HEKHAL · READER'S EDITION

A Book of Contemplacioun the whiche is clepid the Clowde of Unknowyng

The Cloud of Unknowing

A Book of Contemplation Called the Cloud of Unknowing

Evelyn Underhill (1922)

PUBLIC-DOMAIN TRANSLATION

Edition of 2026-08-13 · hekhal.org

About this edition

Middle English original is unimpeachably public domain. The reader spreads use Hekhal Editorial summaries paraphrased from Evelyn Underhill's 1922 modernized edition (John M. Watkins, London), which is itself in the public domain. Hodgson's 1944 EETS critical edition is the scholarly standard for Middle English text and is recommended for serious study. Verified Middle English incipits are reproduced from the Harley 674 manuscript transmission as commonly cited in the scholarship.

TRADITION	christian-mysticism
LANGUAGE	Middle English
PERIOD	late 14th century · East Midlands, England
ATTRIBUTION	Anonymous; possibly a Carthusian or solitary priest writing for a young contemplative
TRANSLATION	Evelyn Underhill (1922)
LICENCE	Public domain
ONLINE	https://hekhal.org/texts/cloud-of-unknowing/

> **Cite this edition:** Evelyn Underhill, trans. "The Cloud of Unknowing." Hekhal reader's edition, 2026-08-13. https://hekhal.org/texts/cloud-of-unknowing/

The *Cloud of Unknowing* is among the strangest, most demanding, and most precisely written documents in the English mystical tradition. Composed in the latter half of the fourteenth century by an anonymous priest or monk in the East Midlands, the work survives in seventeen manuscripts and is, in the specific sense its author intends, a **practical manual**, not a speculative theology but a set of instructions for a particular kind of interior act, executable in principle by a person sitting quietly in a room.

The instruction is this: take everything you know, everything you feel, everything you can think or imagine, including everything you know and feel and think about God, and place it beneath you in what the author calls a **cloud of forgetting**. Then direct the whole naked force of your will toward what lies above, which is not an object and cannot be thought, only approached through what the author calls a *blind stirring of love*. Between you and what lies above is a **cloud of unknowing** that cannot be penetrated by the intellect, only pressed against by this movement of will. *Press against it. Do not stop pressing.* That is the instruction.

The lineage is direct and documented. The *Cloud*'s author translated Pseudo-Dionysius's *Mystical Theology* into Middle English, and that translation survives alongside the *Cloud* in the manuscripts. The *Cloud* is the Dionysian apophatic theology operationalized, given as instruction, as phenomenology, as something the reader is meant to *do* rather than to think about.

CROSS-REFERENCES

- Mystical Theology, the direct Dionysian source the *Cloud*'s author translated himself.
- The Interior Castle, shared apophatic inheritance, different register; Teresa's experiential phenomenology beside the *Cloud*'s practical instruction.
- Risala al-Ahadiyya, the apophatic triangle: the limit of predication in English vernacular and Arabic metaphysical prose within a century of each other.
- Apophasis (ἀπόφασις), the negative-theological method made portable.

Hekhal Editorial summary. The English passages on this page are Hekhal Editorial section summaries presented alongside the verbatim original-language text. They are not a verbatim translation; verbatim PD reproduction in passage-aligned form is pending. The original-language text is unimpeachably public-domain.

The Cloud of Unknowing

A BOOK OF CONTEMPLATION

CANONICAL

MIDDLE ENGLISH · C. 1370 · EAST MIDLANDS

CHAPTERS I-VII · THE BASIC INSTRUCTION

Underhill 1922, paraphrased by Hekhal Editorial. PD reproduction

THE CLOWDE · CAPITULA I-VII

Heere bigynneþ a book of contemplacioun, þe whiche is clepid þe Clowde of Vnknowyng,

of verified passages flagged with quotation marks.

I The author addresses a young contemplative who has been called to this work. The opening chapters restrict the readership directly: the *Cloud* is not for everyone. The contemplative form of life it presupposes is not superior to other forms but is simply different, calling for different work. The reader who has not been called is asked, with seriousness, to put the book down.

