RICHARD ROLLE'S THE FIRE OF LOVE *BETWEEN IMAGE AND REALITY*

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Abstract: *Imagination can be perceived as a dreamlike state in which a person's mind indulges in wandering. It is also the ability to construct a higher mental picture of material things, which are perceived by the senses. Richard Rolle, like many other mystical writers, cautions Christians against the wanderings of the mind and seems to reject (or simply neglect) the exercise of imagination. However, when his work is closely analysed one can see how he subtly uses imagination in the pictures he employs to describe a Christian's spiritual progress. His language and metaphors, which are creative and inspiring, are indirect (and perhaps unwanted) means of rousing the readers' imagination.*

I am going to use Mary Carruthers' analysis of the making of images to discuss the structure of religious discourse on this theme in Richard Rolle's work, The Fire of Love*. I will show that, although declaratively imagination was regarded as an obstacle for spiritual growth, it was necessary in order to express vividly mystics' feelings as well as their experiences and Richard Rolle, in particular, did not refrain from using it.*

Keywords: *mystical writer, Christian literature, medieval mentalities.*

In this paper I want to analyse to what extent and in what way imagination is used by Richard Rolle to describe his religious experiences. Although all the sensations he feels are real, he needs a large range of metaphors to explain and present them to his audience. Furthermore, it appears that for Richard Rolle the most suitable means to describe his inner hopes and aspirations is poetry.

In his work Richard Rolle often advises his readers to focus their thoughts on God and on heavenly realities, and he instructs them to avoid the wandering of the mind. Additionally he warns against false spiritual experiences which might be the result of their imagination. On the other hand Richard Rolle's descriptions of his spiritual visions awaken the reader's imagination and this is because, in order to understand them, the reader must use his creativity.

1. Richard Rolle – Part of the Mystical Tradition

For a contemplative, whose mind is deeply embedded in God, imagination as the wandering of the mind is not allowed, and a Christian must force his mind to keep still. This stillness and emptying of the mind of distractions is necessary in order to attain a "purification of memory", which makes it possible for "the soul to feel the presence of God and to be unified with Him" (Vauchez 147). This is what every Christian hopes for when he starts on a mystical path.

Another aspect, which must be considered by a devout Christian, is the constant effort to detach himself (or herself) from earthly worries as well as from dependence on his (her) fellows, and to expect help solely from God. In order to feel God's love (s)he must "turn to Christ", i.e. "to desire nothing but Him", as Richard

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Rolle (c.1300-1349) says in the first chapter of his *Incendium Amoris – The Fire of Love* (48).[1]

One of the starting points for the mystics is the Pauline verse: "nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me" (Galatians 2, 20). Meditating on this text, and on other biblical or devotional texts, praying constantly and purifying his (her) soul of sins, a person can have a mystical revelation or can feel the "rapture"[2] (the term used by Richard Rolle in chapter 37 of *The Fire of Love*). Moreover Richard Rolle is guided in his devotion by "the apostolic precept: Pray without ceasing, men ought always to pray" (1 Thessalonians 5:7 and Luke 18:1), which is mentioned in chapter 20 (108).

The union with God, which is the aim of a devout Christian, can be regarded as a quest for the profound meaning of things and creatures, which shows a rather intellectual approach (promoted by Hugh and Richard of Saint Victor[3]) to the pursuit for the union with God, a perspective which was known, but rejected, by Richard Rolle, who insisted on simple, but total, devotion. The matter is thoroughly treated in the 5th chapter (Why One Must Heed Divine Love rather than Knowledge or Argument)[4], but even in the prologue he says: "I offer therefore, this book for the attention, not of the philosophers and sages of this world, not of great theologians … but of the simple and unlearned, who are seeking rather to love God than to amass knowledge" (46).

Another important idea that is emphasised is his regret when people deceive themselves that they are contemplatives and they perform God's work, but actually they just "imagine they can … really enjoy the love of Jesus Christ and his sweetness" and "be contemplatives", while engaging in worldly affairs. They just pretend and the deceit goes so deep that sometimes they lie to themselves, and therefore they are described as "pitiful creatures" (ch. 34). So imagination can be both deceiving, and harmful for the weak souls who cannot control it.

Furthermore, the term imagination is often used with negative connotations when it is associated with impure ideas (ch. 29): "When some unclean imagination or thought has obtruded itself against your better judgement do not yield to it, but fight it manfully and cry unceasingly to Christ until you are clothed with God's armour" (135). It is thus clearly and repeatedly stated that imagination should be controlled, subdued and even repressed because only the real feelings are useful for a man's spiritual progress.

