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The Performative Body of Christ in Julian of Norwich's A Vision

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Table of Contents

Foreword · A Vernacular Theology	5
Chapter 1 · Julian and her Texts	13
- 1.1 Biographical and Anchoritic Notes	13
- 1.2 Text and Context: Manuscripts, Editions, and their Readers	21
Chapter 2 · Christ’s Body and Affective Piety	29
- 2.1 The Dual Nature of Christ	29
- 2.2 Affective Piety: Reading and Writing Christ’s Body	30
- 2.3 Making a Virtue of Necessity: Women Writing Christ’s Body	36
- 2.4 Mary as a Model	40
Chapter 3 · Julian’s Body of Christ	43
- 3.1 <i>A Vision, A Revelation</i> , and the Guiding Voice of Julian	43
- 3.2 <i>A Vision</i> as a Multi-Sensory Experience	47
- 3.3 <i>A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman</i> and to the ‘evencristene’	53
- 3.3.1 ‘I desirede to have minde of Cristes passion’	54
- 3.3.2 ‘I wolde that his paines ware my paines’	59
- 3.3.3 ‘I suo fattore / non disdegnò di farsi sua fattura’	63
- 3.3.4 ‘For I am a woman’: a Textual Analysis of Self-fashioning	68
- 3.3.5 ‘I laugh mightelye’: Enfolding and Hybridising	71
- 3.3.6 “If thowe be payed, I am paid”	77
- 3.3.7 ‘Woundes as wyrshippes’ and the Mystical Body of Christ	85
Conclusion · ‘Stage Directions’ for the Quotidian Salvation	91
Summary in Italian	95
Bibliography	103

Foreword · A Vernacular Theology

Julian of Norwich's *A Vision* is the first known work written in Middle English by a woman, and it is probably also the first piece of theology (in the sense of discourse about God) written in English. It is mainly the account of the visions Julian received during several days of serious illness, in May 1373, from which deep theological teachings are discussed and understood.

The present dissertation places the text of Julian in the contemporary tradition of affective piety devotional practices and literary works, while highlighting the peculiar relation that the text maintains with its main source text, the crucified body of Christ. Julian's devotional quotidian practice becomes literature when it is shared. Therefore the analysis wants to investigate the negotiation of, in the words of Nancy Bradley Warren, 'the complex processes involved in transforming embodied experiences of God, and especially of the incarnate Christ, into texts.'¹ The discussion analyses the active role that the usually passive object of the crucifix has in Julian of Norwich's literary work. The imagery Julian uses creates a literary path towards the understanding of the same teachings she received in her visionary experience, in a language that speaks of inclusion, blurred borders, and interactions of bodies.

Julian is writing in the vernacular, in a language that is more accessible to her 'evencristene', a term she uses quite often to refer simply to her fellow Christian, the evangelical neighbour, the other unsophisticated human being who seeks comfort and spiritual guidance for the same problems Julian struggles with. Contrary to other affective texts, Julian of Norwich expresses her meditative experience without any

¹ Nancy Bradley Warren, *The Embodied Word: Female Spiritualities, Contested Orthodoxies, and English Religious Cultures, 1350-1700* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), p. 21.

sentimentality and with a remarkable clarity of mind even during the most intense visions. She is honest and encouragingly human, showing that, despite the special grace that has been accorded to her, she struggles with everyday life exactly like everyone else: for she is ‘hungery and thirstye and nedy and sinfulle and freele’.² In a particularly earnest passage in V 9. 16-45, she describes her perfectly human swinging of faith about her visions and the project of love that God showed her:

And than the paine shewed againe to my felinge, and than the joye and than the likinge, and than the tane and nowe the tothere, diverses times, I suppose aboute twentye sithes. (V 9. 27-30)

In her effort to make plain complicated and sometimes irreconcilable religious truths, Julian of Norwich surprises the modern reader for the intensity of her ‘determination to reimagine Christian thought in its entirety, not as a system of ideas but as an answer to human need’.³

Two versions of Julian of Norwich’s literary work are known: *A Vision*, or Short Text, and *A Revelation*, or Long Text. The present dissertation develops its analysis on the Short Text for various reasons; the most practical one concerns the necessary limited dimension of the study. The Short Text is generally less studied than its longer version; sometimes the research work for this dissertation has been unpleasantly impeded by the lack of attention to *A Vision*. The Long Text is most of the time edited and published on its own. Even the great complete edition of the two texts by Colledge and Walsh lacks synoptic references in its otherwise rich analytic apparatus, and almost completely

² *The Writing of Julian of Norwich: A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman and A Revelation of Love*, ed. by Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006), *A Vision*, ch. 13, l. 42. Further references to Julian’s works, unless otherwise stated, are from this edition. They are given after quotation in the text with ‘R’ for *A Revelation* or ‘V’ for *A Vision*, followed by chapter number and lines.

³ Watson and Jenkins (2006), p. 3.

ignores the significant structure of the Short Text and its original thematic discourses.⁴ The edition in contemporary English by Barry Windeatt is laudable in its choice to include the translation of *A Vision* in a version destined to the non-expert public,⁵ although its explanatory notes to the Short Text are unhelpfully dedicated to the frequent remarks that the Long Text is longer than the Short one. Watson and Jenkins' edition of both texts is remarkable for its attention to readers with no knowledge of Middle English and little or no understanding of editing. It offers the original texts with little spelling modernisation and abundance of glosses and paraphrases. The interesting feature of this edition (the one that has been chosen for the quotations from Julian's texts in this dissertation) is the analytic version of *A Vision* printed synoptically along with *A Revelation*. This editing choice does seem as another remark that *A Vision* is permanently submitted to its longer version, but it helps to retrieve the Short Text's structure and makes its inventive passages immediately visible.

What poses some interesting questions is the fact that the Short Text is very rarely studied and consulted as the existing version which is nearest to Julian's original text.⁶ The manuscripts that preserve the Long Text are separated from the living time of Julian by more than two centuries, with all the consequent scribal and editorial modifications that this implies. On the contrary, the scribal rubric of *A Vision* dates the text (or at least the model from which it was copied to) 1413, when Julian was probably still alive (V Rubric 2). The present dissertation wants to challenge the idea that 'the

⁴ Julian of Norwich, *A Book of Showings to the anchoress Julian of Norwich*, ed. by Edmund Colledge O.S.A. and James Walsh S.J., 2 vols (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1978), pp. 71-196.

⁵ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, ed. and trans. by Barry Windeatt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

⁶ If such an original text ever existed. It may be (as is more likely, considering the fluid notion of texts and books in medieval manuscript culture) that various versions of the text were distributed in different, 'customised' versions, as Watson and Jenkins call them (2006), p. 27.

original revelations as recorded in the short text do not present an immediately connected thematic sequence', are 'fragmentary and enigmatic; a series of segments, without much foreground or background, and in no particular order.'⁷ Therefore this analysis considers *A Vision* as a text standing on its own, suggesting an interpretation of its structure that is coherent with the meaning Julian seems to give to the text.

Too often the interpretations of Julian's texts have been based on standard linear narrative approaches that did not consider the beauty and reasons behind the 'curiously recursive and apparently involuted'⁸ style of her narration. Julian of Norwich does not simply record a series of events: she reads her experience as a paratext to the main text which is Christ's body. Her language must therefore be fully sensorial and physical, acknowledging but not taking to extremes the subordination of the body to the soul. Both her imagery and her narrative style speak of 'enfolding, embracing and enclosing, invoking an all-encompassing three-dimensional aesthetic'.⁹ Her understandings have an endpoint, and their circularity does not imply an incompleteness; still, the arguments she discusses are too important and complicated to be resolved in a simple, linear, and straightforward logical argumentation. Her recurrent domestic practice to get to the understandings is translated in the text with a recursive hybrid language of physicality and spirituality, which conflates quotidian and spiritual through the simultaneous presence of divine and human in Christ's body.

The analysis starts from a consideration of the few biographical details that are traceable for the author of *A Vision*. Even if there is no trace of her anchoritic life in her

⁷ Windeatt (2015), p. xix.

⁸ Vincent Gillespie, "[S]he do the police in different voices": Pastiche, Ventriloquism and Parody in Julian of Norwich', in *A Companion to Julian of Norwich*, ed. by Liz Herbert McAvoy (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2008), pp. 192-207 (p. 192).

⁹ Gillespie (2008), p. 193.

texts, wills and manuscript evidence show that at some point in her life (maybe after receiving her visions) Julian of Norwich decided to become an anchoress. Bequests in Norwich and Suffolk wills testify to the rich and affectionate community that formed around Julian of Norwich, while the encounter with Margery Kempe, recorded in Kempe's book, shows that the visionary experience in particular created empowering interchanges between women. The now almost traditional assumption that Julian was a nun prior to her anchoritic reclusion is questioned on the basis of evidence sometimes neglected. Nevertheless, the question is left open and uncertain. The biographical and anchoritic notes are offered as an introduction and do not influence the analysis much, precisely because of the uncertainty of most of them. It is suggested that some of the centrality attributed to the body of Christ and some imagery of inclusion and enfolding are the result of the anchoritic life Julian was experiencing when she decided to write her book.

A consideration of the manuscript versions of both the Short Text and the Long Text is made to contextualise their editorial history, the real audience of the texts, and the influence that Julian's texts had over the centuries. The fortune of the texts is very limited: instances of engagement with them are rare, although they show some circulation and assimilation amongst other devout women, both lay and religious. The analysis of Julian's ultimate teaching in the present consideration of *A Vision* does suggest a possible reason for centuries of neglecting of one of the greatest pieces of vernacular theology of the late Middle Ages. Nevertheless, this analysis explores the intersubjective presence of the body of Christ in Julian of Norwich's *A Vision*, and it is therefore there that the analysis is directed.

Julian of Norwich's texts show a great affinity with other works of affective piety. Affective piety encompasses a series of devotional practices and texts that made Christ's humanity the centre of their devotion and discourse. The analysis of Julian's works is framed and helped by a discussion on medieval views on Christ's double nature, and how his humanity is consequently depicted in other mystical, meditative, and theological works of the Middle Ages. Particular attention is given to literary depictions of Christ's body, especially to the imagery created around his wounds, the openness of his body, and the reading of these signs as a text. Some examples of other medieval mystic women are given to provide a wide and gendered context. These texts highlight the strategies women had to implement to acquire some authority; the same are used by Julian on various levels and with interesting rhetorical ability. Another gendered discourse is made on Mary, the mother of Jesus. Her representation in affective piety works is briefly analysed as an additional source of power and authority for female authors. Both a distant model, and the human and feminine vector through which the Godhead acquired his human form, Mary is a figure that Julian exploits variously in her long process of self-fashioning as a woman and as an author.

As already mentioned, the visionary experience of Julian encompasses her senses on more than one level. The modalities in which she describes her experience reflect the multi-sensory characteristic of the visions. In keeping with the medieval hierarchy of the senses, sight is nevertheless prevalent. Gaze initiates the visionary experience and is for Julian the primary means of interchange with the crucifix. The contemporary optic theories on light certainly influenced the understanding of Julian in respect to her visions, but it is suggested that the dichotomy light/dark is blurred in the discourse on Christ's body, because of its open character and the coexistence of human

and divine nature in it. In describing a personal experience that encompassed a series of sensations – first of all the bodily sharing of Christ’s pains – Julian needs to employ a language that mixes spiritual with physical, in a way that makes her individual experience shareable and understandable by a readership that did not experience it.

The analysis shows that Julian introduces the reader to her experience through the same vehicle she used: Christ’s body. She does use the typical resources of affective piety, depicting the body of Christ with the devotional canons of the late Middle Ages. Despite this, the analysis shows that in Julian of Norwich’s *A Vision* the body of Christ has a function that goes beyond the static object for meditation: it performs real actions in Julian’s spiritual journey. This is evident from the beginning of the text, when Julian expresses her desire for a broadening of the senses involved in her meditative practice. She asks for a bodily sight, instead of something purely spiritual, and for an experience of the moments of the Passion that goes beyond time and space, that brings her to participate with her physical body to the events.

This desire translates, after a journey through the various stages of the Passion, in an experience of compassion: the sharing of the crucified body’s sufferings. Mary, the mother of Jesus, is the only other character to perform actions in *A Vision*. Her role is to direct Julian, and all humanity, towards the crucified body of her son: as the first person to share Christ’s sufferings, Mary is a model and a tool for Julian’s self-fashioning. Mary indicates that the history of salvation is participated by the whole humanity in the sharing of Christ’s pain. The union with Christ’s body is, for Julian, inescapably embodied in the concrete relationship with her fellow Christian and the human community, in the same union made possible by the coexistence of the two natures of Christ in his body.

Julian's language reflects this coexistence and this mingling, by creating an involuted discourse on openness, inclusion, recurrency, enfolding, and universality. The physicality of Christ's scourged body is mixed with the spirituality of highly theological discourses, creating a path towards the knowledge of God that does not remove the devotee from his or her quotidian reality made of flesh, and put him or her in a relationship with the other.

Chapter 1 · Julian and her Texts

1.1 Biographical and Anchoritic Notes

Very little is known for certain about Julian of Norwich. Hers is the only name we have for the author of two texts, *A Vision Shewed be the Goodenes of God to a Devoute Woman*, and *A Revelation of Love that Jhesu Christ, Our Endles Blisse, Made in Sixteen Shewinges*.¹⁰ She was a contemporary of Geoffrey Chaucer and the first known woman to write in vernacular English.

Very few details are revealed about her life in her texts, and virtually nothing is known about those she is silent about. Her birth date can be deduced by the information she gives in the texts: being thirty and a half years old when she received her sickness and first visions in May 1373, she was probably born around the end of the 1342 and the beginning of 1343. (V 2.1; R 2.2; 3.1) The author of the rubric at the beginning of *A Showing* identifies her gender ('a devoute woman'), where she lived ('Norwiche'), her present state, or profession, in a way ('recluse'), and that she was alive in 1413. (V Rubric 1-2) No other significant date is present in the texts and scholars based their suppositions and theories on few external evidences. The most important of these is probably the appearance in *The Book of Margery Kempe*, the biography of the other English mystic of East Anglia, a contemporary of Julian.

More than for the evidence of Julian's whereabouts and profession, the account in *The Book* is interesting for the direct testimony it gives of Julian's immediate reception, reputation, and authority. Margery is driven to Norwich by the desire to find confirmation that her visions are from the Holy Spirit and not of devilish provenance.

¹⁰ Subsequently referred to as *A Vision* or Short Text, and *A Revelation* or Long Text.

Jesus himself bids her to go to Norwich, where she meets a vicar, a Carmelite friar (both known for their sanctity and devotion), and ‘Dame Jelyan’, an ‘ankres in the same cyté’. The two women spend many days talking together: Margery, the younger, seeking advice from Julian about her own spiritual life, ‘for the ankres was expert in swech thyngys and good counsel coud gevyn’.¹¹

The authenticity of this encounter cannot be proved for certain, but the characterisation that *The Book* makes of it seems convincing enough: Margery is anxious to be told that she is on the right path and that she should not listen to other people’s disapproval, as she does innumerable times in *The Book*. Julian’s reaction, on the other hand, seems in line with her tendency to make herself anonymous and invisible: the talking is all about Margery and not directly about what Julian experienced, and Julian’s teaching is compatible with what she discusses in her works. In the words that *The Book* reports, the Holy Ghost is said never to do a thing against love, and ‘yf he dede, he wer contraryows to hys owyn self, for he is al charité’, (18. 966-7) which traces Julian’s understanding of the Godhead as love (‘love is oure lordes mening’, R 86. 17); the gifts of God Julian says to be proof of an authentic divine visit echo the three gifts Julian asks in Section 1 of *A Vision*: ‘whan God visyteth a creatur wyth terys of contrisyon, devosyon, er compassyon, he may and owyth to levyn that the Holy Gost is in hys sowle’ says *The Book*’s Julian (18. 973-5); Julian’s reported words, ‘Holy Wryt seyth that the sowle of a rytful man is the sete of God’, apart from being startling since there is no apparent Scriptural authority for this exact image, are very similar to the end of *A Vision*: ‘He [Jesus] sittes in the saule even right in pees and

¹¹ Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. by Lynn Staley (Kalamazoo: TEAMS, 1996), Ch 18, ll. 960-1. Further references to *The Book*, unless otherwise stated, are from this edition. They are given after quotation in the text with chapter number and lines.

reste'. (V 22. 6-7)¹² While the theological implication of God as love might be ascribed to the Christian tradition and particularly to the New Testament, and the three gifts are present in other treatises on meditation,¹³ the image of Jesus enthroned in the human soul is not unique but more subtly associable with Julian's work.¹⁴

Colledge and Walsh suggest a dating for Margery and Julian's exchanges, which has to be between 1402 and 1413¹⁵ – a dating confirmed by the other external evidence of Julian being the anchoress of Norwich: her mentions in wills. Julian, anchorite,¹⁶ is mentioned in 1394 in the will of the rector of St Michael Coslany, Norwich. There is no evidence of the presence of an anchorhold and therefore an anchorite living in it before this date, which leaves much speculation on what Julian was and did in the fifty years or so before her reclusion. What seems certain is the spreading of Julian's reputation as an expert in spiritual matters in the following years: in addition to the evidence brought by *The Book of Margery Kempe*, several other wills witness the gratitude of the community of Norwich (and as far as Campsey, down in Suffolk) for the anchoress Julian. Her reputation extends beyond the local community and shows her connected with wide and sometimes lofty social and religious environments.¹⁷ Colledge and Walsh argue for the existence of a maid, mentioned in wills, who served her out of devotion, not necessity, confirming the positive influence Julian had around her.¹⁸

¹² The synoptic passage in *A Revelation* is R 68. 7.

¹³ The understanding of God as love can be found in I John 4: 8; for a discussion on the origin of the three gifts of contrition, devotion, and compassion see 'Introduction' in Colledge and Walsh (1978), pp. 36-7.

¹⁴ Possible inspirations for this image are to be found in Ezek 37: 27-28; I Cor 6: 16; and Rev 21: 1-27. Julian's understanding is yet peculiar.

¹⁵ Colledge and Walsh (1978), p. 35.

¹⁶ The term is applied to both men and women, though the special feminine is 'anchoress'. It derives from the Greek *anachorein*: to retire, retreat. See *OED* n. 1. a.

¹⁷ Colledge and Walsh (1978), pp. 33-5; 'Introduction' in Julian of Norwich, *A Revelation of Love*, ed. by Marion Glasscoe (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1986), p. vii; Watson and Jenkins (2006), p. 5.

¹⁸ Colledge and Walsh (1978), p. 34.

Finally, her death must have occurred later than the last explicit mention of ‘Julian recluz a Norwich’ in a will in 1416, and probably before 1429, when the will of Robert Baxter leaves ‘the anchorite in the churchyard of St Julian’s Conesford in Norwich’ anonymous.¹⁹ There is no evidence that Julian was dead at the time, although reaching such an old age would have been extremely fortunate for the times; the fact that the other wills name Julian explicitly while the 1429 one does not supports the hypothesis that Julian had been replaced at her death by another anchoress, perhaps less famous. If this is the case, and considering the increasing number of bequests done to other Norwich anchorites around and after this date, it might be that Julian’s influence led other devout men and women to follow her in the anchorite path. There is in fact a gap of more than half a century between the last evidence of anchorites living in Norwich in the early fourteenth century and Julian.²⁰ Similarly, and related only by a curious coincidence, almost fifty years of Julian’s life are totally obscure and probably always will be.

The fact remains that the interest for the message creates the necessity to know more about Julian. Textual analysis as an absolute and pure identity is surely impossible, even if Julian tries to obliterate herself as much as possible in both texts, coming to the point of removing every reference to her personal details and to her gender from the Long Text. Her reasons for doing so are discussed later, but despite her determination to dissolve behind her writing scholars made and continue making

¹⁹ Glasscoe (1986), p. vii.

²⁰ Norman P. Tanner, *The Ages of Faith: Popular Religion in Late Medieval England and Western Europe* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), p. 61. For a further discussion on other anchorites in Norwich see Norman P. Tanner, ‘Popular Religion in Norwich with Special Reference to the Evidence of Wills, 1370-1532’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Oxford, Campion Hall, 1973), pp. 116-24.

hypotheses and suppositions over her life, especially since it can be argued that the message is partially the messenger herself.

