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Sin Has Its Place, but All Shall Be Well

The Universalism of Hope in Julian of Norwich (c. 1342–c. 1416)

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Julian of Norwich has a high profile these days. This is surely no accident. In an age that has become sensitive to the wisdom sounding in voices historically less heeded, she speaks as a medieval woman. In an age that has learned to wonder whether the systematic discourses of reason penetrate to those mysteries lying at the very heart of things, she speaks in the language of mystical revelation. Moreover, among the female, medieval, and mystical voices we have been minded to listen to

anew, hers is one of the most mellifluous. I mean that her voice attracts us. It speaks to us about matters we too care about desperately—love, evil, wrath, and reconciliation. And it does so in a manner that strikes us as not too far from how we would speak if only we had thought or been graced to try.

What I want to hold up for reflection, then, are the ways in which Julian explores the implications of her "showings" for the mysterious coexistence of divine Creator's love and creaturely evil in our world. The benefit of doing so is twofold. In the first place, we witness an approach to the issue that is compelling and yet different than that of most systematic, theological treatments. She does not carry on her exploration in the tried and true philosophical manner. She does not seek to discover those first principles from which to argue, with coercive deductive force, that divine love and evil do and even must coincide in the manner that they do, whether in our experience as is or as it ought to be. Indeed, she fails to add even one sentence to the age-old discursive effort at theodicy. Rather, as I will try to show, she chooses to address her topic via the relationship of promise, trust, and hope. Central to her efforts are the stories she tells or receives. And it is in thinking about her stories that our second benefit surfaces. For she lived in a literary culture that was acutely aware of story and that had theorized its power to invent plausible "conjectures" about the world; conjectures that disclose what I will call a promissory "order of hope."

Julian of Norwich and Her "Showings"

We begin with Julian and the "showings" or revelations she received. We know very little about her. We do not even know her name, for she is known to us today by the name of the church to which her anchorhold was appended: St. Julian's in Norwich. In the course of the text of her *Showings*, Julian does tell us that the revelations she sought to understand occurred on 13 May, 1373, during her thirty-first year. That would mean that she was born somewhere in the latter half of 1342 or the first third of 1343. She also tells us that she pondered the meaning of her "showings" for nearly twenty years, before she felt she was given to understand the most difficult of them.[1]

1. The edition of the *Showings* used throughout this essay is Edmund Colledge O.S.A. and James Walsh S.J., *A Book of Showings to the Anchoress Julian of Norwich*. For

It would seem that this final contemplative enlightenment and her move into the anchorhold adjacent to St. Julian's were closely aligned, for it is on 20 May, 1393, that we first witness financial support being laid aside on her behalf, almost twenty years to the day after she received her "showings."[2] Julian's contemporary, the redoubtable Margery Kempe, speaks of having traveled to Norwich to meet Julian, an occurrence that fits the chronology of Margery's life best if it occurred within the period 1413–1415.[3] The last evidences of Julian and her upkeep occur in late 1415 and in 1416. It is reasonable to conjecture that subsequent silence bespeaks her death, as by 1416 she would have been seventy-three or seventy-four years old.

Julian's text manifests a deep familiarity with the phraseology of Vulgate Latin and of the writings of Augustine of Hippo, Gregory the Great, William of St. Thierry, and a number of Middle English spiritual works.[4] The editors have argued that she must have entered a religious house and community when she was young and that she might well have remained a member of the community right through to 1393 when she was fifty years old.[5] Scholars point to the house of Benedictine nuns at Carrow just outside of the walls of Norwich as a community of appropriate learning endowed with an apt theological library.[6] If Julian had lived long years as a Benedictine sister, her move into the anchorhold of St. Julian's is understandable on very Benedictine terms, provided life as a nun is assumed to be isomorphic with that of a monk. The Rule of St. Benedict names the hermit as the second type of monk. Such a monk is one "who has learned to combat the devil, not in the first heat of his conversion but only after long testing in the monastery. Such a monk has been instructed by the counsel of many and has been formed to the single combat of the hermit by the best of fraternal wisdom so that he is equipped to carry on the spiritual struggle without the aid of others

the purposes of providing the reader a modern English translation, I have used Julian, *Revelations of Divine Love*.

In the present context, one should add that Julian speaks of the essential gist of her "showings" as having come to her fifteen years after the showings themselves or sometime in 1388. Cf. Colledge and Walsh, *Showings*, 732.