A believer's focus on God should be so absolute that even an interest in learning or an emphasis on holy orders can hinder him. This idea is presented in chapter 3, when Rolle compares the contemplatives with the higher angels, who "attend closely to God", while other members of the Church (presumably the priests and especially the hierarchs) are "less interested in spiritual delight" and "more concerned… [with]

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[1] Although written originally in Latin, *Incendium Amoris*, was translated by Richard Misyn in 1434-1435, under the name of *The Fire of Love*.

[2] The phenomenon of "rapture", which "can be understood in two ways: […] to be rapt by love while retaining physical sensation, and the other is to be rapt out of the senses by some vision, terrifying or soothing. I think that the rapture of love is better and more rewarding" (Rolle 166).

[3] Hugh of St Victor (d.1141) and Richard of St Victor (d. 1173) were two French mystical theologians, who were influential on Richard Rolle and other English mystical writers.

[4] Thus knowledge was not only unnecessary, but rather the pursuit of it could separate man from God (ch.5), since they "are too consumed with a desire for knowledge rather than for love" (61). This alienation from God is due to the fact that the reasons for gathering knowledge are "vanity, to get a reputation, to obtain stipends and official positions" (61), and not an honest wish to know God better.

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lording it over people" (54). Sometimes Richard Rolle's work can be interpreted as a justification for his disregard for the common practices of the Church, like his reluctance to sing in the church (ch.31) or his choice of a solitary life (ch.13).

> Although the *perfecti* [the ones who experience divine music, i.e. *canor*] no longer profitably participate in the worship of the earthly Church, their practice of *canor* is also an act of participation – in the worship of the heavenly Church. In singing spiritual songs, the perfect are joining, while still on earth, with the chorus of the saved and the angels in heaven (Watson 71).

Richard Rolle has been regarded as an "English Father of the Church", a phrase used by Horstman in 1895 in his work on the Yorkshire mystic writers. From a theological point of view "he has declared a doctrine of *canor* (song) to be the fundamental tenet of mystical theology" (Watson 139). And he also insists on the importance of *fervor* (heat) and *dulcor* (sweetness), which I will discuss in the last section. Watson also underlines the fact that Rolle places himself in the position of a new (enthusiastic) prophet of an old tradition (138-140), reviving the mystical belief known by the Eastern Desert Fathers, and he perceives himself as the follower of this tradition. This mystical theology became widely discussed in England, in the second part of the 14th century (*Medieval English Mysticism* 113-114).

2. The Wandering of the Mind – Mental Fornication

When discussing the role of imagination and image-creation for the contemplative I used Mary Carruthers' study on meditation, *The Craft of Thought*. One of her most challenging assertions is: "The great vice of *memoria* is not forgetting, but disorder. This came to be called by some monastic writers *curiositas*" (82). Thus *curiositas* (which cannot be translated by curiosity, since it had a totally different meaning) can characterise a wandering mind, which will not or cannot focus. Such a wandering mind is lazy and it does not do the effort to concentrate. The term used by John Cassian is that of "(mental) fornication" (Carruthers 82).

Such a vice plagues Christians, and even monks (and nuns) , and a person can be distracted from his deep prayers. "Being *curious*", Mary Carruthers says, "is the opposite of the state of being *attentus*" (94). But, whenever a hindrance to spiritual progress is identified, the solution (both theoretical and practical) to overcome it is sought and found. To fight against this harmful wandering, the Christian's mind needs a purpose, in other words it must "*have a way* or a *route*" (83). It is the role of cultural memory to establish such a route (or a focus) for the attention of the person who prays, and thus a person can use his (her) mind to work towards progress, in "a process of building" (84). In other words, one of the solutions proposed for disorder and inattention is to walk mentally on the known path, the path experienced and explained by a spiritual guide (a confessor).

Another specific piece of advice to young monks is "to forget their memories of past, pre-claustral experiences before their conversion" (95). Thus, the answer lies in forgetting that which was disordered and ungoverned by strict monastic regulations, and as a result they could not think about things that were not religious, or, desire them and imagine that they are still possible.

Richard Rolle warns against this inattention and uses the mental exercise of focussing on the name of Jesus, and/or on the person of Jesus in general, in order to keep the mind under control. "For, he who prays devoutly does not have a heart which

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wanders about in worldly things, but one that is transported to God in Heaven" (ch.28). Reaching Heaven is naturally the final expectation and the moment of meeting Christ. "Until I can see my Beloved [God] clearly I shall sing at every remembrance of his sweet name; it is never far from my mind"[1] (ch.26). What a Christian must do, until he (she) can meet God in Heaven ("clearly"), is to rejoice at the thought of Jesus Christ, whose person and name must be constantly a focal point for the believer's attention and his daily prayers. Such a practice was well known in the Christian East and was called Jesus Prayer.[2] Day-dreaming and giving free reign to imagination seem to have no place in spiritual practice.

