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**REMEMBERING GOD AS A WAY OF LIFE
IN THE BOOK OF MARGERY KEMPE AND
RICHARD ROLLE'S THE FIRE OF LOVE**

“Doughter, thou mayst no better please God, than
to thynek contynually in his love” (chapter 21).

Keywords: *Medieval civilisation; mystical writers; religious life; Christian women*

Abstract: *In this paper I intend to discuss the medieval mystics' understanding of reality and the way they chose to experience it, and I will focus on their interest in the past. To exemplify the concept of mystical experiences and how to attain them I am going to use one of the books Margery Kempe knew, Richard Rolle's work The Fire of Love; but since this is an impersonal treatise, I will use The Book of Margery Kempe in an attempt to gain a more personal insight into the daily difficulties and worries of a person who feels bound to follow this path.*

*In order to understand the role of memory in their lives I must differentiate between the 21st-century mode of interpretation of time as continuous and homogenous and the medieval perception of time. To this purpose I will use Charles Taylor's analysis of the pre-modern time consciousness and I will show that the pattern that applies to the ordinary secular time – which consists of a succession of events and which implies the existence of the memory of an event after it has passed – does not apply to a medieval Christian's perception of time. According to Charles Taylor (in *A Secular Age*) the pre-modern man felt an awareness of a “higher time” which re-ordered (or “gathered”) profane conventional time, breaking its chronological order and thus in the medieval Christians' consciousness events become connected through their meanings in the divine plan.*

The standard opinion regarding the mystics is that they wanted to be isolated from society, and that their, rather passive, way of life was past-oriented and centred on the person of Jesus Christ, and on the historical events that had marked His life and death. I want to challenge this perception and to show that far from having a past temporal orientation, the mystics used the concept of memory in an active way, by immersing themselves in those events and re-living them, and moreover their lives were motivated by their future expectations in the heavenly kingdom.

In my paper I intend to approach *The Book of Margery Kempe* as a work belonging to the mystical tradition, rather than a sourcebook for the mentalities or

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social practices of the 14th (or 15th) century. Since each of the important 14th-century English mystical writers is unique and their manner of writing is quite different, I believe that *The Book of Margery Kempe* can be safely considered a product of this mystical cultural tradition.

I have chosen *The Fire of Love* by Richard Rolle¹ as a point of reference, not only because he was well-known to Margery Kempe (*The Fire of Love* is mentioned several times in *The Book*), but also because he was one of the most popular writers of the time (more than forty manuscripts of *Incendium Amoris – The Fire of Love* – are preserved, whereas only one copy of the mid-15th-century manuscript of *The Book* has survived).

The Book of Margery Kempe has often been (but not always²) described as “the earliest extant autobiographical work in English” (Dinshaw 222), yet I will not insist on her personal memory, which obviously was essential, but rather I will try to emphasise the role of cultural memory in shaping *The Book*. I want to prove that the major rationale of the narrator, Margery, or the author (called *Kempe* by Lynn Staley) was salvation – a theme common to mystical writers – rather than recounting past anecdotal events.

The most constant effort of a Christian following a mystical path is the endeavour to keep the thought of God perpetually present in his/her mind. Each thought is dedicated to God, and reliving (or rather re-enacting) several events of Christ’s life is a way of keeping this memory alive. Yet, for Margery Kempe, remembering God is not an attempt to chronicle the past, but rather an endeavour connected with the present, since it implies a constant effort to concentrate on God, through repetitive prayers (the Jesus’ Prayer³ or Ave Maria) or meditations on certain subjects (like the Passion). She has two types of mystical experiences: vivid visions of the most important events in Christ’s life, in which she actively participates, and dialogues with Jesus Christ (and some saints).⁴

Margery Kempe – A Past-Oriented Existence

My starting hypothesis is that Margery Kempe and, indeed, other mystics try to find the “fullness”⁵ of their lives in a past-oriented life, as they are interested

¹ Richard Rolle (c.1300 – 1349)

² Lynn Staley considers it to be “a fiction that attempts to create a social reality and to examine that reality in relation to a single individual” (Staley 171).

³ A short prayer that contains Christ’s name and which is repeated for a long period of time.

⁴ I believe that an important issue that should be discussed (which I cannot do here) is the profound dramatic quality of her *Book*, which is made obvious by the dialogues with Jesus. Some aspects are mentioned in an article by Claire Sponsler entitled “Drama and Piety: Margery Kempe” in *A Companion to the Book of Margery Kempe*, 129-144.