II-IV The four degrees of Christian living: ordinary, special, singular, perfect. The *Cloud* addresses the singular and perfect degrees, which are the contemplative life proper. The author distinguishes the active life (which works upon the things of the world) from the contemplative (which works upon God directly), and is precise that both are good and that the choice between them is a

in þe whiche a soule is onyd wiþ God.

“Here beginneth a book of contemplation, which is called the Cloud of Unknowing, in which a soul is oned with God.”

◆ ◆

Lift up þin herte vnto God
wiþ a meek steryng of loue.

“Lift up thine heart unto God with meek stirring of love.”: the basic instruction

◆ ◆

þe cloude of vnknowyng · þe cloud of foryetyng

the cloud of unknowing above · the cloud of forgetting beneath

Middle English from Harley 674
transmission · public domain

vocational matter, not a hierarchy of merit.

V-VII The basic instruction is given. *Lift up thine heart unto God with a meek stirring of love.* Mean Himself, and none of His goods. Do not think on Him through any quality or attribute; think on Him as He is. Whatever you can think on Him is not He, but only one of His works. Place all this thinking, all these qualities, all His works, beneath you in a cloud of forgetting. Above you is the cloud of unknowing. Press into it.

1

2

CHAPTERS VIII-XXVI · THE CLOUD METAPHYSICS

THE CLOWDE · CAPITULA VIII-XXVI

Section summary by Hekhal Editorial.

VIII-XII The structure of the work is now developed. God cannot be

Smyte apon þat þicke clowde of vnknowyng wiþ a scharp darte of longing loue.

known by the intellect. This is not a limitation of *this* intellect that a better one could overcome. It is a structural fact about the relation between the created mind and the uncreated reality it is approaching. The intellect's tools are concepts and images; God exceeds these not by being too large for them but by being ontologically prior to the categories within which they operate.

XIII-XX The cloud of forgetting receives sustained attention. The author is not hostile to the meditative methods of his day: imagination, memory, affective devotion to the sacred humanity of Christ. For the contemplative the *Cloud* addresses, every image, including the most sacred, must be placed in the cloud of forgetting. Not because they are not holy. Because at this level of approach they are still *things*, still objects of a mind that is organizing and attending and constructing. The cloud of

"Smite upon that thick cloud of unknowing with a sharp dart of longing love."

◆ ◆

a nakid entent vnto God

"a naked intent unto God"

◆ ◆

a blynd steryng of loue

"a blind stirring of love"

◆ ◆

will, not intellect

4

forgetting is the condition for the cloud of unknowing to be approached at all.

XXI-XXVI The dart of longing love. The will, not the intellect, is the contemplative faculty. The author calls it a *blind stirring of love* and a *naked intent unto God*. He gives the famous instruction: “smite upon that thick cloud of unknowing with a sharp dart of longing love.” The intellect cannot pass the cloud. The will can press against it. This pressing is the contemplative act.

3

CHAPTERS XXVII-LIV · PRACTICE REFINED, FALSE CONTEMPLATION

Section summary by Hekhal Editorial.

XXVII-XXXIV Refinement of the practice. The author treats the

THE CLOWDE · CAPITULA XXVII LIV

a litel worde of o silable

“a little word of one syllable”

◆ ◆

natural difficulties: the wandering mind, the resistance of formed habits, the temptation to give up, the temptation to strain too hard and produce a false intensity that is not the genuine work. He gives practical counsel: use a single short word, *God*, or *love*, or *sin*, to gather the will when it scatters. Do not analyze the word. Press it against the cloud.

XXXV-XLIV The trials and counterfeits. The *Cloud* is precise about what false contemplation looks like. Some readers, drawn to the work for the wrong reasons, will produce in themselves a heated imagination, a sensory consolation that they mistake for genuine union. The author identifies these states with a phenomenological exactness that has kept the *Cloud* on contemporary reading lists in psychology and psychiatry of religious experience. The criteria for distinguishing the genuine from the counterfeit are moral-psychological:

God · loue · synne

the gathering syllables

◆ ◆

false contemplation

heated imagination · sensory consolation · vanity · agitation

↕

true contemplation

humility · charity · coolness

6

the genuine leaves humility, charity, and a certain coolness; the counterfeit leaves vanity and agitation.

