

2. “Strange in His Ways, Strange in His Words”: Eccentricity, Eremitism, and Autobiography in
the Works of Richard Rolle

By Timothy Glover

Abstract: From the earliest nineteenth-century studies to even the most recent scholarship, Richard Rolle has persistently been treated as an eccentric figure, reflected in his decision to flee society and live as a hermit, as well as his promotion of an idiosyncratic understanding of mystical rapture. Such a view of Rolle has been supported by an autobiographical approach to certain passages in his writings, when the hermit cantankerously defends himself against his critics, or when he offers his own acerbic attacks on those whom he considers feigned lovers of God. This essay presents an alternative to the longstanding view of this material as more revelatory of the “real” Rolle, arguing instead that the eccentric persona developed in such passages was one of the hallmarks of eremitic sanctity in the later Middle Ages, an indication of outsider status that was itself, perhaps counterintuitively, wholly conventional. Drawing on various vitae of hermit-saints, including some that seem to have been known to Rolle himself, the author argues for an approach to Rollean idiosyncrasy as itself a self-consciously conventionalized voice, one that served, among other things, to shore up the hermit’s authority and to demonstrate his place in a tradition of eremitic sanctity.

An early manuscript collection of Richard Rolle’s works depicts the hermit as something of a wild man, with bare feet and shaggy, unkempt hair—a startling contrast to the clean-shaven, tonsured figure kneeling before him (Fig. 1). This vision of Rolle calls to mind the liturgical Office prepared for his canonization, and perhaps most famously its story of Rolle piecing together an improvised habit from his sister’s frock and his father’s rain-hood.¹ The ideas

conveyed in these sources—visual and textual alike—find support in Rolle’s own writings, in his portrayal of himself as an isolated and embattled solitary, and especially in the emotional, defensive, self-aggrandizing voice he uses to refute criticism of his eremitic lifestyle. All of this gives the impression of an idiosyncratic individual, someone at odds with those around him, and, since these accounts are both self-declaredly out of the ordinary and not altogether flattering, it is tempting to take them as at least somewhat reliable. Indeed, a long tradition of scholarship on the hermit has generally characterized Rolle as eccentric, in his life and in his writings—a notion captured over a century ago in Carl Horstmann’s phrase: “A strange man: strange in his ways, strange in his words.”²

And yet, while Rolle’s self-presentation and reception are undeniably eccentric, they should also be understood as largely conventional. Rolle was part of a longstanding tradition of hermits for whom sanctity meant a strident rejection of the world, and who thus offered a provocative critique of the misplaced priorities of their contemporaries. Although their isolation and the nonconformity of their manner of life set hermits apart from society—making them quite literally *ex-centric*—they also, at the same time, followed a model of sanctity with ancient roots, one which was prized by the same society the hermits sought to reject.³ Eremitism was understood as simultaneously exceptional and exemplary, situated on the margins and recognized as an ideal of perfect living.⁴ Accordingly, the depiction (including the self-depiction) of Rolle as personally idiosyncratic can be seen to reflect a widespread understanding of hermits as detached from worldly ways of life. Indeed, it follows an established hagiographic trope, according to which the sanctity of hermits was conveyed through their personal eccentricity. Likewise, the aggressive tone with which Rolle attacks his detractors reflects, at least in part, a common

understanding of eremitic life as offering a provocative challenge to, and critique of, the world around the hermit.⁵

The interpretation of Rolle himself as personally idiosyncratic is predicated on the idea that certain passages from his writings transparently convey the distinctive voice and personality of the historical individual—that, as Horstman suggests, Rolle’s strange “words” reflect his strange “ways.” The privileging of these passages as witnesses to the “real” Rolle is perhaps seen most clearly in Nicholas Watson’s magisterial study. Watson treats the hermit’s aggressive voice as expressing Rolle’s true feelings and motivations, while other passages are understood as mere self-fashioning, or even as a “cover” or “shelter” for these more authentic expressions of himself.⁶ This essay aims to challenge such ways of reading the hermit’s work, and it does so by approaching Rolle’s seeming eccentricity as shaped by an understanding of traditional eremitism, designed to demonstrate his exemplary detachment from, and rejection of, the world around him. To be sure, interpreting Rolle’s written voice as conventional in these terms should not imply that it is lacking in distinctive or unusual features—his writing can still be strange—but it does require us to read that strangeness within, and as contributing to, a longstanding approach to eremitic life. (And, of course, to read Rolle as *not* idiosyncratic would be simply to replace one biographically-driven reading with another.) Rather, the ways of reading pursued here invite us to see Rolle’s aggressive voice not as an interior monologue given expression on the page, but as one of many conventionalized forms of language which the author adopts throughout his writings, a corpus which jumps constantly among different genres and registers.

By taking up the issue of Rolle’s autobiographical writing, this essay addresses questions of interpretation and intellectual history with relevance beyond the Hermit of Hampole. In a recent monograph, for example, Sebastian Sobceki argues that there is no basis for thinking that

