

## THE ENGLISH SPIRIT

On the whole the English type of spirituality shows greater consideration for the human needs of the individual than that of, say, Italy or Spain; it has a gentler and more tolerant character. The northern climate preaches moderation in penances and asks for attention to human frailty and feelings. The phlegmatic Englishman is seldom demonstrative in external religion, for he is unwilling to reveal his emotions, though they be intense. The warm blood of the South appears to him to indulge in excess in all things, excess in sanctity as in sinning. We may find a gentle human element in the mystics of fourteenth-century England; but it goes further back than that. St. Aelred of Rievaulx shows it in his life and writings in the twelfth century; he is in fact one of the only spiritual writers who has dealt with human friendships to justify them as part of the spiritual life. 'I began to wonder whether Scripture had any blessing to give to friendship, or was it only a thing that paganism had praised. However, I had found that the letters of the saints were full of references to friendship.' And so he sets out in pursuit of a human love within the embrace of the divine. 'Particular friendships' have often been condemned; yet there is something of the same sympathy as St. Aelred's in the writing of Richard Rolle, while the author of the *Ancren Riwele* (c. 1200) takes it for granted that the recluses for whom he writes will have special friends.

We may take this very English document, the *Ancren Riwele*, as typical of the gentle English spirit, for it sets out a rule of life of the most austere type and cannot be accused of pandering to human weakness or 'watering down' the Christian spirit. Thus the author condemns one type of friendship, 'for no enmity is so bad as false friendship,'<sup>1</sup> but that is because it is false. True friendship will even justify breaking into the routine of the external rule. 'Silence always at meals . . . and if anyone hath a guest whom she holds dear, she may cause her maid, as in her stead, to entertain her friend with glad cheer, and she shall have leave to open her window once or twice, and make signs to her of gladness at seeing her.' And the thought of the death of a dear friend will often prove efficacious in driving away temptation.

This same spirit, that some might even call humanist, appears in the introduction to the rule which insists on the supremacy of the interior law of love so that the external regulations are elastic, not rigid, and take a subordinate place—religion is 'not in the wide

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<sup>1</sup> The quotations here given are taken from the modernised version of the *Riwele* edited by James Morton and published by Chatto and Windus.

hood, nor in the black, nor in the white, nor in the gray cowl.' The anchoress devotes her life to prayer and meditation, yet she is not to force herself in this occupation. 'Often, dear sisters, ye ought to pray less, that ye may read more. Reading is good prayer. Reading teacheth how, and for what, we ought to pray.' The prayers laid down in the rule are near to being optional: 'Whoso cannot say these five prayers, should say always one: and whoso thinketh them too long may omit the psalms.' Infirmity of course may excuse wholly or in part from the recitation of Office which is otherwise the mainstay of their lives. Even the attitude at prayer should be restful rather than strained; and Rolle's suggestion that it is easier to pray sitting down has a parallel in the direction for morning prayers: 'Begin directly, "Creator Spirit, come," with your eyes and your hands raised up towards heaven, bending forward on your knees upon the bed, and thus say the whole hymn'—which sounds very like a modern Englishman at prayer. The recluse may often please herself as to the number of prayers she should say and the position in which she says them: 'Whoso will may stand up immediately after the first prayer.'

In spite of his Platonic-Augustinian conception of the soul's relation to the body, the author of the *Riwle* lays great stress on moderation in penances.

Though the flesh be our foe, we are yet commanded to sustain it. We must, however, afflict it, as it often well deserves; but not withal to destroy it; for, how weak soever it be, still it is so coupled, and so firmly united to our precious soul, God's own image, that we might soon kill the one with the other. And this is one of the greatest wonders on earth, that the highest thing under God, which is the soul of man, as St. Austin testifieth, should be so firmly joined to the flesh, which is only mud and dirty earth. . . .

It is, then, a natural prudence and discretion rather than any Aristotelian conception of the physico-spiritual unity of man that makes the author preach moderation. Although religion will take as little as possible of any worldly thing, yet these religious anchoresses may without sin live in comfortable sufficiency. 'All that man or woman desireth more than is sufficient for leading life comfortably, according to their station, is covetousness.' Nor need they disdain human consolations, talking with their maids and diverting themselves with instructive tales when they feel low or dispirited, especially after the quarterly blood-letting and in times of sickness. Sickness is to be accepted gladly when it comes, but it would be mere foolhardiness

to court it in any way and it 'displeaseth God' so to do. The devil uses such folly to draw the soul away from God: 'he incites her to so much abstinence that she is rendered the less able to endure fatigue in the service of God, and leads so hard a life, and so torments her body, that the soul dieth.' 'He endeavours to make some one so zealous to flee from the things that make the life of man agreeable, that she falls into the deadly evil of sloth.'