On the other hand analysing the workings of the mind, researchers have noticed that "human thought is symbolic" and also "the human mind requires a sort of image with which to think" (Carruthers 118). These ideas were known in medieval times and thus even though imagination (which usually led to the wandering of the mind) was not acceptable for a religious mind, it was noticed that in order to remember or understand a concept or an idea, it was necessary for the mind to "fashion an image of it" (Carruthers 119), in other words to imagine it in a familiar, personal way. Furthermore, "the matrix and the materials of all human thought" are actually "the products of fantasy and memory", and "these fictions by which we can grasp God (or any concept) in our mind, are constructions that someone can hear, smell, taste, touch, and above all *see* mentally" (Carruthers 120). Accordingly, the human mind uses images in order to focus on or to comprehend a theory, and imagination is asked to create connections between an artificial visual image (created mentally) and the essential element, which is the object of investigation.

The most important aspect of the mystical visions is that they are real and therefore in opposition to anything imaginative; however in order to recognize a vision, which is often allegorical, one must use one's imagination to give meaning to (i.e. to be granted an insight into) the visual representation (or mystical sight). It only becomes a revelation when the scene is recognised (associated with an already known image), and, as a result, it conveys its spiritual message to the worshipper. Therefore in order to identify the divine signs a believer needs to use equally his (her) faith, memory and imagination, an endeavour which presupposes constant spiritual effort.

3. Richard Rolle – the Poet

Although Richard Rolle is very stern in insisting that a Christian's attention should be focused on God, and God alone, and he rejects "everything that is unreal" (chapter 32, p.144), i.e. imagined, it is often that he lapses into poetry, using vivid (and artistic) visions to describe his feelings and experiences. Rolle's poems are inspiring and moving, but his poetry does not reside only in his verses; rather, his whole work (and especially *The Fire of Love*) is imbued with poetical images and lyrical phrases.

[1] The same idea has already occurred when he talks about a person to whom God has given spiritual gifts (like "the understanding of heavenly, spiritual sounds"), who "…has a special love for the Name of Jesus and so honours it that he never lets it out of his mind, except in sleep…" (ch.15).

[2] Jesus Prayer (or the Prayer of the Heart) is a short prayer – Jesus Christ, son of God have mercy on me a sinner – which is repeated continuously. The prayer could be even shorter: Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, and other times just the simple repetition of Jesus Christ's name is recommended.

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The musicality of *The Fire of Love* is perhaps one of its most important features. heavenly or angelic music is a (sensory) reward for those who are "raised up to contemplation to the level of jubilant song. This would mean that he would receive within himself the sound that is sung in heaven…" (ch. 2). The Kingdom of Heaven, which is the final destination of every Christian, is characterised by music, and therefore by experiencing divine music a person can experience heaven.[1]

a. Themes

The profound feeling of joy is constantly mentioned, and it is the result of loving God and of slowly rising to the heights of devotion. Those who feel as "exiles on earth" (and are not interested in earthly pleasures) are rewarded with "imperishable sweetness from the glittering chalice of sweet charity" (ch.2). Their apparent solitude is actually due to the fact that the contemplative choses the company of angels, whose songs he is graced to hear. Later on, heavenly music springs from his (her) heart as a sign of this abundant joy which is the reward of those who love God: "Things cease to be unpleasant when men love you, /And they become happy and joyful" (ch.26).

Rolle's poetry is mostly concerned with heaven and the devout Christian's wish to encounter God and the divine delights in the Kingdom of Heaven. "I am burning to pass over" (to die and go to Heaven), he confessed in chapter 11. Death is perceived to be a blessing because it makes possible the believer's meeting with God, This longing for death is refined towards the end of the book, when the worshipper seems to have attained a maturity, and patiently accepts the hour of death and the final meeting with God. "…although as yet we cannot see your Face/ Our longing is still so ardent /That, were we to live for ever thus,/ We would seek no other object of our love. /The longer we live the more fervently we want you/And the greater joy we experience in your love" (ch.26).