medieval authors routinely created narrators as coherent characters independent from themselves, and that in most cases the speaking voice of the medieval text should, by default, be identified with the author.⁷ Sobecki's arguments offer a useful critique of a scholarly tendency to characterize narrators as *personae* distinct from their author—an approach which may reflect a hermeneutics of skepticism supported by modern literary-theoretical discussions of intentionality, rather than (as Sobecki points out) an understanding necessarily held by medieval authors.⁸ My point is not to suggest that Rolle would have conceived of the eremitic voice he uses as a character or *persona* wholly distinct from himself. Indeed, Rolle's self-portrayal as a traditionally eccentric hermit only makes sense as a self-authorizing gesture if the speaker *is*, at least in some way, identified with Rolle, and his texts invite us to equate the speaker with the historical individual—they profess to be autobiographical, and in some cases are epistolary, and hence anticipate a reader, at least in the first instance, who probably knew Rolle personally.⁹ Still, this authorial voice is mediated by its accretion of different registers, genres, and conventionalized language and tropes, adopted to suit the hermit's purposes, and (as we will see) often motivated by didactic rather than self-expressive aims. Rolle is particularly attentive to the ways in which his voice can be shaped using conventional precedents and deployed to instruct his readers, offering them a model voice to ventriloquize themselves, even as this voice is still, on some level, identified with the hermit. His aggressive, provocative, seemingly eccentric voice can be understood as just one posture among many which Rolle adopts. Ultimately, then, by challenging the conflation of Rolle's potential personal idiosyncrasies with the cultivated eccentricity of his writings, this approach invites us to see a more multi-faceted, disjunctive, and strategic Rollean textual voice than has generally been appreciated.

The English tradition of hermit hagiographies offers many precedents for Rolle, texts in which hagiographers depict their subjects as personally eccentric in order to highlight their sanctity. Such episodes, focused on everyday details of social interaction, clothing, and hygiene, serve as micronarratives of the hermit's exemplary flight from the world. In the Cistercian abbot John of Ford's *vita* of Wulfric of Haselbury (d. 1155, written c. 1185), for example, the hermit is said to abscond mid-conversation from those seeking spiritual guidance, while the anonymous account of the hermit Robert of Knaresborough (d. 1218) relates that its subject refused to rise when King John came seeking counsel.¹⁰ In both cases, the hagiographer draws attention to the fact that this behavior is abnormal and offensive: Wulfric's abruptness "inhumanior forte carnalibus uisus est" [perhaps seemed crueler to the carnal], while a bystander says that Robert "insani capitis est" [is of an insane mind].¹¹ Still, in both cases, the hagiographer goes on to indicate that the saints' actions are exemplary. John of Ford writes that "reuocabat internus odor, et . . . sacra et secreta uoluptas . . . trahebat" [an internal fragrance was calling him back, and sacred and secret desire was drawing him], portraying Wulfric as motivated by his access to hidden spiritual secrets.¹² Likewise, Robert's hagiographer acclaims him and introduces the whole anecdote as evidence that he "pro nichilo celestium respectu reputabat secularia cuncta" [reputed all worldly things as nothing in respect to heavenly things].¹³ The saints' abnormal (even antisocial) behavior thus reflects their eremitic separation from the world, illustrating their sanctity.

Another version of this trope appears in the eccentric clothing and hygiene of Cuthbert (d. 687; *vita* written c. 721) and Bartholomew (d. 1193; *vita* written by 1213), the latter a monk of Durham who took up Cuthbert's hermitage on Inner Farne.¹⁴ Following the ancient precedent of John the Baptist (see Matt. 3.4), the hermit's adoption of distinctive clothing reflects a

lifestyle of asceticism and poverty. Episodes in the *vitae* of Cuthbert and Bartholomew depict their clothing choices as particularly idiosyncratic. Bede tells us that visiting monks would compel Cuthbert to remove his shoes to wash his feet, since he would sometimes wear the same shoes for months on end, while Bartholomew did not wash his cloak until it was black from sweat.¹⁵ As in the examples of Wulfric and Robert, the hagiographers first acknowledge that this behavior is abnormal—here by noting the monks’ reactions to Cuthbert, or that someone “argueret” [might blame] Bartholomew—and they then offer a spiritual justification, showing how this seeming eccentricity bespeaks their subject’s sanctity.¹⁶ Bede writes that Cuthbert “in tantum a cultu sui corporis animum sustulerat, atque ad animae solius cultum contulerat” [had withdrawn his mind so far from the care of his body and fixed it on the care of his soul alone], while Bartholomew’s reported words similarly highlight his privileging of the needs of the soul over the body: “Omnia turpia his corporibus inferre debemus, si ea ad perfectum animae candorem perducere uolumus” [We ought to inflict everything filthy on these bodies, if we want to lead them to the perfect whiteness of the soul].¹⁷ Again, both examples show the saints preoccupied with the spiritual at the expense of the bodily, demonstrating the separation from worldly concerns at the heart of eremitic sanctity.¹⁸

As the major source on Rolle’s life, the Office has been crucial to understandings of the hermit, but when positioned within this hagiographic tradition, the eccentricity it depicts seems utterly conventional. The Office belabors Rolle’s eccentricity. His erratic behavior is immediately on display in the famous anecdote of Rolle’s first eremitic flight, where we see the same formula as in the prior hagiographies. The narrator registers his subject’s abnormality by depicting his stunned [*stupefacta*] sister, who shouts, “Frater meus insanit!” [My brother has gone mad!], and this narrative is then glossed as exemplary: “Sanctus fugit ad solitudinem: /

intrat ibi celestem ordinem” [The saint flees into solitude: there he enters the celestial order].¹⁹ Later Lessons provide further examples. Like Wulfric and Robert, Rolle is silent at dinner and rises to leave immediately after, prompting his host, John Dalton, to explain that “hoc non esse consuetudinis” [this was not the custom]—and the text describes this resistance to social norms as *perfectus*.²⁰ Again, as with Cuthbert and Bartholomew’s enlightened disregard for the state of their clothing as a mere temporal concern, Rolle’s cloak is removed from his back, mended, and replaced without him noticing, an act presented as evidence of his extraordinary—and, one might add, conventionally eremitic—detachment from the world.²¹

