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On the *Showings* of Julian of Norwich
The Short Text

In 1373, anchoress Julian of Norwich received sixteen visions of Christ. She lay ill and close to death as they came to her, and soon upon recovering wrote an account of these “showings,” which describes their contents and revealed meaning. This account, in twenty-five chapters, begins with Julian’s desire for “bodily sight [of the pains of Christ]” through near mortal illness, which she is granted. (125) This is followed by revelations on the created and uncreated things of the world, on the nature of pain and of sin, and on the necessity of sin. Julian elaborates on these concepts in a later, more detailed theological interpretation of her original account; these works are known respectively as the Short Text and the Long Text, and stand together as the *Revelations of Divine Love*. This essay concerns the Short Text alone.

There are three active entities in the Short Text. The first is the group of Julian's companions, who surround her deathbed, where their actions and statements precipitate important spiritual events. Only when the parson comes with his crucifix and says “Daughter, I have brought you the image of your saviour. Look at it and take comfort in it, in reverence of him who died for you and me,” does Julian feel she must move her eyes down from heaven onto the cross. (128) With this motion of the eye begins the series of showings, which reinforces the importance of the physical sight of the crucifix: “Whilst I looked at the cross I was secure and safe... apart from the cross there was no safety, but only the horror of devils.” (143) The presence of the cross splits Julian’s concept of heaven, such that she must choose either the bliss and ease of that which lies above her, where she would go in death, or the pain of Christ, on which her eye is fixed. And Julian finds “I did not want to look up [to heaven], for I would rather have remained in that pain until Judgment Day than have come to heaven any other way than by him... Thus I chose Jesus for my heaven, whom I saw only in pain at that time.” (143) When Julian’s mother, “standing there with the others, held up her hand in front of my face to close my eyes... this greatly increased my sorrow, for despite all my pains, I did not want to be hindered from seeing, because of my love for him.” (142) The presence of the

parson and of her mother make it clear how important it is for Julian to be connected by the sight of her eye, her physical sight, to the physical object of the cross. Through their presence, we are made to consider the species of vision, and the relationships between them; how one may lead to the other, and how they may be told apart, if at all.

The second entity is Julian herself; the whole text is in first person, and all characters are addressed only by Julian, and address no one else. Therefore we are situated uniquely in her mind, and are shown what she is shown, which is quickly followed by its meaning. For instance, seeing “[Christ’s] body bleeding copiously, the blood hot, flowing freely, a living stream,” Julian immediately supplies her own opinion: “It is [pleasing to God] that we accept freely his blessed blood to wash us of our sins, for there is no drink that is made which it pleases him so well to give us; for it is so plentiful, and it is of our own nature.” (137) There has been made no mention of the pleasure of Christ, or of man’s nature, shortly before or after this statement, so it appears to be Julian’s own synthesis of all else that she sees and senses, although it is not spoken or shown to her explicitly. In contrast, when she is made to look at “something small, no bigger than a hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand,” she makes no guess but asks: “What can this be? And I was given this general answer: It is everything which is made. I was amazed that it could last, for I thought it was so little that it could suddenly fall into nothing. And I was answered in my understanding...” (130) All she needs do is pose questions; each statement made in this chapter comes by way of her, dawns into her, directly from the hand and mouth of God, the only active agent. The vision of Christ’s body begins with “I saw,” whereas the latter vision begins with “He showed me.” (130, 137) Julian’s mind is thus distinct from that of God, who is the spiritual third entity of her visions, which distinguishes the text as one of revelation as opposed to ideation: it is not Julian’s thought we have come to know, but the truth as has come through her, as far as we may imagine she has understood it, and as God may have presented it to her understanding.

This distinction becomes important as Julian determines the audience of her visions. When “a man of religion came to me and asked me how I did, I said that during the day I had been raving,” which she then feels is a misrepresentation, as the “raving” would have come from her, whereas the visions came from God. (162) When she continues that “the cross that stood at the foot of my bed bled profusely,” he “became

very serious and surprised. And at once I was very ashamed of my imprudence, and I thought: This man takes seriously every word I could say.” (162) The invocation of God’s pain legitimizes Julian, but still she hesitates: “I could not tell it to any priest, for I thought: How could a priest believe me? I did not believe our Lord God.” (162) The issue becomes no longer that of her own credibility, but rather of each individual man’s willingness to believe. Yet the need to share it outweighs all such considerations, for it concerns “all my fellow Christians, [as] I am taught that this is what our Lord intends in this spiritual revelation.” (133) Julian devotes an entire chapter of the Short Text to the fact that she is “nothing at all, [but] in the unity of love with all my fellow Christians... I write as the representative of my fellow Christians.” (134) Yet as their representative, she must further excuse herself, “for I am a woman, ignorant, weak and frail.” (135) Here again is invoked the saving third entity of God: “Because I am a woman, ought I therefore to believe that I should not tell you of the goodness of God, when I saw at the same time that it is his will that it be known?” (135) The text starts out explicitly as “a vision shown by the goodness of God to a devout woman.” (125) Perhaps it would contain fewer chapters were her sex not mentioned at all.

The *Showings* introduce a variety of concepts that are difficult to reconcile. For instance, Julian’s use of the words *everything* and *nothing* seems to diverge from their vernacular meaning. While Chapter IX concludes that “bliss lasts forevermore, and pain is passing and will be reduced to nothing;” Chapter X begins with a graphic depiction of Christ’s torment, “as if he had been dead for a week and had still gone on suffering pain.” (141) How can Christ’s Passion be so central to Christian thought, powerful enough to affect “all creatures able to suffer pain,” and still be *nothing*? (143) God has created everything that is made, and yet one must “despise as nothing everything created, so as to have the love of uncreated God.” (132) Then is God’s nature separate from his creation? Must the created vacate itself of its own nature to accommodate his? The Devil is to be scorned as nothing; is then the Devil also created? (138) If not, can the uncreated be scorned?

