What Julian Saw: The Embodied Showings and the Items for Private Devotion

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Abstract: The article traces potential visual sources of Julian of Norwich’s (1343–after 1416) Revelations or Showings, suggesting that many of them come from familiar everyday devotional objects such as Psalters, Books of Hours, or rosary beads. It attempts to approach Julian’s text from the perspective of neuromedievalism, combining more familiar textual analysis with some recent findings in clinical psychology and neuroscience. By doing so, the essay emphasizes the embodied nature of Julian’s visions and devotions as opposed to the more apophatic approach expected from a mystic.

Keywords: revelations; mysticism; ekphrasis; neuromedievalism; neuroarthistory; psychohistory; Julian of Norwich; visions; sleep paralysis; psalters; books of hours; rosary beads

1. Introduction

This paper has a very simple thesis to illustrate: that a lot, if not most of theology, found in the writings of Julian of Norwich (1343–after 1416)—a celebrated mystic and the first English female author known by name—comes from familiar, close-to-home objects and images. Images are such an integral aspect of our existence that the famous neuroscientist Rodolfo Llinás, and many after him, claimed that our brain is about making images (Llinás and Paré 1991; Damasio 2010, pp. 63–88). However, such complicated private visual experiences as dream-visions or mystical revelations are insufficient to synthesise knowledge per se, particularly if understood as aimed at a broader community. The images which constitute such visions are often familiar, yet, when spelled out in words, described and reinterpreted, they produce new meanings. This paper attempts to consider Julian’s narrative as an “imagetext”, based on easily recognisable and readily accessible late-medieval devotional objects yet employed to convey a complex and multifaceted experience, however much misremembered and culturally filtered. Here, rather than focusing on theological and philosophical readings of Julian’s text or examining it from the perspective of medieval theories of vision, I read Julian through the developing work on medieval ekphrasis (Barbetti 2011; Fraeters et al. 2013; Johnson et al. 2015) combined with the elements of neurohumanities, especially neuroarthistory. Despite the recently voiced criticism of “neuromania” in the Humanities, the view best presented in (Tallis 2016), neuroscience is now entering the field of vision of medievalists, see (Chance 2012)—the whole journal issue dedicated to ‘neuromedievalism’, especially Jane Chance’s own introduction to it, pp. 247–61; also (Blud 2016), the work on neurology of scribes by Deborah Thorpe, e.g., (Thorpe 2015), the forthcoming collection by (Dresvina and Blud forthcoming), and, to a certain extent (Karnes 2011; Morgan 2013), which includes a brief section on the role of the mirror neurons in our understanding of mystical experiences, and (Kroll and Bachrach 2005).

Such research continues the growing historiographic tradition, which considers how religion relates to the surroundings that define and contextualize human lives. Material culture plays an important role in this exploration as, “since medieval people constructed their spiritual or imagined worlds with familiar earthly building blocks, those objects matter” (Deane 2013, p. 67). Diana Webb, discussing late-medieval domestic devotion stresses the importance of this familiarity and the comfort...
deriving from familiar words, often centred around the Psalms, and/or from objects, images, and books, which became more accessible within people’s homes as the Middle Ages progressed (Webb 2008, p. 31). This familiar, domestic, “homely” appeal of Julian’s text was highlighted by A. C. Spearing in his introduction to one of the most popular translations of her Revelations, pointing out how Julian likens the drops of blood coming out of Christ’s pierced forehead to beads, raindrops, and herring roe, and his discoloured body the clothes on the washing line and to a worn-out board (Julian of Norwich 1998, pp. xix–xx). Caroline Walker Bynum suggests that the tradition of hanging a pyx in the shape of a dove above the altar could have triggered some mystics’ eucharistic visions of the Holy Spirit winging toward them; such increased use of the everyday imagery, evident in late-medieval “lived religion”, is grounded in the realisation of human embodiment, its limitations and perhaps its advantages (Bynum 1991, p. 60; also Ringbom 1969; Ziegler 1992).

Recently, works by metadisciplinary scholars have started to appear discussing what our recently-acquired knowledge about our brain may truly mean for understanding our culture and spirituality, as a part of a larger discussion of the role biology plays in religion (such as Wilson 2002; Burkert 1996; Newberg et al. 2001; Malik 2001, to name a few). The most ambitious of them is perhaps Iain McGilchrist’s The Master and His Emissary (McGilchrist 2010). An Oxford literary graduate and a neuroscientist working in a clinical environment, McGilchrist produced a book that has been labelled “controversial” within the left-brain academe. As Rupert Read puts it,

The “master” of the title is the brain’s right hemisphere; the “emissary”, the left. The brain hemisphere specialisation has been noticed a long time ago (the left usually credited as the locus for speech, dismembering analysis, mechanical fragmentation, linear logic, adherence to the familiar, and utilitarian intellect, while the right is known for its intuiting, holistic approach, handling of paradoxes, initial digestion of the new experiences, and emotional intellect). McGilchrist’s basic thesis is that most neurological events and processes need to begin in the right hemisphere with its ability to see what is new, and end there too, since this is where we are able to relate, vitally, humanly, and as a part of a whole. His idea is that the left hemisphere is “essentially there to be the right hemisphere’s servant or emissary, but the left hemisphere, with its obsession with analysis and its tendency to denial, has usurped the leading role and no longer relinquishes the power assigned to it for a specific purpose (Read 2011, p. 119).