⁵ The term is used by Charles Taylor, and it refers to “peace or wholeness...joy or fulfilment. We all see our lives, and/or the space wherein we live our lives, as having a certain moral/spiritual shape. Somewhere, in some activity, or condition, lies a *fullness*, a *richness*; that is, in that place (activity or condition), life is *fuller*, *richer*, *deeper*, more worthwhile, more admirable, more what it should be. This is perhaps a place of power: we often experience this as *deeply moving*, as *inspiring*. Perhaps this sense of *fullness* is

in constantly remembering events of Christ's life, especially the Passion⁶ (and imitating Christ appears to be a mystical method of contemplation). Naturally, there are several focal points of remembering: the events of Christ's life, the lives of saints (who are often evoked by undertaking pilgrimages), and the memory of one's life (sins and transgressions as well as revelations and mystical experiences).

The medieval practice of imitating Christ, [...], was not confined to the re-enactment and self-infliction of his suffering. *Imitatio Christi* began in the semiotic pilgrimage of the memory and the imagination through the signs of narrative and pictorial representation to the stirring of the mystic's affections and meditation (Lochrie 167).

I will point out that in *The Book of Margery Kempe* memory has a twofold significance: on the one hand there is a personal memory, exemplified by a continual narrating of her life, and on the other hand there is a cultural memory, illustrated by her constant reference to religious writings. As a matter of fact, these two aspects both work together to shape of *The Book*.

As her visions, or at least the ways in which she records them, are influenced by her readings, one can see that for Margery Kempe the memory of mystical experience (which is personal, not cultural memory) also contains cultural elements. Margery often insists on having texts read to her⁷ and it seems that her choice of a way of life is shaped after examples of saints (especially Saint Bridget⁸). Going on pilgrimage is also a way of following the saints' examples and remembering their lives (Saint Bridget in Rome, for instance).

Yet, although several books are mentioned in her story and both she and her scribe knew them, *The Book* itself does not follow their pattern. When analysing the manner in which *The Book* is structured, it can be concluded that although the narrator is aware of and hints at well-known mystical works, she only uses them in order to give authority to her narrative, and she does not shape *The Book* according to them.

After a few biographical details, which are related to her spiritual conversion, Kempe mentions several narrative visions, in which she is shown actively participating in the Birth of Virgin Mary, the Visitation, the Nativity and the Adoration of the Magi (ch. 6-7). The symbolical meaning of presenting these stories about the *beginning* of our salvation at the beginning of *The Book* (which is the recording of her spiritual life) is far more important in the economy of the text,

something we just catch glimpses of from afar off; we have the powerful intuition of what fullness would be, were we to be in that condition" (Taylor 5, my emphasis).

⁶For instance Richard Rolle's *Meditations on the Passion* (which is one of Rolle's works, written in the vernacular).

⁷In chapter 17 the reader is told that for seven or eight years her confessor has been reading books to her, before he dies as she has foreseen.

⁸"Margery could relate to Bridget as a modern saint about whom she heard reminiscences – the only near contemporary devout woman with whose spirituality *The Book* compares Margery's and on whom it was modelled in various general aspects, and in particular instances" (Goodman 119-120).

than any chronological order (of the occurrence of these visions in her life). There is a clear association of *birth* with the *beginning* of her spiritual journey, and even with the *beginning* of *The Book*.

Furthermore these visions are preceded by a dialogue with Christ which triggers her decisive conversion to a life dedicated exclusively to God (ch. 5). Placing these images so early in *The Book* represents a way of presenting the manner of (or rather the tools for) her spiritual progress, namely dialogues with Jesus Christ (ch. 5), fasting and meditation⁹ (ch. 5), mystical visions (6-7), chastity (ch. 9) and pilgrimage (ch. 10). In many of them memory plays a crucial role, which shows that memory is not only the (apparent) instrument of writing *The Book*, but rather one of the essential elements she uses in order to fashion her mystical self.

The *Book* is not a first person narrative, but rather there is a main character “this creature”¹⁰, whose spiritual adventures (conversion, visions and pilgrimages) are written down. It is this literary device, among others, which prompted Lynn Staley to assert that this work is not an autobiography, but rather a carefully structured piece of fiction. The reader often has the impression that the *Book* attempts to present her as a saint¹¹, and as such she is portrayed as not interested in her present existence, but rather in the mystical dialogues she has with Jesus Christ and other saints, which she diligently records.