2. College and Walsh, *Showings*, 33.
3. Ibid., 35.
4. Ibid., 43–59.
5. Colledge and Walsh, "Editing Julian of Norwich's *Revelations*."
6. College and Walsh, *Showings*, 44.

on the strength of his own hand and arm against viciousness of body and mind."[7]

It is fairly seldom that we are given indications of how a recipient understands her revelations and their reception. Does she understand them to be received as visions stimulating the sense of sight whether physical, spiritual, or intellectual? Or might they better be thought of as auditions by which the sense of hearing is stimulated? Moreover, if the receiver understood the revelations to be visions, did she understand them to have been given via dreams or, by contrast, were they received, as with Hildegard of Bingen, while wide-awake with eyes open and fully aware?[8]

In Julian's case, we know that all but one of her revelations were given to her in the context of a near-death experience, when, *in extremis*, she was presented a crucifix to focus her devotion in the interstice between Viaticum and death.[9] A sixteenth vision confirming the authenticity of the first fifteen came to her in a dream after she had preliminarily judged her other visions to be "ravings."[10] Julian later described each of the "showings" and commented upon their significance. She first produced a shorter theological reflection on her visions and then a longer and more complex reflection some twenty years later.

What the vision-descriptions do not tell us is how Julian understood these visions to work and the relation of authority that was properly to hold between vision-description and spiritual commentary. In Julian's case, however, we are helped immeasurably by the difficulty she had in making sense of one of her visions—that of a lord and his servant. It is worth pausing to reflect on what she has to say in this context.

In chapter 50 of the long text, Julian struggles with the absence of evil within her visions: "It was the more surprising that I should see the Lord God regard us with no more blame than if we had been as pure

7. Chamberlin, ed., *The Rule of St. Benedict*, 20. "Deinde secundum genus est anachoritarum, id est heremitarum, horum qui non conuersationis feruore nouo sed monasterii probatione diuturna didicerunt contra diabolum multorum solacio iam docti pugnare."

8. For the genera of vision and dream see above all, Dinzelbacher, *Vision und Visionsliteratur im Mittelalter*. So also Ringler, "Die Rezeption"; Newman, *God and the Godesses*, especially pp. 24–35; and Lynch, *The High Medieval Dream Vision*.

9. The term "Viaticum" names the seventh of the sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church. It is dispensed to the believer when she or he is seriously ill and facing death.

10. College and Walsh, *Showings*, 632–34.

and holy as his angels in heaven."[11] She knows in her heart and has been taught by Mother Church that sin is real and ubiquitous, so she longs to see how God looks upon sin: "nor could I relax for fear that I might lose sight of his blessed presence and be left ignorant how he could be thought to regard us in our sin."[12] This was a matter of considerable anxiety for her. If we are blameless she fails to see this and must account her failure blameworthy. On the other hand, if we are blameworthy, she wonders "how is it that I cannot see this truth in you, my God and Creator, in whom I long to see all truth?"[13]

Her conundrum becomes the occasion for inward tears and prayer. In answer, she is given to see "a wonderfull example"[14] —the story of a lord and his servant. She relates the vision and testifies to God's leading in her reflection upon it. And yet she cannot let the vision go: "Yet for all his guidance, my puzzlement over the *exemplum* never left me. I thought that it had been given as an answer to my request, yet at the same time I was unable to find a wholly satisfying meaning in it."[15] For three months shy of twenty years she struggled with the text with the help of inward leading. That is, inwardly she was prompted "to consider all the details and circumstances shown in the illustration; even if you think they are vague and unimportant."[16] To this prompting she responds with a will:

> I assented wholeheartedly and eagerly, and began to give close attention to all the points and details that had been shown at that time, as far as my ability to understand would allow. I began with the lord and the servant as I saw them: how and where the

11. Julian, *Revelations*, 140. "Then was this my merveyle, that I saw oure lorde god shewyng to vs no more blame then if we were as clene and as holy as angelis be in hevyn" (College and Walsh, *Showings*, 511).

12. Ibid. Translation altered: "and [I] culde haue no rest for drede that his blessed presens shulde passe fro my syght, and I to be lefte in vnknowyng how he beholde vs in oure synne" (College and Walsh, *Showings*, 511).

13. Ibid. "[H]ow may it than be that I can nott see this truth in the, which arte my god, my maker in whom I desyer to se alle truth" (College and Walsh, *Showings*, 512).

14. College and Walsh, *Showings*, 513.

15. Julian, *Revelations*, 143. "But nott withstanding all thys forthledyng, the marveylyng of þe example went nevyr fro me; for me thought it was gevyn me for answere to my desyer. And yet culde I nott take there in full vnderstandyng to my ees in that tyme" (College and Walsh, *Showings*, 519).

