminative and unitive ways, promoted this view.
12 Cloud, p. 17, l. 14–p. 18, l. 7.
13 Cloud, p. 15, l. 21–p. 16, l. 1.
14 Cloud, p. 62, ll. 4–5.
‘who’, ‘when’, and ‘how’ of contemplation, and ends by expressing hope of union with God. The third section (Chapters 45–67) consists mostly of negative analyses of deceptions through repetitions of the constrictive paradigm, but elements of linear sequence are present. While this section likewise concludes with hope – ‘to be onyd to God in spirit & in loue & in acordaunce of wille’ – it chiefly highlights the rhetorical consummation of the linear plan in Section Four.

The opening to Section Four counters earlier warnings against a bodily misconceiving of prepositions by asserting that ‘no3where bodely is euerywhere goostly’. Chapter 69 fictionally fulfils the hope of penetrating the cloud that closes Section One by revealing that the cloud itself potentially is God. The positive transformations lead into a climactic exegesis of Moses on the mount in Chapters 71 and 73. By drawing on emotive Biblical parallels in Richard of St Victor’s Benjamin Major (The Mystical Ark) these chapters poeticize earlier attempts in The Cloud to articulate the goal of contemplation. They contrast with adaptations in Section Three of Richard’s schema of the powers of the soul from Benjamin Minor (The Twelve Patriarchs) which erase Biblical parallels in the source. The exegesis that consummates the author’s teaching identifies the cloud of unknowing with the cloud on Mount Sinai. Although implicit from the first mention of the cloud in Chapter 3, this has not been previously affirmed. An intruded passage selected from the beginning of Benjamin Major further identifies the stirring of love towards the cloud – the essence and fulfilment of the prosaic ‘werk’ – with the mythical splendours of the Ark of the Covenant:

\[\text{& weel is þis grace & þis werk licnid to þat arke. For ri3t as in þat arke were contenid alle þe juelles & þe relikes of þe temple, ri3t so in þis lityl loue put ben contenid alle þe vertewes of mans soule, þe whiche is þe goostly temple of God.}\]

The confrontative structure counterpointing the rhetorical plan of sections operates most powerfully in Section Three, where brief positive formulations, such as the conclusion to Chapter 57, ‘For whi oure werke schuld be goostly, not bodely,
Using and Abusing Language in The Cloud of Unknowing

ne on a bodely maner wroust’, confront many passages of negation. However, from Section Three the constrictive impetus spreads through much of the text. Chiefly, warnings against bodily understanding of prepositions that are supported by *exempla* in Chapters 51 to 61 qualify such terminology when it appears in later expansionary passages, including those describing Moses’ ascent in Chapters 71 and 72. They also retrospectively restrict the meaning of ‘up’, ‘down’, ‘above’, and ‘below’, which are repeatedly applied to spiritual working in Sections One and Two. The cross-referencing reveals the author’s effort to capture and contain the physical associations of language.

Expansive rhetorical conventions sometimes give way as well to his inspired sense of momentary appropriateness. Clues remaining in *The Cloud* suggest that the author shaped his composition to fit his disciple’s changing needs, so that it diverges sharply from Richard of St Victor’s polished productions. The disciple’s spiritual progress surveyed in Chapter 1 seems to have initiated the writing, and a major break in the linear plan between Sections One and Two (Chapters 26 and 27) may signify a halt, before the author responded to a request to recommence. Chapter 27 repeats the point made in Chapter 1, that contemplation is appropriate for those who have renounced active life. Further signs of structural spontaneity include the insertion of the account of the faculties of the soul in Chapters 63 to 66, where they elucidate levels of spiritual working; and the many briefer passages that Clark argues were adapted from Hilton’s *Scale of Perfection*. The author finally offers to amplify and amend his composition at the disciple’s request, a suggestion that seems to

22 *Cloud*, p. 126, l. 25–p. 127, l. 2; p. 128, ll. 3–5.
23 For example: ‘Lift up þin herte vnto God’ (*Cloud*, p. 16, l. 3); ‘it falliþ doune æsein to som þouþt’ (p. 22, l. 12); ‘þis cloude of vnknowyng is abouen þee … a cloude of forþetyng bineþ þee’ (p. 24, ll. 2–3); ‘all þe creatures þat schuld be bineþ him, proudly prees abouen hym, bitwix him & his God’ (p. 64, ll. 7–9).
24 *Cloud*, p. 63, ll. 3–6.
26 *Cloud*, p. 130, ll. 14–17.
have produced *Privy Counselling*. That *The Cloud* is a responsive compilation of his own and others’ material illuminates the author’s organizational method.

