

## RECENT WORK ON WALTER HILTON

ERIC COLLEDGE

WE still know less about Walter Hilton than about any other of the great medieval English mystics, yet what we know is enough to show us that in his own age and during the fifteenth century he was more highly esteemed by students and practitioners of the spiritual life than perhaps any devotional writer of the times. Richard Rolle's sensational works had earned for themselves the immense popularity which they deserved, but there were many who came to deplore this popularity, and it is evident that the influence of Hilton was regarded as both a salutary corrective to Rolle's extremes, and as in itself beneficial. In the present century this development of later medieval thought has been again obscured, partly, though quite involuntarily, because of the new impetus to the study of Rolle given by Miss Hope Emily Allen, in her immensely scholarly if labyrinthine *Writing Ascribed to Richard Rolle*, and in her admirable little edition, *English Writings of Richard Rolle*. In this second work, published in 1931, she presented one solution to the problem which confronts everyone who wishes to edit a text which achieved a large circulation in the Middle Ages. Had she attempted a complete collation of all the surviving manuscripts (no less than ninety-three separate texts of the various English writings which she edited were known to her), she might well have been still engaged in the task. Instead, she took for each treatise or poem two or three of what she considered to be the best manuscripts; and so for the last twenty-four years we have been able to read good, early versions of Rolle's own words largely free from the welter of footnotes with which most of those who are engaged in such scholarly pursuits still encumber their works. One may today be permitted to regret either that Miss Allen did not in the first place turn her attention to Hilton instead of Rolle, or that no one has yet followed her lead and served the Hilton texts equally well. Our first need is an adequate edition of his major Middle English work, *The Scale of Perfection*: Miss Helen Gardner's several important articles upon him in the 1930s served to emphasize this need; and it is much to be hoped

that the group of younger Oxford scholars who are now working upon such an edition will be able to see this most desirable project through.

One of the obstacles which they will encounter in seeking to give their work a value commensurate with the importance of the *Scale* is that we know very little of Hilton's many other writings, Latin and English. Our ignorance would be greater, had it not been for the scholarship of the late Dorothy Jones and of Miss Clare Kirchberger. Dorothy Jones, in her unfortunately little-known modernized English version of *The Minor Works of Walter Hilton*, published as volume XVII of the Orchard Books in 1929, solved the problem of editing in another way. The canon of some of these minor works was for her established by the presence, in MS 472 of Lambeth Palace Library, of *The Epistle of Mixed Life, Eight Chapters on Perfection*, and the English commentaries on *Qui Habitat, Bonum Est* and the *Benedictus*. Eleven other manuscripts were known to her as containing copies of individual works (other manuscripts have since been found): but before she attempted any critical edition of the Middle English text, she published her admirable modern English translations, which were prefaced by a discussion as lucid and informative as it was unpretentious.

More recently, our knowledge of Hilton as a thinker and writer upon spiritual themes has been increased by Miss Clare Kirchberger's modernized English version of one of the most widely-read of medieval English devotional works, the *Stimulus Amoris*, which she published as *The Goad of Love* in the series 'Classics of the Contemplative Life' in 1952. Dorothy Jones had first drawn the attention of present-day students to the ascription of this Middle English translation from the Latin to Hilton: and Miss Kirchberger's bold and ingenious treatment of both her introduction and her text has done much to commend the probability that Hilton was the translator (though she has conclusively shown that this is no mere translation, but a great enrichment, much in the spirit of Hilton's acknowledged works, of the original); and so she has predisposed us in favour of the other contemporary ascription to Hilton of one of the English versions of the tract *De Remediis contra Temptationem*, written in Latin by St Catherine of Siena's English disciple, William Flete.