Like the compilers of the Office, Rolle himself seems to have been familiar with the tropes repeated throughout these earlier eremitic *vitae*, raising the possibility that sources of this kind influenced his self-portrayal. This point comes out most clearly in the apology for his eremitic life in *Incendium Amoris* 13–14, where Rolle frames his own practice as participating in a tradition that includes saintly predecessors. In addition to citing John the Baptist, “princeps heremitarum” [the prince of hermits], he quickly summarizes the lives of two more proximate predecessors, Cuthbert and, more oddly, the Breton saint Maglorius (d. 575).²² Rolle selects this pair to support his broader point that solitary life is superior to ecclesiastical preferment, offering them as examples of saints who gave up episcopal office for solitude.²³ In fact, he seems to be mistaken: Bede reports that Cuthbert gave up his life as a hermit in order to be a bishop (though he did return to the solitude of Farne at the very end of his life), while Rolle’s account of Maglorius fails to mention that the saint went on to found a monastery. Still, his discussion suggests at least some familiarity with the hagiographies of these saints, perhaps recalled from memory, and his ability to pick out a specific subset of holy hermits—those that gave up episcopal positions—could indicate that he knew of more beyond his chosen examples.²⁴

The conventions of this hagiographic tradition are reflected, throughout Rolle's texts, in his insistence that the life of a hermit necessarily leads him to be seen as a social outsider, misunderstood and rejected. The first chapter of his *De amore Dei contra amatores mundi*, for example, describes a solitary contemplative, "raptus a terrenis" [seized from worldly things], whom in turn the lovers of the world will think "insanit" [is mad], and who will live "inter irrisores et scandala, inter reprehensiones et odia" [amid mockers and offensive behavior, amid criticisms and hatred].²⁵ In several places, Rolle says that contemplatives who abandon the world will be considered foolish ["*stultus*"] by the worldly,²⁶ while, more substantially, in *Melos amoris* he claims that "solitarii . . . despecti ducuntur; in omnium obprobrium iam abierunt" [solitaries are considered despised; they have now departed in the reproach of all], and that the solitary is "contemptus a cunctis" [despised by all].²⁷ To be sure, such passages could be read, in a more familiar mode, as examples of Rolle generalizing from his own experiences of rejection, but his portrait of the embattled saint here also corresponds with the ubiquitous, commonplace medieval association of saintliness and persecution.²⁸ The claim that solitaries were particularly vulnerable to rejection and opprobrium reflects their separation from society, placing them at odds with the worldly, and—approached from this direction—such conventions offer an obvious motive for Rolle to emphasize his isolated and embattled position.

In certain cases, Rolle's depiction of his eremitic life even seems to touch on some of the specific tropes identified above. Admittedly, these analogues are not extensive enough to support his immediate access to any specific *vitae*, but they do suggest an eremitic vocation expressed through behavior marked, tropically, as abnormal. In *Incendium*, for example, Rolle recounts his initial refusal to share his spiritual experiences with his critics, since they do not know his spiritual secrets, and he connects this seemingly antisocial interaction with his claims to

particular absorption in spiritual life.²⁹ Earlier in the same text, he describes how the hermit will receive eternal glory “pro despectis pannis” [in exchange for his despised clothes] and “uilibus uestibus” [vile clothes]—and here *vilis* may refer to poverty or physical repulsiveness.³⁰ Again, the hermit’s apparel metonymically represents his impoverished, ascetic lifestyle, and Rolle’s suggestion that hermits are marked as different by their clothing demonstrates the importance for eremitic identity of a deliberate and visible separation from worldly ways of living.

It is similarly in light of this conventionalized outsider status of the hermit that I would propose we read Rolle’s often acerbic responses to inscribed critics—a writerly voice adopted to underscore his separation from the world and thus to demonstrate his position as a saintly hermit. In part, this aggressiveness also surely reflects the hyperbole common to the broader *contemptus mundi* tradition in which Rolle wrote, one similarly predicated on the stark rejection of worldliness. (It seems notable that scholars of *contemptus mundi* texts have often found their rhetoric offensive, in parallel with the reception of Rolle.)³¹ Consider, for example, Chapter 47 of *Melos*, where Rolle takes on Anselm of Canterbury’s claim that contemplative life is limited to the cloister. (This passage and its source are discussed further by Andrew Kraebel, below.) Here the hermit is at his most overtly aggressive, signaling his pointed critique of this great spiritual *auctor* with a series of contrastive juxtapositions: “Ecce enim iuuenis zelo iusticie armatus insurgit contra senem, heremita contra episcopum, et contra omnes taliter opinantes” [For behold, the youth armed with the zeal of righteousness rises up against the old man, hermit against bishop, and against all thinking similarly].³² Throughout the passage, Rolle repeatedly emphasizes eremitic separateness from the world. He responds to Anselm by stressing the exceptionality of solitaries, writing dismissively that his opponent “in monte non stetit qui esset superior ut ualeret discernere qui ardenciores existunt” [did not stand on a high enough mountain

to be able to discern who was more ardent], and he then extends this point to say, more generally, that non-contemplatives “nostrum nesciunt gaudium” [do not know our joy].³³ Rolle argues that those who are not solitaries cannot access their lofty spiritual insights, and he supports this claim by describing how solitaries eschew earthly music (which for Rolle includes ecclesiastical music) in favor of inner, spiritual music, using verbs of fleeing and separation: *fugiunt, transvolamus, cupimus segregari, fugimus*.³⁴ Such language clearly recalls the eremitic flight from the world which is foundational to Rolle’s conception of contemplative life. Indeed, it is surely noteworthy that this aggressive voice seems *only* to appear when eremitic life is at stake—compare, for instance, the moderate, penitent tone adopted when Rolle discusses being reproached by the women in *Incendium* 12—a collocation that suggests that his rhetorical mode is shaped by this foundational polarity.