The fictional exchanges – some of them dramatic debates – that support the confrontative structures of *The Cloud* are multi-vocal, enlivened not only by the personas of author and disciple, but also by such speakers as Christ and the thought which in a mimicry of distraction persists in questioning the disciple. The text’s living vernacular quality extends to the author’s dialogues with his apprentice, in which he reveals that he has been a habitual sinner and that he is still a learner in contemplation. The warmth of their relationship peaks in the conclusion, where he identifies himself with Bezaleel, the maker of the Ark, and his disciple with Aaron, its priestly keeper:

Lo! goostly freende, in þis werk, þof it be childly & lewdely spoken, I bere, þof I be a wreche vnworþi to teche any creature, þe ofice of Bezeleel, makyng & declaryng in maner to þin handes þe maner of þis goostly arke. Bot fer betir & more worþely þen I do, þou maist worche 3if þou wilt be Aaron: þat is to sey, contynuely worching þer-in for þee & for me. Do þen so, I prey þee, for the loue of God Almiȝty. & siþen we ben boþe clepid of God to worche in þis werk, I beseche þee for Goddes loue fulfille in þi partye þat lackiþ of myne.

27 Sutherland, ‘The Dating and Authorship of *The Cloud* Corpus’, suggests that *The Cloud* was written 1385–90, against Clark who argues for ‘the very early 1390s’ (p. 83). Sutherland seems to accept Clark’s dating of the author’s last work, *Privy Counselling*, to the mid-1390s, but objects to Clark’s view of a five-year writing career as ‘too truncated’ (p. 96, n. 10). She points to differences in the style and choice of Biblical quotations between *The Cloud* and *Privy Counselling*. In fact stylistic variations and similarities are present in all five of the author’s authentic works. Clark bases his dating of *The Cloud* and *Privy Counselling* on their interchanges with Hilton’s writings, some of the dates of which are known or can be deduced.

28 *Cloud*, p. 45, l. 1; p. 52, ll. 2–4, 11–12, 24; p. 109, ll. 18–24.
29 *Cloud*, p. 26, l. 13–p. 27, l. 2.
30 *Cloud*, p. 43, ll. 13–14; p. 51, ll. 2–8.
31 *Cloud*, p. 67, ll. 15–19.
The opening fuses the works of writing and contemplation, and points to a third paradox basic to the author’s experience, of using and yet transcending language. The reference to ‘spoken’ confirms the likelihood of mixed oral and written composition. This appears in the shaping of his writing to engage the ear, noted by Hodgson. Such features develop the sense of an intimate conversation conveyed by the dialogues, which because they are practical and experiential resist categorization under *sermocinatio* as a rhetorical figure of thought. The author’s openness in the passage contrasts with his source’s maintenance of levels in contemplative experience. While Richard remains aloof, referring to himself mostly in plural pronouns and verbs, the *Cloud*-author draws closer to his disciple through their shared vocation, briefly dissolving the hierarchy of teacher and learner. The discussion finally opens out into the promise of the disciple’s attainment by submerging the words that have completed their instructive task in the contemplative ‘werk’.

In the central alternation proposed in this essay, ‘expansive’ generally equates with ‘rhetorical’, and ‘constrictive’ with ‘practical’, but like other dichotomies this is subject to partial reintegration. In the *Cloud* texts, devices that constrict language, such as parataxis and aphorisms, were also theorized by the rhetoricians. A comprehensive application of ‘rhetorical’ to the style and vocabulary of *The Cloud, Denis’ Hidden Divinity*, and *Privy Counselling* is nevertheless inappropriate, since other than rhetorical criteria predominate.

---

33 See *Cloud*, p. 1, ll. 12–13; p. 71, ll. 20-22; p. 114, ll. 6–9. The habit of reading aloud made this distinction less clear-cut for medieval than for modern readers. *Privy Counselling* nevertheless assumes a listening audience: ‘I speke at þis tyme in specyal to þi-self, & not to alle þoo þat þis writyng scholen here in general’ (p. 135, ll. 2–3, emphases added).