Importantly, McGilchrist does not maintain that the two hemispheres are the loci for different things or activities—that would be, as he puts it, itself an overly left-brained idea. Rather he suggests, drawing from experimental and clinical evidence, that the hemispheres differ in the way they see and handle things, the kind of world they present. The world of the right hemisphere is wonderfully illustrated in a book by a neuroanatomist Jill Bolte Taylor, whose experience of suffering a rare form of stroke when the whole of her left hemisphere went “offline” does not only corroborate McGilchrist’s views but also, at least in parts, is strikingly reminiscent of many mystics’ recorded experiences. Her “journey into the formless abyss of a silent mind” where the essence of her being “became enfolded in a deep inner peace”, shifting into “a perception that [she] was at one with the universe” would be the envy of any follower of Pseudo-Dionysius (Bolte Taylor 2009, pp. 1, 13). Julian would have recognised the laconic and reassuring answer to dying Jill’s spontaneous prayer within her silent mind: “Hold on. Be quiet. Be still. Hold on”, her own verbal sparseness as the language centre in her left hemisphere got affected, “thinking in pictures”, or, indeed, the beginning of Jill’s miraculous recovery through feeling all wrapped up in her (natural) mother’s arms and love (Bolte Taylor 2009, pp. 61, 75, 87). Apart from the autobiographical narratives of scientists, there is a growing interest in the neuro-psychological research of modern-days “mystical experiences” conducted with a great deal of sympathy, even up to the point of calling the recipients “unusual but sound minds” (Farias et al. 2012). A particular popular interest is attracted to the research into consumption of psychoactive substances leading to “spontaneous walking visual and kinesthetic transformative imagery narratives”, so intense and meaningful that they “often related to psychological and physical healing, problem solving, knowledge acquisition,
creativity, spiritual development, divination, community cohesion, and encounters with disincarnate entities or beings” (much of these consequences can be applied to Julian herself) (quotations are from Echenhofer 2011, p. 153).

Part of the scholarly appeal of such an iconic and much-studied corpus as Julian’s Showings or Revelations is its transcendental subject-matter resulting in a rich, complex, infuriatingly ambiguous and notoriously hard-to-understand text. Together with her writing, Julian’s elusive figure itself is a hotly debated object of academic, religious, or political partisanship: Julian the proto-protestant, proto-feminist, proto-Catholic modernist, undercover heretic, undercover academic, undercover dissident, witness to the vitality and flexibility of late-medieval devotional science, and so on (Morris and Holloway 2010). Her choice to write in the vernacular on a topic for which she often had to invent the English nomenclature—with great care and a varying degree of success—particularly appeals to the logo-centric culture, academic in particular and Western European in general (McGilchrist 2010, p. 295). If we are to believe modern editors and commentators, Julian’s writings almost entirely consist of complicated cultural cross-references, hidden quotations and disguised arguments, frequent puns and “word-knots” to use Ross and Gillespie’s term (Gillespie and Ross 1992, p. 69; Elisabeth Dutton, perhaps more realistically, says, when suggesting that Julian may have read medieval theological compilations: “if such authorities influenced the Revelations in any way, they might then be unnamed because Julian was unaware of their identity, or because she left them unacknowledged in imitation of some compilers’ practice”, Dutton 2008, p. 97). Yet the paradox is that Julian, in her own words, is writing for those who are simple, for the wise know it all already (LT 9), and she calls herself “a simple creature that cowde no letter” (LT 1: The Long Text is cited by chapters as LT and the Short Text as ST. The editions used are Julian of Norwich 2001 and 2006). Pages are written to prove that this phrase is used as a standard medieval modesty topos and signifies that she did not get a formal, University training (a useful discussion of the views on Julian’s literacy can be found in Dutton 2008, pp. 6–11). Saying that she did not get the formal Latinate University education would be stating the obvious, and should not be seen as mere editorial back-covering. Her text is clever and carefully designed, that is granted; but even if Julian was a prodigy and somehow received the best education available in her time (which is highly debatable), her text cannot possibly be what it is often seen like—a cerebral compendium of veiled commentaries on contemporary theological and intellectual issues.

2. Discussion

I would like to take Julian back to the late-medieval pious laity and enquire how her text could be approached by a simple reader, perhaps quasi-literate, whose main religious experiences were predominantly aural and visual. Even though there is no definitive evidence of such a readership, this is the “simple” audience Julian apparently anticipates. It would be unwise to ignore the existing body of scholarly work on Julian, particularly by those authors who persuasively argue that Julian ultimately tries to move away from the images into the realm of the analytical, abstract, and even apophatic, although to my taste the abstractness is occasionally overstated (Gillespie and Ross 1992; Aers David 1996, pp. 93, 97). The ultimate aim of a mystic (at least theoretically) to move away from the concrete physical images into the great spiritual silence of the divine presence does not mean that we should not be examining images a mystic employs. Without recognising these images’ conventionality (or, at times, un-conventionality), we cannot appreciate the way Julian first introduces them and then takes them away from the traditional expectations, formed by the authorized Meditationes vitae Christi-type devotion, “frustrating” her audience’s desires for “bodily engagement” (Aers David 1996, pp. 82–94; quotation at p. 93). Put simply, when the devotee was expected to imagine her or himself as a character of a fanfiction within the established canon of the sacred history, the creativity of his or her pious fantasising was still moulded by numerous literary and visual aids (see Karnes 2011).