Since many of the poems are prayers, it seems that Rolle's direct dialogue with God is made possible by poetry, whereas prose is more appropriate for the theoretical teachings as well as for the rebukes against hypocrites (ch.10) or heretics (ch.6), or those who criticise him (ch. 31), etc. It seems thus that poetry gives Rolle the opportunity to express his longing for God freely, and to praise him unhindered.

The poems show a constant progress towards a deeper understanding of divine love. Spiritual happiness can be found in this world, too, and mystical joy can be clearly heard in Rolle's verses, while the Jesus Prayer is lyrically introduced as the continuous need of the heart to call to God. "Good Jesus, you have bound my heart/ to think of your name, and now I cannot but sing it" (the last chapter). *The Fire of Love* ends in poetry and the last poem declares the joy and peace brought about by loving and constantly thinking about God.

b. Metaphors

One of the characteristics of Richard Rolle's writing is that he uses the feminine pronoun to describe the soul. Whenever he refers to the soul and the relationship with Jesus Christ he refers to the soul as a "she". The modern reader is surprised when the soul, which is described as being able to "taste the sweetness of

[1] Margery Kempe (born c. 1373) talks in her *Book* about experiencing the joy of heavenly music, after which she keeps saying "It is full merry in heaven" to all her friends, who are distrustful of, and surprised by, her conversion (Kempe 46).

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eternity" and to "love humility" and conversely to loathe "carnal pleasures" and to abominate "vainglory", is designated with the feminine pronoun.[1]

The explanation for this feminization of the believer's soul (whether the Christian is a man or a woman) is that the soul is considered the/a "bride of Jesus Christ" (ch.29) and therefore the relationship with Jesus Christ resembles or is allegorically associated with the marriage between a man and a woman. The love felt by the soul gives "her" confidence and grace from God, which is demonstrated by the contemplative's constant state of joy. This idea is later confirmed in the same chapter:

> The soul, made sweet through **her** shining conscience, and beautiful through **her** love of eternal charity, can be called the "garden of Christ"; for when the vices have been weeded out, **she** flowers with virtue and rejoices with joyful song – like the singing of birds!" (135, my emphases)

This short fragment, which shows a picture of perfect happiness, is perhaps the best example of the lyricism which characterises Rolle's whole work. I would like to draw attention to the allegory of the garden which needs weeding in order to be fruitful. The pleasure gardens were very rare in medieval times because they required hard work and they did not yield anything profitable. Such enclosed gardens could be found in the cloisters of monasteries, and also in the courtyards of castles, where they were especially built for the benefit of noble women, who used it as a place of entertainment. So the garden could symbolise and inspire equally spiritual enlightenment and carnal sins.

This idea is supported by the occurrence, in the same chapter (29), of the hermit's warning: "Loving women upsets the balance, disturbs the reason, changes wisdom to folly, estranges the heart from God, takes the soul captive, and subjects **it** to demons!" (136, my emphasis). It is thus obvious that when the soul is regarded as "estranged from God", **it** is objectified and loses the feminine feature that makes the complete union with God possible.

I want to draw attention to only one other metaphor, namely the repetitive usage of the epithet "sweet", which describes almost everything that is divine. In medieval times "sweetness" was highly valued, as it was rather difficult to obtain, since its only source was honey, and bees were difficult to take care of. Thus when, in chapter 22, the mystic refers to the "the sweetness of heavenly contemplation" (113), he emphasises not only the pleasure, but also the rarity, of such an occurrence.

On the other hand "sweetness" is one of the three physical effects of contemplative life, and as such it appears in many instances as an example of the divine grace bestowed on the devout believer by God. In the next section I will discuss this important doctrine and I will point out that imagination is necessary because a Christian who cannot actually feel these realities can at least (according to Carruthers' theory) "fashion an image" (119) of them and even "see them mentally" (120).

[1] Chapter 29: "The faithful soul, bride of Jesus Christ, rejects pride because she loves humility so profoundly. She abominates vainglory because her only desire is for eternal joy and to follow Christ. She loathes carnal pleasure with its softness because she is already tasting the sweetness of eternity, and is burning to have for ever the love of the Beloved. There is no bitterness or resentment about her because through her love for Christ she is ready to endure anything. Indeed she does not even know how to be envious of other people, since […] she rejoices in the progress and salvation of everybody" (134, my emphases).

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4. Spiritual Heat, Heavenly Song, Divine Sweetness – *fervor, dulcor* and *canor*

Perhaps the core of Rolle's theological principle is that constant and deep love for God is experienced physically. This principle is briefly mentioned in the 5th chapter: "And it is all because they were completely absorbed in supreme love, an indescribable love that blazed in their souls, and made them love God with such sweetness and devotion. Fundamentally they knew nothing within themselves, but *spiritual heat*, *heavenly song* and *divine sweetness*" (my emphasis p. 60).