34 Deonise Hid Diuinite, introduction, p. li.


38 Rhetorical recommendations like Geoffrey of Vinsauf’s, that a proverb makes a ‘brilliant’ beginning and ‘adds distinction’ to a poem (*Poetria Nova*, pp. 20–22), contrast with the homely wisdom of *The Cloud*: ‘For þei sey þat God sendeþ þe kow, bot not by þe horne’ (p. 57, l. 10); ‘þot bot wirche more wiþ a list þen wiþ any þiþer strengþe’ (p. 87, ll. 6–7, repeated in *An Epistle of Prayer*, p. 58, l. 2). Alliteration makes the second proverb memorable as an aid during contemplation.
Linguistically expansive and constrictive writing can be distinguished by the following criteria. Expansive passages display decorative devices often involving syntactical repetition, as in balances and antitheses. They include long or syntactically complex sentences; Latinate, ecclesiastical, or French vocabulary; and repetitive adjectival and adverbial usages. Expansive writing normally prepares for, expounds, elaborates, or qualifies ideas, or imposes or confirms conformity with authority.

The contrasting passages of linguistic constriction breach the literary segmentation of the text in ways that simulate interruptions to the flow of thought in contemplation. As the author encourages the apprentice to embark on the ‘werk’ that will take him beyond language’s delusions, various verbal simplicities prevail. These passages are associated with the personal, with experiential immediacy, with the imperative mood of verbs, with vigorous exhortations and homely examples. Repetitions, such as the nexus of ‘naked’, ‘blind’, ‘feeling’, and ‘being’ that recurs in such passages in *Privy Counselling*, are signs that language can penetrate no further. By marking the ‘failingly’ of understanding which the author sees as an opening to uncreated reality, they function to encourage a movement of the mind beyond discourse rather than as decoration. Vocabulary in constrictive passages is predominantly Anglo-Saxon or Scandinavian and words are brief. The oral dialogue component appears in references to the author as speaker: ‘I telle þee’, ‘I mene’, ‘I trowe’, ‘I sey nat’, ‘I sey þat’.

I will illustrate the recurrent stylistic contrasts by considering examples of vernacular spontaneity in relation to surrounding passages of rhetorical expository prose.

In *Privy Counselling* the following passage demonstrates constriction of language:

\[ þat meek derknes be þi mirour & þi mynde hole. Þenk no ferþer of þi-self þan I bid þee do of þi God, so þat þou be on wiþ hym in spirit as þus, with-outyn departyng & scatering of mynde. For he is þi being, & in him þou arte þat at þou arte, not only bi cause & bi beyng, bot also he is in þee boþe þi cause & þi beyng. & þerfore þenk on God as in þis werk as þou dost on þi-self, & on þi-self as þou dost on God, þat he is as he is & þou arte as þou arte, so þat þi þouþt be not scaterid ne departid, bot onid \]

\[39\] *Cloud*, p. 125, ll. 7–10.
in hym þat is al; euermore sauyng þis difference bitwix þee & hym, þat he is þi being & þou not his.\textsuperscript{40}

Apart from two-language confirmatory doublets – ‘departyng & scatering’, common words of French extraction (mirour, difference), and theological terms – ‘cause’, the vocabulary is Anglo-Saxon and largely monosyllabic. A sense of intimate communication results, strengthened by reminders of the speaker’s forceful presence (I bid þee), and by reiterative second person singular pronouns. Alliterating metaphors in the first sentence convey the intellectual darkness in which the perceiving subjectivity will merge with its object. Far from being merely decorative, repetitions of the group – ‘he/hym’, ‘þou/þi’, ‘beyng’, ‘cause’ – create connections that establish union as both a textual and a contemplative goal. The language is nevertheless unselfconscious, deflecting attention from itself towards the reader’s practice. The author’s defence of the simplicity of his teaching follows,\textsuperscript{41} conducted in complex, parenthetic, and periodic sentences, with a blossoming of the adverbs, adjectives, and alliterating antitheses usual in his expansive rhetorical utterances.

In The Cloud, repeated contrasts between the multiple concerns of active life and the singleness of the contemplative act, the ‘o þing … nessessary’,\textsuperscript{42} also minimize language. Chapter 67 repeats ‘onyd’, ‘one’, ‘onheed’, and ‘only’ to explain a stage in the quest for divine union.\textsuperscript{43} The repetitions limit the multiplicity of words in a further textual imitation of contemplation. The words that the author typically repeats in The Cloud are ‘meek’ and ‘blynde’, applied to the ‘steryng of loue’, and ‘nakid’, applied to the contemplative’s being or God’s. Opposed in their function to the repetitive tropes and figures designed to please the ear and the aesthetic sense, these approach the singleness of a contemplation conducted ‘above’ the rational level of language. They also mime persistence of effort in successive contemplative acts.