XLV-LIV The discipline of the body, the role of the confessor, the place of vocal prayer for the contemplative, the difference between the active life and the contemplative life revisited at greater depth. The author returns repeatedly to the central instruction. The reader is not being given a doctrine. The reader is being trained.

5

CHAPTERS LV-LXXV · WILL, SPARK, THE CLOSING

THE CLOWDE · CAPITULA LV-LXXV

Section summary by Hekhal Editorial.

LV-LXII The will receives its fullest treatment. The author distinguishes the will from affection and from intellect, identifying it as the soul's

þe sparcle of þe soule

"the spark of the soul"

◆ ◆

Mynde · Reson · Wille

deepest faculty and the organ of contemplative approach. The will is the *spark of the soul* (a phrase that links the *Cloud* to the German speculative tradition of Eckhart and Tauler, the *Seelenfunklein*): the point at which the soul touches what exceeds it.

LXIII-LXIX The faculties revisited within a Dionysian psychology. Memory, reason, will. Imagination and sensuality below. The contemplative work disciplines the lower faculties not to annihilate them but to free the higher ones for the pressing-against that is their proper act.

LXX-LXXV The closing chapters return to the basic instruction with the authority of a teacher who has finished what he set out to say. The reader is to keep at it. The author closes with characteristic restraint: he will not describe what lies beyond the cloud. To describe it would be a

memory · reason · will: the higher faculties

◆ ◆

Smyte apon þat clowde.
And cese þou neuer.

“Smite upon that cloud. And cease thou never.”

8

betrayal of the instruction. *Press against it. Do not stop pressing.* That is all.

7

APPARATUS · THE APOPHATIC CHAIN

The Dionysian inheritance traced.

Pseudo-Dionysius · c. 500 CE · Greek

The *Mystical Theology* argues that God transcends all predication, that the soul's ascent moves through progressive *unsaying* into a darkness of divine excess. Five short chapters. Speculative theology in apophatic register.

The Cloud · c. 1370 · Middle English

The author of the *Cloud* translated the *Mystical Theology* into Middle English himself. That translation

500 CE → 1370 → 1577

Greek · speculative

Mystical Theology

Pseudo-Dionysius · c. 500 CE

↓

Middle English · practical

The Cloud of Unknowing

Anonymous · c. 1370

↓

Spanish · phenomenological

survives alongside the *Cloud* in the manuscripts. The *Cloud* is the Dionysian apophatic theology *operationalized*: given as instruction, as phenomenology, as something the reader is meant to *do*.

The Carmelites · 1577 · Castilian Spanish

Two centuries later, John of the Cross will make a structurally identical argument in the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*: the *active night of sense* parallels the cloud of forgetting; the *active night of spirit* parallels the cloud of unknowing. Teresa's *Interior Castle* receives the same Dionysian inheritance in a different register: the sixth dwelling place's discernment criteria are an implicit response to the apophatic tradition's silence about phenomenology.

Three documents, three languages, three centuries. The same apophatic argument expressed at different

The Interior Castle

Teresa of Ávila · 1577

One inheritance · three temperature

10

temperatures. Speculative · practical · phenomenological.

9

▽

An orientation

Sometime in the latter half of the fourteenth century, in the East Midlands of England, a priest or monk, we do not know which, we do not know his name, we will not know it, wrote a letter to a young contemplative he was directing. The letter became a book, or the book was always more than a letter, and it survives in seventeen manuscripts under a title its author may not have given it. The *Cloud of Unknowing* is among the strangest, most demanding, and most precisely

written documents in the English mystical tradition. It is also, in the specific sense the author intends, a practical manual: not a speculative theology but a set of instructions for a particular kind of interior act that the author believes is available to anyone called to it, executable in principle by a person sitting quietly in a room, and more radical in its implications than almost anything else written in its century.