I would agree that it is not a simple autobiography and there is artful charm in the way most of the events are narrated, yet “artful charm” is an epithet used to describe Richard Rolle’s writings, too (Watson 33). So, even though *The Book* is not a plain (but rather a well-ordered) autobiography, I believe that it records authentic experiences and feelings, and the narrator wants, first and foremost, to be regarded as a mystical person, and thus she uses her memory selectively, focusing on events with mystical or otherwise symbolically religious significance. In other words, in *The Book of Margery Kempe* there is a delicate balance between, on the one hand, personal memories and style, and, on the other hand, cultural (mystical) tradition. The lack of chronological order in which her life is recorded shows a discontinuity in time and a fragmentation of her narrative, which can only be understood if the medieval perspective on time is analysed.

Time – A Complex Notion for the Pre-Modern Man

The crucial element when discussing memory and remembering is *time*; and one cannot discuss the issues of recollection, autobiography or the relationship of

⁹ Mary Carruthers associates meditation with memory, as “the meditational way provides the necessary cognitive disposition both ordering the whole and localizing it and its parts” (Carruthers 82).

¹⁰ The use of the appellative “this creature” could be a form of self-effacement, or perhaps an attempt to copy Saint Paul’s method of narrating his mystical experiences in 2 Corinthians 12: 2-4.

¹¹ Katherine J. Lewis points out that Margery “or those involved in her *Book* may not have seen canonisation as an obvious goal” since the practical process involved in a canonisation would have been expensive and lengthy and very few females were canonised in those times. Furthermore *The Book* should have been written in Latin (212).

the past with the future for a mystical writer, and indeed for any pre-modern person, unless one explains the different ways in which pre-modern and modern men perceive time. For a contemporary individual time is “homogeneous”, yet for the medieval person it was “kairotic” (the time line was discontinuous, as there were moments in time which had a greater value than others and called for reversal and others which demanded rededication) and it could be distinguished by using the term “higher time” (Taylor 54).

Charles Taylor, in his work *A Secular Age*, explains that there is a profane (or ordinary) time which comes to be characterized by using the term “secular”; and, people who are “in the saeculum” are imbedded in ordinary time, which is the case with modern society today. Alternatively there is “higher time [which] gathers and re-orders secular time” (55). That is, it works according to a different logic and creates connections between events that are not related chronologically, but are close in significance, i.e. divine significance. “...two events were linked through their immediate contiguous place in the divine plan. They are drawn close to identity in eternity, even though they are centuries [...] apart” (55). The religious meaning of a certain celebration places the (present) day, in which the celebration takes place, in direct connection with the day (in the past) when the original event, which is celebrated, took place.

One such example is presented in chapter 82, when Margery takes part in the Mass on the occasion of Purification Day (or Candlemas Day), celebrating The Presentation of Jesus at the Temple. While in Church, “hir mende was raveschyd into beholdyng of owr Lady offeryng hyr blisful sone owr Savyowr to the preyst Simeon in the tempyl”¹². Margery’s active way of remembering is in truth a re-enactment of (and even participation in) the religiously significant events from the past, which is the case with the Birth of Virgin Mary and the Nativity (chapters 6 and 7).

This general description of the way time was perceived can be further clarified when the multiple connotations of “eternity” are discussed. Firstly, the most common and oldest meaning is the philosophical understanding of eternity as “that of perfect immobility, impassivity” (Taylor 57). This rather infertile image is completed with the *ritualized* perceiving of eternity as “a time of origins” or “a Great Time” (57). It is this *ritualized* understanding of time (the second) which is the basis for the Church services celebrated during the liturgical year, when the Church “remembers and re-enacts what happened *in illo tempore* when Christ was on Earth” (Taylor 58). It is this understanding of time which triggers Margery’s biblical visions, the most poignant being that of the Passion.

But I believe that the most useful perception of eternity is the gathering of time in a moment, a moment that one can participate in by continuously seeking to be in the presence of God. This perceiving of time as “a kind of extended simultaneity” that “gathers it [time] into an instant” (57) could be called the *mystical* perception of time and I believe that it is the most common for the mystics.

¹² Her mind was ravished into beholding our Lady offering her blessed son, our Saviour, to the priest Simeon in the Temple.