The most specific of these physical phenomena is the *spiritual heat* (*fevor*), which he mentioned in the prologue, and which he describes with many details in the 15th chapter. It is this *heat*, which is defined as *the fire of love*. Equally music is a strengthening reward, because "their mind is changed and passes into lasting melody" and again "they dwell in the heights of harmony, in the wonderful rhythm of sweet and melodious meditation" (ch. 5). Furthermore this feeling is accompanied by "divine sweetness" which "completely fills their minds and binds them now and hereafter with the indissoluble claim of love" (ch. 5). This feeling of inner harmony and pleasure which is defined by "everlasting sweetness" is related to experiencing the sight of God and revelling in the presence of God.

Although it is not stated clearly, I would compare the relationship between these three phenomena with the relations within the Holy Trinity, a doctrine which he defends in the 6th chapter. The order in which these three physical phenomena occur is not essential, but, in chapter 14, he mentions the fact that *heat* is followed by *song* and then *sweetness*. Alternatively, in the same chapter, the first two can be the product of very great sweetness, which thus precedes them.

> I call it fervour when the mind is truly ablaze with eternal love and the heart similarly feels itself burning with a love that is not imaginary but real. For a heart set on fire produces a feeling of fiery love. I call it song when there is in the soul overflowing and ardent, a sweet feeling of heavenly praise; when thought turns into song; when the mind is in thrall to sweetest harmony. …and from these two there springs the third, for unspeakable sweetness is present too. Fervour and song bring marvellous delight to a soul, just as they themselves can be the product of very great sweetness (89-90).

In *Incendium Amoris*, Rolle finds "a personal voice and a personal *auctoritas*" (Watson 113) and tries to share his personal experiences for the benefit of others. Beginning his book with "an *exemplum*, seems a deliberate attempt to surprise the reader, engaging his interest at once" (Watson 115). Rolle shows from the start (in the Prologue) his intentions, namely to make ("stir") people to love God, and such a miracle (as the heating of his heart) can be an incentive for their spiritual effort. The book is addressed to "the simple and unlearned" (in the Prologue), but later on he also writes for the learned who want to take it seriously, and finally for all people and in order to accommodate them all, he uses a mixture of modes (apologetic, didactic, lyrical, etc).

Rolle's style can be apologetic (defending the reality of his experiences and the correctness of his behaviour and mysticism) or didactic, explaining the dogma of the Holy Trinity, and his theology of the *fervor*, *canor* and *dulcor* to all Christians, enrapturing them with this potentiality and equally warning them against imagining these feelings. Despite his wide range of styles, sometimes his words betray him, and (in chapter 34) he admits to being "unable to find words to tell of the immensity of such

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eternal sweetness!" (151) In such moments poetry (or lyricism) seems to become the only available medium to express his feelings.

5. Conclusions

In his work, *The Fire of Love*, Rolle insists on his personal mystical practice, whose result was the physical heating of his chest, which he called *the fire of divine love*. He asserts that this experience is real and thus often rejects the concept of imagination and contrasts his own experiences with the false ones professed by other people. Imagination is thus viewed negatively because people can be deceived by their own imagined feelings.

Secondly imagination is negative because it can lead to the wandering of the mind, and thus the contemplative cannot focus on God and his attention is dissipated. Such a situation can only be rectified by the constant and conscious effort made by Christians to avoid any unclean thought and to forget past details in their lives that can stimulate sinful imaginings.

Despite the fact that imagination is considered destructive and damaging for the soul, it is used extensively in Rolle's writings, in order to create images that can describe his spiritual path. Since his emotions are so much involved in the experiences he records, he needs lyricism to express better the wonderful sensations he has. Although his literary style is sometimes didactic and other times apologetic, the reader is charmed by the candid enthusiasm Rolle uses to record his thoughts and his feelings.

He associates the physical perceptions of sweetness, singing and heat with spiritual progress and insists on the interwoven concepts of *fervor*, *canor* and *dulcor* as the most important physical consequences of mystical closeness to God. Although he is sometimes didactic, and describes vividly and clearly the dogma of the Trinity, cold dogmatism cannot explain the heartening heat he feels inside, nor the music he hears nor the sweetness of experiencing divine harmony. Therefore his work, *The Fire of Love*, is one of the best examples to show that poetry and music are the best media to express spiritual adoration (love), and not only romantic affection.

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