

off with a carbolic injection. The gang of men sent to clean up found him sitting on the ground, his head leaning against the wall, 'his body clean and his face radiant'. 'To see him', continued the witness, 'you would easily take him for a saint. He seemed to radiate light. The other corpses were dirty, with their wasted forms stretched out on the ground. He seemed to be asleep—.'

Like all the rest, like many others too, his body was cremated. And already his ashes, scattered to the four winds of the spirit, are coming up as seeds of glory.

The work of Niepokalanow goes on.



THE SCALE

BY

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O study of English medieval spirituality would be complete without a treatise on Walter Hilton. That is patently true. It is also clear that he should come at the conclusion of such a study for he is at once the most learned and the most analytical of all these writers. He is a man of wide experience both in his life of prayer and in his direction of contemplative religious, and he is a man who has studied in the Schools with greater patience than Rolle and with a tidier mind than the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*.

In the present series of articles we have followed these various medieval writers in an orderly progression not according to historical procedure but in relation to the development of the soul under grace as recorded by each writer. Langland was made to propose the ways and working of the first Conversion; the *Ancren Riwele* neatly described the Purgative Way; Richard Rolle was typical of the Illuminative Way; while *The Cloud* and Mother Julian were both, in different respects, seen to be speaking of the Unitive Way. Consequently Walter Hilton who is the only one among them to set down with the precision of the theologian the whole way of progress to union, would seem to claim the last word as presenting a complete summary, foreshadowing the consummate skill of St John of the Cross in describing the Christian's ascent to perfect union with God in the divine nuptials.

Hilton's date places him, not at the end of the spiritual movement in England, but rather in the middle of its progress when

it was at its height. He died some twenty years before Mother Julian, going to the fulfilment of his union in God on the eve of the Annunciation, 1395 or 1396. During his lifetime the Church in England had to struggle against the enthusiasm of the Lollards; but he took little part himself in any of that side of the defence of the faith though a Prior of his at Thurgarton was appointed a judge of the Lollards in 1388. Hilton was content to live in that Priory a simple Augustinian Canon, concerning himself with the direction of devoted men and women, particularly of anchoresses and others dedicated to the contemplative life. He had studied theology in Paris, where he had probably become a Master of Theology; but he uses his learning to correct the misunderstanding among the devout followers of Richard Rolle rather than to defeat the heretics. And he uses it too to build up in clear and precise language the theological structure of the life and growth of prayer. In this he was supported by his fellow Augustinians who were for the most part in a flourishing condition in England; John of Bridlington, an Austin Canon of his day, was reputed as a saint; while the Austin friars, who numbered William Fleet, the close friend of St Catherine of Siena, as one of their number, must have been in true sympathy with their 'canonical' brethren. Soon after Hilton's death he was already recognised as an established master of the spiritual life—Margery Kempe refers to him as a well-known authority. This authority indeed may be recognised by a simple reading of those works which have so far been made available to the public today¹; there we may discover the teaching of a man who has the knowledge as well as the humility and experience to speak of the things of the spirit as a guide.

And it is as a guide from the first steps to the final goal of the way of perfection that we can rely upon him without fail. He is well read in the Scriptures and the Fathers; he refers in particular to the Fathers of the Desert, St Gregory, the pseudo-Dionysius and his own St Augustine. He is influenced too by the mystical doctrine of the Victorines; and it is possibly this ancestry which leads him to make his map of the Way. Certain it is that although his own analysis bears the marks of fresh originality he derives the main outline of his divisions from his forbears. It is worth noting that other Augustinians writing at this time were also developing their schemes. Thus Bl. John Ruysbroek had composed his *Seven Steps*

¹ Besides *The Scale* and *The Minor Works* (published in the Orchard Series by Burns Oates) there remains a great treasure store of his works still in MSS. Recently his translation of the *Stimulus Amoris* has been unearthed by Miss C. Kirchberger at the Bodleian and will, we hope, soon find its way into print.

of the *Ladder of Spiritual Love*² some years before. Or again we find the steps worked out in *The Mirror of Simple Souls* which was written by someone influenced by very much the same spiritual tradition as Hilton³. They had all in their own way been influenced by Richard of St Victor, whose six degrees of contemplation are neatly docketed by St Thomas and made into steps in the ascent (II-II, 180, 4 ad 3).