A final example of contemplative mimesis is the passage in The Cloud that recommends attaching ‘a litil worde of o silable’ to the divinely-inspired ‘steryng

\textsuperscript{40} Privy Counselling, p. 136, ll. 7–16.
\textsuperscript{41} Privy Counselling, p. 137, ll. 4–25.
\textsuperscript{42} Cloud, p. 31, ll. 18–20; p. 52, ll. 1–23.
\textsuperscript{43} Cloud, p. 120, ll. 6–20.
of loue’ which is the essence of the ‘werk’. This single syllable – ‘GOD’, ‘LOUE’ – integrates all the dichotomies, hierarchies, and multiplicities in the author’s doctrine. The passage typifies both his parsimony about language and his drive to unity: ‘sey him þat þou wilt haue it al hole, & not broken ne vndon’. The discussion is in fact unified on repetitions of ‘worde’, and further demonstrates the text’s resistance to expansionary rhetoric. ‘Worde’ is first linked with warrior metaphors to create repetitio, but later imitates the mental repetition being taught. As the distracting thought is progressively silenced, both textual ‘worde’ and ‘worde’ as contemplative vehicle merge into the divine stillness. The many repetitions suggest, not rhetorical abundance, but the ultimate futility of ‘wordes’ in contrast with that stillness.

Fourthly, paradox elucidates the Cloud-author’s textual and contemplative practice through its own appearances in his writing, which again highlight his linguistic frugality. Paradox has no equivalent Latin word and is not defined in Cicero’s Rhetorica ad Herennium or in medieval handbooks descending from it, such as those by Geoffrey of Vinsauf, John of Garland and Robert Basevorn. However paradox and its short form oxymoron are sometimes used in medieval and later literature in an expansionary manner, to surprise a reader who recognizes a truth in an ingenious contradiction. John Donne’s witty poetry contains many instances, such as: ‘for I/Except you’enthrall mee, never shall be free’. Alternatively, these devices are used in contemplative writing to frustrate attempts to make sense of conjoined but opposed words. With the failure of logos, the mind is led to the undefined creative space between the opposites, as theorized by the French feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray, or raised to the divine, ‘above’ syllabic illusory ‘reality’. In the Cloud texts, paradoxes and oxymorons either encourage word-free, imageless contemplation as in ‘blinde beholdyng’, or (fail to) represent the divine as transcendent subject as in ‘þis souereyn-schining

---

44 Cloud, p. 28, l. 10–p. 29, l. 6.
45 Cloud, p. 29, ll. 3–4.
46 Cloud, p. 28, ll. 17–20.
47 Cloud, p. 29, ll. 1–4.
48 Holy Sonnet 14.
50 Cloud, p. 32, l. 7.
derknes’. In such instances of ultimate constriction, the creative power of language is turned against itself.

Apart from a playful instance in *An Epistle of Prayer*, paradoxes and oxymorons in the *Cloud* group are used to achieve the contemplative goal of ‘þe schortyng of wordes’. In *Denis’ Hidden Divinity* the author translates the Pseudo-Dionysius’ paradoxes concerning the intellectual knowing which is in effect ‘vnknown’ and conversely his hope of knowing ‘þat vnknowyng’. He also faithfully renders references to the divine darkness which is essentially light. He adds an anti-intellectual allusion to ‘þees vnwise men zit wonyng in here wittys’, and imposes his oxymoron from *The Cloud*, ‘blynde beholdynges’, on Sarracenus’s ‘circa mysticas visiones’.

References to ‘blynde beholdyng’ flow through *Privy Counselling* where they counteract any tendency to break down the being of the contemplative, or creation, or God into parts that are subject to thought. The contemplative carries out his activities and resists the world, flesh and devil while sleeping ‘in þis blinde beholdyng of þi nakid beyng, þus onyd to God’. The author explains that this ‘blynde werk’ of the soul is accompanied by ‘a maner of goostly siþ’, and the paradox persists with a different referent, even after the contemplative has