We may consider *everything* the office of creation, for a thing exists in relation to other things that are created, for they are of the same size and origin, and can be compared. In the world of the created, all things that have ever been are all of the same dimensions, having all come from the shaping hand of God

and tiny in comparison to him. Julian looks at “everything which is made,” and is “amazed that it could last, for I thought it was so little that it could suddenly fall into nothing.” (130) *Nothing* is the office of divinity, which dwarfs creation. Then to despise creation as nothing is to look towards the divine, to keep one’s eye trained on God: Julian’s eye never leaves the cross, around which all darkens into nothing. In that darkness, she supposes there are devils. But those devils are reduced to nothing, for they are seen in comparison to God. *Everything* and *nothing* exist only in relative terms, and all things are judged in relation to God, for he is in everything and is the end of everything, as all things have come from him. To the created thing, those around him are in being, for he is of the same size and nature as them. Yet if he could look completely to God and be given also to him, his soul would seem as nothing in relation to God’s greatness. Similarly, he would despise his pain as fleeting, for at the end of it is the bliss of Heaven: “Let [man] pass [pain] over lightly and count it as nothing... why should it grieve [him] to endure for awhile, since that is [God’s] will and to [God’s] glory?” (162)

Yet we could not despise our pain if we could not have bliss. Our pain would then no longer exist in relation to a larger thing, either in its duration or in its meaning. We are able to do so only because Christ himself has taken his place among those he has created and suffered at the scale of the existing *everything*. He suffers more than any created thing, more than all creation, “more pain than would all men together, from the first beginning to the last day,” and so his suffering dwarfs everything, and turns it to nothing. (144) In this is his ultimate Humanity, that he is more Human and a better Creation than any other thing, for he can suffer so much of the particular, more than any have ever suffered. And yet “he counts as nothing his labour and his bitter sufferings... [counts] it all as nothing for love, for everything seems only little to him in comparison with his love.” (145) In this is his Divinity, that he can see the largest pain of creation as nothing, and that his relation to everything has made even the Devil into a nothing to be scorned. Christ is God and Man at once, and so in him is the culmination of nothing and of everything. Our bliss is possible only because Christ has suffered for our sins, such that we may be rejoined to him in Heaven. Therefore we are able to despise our pain, for in comparison to the divine eternity it is nothing, and so we ourselves may achieve a measure of divinity, through the gift and the sacrifice of Christ.

And the seed of this eternity is love. All creation “lasts and always will, because God loves it; and thus everything has being through the love of God.” (130) And Christ is God’s greatest act of love, that he has been sent to suffer for his beloved. The pain of Christ’s lover mirrors his pain, for there is “[no] greater pain than to see him who is all my life, all my bliss and all my joy suffer.” (142) The created thing suffers the fullest extent of her suffering for He who has done the same, and in this there is justice, absolution and symmetry, because Christ is “longing in love, and that persists and always will until we see him on the day of judgment.” (151) He has suffered and died such that everyone he loves may come to him, and it is right of his lover to honor him by suffering in return, by feeding and growing her love, which is greater than the pain it causes, and turns the pain to nothing. This is the office of the divine, to which her love unites her.

This union is, however, incomplete: when “our Lord brought to my mind the longing that I had for him before, I saw that nothing hindered me but sin.” (147) Although it stands between her and God, Julian believes “that [sin] has no kind of substance, no share in being, nor can it be recognized except by the pains it causes.” (148) Then Christ’s Passion should have left for sin no place in all creation, for all creation is of God. Yet sin still exists in created things, exists as the pain of sin, which is distinct from other pains since “a soul may have God in every pain, but not in sin.” (156) And we are told that “during the time that a man is in sin he is so weak, so foolish, so unloving that he can love neither God nor himself.” (159) Then the task of man to conquer sin is to put before all his love for God, who lives in him in the figure of Christ, and to have such a love that it drives him away from his own soul, from his created soul. And his soul will come to nothing, and his sin be brought to dust beside his pain and longing. And in this is the assurance that all will be well, for “Adam’s sin was the greatest sin ever done or ever to be done until the end of the world,” and yet God atoned for Adam’s sin. (149) And if such a sin can be unmade, so can any be unmade through the pain of love.

Julian writes with an ease of hand that leaves little in hiding. Her sentences are clean, short, steady, and yet they reach across such scapes of thought that they are left in opposition, at least in appearance. It is the slow, discerning reader’s task to weave them together in comparison, by which one is made large and the other small. We are shown that there is sin that divides us from the good and the bliss of God. And yet

man should sin, for it is his honor to be redeemed, and this comes by an awareness that brings him white, hot, redeeming pain, white and hot like the light on Julian's cross. Of this she wishes more, that she might see Christ's Passion more clearly, for she loves him as he loves her. And that love keeps the soul penitent, until its pain and longing grow so large that sin is made nothing. Any sin can be made nothing if even the greatest sin, the original sin, could be shone out of existence by the pain and thirst of Christ, whose thirst is his love for us. And we thirst in reciprocity, in compassion, that we may know him completely, and suffer out the sins of our lives, that we may be fit to be joined with him.

Bibliography

Julian of Norwich. *Showings*, tr. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh. Paulist Press, 1978.