Whatever was the nature of Julian’s “experiences” which triggered the composition of the Revelations, these had to be expressed in the body and through culturally-informed means. In the
current state of being it is impossible to avoid the fact that the mind is embodied and sustains the rest of the bodily organs that interact with the brain, determining our mental state. Long before the discovery of the neuron networks it was known that the embodied mind is capable of eliciting emotional responses from imaginary stimuli (Blud 2016, p. 458). Furthermore, we now know that much of what we see (or we think we see) we are filling in from memory, relying on our previous experiences (Kosslyn 1994). The visually-driven nature of these mystical experiences suggests that we are most likely to find a lot of this cultural context in contemporary visual media. However, the survival of medieval art in Norwich and East Anglia, although better than in many other English regions, is still patchy, and even with the amount of research already dedicated to it we are still not sure what exactly people like Julian actually saw around them (Nichols 2002; Lasko and Morgan 1974; also Gunn 2008).

Norwich is famous for several types of art, first of all, its cathedral bosses and misericords, although these, apart from the ones in the nave, were reserved for the monks of the cathedral priory and Julian is not likely to have seen them—or not often. Another obvious suspect is the local school of stained glass, flourishing in the fifteenth century but originating in the fourteenth (Woodforde 1950; King 2010, http://www.cvma.ac.uk). However, surviving examples are mostly too late—with no complete fourteenth-century stained glass surviving in Norwich—and also they are too high up (a good review of the extant examples of the stained glass in Norwich can be found at http://www.norfolklstainedglass.co.uk/Norwich/home.shtm). One wonders if people in the Middle Ages were all far-sighted.

A third artistic medium known to be popular in Norwich and East Anglia is the religious theatre, such as the precursors of the N-Town plays and its likes (Scherb 2001; Granger 2009; or the classic Gibson 1989). It is likely that Julian saw such plays, because Margery Kempe, a generation later, clearly knew quite a few of them (the ones in York at least), but, again, the information for the fourteenth century, which is Julian’s time before her illness in May 1373, is far from sufficient. Even though some of Julian’s visionary expectations could have come from contemporary drama, the way she does “close viewing” of only one object at a time makes the religious theatre a less likely dominant source of her visionary experience. In the late-medieval drama the necessity to have larger involvement of the community members and thus to have several actors, as well as the need to animate scenes where otherwise nothing much happens, caused various elaborations on familiar scenes, for example in some Nativities Joseph is dishing out soup as Mary lies with the Christ Child in the manger (Penketh 1997). Julian’s visions, however, are never crowded with figures, they are focused on one, maximum two objects at one time.

To complicate matters, the art that Julian witnessed may not necessarily have been purely East Anglian. In the late Middle Ages the region displayed strong economic and cultural links to the Continent. Margery Kempe’s son famously spent so much time on the continent that his writing was “neithyr good Englysch ne Dewch”—if he was indeed her first scribe and the initial manuscript was not copied by his wife from Gdansk. The Flemmings Johns Asgers, father (also mayor of Norwich in 1426) and son, whose tenement was occupied by one of the city’s beguines, held dual English-Flemish “citizenship” and must have been fluent in both languages (Tanner 1984, p. 65; on aliens in late-medieval England in general see Ormrod et al. 2017). It is unclear how much exactly the exiled English nuns, whose main languages of communication were French and Latin and who did not necessarily know Middle English, actually interfered with Julian’s own narrative while copying it, but the texts we now have are linguistically challenging—up to the point of suspecting that Julian had direct access to Continental devotional writings, with Flemish, Dutch, or French being the main suspects (see Dutton’s discussion of Julian’s use of ‘mean’ in Dutton 2008, pp. 73–75; it has also been suggested that the support for Julian’s reference to John of Beverley’s sin in his youth (LT 38) can only be found in the Flemish apocryphon surviving as a chapbook Jan van Beverley (1512); notably, many Books of Hours and some Psalters begin with calendars, and this may be the source of Julian’s recollection of John, whose feast day is on 7 May, immediately before her vision of bleeding Christ, see Deighton 1993; Parsons and Jongelen 2012). This does not necessarily mean
that Julian was of Continental birth—after all, more vernacular inscriptions in women’s books were made in Anglo-Norman than in Middle English until the beginning of the fifteenth century, and Julian may well have been of upper-class origin and equally proficient in French, as perhaps suggested by her ‘granmercy’ in responding to God (Scott-Stokes 2006, p. 21; LT 41). However, multilingualism would certainly facilitate cultural exchange with the Continent. According to England’s Migrants 1330–1550 database statistics (England’s Immigrants 2019), Norfolk had the third largest immigrant population in England after London and Kent, with over 90% recorded individuals originating from the modern Low Countries, Belgium and the north of France, and residing in Norwich. Tradewise, “the link between Norwich and the Low Countries, based on commercial dealings and dynastic ties, was deeply entrenched by the late fourteenth century” (Dunn 2004, p. 227). The only communities resembling beguimages in England—a kind of informal devotional sorority, popular in the Low Countries in the late Middle Ages—were established in Norwich (Tanner 2004, pp. 140–41; Tanner 1984, pp. 64–66). At least from the fifteenth century, if not earlier, East Anglian art displayed evidence of growing influence from the Continent, particularly the Flanders (Lasko and Morgan 1974, p. 32; Dennison 2013; Mitchell 2000). We do know of later examples of Norfolk families commissioning paintings for their houses and churches such as the Ashwellthorpe Triptych (c. 1519, now in Norwich Castle Museum); the presence of Continental art in late-medieval East Anglia further testifies to the established links between the two regions, although, admittedly, the survival rate for such works of art is not better than that of the domestic examples.