---

51 Denis' *Hidden Divinity* p. 5, l. 27; Sarracenus: ‘In hac superlucenti caligine’, *Deonise Hid Diuinite*, ed. Hodgson, p. 96, l. 18.
52 ‘Bot forþi þat þer is no sekir stonding upon drede onliche for drede of sinking into ouer moche heunies …’ (*An Epistle of Prayer*, p. 49, ll. 11–12).
54 Denis’ *Hidden Divinity* p. 5, l. 22.
55 Denis’ *Hidden Divinity*, p. 7, ll. 5–6.
56 Denis’ *Hidden Divinity*, p. 3, l. 17; p. 5, l. 27.
58 Denis’ *Hidden Divinity*, p. 2, l. 32; Sarracenus in *Deonise Hid Diuinite*, ed. Hodgson, p. 94, l. 11.
59 *Privy Counselling*, p. 139, l. 12.
60 *Privy Counselling*, p. 142, ll. 9–12.
61 *Privy Counselling*, p. 143, l. 22; p. 144, ll. 1–3.
62 *Privy Counselling*, p. 139, l. 12.
64 *Privy Counselling*, p. 147, ll. 17–18.
65 *Privy Counselling*, p. 165, ll. 5–11.
attained the state of chaste love. He then sees his God and his love ‘bot blyndely, as it may be here’. In this way ‘blinde beholdyng’ transports the failing of language to the key ideas in *Privy Counselling*.

The author’s independent attitude to such thoroughly assimilated sources as the Latin interpreters of Dionysius is also evident because, apart from ‘blinde beholdyng’ and continuing play on the theme of a knowing which remains an unknowing, *The Cloud* itself contains no technically developed oxymorons or paradoxes. However, the cloud of unknowing is presented paradoxically as an opaque barrier which is yet a zone of connection. Radicalized in Chapter 68 as a ‘Nothing’ suddenly discovered to be ‘All’, it combines the drama of literary paradox with the transcendency of anti-linguistic contemplative paradox. The revelation of an abyss of logical contradiction at the heart of the text reaffirms the metaphorical quality of the many preceding accounts of working in the cloud, and challenges the reader to move through delusive, imagination-based knowledge into the truth of ‘goostli’ working. An equal depth of paradoxical insight in *Privy Counselling*, where a ‘nou3tnyng’ of self leads to experience of God as ‘one in alle & alle in hym’ has no known precedent. As Joseph Keller observes:

---

67 The challenge posed by the paradoxical conception of ‘Nothing’ in *The Cloud* emerges by contrast with Hilton’s exposition of the image of sin as an absence of good, experienced as ‘n03t whereinne þi soule myst rest’. Hilton repeats the conventional view that this ‘n03t’ is the opposite of Jesus or the divine (*Scale* Book 1, ch. 53, Cambridge University Library Additional MS. 6686, fol. 325a). However in *The Scale* Book 2, which responds to *The Cloud*, Hilton adopts the paradox of ‘þis riche n03t’ for the darkness in which the soul seeking reform in feeling awaits sight of Jesus as love and light (ch. 24, British Library MS Harley 6579, fol. 91r), thereby approaching the profound conceptual unity achieved at this point in *The Cloud*. See Cheryl Taylor, ‘A Contemplative Community? The Cloud Texts and Scale 2 in Dialogue’, *Parergon*, 19(2) (2002), 81–99 (p. 89).
Mystics will often negate a proposition at a climactic point of a discourse whose development seemingly had not prepared us for semantic or syntactic puzzles. Typically, the negated proposition is a semantic paradox whose effect is to reveal the ambiguity of the discourse we have been reading.\(^{69}\)

Many metaphors and similes in the *Cloud* texts short-circuit imaginative associations and limit verbal expression, but others are amply expressed and vividly evoke the physical and inner worlds. The former represent constriction and the latter elaboration of language. The two kinds of images differ qualitatively, in that whereas the former seeks simplification and recovery of a pure ground of being transcending discourse, the latter draws its power from the layered and segmented ‘reality’ produced by language.

Studies of imagery in *The Cloud* contend over this demarcation. Beverly Brian and Wolfgang Riehle emphasize non-physicality or non-specificity,\(^{70}\) while Ellen Caldwell traces a progression in *The Cloud* from literal, through abstract images, to the paradoxical pseudo-image.\(^{71}\) Other commentators insist on the images’ physical, visual, and imaginative qualities. Burrow argues that the author’s instruction ‘teems with unpurged and creaturely imagery of a very solid and physical kind’ as a means of underscoring his distinction between physical and spiritual.\(^{72}\) Minnis places ‘the experiential and concrete quality of the imagery and symbolism’ under the anagogical principle, by which images of the physical world

---


\(^{70}\) Brian points to ‘sunken’ images, which are visual but not pictorial; to the superimposition of incompatible images; and to the linking of simple images with terms of epistemological negation in what is almost an anti-metaphor, for example, ‘cloud of unknowing’ (‘A Study of the Imagery of *The Cloud of Unknowing*’, pp. 69-70). Riehle finds that the author ‘is almost painfully obsessed with his attempts to make the reader aware of the improvised, provisional character of mystical imagery’ (*The Middle English Mystics*, trans. Bernard Standring (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), p. 9.)