But Walter Hilton and Richard of St Victor as well as all their contemporaries of the twelfth and fourteenth centuries were indebted ultimately to St Augustine and it will not be out of place in here introducing *The Scale* to refer back to St Augustine's treatise on the 'Quantity' of the soul where he treats of the seven degrees of the breadth of the soul (P.L. 32, 1073-6). St Augustine first describes the degrees in which the soul is comparable with that of the animals, as informing the body and delighting in the senses; but he goes on to show its ascent to the seventh degree of the 'Vision and contemplation of the truth'. The soul is concerned with cultural things—skill in making things and in fashioning signs and words—but it has to purify itself in order to reach out towards the good and the beautiful in themselves; and being cleansed the soul goes on its way most joyfully and with great trust in God. This is the fifth degree and in the sixth the mind is finally cleansed for the pure contemplation of truth in the Wisdom of God.

This sevenfold progress of St Augustine is significant as being distinctly a way to contemplation, whereas the pseudo-Dionysian tradition, most perfectly expressed by St John of the Cross, emphasises the steps towards perfect union in God. Evidently the way and the goal are fundamentally the same, but the difference in the way of expressing the process of sanctification is significant and explains the difference between Hilton's *Scale* and John of the Cross's *Ascent*. Hilton inherits both the Dionysian and the Augustinian traditions, but he shows clearly that the way to union is a way to contemplation whereas those who base themselves exclusively on the *Ascent* are likely to leave out the problem of action and contemplation and so fall into the snare of regarding the two as independent ways to perfection. Hilton recalls his readers to the ancient and constant tradition that action is the beginning and belongs to the purgative and illuminative way but must eventually lead to the peaceful vision flowing from the contemplative life. That is

² Translated from the Flemish by F. Sherwood Taylor under this title and published by the Dacre Press, 1943.

³ Edited in the Orchard Series by Clare Kirchberger. (Burns Oates, 1927.) Cf. Div. XIV.

why the *Scale* is of such value to many modern readers who have been nourished almost entirely on the Spanish mystical writers of the Renaissance. It is worthwhile therefore to outline the steps towards heaven as given by Hilton in the first few chapters of his most celebrated work. The scale of perfection begins with that type of active life which is concerned with bodily things—either in disposing a man's worldly life virtuously or in the practice of ascetical works,

bodily deeds which a man doth to himself, as great fasting, much waking, and other sharp penance-doing (i, 2)⁴.

Hilton distinguishes—though only by a passing phrase—between bodily and ghostly works of the active life; and in this we may discern a certain growth from the merely outward actions of virtue, overcoming the passions in their eternal expression, and the inner spirit of these virtues which lead the soul on towards becoming 'buxom and ready to the will of the Spirit' (id). In his little work on the 'Mixed Life', written for the direction of a man of means living in the world⁵, Hilton places this active way of life at the lowest possible level consonant with grace. Without thought of love or savour of devotion the man of the active life desires to please God and come to heaven on account of the dread of God and the pains of hell. But the fulfilling of the duties of the active life of the world lead on to a more 'ghostly' activity, thus following in the footsteps of Martha who busily ruled her household in order that the Lord might remain quietly within.

And thou shalt also look and know wisely that thy things and thy worldly goods be rightfully kept, that thou might the more plenteously fulfil the deeds of mercy with them unto thy even-Christian. And also thou shalt with Maria leave business of the world and sit down at the foot of our Lord by meekness in prayers . . . And so shalt thou go on from the one to the other meedfully and fulfil them both. (*Minor Works*: i, 2.)

And so the soul progressing in her journey towards God naturally slips into the contemplative life, which 'lieth in perfect love and charity, felt inwardly by ghostly virtues and by soothfast knowing of God and ghostly things' (*Scale* i, 3).

But there are degrees within this contemplative life, and Hilton sets down as a first though not indispensable degree that of study and the exercise of natural wit in coming to know things about God. This is the life in particular of the theologian but it may be shared by any who are interested in their religion and set about reading and

⁴ References are to the number of the book and of the chapter according to the Orchard Series edition (Burns Oates; 1927).