The visual nature, though, of at least some of Julian’s revelations suggests a different medium, which allows close—and repeated—examination: that of the book. The “close and repeated examination” engrains the observed images in the memory, which then presents them to our “mind’s eye”, particularly under stress (this is obviously a very brief and simplified description of a complex neural process, which has not yet been fully understood—see, for example, a discussion of the “mind’s eye” in Ratey 2003, p. 107). The assessment of the visual environment’s impact on the brain has recently been both embraced as a prevailing explanatory tool, as in John Onians’s work on neuroarthistory (Onians 2007; Onians 2016), and cautioned against as a dominant methodology by scholars like Matthew Rampley (Rampley 2016; Rampley 2017). I am inclined to keep to the middle and agree that humans tend to be predisposed, yet not bound, to replicate their visual experience, and that the way we re-live familiar imagery is often changed by physical and psychological distress. Julian’s mystical experience was triggered by her acute illness, but we know from her own words that she was already spiritually inclined and therefore had spent time contemplating religious images in a reasonably stressful environment, with thoughts of Christ’s sufferings and of her own inadequacy and guilt (on devotional gazing see, for instance, Lentes 2006). Moreover, as Sarah Salih reminds us, liveliness was “the normal condition of devotional art” in the later Middle Ages, and that “movement of either the viewer or the object was built into the situations in which people looked at it”, hence Julian was culturally conditioned to expect these familiar images come to life (Salih 2019).

An illustrated book a fourteenth-century reasonably well-off woman could have had, or at least had had access to, would be a Breviary or a Missal type of codex, but much more likely a Psalter or a Book of Hours. The archidiaconal visitations of St Julian’s church, Norwich, indicated that in 1368, five years before Julian’s visions, the church had four Psalters in its possession, although we do not know whether illustrated or not (Upjohn and Groves 2018, pp. 78–79). At least one illuminated psalter was in possession of Carrow Priory, in whose jurisdiction St Julian’s lay; at least two more are known to have been kept in the Priory (Salih 2019; Bell 1995, pp. 126–27). Margery Kempe may have had a Book of Hours, perhaps a simpler yet not cheap copy, but she must have seen lavish ones, status symbols as well as devotional aids, at the homes of her aristocratic and wealthy acquaintances. Margery recalls having “his boke in hir hand” during the frightful episode of the fall of the fragment of St Margaret’s ceiling on 9 June 1413, described in Chapter 9 of the Book of Margery Kempe (Kempe 2004; see also Hill 2006). Given the position of Margery’s father amongst Lynn’s oligarchy, she may well have had an illustrated book for her private devotions, and perhaps not even one (Parker 2004, pp. 56–57). So if we
can assume at least a mercantile or gentry background for Julian, even if she did not have one or the other herself, she must have seen copies on a regular basis too (Scott-Stokes 2006; Gunn 2008, p. 33).

Psalters were perhaps the most popular book for lay devotions until the late fourteenth century, when they were superseded in this function by Books of Hours. Ancene Wisse contains references to the Psalter, from which the anchoresses were expected to recite versicles (Ancene Wisse, Part 1:26). The psalms in the Books of Hours were so well known that they are often indicated only by their incipits; they were also employed as learning means, even containing ABCs (Scott-Stokes 2006, p. 8; LT, ch. 51). There was a strong tradition of fourteenth-century illustrated East Anglian and Lincolnshire Psalters, with a plethora of richly illuminated books for (presumably) aristocratic patrons, of which the most famous are perhaps the recently published facsimiles of the Luttrell Psalter and the Macclesfield Psalter, and a number of Continental ones must have been in the country by the fifteenth century (Sandler 1986; Sandler 2004). Although there was no guaranteed established visual programme generally before the end of the fourteenth century, a number of similar images appeared in many of them, such as the image of a fool for the Dixit Insipiens (Ps 52), the Trinity as identical twins (with an optional third, the dove of the Holy Spirit) for Dixit Dominus (Ps 109), or a person emerging out of the water for the Salvum me fac Deus (Ps 68/69).

By the second quarter of the fourteenth century, an illustrated English Psalter could have ten main illuminated initials: Ps 1 with the Tree of Jesse, surmounted by Mary; Ps 26, with David’s Anointing; Ps 38, with David pointing to his eyes (or the Judgment of Solomon); Ps 52, with David debating the existence of God with his fool (or the devil tempting Christ); Ps 68, with David or Jonah in the water (or an image of Christ’s Passion or Resurrection); Ps 80, with David playing bells (or Jacob wrestling with the angel); Ps 97, with clerics chanting (or the Annunciation to the Shepherds); Ps 109, with different versions of the Trinity. To this initially Continental division would be added Ps 51, usually with Doeg slaying the priests of Nob, and Ps 101, with the personification of Ecclesia (with or without Christ as her bridegroom) (Panayotova 2008, pp. 59–62).