Scholars roughly divide in two sets of hypotheses: those who argue for Julian being a nun previous to her enclosure in the anchorhold, and those who bring evidence for a lay and possibly mother and wife Julian. The present paper presents the two hypotheses as they were equally supported and shared, although it must be said that the nun option is the leading one.²¹ The same amount of space is given to both of them, primarily because the second one is most of the time dismissed or ignored without a real confutation of it.²² Conscious of the impossibility to establish a definitive picture, the following paragraphs briefly go through the principal evidence and counter-evidence for both suppositions.

The links with Carrow Abbey, outside Norwich's walls,²³ suggest that she might have been a Benedictine nun there: the convent had the right, albeit a formal one, to nominate the rector of Saint Julian's Church, where the anchorhold was; the same anchorhold seems to have been in the gift of the Carrow nuns.²⁴ The convent might be the place in which Julian reasonably received her liberal arts education, which Colledge and Walsh demonstrate to be vast and widely employed in her texts, as well.²⁵ Against

²¹ For a partial list of scholars who investigated on the matter see Liz Herbert McAvoy, *Authority and the Female Body in the Writings of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe* (Martlesham, Boydell & Brewel, 2004), p. 22. Not mentioned by Herbert McAvoy is Barry Windeatt, who maintains a balanced view of both the hypotheses editing *English Mystics of the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 181, and editing Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. xv-xvi.

²² See for example Marion Glasscoe, *English Medieval Mystics: Games of Faith* (London: Longman, 1993), p. 24, Christopher Abbott, *Julian of Norwich: Autobiography and Theology* (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 1999), p. 53, and Watson and Jenkins (2006), p. 4.

²³ The Abbey, sometimes improperly called Priory, was at Julian's time not part of the urban complex of Norwich, in a village outside the walls, Bracondale. This means that the anchoress in Norwich mentioned in wills cannot but be reclused in the city, and not at Carrow Abbey, where there is evidence of other anchoresses reclused there. Nevertheless, the link cannot be dismissed easily: the abbey is twenty minutes on foot from St Julian's Church, a distance easily covered even in the Middle Ages.

²⁴ Windeatt (2015), p. xv; Colledge and Walsh (1978), p. 44; Watson and Jenkins (2006), p. 4.

²⁵ Colledge and Walsh (1978), pp. 47-52.

this there is the fact that never, in any of her texts, does Julian make any allusion to her nun sisters, and that education in English nunneries in the fourteenth century was not as prosperous and flourishing as it was auspicious, according to the testimony of episcopal letters to female convents in those years.²⁶

Her evident knowledge of various contemporary texts, both religious and lay, does not need to be justified by a religious formation previous to her enclosure. *Ancrene Wisse*, a spiritual and practical guide for anchoresses, does not forbid to read and, under the guidance of a confessor, an anchoress had the possibility to deepen her spiritual knowledge by reading books.²⁷

Finding Watson's dating accurate and convincing, it can be argued that the composition of both texts occurred in the restricted space of Saint Julian's anchorhold, where Julian had the possibility to read vernacular texts and increase her understanding of rhetorical strategies.²⁸ Her claiming of being 'unletterde' (R 2. 1) is clearly part of her policy of modesty and a *captatio benevolentiae* towards her readers, or simply a declaration of not knowing any Latin – which was the typical meaning of 'unletterde' at the time.²⁹ Colledge and Walsh make an effort to demonstrate her profound knowledge of the Vulgata, which would explain the various indirect quotations and confluences of the Holy Scriptures passages in the texts.³⁰ More than demonstrating a literate knowledge of the Bible, Colledge and Walsh's examples succeed in suggesting a biblical familiarity compatible with hearing and quoting from memory.

²⁶ Eileen Power, *Medieval English Nunneries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922), pp. 237-281, especially p. 248.

²⁷ Anne Savage and Nicholas Watson, ed. and trans., *Anchoritic Spirituality: Ancrene Wisse and Associated Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), pp. 152-3.

²⁸ Nicholas Watson, 'The Composition of Julian of Norwich's *Revelation of Love*', *Speculum*, 68 (1993), pp. 637-683.

²⁹ See Power (1922), p. 247.

³⁰ Colledge and Walsh (1978), pp. 45-7.

An interesting analysis on the motherhood imagery in *A Revelation* by Herbert McAvoy compares other mystical writings by women, showing that Julian's choices match those made by women who experienced maternity on their own skin.³¹ Ward reads some passages as clear references to the author's own motherhood, for example seeing in R 64. 24-30 a description inspired by the death of Julian's own child during the numerous episodes of Black Death in the fourteenth century, offering a compelling speculation on Julian's hidden life.³² If this supports the hypothesis that Julian had been a mother and presumably a wife previous to her anchoritic dedication, it is also true that *A Revelation's* motherhood imagery is congruous with other affective piety commonplaces, and is to be considered part of *A Revelation's* theological discourses – as the chapter on the humanity of Christ will show.

Central to the discussion is that, despite the uncertainties about Julian's intellectual and personal life, the texts speak of a woman whose erudition is exquisite, a knowledge that surely only partially comes from the gaze that Julian keeps constantly on the crucifix. In the anchorhold where she probably wrote her texts the only window always open was the one on the church's altar. The anchoress' closed space opens invariably to Christ's body, both in the image of the crucifix and in the consecrated host. That is the central biographical information that helps unveiling *A Vision* and *A Revelation's* meaning, more than any other (very interesting) speculation.

An anchoress was someone who decided to live permanently enclosed in a small cell adjacent to a church (an anchorhold) in a life of prayer and contemplation. Unlike hermits, who inhabited isolated and wild places, anchorites usually lived in the middle

³¹ Herbert McAvoy (2004), pp. 64-95.

³² Benedicta Ward, 'Julian the Solitary' in *Julian Reconsidered*, ed. by Ken Leech and Benedicta Ward (Oxford: SLG Press, 1988), pp. 11-35 (pp. 24-5).

of towns or villages, the civilised places where normally a church stood. After her enclosure, the anchoress was considered to be dead to the world, and her way of life was a living death, undertaking what Savage and Watson call a ‘literal and lifelong commitment to being “crucified with Christ”’.³³ Whatever her previous experience, she would have made a vow of obedience and chastity; even so she would have not been linked to any particular religious order as she was under the authority of the bishop.³⁴ Her spiritual and practical guidance might have been under the responsibility of either a secular or religious confessor.³⁵

In such an enclosed place, ‘a liminal space between this world and the next’,³⁶ vulnerable to the natural elements, cramped and lightless, with the Host on the altar as her only constant companion, an anchoress fully experienced the Christian notion of earthly life as a prison, in which the only possible escape and comfort was to put oneself in the hand of God. Still, in a crowded and lively place as medieval Norwich was,³⁷ even if hidden to the view of the busy passersby, an anchoress would have enjoyed daily exchanges with the external world, as the encounter between Margery and Julian suggests. Physical and visual contact with the world outside the anchorhold was generally forbidden, and exceptions were strictly regulated; spiritually edifying talking was allowed, but an anchoress should have not been a ‘professional’ teacher or preacher, for it would have been distracting and inappropriate.³⁸

³³ ‘Preface’ in Savage and Watson (1991), p. 1.

³⁴ Savage and Watson (1991), p. 49.

³⁵ For example the aforementioned *Ancrene Wisse* is very likely by one or more Augustinian members, who seem to know their addressee very well, since they speak to them in an affectionate and colloquial way. See Savage and Watson (1991), pp. 5-15.

³⁶ Windeatt (2015), p. xii.

³⁷ Cate Gunn, “‘A recluse atte Norwyche’: Images of Medieval Norwich and Julian’s Revelations’, in *A Companion to Julian of Norwich*, ed. by Liz Herbert McAvoy (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2008), pp. 32-41 (pp. 32-4); Colledge and Walsh (1978), pp. 39-43.

³⁸ Savage and Watson (1991), pp. 72-5; p. 204.

As it was for Julian, anchoresses' presence in wills demonstrate the local population's affection, to which the recluses would have reciprocated with prayers and spiritual counsel. She acted as an example of holy life especially towards her maids, to whom she was instructed to teach lovingly.³⁹ If Julian was already an anchoress when she started writing, it was with the permission of her confessor that she shaped her literary heritage. At one point, her texts left the anchorhold, addressed to the 'evencristene'(V 6. 1), which is to say the entire human race, and out of her control or her confessor's, acquired their own editorial life.

1.2 Text and Context: Manuscripts, Editions, and Their Readers⁴⁰

A Vision and *A Revelation* are texts that do not conform to any specific literary genre. They are the account of the experience that Julian of Norwich did after the nearly deadly illness she underwent in May 1373. They describe scene by scene the visions she received, but they are also the testimony of her deep theological meditations in a language that ranges between dense rhetorical phrasing and what Watson calls 'imagistically spare' arguments.⁴¹ Another similarly anachronistic term to define Julian's texts might be found in 'spiritual autobiography', which normally refers to other centuries and other contexts.⁴² The term is effective since it gives the glimpse of a daily life (hence 'biography') lived in a constant relation with the divine and the transcendent (hence 'spiritual'). In a sense, although different from the seventeenth-century examples of spiritual autobiographies, Julian's texts do record her

³⁹ Savage and Watson (1991), p. 52; p. 206-7.

⁴⁰ The manuscripts and printed editions mentioned in this section are to be found in a complete list in Watson and Jenkins (2006), pp. 458-9.

⁴¹ Watson (1993), p. 650.

⁴² See D. Bruce Hindmarsh, *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative: Spiritual Autobiography in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

spiritual journey as she advances in further understanding; in this light the borrowed denomination ‘spiritual autobiography’ seems relevant. After all, her texts are written in the first person, despite her unceasing efforts to remove her individuality from the picture.

The manuscripts that preserve Julian’s works give us two texts, with one normally considered to be the amplification of the other. The Short Text is preserved in British Library MS Additional 37790 (Amherst); the manuscript offers a glimpse of the milieu in which Julian’s text might have been read: it merges various meditative texts, most of them copied in Middle English translations, like Richard Rolle’s *De Emendatio Vitae* and *Incendium Amoris*, Marguerite Porète’s *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, and Bridget of Sweden’s *Revelations*.

While the initial gatherings are later than Julian, most of the texts are earlier or contemporary. The scribal rubric at the beginning of *A Vision* dates at least its source to around 1413, while Rolle’s translations are dated 1435 by the translator Richard Misyn, and said to be made at the instigation of Dame Margaret Heslyngton, recluse.⁴³ The whole manuscript might derive, then, from a florilegium compiled for the spiritual edification of Margaret the anchoress – giving yet further evidence that the anchoresses had the chance to read and expand their knowledge, and suggesting that the florilegium was composed for this very purpose by copying from various earlier sources. Laing’s analysis on the literary disseminations of *A Vision* confirms the Norwich provenance of

⁴³ Margaret Laing, ‘Linguistic Profiles and Textual Criticism: the Translations by Richard Misyn of Rolle’s *Incendium Amoris* and *Emendatio Vitae*’ in McIntosh, Angus, M. L. Samuels, Margaret Laing, *Middle English Dialectology: Essays on Some Principles and Problems*, ed. by Margaret Laing (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1989), pp. 188-223 (p. 189).

the text, and detects the successive scribal influences, localised from around the Lincolnshire area where Misyn was a Carmelite prior for some time.⁴⁴

The Long Text is preserved in its medieval version only in excerpts, passages, and selections included or interpolated in various works and anthologies.⁴⁵ It is found in its complete version in two later manuscripts: the Bibliothèque Nationale MS Fonds Anglais 40, and the British Library MS Sloane 2499.⁴⁶ The former is dated around the end of the sixteenth century, the latter around the mid-seventeenth century. These manuscripts were probably copied by English nuns who moved to France after the turbulence of the Reformation.

An interesting instance of the audience the book engaged is Colwich, St. Mary's Abbey MS Baker 18 (ca. 1630), which includes various extemporaneous passages from *A Revelation* interpolated in a text of personal spiritual thoughts written by Margaret Gascoigne, a young Benedictine nun from the house of Cambrai.⁴⁷ This gives a partial account of the fortune of the text, still copied and read two centuries after the death of Julian, in European Benedictine and Carthusian houses, two orders largely devoted to meditation.⁴⁸ A community in exile would have found a certain degree of spiritual comfort in a text from their motherland which contributed to maintain the English links and provide spiritual guidance. The necessity of preservation partially explains the choice of reproducing the texts in the obscure Middle English northeastern dialect of the

⁴⁴ Laing (1989), p. 209; p. 189.

⁴⁵ London, Westminster Cathedral Treasury MS 4, copied from a 1450 compilation at the beginning of the sixteenth century; Lancashire, St. Joseph's College MS (The Upholland Anthology), ca. 1630.

⁴⁶ Of which a semi-modernised version exists in London, British Library MS Sloane 3705, dated late seventeenth century.

⁴⁷ Watson and Jenkins (2006), p. 14.

⁴⁸ See Diane Watt, *Medieval Women's Writing* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), p. 113; and Marleen Cré, 'Women in the Charterhouse? Julian of Norwich's *Revelation of Divine Love* and Marguerite Porete's *Mirror of Simple Souls* in British Library, MS Additional 37790', in *Writing Religious Women: Female Spiritual and Textual Practices in Late Medieval England*, ed. by Denis Renevey and Christiania Whitehead (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000), pp. 43-62.

originals, instead of translating it in the French or Early Modern English plausibly spoken by the nuns.

Watson successfully demonstrates that the genesis of *A Vision* and *A Revelation* is traced in the repressive atmosphere generated by the Lollard heresy of late fourteenth and early fifteenth century.⁴⁹ The small number and late date of the manuscripts suggests that, despite the increasing worthiness of the vernacular in literature,⁵⁰ neither of her texts circulated widely.

The first printed version of the Long Text generated some reactions and a dialogue in between the printed pages worth considering. Serenus Cressy (born High Paulinus Cressy) a Benedictine converted from Anglicanism,⁵¹ published a printed edition of the Long Text in 1670. For more than two centuries, all the subsequent editions were based on this edition. As Watson and Jenkins noted,⁵² the dedication and the section to the reader contributed in shaping the reception and perception of the text and its author. Cressy promotes *A Revelation* emphasizing the visionary element of it, disregarding the theological arguments.⁵³ As a consequence, until very recently in the history of the texts' literary criticism, it was Julian the visionary that received most attention.

Probably more worried about the Roman Catholic holding of the English court after the Restoration than concerned in literary analysis, the Anglican bishop of

⁴⁹ Watson (1993), p. 664.

⁵⁰ Nicholas Watson, 'The Politics of Middle English Writing', in *The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory, 1280-1520*, ed. by Jocelyn Wogan-Browne and others, (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1999), pp. 331-352 (p. 339).

⁵¹ Colledge and Walsh (1978), pp. 12-4.

⁵² Watson and Jenkins (2006), pp. 16-7.

⁵³ R.F.S. Cressy, 'To His Moust Honoured Lady, The Lady Mary Blount, of Sodington' and 'To the reader' in Julian of Norwich, *XVI Revelations of Divine Love Shewed to a Devout Servant of Our Lord Called Mother Juliana, an Anchorete of Norwich, Who Lived in the Dayes of King Edward the Third*, ed. by R.F.S. Cressy ([?]London: R.F.S. Cressy, 1670), fols. A2^r-A4^v.

Worcester vehemently addressed the ‘Fanatick’ spirituality of Julian in his response to Cressy’s edition in 1671, coming to ascribe to Julian’s visions the justification for the Catholic Feast of Corpus Christi.⁵⁴ Cressy’s reply to the accusations, in 1672, gave back some literary credit to Julian’s ‘admirable’ ‘sense and taste’ in understanding some theological discourses.⁵⁵ Yet Cressy oversimplified Julian’s writing, for underneath ‘the agreeable simplicity of the Stile’⁵⁶ lies the theological richness and merit of a woman that reconciled the doctrine of God’s wrath with the contradictory evangelical notion of God as infinitely merciful and pure love. The simple language that voiced intricate arguments did not contribute to the fortune of the text outside the anchorholds or the cloisters, until the twentieth century’s interest brought Julian’s texts under the scrutiny of a wider audience.

Today, her role as the earliest woman writer of English is known about and her audacious speculative theology is recognised outside and inside academic circles. Her regained importance is frustrated by the lack of information on this formidable medieval writer, or else the same scarcity arouses inventive curiosity, as more recently her texts inspired novels, poetry, paintings, plays, musical compositions,⁵⁷ scholar and social communities,⁵⁸ a religious order and religious meditative groups.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Edward Stillingfleet, *A Discourse Concerning the Idolatry Practised in the Church of Rome and the Danger of Salvation in the Communion of it in an Answer to Some Papers of a Revolted Protestant: Wherein a Particular Account is Given of the Fanaticism and Divisions of that Church* (London: Robert White, 1671), pp. 235-261.

⁵⁵ R.F.S. Cressy [Serenus], *Fanaticism Fanatically Imputed to the Catholick Church by Doctour Stillingfleet and the Imputation Refuted and Retorted* ([?]Douai, [?]R.F.S. Cressy, 1672), p. 65.

⁵⁶ Cressy (1670), fol. A3^r.

⁵⁷ Watson and Jenkins (2006), pp. 20-2.

⁵⁸ For example, the Umiltà Community <<http://www.umilta.net/>> [accessed 24 October 2017]; Friends of Julian and The Companions of Julian <<http://juliancentre.org/community/>> [accessed 24 October 2017]. Apparently, she is also candidate to the position of patron saint of cats: since the *Ancrene Wisse* (Savage and Watson (1991), p. 201) allowed only a cat as companion for the anchoresses, the folkloristic sensibility linked Julian of Norwich to this animal, often depicting it in her iconography. See, amongst others, the work of Robert Lentz:

<<https://www.trinitystores.com/store/art-image/julian-norwich-14th-century>> [accessed 24 October 2017].

What makes Julian of Norwich a companion and a guide for so many multifaceted realities might be the absence of any ultimate information or key for interpreting her figure and her texts. This seems to be the position of Alexandra Barratt, who ascribes most of the ways Julian of Norwich is seen today (even her being ‘the first English woman of letters’) to previous editorial misuses or misinterpretations.⁶⁰ Christopher Abbott warns himself and others of the risk of shaping the figure of Julian according to one’s own purpose.⁶¹ It remains unclear what the conclusions of this appreciable caution towards the ‘apotheosis’⁶² of Julian are, according to Abbott and Barratt. While the necessity for editorial accuracy is not a matter of opinion, the frequent responses to the apparently negative appropriation of Julian of Norwich by her readers (‘One would not wish to disparage what so many have found there over the last five hundred years, even if readers have mainly found what they wanted to find.’)⁶³ appear debatable.

The present thesis wants to discuss the ways in which Christ’s body is perceived, described, and used in the literary work of Julian of Norwich. Despite the conscious attempts to offer a scholarly accurate version of the author and her texts, the partiality of the analysis wishes not to suggest a shaping of the object of study to support a self-convenient hypothesis. The second chapter brings evidence that, despite being an unique voice, Julian of Norwich’s work was written in a literary milieu which

⁵⁹ The Episcopal Church’s Order of Julian of Norwich <<https://www.orderofjulian.org/>> [accessed 24 October 2017]; the Julian Meetings <<https://jimmagazines.wildapricot.org/>> [accessed 24 October 2017].

⁶⁰ Alexandra Barratt, ‘How Many Children had Julian of Norwich? Editions, Translations and Versions of her Revelations’, in *Vox Mystica: Essays for Valerie M. Lagorio*, ed. by Anne Clark Bartlett and others (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1995), pp. 27-39, (p. 35).

⁶¹ Christopher Abbott, *Julian of Norwich: Autobiography and Theology* (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 1999), pp. 2-3.

⁶² Barratt (1995), p. 39.

⁶³ Barratt (1995), p. 38.

contributed to form her literary sensibilities. The central focus is on the handling of Christ's body in literary terms, with inevitable theological explanations when needed.

