

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Julian of Norwich (1342-1416) *Book of Showings* (A, 282-284)

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? 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.

Question: The Vision of a Bleeding Head

With William Langland we asked whether we are able to access the allegorical style today, and whether the dream vision is a captivating literary form for us. We were of course raising the issue of reading Christian literature in an age when narratives of other kinds may be more familiar or attractive to us. With Julian the problem is keener. 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 andnowness. Question: *is this a type of imagination which you are at home with? Do you "understand" it? Can you live with this Vision?*

Comparative Literature:

1. We are getting into mystical territory here, not just into the visionary realm Langland took us through in *Piers Plowman*. This is the time 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.
2. Julian of Norwich writes from the center of her visions, though surely not without literary genius as shaper. You might want to look into the portrayal of religious states *in* literature, as distinct from *as* literature (Julian's case.) Good case studies 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.