There are a number of verbal allusions to the psalms in Julian, as well as to other parts of the Scripture, as indicated in recent critical editions (Julian of Norwich 2001, pp. 796–805; Julian of Norwich 2016, pp. 179–286), such as the response to her desire to have more light to see the face of Christ in LT 10 (“If God wil shew thee more, He shal be thy light; thee nedith none but Him”) and the ensuing vision of the safety at the sea bottom being reminiscent of the opening line of Ps. 27 “The Lord is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear?” She was certainly familiar with Psalms even as a devout laywoman, and must have had access to a written version in one form or another. From the late thirteenth century onwards, one could even find complete Psalters in English (metrical, prose, or paraphrased), but these were scarce and, before the multiplications of the Wycliffite translations in the early fifteenth century, often had local circulation (Sutherland 2015, esp. ch. 3). For the monolingual devotees the conventional book before the end of the fourteenth century would have been the Prymer, a close relative to the Latin Books of Hours, usually complete with 52 psalms, hymns, collects, and a litany in Middle English; 17 manuscripts of such books are still extant (Kennedy 2014; Littlehales 1895, pp. viii–x). None of these, however, contain any miniatures, even if most are decorated with flourished initials or floral borders; this, however, does not necessarily prove that their owners had to be of the Wycliffite/Lollard sympathies (Kennedy 2014, pp. 716–19).

The Books of Hours for that period had not yet acquired their more or less established canon, and their pictorial programme was still fluid in the middle of the fourteenth century. However, one may expect to see at least some of the images found in later, mass-produced versions. For example, the Hours of the Virgin were illustrated by the Infancy cycle: Matins was opened by the Annunciation, Lauds with the Visitation, Prime with the Nativity, Terce by the Annunciation to the Shepherds, Sext, the Adoration of the Magi, Nones, with Candlemas, Vespers, with the Flight to Egypt (or the Massacre of the Innocents), and the Coronation of the Virgin at Compline (Wieck 1997, p. 23). Hours made for the English market were often preceded by eight Passion scenes, from the Agony in the Garden to the Deposition in the Tomb, or they would have both cycles within one book (Duffy 2006, pp. 13–14).
Almost any Book of Hours would have had a picture of the Annunciation, the Crucifixion, and later of such devotional, rather than narrative, images as Christ as the Man of Sorrows, the Wound of Christ (or the Five Wounds), and the Vernicle or the arma Christi (Duffy 2006, pp. 72–73).

Let us now try to establish what Julian actually saw and compare it to the surviving material object accessible as items of domestic devotion. It is surprising, given how much has been written about Julian’s text as an example of medieval vernacular literature or theology, that only a few studies ever touch upon the visual side of her narrative (Windeatt 2014; Gunn 2008; Barratt 2008; Kamerick 2002, pp. 132–38; Lermack 1993; Baker 1994, pp. 40–62; Salih 2019; to a certain extent Aers David 1996; Hagen 2004, pp. 145–60; however, they provide just a couple of actual images).

It is beyond doubt that the intention and meaning behind the visions in the different periods of the Middle Ages varied, and a visionary’s “I saw” could mean anything from “I visualized” to “I imagined” to “I hallucinated”, as Barbara Newman brilliantly demonstrates (Newman 2005). Yet the visual component of Julian’s revelation remains of paramount importance. One of her most frequently used verbs is “to see” and one of the most frequent phrases is “as to my sight”.

It could be fair to object that this particular phrase does not refer to the actual sight but that it should be taken figuratively, meaning to say “it seems”, or “it appears”, but both of these in their direct, literal meaning, too, refer to seeing. As Iain McGilchrist observes,

> Probably the most important metaphor of our relationship to the world is that of sight. ‘Knowing as seeing’ is one of the most consistent of all metaphors, and exists in all Indo-European languages, suggesting that it developed early in the Indo-European Ursprache . . . ‘I see’, we say, meaning ‘I understand’ (McGilchrist 2010, p. 161)

In order to be taken figuratively, “as to my sight” should be so familiar to a medieval English ear that the literal meaning of it is easily overlooked. However, the phrase is only attested to twice in Middle English literature outside of Julian’s writings. The first instance is found in Chaucer’s translation of the Roman de la Rose, l. 740 (Chaucer 1988, p. 694—the entrance and dance of Sir Mirth and his companions: “So fair folk and so fresh had he/That when I saw, I wondred me/Fro whennes siche folk might come,/So faire they weren, alle and some;/For they were lyk, as to my sighte,/To angels that ben fethered brighte” (ll. 737–42). Compare the original text: “S’avoit si beles genz o soi,/Et quant je les vi, je ne soi/Dont si tres bele gent pooient/Estre venu, car il sembloient/Tout pour voir anges empenez:/Si bele gent ne vit honz mez” (ll. 720–25): (“And he was accompanied by such fair folk. When I saw them, I could not tell where such fair people came from, for indeed they seemed to be winged angels. I have never seen such fair folk”), Lorris and Meun 1992, p. 76). The other appears in line 241 of The Floure and the Leafe dream-poem, again, in the Rose tradition and long attributed to Chaucer (Pearsall 1990: “Next after hem came in armour bright,/All save their heads, seemely knights nine;/And every claspe and naile, as to my sight,/Of their harneis were of red gold fine” (ll. 239–42). See also line 174 of the same poem: “. . . and to my sight, trewly,/She lady was of the company”. “To my sight” phrase is slightly more common in late ME, mostly appearing in a context of a vision/apparition, see, for instance, IMEV 3928.5, Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Ashmole 1485, Part III.ii (SC 7652), Part III, f. 46v: When busy at my booke I was vppon a certain night/this vision heare exprest appeered to my sight . . . (The vision of Sir George Ripley, Canon of Bridlington, f. 46v)).