Chapter 2 · Christ's Body and Affective Piety

2.1 The Dual Nature of Christ

When speaking of Christ's body, the matter of Christ's dual nature is to be addressed, for it is in the encounter and compenetration of these two dimensions that Julian of Norwich's experience takes place. 'I have seen the human form of God, and my soul has been saved.'⁶⁴ With these words, echoing Genesis 32: 31, John of Damascus, in the seventh century, defended the veneration and exhibition of divine images. The Doctor of the Church was greatly concerned about the human nature of Christ, speaking 'against those that say that, if Christ has two natures, either you adore the creature also by adoring a created nature, or you say that there is one nature that is adorable or one that is not.'⁶⁵

The attention to the dual nature of Christ has always been a concern of Christendom, since the First Council of Nicaea condemned the Arian heresy, which negated the divine nature of Jesus. Even though the flesh is synonymous with sin and an emblem of human weakness, Jesus' flesh is to be adored because of its union and perfection with his divinity: as John of Damascus says in the previously cited critique, 'He and His flesh are adored together with one adoration by all creation.'⁶⁶

The matter must still have been of great interest, three centuries later, as Anselm bishop of Canterbury decided to write in 1097 his dialogue *Cur Deus Homo* ('Why a human God?'), in which he explains why it was necessary for God to become a man,

⁶⁴ John of Damascus, *Three Treatises on the Divine Images*, translated by Andrew Louth (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003), p. 36.

⁶⁵ John of Damascus, *Writings*, translated by Frederic H. Chase, Jr. (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1958), p. xlix.

⁶⁶ John of Damascus (1958), p. 336.

and celebrates this humanity.⁶⁷ If the redemption of the flesh is done through the flesh this cannot but be an area worthy of meditation. The Incarnation and the sufferings of the Passion are the core subjects of Anselm's other popular text: *Orationes sive meditationes*, a guide to contemplation upon the faithful's own sins, to expiate them.⁶⁸ Similar texts flourished throughout the Middle Ages, written for both religious and lay men and women. Some of these texts share characteristics and styles that led scholars to unify them under the affective piety tradition.

2.2 Affective Piety: Reading and Writing Christ's Body

The emphasis on the humanity of God results in a legitimisation of the human experience, as confirmed by the several examples of late Middle Ages texts, that are largely characterised by realistic visualisations and representations of the human experience.⁶⁹ Julian of Norwich describes the Incarnation, justifying the use of every human aspect, even bodily functions,

for he [Jesus] hath no dispite of that he made, ne he hath no disdaine to serve us at the simpilest office that to oure body longeth in kinde, for love of the soule that he made to his awne liknesse.

R 6. 33-5

It will be argued later that the works of Julian are influenced by and on a certain extent part of the affective tradition, a label which encompasses the theology, rhetoric, and more generally piety concerned with highly emotional devotion to the humanity of

⁶⁷ Anselm of Canterbury, *The Major Works*, ed. and trans. by Brian Davis and G.R. Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 97-202. See also Sidney Norton Deane B.A., 'Introduction' in Anselm of Canterbury, *Proslogium; Monologium; An Appendix In Behalf Of The Fool By Gaunilon; And Cur Deus Homo*, trans. and ed. by Sidney Norton Deane B.A. (London: Trübner, 1910), pp. viii-ix.

⁶⁸ Denis Renevey, 'Margery's Performing Body: The Translation of Late Medieval Discursive Religious Practices', in Renevey and Whitehead (2000), p. 200.

⁶⁹ Elizabeth Robertson, *Early English Devotional Prose and the Female Audience* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990), p. 186.

Christ, and necessarily to his body as well. The human nature of God is emphasised; especially the embodied quality of that nature is reserved a particular attention and veneration. In these works, Christ's birth and death are the most represented episodes of his life, for these are the two moments in which Christ's body is emphatically central and its humanity obviously claimed. At the same time, these two episodes mark the moment in which the Incarnation as a means of redemption for humanity has its greatest manifestations: with Christ's birth, the Godhead acquires human flesh, which is later sacrificed on the cross, according to Christian belief, for the delivery of humanity.

The Fall has created the separation between matter and spirit, between flesh and soul; the union of God and man in Christ, that is the incarnation of the divine in the human, reaffirms and justifies their union (matter and spirit, flesh and soul) in humanity. The creation of mankind in the image of God is re-established, and through the grandeur and beauty of the creature it is possible, by analogy, to contemplate the author, God.⁷⁰ As Sarah Beckwith points out, 'the material world becomes a text which may be interpreted, scrutinized, allegorized and investigated for the way it pointed to its exemplar and author: God.'⁷¹

Flesh is what humankind and Christ most obviously share, which explains the intense interest for Christ's body in late medieval piety: affective piety uses the humanity of Christ's body (i.e. his flesh) to make his divinity visible and knowable, and as an accessible human path to God. Bernard of Clairvaux's theology of the flesh explains how it is necessary for mankind to be made of spirit and flesh at the same time,

⁷⁰ A topic which is already present in the Old Testament, especially in Wisdom literature: see for example Wis 13: 5, Ps 19: 2-7, Ps 89: 6-13, Job 38-41.

⁷¹ Sarah Beckwith, *Christ's Body: Identity, Culture and Society in Late Medieval Writings* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 47.

specifically linking the flesh to the experiential dimension essential for the human knowledge of God:

But *we* live on after the body dies; still, there is no access open to us, except through the body, to those things whereby we live in happiness. He had perceived this who said: *The invisible things of God are clearly seen, being understood by those things which are made* (Rom. i. 20). For, indeed, those things which are made – that is, corporeal and visible things – unless they be perceived by the instrumentality of the body, do not come to our knowledge at all. The spiritual creature, therefore, which we are, must necessarily have a body, without which, indeed, it can by no means obtain that knowledge which is the only means of attaining in those things, to know which constitutes blessedness.⁷²

Bernard unfolds an affective theology that links this knowledge of God through one's own body to the knowledge of God through the knowledge of one's own essence.⁷³ Like Julian, Bernard makes the centre of self-knowledge the crucified body of Christ, a rock whose wounds are the clefts in which to find a solid foundation for one's soul.⁷⁴

In a word, my philosophy is this, and it is the loftiest in the world: to know JESUS, and Him crucified. [...] Him who I embrace with joy and gladness, for He dwells ever upon my breast and in my heart.⁷⁵

The theme of the wounds of Christ is typical of affective piety works: they are often the first term of comparison in a series of metaphors and similes where their revealing of the sufferings Christ endured is associated with diverse images. In the most evocative ones the wounds of Christ are gates through which Christ's body and the devotee's body meet and intersect. An example is offered by *The Prickyng of Love*, a Middle English translation of a Latin treatise on contemplative life, with practical advice for

⁷² Bernard of Clairvaux, *Cantica canticorum: Eighty Six Sermons on the Song of Solomon*, ed. and trans. by S.J. Eales (London: Eliot Stock, 1895), Sermon V. 1, p. 24.

⁷³ See Bernard of Clairvaux, *The Two-Fold Knowledge: Readings on the Knowledge of Self and the Knowledge of God*, ed. and trans. by Franz Posset (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2004), pp. 45-53.

⁷⁴ Bernard of Clairvaux (1895), Sermon LXI. 3, p. 367.

⁷⁵ Bernard of Clairvaux (1895), Sermon XLIII. 4, p. 269.

meditation on the passion and Cross.⁷⁶ It offers interesting images of the relationship between the devotee and Christ's body: the crucifix is not a static and passive object of contemplation and imitation, but a performative meeting place for flesh and spirit, for the human devotee and the Godhead. The wound of Christ is seen as a safe place for the soul to enter. More, it is a mother's womb which gives new life to the human soul. The open wounds of Christ generate preoccupation for, like a womb, they can deliver the soul, which find itself separate from Christ's body. The hope of the soul is that, like a mother with her child, Christ would keep the soul in his arms, until the moment when it would be possible to enter again the safe shelter of the wound to be 'unpartabelly to hym festened'.⁷⁷

The maternal image is developed in the image of the wound from which the soul sucks nourishment like a mother's breast: 'For this shal þou loue þat holy flesh & souke out of hit at his woundes þat aren so wyde þe swetnesse of grace þat is hid wiþinne'.⁷⁸ The final aspiration is the total union of the soul to Christ's body, a desire shared by Richard Rolle in his *Meditations on the Passions*, and by Julian, as it will be discussed in the next chapters.

The images that Rolle associated to the wounds of Christ are lively and eclectic, encompassing similes in which the scourged and wounded body is compared to a sky full of stars, to the holes where the doves take shelter, and to the cells of a honeycomb. More interestingly, the holes in Christ's body are like the holes of a net. The soul longs

⁷⁶ The translation does not always follow the Latin original, which is already an elaboration of Bonaventure's material by a Milanese friar. Sometimes the work is attributed and accordingly listed as by Bonaventure. The Italian editor explains and clarifies the influences and the real authorship in *Stimulus amoris; Canticum Pauperis*, ed. by Collegium S. Bonaventurae (Florence: Quaracchi, 1905), pp. VII-X.

⁷⁷ *The Prickynge of Love*, ed. by Harold Kane, 2 vols (Salzburg: Universität Salzburg, 1983), I, p. 10.

⁷⁸ Kane (1983), I, p. 6.

to be like a fish, caught in the net of the scourged body of Christ, kept safe into it, wrapped and engulfed:

lord swete Ihesu, þi bodi is lijk a nett: for as a nett is ful of holis, so is þi bodi ful of woundis. Here, swete lord Ihesu, I biseche þee, catche me in þe nett of þi scourginge, þat al myn herte & love be to þee; & drawe me euere to þee & wiþ þee as a net drawiþ fisch, til I come to þe bank of deef.⁷⁹

In the same meditation, Rolle compares the wounded body to a book, whose words are Christ's wounds:

swete Ihesu, þi bodi is lijk a book writen wiþ reed enke: so is þi bodi al writen wiþ rede woundis. Now, swete Ihesu, graunte me grace often to rede upon þis book & sumwhat to vndirstonde þe swetnes of þat writinge, & to haue likinge in stodious abidinge of þat redinge.⁸⁰

Rolle's desire is to be able to abidingly pray on this book 'matyns, pryme, houris, euesong & complin, my meditacioun, my speche, & my daliaunce,' linking every aspect of his life to the reading of the wounded Christ's body. The crucified body of Christ is, in affective piety literature, a text in which the soul in contemplation can read the project of love of the Godhead for humanity, negotiating their own role in the project and the identity they choose for themselves to play that role.

Some elements of *imitatio Christi*, the imitation of Christ, can be traced in these recurrent themes of interpenetration between Christ's body and the devotee's, and the desire for the assimilation in Christ's body. It is what Bernard advises in his theology of self-knowledge which leads to the knowledge of God; it is how Julian understands her theology of the humanity of Jesus, that is 'in overcoming the division between "affective" and "contemplative" pieties', for a 'participatory model of knowing, in

⁷⁹ Richard Rolle, 'Meditations on the Passion: 2. Ms. Cambr. Addit. 3042', in *Yorkshire Writers: Richard Rolle of Hampole an English Father of the Church and his Followers*, ed. by C. Horstman (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1895), pp. 92-103 (p. 96).

⁸⁰ Rolle, 'Meditations', in Horstman (1895), p. 97.

which there is a mutual interpenetration of subject and object',⁸¹ God (in Christ) and humanity. In this lyric, this process is exemplified by the poetic persona asking to be clad in Christ's skin, deeply wrapped in it:

Gold & al þis werdis wyn
Is nouth but cristis rode;
I wolde ben clad in cristes skyn,
Þat ran so longe on blode,
& gon t'is herte & taken my In —
Þer is a fulsum fode
Þan ȝef i litel of kith or kyn,
For þer is alle gode. Amen.⁸²

The lyric is part of an anthology of preaching material, assembled around 1372 by John of Grimestone, a Norfolk Franciscan friar. The skin is what protects a body and gives contour to it; it is what physically shapes the interaction of a body with the world outside. In this sense, Christ's body is given the freedom to re-shape and re-create the boundaries of the devotee's existence.

The annihilation of the devotee's identity in Jesus is the point of departure for the making and re-making of one's own identity. Affective piety literature offers a window on these mechanisms of late Middle Ages self-fashioning: the *imitatio Christi*, being such a distant goal, is a constantly generating process of identity for those who undertake it. Julian's text is one example of a late medieval experiment of self-fashioning through the contemplated (but almost tangible, as has been exemplified in this section) means of Christ crucified.

The relationship with Christ crucified is, in affective works, manifestly physical and sensual. Its use of bodily and intimate images is, in Sarah Beckwith's words, to the

⁸¹ Frederick C. Bauerschmidt, *Julian of Norwich and the Mystical Body Politic of Christ* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), pp. 33-34.

⁸² *Religious Lyrics of the XIVth Century*, ed. by Carleton Brown (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 88.

limit of grotesque. The arguments that Beckwith makes in her study offer a greater understanding of the social function of Christ's body's imagery; still, one of the starting points for her discussion is Durkheim's definition of 'sacred' as something removed from the 'profane'. From this, she deduces that the only way to know the sacred is through its profanation, which is what in her opinion happens to Christ's body in affective piety.⁸³ Following what has been said above, this definition cannot be applied to Christianity, or it should be done with caution, since it is a religion based upon the very fusion and therefore blurring of these two categories in the Incarnation of Christ. The reading of medieval texts should not be distorted by the modern conception of religion and religious practices as something relegated to the private aspect of one's life, removed from everyday life, social relations and orders, and communities' practices. In the next chapters it will be argued that Julian's work is devoted to assert publicly the revelations of love she received privately exactly as such a social bond, which can be alien to today's way of life, and therefore misinterpreted.

2.3 Making a Virtue of Necessity: Women Writing Christ's Body

To experience God in his humanity and flesh is not therefore forbidden, but it is even desirable, and women in the Middle Ages enjoyed a surprising advantage and privilege in this experience. These ideas are the result of the various views of the female that the Middle Ages inherited from Aristotle's natural treatises.⁸⁴ Women were considered to have moister humours, which gave them powerful faculties of the senses,

⁸³ Beckwith (1993), pp. 52-57.

⁸⁴ Ian MacLean, *The Renaissance Notion of Woman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp. 8, 30-2.

and also made them inclined to tears, or more sensible and compassionate.⁸⁵ This made women able to be nearer Christ, the human divinity, and to have a sensorial understanding of God. The hagiographer makes Saint Margaret say that Jesus ‘is leoflukest lif forto lokin upon ant swotest to smellen.’⁸⁶ The *imitatio Christi* meant as a fusion with the crucified body of Christ is not simply an attempt to escape from the human body. On the contrary, it becomes an opportunity for the justification of the human flesh, especially for women; it is what Caroline Walker Bynum calls ‘the opportunity of physicality’:

They strove not to eradicate body but to merge their own humiliating and painful flesh with that flesh whose agony, espoused by choice, was salvation. Luxuriating in Christ’s physicality, they found there the lifting up — the redemption — of their own.⁸⁷

It is significant that all the examples of affective piety made until now are from male authors: the concept of *auctoritas* (authority) was still inevitably linked to the ultimate *auctor*: God. The masculinity of the Godhead was generally taken for granted, despite the fact that both connotations and images are present in the Bible.⁸⁸

Those women who, in affective piety, managed to appropriate some kind of authority to speak and write did it by subordinating their authority to the supreme one, God, and in particular the incarnate God, Christ. Their authority came from the visions or revelations they received, making God the only real author, who was responsible for their necessity to write.

⁸⁵ See Helen Solterer, ‘Seeing, Hearing, Tasting Woman: Medieval Senses of Reading’, *Comparative Literature*, 46 (1994), 129-145, and Robertson (1990), p. 34.

⁸⁶ ‘The Liflade ant de Passiu of Seinte Margarete’ in *The Katherine Group MS Bodley 34*, ed. by Emily Rebekah Huber and Elizabeth Robertson (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2016), 17th stanza.

⁸⁷ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: the Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), p. 246.

⁸⁸ See on ‘God as a mother’, for example: Isa 49: 14, Isa 66: 13, and I Pet 2: 2.

Gertrude the Great, a Benedictine nun from Thuringia, writes down the divine revelations her mentor, the elder nun Mechtild of Hackeborn, received. Her writing is, she says, purely devoted to share the grace God gave Mechtild: ‘Tho that sche tolde, in the name of Jhesu I schalle wryte als Y have connyng, to the worschepe of the Holye Trynite.’⁸⁹ As said before, the Birth of Christ is a popular theme in affective piety, since it is the very moment of the divinity’s Incarnation. Mechtild’s vision of the Birth of Christ is marked by the participation in the events typical of affective piety. She receives the infant Jesus in her lap, intersecting the realm of pure vision with her actual action, embracing and kissing him until she reaches a complete union with the Trinity:

tyll sche hadde sodaynlye that gloriouse childe in here lappe, whiche passede in speciouste all mennys childre.
Botte when sche sawe hym before here, than toke sche here dere sonne with full fervente love and with suche joye that hitt may not be spokenne ande kyssede hym full lovynglye, thorowe whiche kusse sche was oonyde fullye to the blessedde Trinite.⁹⁰

The bodily nature of the infant Jesus is what allows Mechtild to experience God in the Trinity, a process which sounds similar to the understandings of complex theological truths by Julian of Norwich, as will be argued in the next chapters.

Bridget of Sweden’s description of the Birth of Christ is exquisitely feminine in her attention for details which only a woman who dealt with pregnancy and giving birth could possess. Being a divine birth, the delivery is almost supernatural, but what is extremely familiar and ‘homely’, as Julian would say, is the breastfeeding that follows.

Bridget’s vision is peculiar in the handling of the bodiliness of Jesus in her account of the circumcision of the child: Mary is said to have kept the piece of removed

⁸⁹ From *The Book of Ghostly Grace*, a Middle English translation of Gertrude’s Latin original text, edited from the manuscript BL MS Egerton by Alexandra Barratt in *Women’s Writing in Middle English* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 50.

⁹⁰ Barratt (2013), p. 53.

skin for her whole life, and have passed the relic to the evangelist John, together with the blood from the wounds of the crucified Christ. What might seem a step over the boundaries of good taste is yet another example of the use of Christ's body as a medium to perceive the closeness of the Godhead and the justification of human body experience.

Bridget's visions are normally structured in a dialogical way: it is a typical form that emphasises where the real authority lies, by directly quoting the words of the deity. It is Jesus himself that, in a passage where he describes his own Passion, exhorts Bridget to the *imitatio*:

yf my hede was persyd and prykyd with thorne and hynge down vpon þe crosse for the, then muche more thy hede owght to be inclyned and bowyd down to all mekenes.⁹¹

Christ lists various parts of his tortured body and links each of them to an act of compassionate imitation that the devotee should perform, writing over the devotee's body the new text of the crucified body of Christ. In Bauerschmidt's words, by meditating on the Passion, 'one attained a kind of subjective appropriation of Christ's objective atoning work by participation in his redemptive pains.'⁹²

Craftily hidden behind the authoritative voice of the deity, these writing women are nevertheless carving out for themselves an authority that comes from their own experience, from their (albeit peculiar) life. Chaucer's Wife of Bath's claim for an authority of experience is put into practice with the scarce means a woman in the late Middle Ages could find. The centrality of Christ's body in this authority that comes

⁹¹ From an incomplete compilation of Bridget's *Revelatione* translated in Middle English, edited by Domenico Pezzini in 'Wordis of Christ to hys spowse: una compilazione di testi brigidini nel MS Oxford, Bodleian Library, Rawl. C.41', *Aevum*, 66 (1992), 345-360 (p. 355).

⁹² Bauerschmidt (2008), p. 38.

from experience is what is more relevant for the present analysis of Julian of Norwich's singular dealing with her own visionary experience.

2.4 Mary as a Model

The role model proposed to Christian women by Mary, the mother of Jesus, is another resource that women in the Middle Ages appropriated despite the generally adverse male environment. Mary is an exceptional figure and, arguably, a very hard model to follow. In Christianity, she is placed at the very centre of the redemptive story of humanity: she is the female flesh in which the flesh of the Godhead was formed, but she is also a virgin. The incarnate Christ is born from a virgin, without an earthly biological father, therefore he is a Godhead who received his humanity wholly from a woman.

The redemptive power of the flesh of a woman sets a distant but enabling model for women, and virginity is raised to one of the highest virtues.⁹³ Mary is present in the physical and sensual images of some affective meditations, typically in her maternal role of mother of the new humanity, redeemed by her son. Elizabeth of Hungary, in her visions, enters the service of the Virgin Mary and witnesses Mary's preparation to become the mother of Jesus,⁹⁴ while the already mentioned *The Prickyng of Love* hopes to drink Mary's milk, mixed to Jesus' blood sucked from his wounds, in a redemptive drink:

⁹³ Although, Beckwith claims that 'celibacy [was] a precondition for sanctity' (Beckwith, p. 80), this did not prevent women with children (clearly not virgins) from being canonised: Saint Bridget of Sweden, Saint Elizabeth of Hungary, and Saint Rita of Cascia are some examples.