\(^{72}\) ‘Fantasy and Language in *The Cloud of Unknowing*’, pp. 293–96.
were rehabilitated or ‘upraised’, notably by Grosseteste and Gallus, as media for communicating the divine.\(^73\)

However, medieval thought’s ultimate subordination of physical symbolism is indicated, when Grosseteste states that the goal of anagogy is to experience the divine at a point beyond symbols and images.\(^74\) The author’s repeated theorizing of the spiritual as ‘above’ the physical shows that he agrees with this priority. *The Cloud, Denis’ Hidden Divinity*, and *Privy Counselling* accordingly strive to inhibit the physical associations and to recollect the figurative status of the images central to their message. This once again mimes the effort made in contemplation to transcend discursively produced ‘reality’.

In *The Cloud* the essence of instruction is further conveyed by recurrent metaphors of darkness, blindness, and nakedness. All are striking for their non-specificity, which underlines the openness of their tenors and invites the reader to enter into the mystery of loving relationship with the divine, and ultimately into the divine mystery. Visualization is thwarted by an interweaving of the non-specific physical elements with abstractions or non-verbalized feelings, in a way that rejects the rhetorical classification of metaphor (*translatio*) as a decorative trope (*ornatus difficilis*):\(^76\) ‘þou fyndest bot a derknes, & as it were a cloude of vnknowyng’;\(^77\) ‘nakid entent’;\(^78\) ‘a meek blynde stering of loue’;\(^79\) ‘cloude of

\(^75\) For example, Biblical exegesis focuses on Christ’s divinity. *The Cloud* approves Mary Magdalene’s contemplation, not of ‘þe swete voyce & þe wordes of his Manheed’ (p. 47, ll. 9–10), but of ‘þe soureynest wisdom of his Godheed lappid in þe derk wordes of his Manheed’ (p. 47, ll. 11–12, my italics). This emphasis recurs in the author’s expansion of Augustine’s comment on the Ascension: ‘þat bot ȝif þe schap of his manheed be wiȝdrawen from oure bodely iȝen, þe loue of his Godheed may not fasten in oure goostly iȝen’ (*Privy Counselling*, p. 171, ll. 8–10). *The Cloud* stresses the significance of the Passion, in parallel with the offering of contemplative love, for uplifting humanity, without activating the bodily and emotive Passion traditions (p. 60, l. 25–p. 61, l. 4).
\(^77\) *Cloud*, p. 16, l. 20–p. 17, l. 1.
\(^78\) *Cloud*, p. 17, l. 2.
\(^79\) *Cloud*, p. 22, l. 18.
Using and Abusing Language in The Cloud of Unknowing

The Cloud theorizes its purging of the spatial content of figurative language: ‘for in goostlines alle is one, heist & depnes, lenghe & brede’. It draws attention to the figurative status of its central metaphors and to the technique for ‘sinking’ metaphors, as in the assertion quoted above: ‘it is not clepid a cloude of þe eire, bot a cloude of vnknowyng’. The beam of light that pierces the cloud is ‘goostly’ and the experience is ineffable. When in Chapter 68 The Cloud attains its redefinition of the darkness of the via negativa as a superabundance of spiritual light, the affective content is transformed but the visual content stays formless and unbounded.

The cloud-darkness-light imagery central to The Cloud’s organization reworks traditional elements from the Bible and writings of the via negativa. Denis’ Hidden Divinity translates the paradoxical essence of negative theology, ‘where alle þe priue pinges deuinitee ben kouerid and hid vnder þe souereyn-schinyng derknes of wisest silence’; but apart from stray references in Privy Counselling imagery in which light and darkness are interchangeable does not reappear in the author’s freely composed works.

Non-evocative metaphors of light are also applied conventionally in The Cloud to psychospiritual qualities, e.g., ‘liþt of vnderstonding in þi reson’ (p. 17, ll. 4–5); ‘þe liþt of grace in þe reson’ (p. 117, l. 21); ‘þe liþte & þe coriouste of ymaginacyon’ (p. 118, ll. 5–6).