Mary Carruthers also quotes a vision from the *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great (Gregory the Great *Dialogues* II. 35, 24-6). In this vision Benedict saw (while praying) “the whole world drawn up, *adductus*, before his eyes as though it were gathered up *collectus* in one ray of sun. As one’s mind enlarges, *dilatatus est*, in holy contemplation, the whole world becomes <gathered up>, *collectus*, into a single ray of intense light” (Carruthers 192). It is while feeling this delightful ecstasy, when time stands still, that the soul enjoys the happiness of Heaven. Such a moment of divine inspiration is mentioned by Margery Kempe in chapter 3, when she hears a divine melody and has the revelation that “it is ful mery in hevyn”¹³. When trying to share this revelation with her acquaintances, she fails to convey the divine inspiration, and she is not believed, but rather mocked.

Richard Rolle¹⁴ also mentions the interest the person who meditates has for eternity, when he talks about the mind focusing (unmovingly) on eternity: “the lover [of God] finds his mind, [which is] already keen, is made clean as well, and completely fixed in its overruling passion for eternity” (Rolle 165). He further connects this “intensity” of his concentration with 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). Margery is very often the privileged receiver of such a sort of “rapture” during her dialogues with Jesus Christ, when, without losing her senses, she feels the divine love and is moved to tears (and shrieks) by her devotion.

Time, in its specific import in the mystic space, lacks a clear chronological feature, and it is oriented upwards, towards the divine unmovable eternity. In order to reach this ultimate state, the believer regards the historical events in Jesus Christ’s life as reference points, not only as moments (from the past) on which to meditate, but rather as opportunities (set in motion by the ritual) to further his/her spiritual progress. Through the ritual the past merges into the present, and the believer feels that he is in the presence of Jesus Christ and/or his saints. Such a multi-layered image of time could only lead to “a multiplex vertical context” for the mundane flow of secular time (Taylor 57). The events in Christ’s life are thus a focus for meditation, the role of which is to reach God and Heaven.

So first and foremost time is the eternal present of God, the time of harmonious peace, which is still and blessed. Secondly, due to the worship, all the events related to salvation are turned into a ritual present, for all those who participate, and thus time is bent in a loop. And thirdly there is a time of revelation, condensing present and past in a moment (or period) of rapture.

¹³ It is full merry in Heaven.

¹⁴ The importance of Rolle’s work *Incendium Amoris (The Fire of Love)*, which was read to her (ch. 17 and 58), for Margery is demonstrated by the fact that she also felt the fire of love (and also other tokens of God’s special blessing), and she describes this experience in chapter 35 and mentions it again in chapter 89. The close connection between Richard Rolle’s work and Margery Kempe’s piety was noticed by Goodman as well (115).

Mystics and Their Expectations

In this part of my paper I want to show how applying Charles Taylor's theory about the pre-modern people's perception on time can clarify one of the purposes of *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Furthermore, once Richard Rolle's work is considered, as well as the connection between the two, it becomes obvious that the function of memory is not to preserve an image of an earthly past (since not even the events in Christ's life are delegated to the past), but rather to be the basis for constructing a heavenly future, in other words, to show the way towards salvation. The shift from earthly existence to a spiritual life, which actually represents the focus of a mystic's life, is crucial in understanding his/her way of using memory.

If one considers that time for Margery is not the ordinary, "secular" time, but rather the spiritual "higher time" (to use Charles Taylor's term), the obvious conclusion is that *spiritual chronology* provides the narrative principle of her *Book* and structures its organization. The first chapter is not just the story of the depression she had after giving birth to her child, but rather the moment of spiritually encountering Jesus Christ for the first time. Even if we do not witness a complete conversion, it is obvious that this episode marks the beginning of her awareness of God. As such we may associate it with the first chapter of Richard Rolle's *The Fire of Love* in which he talks about "Man's conversion to God, and matters that help or hinder his conversion". She also calls her Book a "treatise" (in prologue and chapter 89), following thus the mystical tradition.

Margery's perception of "higher kairotic time" can be better refined if we consider her ability to make more than one connection when participating in religious celebrations, and to comprehend more than just the obvious biblical association (which is actually a ritualistic perception of time, relating the present feast with the original event that took place in *illo tempore*). For instance, a wedding (in chapter 82) is for Margery an opportunity to *remember* firstly the biblical story of "how our Lady was joynyd to Joseph"¹⁵, and secondly "the gostly joynynge of manny's soule to Jhesu Crist"¹⁶.