There is, further, a clear sense of performativity in *Melos* 47, suggesting that Rolle’s divisiveness represents a posture deliberately assumed for the sake of readers, rather than straightforward self-expression. Note, for example, the overt call for his readers to pay attention in the passage quoted above: “Ecce!” A similarly dramatic demand for the reader’s attention appears two chapters earlier in *Melos*, as Rolle imagines a fictitious dialogue between himself and another speaker, beginning with a pointed “Eya” [Hey!].³⁵ Such details suggest that, Rolle’s actual personality notwithstanding, the voice we encounter here is adopted, performatively, for rhetorical ends, an assertive display of eremitic separation from the world.

The rhetorical cultivation of Rolle’s first-person response to Anselm in *Melos* 47, is reinforced when considered as part of the hermit’s didactic purpose in this text, and in this section in particular. *Melos* 47, begins as a postil on Ps. 54.8, “Ecce, elongavi fugiens, et mansi in solitudine” [Behold, fleeing I have withdrawn, and I have remained in solitude], with this

initial psalmic *Ecce* already indicating that Rolle's own voice echoes and is modeled on that of the biblical author, and is thus in some sense expository.³⁶ E. J. F. Arnould's account of this chapter draws attention to its scholastic style of argumentation, indicating that Rolle has didactic intentions in mind.³⁷ In the course of his discussion, the hermit makes this overarching purpose clear, saying that he wrote this book "ut, dum legitur, presumentes et superbientes confundantur, qui alciora frustra arguunt iam se arripuisse" [so that, when it is read, the presumptuous and proud might be confounded, those who vainly argue that they have already reached higher things].³⁸ His condemnatory language thus presents a particular approach to *Melos*'s broader designs, namely, to write "de gloria et perfeccione sanctorum" [of the glory and perfection of the saints], language which Rolle echoes in this chapter.³⁹ Such a purpose is evangelistic as well as apologetic, as he explains a few chapters earlier: "Profero propositum, ut peccatores peniteant, et perfecti non prospicientes pulchritudinem prosperitatis presentis properent ad palacium perpetui Imperatoris, non stantes cum stolidis in stulticia, sed spaciantes in speciem spiritualem." [I proffer this purpose so that sinners might repent, and so that the perfect, not paying attention to the prettiness of present prosperity, might hasten to the palace of the perpetual Emperor, not standing with the stupid in folly, but roaming in spiritual beauty.]⁴⁰ He implies that descriptions of the glory of the saints, and especially of saintly solitaries, are meant to inspire readers to reject earthly things and pursue things heavenly. Rolle's exhortation to the *perfecti* here invokes the distinction between the worldly and the spiritual which is the basis of eremitic seclusion, including another harsh condemnation of the worldly as "stolidis in stulticia." For Rolle, the worldly who are to be condemned can be extended to include those, such as Anselm, who prioritize life in a religious community ["in congregatione"]—although elsewhere he accepts the legitimacy of monastic contemplatives, reinforcing the likelihood that his strident tone in *Melos*

is meant as hyperbole, perhaps again reflecting norms of *contemptus mundi* literature.⁴¹ By inviting readers to behold the solitary, the psalm verse offers an opportunity for Rolle to describe and perform an idealized conception of sanctity as belonging to the hermit, separated from the world, and he thus adopts a rhetorical posture which involves the rejection of worldly critics through powerful, polarizing language, and which parallels his argument for the legitimacy of solitary life.

Not incidentally, at least one medieval reader recognized the discussion in *Melos* 47, to be at once compelling and traditional. In Oxford, Lincoln College MS Lat. 89 (s. xiv/xv), this section of the text is accompanied by marginal notes with two extracts from *Incendium*, 14—advocating solitary life, and including the references to vile clothing, quoted above—and these are followed by another from the eighth-century *vita* of the Mercian hermit Guthlac (d. 714/15), a passage in which demons torment the saint, commanding him to abandon the wilderness [*“imperantes ut de heremo exiret”*], and Guthlac is strengthened by the appearance (and endorsement) of a vision of Saint Bartholomew the Apostle.⁴² The encounter resonates with Rolle’s polarizing characterization of the solitary embattled by enemies who reject the legitimacy of eremitic life, and the text’s placement here suggests that this annotator found Rolle’s aggressive apologies for solitary life consistent with a hagiographic tradition which, as we have seen, glosses the hermit’s eccentric lifestyle and worldly detachment as exemplary.

This approach to Rolle’s aggressive voice offers an alternative to earlier, typically autobiographical readings of such passages, inviting us instead to see this voice as cultivated in an attempt to model and thereby exhort rejection of the world.⁴³ Indeed, even the densely alliterative style of *Melos* can be seen as offering further support for this way of reading. Given the sustained effort it presumably demanded of the author, this alliteration is surely best read not

as a reflex of Rolle's personal idiosyncrasies or an outpouring of emotion, but as a deliberate and strategic stylistic choice, and since it appears in some way connected to the experience of *canor*, which defines advanced contemplative experiences for Rolle, we might see the highly unusual alliterative style of *Melos* as another self-conscious adoption of this same trope of eremitic eccentricity. It is, in other words, a style marked as a departure from the typical, and perhaps intentionally alienating readers who were not prepared to make a similar flight from the ordinary.⁴⁴ Certainly, this way of reading need not imply that Rolle invented the critiques of eremitic life to which he responds in his aggressive tone, but rather that we cannot use Rolle's rhetoric as proof of his own embittered feelings or of the strength of any charges made against him. (And in the one case where we do know the source, Anselm, the criticism is notably muted and indirect). Rolle may well have been a passionate, emotional, idiosyncratic individual, but reading his works as the immediate product of his feelings would risk obscuring how the author deploys an emotive voice strategically and didactically.