However the experiential aspect of the imagery recurs in An Epistle of Prayer and Discretion of Stirrings in metaphors of blindness, such as ‘blinde abiding of his wille’ (An Epistle of Prayer, p. 49, l. 3); see Discretion of Stirrings, p. 72, ll. 12–13 and p. 76, l. 6.
In *Privy Counselling*, blindness and nakedness anti-metaphors obstruct the connotative properties of language so as to convey contemplative practice by again denying pictorial or tangible referents. They are often crossed over in relation to their referents (‘síst’, ‘felyng’, ‘beholdyng’) or fused together, doubling their impact and further inhibiting the imagination, as in ‘þe nakid síst & þe blynde felyng of þin owne being’; 95 ‘be as blynde in þe louely beholdyng of þe beyng of þi God as in þe nakid beholdyng of þe beyng of þi-self’. 96 An allegorical exegesis of Proverbs 3.9–10 identifies the substance and first fruits with which the contemplative is to worship the Lord with his own being, ‘nakedly seen’ and ‘blindly felt’. 97 In contrast with *The Cloud*, 98 the conceptual emptiness of ‘naked’ is enhanced in *Privy Counselling* by clothing metaphors that follow St Paul into transcendence:

For þof al I bid þee in þe biginnyng...lappe & cloþe þe felyng of þi God in þe felyng of þi-self þit schalt þou after...nakyn, spoyle & vterly vncloþe þi-self of al maner of felyng of þi-self, þat þou be able to be cloþid wiþ þe gracyous felyng of God self. 99

In the first 32 chapters of *The Cloud*, innovative kinaesthetic metaphors describe the work of treading, putting, beating, smiting, and bearing down, thoughts, beholdings, impulses and sins, often under the cloud of forgetting, and of smiting, beating, and putting upon with love, and of lifting love up to, the cloud of unknowing. The anagogic principle prevails, in that association with intangible objects or instruments inhibits the verbs’ imaginative content. The metaphors converge on a phrase in Chapter 68, at the beginning of the Section Four climax, when the kinaesthetic metaphors reach the extreme of ‘wrastlyng’, and combine with the culmination of the contra-visual metaphors: ‘wiþ þat blynde nouȝt’. 100

Such linguistically constrictive images contrast with images in all *Cloud* texts that draw on language’s powers of sensual and imaginative elaboration. When the author likens heretics to madmen who cast the cup of physical signification to the

---

95 *Privy Counselling*, p. 141, l. 24.
96 *Privy Counselling*, p. 144, ll. 1–3.
97 *Privy Counselling*, p. 141, ll. 23–26.
98 *The Cloud* uses ‘lappid & foulden’ (p. 28, l. 10) and ‘belappid’ (p. 43, l. 4) only.
100 *Cloud*, p. 122, l. 3.
wall after drinking the spiritual contents, he is theorizing one of his common linguistic practices. The passage reaffirms both the sacramental nature of physical reality as a medium for divine truth and the validity of the Church’s sacraments as vehicles of grace against Lollard objections.

Most images utilizing the associative properties of language are scriptural, filtered to the author through patristic, monastic, and liturgical traditions. Some normalize imagery elsewhere used negatively, as when Privy Counselling contrasts the bright sun of divine illumination with the workings of the natural intelligence, presented as ‘þe derknes of þe moneschine in a mist at midwinters níst’. The many de-energized commonplace images contrast with innovative allegorical exegeses, such as that of the first fruits in Proverbs already referred to. They also contrast with imagery that imparts vitality to the source material. For example, the exhortation to ‘Take good gracious God as he is, plat & pleyn as a plastre,  