⁹⁴ 'Elizabeth of Hungary' in Barratt (2013), pp. 75-87.

& I shal fonde to sowke with him with al þe feith that i haue & thus
shal I tempore to-gidere þe swete mylke of marie the virgine with þe
blood of ihesu and make to myself a drynke þat is ful of hele.⁹⁵

Mary is a human medium through which the distant divinity of God can be experienced, discussed, appropriated, and negotiated in human terms. She is especially central for the visionary experience and the *imitatio* practice. According to the Gospels, she is one of the few followers of Jesus who witness the crucifixion; her gaze over her crucified son is, in the One of Bonaventure's meditations over the Passion translated into Middle English verse, describes the crucifixion Mary experiences on her own body by looking at her dying son:

Truly yn herte she ys crucefyed,
Ful feyn for sorow she wulde ha deyde. [...]
And to hys fadyr styllly he [Jesus] pleyne:
“Fadyr! seest þou nat my modyr peynes?
On þys cros she ys with me,
Y shulde be crucefyed, and nat she [...].⁹⁶

Gazing over the body of the crucifix with compassion means participating in the salvific suffering and death of Christ. In a way, it can be said that Mary is the first follower of the *imitatio Christi* practice, and the model to follow.

⁹⁵ Kane (1983), I, p. 9.

⁹⁶ Bonaventure, *Meditations on the Supper of Our Lord, and the Hours of the Passion*, trans. by Robert Mannyng, ed. by J. Meadows Cowper (London: Trübner, 1875), ll. 685-6; 689-93, p. 22.

This chapter has presented a series of examples of literary works that share elements of affective piety. The centrality of Christ's body in all these works is what was most interesting for the purpose of the analysis of Julian of Norwich's writings. Christ's body is not just an object of contemplation: it meets, intersects, and modifies the devotee's own body, and gives tools for a shaping of the self modeled on the humanity of Christ himself, or on his human mother Mary. It creates a community of people which shares practices and experiences through what might be anachronistically called the hypertext 'Christ's body'.

Chapter 3 · Julian's Body of Christ

3.1 *A Vision, A Revelation, and the Guiding Voice of Julian*

The conspicuous difference in length between *A Vision* and *A Revelation* (the latter four times longer than the former) is due to the pervasive presence in the latter of Julian the theological interpreter, beside Julian the participant. For, as Watson and Jenkins noted, the figure in the texts is double:

In *A Vision*, and more in *A Revelation*, the figures of Julian the participant in her revelation and Julian its interpreter have discernibly different functions: one existing to ground the two works' thought in the confusing textures of lived experience, the other to elucidate the experience's general claims, meanings, and implications. The pull between these functions, and their mutual dependence, complicates *A Vision's* and *A Revelation's* enactment of the anchorite's symbolic solitude before God, keeping the works humanly and intellectually engaged with the world.⁹⁷

In the Long Text, Julian the interpreter magnifies her function as theologian. It is thanks to this union that precious passages of *A Revelation* are created, like for example the one in which she reconciles the human (and therefore the Church's) vision on sin with God's omniscient perception of sin (R 45). *A Revelation* is much more exegetic, theologically dense, and it reverberates almost as a commentary of the shorter one. Julian herself makes a reference to this enhanced theological understanding and interpretation in passages of the Long Text:

The secunde is the inwarde lerning that I have understode therein sithen. [...] For twenty yere after the time of the shewing [...] I had teaching inwardly [...], with avisement, all the pointes and the propertes that were shewed in the same time. (R. 51, 65-77)

⁹⁷ Watson and Jenkins (2006), p. 7.

Confronting both texts, it is clear that *A Revelation* is a more mature work, and shows an awareness of the author's voice that is suppressed in *A Vision*, and is denied by various apologetic passages. This led Vincent Gillespie to consider the Short Text a 'probation text, of the type required of some aspirant anchorites, [...] in order to justify to the bishop their vocational drive and the orthodoxy of their spirituality.'⁹⁸ As was discussed in the biographical notes, the dating of the texts makes it more likely that Julian was already known as a visionary at the time when she wrote *A Vision*, and wanted to use it to defend herself from the possible accusations of Lollardy.⁹⁹

Women that publicly handled spiritual matter had to put themselves under some sort of authority; as discussed in the section dedicated to women writing in the Middle Ages, God (the greatest authority) was one of the main resources for the appropriation of authority by a medieval woman. Hence the numerous reiterated clarifications that both Julian and her younger counterpart Margery Kempe do so, in regards to their role as visionaries. They present themselves as intermediaries, as tools entrusted with divine revelations without any merit:

For the shewing I am not goode but if I love God the better, and so may and so shulde ilke man do that sees it and heres it with goode wille and trewe meninge. (V 6. 11-2)

And so had sche felyng of many mo than be wretyn which owr Lord of hys mercy revelyd to hir undirstondyng, thow sche wer unworthy of hir meritys. (71. 4077-9)

While the idiosyncratic personality of Margery Kempe keeps her presence invariably on the scene of her mystical account, Julian of Norwich extensively transfers her authority to her experience. One of the things that strikes the reader while reading Julian of

⁹⁸ Quoted in Liz Herbert McAvoy, 'Introduction: "God forbede ... that I am a techere": Who, or what, was Julian?' in *A Companion to Julian of Norwich*, ed. by Liz Herbert McAvoy (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2008), p. 5.

⁹⁹ Watson (1993), pp. 660-4.

Norwich is the constant removal of the self, the gradual dissolving of the presence of her individuality, who consciously disappears in the universality of Christendom. Julian is speaking for the widest possible audience, the whole of humanity, hiding her own self but keeping her voice ringing through the pages: ‘Alle that I saye of myselfe, I meene in the persone of alle mine evencristene’ (V 6. 1). She guides her readers away from her, and towards the Godhead:

I praye [...] that ye leve the behaldinge of the wrechid, sinfulle creature [...] and that ye behalde God, that [...] walde shewe generalye this vision in comforthe of alle. (V 6. 3-7)

She advises them to take her experience as something valid for every Christian. In doing so, Julian erases herself twice: first by declaring herself as just a vessel for divine instruction, and then by melting her individuality, and, in some ways, her gender, to become a symbol for all of humanity.

In the first text, *A Vision*, although both these tendencies to remove herself are present, certain minute touches escape Julian’s screening - the same consciousness that makes *A Revelation* a theologically exquisite piece. They might be defined as accidental biographical details, that enliven the painting of the mystic life that Julian offers to her readers. An example is offered by the recounting of the loving gesture that Julian’s mother (either the natural one, or the Mother Superior) makes when she thinks Julian is dead, on her sickbed, while Julian is having yet another vision of Jesus’ Passion:

My modere, that stode emanges othere and behelde me, lifted uppe hir hande before me face to lokke min eyen. For she wened I had bene dede or els I hadde diede. And this encrested mekille my sorowe. (V 10. 26-8)

This detail is completely missing from *A Revelation*, where Julian distances herself from her individuality almost completely. She asks her readers not to be passive, though, but to interiorise the text and make it their own. Her guiding voice echoes that

of the authors of popular treatises on meditation. For example, Nicholas Love invites the faithful who wants to meditate to plunge into the scene, and to think as though they were present at the imagined events, in his *The Myrrour of The Blessed Lyf of Jesu Christi*:

And so ymagine we & set we oure mynde & our þouht as we were present in þe place where þis was done at Bethелеem! beholdyng how þees þre kynges comen with gret multitude & a wirchipful company of lordes & oper seruantes, & so by token of þe Sterre firste ledyng & after restyng vp on þat place, þat the child Jesus was inne!¹⁰⁰

Once the different qualities of the two works are so identified, the decision to analyse *A Vision* seems consistent with the intention and dimension of the present thesis. While the theological teaching and understanding of *A Revelation* are and should be the object of a broader study, the present discussion concentrates its efforts on the literary and experiential aspects of Julian of Norwich's work which are found in *A Vision*. The following are additional reasons for this choice.

The Short Text has a double agenda, as is declared in the rubric: the vision contains 'fulle many comfortabille wordes and gretly stirrande' (V 1), setting two specific goals for the text: both to bring comfort to the readers and to incite them to act. This double agenda is reflected in the structure of the text: as will be argued later, Julian's visions are normally followed by a moment of reflection – what has been seen acquires practical meaning as a guide to action in Julian's and the readers' lives. The writing of the second text seems to be the result of this same bipartite process: years have passed from the first vision (at least ten, if not a full twenty, according to Watson)¹⁰¹ and Julian decides to expand her work with the reflections and further

¹⁰⁰ Nicholas Love, *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ: A Full Critical Edition*, ed. by Michael G. Sargent (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 2005), p. 44.

¹⁰¹ Watson (1993), p. 664.

‘understanding’ (R 86. 13) that have been given to her in those years. Hence the analysis does make use of the commentary that *A Revelation* offers in respect to *A Vision*. This use is limited to the occasions when such an intertextuality allows a wider exploration of the modalities in which Julian of Norwich experiences and uses Christ’s body.

3.2 *A Vision* as a Multi-Sensory Experience

Medieval culture was based on the sensory in a way which is radically different from what senses represented for previous or late societies, especially for what concerns the use of images. Hearing had a direct link with faith: in Romans 10: 17 Saint Paul puts together the conversion process of the soul with hearing the word of God. More importantly, the concept of the image in the Middle Ages derived from the elaborations on Genesis 1: 26-27, where God creates man to his own ‘*imagine*’ and ‘*similitudinem*’. The relation of ‘*similitudinem*’ between the creature and the creator implied that, in the medieval conception, an image preserved part of the properties of the thing it depicted.¹⁰² For the same reason, the implication was that ‘the honor rendered to the image passes to the prototype.’¹⁰³

Finally, images acted as symbols, which are ‘a collecting of visible forms for the demonstration of invisible things’, according to Hugh of Saint Victor, writing in the

¹⁰² ‘As [...] painters transfer the human forms to their pictures by means of certain colours, applying to their work of imitation [...] the proper and corresponding tints, so that the archetypal beauty may be transferred exactly to the likeness [...], thus it would seem to me that our Maker also, with certain tints as it were, by putting on virtues, paint the image with various colours according to His own beauty’. Gregory of Nyssa, *De opificio hominis*, 5, quoted in Gerhart B. Ladner, ‘The Concept of the Image in the Greek Fathers and the Byzantine Iconoclastic Controversy’, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 7 (1953), 1-34 (p. 3).

¹⁰³ Basil of Caesarea, *De Spiritu Sancto*, XVIII, 45, quoted in Ladner (1953), p. 3.

twelfth century.¹⁰⁴ According to Ladner, the medieval understanding of symbolism is influenced by Origen, who writes that ‘whatever happens in an unexpected or strange way in Holy Scripture is a [...] sign or symbol, of something else, namely of something beyond the realm of sense experience.’¹⁰⁵

Every medieval urban space was an incredible source of sensory variety, and Norwich provided a remarkable series of stimuli: it was one of the greatest towns in the English Middle Ages.¹⁰⁶ Its wealth of commercial and religious activities contributed to the multi-sensory experience that Julian records in her text. More than other sources, religion provided images: Norwich’s Norman cathedral was and is a perfect example of the use of religious images on multiple levels. The colourful stained glass windows were rich in Biblical and Saint’s stories, as were its precious altarpieces, disseminated in the Cathedral’s chapels.¹⁰⁷ Religious images were the paradigm on which one constructed his or her own personal religious experience, grounding it on the communal history of Salvation - a story depicted in every church and suggested by the persistent push of the gaze towards heaven of the majestic architecture.

The description of the medieval town of Norwich underlined the public employment of the visual material, which had shared public functions as well. As hinted in the chapter about affective piety, religion was no private matter in the Middle Ages, as it is instead in the society of today. In the same fashion, the visionary experience was no subjective concern: as the encounter between Margery and Julian witnesses, the

¹⁰⁴ Hugh of St. Victor, ‘Commentar’ in *Hierarchiam Coelestem S. Dionysii Areopagitae*, 2, quoted and translated by Gerhart B. Ladner, ‘Medieval and Modern Understanding of Symbolism: A Comparison’, *Speculum*, 54 (1979), 223-256 (p. 225).

¹⁰⁵ Origen, *In Joann.* 13, 60, quoted in Ladner (1979), p. 224.

¹⁰⁶ Colledge and Walsh (1978), pp. 39-43.

¹⁰⁷ The most famous is the Despenser Retable, c. 1381. See Maria Prozesky, ‘Imitatio in Julian of Norwich: Christ the Knight, *Fruitio*, and the Pleasures of Courtesy’, *Parergon*, 30 (2013), 141-158 (p. 146).

visionary experience created a community which shared experiential wisdom - the same experiential wisdom that women used as a source of authority. The visionary material generated a different, if not new, way to express and understand one's relationship with religion and ultimately with the Godhead. Radically different but sharing some of the functions of a *Biblia Pauperum*, the visionary experience, once shared by those who underwent it, acquired the same role as written knowledge.

Enhanced by the experience, the visionaries, and Julian with them, guided their communities to a deeper understanding of the human experience seen through the religious paradigm. The title *A Vision* is taken from the scribal rubric found at the beginning of the manuscript. The text highlights the visual component from its first lines: the rubric states that what follows is 'a vision' which is 'shewed to a devoute woman' (V Rubric 1). However, the reference to the 'vision' should not obliterate the intense presence and involvement of each of the five senses in Julian's visions. Her experience encompasses a series of sensations not confined to the sole vision. Watson and Jenkins noted that Julian uses 'I sawe' sixty-five times, to describe any form of perception, including mental intuitions and realisations.¹⁰⁸

This experience is not an unique feature in late medieval devotion, although Julian developed it in her own unique fashion: as the second chapter illustrated, the desire to be deeply involved in Christ's life through the practice of meditation was common, as part of the affective piety practices of the late Middle Ages. When Julian asks to be given a 'bodilye sight' of Christ's Passion, she is aware that she is not the first, and there are other 'Cristes lovers' who had visions of Christ's sufferings; 'I wolde

¹⁰⁸ Watson and Jenkins (2006), p. 66.

have beene one of thame and suffrede with thame': (V 1. 15-6) she desires to be part of that community.

As the affective piety exemplifies, the alleged ubiquitous hatred and separation of the body and flesh in the Middle Ages is a misconception and an oversimplification: Julian is not unique in her dealing with the intersection of flesh and spirit. In the words of Bauerschmidt, 'in all three of her desires there is a startling physicality, predicated on a view of bodies as malleable, transformable realities, a view that blurs the line between soul and body.'¹⁰⁹ Moreover, the three gifts she asked in her youth (and which generate the mystical experience) do not refer to a single sense but cover and intersect the whole of them. This idea will be discussed in the commentary to Section 1 of *A Vision*.

The multi-sensory experience of *A Vision* is evident in the modalities in which Julian records her visions. They are various and distinctive of the object of the vision she recounts. In accordance with her desire to receive a 'bodily sight' of Christ's passion, she uses this expression with no further denotation only when describing the visions about Christ's body and its transformations. She is also aware that what she is experiencing is not the same as a proper, earthly, bodily sight: Christ's scourged body in V 8 produces such an abundance of blood that Julian realises 'it shulde hafe made the bedde alle on blode, and hafe passede on aboute', (V 8. 23-4) had it been normal blood, bodily 'in kinde' (V 8. 23).

Visions that do not feature Christ are recorded, specifying other sensory modalities. For example, the visions of the Virgin Mary are characterised by a further explanation of the receiving modalities: in V 4. 21-31 Julian specifies that the vision is 'gastelye in bodilye lykenes'. A demonic vision in V 21 is described as in ostensible

¹⁰⁹ Bauerschmidt (2008), p. 37.

‘bodely’ nature, which suggests that in reality it was not. The episode is particularly rich in sensory details: the devilish smoke propagates ‘a foule stinke’ (V 21. 27), a ‘bodely heete’, and the frightened Julian hears an obscure ‘bodely jangelinge and a speche’ (V 23. 2-3).

As suggested by Gillespie, Julian records, processes, and discusses her visions in accordance to the medieval optic theory. She differentiates the multi-modalities in which she receives the visions and understanding; still, the visual aspect is prevalent:

In keeping with the medieval hierarchy of the senses, sight is given pride of place as the most elevated mode of perception, able to seek out, receive and engage with the light of God.¹¹⁰

The concept of ‘light of God’ goes beyond the metaphorical sense. Building from the Gospel’s understanding of the Godhead as ‘light’,¹¹¹ in the Middle Ages light is considered to be more spiritual in essence, and propagated directly from its source, which is God.¹¹² Light disseminates from the first sphere to the others, descends in the world and mixes with matter, becoming less and less pure as it separates from God. Therefore every object is as close to God, pure light, as it is illuminated (both in its sense of ‘filled with light’ and ‘made clear’). For a contemplative, the natural conclusion is the recognition of the necessity for the ‘fallen human psyche’ to ‘escape from the dark confines of corporeality and materiality and to aspire to the full light of illumination’, by means of a ‘gradual refinement’ of their light.¹¹³

¹¹⁰ Vincent, Gillespie, ‘The Colours of Contemplation: Less Light on Julian of Norwich’, in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England: Exeter Symposium VIII*, ed. by E. A. Jones (Martlesham: Boydell & Brewer, 2011), pp. 7-22 (p. 8).

¹¹¹ Jn 8: 12; see also Eph 1: 17, 1 Th 5: 4-8, and Lk 1: 79.

¹¹² See also Michelle M. Sauer, ‘Architecture of Desire: Mediating the Female Gaze in the Medieval English Anchorhold’, *Gender & History*, 25 (2013), 545-564 (p. 553).

¹¹³ Gillespie (2011), p. 13.

In V 7 Julian draws a summary, listing the three modalities in which God has given her the visions:

Alle this blissede techinge of oure lorde God was shewed to me in thre parties: that is, be bodilye sight, and be worde formede in mine understandinge, and be gastelye sight. Botte the gastelye sight I maye nought ne can nought shewe it unto yowe als oponlye and als fullye as I wolde. (V 7. 1-4)

Two modalities are directly linked with sight (the bodily sight and the ghostly sight), while the words formed in her understanding suggests an inspired after-reflection on her visions. If informed by the optical theory, even this modality involves the visual, since it is thanks to God's enlightenment that Julian can receive her 'understandinge'. The awareness that Julian is not able to convey what she experienced in a perfect way is only partially a strategy of humility. She is reflecting on her visions according to the medieval optic theory, recognising that her (and her reader's) vision is imperfect and it requires the intervention of the Godhead to be fully clarified.¹¹⁴ The auxiliaries she uses to explain her imperfect account ('can', 'may', and 'would') each relate to one of the faculties of the mind: memory, reason, and will.¹¹⁵ This tryptic taken as a whole reflects the perfection of the Trinity. Accordingly, the quoted passage is followed by a pledge, which asks God for his light and a better understanding:

Botte I truste in oure lorde God allemighty that he shalle, of his goodnes and for youre love, make yowe to take it mare gastelye and mare swetly than I can or maye telle it yowe. (V 7. 4-6)

The analysis of Gillespie is accurate and offers a deep insight on the medieval optical theory and the influences it had on literature. The understanding of light and colours of Julian of Norwich is surely informed by the contemporary theories of light

¹¹⁴ For a discussion (with a focus on the Long Text) on how this 'unwitting imperception and blindness' is perceived by Julian as the cause of much pain and sin in the human condition, see Windeatt (2015), pp. xxxiii-xlix.

¹¹⁵ Watson and Jenkins (2006), p. 74.

and perception. Nevertheless, from the analysis of how she uses Christ's body, it is also evident that she adopts a different theology, enriched by the Incarnation. She goes, in a sense, beyond the pastoral theology of the fallen human psyche that has to refine itself to reach a more complete union with God. In her perspective, the mixing of the divinity of Christ with dark human flesh changed the dichotomy light/dark. The incarnation does not eliminate the necessity for spiritual refinement towards the light, but it adds a more human, more earthly way for the journey towards God. These points are further discussed in the next sections, specifically in the analysis of Julian's descriptions of Christ's body.