The past year has seen two further contributions to Hilton

studies. The first is an article by Miss Joy Russell-Smith, *Walter Hilton and a Tract in Defence of the Veneration of Images*, in volume VII of *Dominican Studies*. This article is essentially 'learned', and cast in a scholarly form; but it has performed several services which will be of benefit to later, more popular writers. It provides us with a survey of the still unpublished and untranslated Latin minor works. There are those found in the British Museum MS Royal 6 E III (Miss Russell-Smith has been able to add other manuscripts) and previously known as Hilton's: *De Utilitate et Prerogatiuis Religionis*, *De Imagine Peccati* and *De Habenda Consolatione*. To these she has added the other work found in the Royal manuscript, *De Lectione, Intentione, Oratione et Aliis*, which she ascribes to Hilton with what seems considerable probability, and the subject of her article, *De Oratione Imaginum*, five manuscripts of which have been found. Miss Russell-Smith begins by making a point, relevant to other of Hilton's works, concerning *De Utilitate Religionis*: it is well known that this treatise was addressed to Adam Horsley, and so justifies (if any such justification were needed in a medieval work) its form of private letter; but she relates it to the events of the time, and shows that Hilton was also concerned to refute, in an epistle which he expected to gain circulation, Wycliffe's attacks upon the monastic life. She then goes on to show that the form of *De Adoratione Imaginum*, that of a 'quaestio' which might be used in academic disputation, a form not known previously to have been employed by Hilton, is one which he seems to have been well fitted to use, since he is said to have qualified for a degree in canon law. Later in her article, Miss Russell-Smith turns her attention to another aspect of studies such as these, showing us that Hilton had Carmelite as well as Carthusian connections, and that these contacts with orders other than his own led to the dissemination of characteristically 'Carmelite' and 'Carthusian' types of manuscript.

This is an important article, on no account to be neglected. It is greatly to be hoped that it will lead to an edition of the Latin minor works; and it is good to know that its author already has in hand the project which Dorothy Jones never completed, a critical edition of the English minor works. It is therefore in many respects unfortunate that Miss Russell-Smith has partly been forestalled by the appearance, as volume XXIII (1954) of the series *Lund Studies in English*, of an edition, *An Exposition of*

'*Qui Habitat*' and '*Bonum Est*' in *English*, by Björn Wallner. Such an edition had been planned many decades ago by a Swedish student of medieval English Biblical translations and commentaries who achieved some distinction in this field, the late Anna Paues; but, like many of her other projects, it was unfinished at her death. Mr Wallner succeeded to it, and he has made his own contributions, identifying these two texts in the great Vernon Manuscript, where their presence had been unknown to Anna Paues and overlooked by Dorothy Jones. He has supplied his edition with a valuable linguistic examination, and his discussion of the attribution of the texts to Hilton is careful and, up to a point, well informed. But he is out of touch with what is at present being thought and written about his author (his Bibliography includes neither Miss Kirchberger's book nor Dom Gerard Sitwell's re-issue of the Orchard Books version of the *Scale* in 1953), and he bases some of his discussion of authorship upon criteria which today no longer can be admitted, notably Professor Margaret Deanesly's suggestion (made in 1920, in *The Lollard Bible*, a work heavily influenced by Coulton) that Hilton's *Mixed Life* 'was the first English manual to recommend, almost indirectly, the reading of the gospels to lay people'. Even if Professor Deanesly's dating of *Mixed Life* as of the decade 1370-80 be still admissible (and one would like a fresh opinion on this), such a statement requires so many qualifications that it was hardly worth making, and to use it to attempt to throw doubts upon Hilton's authorship of *Bonum Est*, where Bible-reading is not commended, is labour spent in vain. Other doubts expressed as to the authenticity of *Bonum Est* derive from the fact that this treatise, unlike *Qui Habitat*, is not addressed to any particular recipient. But this argument, which applies equally well to the *Benedictus*, implies that Hilton could only write in one style: Miss Kirchberger and Miss Russell-Smith have shown us that he was master of many.