16. Ibid., 144. "[T]o take hede to alle þe properties and the condescions that were shewed in the example, though þe thyngke that it be mysty and inddefferent to thy sight" (College and Walsh, *Showings*, 520).

> lord sat; the colour and cut of his clothes; his appearance, and his innate nobility and goodness; and how and where the servant stood, what his clothes were like, and their colour and style; his outward bearing and his inner goodness and loyalty.[17]

Julian's description of her inner promptings points us in the direction of ancient and medieval rhetorical theory as it had been appropriated within the Christian tradition. From Cicero and the pseudo-Cicero, medieval schoolmasters had appropriated the notion that rhetoric is divided into five parts, one of which is *memoria* or schooled memory.[18] *Memoria* was in many ways the lynchpin of the whole disciplinary structure. In other words, rhetoric, like all ancient and medieval cultural practice, was mnemonically primed; it depended upon the memory for its content and cogitative pattern. And that meant that the memory could not be left to chance or nature's gifting; it had to be trained, expanded by art, so that it was rendered capacious enough to include all that it must, i.e., in the present context, all those claims about the world that constituted the right or authoritative places to start in order to think properly and fruitfully about the topic to hand.

Cultural practice of any kind, then, was organized around the schooled memory and its stable and carefully tended central mental image. That image would be endowed with enough striking features to furnish what might be termed "a mnemonic closet organizer" (*ratio*) for thought. One had ceaselessly to reinforce one's organizing image so as to be able to attach to each of its striking features what one needed to remember in units, each graspable via a single act of recall.[19] Thus,

17. Ibid., 144. "I assentyd wylfully with grett desyer, seeing inwardly with avysement all the poyntes and the properties that were shewed in the same tyme, as ferforth as my wytt and my vnderstandyng wylle serve, begynnyng my beholding at the lorde and at þe servant, at the manner of syttyng of the lorde and the place he satt on, and the coloure of his clothing and the manner of shape, and his chere withoute and his nobley and his goodness within; and the manner of stondyng of the servant, and the place where and how, and his manner of clothing, the coloure and the shape, at his outwarde behaving and at his inwarde / goodness and his unlothfulnesse (College and Walsh, *Showings*, 520–21).

18. For discussions of rhetorical *memoria* in its ancient and medieval contexts see the classic study of Yates, *The Art of Memory*, as well as the more contemporary surveys of Kennedy, *Classical Rhetoric and Its Christian and Secular Tradition*; and Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*.

19. Cf. Thomas Bradwardine's statement, "each [memory—sw.] location should be of moderate size, as much as one's visual power can comprehend in a single look." Translated by Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*, 281.

the artificial memory could be stocked with heterogenous units, one strand of which could be, for example, sayings (*sententiae*) that were in themselves trustworthy starting points (*auctoritates*) for thinking about divine love and creaturely evil. Other strands might be arguments, metaphors, or narratives; all of them trustworthy starting points in their own right.[20]

Julian's inner promptings suggested that she was to treat the vision of the lord and the servant as if it were a memory image. In other words, she felt prompted to examine the vision's every detail and to do so in a determinate order. If this were, in fact, a memory image that she constructed and maintained on her own recognizance, her orderly examination of its features would gain access to units of meaning and expression she had previously attached to the image's many places. By collating and re-collating these units, she would "invent" a discourse in and through which to think about things and so discover their meaning. Of course, she had not constructed the "image" of the lord and his servant. Rather she had been *given* it. Was her "showing" or revelation, then, an infused memory image to which were attached units of revelation to be discovered by subsequent contemplation?

As tempting as it is, there is one difficulty with this picture. Her vision is not a static one, and memory images needed to be static or unchanging as well as striking if they were to do their work. That is why the most famous treatment of rhetorical *memoria*, the pseudo-Cicero's *Rhetorica Ad Herennium*, takes architectural tableaux as its memory images of choice.[21] While medieval memory images did not need to be restricted to architectural tableaux, they too were invariably static and unchanging. What Julian is given in her vision is, by contrast, a story. It is full of movement. In it, characters are given to grandiose gestures; they leap, race and fall, writhe in agony or empathy, embrace and weep for joy.

Still, it is beyond dispute that Julian felt prompted to treat the vision mnemonically. I mean that she assumed the narrative contained hidden meaning she had to discover contemplatively via the cogitative acts of collation and invention proper to *memoria* as formal rhetorical constituent. This assumption points us, in turn, towards the literary and

20. For the conjunction of authority, authorship, and memory see Carruthers' chapter, "Memory and Authority," in Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*, 189–220, and the literature cited there.