Julian's multi-sensory visions of the crucified Christ are performative of this different way of knowing God that Christianity was developing. It is her goal, in the end, to convey the hopeful message implied in Christ's incarnation that, in Windeatt's words, 'there can be meaning in human suffering and indeed that humanity was worthy to be suffered for and saved.'¹¹⁶ The last section of the present thesis will analyse how Julian uses Christ and his body as a vector to convey this idea, and how Christ's body performs in the salvation history held in *A Vision*.

3.3 A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman and to the 'evencristene'

A Vision describes a visionary experience that Julian had during several days of serious illness, in May 1373, when she was thirty years old. Lying in bed, losing consciousness, Julian of Norwich believed, together with the people gathered around her bed, that she was about to die. In this liminal state of conscience, the crucifix (which had been put in front of her by the priest called to administrate the last rites) started to bleed. What

¹¹⁶ Windeatt (2015), p. xlvi.

follows is the recording of the events and the meditations generated by them, written once Julian had recovered. With elegant rhetorical strategies, Julian writes a spiritual guide which is not only a guide, a theological treatise which is not only theological, the record of an experience which is addressed to the ‘evencristene’ (V 6. 1). Julian is a woman in contemplation, but fully in the world: she recorded their experience in the vernacular, making her spiritual development accessible to a lay audience, one removed from the monastic life.

The following sections are dedicated to the analysis of the text, which shows that Julian wants to introduce the reader to her experience through the same vehicle she used: Christ’s body. The analysis will show that Julian does use the typical resources of affective piety, and depicts Christ’s body with the devotional canons of the late Middle Ages, but she does not stop there. Christ’s body has a function and performs real actions in Julian’s spiritual journey. She uses it to get her reader (and herself, in the process) to the reconciliation of the material with the spiritual, of the human with the divine. Elizabeth Robertson says, talking about another vernacular work, Langland’s *Piers Plowman*, that these works ‘celebrate the paradoxical transcendence of this world available precisely through the full experience of this world.’¹¹⁷

3.3.1 ‘I desirede to have minde of Cristes passion’

After the scribal note discussed in 1.2 and 3.2, Julian’s account begins. The division in sections follows those in MS Additional 3790;¹¹⁸ there is no evidence whether it was a scribal decision or Julian’s, nevertheless the analysis becomes agile if made following

¹¹⁷ Robertson (1990), p. 196.

¹¹⁸ London, British Library, MS Additional 3790, fols. 97^r-115^r.

this division. Section 1 starts with Julian listing three desires she had when she was younger:

I desirede thre graces be the gifte of God. The first was to have minde of Cristes passion. The seconde was bodelye sykenes. And the thrid was to have of Goddes gifte thre woundes. (V 1. 1-3)

The multi-sensory nature of Julian's visions is clear from the multiple modes of perception involved in the description of the three gifts. Even if the first gift is clearly something that would happen on a mental level, the discussion in 3.2 made evident the complex involvement of other senses in Julian's mental experience. The sickness she asks for would happen obviously on a physical level, while the last gift, despite its apparent physicality, is spiritual in nature. Julian is not referring to the actual tangible Christ's wounds of Christ (as it was in the case of stigmata for other mystics and saints), as she specifies at the end of the section. The wounds are actually inspired by an oral account by a man 'of halye kyrke' (V 1. 36), possibly a preacher, about the story of Saint Cecilia, a virgin martyr of the early Church. According to *The Golden Legend* and Chaucer's *Second Nun's Tale*, Cecilia is killed with three sword strokes.¹¹⁹

Julian tries to shape her life on the life of saints, as the example of Saint Cecilia suggests, and on Christ's life. She specifies at which age she wanted to receive her sickness, and it is not a casual number: 'This sekenes desirede I in my youth, that I might have it whene I were in threttye yeere elde' (V 1. 34-5), the same age that Jesus had when he started his ministry, according to Luke 3: 23. The subtle element of *imitatio Christi* (and the authority of a ministry given to Julian) will be developed and expanded in her desire for compassion, which she will have when, at thirty years old, the gift of bodily sickness will be granted to her.

¹¹⁹ Watson and Jenkins (2006), p. 64.

Even if Julian asserts multiple times that her intention was not to receive any special revelation, the impression the reader gets from Julian's asking for an intense recollection of Christ's Passion is that she had already experienced it in some way, a way that has to be intended superior to the simple passive exposition to crucifixes, if it can be said so, which would have been a daily experience for every devout woman. As a literate woman, Julian might have read one of the numerous treatises and manuals on meditation, or the accounts of other mystics of the time. Watson reports that in 1407 the library of the Benedictine Adam Easton arrived in Norwich: it was made up of more than 200 books likely to circulate in the religious milieu of the prosperous town. Easton was the defender of the cause of Bridget of Sweden in Rome, and surely his library included various analogous texts.¹²⁰

Other than through books, Julian might have experienced Christ's Passion through the devotional practice of meditation, since she says that this desire came to her mind 'with devotion' – which can mean both 'in a devout manner' and 'while doing an action of devotion', as in a meditative state.¹²¹ The hypothesis that she was already meditating on Christ's Passion is suggested by Julian herself: according to *A Vision*, she had 'grete felinge in the passion of Criste' already, but she 'desirede to have mare, be the grace of God' (V 1. 4-5). This 'mare' is described as a desire for a broadening of the senses involved.

Julian declares that she knows already the pains Christ has been in, as she is familiar with his image on the cross, thanks to the teaching of the Holy Church and to the 'paintinges of crucifexes' (V 1. 10), but this seems not to be enough. Instead of a mental image, she asks for a 'bodilye sight' (V 1. 13) and for an experience of the

¹²⁰ Watson (1993), p. 682.

¹²¹ See *OED* n. I.1.a and n. I.2.

moments of the Passion that goes beyond time and space, and that brings her to participate with her physical body to the events:

Methough I wolde have bene that time with Mary Maudeleyne and with othere that were Cristes loverse, that I might have seen bodilye the passion of oure lorde that he sufferede for me, that I might have sufferede with him as othere did that loved him. (V 1, 6-9)

Julian will not experience this intense recollection of Christ's passion until she is 'thrittye wintere alde and a halfe' (V 2. 1), when she receives the bodily sickness she asked for in her youth. After several days of serious illness, Julian is sure she is at death's door: she has already shifted her gaze away from the earthly world and put it towards heaven, where she is certain she is going, very soon.

As already said, the events of the Passion highlight Christ's humanity and his body. The first vision starts in fact with the bleeding of the crucifix Julian is looking at. At that moment, Julian thinks she is almost dead and surely feels a connection with the man on the crucifix: they are both living the last moments of their earthly life. It is interesting to notice how Julian's gaze moves from 'upwarde into heaven' (V 2. 25) to the crucifix, earthward, almost unwillingly, as an act of obedience to her curate. It would be from this act of shifting her gaze on the crucifix that the visions will start.

As soon as her gaze is fixed on the crucifix, the lights in her bedroom are annihilated and the only light emanates from the crucifix itself:

After this my sight begane to faile, and it was alle dyrke aboute me in the chaumber, and mirke as it hadde bene night, save in the image of the cross there helde a comon light, and I wiste nevere howe. Alle that was beside the crosse was huglye to me, as if it hadde bene mekille occupiede with fendes. (V 2. 29-32)

In accordance with the medieval optical theory, human sight fails in front of the divine for it is imperfect. The light is described as 'comon', which might seem confusing. It is

clear that it is not to be intended in the modern sense of ‘normal and familiar’;¹²² the phenomenon of the crucifix emanating light is manifestly inexplicable for Julian: ‘I wiste nevere howe’, she cannot explain how. It cannot be, as Gillespie suggests, that ‘comon’ signifies simply a ‘shared experience [...] and is intended to stand in distinction to “special” graces.’¹²³ It is evident that there is no normal grace in a crucifix that miraculously casts a light ‘somehow “in” the cross, not shining on it or reflecting from it’, and that is ‘apparently unmediated, unrefracted and unreflected’,¹²⁴ as the medieval optic theory hypothesised God’s light was. This experience is a gift which was no standard feature of ‘the common deathbed experiences of most Christians’.¹²⁵

The first four meanings of ‘comon’ recorded in *MED* concern a dimension that differs from the one suggested in Gillespie’s idea of ‘shared experience’. ‘Comon’ is relative to something owned or used jointly, something affecting, or open to, an entire community.¹²⁶ The contemporary English translation by Windeatt proposes the phrase ‘for all mankind’¹²⁷ to convey the medieval meaning of ‘comon’, and that is what Julian was likely thinking when she decided to use this adjective: the light of the crucifix is a gift for the ‘evencristene’. Julian is showing the direction where the book is leading its readers, which is towards Christ’s crucified body.

Julian introduces her readers into the visions with a consistent method: to make the extraordinary things she experienced accessible and comprehensible, Julian classifies her visionary experiences in a modality that is shareable by those who did not undergo it. The physical and sensory aspects of the visionary experience, now in its

¹²² Even if this sense is present in *MED*, see ‘commūn’ and variations, nn. 5 and 6.

¹²³ Gillespie (2011), p. 20.

¹²⁴ Gillespie (2011), p. 20.

¹²⁵ Gillespie (2011), p. 20.

¹²⁶ *MED*, see ‘commūn’ and variations, nn. 1-4.

¹²⁷ Windeatt (2015), p. 5.

early stages, are consciously formulated to be understood by the 'evencristene', even if it can be argued that everything happened in Julian's head. Nevertheless, Julian's experience becomes literature in the moment in which she translates it for others to experience in the same way. Her use of affective piety's commonplaces, Saint Cecilia's story, light and perception evidences her intention of creating a shareable story of her experience. In the following sections, her use of Christ's body will be analysed as the primary means for Julian's telling of her and other stories.

3.3.2 'I wolde that his paines ware my paines'

The supernatural light of the crucifix is implied to be the cause of the miraculous interruption of Julian's pain: 'And in this, sodeynlye alle my paine was awaye fro me and I was alle hole' (V 2. 36-7). She understands that she has been delivered from death, and the miracle reminds her of the reason why she has been granted more time. In V 2. 10 Julian asserts that she is reluctant to die, for she 'walde hafe lyevede to have lovede God better and langere time' (V 2. 8-9). Time has been granted to her and she sets to make good use of it straight away:

And sodeynlye come unto my minde that I shulde desire the seconde wounde of oure lordes gifte and of his grace: that he walde fulfille my bodye with minde and felinge of his blessedde passion [...]. For I wolde that his paines ware my paines, with compassion [...]. But in this I desirede nevere ne bodely sight ne no manere shewing of God, botte compassion, as methought that a kinde saule might have with oure lorde Jhesu, that for love wolde become man dedlye. With him I desirede to suffere, lyevande in dedlye bodye, as God wolde giffe me grace. (V 3. 1-9)

It has been argued that Julian is here defending herself from potential accusations, provoked by the claims of having undergone a visionary experience. For example, Watson and Jenkins quote *The Chastising of God's Children*, where Saint Bridget's

confessor warns her from visionaries with ‘a sodeyn wit for fantesye’: it seems natural that these phenomena might have raised doubts about the trustworthiness of mystics and the authenticity of their visions. To prove herself true, in this passage Julian gives the impression that when she received the vision she was not trying to rouse or kindle it of her own volition, as in the opinion of Watson and Jenkins.¹²⁸

The passage might certainly fulfil this apologetic function, but what Julian underlines is more interesting than what she denies. It seems that, at thirty years of age, she has forgotten the request she made when younger, for she does not ask for a ‘bodely sight’ as she did in the past (V 1. 4-19). What she asks for is compassion, the ability to suffer together with Christ.¹²⁹ Julian’s request is interesting because, while asking for an apparition involves only a couple of senses (i.e. sight and hearing), compassion encompasses Julian’s perception on a greater range: sharing the sufferings of Christ should surely be considered to be on another level than simply assisting to them.

Furthermore, the request for the same pains and sufferings as Christ’s implies a sharing of the means through which these are experienced: Christ’s body is a shared object, in the sense that Julian and Jesus share through it the same corporal sensations and also the same revelations. If it is true that, as Bauerschmidt says,¹³⁰ Julian is ‘reading’ Jesus’ crucified body as her ‘revelatory text’, it is also true that she is reading herself as a parallel text through the ‘cum-passio’. The practical consequences of these implications are to be seen in the teaching – or ‘understanding’, as Julian calls it – which is discussed in the following sections.

¹²⁸ Watson and Jenkins (2006), p. 66.

¹²⁹ *OED* n. 1.

¹³⁰ Bauerschmidt (2008), p. 36.

It is only after Julian formulated the desire for compassion that the first vision begins, with an image which underlies all the ‘ghostly sights’ discussed in 3.3.3 and 3.3.4. The vision starts from a dramatical tight close-up on the crown of thorn over the head of the crucified Christ. The crucifix which the curate had put in front of the dying Julian is magnified in the vision until only the detail of the head and the copious bleeding is visible:

And in this, sodaynye I sawe the rede blode trekille downe fro under the garlande alle hate, freshlye, plentefully, and livelye, right as methought that it was in that time that the garlonde of thornes was thyrstede on his blessedede hede. Right so, both God and man, the same sufferde for me. (V 3. 10-3)

The description of the blood that floods from Christ’s head is, in its vividness, part of the meditative practice of affective piety. It appears to Julian, she thinks, in the same way that it was ‘in that time’ (V 3- 11-2), at the historical time of the crucifixion of Jesus. Despite the distance in historical time, the vision makes Christ’s blood an immediate reality that Julian is experiencing. The immediacy is suggested by the connotations given to the blood: it is hot and fresh, plentiful and vivid – a realistic blood that has just left the vessels on the head.

A parallel passage in *A Revelation* presents the same scene with a polished and deeper perceptual intensity in the restricted frame of the head of the Crucifix:

I saw the bodely sight lasting of the plentuous bleding of the hede. The gret droppes of blode felle downe fro under the garlonde like pelottes, seming as it had comen oute of the veines. (R 7. 9-12)

The vigour of the bleeding is evoked by the term ‘pelottes’, which is used to describe heavy rain, but also stones, cannonballs, or hunks of meat.¹³¹ The blood is meticulously described in all the phases it goes through: Julian uses the entire palette of colours.

¹³¹ Watson and Jenkins (2006), p. 146.

And in the coming oute they were browne rede, for the blode was full thicke. And in the spreding abrode they were bright rede. And whan it came at the browes, ther they vanished. (R 7. 12-4)

The description then zooms in further, and the frame is reduced to the single drops:

The plentuoushede is like to the droppes of water that falle of the evesing of an house after a grete shower of raine, that falle so thicke that no man may number them with no bodely wit. And for the roundhede, they were like to the scale of hering, in the spreding of the forhede. (R 7. 17-20)

The stream of blood from underneath the crown of thorns becomes the copious dropping of rain from a thatched roof: a habitual scene from everyday life.

The simile that follows compares the red drops to red herrings; Julian strikes the mind of the reader with an image of astonishing intimacy. Herrings are not normally red: they become reddish-brown subsequently to the preservation processes of smoking and salting. It is a typical everyday process of the British islands and it most certainly evokes a colourful and intimate image, as well as the strongly pungent smell of the fish, which is paralleled to the smell of blood – another pungent odour that Julian, as a woman, knew too well. Read as a whole, the symbolism in this passage almost takes the reader from the contemplation of a crucifix, to the Calvary, then to the marketplace and houses of the medieval Norwich.

A Revelation employs a wide range of images to make manifest the intersection of human and divine, material and spiritual, that Christ embodies. Julian does it in a way that her contemporaries would have understood. *A Vision*'s description of Christ's bleeding head is much shorter and there are fewer layers of meaning. Julian gets more quickly to the most important thing she understands (and wants the reader to understand with her): the central point is that the body Julian and her reader are contemplating is 'right so, both God and man, the same sufferde for me' (V 3. 12-3). Both texts lead to the same conclusion: 'oure lorde Jesus' behaves in a 'homlye' way to the astonished and

full of wonder ‘sinfulle creature lyevande in this wreched fleshe’ (V 3. 17). His ‘curtayne love’ (V 3. 19), his suffering shared by Julian, and the sight of his passion bring Julian to an ‘understandinge’ (V 3. 22), which is about the salvific power of God for Julian, and for all humanity with her:

With this sight of his blissede passion, with the godhede that I sawe in min understandinge, I sawe that this was strenghe enoughe to me – ye, unto alle creatures lyevande that shulde be safe – againes alle the feendes of helle and againes alle gostelye enemies. (V 3. 21-24)

Christ’s body is the means the Godhead uses to deliver Julian from her spiritual enemies. The present tense is used knowingly, for the immediacy of the vision makes evident that humanity’s salvation is, for Julian, something that did not happen once and for all in history. With her daily participation to the pains of Christ, through compassion, she (and every Christian with her) becomes part of the salvation history – namely, not the universal salvation history, but the one she is part of in her recurrent quotidian discipline of meditation.

3.3.3 ‘I suo fattore / non disdegnò di farsi sua fattura’¹³²

As said in 3.2, Julian does specify the modality in which she receives the visions, especially when there is the necessity to distinguish the ‘bodilye sight’ from the ‘gastelye sight’ (V 7. 2-3). The next revelation does not concern Christ’s body, although the semantic frame and the figurative language symbolically link the passage to the image of the crucifix. Like other visions not regarding Christ and his body, it is marked with the tag ‘gastelye sight’.

¹³² ‘He, who made [human nature] first, did not disdain / to make Himself of its own making’. Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso; a verse translation*, ed. and trans. by Robert and Jean Hollander (New York: Doubleday, 2007), Ch. XXXIII, ll. 5-6, pp. 818-9.

And this same time that I sawe this bodily sight, oure lorde shewed me a gastelye sight of his hamly lovinge. [...] He es oure clethinge, that for love wappes us and windes us, halses us and alle beclouses us, hinges aboute us for tender love, that he maye nevere leve us. And so in this sight I sawe sothelye that he is alle thinge that is goode, as to mine understandinge. (V 4. 1-6)

The understanding that Julian receives in Section 4 is purely intellectual only at a first glance. She is surely trying to convey the theological principle of the love of God for humanity, but tracing it back to the physical and human dimension. The pervasive nature of this love is expressed by Julian in the idea that God is every good and comfortable thing.¹³³ Still, the idea is formulated through the body of the crucified Christ, whose arms wide open on the cross, ‘hinges aboute us for tender love’ (V 4. 4), are seen as a divine embrace of humanity. The image is still very physical, when considering the metaphor of the divinity that like clothing covers the human body, or the list of verbs that suggests a tight and intimate contact of the Godhead all around humanity. Even when Christ’s body is not featured as the object of the vision, it is present as a tangent theological source of understanding: it is again the text read and interpreted by Julian.

Spatiality is annihilated in Julian’s desire to be one with the Godhead. The terms she uses to describe the embrace of the cross over humanity recall the desire expressed in the lyric quoted in 2.2:

I wolde ben clad in cristes skyn,
Pat ran so longe on blode,
& gon t’is herte & taken my In¹³⁴

¹³³ What might seem a materialistic vision of the love of God is in fact justified by the reiterated references to God as a comforter of humanity found in the Holy Scriptures, both in the Old (Ps 23: 3-4; Isa 49: 13, 52: 11; Zac 1: 13) and in the New Testament (Lk 2: 25; II Cor 1: 3-7; Phil 2: 1; and others).

¹³⁴ *Religious Lyrics of the XIVth Century*, ed. by Carleton Brown (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 88, ll. 3-5.

The skin, which is the outer physical definition of a body, is a blurred border in Christ's body because of his wounds, a liminal space between the self and the others. In the same way, Julian sees the body on the cross as something open, which is not defined by the typical physical boundaries of skin. Christ is humanity's clothing, in which humanity is wrapped and enclosed in an unity that is never to be separated ('that he maye nevere leve us.' (V 4. 5)). Jesus' flesh that clothes humankind suggests a generative power typical of the process of gestation: humankind is like a creature that receives its shape wrapped in the safe place of the womb which is Christ. This evocation of the mingling of flesh does give a feminine connotation to Jesus, if 'feminine' is intended as pertinent to something having generative power. This anticipates the imagery in the following bodily visions, which feature the whole creation and Mary, the mother of Jesus. Generative power and redemptive power are skilfully put together by Julian in the gradual unfolding of her visions.