Now believed to be written in the fifteenth century, perhaps by a woman and certainly in a female voice, the poem is heavily indebted, apart from Chaucer and Lydgate, to a whole plethora of French poets: Guillaume de Lorris, Guillaume Machaut, Jean Froissart, and Eustache Deschamps (Pearsall 1990; Marsh 1906, p. 7), with references to fifteenth-century songs from Normandy (ll. 176–78, and, perhaps, 350). The female narrator, as with Julian, unusually does not fall asleep during her vision, but tries to make sense of it by observing intensely the arrival of the colourful companies of knights and ladies to a green meadow. It is not too unreasonable to suggest that the poem, or at least some of its parts, is also a translation, which would add extra weight to the hypothesis of Julian’s Continental linguistic connections (The poem’s ‘sister-text’, The Assembly of Ladies, still extant in the same MS and probably by the same (female) author, displays “some specific influence from the Burgundian
styles”. Another curious detail appears in line 550: The words “For wele to better” is, as Pearsall notes, “an echo, perhaps, of the idiom of the French motto, *De bien en mieulx*. Cf. *De mieulx en mieulx*, used as a motto in the fifteenth century by the Paston family of Norfolk.” (“Assembly of Ladies: Introduction”, and note 550 to “The Floure and the Leafe”). There are several examples of a corresponding French phrase, ‘*a mon avis (advis/aviz)*’ between 1346 and 1416, with one coming from the Letter IX of the exposition to another Rose-inspired dream-poem, La prison amoureouse (early 1370s) by Jean Froissart, as well as from his Chronicles (two cases) (Kelly 1978, p. 165; (Online Froissart 2013) [https://www.hrionline.ac.uk/onlinefroissart/index.jsp](https://www.hrionline.ac.uk/onlinefroissart/index.jsp), citing Paris MS Fr. 2650, fols 90v and 91 r; (Dictionnaire du Moyen Français 2016) [http://www.atilf.fr/dmf/](http://www.atilf.fr/dmf/), citing four more examples).

What is important for our argument is that in these poems the phrase appears during moments of great surprise, of the observer’s intense visual experience (as, for example, Chaucer’s “I wondred me”), and the acknowledgement of the inadequacy of language to express the vision (e.g., The Floure and the Leafe, ll. 138–40). Thus, the phrase refers to visual perception, which suggests that Julian’s “as to my sight” should not be read as an exclusively figurative topos.

Three kinds of sight, or three ways of “showing” are famously described in Chapter 9 of her LT, where she is trying to explain how she actually received her revelations:

> All this was shewid by thre, that is to sey, be bodily sight, and by word formyd in my understonding, and be gostly sight. But the gostly sight—I cannot ne may not shew it as hopinly ne as fully as I wolde.

These are often read as Julian building on the Augustinian textual analysis of visual perception, with the division into “corporeal”, “imaginative” and “intellective” vision, acknowledging, however, that St Augustine’s influence was indirect (Watson 1992, p. 85). Could this indirect influence reach Julian not via textual, but via visual channels? There is an interesting fourteenth-century visual parallel to such several types of vision in the British Library, MS Yate Thompson 11, a French devotional manuscript, which depicts, on folio 29r, three degrees of mystical union experienced by a woman (presumably a nun) after a confession with her Dominican spiritual guide (https://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/ILLUMIN.ASP?Size=mid&IllID=45156).

Katie Walker describes how, following Michael Camille’s analysis—based, in turn, on Augustinian vision theory (Camille 1996, pp. 120–23; McGinn 2006, p. 187)—“[i]n the first [frame], the nun kneels before her confessor and although the divine is not present, it is tangible, signalled by Christ’s strangely disembodied hand blessing from the edge of the scene. Here, in this first level, the nun has only earthly sight; unable to see divinity ‘in the flesh’, her piety must be mediated by another” (Walker 2003, p. 3). This is similar to Julian’s reliance on her curate (mentioned in the LT) before the revelation, or on the “religious person” who recites to her the life of St Cecilia in the ST. “The second frame depicts the nun kneeling before an image of the Virgin and Child. It is the statue that mediates her act of devotion; in other words, the nun recognises the statue as a signum of a higher truth.” This corresponds with Julian’s direct ‘bodily sight’. Then “[t]he third image shows a spiritual level of perception that Michael Camille terms “imagined contemplation.” Prostrate before an image of Christ as the Man of Sorrows, the nun’s eyes do not look at the vision, implying that it is created in her mind. Christ himself mediates this level of perception as he, quite literally here, pours out his blood for the nun.” This is the second sight in Julian, formed in her “understanding”, that is her mind (Admittedly, for Julian is it oral—it is to words to which that she moves, but many mystics “often stretched or blurred Augustine’s categories” (McGinn 2006)). Note also the focus on Christ’s blood (something she sees often, and copiously): the physical depiction on the face of the Crucifix, the animated vision of the bleeding in her ‘bodily vision’, and the mental-mystical vision of his descent into Hell and ascent into Heaven in Chapter 12 of the LT. “Finally, the highest level of perception is the ‘mystical mode.’ Now, looking at the vision before her, this becomes the ‘pure and naked seeing of divine reality’” (Walker 2003, p. 3). This last mode corresponds to Julian’s ‘ghostly sight’, which she finds so difficult to describe through our limited human means—as opposed to the images that can easily draw on known iconography.
There is, however, the fifth type of Julian’s vision, which is remarkably different in its origin from the majority of the “showings”—the difference Julian recognises herself when she introduces the demonic appearance in Chapters 66 of LT: “This oggley shewing was made slepyng, and so was non other”. This brief nightmarish episode involved all five senses, entailing strong heat, overpowering stench, and a vision of fire:

And in the slepe at the begynnyng, methowte the fend set him in my throte puttand forth a visage ful nere my face like a yong man, and it was longe and wonder lene. I saw never none such. The color was rede like the tilestone when it is new brennt, with blak spots therin like blak steknes fouler than the tile stone. His here was rode as rust evisid aforn with syde lokks hongyng on the thounys. He grynnid on me with a shrewd semelant, shewing white teeth, and so mekil methowte it the more oggley. Body ne honds had he none shaply, but with his pawes he held me in the throte and wold have stranglid me, but he myte not.