⁵ *Minor Works*, No 1. Published in the Orchard Series. (Burns Oates, 1929.)

meditating on the truths of faith. In fact this 'first part of contemplation' may well be understood as the time of meditation and discursive considerations in prayer. But in the context Hilton is thinking of the contemplation derived in the main from natural reason and the natural asceticism of ordinary human learning. For some, as he says later in the *Scale*, this study is required for the perfection of their contemplative life: there are some who are

specially inspired to seek soothfastness in Holy Writ, with great devotion in praying and with much business in studying going before (ii, 43, p. 381).

But such learning in the beginning may be without charity, and the knowledge which it gains 'is but a shadow of very contemplation'. 'This knowing alone is but water', but our Lord can turn this water into wine.

So we come to the next stage which is truly spiritual and cannot be had without charity. But in it knowledge and understanding play a very small part. It springs from meditation and discursive prayer, but it consists for the most part in affections without understanding. It appears to be a time of many consolations and the description given by Hilton is reminiscent of much that we have seen in Richard Rolle and which we have suggested was in many ways restricted to the illuminative way—though it might at first seem strange to be calling a period of great affection and little understanding a stage of illumination. In its earlier or 'lower degree' this part of contemplation is said to be attainable also by active men, and if we were to introduce a modern phrase here we might say that it is just at this point that the distinction between acquired and infused contemplation might apply. Yet Hilton does not suggest that contemplation of a supernatural type can ever be reached actively—it comes and goes as God wills.

The lower degree of this feeling men which are active may have by grace when they be visited by our Lord. . . . But this feeling in its fervour cometh not alway when a man would (i, 6, p. 9). It remains therefore an infused gift not at man's disposal, but even those who have little time to give to prayer and who are engaged in the tight-rope performances of keeping the balance of moral virtue in an active life may receive the grace of vivid affections and aspirations which will come in the midst of labour and bustle to bring the soul suddenly to the feet of God.

But the higher degree of this 'thoughtless' but affectionate contemplation comes only to those who dispose themselves for quietness and who after great and hard asceticism are sufficiently purified in conscience to receive that gift of sweet and heavenly song, so

characteristic of Rolle and so often realised by those who set themselves seriously to this way of life. Hilton, who must have been well versed in the works of Rolle, evidently regards this angelic song—a metaphor of course for some experience not easily described as it is 'without knowing'—as a special gift from God to the contemplative; but he does not regard it as of great significance—it lies within the 'second part of contemplation'. And this may confirm us in supposing that Rolle does not describe a very exalted type of prayer and union with God and that it lies all within the illuminative way.

Hilton's third part of contemplation, 'which is as perfect as it may be here', introduces an idea of contemplation and the perfection of charity in which the intellectual gifts of the Holy Spirit are particularly in evidence—the whole period being dominated by the affective knowledge of God proceeding from Wisdom: 'it lieth both in cognition and in affection; that is to say in knowing and in perfect loving of God' (i. 8, p. 11)⁶. The third part, which is identified with the 'reforming in faith and feeling' to the image of Christ, contains within its scope the possibility of its own progress and perfection which leads finally to the greatest union with God known on earth, spoken of in terms of the union of marriage.

Of this oneing and conforming to our Lord speaketh St Paul thus: 'Whoso' by ravishing of love 'is fastened to God, then God and his soul are not two but one'. And soothly in this oneing is the marriage betwixt God and the soul, which shall never be broken. (i, 8, pp. 11-2.)

And Hilton goes on to distinguish this special visitation from God from any sort of sensible feelings such as a 'fire glowing and warming the breast', thereby implying that the angelic song and the burning heat of Richard Rolle do not belong to the heights of the perfection of charity.