Further, this acerbic voice—used at once to defend and, rhetorically, to enact eremitic separation from the world—is just one among many first-person postures adopted across the hermit's corpus. Rolle's evident appreciation of the didactic potential in employing different voices offers a striking example of David Lawton's recent observations concerning medieval habits of speaking through the voices of others, especially through liturgy and the citation of *auctoritates*—and, for Rolle, the authority most open to such creative ventriloquizing was undoubtedly Holy Scripture.⁴⁵ Throughout his works, Rolle approaches biblical passages as the speech of different categories of people—such as the damned (offering a warning to readers) or the penitent or the saintly (acting as models to imitate or cultivate)—and he often quotes biblical passages and assigns them to such generalized speakers: e.g., Song of Songs 1.1: “Vox

languentis anime amore eterno” [The voice of the soul languishing in eternal love], Job 10.8: “penitens” [the penitent], and Job 30.31: “doloribus dampnatus” [one condemned to suffering].⁴⁶ Rather than being prescriptive or exclusive, such identifications seem to reflect an awareness that Scripture can be interpreted as expressing various paradigmatic perspectives.

Accordingly, throughout his writings Rolle himself adopts different biblical *personae*, often to achieve specific didactic ends, and at times he invites the reader to take on a biblical voice for themselves, even as that voice is simultaneously identified as spoken by the hermit-author.⁴⁷ This is perhaps seen most clearly when Rolle expounds biblical verses with glosses meant to be spoken, in the first-person, by the identified *persona*. Such passages develop conventional late antique and medieval expository habits, as Kraebel’s work has indicated, with paraphrasal glosses introduced with the tag *quasi dicat* or *quasi diceret* [As if he or she said]—but they also reflect an understanding that a reader should pray using the words of Scripture.⁴⁸ Indeed, Rolle’s paraphrases often turn into prayers, punctuated with such vocatives as “O Fili Dei” [Oh Son of God], and inviting the would-be righteous person to recite their contents: “Congruunt hec uerba iusto” [These words befit a righteous person].⁴⁹ In thus presenting his first-person text as a potential script for readers, Rolle was following the model of Anselm’s *Orationes et meditationes*, which offers prayers for the reader to adopt in various situations—a model which also operates in the lyrics embedded in his English Epistles.⁵⁰ His paraphrases of biblical voices are sometimes infused with Rolle’s biography (as when he inserts references to solitary life), while in other instances he adopts voices clearly dissociated from himself (as when he speaks in the voice of the damned, a voice not to be imitated but rather feared).⁵¹ Full exploration of these biblical *personae* is beyond the scope of this short essay, but the point remains—Rolle’s textual voice is persistently identified as his own, while also, at the same time,

made up of an accretion of different perspectives and precedents, not always easily distinguishable from one another, and offered as material for readerly engagement and appropriation.

The hermit's aggressive voice, traditionally read as more authentically autobiographical, can thus be understood instead as just one posture among the many which Rolle assumes—in this case, shaped by a conventional understanding of hermits—in order to model a particular kind of sanctity or devotional engagement. Consider, for example, another passage in which the hermit clearly performs and dramatizes his autobiographical, first-person voice, departing from the aggressive mode of the *contemptus mundi*, but nonetheless shaping his voice as a didactic model for readers. *Exposicio super aliquos versiculos Cantici Canticorum* 4, offers a voice at once identified with Rolle, and yet clearly adopted performatively with the aim of cultivating imitation and thus designed to be inclusive. Beginning with the cosmic biblical metanarrative of the Fall and Incarnation, Rolle opens the chapter writing in a voice that speaks, inclusively, on behalf of the whole human race: “O bone Iesu . . . saluas dampnatum genus humanum . . . Vnctus ad nos uenisti” [Oh good Jesus . . . you save the damned human race . . . You came to us anointed”].⁵² Rolle's inclusive outlook here indicates a desire to incorporate the reader into his first-person voice, to speak for all Christians, rather than to shoehorn them into his experiences. Further along, though, the speaker shifts the focus to himself, using language of *canor* and *dulcor*: “Est autem nomen Ihesu in mente mea cantus iubileus, in aure mea sonus celicus, in ore meo dulcor mellifluus” [Yet the name Jesus is a jubilee song in my mind, a heavenly sound in my ear, a mellifluous sweetness in my mouth].⁵³ Of course, such phrases clearly invoke Rolle's spiritual experiences, but their autobiographical content is neither explicit nor developed. If autobiographical, this *persona* primarily serves as a

model to which the reader should aspire, since Rolle goes on to offer an exhortation: “Hoc nomen Ihesu in memoria iugiter memento tenere” [Remember to hold this name Jesus continually in your memory].⁵⁴ Rolle has been writing in a voice, in other words, which his readers should endeavor to adopt, and which, perhaps, by reading his text, they can at least begin to practice for themselves.⁵⁵ Indeed, Rolle is arguably taking on another’s voice for himself here, loosely citing Bernard—“Jesus mel in ore, in aure melos, in corde iubilus” [Jesus is honey in the mouth, melody in the ear, joyful song in my heart]—an observation which should make it clear that, while Rolle’s spirituality draws on his own experiences, it is simultaneously understood using conventional religious language, and thus transmits a conventional (rather than wholly idiosyncratic) posture of devotion as a model for new readers.⁵⁶ The explicitly autobiographical anecdote which follows at the end of the chapter is then consistent with this outward-looking didactic purpose: it is offered not as overt self-assertion, but as an *exemplum* illustrating the value of devotion to the Holy Name, meant to reinforce the preceding discussion.⁵⁷ In this case, Rolle uses his “own” voice not only to assert himself or to highlight his unique experiences, but, in a much more open and generalizing way, to exemplify an ideal of devotion deriving from his favored authoritative models of sanctity. This is not an interior monologue, but a voice that is compiled from precedents and designed to invite the reader in.