In the passage that follows, Julian contemplates what is created and the 'nought' (V 4. 11) it is, which she renders with the famous image of the hazelnut in the palm of her hand. The awareness that the creation lives and lasts only because God loves it and keeps it generates in Julian another outburst of longing for a complete union with the divine. The only way to find rest is in the substantial identity between the Godhead and the devotee, expressed by the annihilation of the physical distance between the two bodies:

For to I am substantiallye aned to him I may nevere have full reste ne varray blisse:
that is to saye, that I be so festenede to him that thare be right nought that is made
betwyxe my God and me. (V 4. 16-18)

The cross is still hanging over Julian and its imagery is indirectly suggested by Julian's desire to be fastened to the Godhead, in the same way as Jesus was fastened to the cross.

The redemption is given by God's mercy and grace (V 4. 19) but it is only possible because of the creature's determination to share the Godhead's body and with it his body's sufferance.

In Section 4 Julian receives the first vision of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Since this is not a bodily sight of Christ it is described as a ghostly sight, but in a bodily likeness. Mary appears to Julian as a humble and meek young woman, 'in the stature that sho was when sho conceivede' (V 4. 22-23), around fifteen years old, according to the medieval accounts of the annunciation.¹³⁵ Julian is given this vision to meditate the mystery of the incarnation, specifically the implications of a God born from one of his creatures. The impossible model who is Mary is revealed as a soul steadily beholding her God, in a perpetual act of reverent contemplation.

The gaze of Mary guides the devotee, as is common in affective piety, towards her son and towards the incomprehensible homeliness of God with 'a simpille creature of his makege' (V 4. 26). This phrasing, which reports the thoughts of Mary in front of her being chosen to be the mother of God, parallels what Julian thinks of the homeliness Jesus shows towards her, at the beginning of the visions (V 3. 16-17). The two women in contemplation are united by a special choosing: Julian as the receiver of visions and special understandings valid for all mankind, Mary as the means for the deity to become man for the salvation of all mankind. Both are full of 'wonder and merveye' in front of a God who lowers himself for love of his creature. This parallel should not imply that Julian is trying to identify herself with Mary, in fact the vision is followed by her understanding of the distinctiveness of Mary as a creature:

¹³⁵ Watson and Jenkins (2006), p. 68.

In this sight I sawe sothfastlye that sho is mare than alle that God made benethe hir in worthines and in fulhede. For abovene hir is nothinge that is made botte the blissede manhede of Criste. (V 4. 30-32)

Julian knows that Mary is a special creature: she is the worthiest and the fullest of grace amongst God's creatures. Interestingly enough, the only thing that is made which is above her is the humanity of her son – the same humanity Christ received from the conception in Mary's womb.

The example of Mary is, for the purpose of Julian's narrative, the demonstration that the history of salvation is made possible (through the grace of God who called Mary and gave Julian the visions) in every Christian's life. It is true that Julian is not instructed to spread what she learnt as, for example, Margery Kempe was – directly by Christ himself (5. 391-4). It is also true that Julian indirectly sets an example of the universal character of her visions, by showing that the history of salvation is participated by the whole humanity through the incarnation of Christ in a human body. Here is Mary, the human woman who made possible the incarnation, that makes evident this implication.

The first vision ends after the bodily sight of Mary and Julian is given time to meditate what she saw. While the bodily sights cease, she says that 'the gastely sight dwelled in mine understandinge' (V 5. 19-20). Christ's body is the only bodily sight Julian has received, so it is the vision of the crucifix that dwells in Julian's mind during the other visions and while she meditates on what she saw:

And in that time that oure lorde shewed this that I have nowe saide in gastelye sight, I saw the bodilye sight lastande of the plentyouse bleding of the hede. (V 5. 1-2)

The other visions are functional to the main one – which is Christ’s body, as Mary was functional for the incarnation. The rhetorical ability of Julian creates a series of layers of visions kept together by Christ’s body, which is the main significance of her text both on a textual level and on a theological one.

3.3.4 ‘For I am a woman’: a textual analysis of self-fashioning

Section 6 of *A Vision* deals with the matter of authority in a text written by a woman. The visions described in 3.3.2 and 3.3.3 are rich in highly theological implications: Julian feels she potentially challenged the custodian authority of divine knowledge. It might have been the subtle comparison of Julian’s calling with Mary’s one, or the sensation that proposing the image of the whole creation in a hazelnut implied great responsibilities. In any case, Julian needs to address the question of her authority in her text.

She manages the problem with a traditional device, which inserts in the picture an external authority that justifies what is written in the text. As discussed in 2.3, women (but also men) gained authority over their texts by submitting their own authority to the supreme one, the divine one: God. Nevertheless, the text she is reading is Christ’s body, and what Julian reads in that body is the project of salvation and love that God has for all humankind. Julian does play a role in this project, and therefore Julian does claim for herself a right to speak. The operation of self-fashioning is completed at the end of a long passage, that possibly takes Section 6 in its entirety. The first few lines introduce the arguments Julian is going to stress and expand through the section:

Alle that I saye of myselfe, I meene in the persone of alle mine evencristene, for I am lernede in the gastelye shewinge of oure lorde that he meenes so. And therfore I praye yowe alle for Goddes sake, and counsayles yowe for youre awne profit, that ye leve the behaldinge of the wrechid, sinfull creature that it was shewed unto, and that ye mightlye, wiselye, lovandlye, and mekelye behalde God, that of his curtays love and of his endles goodnes walde shewe generalye this vision in comforth of us alle. (V 6. 1-7)

What Julian links in this passage is: the universal quality of the teachings she got from the visions, God's authorship of the revelations, and her self-fashioning in her role in the transmission of the teachings. A textual analysis of the section highlights the rhetorical ability of Julian in the creation of a cohesive and convincing discourse, handling various complicated arguments.

The universality of the text which is Christ's body is stated in the repetition of phrases that have as referents either a large group of people or the everyman: 'alle mine evencristene' (V 6. 1, 20, 30, 39), 'yowe alle' (V 6. 3), 'us alle' (V 6. 7), 'everilke manne' (V 6. 13), 'many oder' (V 6. 16), 'alle mankinde' (V 6. 21). The teachings she received through her visions are beneficial for those who, instructed by the visions, behold God. This aspect is conveyed by terms with positive connotation, as for example: 'profit' (V 6. 4, 13, 16), 'comforth' (V 6. 7, 34), 'grete joye and likinge' (V 6. 9), 'alle that is goode' (V 6. 22), 'blisse' (V 6. 31).

The authorship of God is remarked in various phrases, normally associated with phrases which referent is Julian, the worthless tool in the hands of God: the beginning of Section 6 (extensively quoted above) offers two examples of sentences in which the 'wrechid, sinfull creature' (V 6. 4) is associated with the agency of God in giving her the visions and the knowledge she got from them. Later on, the bipartite structure is repeated various times: 'For the shewinge I am not goode but if I love God the better' (V 6. 11); 'and therto was stirred of God in the firste time when I sawe itte [...]. For if I

loke singulerlye to myselfe, I am right nought' (V 6. 14-19); 'Thane shalle ye sone forgette me that am a wreche, and dose so that I lette yowe nought, and behalde Jhesu that is techare of alle' (V 6. 44-45).

Towards the end of the section, after mentioning the incarnation and the crucifixion, ('that is God, that of his endeles love wolde become oure brothere and suffer for us.' (V 6. 32-33)) leading back her readers to the text she is reading to them, the self-fashioning process of Julian reaches one of its more pronounced delineations. She does lower herself at first, clarifying that she does not mean to teach what she learnt (teaching was an activity generally forbidden to women, as *Ancrene Wisse* states¹³⁶), leaving the agency to 'the shewing of him that es soverayne techare' (V 6. 37-38).

Despite her lack of authority, she does feel the urge: 'Botte sothelye charite stirres me to telle yowe it' (V 6. 38), and, in a slightly defiant outburst, she declares her identity of woman and writer:

Botte for I am a woman shulde I therfore leve that I shulde nought telle yowe the goodenes of God, sine that I sawe in that same time that it is his wille that it be knawen? And that shalle ye welle see in the same matere that folowes after, if itte be welle and trewlye taken. (V 6. 40-43)

The identity that Julian shapes for herself is subordinate to the greater authority of her visions, better, to the teaching the text which is Christ's body gives her. Undoubtedly, the vision of Mary described in 3.3.3 is one of the sources from which Julian took the power of asserting her feminine individuality as a legitimate contribution to the history of salvation and to the spreading of God's message. Self-fashioning is a long and complicated process that, as the textual analysis showed, is done with cautious skillful

¹³⁶ Savage and Watson (1991), pp. 72-5; p. 204. See also about preaching in particular J. R. Owst, *Preaching in Medieval England: An Introduction to Sermon Manuscripts of the Period c. 1350-1450* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1926), pp. 5-7.

rhetoric. Even if subordinating it to her visions, she manages to obtain the authority that comes from experience, the one that writing women exerted at a time in which their power was limited, as discussed in 2.3.

3.3.5 ‘I laugh mightelye’: Enfolding and Hybridising

Julian’s recursive narrative style becomes evident from Section 8, when the crucifix head she has been beholding in the background of the visions returns in the foreground. As it happened in Sections 3-5, it engenders other visions and other understandings which mix the physicality of Christ’s scourged face with the spirituality of highly theological discourses – namely the omnipresence of God, the overcoming of the devil, sin, everlasting life, and God’s goodness.

The ‘bodely sight’ at the beginning of Section 8 is again the bleeding head of the crucified Christ, in which Julian reads, or as she says ‘behelde’ (V 8. 2), some of the events of the Passion, as described in the Gospels.¹³⁷ She is contemplating, of course, the results of these events – as in reading the signs of them on Jesus’ skin:

And after this, I sawe with bodely sight the face of the crucifixe that hange before me, in whilke I behelde continuely a party of his passion: despite, spittinge, sowlinge of his bodye, and buffetinge in his blisfulle face, and manye langoures and paines, ma than I can telle, and ofte changinge of coloure, and alle his blissede face a time closede in dry blode. (V 8. 1-5)

The changes that the body of Christ undergoes as death approaches are noted by Julian with thorough details, with particular attention to colours and dryness. Christ’s assimilation of humanity’s sins – realised in its fullest in his own human suffering –

¹³⁷ Matt. 26: 67.

transforms his body, as Bauerschmidt says, in a ‘salvific generativity, whereby his body assimilates us’.¹³⁸

This I sawe bodilye and hevelye and derkeye, and I desired mare bodelye light to hafe sene more clerelye. And I was answerde in my resone that if God walde shewe me mare he shulde, botte me neded na light botte him. (V 8. 5-8)

As explained by the medieval optic theory, in taking on humanity’s sins, Christ’s body becomes darker. His body is distancing itself from the light and the beauty of the divine, and the dark colours are the visible signals of that. In her understanding of darkness as the absence of light, and of light as beauty and purity coming from God, Julian represents sin as the opposite of the presence of God – which is absence of God. It is evident that Julian struggles to understand what is happening, and probably to reconcile it with the teachings she received from the Church. The answer she gets in her ‘resone’ (V 8. 7) fits with the optic theory principle of God as the source of every light: she asks for better understanding, but she is put in front of the reality that there is (in this world) a limitation to the spread of light, which is the limited human intellect. Similarly, the theological implications of Julian’s feeling that ‘sinne is nought’ (V 8. 16) go beyond this dissertation;¹³⁹ the matter will be briefly discussed later when Julian returns on it, in a deeper relation with Christ’s body.

Another absence in the picture plays with the physicality and the interaction of bodies, eliminating the bodies of Jesus’ torturers from the account. They are never described nor mentioned, and their physical absence emphasises the effects their actions have on the body of Christ. Julian may have taken inspiration from late medieval church

¹³⁸ Bauerschmidt (2008), p. 84.

¹³⁹ But are discussed extensively in other studies. Particularly helpful is Margaret Healy-Varley’s ‘Wounds Shall Be Worships: Anselm in Julian of Norwich’s *Revelation of Love*’, *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 115 (2016), 186-212. See also Bauerschmidt (2008), pp. 96-107; Gillespie (2011), pp. 7-22 (p. 18).

roof bosses, where the scene is also ‘disturbingly fragmentary’. Watson and Jenkins note that the tormentors are sometimes ‘depicted merely as a spitting mouth or a slapping hand with no bodies attached’.¹⁴⁰ While the crowd that assails Christ during the Passion is normally depicted in affective piety’s texts, Julian decides not to – possibly because that is simply what she experienced (i.e. she did not receive a vision of the crowd, but only of the crucified Christ), or rather because she is looking at the crucifixion of Christ as an act that is redemptive of all humanity.¹⁴¹ The wounds opened in Christ’s body are not the result of some torturer’s actions, but the result of the Godhead’s assimilation of humanity’s sins.

The vision of the bleeding crucifix becomes more intense through the section; the descriptive frame extends to the whole Christ’s body, abused at a point that it almost liquefies.¹⁴² The open trait of Christ’s body is emphasised by the scourging effects on his skin, which Julian describes with her usual vividness.

And after this I sawe, behaldande, the bodye plenteouslye bledande, hate and freshlye and lifelye, right as I sawe before in the hede. And this was shewed me in the semes of scourginge. And this ranne so plenteouslye to my sight that methought, if it hadde bene so in kinde for that time, it shulde hafe made the bedde alle on blode, and hafe passede on aboute. (V 8. 20-4)

The bountiful bleeding flood the surroundings: it is a liquid that comes from the inside to the outside, intersecting Christ’s self with the others’ through the liminal space of his wounds. The flood is compared to the plentiful waters God created for the earth, ‘to oure bodilye ese’ (V 8. 25), Julian says:

¹⁴⁰ Watson and Jenkins (2006), p. 76.

¹⁴¹ A consideration of the synoptic passage in *A Revelation* seems to confirm both these hypotheses: Julian explicitly states that she ‘saw not so properly specified the Jewes that did him to deth’ (R 33. 17-8), while she tries to handle the reconciliation of her visions about God’s infinite mercy with the Church’s teachings on damnation. Again, this discussion lies outside the present dissertation; Bauerschmidt (2008), pp. 113-119 helps the debate on Julian’s orthodox or heretic understanding of Salvation.

¹⁴² Bauerschmidt (2008), p. 85.

Botte it likes him better that we take fullye his blessedde blode to washe us with of sinne, for thare is no likoure that es made that him likes so welle to giffe us. For it is so plenteouse and of oure kinde. (V 8. 26-8)

The suggestion of the practice of the Eucharist, in which the faithful's body is permeable to Christ's body quite literally, is evident in Julian's use of 'likoure' (V 8. 27) which could both refer to liquid (especially blood) or to wine (especially communion wine).¹⁴³ Christ's body, in the form of his blood, is performative of a generative action of redemption, whereby the dispersion and therefore contamination of his fluid does not involve corruption or loss of integrity. On the contrary, the divine power acquires more generative power by being 'brought low, so as to be spread abroad by the human blood of Jesus.'¹⁴⁴ It is precisely because Christ's blood is 'of oure kinde' (V 8. 28) that it is an effective means to wash humanity's sins, in Julian's understanding.

The following passage makes it evident that Julian does go beyond affective piety practices in her effort to negotiate her experience and render it in a shareable way. Instead of being devoured by sorrows for the approaching death of Christ, as the meditative practice of contrition would envisage, Julian receives (and therefore reports) the understanding of the victory of the Godhead over the enemy, the devil. While from the human point of view beholding the text that is the Cross is reading of destruction, of failure, and of despair, Julian's interpretation of the text entangles sufferance with hope.

It is significant that Julian decided to express the understanding of the overcoming of the devil through verbal form. It is God himself that speaks in Julian's mind the words that announce the success.

¹⁴³ *MED*, see 'licour' and variations, n. 1-2.

¹⁴⁴ Bauerschmidt (2008), p. 85.

And than was, withouten voice and withoute openinge of lippes, formede in my saule this worde: “Herewith is the feende overcomen.” This worde saide oure lorde menande his passion, as he shewed me before. (V 8. 30-3)

The intervention of the character of the Godhead is necessary, for Julian is asking to her readers to believe the impossible. After the description of Christ’s undoing and liquefying body, the paradox of his victory through the torturing death on the Cross is even more startling, described by Julian’s hybrid language. The celebration of God’s omnipotence (‘he es in alle thinge’; ‘he dose alle that es done’; ‘God dothe alle thinge, be it nevere so litille. Nor nathing es done be happe ne be eventure, botte be the endeles forlume of the wisdom of God.’ (V 8. 9-14)) is placed side by side with his ignominious death. The text itself envelops the passages about the omnipotence with those describing the dying body of Christ. The outline of Section 8 is: ll. 1-8, vision of the bleeding face of Jesus; ll. 9-19, vision of God who does all things; ll. 20-28, vision of the scourged body of Jesus; ll. 30-47, vision of the overcome devil and Julian’s laughter; ll. 48-54, summary and conclusion. This pattern is a perfect example of the process typical of Julian’s writing, in which ‘the very substance of her writing seems to fold back upon itself’.¹⁴⁵

The characterisation of the devil as an object of scorn is a rhetorically crafted passage, which introduces elements of derisive jubilation in the heavy description of the Passion and the solemn omnipotence of God. Julian is shown that the devil is overcome and that all his hard work to gain souls is pointless. The supreme enemy, for whose destruction God had to lower himself, became man, and died a horrible death, became a laughingstock. In front of something so incredible and impossible to understand, Julian

¹⁴⁵ Bauerschmidt (2008), p. 107.

cannot but mix the high language of creation, incarnation, and redemption, with the human exorcising act of laughter:

Also I sawe oure lorde scorne his malice and nought him, and he wille that we do the same. For this sight, I laugh mightelye, and that made tham to laugh that were aboute me, and thare laughinge was likinge to me. I thought I wolde mine evencristene hadde sene as I sawe. Than shulde thaye alle hafe laughen with me. Botte I sawe nought Criste laugh. Neverthelesse him likes that we laugh in comfortinge of us and enjoyande in God for the feende is overcomen. (V 8. 42-7)

The reader is briskly brought back to the domestic scene of Julian's bedroom, full with people who all share Julian's mirth (the first community, the first 'evencristene' with whom Julian shares her experience), a setting most likely forgotten during the long divine visions and the elevating discourses.

The contrast of quotidian and individual with the everlasting and universal is one of the most compelling rhetorical techniques of Julian's: she knows that her fellow Christian struggles with the reconciliation of the idea of an omnipotent God with the outrage of the Cross, or the needs for spiritual elevation and the day-to-day life of 'travaile' (V 8. 54). She translates these preoccupations in a literary language that hybridises and mixes, showing that it is precisely in the adulterated condition of humanity that salvation has been obtained and can still be.

'It is the sight of Jesus' bleeding head that occasions Julian's hybridization of language, mixing high and low, majesty and familiarity,' for 'one can speak simultaneously of God's power and God's self-degradation', of theological truth and daily life, 'only through the hybrid language of incarnation.'¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁶ Bauerschmidt (2008), p. 84.

3.3.6 “If thowe be payed, I am paid”

In Section 9 Julian contemplates the three degrees of bliss that a soul will receive from God in heaven, developing an engaging understanding of the Trinity that will be discussed further in the following sections, when Julian returns to it. After, the visions go back to show the crucified Christ’s death. The following visions and meditations represent the centre of the meditative journey of Julian. In the same fashion, the sections that record these visions are in the textual centre of the book (V10-15). After having beheld Christ’s body in the previous visions, she is finally accorded the request she made at the beginning: ‘For I wolde that his paines ware my paines’ (V 3. 3-4). Again, as always in Julian of Norwich’s works, the point of departure for experiencing, understanding, and sharing, is Christ’s body, now in the very moment of death.

The spectrum of colours that Julian sees on the face of the dying Jesus draws nearer and nearer the extreme side: black, the colour which relates to the total absence of light. Gillespie notes how the connotative terms that Julian uses in the description in V 10 refer ‘to earth, to autumn, to manhood, to bile and melancholy, to cold and dryness.’¹⁴⁷

After this, Criste shewed me a partye of his passion nere is dyinge. I sawe that swete face as it ware drye and bludyelesse with pale dyinge; sithen mare dede pale, langourande; and than turnede more dede to the blewe; and sithene mare blewe, as the fleshe turnede mare deepe dede. For alle the paines that Criste sufferde in his bodye shewed to me in the blissede face, als farfurthe as I sawe it, and namelye in the lippes, thare I sawe this foure colourse–thaye that I sawe beforehande freshlye and ruddy, liflye and likande to my sight. This was a hevye change, to see this deepe dyinge. And also the nese claungede and dried to my sight. This lange pininge semede to me as he hadde bene a sevensight dede, allewaye sufferande paine. And methought the dryinge of Cristes fleshe was the maste paine of his passion and the laste. (V 10. 1-11)

¹⁴⁷ Gillespie (2011), p. 24.