More than this, we must allow in Hilton's works what we ought to expect to find in the writings, composed in different periods of his life and written for different types of reader, of a man constantly concerned that he should himself learn and grow in the life of the spirit: we must look for change, for development, even for seeming inconsistencies in his own personal views. One example of this may briefly be considered. The treatise

*De Adoratione Imaginum* commends images because the sight of them recalls the Passion and the martyrdom of the saints; Hilton supports this by quoting St Paul, in I Corinthians 2, 2, saying that he had preached nothing but Christ crucified, and that as to fleshly, not spiritual men. Miss Russell-Smith has paralleled this from Book I chapter 35 of the *Scale* (and we now know that in Book I we have the early version, originally intended to be in itself complete), where Hilton quotes similar texts from I Corinthians to support his contention that one can only come to contemplate Christ's Godhead by first meditating upon his humanity. But in *Qui Habitat* we find a quite different emphasis: there Hilton says that Christ has two names, God and Man, and that however much we may love his humanity, still we only know half his name, a point of view comparable with chapter 30 of the later Book II of the *Scale*, also quoted by Miss Russell-Smith. There is no discord in these several views, but there is difference, and it is in part to be accounted for by the preoccupation which both *Qui Habitat* and *Bonum Est* show with the afflictions which will accompany the spiritual man's advance towards perfection. When he was young and ardent he might believe that such trials would cease as he progressed, but it is not so. Constantly he is denied the beatific vision which is not to be had this side of Paradise. He remains in darkness and affliction; and even his merely intellectual problems multiply. As the world draws nearer to its end, so the universal martyrdom of the saints of God approaches: and man's life is a microcosm, closing in a bitter spiritual passion. These two works are written on a strictly ascetic level, and, like all Hilton's writings, they are very consciously 'unenthusiastic'; and of *Bonum Est* one can only say that if Hilton did not write it, the author was someone who was his equal in expounding the 'via purgativa', and that such exponents are rare in any age.

It is good that these recent publications have served to throw some light upon the development of Hilton's thought and doctrine, because the most vexed question of all, whether he was the author also of *The Cloud of Unknowing* (and of the series of shorter treatises and translations which are by the author of *The Cloud*) has once again been brought into the open. This controversy has had a curious history in modern times. Miss Allen, while providing from her great erudition evidence which might seem to advance Hilton's claims to authorship of *The Cloud*, professes

herself agnostic on the point. Miss Gardner in 1933 produced, in the *Review of English Studies*, what still may be thought a well-argued demonstration that the balance of probability is against Hilton as author; but, reviewing Dr Phyllis Hodgson's critical edition of *The Cloud*, in 1947 in *Medium Aevum*, she partly withdrew what she had written in 1933, and in her article on the text of the *Scale* in the 1936 volume of *Medium Aevum*, saying that if she were writing her earlier work again in 1947 her conclusions would be far less definite. But it seems to the present writer that her grounds for this retraction were less cogent than those on which her earlier arguments were based; yet on the other hand it cannot be said that Dr Hodgson in her article, *Walter Hilton and 'The Cloud of Unknowing': a Problem of Authorship Reconsidered* (*Modern Language Review*, October 1955), has produced convincing reasons for her conclusion that Miss Gardner was right in 1933 and wrong in 1947. The problem will not be solved by circling round it, and the core of the problem still remains: is it likely, is it possible that Hilton in *The Cloud* and its attendant treatises taught the *via negativa* towards an essentially Dionysian union with God, in which cognition has no part, and that then, a few years later, for any reason whatever, he embarked upon the *Scale* and his other acknowledged works, in which similarities of language to that used in *The Cloud* only serve to stress the essentially different, cognitive union which *The Scale* teaches? Is this psychologically possible, is it inherently probable, and, above all, what other mystics can be shown who have done thus or similarly? It will be surprising if, as we presently come to know Hilton better through his acknowledged works, we do not also come to see more clearly that these are not from the hand which wrote that surpassing work of spiritual and intellectual genius, *The Cloud of Unknowing*.