The suggestion that the speaking voice of a text is not transparently identifiable with its author is, of course, not new to literary criticism. The possibility that Rolle’s autobiographic mode gives us access to his psychological depths is understandably appealing—medieval autobiography is relatively unusual, and its use attracts a special fascination for modern readers, seeking, as Hope Emily Allen put it, to hear “the veritable utterances of a medieval Englishman, speaking with the human directness and intelligibility of a modern.”⁵⁸ But this interest has

ironically flattened Rolle's work, assimilating it to a singular and interestingly idiosyncratic personality. By recognizing that this personality is shaped by eremitic convention, it is possible to see it as just one example among many of Rolle constructing his voice, using conventional ideas of sanctity and devotion, to instruct and inspire his readers. Instead of approaching Rolle's works as dominated by a single, monologic personality, this invites us to recognize the multi-faceted texture of his written voice. And, despite Rolle's insistence on solitude and isolation, it is his dramatization of his voice which connects him to eremitic tradition and invites the participation of his readers. And so it seems only appropriate that, to return to Fig. 1, the apparitional hermit appears not just with an appearance of unkempt eccentricity, but also bearing a book, at once a sign of his authority as a writer and a reminder of the tradition of hagiographic literature which cultivated this convention of the "strange" hermit.

Timothy Glover is Research Fellow at Emmanuel College, Cambridge (email: tlg30@cam.ac.uk).

¹ Reginald Maxwell Woolley, ed., *The Officium and Miracula of Richard Rolle of Hampole*, (London, 1919), 23–24. See Zieman's discussion of the scene in "Resonant Charisma: Richard Rolle as Public Contemplative," in this cluster.

² Carl Horstmann, *Yorkshire Writers: Richard Rolle of Hampole, an English Father of the Church, and His Followers*, Library of Early English Writers 1–2, 2 vols. (London, 1895–96), 2:xxiii. Likewise, writers following Horstman describe a "self-willed, bitter individualist" and "a man full of idiosyncrasy" (Hope Emily Allen); "no conventional saintly or devout figure" whose works are full of "eccentricities," "bewildering and alien" (Nicholas Watson), and an individual

whose struggles with lust are “very idiosyncratic,” to an extent “found nowhere else in Western mystical writings” (Denis Renevey). See Allen, *Writings Ascribed to Richard Rolle, Hermit of Hampole, and Materials for his Biography*, Modern Language Association of America, Monograph Series 3 (New York, 1927), 7; Allen, “Richard Rolle,” *Times Literary Supplement* 1589 (14 July 1932): 516; Nicholas Watson, *Richard Rolle and the Invention of Authority*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature 13 (Cambridge, UK, 1991), 52 and xi; and Denis Renevey, *Language, Self, and Love: Hermeneutics in the Writings of Richard Rolle and Commentaries on the Song of Songs* (Cardiff, 2001), 72 and 71.

³ While there were reservations about the risks of eremitic life, its exemplary status was recognized by orthodox, canonical writers; see E. J. F. Arnould, “Richard Rolle and a Bishop: A Vindication,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 21 (1937): 55–77, at 69–75. Major studies on medieval hermits and anchorites are Rotha Mary Clay, *The Hermits and Anchorites of England* (London, 1914); Ann K. Warren, *Anchorites and Their Patrons in Medieval England* (Berkeley, 1985); and Tom Licence, *Hermits and Recluses in English Society, 950–1200* (Oxford, 2011). Watson argues that Rolle’s eremitic life was not particularly unconventional, and concessions throughout his discussion acknowledge that many aspects he highlights were probably not especially controversial, and that the criticisms to which Rolle responds reflect more widespread reservations about hermits in general, rather than unique characteristics of Rolle’s own eremitic life; see Watson, *Invention*, 40–53.

⁴ This may qualify Christopher Roman’s attempt to read Rolle—who was, in many ways, highly conservative—as a queer figure: see Christopher M. Roman, *Queering Richard Rolle: Mystical Theology and the Hermit in Fourteenth-Century England* (Cham, 2017).

⁵ E. A. Jones, “O Sely Ankir,” in *Anchorites in Their Communities*, ed. Cate Gunn and Liz Herbert McAvoy, *Studies in the History of Medieval Religion* 45 (Cambridge, UK, 2017), 13–34, discusses the relationship between eremitism and secular power; see also E. A. Jones, ed., *Hermits and Anchorites in England, 1200–1550* (Manchester, 2019), 156 and 160, and Jacques Dalarun, *Robert of Arbrissel: Sex, Sin, and Salvation in the Middle Ages*, trans. Bruce L. Venarde (Washington, DC, 2006), vii–viii and 31–34.

⁶ Watson, *Invention*, 87 and 90.

⁷ Sebastian Sobceki, *Last Words: The Public Self and the Social Author in Late Medieval England* (Oxford, 2019).

⁸ See also A. C. Spearing’s critique of the assumption that medieval narrators typically represent coherent, individuated characters or *personae*, in *Textual Subjectivity: The Encoding of Subjectivity in Medieval Narratives and Lyrics* (Oxford, 2005), and *Medieval Autographies: The “I” of the Text* (Notre Dame, IN, 2012).