It is perhaps the best example of the way in which the simple act of remembering acquires an imaginative dimension, proving thus Carruthers' assertion that "Meditation is a *craft* of thinking. People use it to make things, such as interpretations and ideas, as well as buildings and prayers" (Carruthers 4). Margery's thoughts are not past-oriented even though she constantly remembers Jesus Christ's life, but rather they are the result of her endeavour to combine the cultural memory (or tradition) of mysticism with her personal memory of mystical experiences in order to create dynamically a vibrant space in which God and woman can relate in harmony. The *Book* is a story of a growing relationship, which can only find fulfilment in the future. So, remembering God, as a way of life, is a future-oriented activity and an active, rather than a passive, one.

Moreover, according to Mary Carruthers the religious meaning of the concept of "memory" is as much to remember as is it to "be mindful of" and, in

¹⁵ How our Lady was joined to Joseph.

¹⁶ The spiritual joining of man's soul to Jesus Christ.

accordance with this, a certain memory can trigger the rise of feelings and emotions, which need to be canalised and which are used to *motivate* the person to act (Carruthers 66-7), so the purpose of recollection is related to the present or even the future. It is this denotation of memory that is used by Richard Rolle in passages like: “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*” (ch. 26, 123). And in another instance he writes about a person to whom God gave spiritual gifts (like “the understanding of heavenly, spiritual sounds”) “...he 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, 93-4). Consequently keeping God in his mind becomes a device that helps the contemplative focus on his task. This is the practical reason why in mystical tradition there is an emphasis on “the constant dwelling on the memory of Christ”, an endeavour which is “salvific, because it keeps the meditator from being distracted and turned to sin” (Watson 146).

Margery Kempe also says, in a famous passage, “Sir, hys deth is as fresch to me as he had deyde this same day, and so me thynkyth it awt to be to yow and to alle Cristen pepil. We awt evyr to han mende of hys kendnes and evyr thynkyn of the dolful deth that he deyde for us”¹⁷ (chapter 60). Her reaction shows once again that secular time, with its conventional chronology, has no influence on Margery, but rather she is subjected to a more complex construal of it.

Furthermore, Margery’s existence, as it has been stated repeatedly, inspired people to change their wicked ways and to repent.¹⁸ Her unusual behaviour, her words as well as her prayers (and intercessions) are instruments of bringing about salvation, a fact which is stated even at the beginning of the *Book* “For I have ordeyned the to knele before the Trynyte for to prey for al the world, for many hundryd thowsand sowlys schal be savyd be thi prayers” (ch. 7).¹⁹ I would like to stress the word “ordained” (ordeyned²⁰), which implies a ritualized position, as in ordination into priesthood. This places her in the more or less established category of people whose duty is to awaken the believers’ sensitivity to Jesus Christ and to the divine in general, and equally to pray (mediate) for them.

Conclusions

What I have attempted to do is to concentrate on the spiritual-mystic connotations of the *Book*, delegating the post-modern, elaborate and mostly feminist speculations to a secondary position. Therefore I have discussed the mystical device of focusing on the memory of God, when endeavouring to construct a mystical self. I have tried to demonstrate that Margery Kempe’s was an active remembering, and led to a transcending of the concepts of past and present, or memory and

¹⁷ Sir his death is as fresh to me as if he had died this same day, and so, I think, it ought to be to you and to all Christian people. We ought always to remember his kindness, and always think of the doleful death that he died for us.

¹⁸ One such instance is the conversion of Thomas Marchale, ch. 45

¹⁹“For I have ordained you to kneel before the Trinity to pray for the whole world, for many hundred thousand souls shall be saved by your prayers”

²⁰ It is used with reference to her in chapter 78, too.

imagination. The key to understanding her work can be found, I believe, in comparing it with the writing of another mystical writer (whom she was familiar with), namely Richard Rolle, who was (chronologically) one of the first English mystical writers.

Additionally, it has been shown that in shaping the *Book of Margery Kempe*, cultural memory (which is exemplified by all the books read to her) plays an important role, equal to, if not more important than, her personal memory. Contemplatives constantly aspired to (and readied themselves for) a mystical experience or a revelation, and this involved a constant act of remembering God (Jesus Christ's life, His teachings, or His very name – in the Jesus' prayer). Such a practice apparently generated a past-oriented life and a withdrawal from society. On the other hand, their expectations regarding their (and others') salvation show that they (especially Margery Kempe) were actively involved in the present lives of their fellow Christians and that their concerns were future-oriented, particularly with reference to their spiritual future (i.e. heavenly existence).

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