Few lines below, Julian adds the detail of a ‘blawinge of winde fra withouten that dried mare’ (V 10. 19), not a standard detail in accounts of the Passion, and Watson and Jenkins speculate that ‘a cold east wind from the North Sea might have been a feature of many Good Fridays in fourteenth-century Norwich’.¹⁴⁸

Red, brown, blue, and black mark the stages of the ‘undoing of the creation by sin’,¹⁴⁹ which Christ’s flesh undergoes. As already noticed, in Julian’s writing Christ is not only an object of contemplation, fixed in time and space; the relationship between the contemplative subject and the contemplated object is not a straight unidirectional line. The changing colours – particularly of the lips and the shrinking nose, which are not a typical objects of contemplation in affective piety – are one of the first details that shows this distinctive trait of Julian’s Christ’s body. Gillespie continues: ‘[Julian’s] colour palette exactly matches the experiences that she and Christ undergo in these scenes; the cold wind, the dry dying, the human suffering, the thirst of Christ.’¹⁵⁰

This is the greatest pain that Jesus experienced so far, in Julian’s eyes, and it is also the one that Julian shares – a reference to her present situation is her mentioning the fact that the crucified body looked as it was dead for seven nights, which parallel with Julian’s days of illness.

The passages where the abundance of Jesus’ bleeding is described (in V 4 and V 8) are always almost surprisingly gleeful, linked with images of fertile generativity; to the moment of death Julian opposes the generative power of her Saviour’s blood with the dryness and coldness of the absence of it. The liquefied body of Christ ‘hadde failinge of moisterre, for the blessedde fleshe and banes ware lefte allane withouten blode

¹⁴⁸ Watson and Jenkins (2006), p. 82.

¹⁴⁹ Watson and Jenkins (2006), p. 178.

¹⁵⁰ Gillespie (2011), p. 24.

and moistere.’ (V 10. 16-7) Julian anticipates that Christ’s thirst has also a spiritual reason, explained fully in V 15: the unity of humanity with him cannot be complete on earth, and therefore, for his desire to enfold humanity in himself, he is thirsty. ‘The thirste [is] that he has us nought in him als haelye as he shalle thane haffe’ (V 15. 15-6). The universal understanding of Salvation is further discussed in 3.3.7.

The settling of a dying human body on a cross is described with surprisingly accuracy: death by crucifixion does not come strictly because of nailing, but because of the impossibility for the convicted to breathe, due to the outstretched arms unable to support the torso. As Julian says, death comes ‘with wringing of the nailes and paysinge of the hede and weight of the bodye’ (V 10. 17-8), a description easily inspired by the common crucifix iconography, to which Julian gives a new, startling immediacy. Julian can describe the death with liveliness also because she experienced the same pains that caused it; in her illness and in her sharing Christ’s body, she feels the crucifixion’s pains:

Swilke paines I sawe that alle es to litelle that I can telle or saye, for it maye nought be tolde. Botte ilke saule, aftere the sayinge of Sainte Paule, shulde “feelee in him that in Criste Jhesu.” This shewing of Criste paines filled me fulle of paines. For I wate wele he suffrede nought botte anes, botte as he walde shewe it me and fille me with minde, as I hadde desirede before. (V 10. 21-5)

The community who is reunited around Julian’s bed perceives that the moment is pivotal, that the body which Julian and Jesus are sharing is approaching death – for her mother (either the natural one, or the Mother Superior) closes her eyes, thinking her dead. The importance of the gaze (and the sharing between object and subject of the contemplation through the means of sight) is underlined by the sorrow that Julian is caused when her eyes are closed: ‘For noughtwithstandinge alle my paines, I wolde

nought hafe been letted for love that I hadde in him.’ (V 10. 28-9) She believes that, in closing her eyes, the transmission of the sufferance will be interrupted.

As said in 3.3.5, the suffering of the crucified Christ is entangled with hope, the same hope that is not present in Hell’s pain, as Julian says in V 10. 32-4, when she earnestly declares: ‘Than thought me, I knewe ful litille whate paine it was that I asked, for methought that my paines passede any bodilye dede’ (V 10. 31-2). Julian follows Paul in the first and second chapters of Philippians: first she quotes it directly when talking about the necessity of the *imitatio Christi*, in V 10. 22-3, then she ponders, like the apostle, how death would be a gain, for it would mean a complete union with Christ, in the death he is undergoing on the cross:¹⁵¹

Howe might my paine be more than to see him that es alle my life, alle my blis, and alle mye joye suffer? Here feled I sothfastlye that I lovede Criste so mekille aboven myselfe that methought it hadde beene a grete ese to me to hafe diede bodilye. (V 10. 34-7)

Christ’s death is shared by all those ‘Cristes loverse’ (V 1. 7) who gaze towards his crucified body: the second vision of Mary is collocated now, at the feet of the cross, while she beholds her crucified son with the same love that Julian has just declared. Furthermore, Julian is now totally part of this community, gathered underneath the cross. After a one-to-one relationship enjoyed in the first long section of V 10, through Mary and the community of ‘alle his trewe lovers’(V 10. 40), Julian can change her referent to the universal ‘us’, that in V 10. 46 is extended to the whole creation. The phrasing and terminology that Julian uses for herself in V 10. 36-7 is almost the same she uses to describe the love that Mary and the disciples have for Christ:

¹⁵¹ Phil 2: 20-24.

Herein I sawe in partye the compassion of oure ladye, Sainte Marye. For Criste and sho ware so anede in love that the gretnesse of hir love was the cause of the mekillehede of hir paine. [...] And so alle his disciples and alle his trewe lovers sufferde paines mare than thare awne bodelye dying. For I am seker, be min awne felinge, that the leste of thame luffed him mare than thaye did thamselke. Here I sawe a grete aninge betwyx Criste and us. For when he was in paine, we ware in paine, and alle creatures that might suffer paine sufferde with him. (V 10. 38-45)

Julian hears a voice, which suggests to her to look towards heaven in the same way as the parson suggested to her to look towards the crucifix in V 2. 22-5. This time, after her journey of beholding and sharing Christ's body, Julian knows where to look for comfort and salvation: not an undefined empty heaven, but Christ crucified, where she has been reading (and experiencing) the project of love of the Godhead for her. 'Thus chese I Jhesu for my heven, wham I saw onlye in paine at that time' (V 11. 1) is a 'profoundly contradictory'¹⁵² conflation only if one does not consider the journey Julian has made as the reader of the body of Christ, where precisely hope and death conflate, as discussed in 3.3.5.

Heaven and pain, hope and death can conflate because the divine and the human conflate in Christ's body dying on the cross: 'And thus sawe I my lorde Jhesu langoure lange time. For the aninge of the godhede for love gafe strenght to the manhede to suffer mare than alle men might.' (V 11. 6-7) As Jesus has inscribed in his flesh the hope that is divine resurrection ('For the paines was a dede done in a time be the wyrkinge of love' (V 11. 14-5)), so Julian and all those who suffer with(in) Christ can enjoy the same hope and strength that comes from the certitude that the pain was and is undergone as a working of love. This will become central during the analysis of the implication of Julian's relationship with Christ's body for the human community.

¹⁵² Watson and Jenkins (2006), p. 84.

Christ and Julian are at this point almost literally sharing the same cross, and the transformation Jesus goes through at the moment of death and instant glorification is shared in the same way by Julian: she experiences that the cross is ‘chanchede into blisfulle chere’ (V 11. 17-8) and seems to follow Jesus in his glorification in Heaven – although, as it is described, Julian is cautious not to infer such a possibility: it appears to be a ‘rapture in the traditional sense’.¹⁵³

In Heaven, she experiences the Trinity through the ‘blessed manhede of Criste’ (V 12. 8), exactly as Mechtild suddenly understands the mystery of the Trinity by holding the infant Jesus in her hands.¹⁵⁴ Indeed, Julian does not see the Father nor the Holy Ghost, but only their ‘properte’ and their ‘wyrkinge’. According to Julian, the Father is understood through his giving ‘mede tille his sone Jhesu Criste’ (V 12. 11-2): this gift is humanity itself, the crown of Christ the king. The Holy Ghost is understood through the ‘endeles likinge’ (V 12. 34) that souls enjoy in Heaven.

This ‘likinge’ is shared by Julian with Jesus in their dialogue in Section 12, and through Julian to the whole of humanity. Christ declares himself willing to ‘suffere mare [...] if it ware nedfulle to suffer mare’ (V 12. 24-5), and in an exchange that sounds extremely natural, as if between two dear friends, Christ adds: “‘Erte thow wele payed?’” Be the tothere worde that Criste saide–“if thowe be payed, I am paid”” (V 12. 37-8). Julian is the means through which this intimate dialogue is shared with the community of the body of Christ, discussed in the next section.

The universality of the teachings she has received is already evident in the anaphoric repetition of Christ’s willingness to ‘suffer mare’: with skillful rhetorical devices ‘she is able to communicate the fact in faith that God’s love for the world, the

¹⁵³ Colledge and Walsh, p. 97.

¹⁵⁴ See discussion in 2.3.

proof of which is the sacrificial death of his Son, is as sure and active and manifest now as it was at the time of Christ's passion and death. Every day a glorified Redeemer¹⁵⁵ is ready to do the same, if it might be. It is crucial for Julian to underline that what is true for her is true for her 'evencristene', as she ends V 12 with an exhortation to her readers:

Thinke also wiselye of the gretnesse of this worde: "That ever I suffred passion for the." For in that worde was a hye knowinge of luffe and of likinge that he hadde in oure salvation. (V 12. 41-3)

Step by step, vision by vision, Julian starts to give her readers the fruit of the knowledge she received, anticipating the final sections in which the mandate of her book is interwoven with the universal history of salvation she read in Christ's body.

In Section 13, Julian has the last bodily vision of Christ. This parallels the moment of death, featuring Mary as well as the body of Christ in its resurrected form. The triumphant saviour, that is almost always absent from affective piety texts, directs Julian's gaze towards his open, now glorified, wounds:

Fulle merelye and gladlye oure lorde loked into his side and behelde, and saide this worde—"Lo, how I loved the"—as if he hadde saide: "My childe, if thou kan nought loke in my godhede, see here how I lette open my side, and my herte be cloven in twa, and lette oute blude and watere alle that was tharein. And this likes me, and so wille I that it do the." (V 13. 1-6)

The wound is again at the centre of Julian's meditation, yet the resuscitated body of Jesus still bears his human wounds, instead of being a healed and untouched body. To say it with Bauerschmidt's words, 'the wound that human sin inflicts upon Jesus' body is healed, not through closure, so as to restore his body to smoothness, but by transformation into the open site of God's salvific work.'¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁵ Colledge and Walsh, p. 98.

¹⁵⁶ Bauerschmidt (2008), p. 105.

Julian glosses Jesus' words, and put her commentary in Jesus' mouth, as it was him who pronounced them. This is a technique that Julian derived from medieval biblical exegesis.¹⁵⁷ In those words, Julian's desires to surpass the boundaries of Christ's body, entering the safe and generative place through the openings of the wounds, (as expressed in V 4) are welcomed by the Godhead, who shows the tangible signs of his love.

The image is enhanced in the Long Text, to make Jesus' side wound as inclusive as possible. In *A Revelation* Jesus, by showing his open side, 'shewed a fair, delectable place, and large inow for alle mankinde that shalle be saved to rest in pees and in love' (R 24. 3-4). As Bauerschmidt noted, 'the death of Jesus transforms the privations of earthly life into an open space, a place "nowted" of earthly attachments, into which God's servants can be gathered so as to share in the plentitude of the divine life.'¹⁵⁸

Mary appears in V 13 for the last time, as the vector that leads humanity to the beholding of her son's crucified and then glorified body. In the Long Text, Julian adds that in Mary's blissed soul she can learn to know herself, 'and reverently drede my God' (R 25. 17). The role of Mary in the history of salvation (the one performed in Julian's, and every Christian's, daily practice of devotion – as opposed to the one performed once and for all with Christ's death) is made more explicit in *A Revelation*: the relationship between the humanity that seeks the Godhead and Mary is expressed in human terms. Mary is like 'a man [who] love a creature singularly above alle creatures'. Like in a human love, he, that is she, 'wille make alle other creatures to love and to like that creature that he loveth so mekille.' (R 25. 26-8)

¹⁵⁷ Watson and Jenkins (2006), p. 88.

¹⁵⁸ Bauerschmidt (2008), p. 105.

In the same fashion, Julian acts as Mary does, making her readers follow her gaze which is, necessarily and relentlessly, directed towards the crucified Christ. The next section will discuss Julian's original inclusive salvation history, how she renders the teachings she received to make them understood and meditate (in a practical way) by her fellow Christian, and how she originally shapes the body of Christ which is the ultimate embodiment of the Godhead in a human form.

3.3.7 'Woundes as wyrshippes' and the Mystical Body of Christ

The communal aspect of Salvation is evident in Julian: she adopts a peculiarly including understanding of it. When she asks 'A, goode lorde, howe might alle be wele for the grete harme that is comon by sinne to thy creatures?' (V 14. 2-3), God shows her that there are two parts of knowledge. The latter is hidden from humanity while they are in the world, while the former is a 'blissed party' (V 14. 16), 'open and clere and faire and light and plentious' (V 14. 16-7), accessible to everyone.

In this passage the 'blissed party' (Christ the Saviour and humanity's redemption) is described as having blurred and undefined boundaries; Julian's lexical choices closely resemble and contrast with the terms used for the description of the bleeding body of Jesus. The redemption of humanity is an open and beautiful space, it spreads in plentiful quantity, as Christ's wounds and blood did. Unlike the wounds and blood of the dying Christ, dark in colour (V 3. 10-3; 8. 1-6; 10. 1-10), redemption's colours are clear, bright, full of the light of the divine.

Julian's understanding of incarnation and redemption is not something revealed to the few, instead it is a knowledge spread in the world through the body of the crucifix – for this is the form that God's love assumes in an imperfect world of sin. 'Oure parte

is oure lorde' (V 14. 23), possibly influenced by Psalm 16: 5 and Psalm 119: 57, reminds the community of readers that Christ gained salvation for them on a physical level, making them the owners of something tangible: Christ's human body, both the crucified one and the glorified one in heaven, as will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

As Julian says in her revelations, the body on the crucifix is the means that humanity has to reach union with the Godhead in the imperfect world where imperfect light propagates; this union is intended both as a knowledge of self and God: Saint Bernard made the centre of self-knowledge the crucified Christ; specifically, this knowledge is acquired in the mutual indwelling of Christ in the soul and the soul in Christ.¹⁵⁹

For Julian, the embodiment of every Christian within Christ is not only an individual journey, made in the privacy of one's own room: it is done in relation to the 'other', in a community of people, for Christ himself is the Church:

For he is haly kyrke. For he is the grounde, he is the substance, he is the techinge, he is the techare, he is the ende, he is the mede wharefore ilke trewe saule travailles. (V 16. 3-5)

The union with Christ's crucified body is, for Julian, inescapably linked to the 'concrete act of dwelling within Christ's ecclesial body.'¹⁶⁰ Her recurrent careful claims that the truths she saw in the visions is in accordance with the teaching of the Church are made only partially to avoid possible accusations of heresy.

In sacramental theology, the Church is the body of Christ. Paul says in I Corinthians:

¹⁵⁹ Bernard of Clairvaux (2004), pp. 45-53; Bernard of Clairvaux (1895), Sermon XLIII. 4, p. 269.

¹⁶⁰ Bauerschmidt (2008), p. 108.

Sicut enim corpus unum est et membra habet multa omnia autem membra corporis cum sint multa unum corpus sunt ita et Christus. Etenim in uno Spiritu omnes nos in unum corpus baptizati sumus sive Iudaei sive gentiles sive servi sive liberi et omnes unum Spiritum potati sumus.¹⁶¹

The reaffirmation of this union of the Christians is made visible and recreated every time that the body (the community) reunites for the celebration of Mass and, most of all, infringes the boundaries of their and Christ's bodies, when assimilating the consecrated host. It is significant that there is a community reunited around Julian's sickbed: they participate in Julian's joy for they are, even if partially, incorporated in the visionary experience through her. The vision of the love of God for humanity is in itself a vision of this universal union of souls:

What may make me more to love mine everchristen than to see in God that he loves alle that shalle be safe, as it were alle a saule? (V 17. 6-7)

It is interesting to notice that Julian defines sin as a physical blow on the sinner's soul: it is the 'sharpest scourge that any chosen saule may be better with' (V 17. 22). In the same way that humanity's sins scourged Christ's body, individual sin creates wounds on human souls. The mystical body of Christ is affected by this scourging; the wounded soul is healed by a journey of contrition and the appropriate confession, which turns the soul again 'in the life of haly kyrke' (V 17. 27-8), healing with it the entire community of the mystical body of Christ.

Still, Julian's handling of sin is not inscribed in a justice-like system of 'guilt equal penalty', for as the wounds of the crucified Christ are turned from death to generative life, so the wounds of the contrite sinner will be his or her reward in heaven:

¹⁶¹ I Cor 12: 12-13. Biblia Sacra Iuxta Vulgatam Versionem, <<https://www.biblegateway.com/versions/Biblia-Sacra-Vulgata-VULGATE/>> [accessed 7 December 2017].

Though he be heled, his woundes er sene before God nought as woundes bot as wyrshippes. And so on contrarye wise, as it es punished here with sorowe and with penance, it shalle be rewarded in heven be the curtayse love of oure lorde God alle mightye. (V 17. 33-6)

Julian comes to this understanding after having been convinced of the infinite and perfect love of the Godhead for his creatures, shown in the death of both the humanity and the divinity of Christ on the cross. This conviction is what allows Julian to say:

Na mare than [God's] love es broken to us for oure sinne, na mare wille he that oure love be broken to oureselfe ne to oure evencristen, botte nakedlye hate sinne, and endeleslye love the saule as God loves it. (V 18. 16-8)

embodying her relationship with her fellow Christian and the human community in the same union, made possible by the union of the two natures of Christ.

The outline of *A Vision*, despite its possibly provisional character, in what sounds like a vaguely structured oral telling, has a meaning. This section investigated the understanding about the community of Christians on which Julian meditates after having received the last bodily vision of the crucifix – and it is important to underline that she did not put it before, as a prerequisite, but as something she learnt from having received the bodily visions of Christ, first as a dying body, then as a glorified flesh in Heaven.

After having beheld the project of love of God for all humanity, embodied in the crucified body of Christ, especially after having being directed towards the contemplation of Christ's wounds in Section 13, Julian explores it in relation to the human community, the evangelical 'neighbour'. In the same way as she gazes towards Christ's pains, she shares his suffering body (V 3. 3-4), and his deadly cross (V 10. 17), she pays attention to her 'evencristene''s sufferance. In the words of Weil, 'ce n'est pas seulement l'amour de Dieu qui a pour substance l'attention. L'amour du prochain, dont

nous savons que c'est le même amour, est fait de la même substance.¹⁶² The attention Weil is talking about is the very same process Julian undergoes in her compassion journey through Christ's crucified body. She emptied her mind of volition other than the desire to share the crucifix's pains, in the same way as Weil describes the process of attention:

L'attention consiste à suspendre sa pensée, à la laisser disponible, vide et pénétrable à l'objet [...]. Et surtout la pensée doit être vide, en attente, ne rien chercher, mais être prête à recevoir dans sa vérité nue l'objet qui va y pénétrer.¹⁶³

This is the attitude of the contemplating Julian, created using a language of inclusion, indwelling, enclosure, openness, and abundance, in relation to the experience of the visions of the crucified Christ.