⁹ On Rolle’s transmission by authorial epistolary dispersal, see Ralph Hanna, “The Transmission of Richard Rolle’s Latin Works,” *The Library* 14 (2013): 313–33, at 328.

¹⁰ John of Ford, *Wulfric of Haselbury* 1.8, ed. Maurice Bell, *Somerset Record Society* 47 (London, 1933), 21, and Paulus Grosjean, ed., *Vitae s. Roberti Knaresburgensis* 20, *Analecta Bollandiana* 57 (1939): 364–400, at 394. In the version quoted here, Robert’s *Latin Life* survives in a single fifteenth-century manuscript, and the date of its composition is unknown; the other dates given above are taken from Licence, *Hermits and Recluses*, 20.

¹¹ *Wulfric of Haselbury* 1.8, ed. Bell, 21, and *Vitae Roberti*, 20, ed. Grosjean, 394.

¹² *Wulfric of Haselbury* 1.8, ed. Bell, 21.

¹³ *Vitae Roberti*, 20, ed. Grosjean, 393.

¹⁴ On Cuthbert's cult, see now Christiania Whitehead, *The Afterlife of St. Cuthbert: Places, Texts, and Ascetic Tradition, 690–1500*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature 113 (Cambridge, UK, 2020), with Bartholomew discussed at 110–27. For these dates, see Bertram Colgrave, ed. and trans., *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert* (Cambridge, UK, 1940), 8 and 16, and Licence, *Hermits and Recluses*, 20.

¹⁵ Bede, *Vita sancti Cuthberti* 18, in *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert*, ed. and trans. Colgrave, 218. Geoffrey of Coldingham, *Vita Bartholomaei Farnensis* 9, in Symeon of Durham, *Symeonis Monachi Opera Omnia*, ed. Thomas Arnold, *Rerum Britannicarum Medii Aevi scriptores* 75, 2 vols. (London, 1882–85), 1:302; for dating see Licence, *Hermits and Recluses*, 20.

¹⁶ *Vita Bartholomaei* 9, ed. Arnold, 1:302.

¹⁷ Bede, *Vita sancti Cuthberti* 18, ed. and trans. Colgrave, 218 (translation altered), and *Vita Bartholomaei* 9, ed. Arnold, 1:302.

¹⁸ Further comparable examples of eremitic eccentricity are found in Reginald of Durham, *The Life and Miracles of Saint Godric, Hermit of Finchale*, ed. and trans. Margaret Coombe (Oxford, 2022): see, for example, Godric's avoidance of human contact (134) and his ascetic practices of not changing clothes, not washing (104) and vowing always to go barefoot (108).

¹⁹ Woolley, ed., *Officium*, 24.

²⁰ Woolley, ed. *Officium*, 26. There is also a possibility that Rolle stayed silent to avoid discovery as the missing son of someone known to Dalton.

²¹ Woolley, ed., *Officium*, 33.

²² Cambridge, University Library MS Dd.5.64, part 2, fols. 21v (Cuthbert and Maglorius) and 22v (John the Baptist), and cf. Margaret Deanesly, ed., *The "Incendium Amoris" of Richard Rolle of Hampole* (Manchester, 1915), 181–82. Rolle's epithet for John the Baptist follows

Jerome, *Ep.* 22, itself a commonplace of insular hermit hagiographies: see Tom Licence, “Goscelin of St. Bertin and the Life of St. Eadwold of Cerne,” *Journal of Medieval Latin* 16 (2006): 182–207, at 191. [EDITORS’ NOTE: Ralph Hanna, “Richard Rolle’s *Incendium Amoris*: A Prospectus for a Future Editor,” *Journal of Medieval Latin* 26 (2016): 227–61, draws attention to the limitations of Deanesly’s edition, which, though crucial for later Rolle scholarship, contains frequent substantive errors. Throughout this cluster, therefore, all quotations from *Incendium* will be drawn from Dd.]

²³ Deanesly discusses Maglorius, *The “Incendium Amoris”*, 46–47.

²⁴ For Rolle working from memory, see Andrew Kraebel, “Hermit Libraries: Material Sources and the Making of Richard Rolle’s Prose,” in this cluster.

²⁵ Paul F. Theiner, ed., *The “Contra Amatores Mundi” of Richard Rolle of Hampole*, English Studies 33 (Berkeley, 1968), 69.

²⁶ *Exposicio super aliquos versiculos Cantici Cantorum* 1, in *Richard Rolle: Unprinted Latin Writings*, ed. and trans. Ralph Hanna (Liverpool, 2019), 62; Theiner, ed., *Contra Amatores* 5, p. 85; Rüdiger Spahl, ed. and trans., “*De emendatione vitae*”: eine kritische Ausgabe des lateinischen Textes von Richard Rolle, mit einer Übersetzung ins Deutsche und Untersuchungen zu den lateinischen und englischen Handschriften 12, *Super alta perennis: Studien zur Wirkung der Klassischen Antike* 6 (Göttingen, 2009), 234–36; and Deanesly ed., *Incendium*, 32, p. 238.

²⁷ E. J. F. Arnould, ed., *The “Melos Amoris” of Richard Rolle of Hampole* 46 and 48, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1957), 143 and 153.

²⁸ See, for example, Donald Weinstein and Rudolph M. Bell, *Saints and Society: The Two Worlds of Western Christendom, 1000–1700* (Chicago, 1982), 158–59, and Catherine Sanok, *Her*

Life Historical: Exemplarity and Female Saints' Lives in Late Medieval England (Philadelphia, 2007), 14–16.

²⁹ Deanesly, ed., *Incendium*, 31, p. 232.