---

101 Cloud, p. 107, ll. 17–19.  
103 Privy Counselling, p. 145, l. 30–p. 146, l. 5.  
104 For example, rubbing away the rust of sin (Cloud, p. 43, ll. 16–17; p. 123, l. 2); the stink of sin (Cloud, p. 43, l. 4; p. 46, l. 7; p. 79, l. 14; p. 82, ll. 13–14; Privy Counselling, p. 138, ll. 14–15); sin or the sense of self as a burden (Cloud, p. 45, ll. 14–15; Privy Counselling, p. 157, ll. 13–14 and 22); picking off or cracking the ‘rough shell’ of physical sign/prayer so as to feed on the ‘sweet kernel’ of spiritual discernment/chaste love (Cloud, p. 107, ll. 15–16; An Epistle of Prayer, p. 57, ll. 23–24); fruit as a metaphor for spiritual and other attainments (Cloud, p. 35, l. 2; Privy Counselling, p. 146, l. 10; p. 150, ll. 1–2; p. 160, l. 14; p. 166, ll. 24–25); the lady and maiden to signify subordination (Denis’ Hidden Divinity p. 5, l. 8 (added by the translator); Privy Counselling, p. 145, ll. 1–2); and the kindling of love or desire. The Cloud texts also develop popular metaphors and similes of shepherding (Cloud, p. 15, ll. 6–9), battle (Cloud, p. 67, ll. 1–4; p. 109, ll. 7–11; Discretion of Stirrings, p. 67, ll. 1–2 and 25–27; Privy Counselling, p. 172, l. 6), and marriage (Cloud, p. 15, ll. 4 and 16; An Épistle of Prayer, p. 54, l. 26–p. 55, l. 1; p. 56, ll. 21–22). Long, formal analogies, such as those in An Epistle of Prayer and Discretion of Stirrings, and the allegory of the house of spirituality in Privy Counselling, p.159, l. 5–p. 160, l. 3, also occur.
& legge it to þi seek self as þou arte’, dramatizes the inner life by adapting an Augustinian healing metaphor. Many images in the Cloud texts use language enthusiastically to demonstrate right working. A receptive reader’s joy in this creative language – which one might venture to call *jouissance* – thus impinges on the bliss of contemplation. Once imbibed the images are at hand to be used as guides and tests at times when the ‘werk’ is in process.

A sea voyage analogy in Privy Counselling exemplifies this. By contrast with the formal exemplum of the ship of the soul in Discretion of Stirrings, which maintains a distance from the spiritual path it summarizes, Privy Counselling subordinates *exclamatio, nominatio* (onomatopoica), *dissolutio* (omission of connective words), and English devotional alliteration to mimicry of moment-by-moment shifts in the sense of grace:

For sodenly, er euer þou wite, alle is awey, & þou leuyst bareyn in þe bote, blowyn with blundryng, now heder now þeder, þou wost neur where ne wheder. 3it be not abascht, for he schal come, I behote þee, ful sone, whan hym likijþ to lepe þee & douȝtely delyuer þee of alle þi dole, fer more worþely þen he euer did before. 3e! & 3if he eft go, eft wol he come aȝeyn ...

The Cloud and Privy Counselling therefore use anti-metaphors of cloud, darkness, blindness and nakedness to convey contemplative practice and experience of the divine. They negate the sensual and imaginative content of such images by joining them with unnamed feelings and abstract referents. The images contribute to the texts’ constriction of language preliminary to the offering of ‘a meek blynde stering of loue’ to God at a point ‘above’ the imagination. A contrary set of images throughout the corpus nevertheless expresses a joyful creativity in contemplation

---


107 *Discretion of Stirrings*, p. 64, ll. 7–20.

subordinated to a practical instructional purpose. Originality and precision in imagery used to convey difficult concepts and states are among the outstanding linguistic features of The Cloud and Privy Counselling. These qualities are undeniable, both in images which reduce and those which exploit the connotative powers of language and the multiplicity of words.

Layers of paradox evident in both their composition and their modern reception point to an interplay in The Cloud of Unknowing and associated writings between constrictive or energized, and expansive or conventional language use. Although decorative tropes and figures, Latinate or French-derived vocabulary and traditional English alliteration are ingrained in the author’s expression, sections in The Cloud and Privy Counselling constrict language to vernacular, direct, and circumstantial modes. It is particularly in such energized sections, in paradoxes, and in imploding and sunken metaphors, when the writing challenges the reader to surpass the sureties of reason and the ‘reality’ produced by discourse, that the genius of these works resides.109 Furthermore, although the author exploits the rhetorical conventions of his time, a departure from the aesthetic imperatives of ecclesiastical culture is implied, especially in The Cloud, by the vernacular responsiveness of the writing. In the twenty-first century the text still appears as a living entity, governed by the author’s spontaneous intuiting of his readers’ needs based on his own contemplative practice.

109 Helen Gardner described The Cloud as ‘a work of genius’: review of The Cloud of Unknowing and The Book of Privy Counselling, ed. Phyllis Hodgson, Medium Ævum, 16 (1947), 36–42 (p. 36).