The transforming of the embodied experience of God in a shareable piece of literature is the final action of Julian of Norwich's visionary journey. 'Her *Showings* bears witness to embodied human experience in history and, simultaneously, issues a call to action, seeking re-embodiment in the lives of its readers through human history.'¹⁶⁴

This calling to action symbolically encircles the text, being present in the first lines (as discussed in 3.1) and as the last advice Julian gives to her readers at the very end of *A*

Vision:

For God wille ever that we be sekere in luffe, and pesabile and ristefulle as he is to us. And right so of the same condition as he is to us, so wille he that we be to oureselfe, and to oure evencristen. Amen.

Explicit Juliane de Norwich.

(V 25. 32-5)

¹⁶² Simone Weil, 'Réflexions sur le bon usage des études scolaires en vue de l'amour de Dieu', in *Attente de Dieu: Lettres écrites du 19 janvier au 26 mai 1942*, (Paris: Éditions Fayard, 1966), p. 74. The link between Julian's experience and Weil's thought has been made thanks to the reflections in Bauerschmidt (2008), pp. 96-107.

¹⁶³ Weil (1966), p. 72.

¹⁶⁴ Bradley Warren (2010), p. 45.

Finally, the book shows the possibility to contemplate and behold Christ without having to transcend the human reality in which the human community is put. In the community Julian theorises in *A Vision*, the sufferings of the others are the sufferings of Christ, suffering acquires meaning, and the sharing of it enhances its significance, as well. The mystical body in which humanity is united becomes, for Julian, the way to contribute to quotidian salvation.

Conclusion · Stage Directions for the Quotidian Salvation

In *A Vision* Julian of Norwich outlines a practical theology of the quotidian history of salvation, embodied in a mutual exchange with the crucified body of Christ, based on compassion – which is the sharing of sufferings, in particular through the sharing of Christ’s body. The author directs her readers towards the implementation of the same exchange she experiences in this physical union with the incarnate Godhead, embodied in the readers’ concrete relationship with their ‘evencristenes’ and the human community. Significantly, the whole visionary experience of Julian starts from an interaction between two fellow Christians, mediated and centered in the performative body of Christ on the crucifix, not in the solitude of Julian’s room.

The analysis of the visionary account of Julian of Norwich was made following the textual structure of the Short Text. This is primarily because the dimension of the present dissertation required a reduced object of analysis. Eliminating part of the immense theological discourse of the Long Text allowed me to show the rhetorical abilities of Julian of Norwich, without remaining entangled in the long debate about the heretical or orthodox nature of her thoughts. Besides, the Short Text has rarely been considered as a text standing on its own, and most importantly as the witness which probably carries the version of the text nearest to Julian’s intentions. The narrative structure of the Short Text appears compatible with the ultimate goal of Julian, which is to provide an account of her visions that can serve as a handbook for her fellow Christians. It has been suggested through the analysis that Julian must have conceived her narrative structure based on her ultimate goal, despite the presence of some characteristics that makes the Short Text sound an oral, fresh, unstructured account. The

present dissertation concentrated on the interaction of the text with the body of Christ, therefore it is auspicious that other studies broaden the analysis of *A Vision*'s structure to enhance its understanding.

Operations of self-fashioning and theological understandings are interwoven in the text thanks to the rhetorical ability of Julian, who creates a series of discourses kept together by the performative body of Christ. Through the visionary experience she underwent, Julian is able to shape for herself an identity inscribed in the understandings she received. The bequests made to Julian by Norwich people, her encounter with Margery Kempe, and the evident influences in *A Vision* of analogue meditative texts prove that the visionary experience created a community. This net of relationships seems to be mainly feminine, for experiential wisdom was a powerful tool for women, who used it as a source of authority.

Recording her visions, Julian combines two sources of authority in her text, partially delegating her own authority to the Godhead's, thanks to whom she received the visionary experience. Furthermore, she created an additional source of authority and means for self-fashioning as a female author through her partial identification with Mary, the mother of Jesus, and her *imitatio Christi*. This process is put into the text with a system of textual allusions, parallels, and syntax mirroring. By balancing her claims of unworthiness with her confident affirmation of her understandings, Julian obtains a legitimate place in her community.

What Julian individually underwent necessitates a method to translate her own individual experience in a way that others can understand, therefore *A Vision* takes the form of a multi-sensory account. In doing this, Julian makes use of the contemporary theories of perception of light, enriched by her own understandings of the Incarnation's

implications of the mingling of extremes. The dichotomy light/dark is blurred in the open space of Christ's body, where the divine mixes with the human, opening a new way for the devotee of knowing, experiencing, and living God. The body of the crucified Christ is used by Julian following the tradition of affective piety's devotional practices. Her work is certainly influenced by contemporary texts which use the body of Christ as a catalyst for meditations. Julian goes beyond the conventions of these practices, as it was exemplified by her original use of the body of Christ as an active subject in her meditations. This is evident in the theme of the wounds of Christ, which, as the liminal space between the human divinity and the world, are used by Julian to create her language of union, inclusion, and mutual interchange.

Julian's language, supported by the performative body of Christ, lets her explore a theological discussion that merges universal truths with individual lives, the highly spiritual practices with the quotidian practical affairs. Writing in the vernacular, from a lay point of view, Julian fills a space left empty by other vernacular devotional works. She manages to write a highly theological text not linked with any superimposed agenda: her account is a story, told by someone who experienced it to someone who did not. Julian feels the doubts, worries, and concerns of her 'evencristenes', willing to understand some apparently irreconcilable religious teachings, and also willing to develop a spiritual practice without embracing the extremisms of a consecrated religious life. In other words, Julian of Norwich shaped her writing to make a history of salvation which is made actual, an everyday event. She does it by summoning, as Bauerschmidt suggests, her fellow Christians into Christ's crucified body: ¹⁶⁵ the daily participation to the pains of Christ opens the devotee to the sharing of the sufferings of his or her

¹⁶⁵ Bauerschmidt (2008), p. 201.

‘evencristene’ within the social community. God’s project of love for humanity, which Julian reads in the wounded body of the crucified Christ, is not seen as ‘an individual’s consolation amidst the brute forces of a heartless world, but as the social bond that grounds “the lyfe of alle mankynd that shalle be savyd.”’¹⁶⁶ (R 9. 9-10). As the analysis showed, for Julian ‘salvation depends on incorporation into and union within the suffering, generative body of Christ, and this incorporation and union is as much “political” as it is “spiritual”’,¹⁶⁷ where ‘political’ is intended as something pertinent to a community of people.

This language of openness, inclusion, and union is probably one of the main reasons that justifies the incredibly scarce popularity of Julian of Norwich’s texts during her time, and virtually nonexistent readership until the last century. Medieval Christendom’s borders coincided with those of Europe, and in many aspects the spiritual project of the community of the Church coincided with the political project of the European one. The same communal aspect might help to explain the fact that her early modern editors and readers felt the necessity to inscribe Julian of Norwich in the sometimes sterile traditional meditative practice, not considering her brilliant theology, written as practical ‘stage directions’¹⁶⁸ for the quotidian history of salvation. The study of this possible explanation goes beyond the present dissertation, but it seems a very interesting point of departure for further analyses on the original, in many ways modern theology of Julian of Norwich.

¹⁶⁶ Bauerschmidt (2008), p. 36.

¹⁶⁷ Bauerschmidt (2008), p. 36.

¹⁶⁸ Bauerschmidt (2008), p. 192.

Summary in Italian

A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman, normalmente chiamato *A Vision*, è il primo testo scritto in lingua inglese da una donna, Julian di Norwich. Con ogni probabilità, è anche il primo scritto teologico (nel senso di discorso su Dio) redatto in inglese. Si tratta del racconto delle visioni che Julian ricevette nel corso di diversi giorni di malattia, nel maggio del 1373. Da queste visioni Julian ricava complessi insegnamenti teologici che discute e su cui ragiona nel suo testo.

La presente tesi inserisce il testo di Julian nella tradizione delle devozioni della ‘affective piety’ (pratiche devozionali il cui focus emotivo si sviluppa attorno all’umanità di Cristo, con particolare enfasi sui momenti della nascita e della morte) e delle opere letterarie ad esse correlate. L’analisi evidenzia il rapporto peculiare ed originale che il testo di Julian intrattiene con la sua fonte testuale principale, ovvero il corpo di Cristo. La pratica devozionale quotidiana di Julian diviene letteratura una volta che essa viene condivisa. In questo senso l’analisi è stata svolta cercando di comprendere in che modo vengano messi in pratica processi volti a trasformare esperienze incarnate di Dio in testi fruibili da altri. Questa tesi discute il ruolo particolarmente attivo del crocefisso, un oggetto normalmente passivo, nell’opera di Julian di Norwich. Il linguaggio di Julian, ricco in descrizioni, immagini, e sensazioni, crea un percorso letterario che porta il lettore alla comprensione dei medesimi insegnamenti ricevuti nell’esperienza mistica. Il linguaggio di Julian parla di inclusione, confini sfumati, e interrelazione dei corpi - specialmente del corpo del fedele con quello del crocefisso.

Julian scrive nella lingua vernacolare, l'inglese, in modo che il suo testo possa essere più comprensibile per il suo 'evencristene', un termine da lei utilizzato per riferirsi semplicemente al suo vicino, il prossimo evangelico: un altro essere umano, senza troppe pretese o ricercatezze, che cerca conforto e guida spirituale nei medesimi problemi con cui Julian combatte ogni giorno. A differenza di altri testi simili della 'affective piety', Julian di Norwich racconta la sua esperienza meditativa e visionaria senza sentimentalismo, con una chiarezza e lucidità che non vacillano nemmeno nel corso delle visioni più intense. È onesta e umana in maniera incoraggiante, mostrando al suo lettore che nonostante le sia stata accordata una grazia speciale, incontra le medesime difficoltà di un qualsiasi altro cristiano nella sua vita di tutti i giorni. Nel suo sforzo letterario di spiegare e rendere comprensibili verità di fede spesso complicate o contrastanti tra loro, Julian di Norwich sorprende il lettore moderno per l'intensità della sua determinazione nel reimmaginare il pensiero cristiano nella sua interezza, non come un sistema di idee, ma come una risposta ai bisogni umani.

Ci sono giunte due versioni del testo di Julian di Norwich: *A Vision*, o Testo Breve, e *A Revelation*, o Testo Esteso. Questa tesi analizza il Testo Breve per più di una ragione, in primis la necessità di mantenere limitate le dimensioni dello studio. Inoltre *A Vision* è generalmente meno studiato della versione più estesa; in alcuni casi la ricerca per questa tesi si è rivelata difficoltosa proprio per la minore attenzione rivolta ad *A Vision*. *A Revelation* è spesso edito e pubblicato da solo, ed anche le opere di edizioni più importanti e complete trascurano l'analisi del Testo Breve, la sua struttura e i discorsi tematici che gli sono propri e che non condivide necessariamente con il Testo Esteso.

Ciò che ha fatto riflettere durante lo studio del materiale e dell'apparato critico è stato realizzare che *A Vision* non viene sufficientemente considerato come il testo più vicino all'ipotetico originale. I manoscritti che conservano *A Revelation* sono stati redatti più di due secoli dopo, il che comporta una serie di modifiche dovute a copiatore e scelte editoriali di cui non possiamo essere completamente consapevoli. Al contrario, il manoscritto che preserva *A Vision* data il testo o perlomeno la sua fonte, fornendo un anno preciso, il 1413, in cui Julian era ancora vivente, con ogni probabilità. Questa tesi vuole mettere in discussione la concezione di *A Vision* come la brutta copia del testo definitivo, o come una versione non avente coerente struttura interna. Viene infatti suggerita una possibile struttura che pare essere correlata al significato del messaggio che porta il testo.

Il linguaggio di Julian è ricorsivo e in qualche modo involuto, questo perché l'autrice non sta semplicemente raccontando un evento ma sta leggendo la sua personale esperienza come paratesto al testo principale, che è il corpo di Cristo. Il suo linguaggio non può che essere ricco di riferimenti sensoriali e fisici, che riconoscono ma non estremizzano la superiorità dell'anima sul corpo. Il suo discorso non è circolare ed inconcludente, ma visti gli argomenti complessi di cui tratta, non sempre è lineare e immediato. La meditazione che Julian svolge quotidianamente per giungere alla comprensione delle rivelazioni ricevute è tradotta testualmente con un linguaggio che ibrida corporeità e spiritualità, unendo il quotidiano ed il trascendentale grazie alla compresenza di umano e divino nel corpo di Cristo.

Le informazioni biografiche sull'autrice sono particolarmente scarse. Sebbene non vi sia traccia nei testi della sua vita da anacoreta, lo studio dei manoscritti e di testamenti dell'area di Norwich porta alla conclusione che, ad un certo punto della

propria vita (probabilmente dopo aver ricevuto le visioni) Julian di Norwich abbia deciso di abbracciare la via dell'anacoretismo, una pratica slegata da ordini religiosi che prevedeva la reclusione volontaria in celle individuali affiancate a chiese. I lasciti testamentari analizzati testimoniano la comunità ampia ed affezionata che si è formata attorno all'anacoreta Julian di Norwich. L'incontro con Julian che Margery Kempe (una mistica proveniente dalla stessa area geografica di poco più giovane di Julian) racconta nel suo libro getta luce sulle potenzialità dell'esperienza visionaria, nel suo essere facilitatrice di scambi e legami tra donne. Questa tesi mette in discussione, tramite considerazioni spesso tralasciate, l'assunto divenuto quasi tradizionale che colloca Julian all'interno di un ordine religioso, prima della sua decisione di seguire la via dell'anacoretismo. Le informazioni possedute sono però estremamente insufficienti per stabilire un quadro biografico definitivo, per cui la questione è lasciata aperta e incerta. I cenni biografici sono forniti come introduttivi e non influenzano l'analisi che parzialmente. Si suggerisce come la centralità attribuita al corpo di Cristo ed alcune immagini d'inclusione possano essere ispirate dalla vita di anacoreta di Julian.

La fortuna del testo è molto limitata e vi sono pochissime tracce che sia stato diffuso, ognuna delle quali è legata a contesti femminili. Vi è qualche esempio di donne devote che abbiano letto e meditato il testo di Julian, inserendolo nelle loro pratiche devozionali e facendolo proprio. A parte questo, fino al secolo scorso Julian ed i suoi scritti erano quasi sconosciuti. La conclusione della tesi suggerisce che una motivazione possa essere dettata dal messaggio universale di salvezza che Julian propone nel suo testo. Le influenze dell'ambiente letterario e devozionale circostante sull'opera di Julian sono evidenti nella lettura di altre opere a lei contemporanee o quasi, al cui centro vi sia l'incarnazione di Cristo e in particolare la sua Passione. Testi meditativi di

Bernardo di Chiaravalle, Richard Rolle, Nicholas Love, ed altri, evidenziano le tematiche poi riprese da Julian nel suo testo. In questi testi il corpo di Cristo possiede confini non ben definiti, rappresentati dalle ferite aperte sul suo corpo, uno spazio in cui il fedele desidera essere racchiuso, per esser nutrito e generato nuovamente. Particolarmente interessante è l'analisi delle strategie che altre scrittrici mistiche medievali utilizzano per ricavarsi il loro piccolo angolo di autorità, in una società in cui la loro voce era poco ascoltata. Brigida di Svezia e Gertrude di Helfta utilizzano l'esperienza mistica come fonte di autorità per i loro scritti, delegando necessariamente parte di essa a Dio, il supremo autore e colui il quale ha permesso che l'esperienza visionaria potesse avvenire. Nonostante questo, per queste donne come per Julian l'esperienza è ciò che permette loro di autodefinirsi, creare una identità e trovare uno spazio nella comunità sociale. L'esempio della figura di Maria, madre di Cristo, è un tema ricorrente nell' 'affective piety', specialmente nei testi scritti da donne. Il suo ruolo nella storia della salvezza è ripreso come strumento di identificazione da queste scrittrici, e con interessante abilità retorica da Julian in più punti nei suoi testi.

L'esperienza visionaria di Julian è multisensoriale. La necessità di dover tradurre un'esperienza interiore, personale ed individuale, ha portato l'autrice all'utilizzo di una modalità espressiva che potesse essere condivisa e compresa da chi non ne ha fatto esperienza. I sensi di Julian sono coinvolti a vari livelli, e le visioni sono descritte in diversa maniera, a seconda degli aspetti più o meno fisici di queste. La vista è il senso che viene privilegiato, sia per il suo aspetto più naturalmente condivisibile, sia per l'importanza nella gerarchia sensoriale medievale. Le teorie ottiche medievali che ascrivono la fonte della luce a Dio sono adattate da Julian alla sua esperienza corporea della divinità. Questo avviene nello spazio aperto e condiviso del corpo di Cristo in cui

umanità e divinità si incontrano, rendendo sfumati i confini della dicotomia luce/ombra. Julian condivide le sofferenze del corpo del crocefisso, entrando in un certo senso in questa zona indefinita tra spirituale e fisico, che non può che tradursi in un linguaggio ibrido, che mischi spirito e materia, alto e basso, luce ed ombra.

Pur descritto come un corpo nella Passione che si rifà ai canoni del tardo medioevo, il Cristo di Julian ha una funzione che va oltre l'essere semplicemente l'oggetto su cui si svolge la meditazione: Cristo compie azioni nel percorso meditativo di Julian. Questo è evidente fin dall'inizio del testo, quando Julian esprime il suo desiderio di ricevere quelle che lei definisce visioni corporali, in opposizione alle visioni spirituali che il testo suggerisce fossero già parte della sua pratica meditativa quotidiana. Ciò che desidera è che le venga data la possibilità di ampliare la sua esperienza meditativa, fino ad includere diversi sensi prima non coinvolti. Desidera sperimentare la Passione in prima persona, condividendo i dolori di Cristo. Nella sua retorica, dunque, il corpo di Cristo diviene un oggetto/soggetto i cui confini corporali e concettuali sono indefiniti, sempre più aperti e generanti tanto più il suo corpo è condiviso con il fedele in meditazione.

Il linguaggio di Julian, tramite la performatività del corpo di Cristo, le permette di esplorare un discorso teologico in cui verità universali si mescolano alle vite degli individui, le pratiche spirituali di elevazione si intersecano con le occupazioni pratiche quotidiane. Scrivendo nella lingua vernacolare e, per quanto il testo riporta, dal punto di vista di un laico, Julian si inserisce in uno spazio letterario lasciato vuoto da altri testi devozionali in lingua vernacolare. Il suo testo è una teologia di alto livello concettuale che non cerca di difendere altre autorità al di là del Cristo: è la storia di un'esperienza, raccontata da chi l'ha sperimentata a chi non l'ha fatto. Julian è consapevole delle

difficoltà che il suo 'evencristene' incontra nel cercare di conciliare gli insegnamenti di una religione (spesso in apparente contraddizione) con la vita di tutti i giorni. È anche consapevole delle necessità di un gruppo di persone desiderose di mantenere una vita spirituale seria, senza per questo poter o voler ricorrere alla scelta estrema della vita consacrata. In sostanza, nei suoi scritti Julian di Norwich ha attualizzato la storia della salvezza cristiana, facendone un evento che possa avvenire tutti i giorni, nella pratica meditativa e nella relazione con il prossimo. L'invito del testo, considerando il percorso strutturato con il quale Julian conduce lettore, è quello di riunirsi come comunità nel corpo del Cristo crocefisso: la partecipazione quotidiana ai dolori del Cristo volge il lettore alla condivisione delle sofferenze del prossimo, all'interno della comunità.

L'incorporazione nel corpo di Cristo a cui Julian aspira è tanto politica quanto spirituale. Questa caratteristica e la retorica di apertura, inclusione, ed unione del testo possono essere suggerite come spiegazione del sostanziale oblio in cui Julian e le sue opere hanno vissuto fino al secolo scorso. I confini della cristianità europea nel Medioevo coincidevano sostanzialmente con i confini dell'Europa stessa, e sotto molti punti di vista il progetto spirituale comunitario della Chiesa coincideva con il progetto politico dell'Europa. Lo stesso problema potrebbe aver portato gli editori del testo nella prima epoca moderna ad inserire i testi di Julian nella tradizione meditativa, a volte sterile e fine a se stessa, senza considerare la sua acuta teologia, sviluppata e scritta come un canovaccio teatrale: le istruzioni pratiche per la storia della salvezza quotidiana. Lo studio di una tale spiegazione, qui solo suggerita, richiede un'analisi più ampia ed approfondita: potrebbe essere un futuro punto di partenza per un'ulteriore studio della teologia di Julian di Norwich, sotto molti aspetti decisamente moderna.

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