³⁰ CUL Dd.5.64, part 2, fol. 23v; cf. Deanesley, ed., *Incendium*, 184. See also Rolle's references to being in "pannis putridis . . . nudus . . . sine coopertorio confortabili," in Arnould, ed., *Melos*, 7, p. 20.

³¹ Innocent III, *On the Misery of the Human Condition: "De Miseria Humane Conditionis"*, ed. Donald R. Howard, trans. Margaret Mary Dietz, The Library of Liberal Arts 132 (Indianapolis, 1969), xv; Robert Bultot, "Le mépris du monde chez s. Colomban," *Revue des sciences religieuses* 35 (1961): 356–68, at 366–68, where Bultot attempts to defend the genre; and Malcolm Moyes, *Richard Rolle's "Expositio super novem lectiones mortuorum": An Introduction and Contribution towards a Critical Edition*, Elizabethan and Renaissance Studies 92, 2 vols. (Salzburg, 1988), 1:96.

³² Arnould, ed., *Melos* 47, p. 147.

³³ Arnould, ed., *Melos*, 145 and 146.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Arnould, ed., *Melos*, 139.

³⁶ On this point, see John Alford, "Biblical *Imitatio* in the Writings of Richard Rolle," *ELH* 40 (1973): 1–23, at 10.

³⁷ Arnould, "Rolle and a Bishop," 58–61.

³⁸ Arnould, ed., *Melos* 47, p. 145.

³⁹ As pointed out by Andrew Albin, *Richard Rolle's "Melody of Love": A Study and Translation with Manuscript and Musical Contexts*, Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies 212 (Toronto, 2018), 289 n. 1. Compare Arnould, ed., *Melos* 5 and 47, pp. 15 and 145.

⁴⁰ Arnould, ed., *Melos* 40, p. 125.

⁴¹ Rolle references *congregatio* in Arnould, *Melos* 47, p. 147; see also Deanesley, ed., *Incendium* 13, p. 179. He adopts a more moderate stance in *Super aliquos versiculos Cantici* 2 and 5, in *Unprinted Latin*, ed. Hanna, 72–74 and 120–22; in Arnould, ed., *Melos*, 50, p. 161, he seems to criticize lukewarm monks and then exhorts them to pursue contemplation.

⁴² On this manuscript and the marginalia discussed here, see Albin, “*Melody of Love*”, 52–53 and 358–61. For Guthlac, see Henry Mayr-Harting’s *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* entry, s.v. “Guthlac [St. Guthlac] (674–715), Hermit,” and Bertram Colgrave, ed. and trans., *Felix’s Life of Saint Guthlac* (Cambridge, UK, 1956).

⁴³ In addition to the examples from earlier scholarship offered above, on *Melos* in particular see, e.g., Gabriel M. Liegey, “Richard Rolle’s ‘Carmen Prosaicum’: An Edition and Commentary,” *Mediaeval Studies* 19 (1957): 15–36, at 16, who writes that Rolle’s “lyric soul seeks to have itself heard . . . Time and again at a point in his exposition he seems so moved that he bursts into song.”

⁴⁴ Cf. Ralph Hanna, “The Oldest Manuscript of Richard Rolle’s Writings,” *Scriptorium* 70 (2015): 105–115 (at 110): “The notoriously difficult prose and persistent interest in mystical ‘song’ may have rendered this text, even in the Middle Ages, something of a niche-market item.” He goes on (110 n. 16): “*Melos* is mannered *Kunstprosa* of a sort that may have deterred more casual readers.” For more on Rolle’s alliteration and its effects on readers, see Albin, “Listening for *Canor*.”

⁴⁵ David Lawton, *Voice in Later Medieval English Literature: Public Interiorities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

⁴⁶ *Incendium*, 26, Dd.5.64, part 2, fol. 43v; cf. ed. Deanesly, 216; *Super lectiones mortuorum*, 3, in Moyes, *Introduction*, II, 177; *Melos*, 25, ed. Arnould, 73.

⁴⁷ In addition to Alford, “Biblical *Imitatio*”, see Annie Sutherland, “Biblical Text and Spiritual Experience in the English Epistles of Richard Rolle,” *Review of English Studies* 56 (2005): 695–711.

⁴⁸ Kraebel, *Experiments*, 6 and *passim*.

⁴⁹ *Super lectiones mortuorum*, 2, in Moyes, *Introduction*, II, 162.

⁵⁰ On voice and Anselmian prayer, see Sarah McNamer, *Affective Meditation and the Invention of Medieval Compassion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 11–14, citing further relevant studies. On Rolle’s lyrics in this tradition, see Albin, “The Sound of Rollean Lyric,” in *What Kind of a Thing is a Middle English Lyric?*, ed. Nicholas Watson and Cristina Maria Cervone (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022), 218–42.

⁵¹ See *Super lectiones mortuorum*, 1, in Moyes, *Introduction*, II, 151–52; *Melos*, 36, ed. Arnould, 112.

⁵² *Unprinted Latin*, ed. Hanna, 96.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 100–102 (this translation adapted from Hanna’s).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁵⁵ See Spearing, *Textual Subjectivity*, ch. 6; David Lawton, “Psalms as Public Interiorities: Eleanor Hull’s Voices,” in *Psalms and Medieval English Literature*, ed. Atkin and Leneghan, *op. cit.*, 298–317.

⁵⁶ Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermones Super Cantica*, 15.6, in *Opera*, ed. J. Leclercq, C. H. Talbot, and H. M. Rochais, 8 vols. (Rome: Editiones Cistercienses, 1957–77), I, 86.

⁵⁷ Rolle, *Super aliquos versiculos*, 4, in *Unprinted Latin*, ed. Hanna, 112.

⁵⁸ Allen, *Writings Ascribed*, 8.