

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Book of Showings (A, 282-284)

Julian of Norwich (1342- after 1416)

The bare facts of the case

How much can you know of an anchoress who cloisters herself from the world, after a ceremonial burial has ritually closed her off from the rest of society? And who spends the greater part of her life immured in a small cell, with only a narrow window to give her access to food and the rare human voice. The answer is, not much: that the cloister itself was in Norwich, in East Anglia, and is still standing, and that we know from Julian exactly the time when she received the visions that she writes of in her *Book of Showings*: May 13, 1373, at the age of thirty and a half. The rest is in the text, her *Book of Showings*.

Accessibility

With William Langland, author of *Piers Plowman*, we asked whether we are able to access the religious allegorical style today, and whether the dream vision is a captivating literary form for us. We were of course raising the issue of reading mystical Christian literature in an age when narratives of other kinds may be more familiar or attractive to us. We tossed back and forth the possibilities of reaching beyond our familiar discourse to a relatively distant idiom and stage of our own language. We had to feel that, in the case of Langland, we had difficulty feeling at home with the tale he told, rather formal and stiff but purposeful—in the category, perhaps, of a centuries-later writer like John Bunyan, who also tends to win our hearts through a rather innocent genuineness. With Julian the problem is keener than with her contemporary Langland. The physical of the created world—whether Christ's bleeding head or a simple hazelnut—is infused with its spiritual meaning and presence, and yet retains a totally absorbing hereness and nowness. Is she an innocent? Is *this a type of imagination which you are at home with? Do you "understand" it? Can you think yourself into this kind of vision?*

Mystical Territory

We are getting into mystical territory here, not just into the visionary realm Langland took us through in *Piers Plowman*. This is therefore the time, right at the beginning, to recommend a great book, Evelyn Underhill's *Mysticism* (London, 1911), which will shed light on the nature of mystical experience, as well as on the mediaeval context for the meditations of a woman like Julian of Norwich. Interestingly enough, mystical insights are inevitably tied to the cultural sensibilities of a particular historical moment. Being a mystic at a certain time means reflecting that time's tone and street sense in your mysticism. Does mysticism not take you 'out of time'? Perhaps it opens you to the finest essence of your time?

A literary parallel

Julian of Norwich writes her visions from the center of her time, though surely not without literary genius as shaper. You might want to study the filiations that join great literature with a kind of mysticism. You might want to look into the portrayal of religious states *in* literature, as distinct from the actuality of such states as literature (Julian's case.) Good case studies of mysticism as literature can be found throughout the work of Fyodor Dostoyevsky, whose *The Brothers Karamazov* explores the religious sensibility, almost as if from the inside, but still as part of a narrator's portrayal: the characters of Alyosha, Father Zosima, and of the Grand Inquisitor are perfect examples of the portrayal of the religious sensibility from *within* literature. In these figures of imagination, the mystical condition is realized. Let's see how Julian inscribes such ineffable feelings, as she finds or is them, in herself.

Mystical text

We can satisfy ourselves, in the case of Julian, by looking closely at a chapter from her *Revelations of Divine Love* (The Showings. Chapter V). She places us close to her soul, as she receives intimations of conversation from her Lord who is rising inside her.

In this same time our Lord shewed me a spiritual^[1] sight of His homely loving. I saw that He is to us everything that is good and comfortable for us: He is our clothing that for love wrappeth us, claspeth us, and all encloseth^[2] us for tender love, that He may never leave us; being to us all-thing that is good, as to mine understanding.

Also in this He shewed me a little thing, the quantity of an hazel-nut, in the palm of my hand; and it was as round as a ball. I looked thereupon with the eye of my understanding, and thought: What may this be? And it was answered generally thus: it is all that is made. I marveled how it might last, for methought it might suddenly have fallen to naught for little[ness]. And I was answered in my understanding: It lasteth, and ever shall [last] for that God loveth it. And so All-thing hath the Being by the love of God.

In this Little Thing I saw three properties. The first is that God made it, the second is that God loveth it, the third, that God keepeth it. But what is to me verily the Maker, the Keeper, and the Lover,—I cannot tell; for till I am Substantially oned^[3] to Him, I may never have full rest nor very bliss: that is to say, till I be so fastened to Him, that there is right nought that is made betwixt my God and me.

It needeth us to have knowing of the littleness of creatures and to hold as nought^[4] all-thing that is made, for to love and have God that is unmade. For this is the cause why we be not all in ease of heart and soul: that we seek here rest in those things that are so little, wherein is no rest, and know not our God that is All-mighty, All-wise, All-good. For He is the Very Rest. God willeth to be known, and it pleaseth Him that we rest in Him; for all that is beneath Him sufficeth not us. And this is the cause why that no soul is rested till it is made nought as to all^[5] things that are made. When it is willingly made nought, for love, to have Him that is all, then is it able to receive spiritual rest.

Also our Lord God shewed that it is full great pleasance to Him that a helpless soul come to Him simply and plainly and homely. For this is the natural yearnings of the soul, by the touching of the Holy Ghost (as by the understanding that I have in this Shewing): God, of Thy Goodness, give me Thyself: for Thou art enough to me, and I may nothing ask that is less that may be full worship to Thee; and if I ask anything that is less, ever me wanteth,—but only in Thee I have all.

And these words are full lovely to the soul, and full near touch they the will of God and His Goodness. For His Goodness comprehendeth all His creatures and all His blessed works, and overpasseth^[6] without end. For He is the endlessness, and He hath made us only to Himself, and restored us by His blessed Passion, and keepeth us in His blessed love; and all this of His Goodness."ghostly," and so, generally, throughout the MS.

Inside this mystical text: A Commentary.

Julian guides us through contemplation of a humble object, the hazelnut. What strikes us, as characteristic of her thinking, is its muscularity. The Lord's 'homely loving' shows up in the simplicity by which it displays its thereness. 'He shewed me a little thing,' she proceeds, declaring simply that a small hazelnut is there in her hand. She looks at it, 'with the eye of her understanding.' From simply holding the object she allows her understanding to penetrate it. That penetration enables her to ask herself 'what may this be'? (In other words the hazelnut's otherness suffices to raise the question of what it is. The succession of conditions of awareness is en marche.) The answer to Julian's question is that it, the hazelnut, is "all that is made." If so, how will it last? Mustn't what is made fall out of existence? She answers herself that because God loves the hazelnut it cannot fall out of existence. (The ensuing dialogue is with herself, answering her own questions.) 'And so all thing hath the being through the love of God.' God as Maker, Keeper, and Lover is forever separated from me, so that by the amount of that separation I can never be at rest. will only be at peace if there is no making separating me from God. Our end is to rest in God.

From the amazement of something that exists by God's making, that is simply present, to our awareness of God's love, manifest in his making, to our sense of the fraught distance that separates us from our creator, Julian drives a muscular path of self-posed questions and charged responses.