When the anchoress retires to bed she should sleep; 'In bed, as far as you can, neither do anything nor think, but sleep.' She may wash as often as she pleases, and may on no account wear haircloth or irons or chains without the special leave of her director; and the same holds for fasting. All this may be considered sound common sense, but a de Rancé would surely frown at the permission to keep a pet, even though that permission is strictly limited to one cat!

The *Riwle* shows considerable understanding of the human character, especially in its first assault on the castle of the spiritual life when over exertion disheartens the beginner and causes him to fall back into his old evil ways. Yet the life here described could not be called humanist, in the sense of a man-centred naturalism, nor yet preaching mediocrity under the cloak of holy moderation. Mediocrity has indeed been for long typical of English spirituality, but the tepid Briton would not persevere for many days under this *Riwle*. The author insists that the life must be hard and austere, and outlines a mode of life that many even of the devout to-day would regard as imprudent if not unnatural. On the subject of Penance he preaches (as he admits) pure St. Bernard, and *he* was no meddler with the joys of this world.

The everlasting arguments against mortification have to be silenced:

"My dear sir," someone may say, "is it wisdom now for a man or woman thus to afflict themselves?" . . . Who is there who is not sick of sin? For our sickness God drank a poisonous drink upon the cross. And will not we taste any bitter remedy for ourselves? It must not be so. It is not so. His follower must surely follow him in his suffering with bodily pain . . .'

Then the same 'moderating' voice is heard again: "'Will God avenge himself so severely upon sin?" Yes, O man or woman, for consider now how greatly he hateth it.' And finally come the popular attacks on voluntary penance: (a) 'What is God profited though I afflict myself for his love?' and (b) 'Sir, does God sell his grace? Is not grace a free gift?' To the first he replies: 'Dear man or woman, God is pleased with our good. Our good is that we do what

we ought . . . ' And to the second : 'Although purity is not bought of God, but given freely, ingratitude resisteth it, and renders those unworthy to possess so excellent a thing who will not cheerfully submit to work for it.'

There is little softness about this rule of life ; the beginner must lead an essentially austere and rugged life, for it is a life of purification.

' Let not anyone handle herself too gently, lest she deceive herself. She will not be able for her life to keep herself pure, nor to maintain herself aright in chastity without two things, as St. Ailred wrote to his sister. The one is, giving pain to the flesh by fasting, by watching, by flagellations, by wearing coarse garments, by a hard bed, with sickness, with much labour. The other is the moral qualities of the heart . . . '

And yet the author concludes the treatise on penance by saying that what he has written about austerity and hardship was not for those for whom he was immediately writing, as they seemed to him often to suffer too much, but for others who were inclined to laxity.

The gentleness of the English spiritual writers must not be confounded with any spirit of naturalism. Such a confusion has often occurred in modern times, since pragmatism has sunk in deeply and a practice is regarded of no value unless it serve a humanitarian or social purpose. Contemplation is at a discount because it is useless to humanity ; and mortification finds no place in the utility scheme since an emaciated body is an affront to the happiness and welfare of mankind. That is stating it crudely and there are in reality many subtleties to justify the attitude : Christ by the Incarnation has sanctified the natural man, nature has been perfected by grace. The little pleasures and comforts of life may be raised to an integrated supernatural life. Life rather than death is the characteristic word among true Christians. . . . Such specious reasoning might obscure the constant Christian insistence on subduing the body, overcoming the effects of original sin and making satisfaction for past evils by means of severe voluntary mortifications. Severity and sharp suffering, however, have seldom in this island been mistaken for harshness or a manichean hatred of the flesh. Mother Julian of Norwich has given a profoundly theological explanation of the wrath of God, which is in effect his love (his will is always a will for good), and the same sweet spirit of charity pervades all the genuine English ascetical teaching. ' Nothing is ever so hard that love doth not make tender, and soft and sweet.' There is no ' pale Galilean ' about the genuine spirituality of England.

CONRAD PEPLER, O.P.