21. Yates is particularly thorough in discussion of this point in *The Art of Memory*, 1–26.

philosophical integument.[22] The rhetorical and philosophical trope of the integument had by Julian's day an ancient pedigree. It first arose in the Hellenistic centuries of Antiquity, as the grammarians of Ptolemaic Egypt or Seleucid Antioch struggled to read the Homeric corpus and the stories of the gods collected by archaic Greek mythographers in a way that remained edifying in their very different world. This Hellenistic interpretive practice contributed mightily, on the one hand, to the development of the spiritual exegesis of the Scriptures within the so-called Alexandrian school of patristic Christianity. On the other hand, Latin schoolmasters of the twelfth century found themselves in a situation parallel to that of the Hellenistic grammarians and so found their interpretive strategies as helpful as had the Alexandrian fathers. Twelfth-century schoolmasters faced the authoritative survival of a disparate body of pagan mythographies and the many stories they preserved. They responded by further elaborating protocols of integumental reading whereby they sought to open up pagan narratives to properly Christian meaning. Pagan narratives were read as stories providentially preserved from the wreck of the ancient world because they hid within themselves significance that was appropriate to Christian edification.[23] The Christian reader accessed the edifying kernel hidden below the narrative surface by attending to the narrative surface in all its many details. Collative meditation upon the narrative details brought hidden meaning to the surface much as examination of one's memory-image called to the surface the mnemonic units attached to the image's significant features, or, for that matter, as spiritual reflection upon the parables, metaphors, and poetic utterances of the Scriptures gave rise to a deeper significance pointing beyond themselves to Christ, the soul, or the world-made-right. It seems to me, then, that Julian understood her vision of the lord and the servant integumentally. She approached it meditatively in order to call to mind the units of meaning hidden within it so as to collate and recollate those units via the rhetorical process of invention into a coherent and edifying discourse.[24]

22. The significance of the integument and of integumental reading is well brought out in Jeauneau, "L'usage de la notion *d'integumentum*"; Dronke, *Fabula*; Dronke, ed., *History of Twelfth-Century Western Philosophy*; Stock, *Myth and Science in the Twelfth Century*.

23. This cultural ethos is brilliantly sketched in the introduction of Southern, *Scholastic Humanism and the Unification of Europe*, 1–10.

24. For invention and its attendant acts both discursive and cultural, see Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought*.

As such, Julian's integumental treatment of the vision of the lord and his servant constituted simultaneously an instance of the spiritual exegesis of divine revelation, in this instance, the private revelation or "showing" granted her.

Julian and the Riddle of Evil

The passage from chapter 50 that we have just tarried over follows upon two antecedent meditations that together articulate a central tension of the *Showings* as a whole. In chapter 49 Julian reflects upon the love of God and its implications for God's posture towards creatures. In her view human life is rooted in love, and there is no life for us apart from love's grounding.[25] This "showing" entails that "it is absolutely impossible that God should be angry. Anger and friendship are mutually opposed."[26] She contrasts this divine posture with our own posture towards ourselves in this life: "and I know Þat we . . . be moch blame worthy."[27] The disjunction causes her to wonder. She can neither deny the knowledge of self-blame taught by the church and confirmed by her own experience, nor deny the blame-free revelation of her "showings." "How may this be[?]"[28] she wonders. Her marveling, in turn, brings her to anguish as she struggles, suspended upon the horns of her dilemma: "It was the more surprising that I should see the Lord God regard us with no more blame than if we had been as pure and holy as his angels in heaven. Between these two opposites my mind was extremely perplexed. I could not see how to reconcile them, nor could I relax for fear that I might lose sight of his blessed presence and be left ignorant of how he could be thought to regard us in our sin."[29]

25. College and Walsh, *Showings*, 505.

26. Julian, *Revelations*, 137. "[I]t is the most vnpossible that may be that god shulde be wrath, for wrath and frendschyppe be two contrariese" (College and Walsh, *Showings*, 505).

27. College and Walsh, *Showings*, 510.

28. Ibid.

29. Julian, *Revelations*, 140. "Then was this my merveyle that I saw oure lord god shewyng to vs no more blame then if we were as clene and as holy as angelis be in hevyn. And between theyse two contraryes my reson was grettly traveyled by my blyndnes, and culde haue no rest for drede that his blessed presens shulde passe fro my sight, and I to be lefte in vnknowyng how he beholde vs in oure synne" (College and Walsh, *Showings*, 510–11).