

THE SCALE OF PERFECTION. By Walter Hilton. Translated into Modern English, with an introduction and notes by Dom Gerard Sitwell, O.S.B. (Burns Oates; 18s.)

The revised *Orchard Series* is once more making available, though at a much enhanced price, the great spiritual classics (especially those of English authorship) in authoritative critical editions. The present Master of St Benet's Hall, following the example of his predecessor, Abbot Justin McCann (with whom the series has been so closely associated), combines an exact scholarship with a temperate regard for the needs of the usual reader. Thus while the introduction gives adequate information on texts and earlier printed editions—a full critical edition has still to appear—Dom Sitwell reasonably argues that Walter Hilton's spiritual teaching deserves to be available now in modern English, even though the experts may yet have much work to do on the numerous manuscripts and on the analysis of Hilton's sources. Works of spirituality, like any others, can become the specialized preserve of technicians; and the truth they have to declare may seem secondary to the textual problems they arouse. Thus Dom Sitwell's balanced combination of respect for the document with love for the doctrine it teaches (and hence with the desire to make it intelligible to modern readers), is welcomed.

Walter Hilton is a man of his own (fourteenth) century. He does not—and how can he be expected to?—anticipate later controversies, and to hope to find in him the systematized methods of Counter-Reformation teaching on prayer and contemplation is to misunderstand his purpose and the organic simplicity of *The Scale*. For him, as Dom Sitwell clearly shows, 'contemplation is not a sort of "mystery" to which only the initiated can attain, but is simply the manifestation of a more than ordinary degree of holiness to which everyone should, at least remotely, aspire'. The simple strength of his teaching by-passes the complicated territory which the *devotio moderna* and its later developments have left as a legacy to Catholic spirituality. And that is why it can be an unprofitable occupation to analyse or compare: Hilton is urging men to seek God, to be united with him in contemplation, and the means he proposes are the radical ones of practising the virtues of faith, hope and charity, and growth in prayer and mortification. His evangelical purpose is at the centre of Christian life, and it is good that it should be re-stated at this moment when there was never so great a need for a return to what is essential—'offer to our Lord what should be the only desire of your heart, the desire to possess him and nothing else'. (Cap. 23).

Dom Sitwell's version reads freely, devoid as it is both of archaic 'atmosphere' and self-conscious 'modernity'.