Familiar to many through Henry Fuseli’s 1781 painting “The Nightmare”, the phenomenon Julian describes here is sleep paralysis, believed to be a demonic visitation since late antiquity and certainly known to a medieval audience (Sharpless and Doghramji 2015, p. 59; the seminal article on the subject is (Davies 2003). Sleep paralysis is described, for example, in the legend of St Michael in the South English Legendary, see Perk 2017, p. 159). Put simply, it is an overlap between REM phase of sleep and the state of awareness, when the person is unable to move, speak, or react, and experiences terrifying hallucinations, usually accompanied by a feeling of pressure on one’s chest, palpitations, difficulty breathing, and sensing a presence in the room. If there is a mirror in the room, the “intruder”, being the product of the REM phase, will not be seen in it, which probably encouraged the belief, popularised by Bram Stoker, that vampires and the undead have no reflection in the mirror (Sharpless and Doghramji 2015, p. 59; Broks 2016). Medieval sleeping patterns, especially of those following the monastic timetable who regularly had their sleep interrupted, may have made people of that time particularly prone to sleep paralysis (Dudley and Goodare 2013, p. 123). As would be expected from this phenomenon, the terrifying experience was gone as soon as Julian was fully awake and able to speak and her palpitations subsided (“my harte beganne to comfort”), with her bed-side companions wetting her temples probably speeding up the process.

The implications of identifying a physiological origin for at least this particular vision is important for the justification of the use of the word “experience”, applied to Julian’s narrative. Finding numerous cultural parallels, combined with the human tendency to fill in gaps from culturally-affected memory, may lead us to reading Julian’s text as a pure piece of pious fiction, of something that either never happened, or was entirely reconstructed years later in accordance to the familiar philosophical, theological, and iconographical expectations of her time—in which case the use of such somatically-aware methods as neuroarthistory is pointless. Of course, any attempts to come into a contact with the real live person behind the narrative are likely to fail, as anything we know about Julian’s personality is derived from her text. However, being able to readily identify a phenomenon, which even today affects about 8% of the world population (with 28% in risk groups, Olunu et al. 2018), gives more credibility to Julian’s text as at least a pale reflection of some genuine experiences, further confirmed by her doubts about them. The red-and-black appearance of the sharp-toothed devil may well have been suggested, at least in part, by the contemporary imagery, digested and reassembled during the vivid dreaming of the REM phase, but it is also significant that Julian is careful to include the less orthodox bits of her vision (an interesting illustration of the devil suffocating an already dead man in his bed can be seen in an early fourteenth-century French manuscript of Justinian’s Digestum Vetus with glossa ordinaria, British Library Arundel 484, fol. 245r, http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/ILLUMIN.ASP?Size=mid&IIIID=5122. For medieval theories about sleep paralysis see MacLehose 2013). Julian is primed, but not imprisoned by cultural expectation.

Nicholas Watson pointed out that “Julian’s revelation has an imagistic sparseness and at least a surface fragmentariness to it that is largely untypical of the experiences of medieval women visionaries,
and which must initially have been deeply confusing to its recipient” (Watson 1992, p. 85). Not only to its recipient, but to its scholars, also. However, there is imagery in Julian, although we do not notice it, as we focus on more important facets of her polysemous text. Just as, in the same way, we forget the bloodied face of Christ from Chapter 7 of the LT, which seems to be bleeding continuously—for another ten chapters. Denise Baker argues that of the seven purely corporeal visions (Christ’s head wearing the Crown of Thorns, His face while being mocked; His scourged bleeding body; the discourting of His face during the Agony, His blissful cheer, the Wound in His side and Christ in Glory) the last three “indicate the direct influence of late medieval iconography”, rather than the Passion narratives designed for meditation (Baker 1994, pp. 48, 55).

David Aers remarks on the pivotal point, described in Chapter 21 of LT, of Christ’s changing cheer on the cross at the anticipated moment of His death, and consequently the changing of Julian’s cheer, making her full merriness): “She expects to witness the death, “to have seen the body all deed” (21/379), an expectation fostered by received traditions of meditation and iconography. To her astonishment, and to her readers’ astonishment, this is not what she next sees: “I saw him nottt so” (21/379). He does not die and she now encounters a sudden change of his appearance and experiences overwhelming joy. This truly idiosyncratic choice disrupts the normative late medieval sequence of meditations” (Aers David 1996, p. 90). He proceeds to say that for a medieval devotee it was highly unusual see no mourners, no deposition, no burial. Instead Julian enters into a dialogue with a cheerful Christ—still on the Cross—and it is in this context, Aers rightly notes, “we meet the wound in Christ’s side” (Aers David 1996, p. 91). Such a turn of the events would be “truly idiosyncratic” if we only derive the context from the textual Meditationes tradition. The cheerful Christ on the cross at the moment when He is supposed to be dead, and His active exchange with the present devotee is as an iconographic motive found in late-medieval art, especially manuscript illumination (Hamburger 1998, pp. 134–42).