The instruction is this: take everything you know, everything you feel, everything you can think or imagine, including everything you know and feel and think about God, and place it beneath you in what the author calls a cloud of forgetting. Then direct the whole naked force of your will toward what lies above you, which is not an object and cannot be thought and cannot be imagined and can only be approached through a movement the author calls blind stirring of love. Between you and what lies above is a cloud of unknowing that cannot be penetrated by the intellect, only pressed against by this movement of will. Press against it. Do not stop pressing. That is the instruction.

The tradition from which this emerges is identifiable with considerable precision even though the author's name is not. The *Cloud* is a vernacular English translation, not

linguistically but spiritually, of the apophatic theology Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite wrote in Greek around 500 CE and which shaped the contemplative inheritance of both Eastern and Western Christianity for a millennium before this anonymous English author absorbed it and gave it back in a language a young person without Latin could follow. The *Mystical Theology* of Dionysius, five short chapters arguing that God transcends all predication, that the soul's ascent moves through progressive unknowing into a darkness of divine excess, is the direct ancestor of the *Cloud*. The author knew this. He translated Dionysius's *Mystical Theology* himself, and that translation survives alongside the *Cloud* in the manuscripts. He was not borrowing from Dionysius unconsciously. He was working a deliberate inheritance with the confidence of someone who has verified it by experience and is now teaching it.

What the *Cloud* does to its Dionysian source is not simplify it. It operationalizes it. Dionysius writes as a theologian arguing a position about the nature of divine transcendence. The *Cloud*'s author writes as a director giving instructions to someone who needs to do something specific with their body and attention in a room. The shift from speculative to

practical is not a loss of rigor: the *Cloud* is as rigorous as Dionysius, and considerably more specific about the phenomenology of what actually happens when the instruction is followed. What does it feel like to press against the cloud? What failures will occur? What false illuminations will present themselves as the real thing? What is the difference between the authentic stirring of love and its counterfeits? The *Cloud* addresses all of this with the precision of a document written by someone who is describing actual interior territory, not constructing a theological argument.

The young person the author is addressing is significant. The *Cloud* is not addressed to a general audience. Its opening chapters explicitly restrict it, not everyone is called to this, the author says, and the contemplative form of life it presupposes is not superior to other forms but is simply different, calling for different work. This restriction is not elitism in the ordinary sense. It is the author's way of saying that what the *Cloud* describes is a specific vocation with specific conditions, and that reading it out of curiosity or as spiritual entertainment is a misuse that can cause harm. The directness of this warning, the author tells the reader who has

not been called to put the book down and not read further: is itself a signal of the seriousness with which the text understands its own stakes.

The central concept, the cloud of unknowing, operates on a logic the author is quite precise about. God cannot be known by the intellect. This is not a limitation of this particular intellect that a better or more trained intellect could overcome: it is a structural fact about the relationship between the created mind and the uncreated reality it is trying to approach. The intellect's tools are concepts, images, analyses, arguments. God exceeds all of these not by being too large for them but by being ontologically prior to the categories they operate within. The cloud is not a barrier that the right technique could dissolve. It is the phenomenological experience of pressing the intellect against its own limit and discovering that the movement which can continue past that limit is not intellectual at all but something the author calls will, or love, meaning by these words not emotional states but the soul's fundamental orientation and capacity for self-giving.

The cloud of forgetting below, the instruction to place everything known and felt beneath conscious attention, is as

important as the cloud of unknowing above, and the author gives it careful attention. The spiritual literature of his period is full of methods for using imagination, memory, and affective meditation as pathways toward God, the Ignatian method, later, will develop this into a precise system, and the Franciscan meditative tradition the *Cloud*'s author would have known did something similar. The *Cloud* is not hostile to these methods for those to whom they are appropriate. But for the person called to the work the *Cloud* describes, every image, including the most sacred images, the humanity of Christ, the sorrows of Mary, the details of the Passion: must be placed beneath. Not because these things are not holy but because at this level of approach they are still things, still objects of a mind that is organizing and attending and constructing. The cloud of forgetting is the condition for the cloud of unknowing to be approached at all.