In the second book of the *Scale* this progress to unity is described simply in terms of love: the first love belongs to those who have faith and is sufficient for salvation, the second springs from a special affection for our Lord in his manhood as seen in the imagination, and the third brings a 'ghostly sight of the Godhead in the manhood' and that comes only after the reforming in feeling. In view of this simple doctrine we need not to labour the fact that Hilton is writing of the same things as St John of the Cross, and all the great Christian mystics: for these 'steps of love' are the concern of all who are seeking the way of perfection. What is remarkable is that

⁶ Compare: 'Contemplation which is divine love and knowledge in one'. John of the Cross. *Living Flame* 3, 32. Pen. iii, 177.

the same basic truths can be experienced and expressed in such outwardly differing modes. If any proof were needed to insist that confessors and directors should avoid pressing their penitents into any clearly established scheme but instead should simply wait upon the Lord and watch and assist his working in the individual soul, this diversity among the great masters of the spiritual life should be sufficient. The way is one in Christ who is the way, it is the way of love—the love of Christ, but Christ is lived in each person according to the construction of that personality and the love works through the individual's free will.

Hilton's *Scale* gains perhaps over some other later descriptions of the way in being very wide and very general so that the individual can find his own way therein without being embarrassed by a bundle of inapplicable particularities. The somewhat intricate 'scales' to union as found in modern writers who perhaps take St John of the Cross too rigidly suffer from this embarrassment, and indeed they are often the cause of misunderstanding and controversy about the various rungs in the ladder. Like St Thomas, Hilton provides the general principles according to which the soul moves towards God with the steps of love; but he adds something of his own experience in measuring the length and number of these steps.

The whole way to perfect union is thus mapped out by Hilton in a way which lays emphasis on knowledge and on charity without being over-precise in those details of progress which vary from person to person. His great division, derived partly from Richard of St Victor and partly perhaps from his own experiences, draws a line between reformation in faith, which includes both the purgative and the illuminative ways,⁷ and reformation in faith and feeling. The latter is that of 'perfect' love which St Thomas distinguishes from the beginner's and the proficient's loves. Both these are '*in fieri*', growing up into maturity. But the reformation in feeling is that very maturity itself, a certain completion, love '*in facto esse*', already achieved. In this last perfection the soul is played upon especially by the Holy Spirit; the gifts are released from their temporary captivity under the attachments of sin.

Now everyone in a state of grace, however much embroiled in the active life or held down by his own venial sins, is '*in fieri*' to the perfection of charity: that is to say, he has the beginning of it and a beginning which is an active power moving him towards this perfection. He is like the young man of intelligence just starting

⁷ Cf: ii, 29, p. 292; ii, 30, pp. 296-7; ii, 32, pp. 309-10.

his period at the university—he has the beginnings of academic distinctions and the natural development will be for him to receive the honours which are the university's to give. So we find that Hilton breathes a comforting spirit of optimism and of objective certainty of reaching this perfection of love. Once a man has begun to climb the scale, then the natural development will be for him to be granted the attainment of its end—perfect love '*in facto esse*'. The reformation in feeling is the natural conclusion to a generous life. Anyone who tries to correspond generously to the grace of the state in which he finds himself at the present moment—not crying for greater things than the simple gifts of God—will find himself carried forward towards this contemplation (cf. ii, 21, p. 249). And the movements and fervour that he feels at the moment will be a safe guide to the way God is leading him. Hilton is insistent that his words are not to be taken as providing necessarily the here-and-now things to be prayed or thought or done. He concludes the first book of the *Scale* by insisting on this point.

If any word be therein that stirreth thee or comforteth thee more to the love of God, thank God, for it is his gift and not of the word. And if it comfort thee not, or else thou take it not readily, study not too long thereabout, but lay it beside thee till another time, and give thee to prayer or to other occupation. Take it as it will come and not all at once. (i, 93, p. 173.)

Such advice is very necessary in studying the way to heaven as outlined by any writer. For the writers' words are only helps, means to attaining the end. It is often easy to slip into the habit of regarding them almost as the end itself, or at least as describing the machinery which if set in motion will lead inevitably to heaven. This kills the spontaneous movement of the soul and stultifies its growth. The only certain 'machinery' is the love of God and a corresponding desire and generosity on man's part. With these two conditions fulfilled the end becomes at once an immediate possibility.

And therefore lean fully to thy feeling when it is gracious and ghostly, and keep it tenderly, and have great dainty, not of thy self, but of it, that thou might see and feel Jesus ever better and better. For grace shall ever teach thee by itself if thou wilt fall thereto, till thou come to the end. (ii, 42, p. 376.)