This is the position that has made the *Cloud* simultaneously central and controversial in the Christian contemplative tradition. The instruction to set aside even the humanity of Christ in contemplative prayer looks, to a certain reading, like a bypassing of the Incarnation, the central Christian theological commitment that God became human precisely

so that the human could encounter God through the human. The author addresses this objection directly and with some impatience: there is a time for meditative engagement with the sacred humanity, and there is a time for what the *Cloud* describes, and confusing them is the error. The tradition that follows, John of the Cross will make a structurally identical argument two centuries later in the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, and the parallel is not incidental: has consistently upheld this distinction while acknowledging that it remains a site of genuine theological tension.

The *Cloud* belongs to a remarkable flowering of vernacular mystical writing in fourteenth-century England that includes Richard Rolle, Walter Hilton, and Julian of Norwich: four writers, roughly contemporaneous, working in the same language and producing documents of extraordinary diversity and depth. The *Cloud*'s author almost certainly knew Hilton's *Scale of Perfection*, and the relationship between the two works is one of the interesting scholarly questions the tradition has not fully resolved. What distinguishes the *Cloud* within this company is its philosophical precision and its absolute refusal of consolation. Rolle's mysticism is warm, sensory, full of felt

experience. Julian's is visionary, rooted in the specificity of her revelations, ultimately consolatory. The *Cloud* offers none of this. It offers an act and a cloud. What lies beyond the cloud it will not say, because saying it would be a betrayal of the instruction it is giving. Press against it. Do not stop. That is all.

The text's afterlife runs in two directions that rarely meet. In the scholarly tradition it is a document of late medieval English spirituality and Dionysian reception, studied for what it reveals about the intellectual and spiritual culture of fourteenth-century England. In the living contemplative tradition it is still used as a practical manual by people who are attempting the act it describes. Both of these readings are fully legitimate. The *Cloud* is unusual in the corpus of Western mystical literature in that its instruction is sufficiently precise and sufficiently stripped of cultural specificity that it can be followed, or attempted, without the full theological scaffolding of medieval English Catholicism. Whether this portability is a feature of the method itself or an artifact of the text's unusual combination of brevity and precision is one of the questions its contemporary reception leaves genuinely open. The author, characteristically, would

probably say it does not matter. Press against the cloud. Do not stop.

The *Cloud of Unknowing*'s commentary tradition is unusual: the same anonymous author wrote a body of companion treatises (*The Book of Privy Counselling*, *The Epistle of Discretion in the Stirrings of the Soul*, *The Epistle of Prayer*, *Hid Divinity*: the Middle English translation of the Dionysian *Mystical Theology*) that constitute a self-commentary unprecedented in the medieval English contemplative tradition. The author's other works clarify, defend, and extend the *Cloud*'s argument against the inevitable misreadings.

The standard scholarly Middle English edition is **Phyllis Hodgson**'s *The Cloud of Unknowing and Related Treatises* (Early English Text Society, 1944, revised editions through 1982). The reference modern English translation is **James Walsh**'s 1981 Paulist Press edition (under copyright). Hekhal hosts the public-domain **Evelyn Underhill** 1922 translation alongside the Middle English, with the author's other treatises pending. **William Johnston**'s *The Mysticism of the Cloud of Unknowing* (1967) remains the standard scholarly orientation; **Bernard McGinn**'s treatment in *The Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism* (2012) places the text in the late-medieval English vernacular tradition.

Colophon

The Cloud of Unknowing. Hekhal reader's edition of 2026-08-13. Generated from the living edition at https://hekhal.org/texts/cloud-of-unknowing/; the online text may since have been corrected. The English rendering and apparatus are released under the licence stated above (Public domain); you may copy, share and adapt them with attribution to Hekhal and a link to the online edition, under the same licence.

Hekhal is an open, sourced reference to the world's mystical traditions. New texts, maps and lexicon entries: hekhal.org. To fund the translation of a text that has none in English, see hekhal.org/sponsor.

© 2026 Hekhal · hekhal.org