The best example comes from the Psalter and the Hours of Bonne of Luxembourg (NY the Met Museum of Art, The Cloisters Collection 1969 [69.86]), made in Paris in the mid-1340s. A series of miniatures illustrating the Passion prayer in French contains several images parallel to at least some of Julian’s experiences. One depicts an abbot, presumably St Bernard of Clairvaux, contemplating a realistically-rendered crucifix (fol. 295r); a second one represents real Christ, in exactly the same position, paradoxically alive in his death, gazed upon by Bonne and her husband, implying a (para-)mystical experience. Jesus is looking amicably on the aristocratic devotees while pointing to the wound in his side; His gesture as well as the praying gesture of the royal couple is simultaneously echoed by the two angels (329r). Next, we see the wound itself, looming large among the other instruments of Christ’s Passion on the arma Christi image, drawing the meditator in through its entrancing gradient colouring (fol. 331r; the images are reproduced in Hamburger 1998, pp. 140–42; and on the Metropolitan Museum’s website, http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/471883 (click “show more”)).

The first vision Julian receives is the profuse bleeding of Christ’s head from under the garland of thorns, and the Passion in the first part of her vision is mostly reflected on His face, particularly through the bleeding and the changing of colour. She does not appear to see the familiar Crucifixion scene, of the full-length figure of Jesus, flanked by Mary and John, or at least this does not become one of her main visions. She indicates the awareness of the established iconography and perhaps her surprise at not being given the sight of it when she states, as she closely watches Christ’s face, that at some point He looked down to the right, where, as she comments in Chapter 25, His Mother stood at the time of Passion. Christ’s face as the centre of the Passion directly reflects the image of arma Christi, appearing in Books of Hours, with the head of Jesus, eerily detached from the rest of the body, surrounded by the instruments of his Passion, such as the nails, whips, and the crown of thorns (one of the most famous of these images, from the Omne Bonum Encyclopaedia (BL MS Royal 6 E. VI, fol. 15r) even appears on the cover of Elizabeth Dutton’s book on Julian in recognition of its importance for the visionary process). Some of these images also contained a separate depiction of Christ’s wound in one of the segments of the “coat-of-arms”, and in Chapter 24 Julian relates how her
‘understanding’ was led into the wound in Christ’s side, where she found a wonderful space, suitable for all mankind. Images of this wound abound in late-medieval Books of Hours and solicit special devotions (e.g., Duffy 2006, p. 38. This devotion may have influenced Fra Angelico’s fresco at San Marco of the disembodied torturers spitting at (as a mouth) and slapping (as a hand) the blindfolded Christ, where we sense but do not see, with Christ, his torturers).

In regards to the image of Christ’s face frequently changing colour Julian helpfully gives us the clue as to where it comes from. In Chapter 10 she directly compares it to the holy Vernicle of Rome, the towel used by St Veronica to wipe off Christ’s face, kept as a relic in St Peter’s, which, according to pilgrim’s accounts, miraculously changed colour to display Christ’s Passion. Books of Hours often had an image of the Vernicle in them (on the importance of the Vernicle see Cooper and Denny-Brown 2014, especially a critical edition of “O Vernicle” by Ann E. Nichols in it; also Windeatt 2014, pp. 191–92). A particularly interesting one is found in the East-Anglian mid-fifteenth-century manuscript BL Arundel 302 on fol. 63r, where Christ’s face is painted in silver and literally changes colour depending on how the light reflects on the page (http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/ILLUMIN.ASP?Size=mid&IllID=12316). It is of course too late to have been seen by Julian, but it certainly chimes in with her extended gazing at the changing face of Christ, allowing not only for a longer, but also for a more dynamic contemplation of such image. This dynamism, as well as the arma Christi imagery, also links to medieval religious drama. We know that later the craftsmen’s tools became firmly associated with the instruments of Christ’s Passion (the York Pinners using the nails to advertise their craft in the Crucifixion play), while actors playing God and Jesus could have their face gilded (Cooper and Denny-Brown 2014, p. 174; Muir 1997, p. 33).

Julian’s discussion of the Virgin Mary focuses not so much on her visions of the Mother of God but on Julian’s contemplation of these visions. However, already in Chapter 4 she describes how she was shown Mary “ghostly in bodily likeness”, little older than a child, “in a stature as she was when she conceived”, humbly saying to Gabriel “Lo me here, God’s handmaiden”. The complicated vision is an expansion the image of Annunciation, which occupied a privileged position of Books of Hours, particularly those made for women. The words from Luke 1:38, inscribed on banderols, could even be coming out of the Virgin’s mouth in response to the angelic “Ave Maria”. The same image is evoked in Chapter 7 when Julian sees Mary “beholding her Maker”, who chose to be born of her, reminiscent of the presence of God in the Annunciation scenes.

More can be said about the presence of the Hours imagery in Julian, but let us turn now to some curious visual clues reminiscent of the Psalters. The first is a very famous one and concerns the vision of the Creation as a small round object in Chapter 5:

Also in this He shewed me a littil thing the quantitye of an hesil nutt in the palme of my hand, and it was as round as a balle. I lokid there upon with the eye of my understondying and thowte, What may this be? And it was generally answered thus: It is all that is made. I mervellid how it might lesten, for methowte it might suddenly have fallen to nowte for littil.

The word “quantity” itself (OF via Latin) is an interesting choice, apparently not found in Middle English before the very end of the fourteenth century except for one example (T. Wright, Polit. Songs Eng. (1839) 334, c. 1330: ‘He wole. 3eve the gode man drinke a god quantite’, cited in OED 2019, and Middle English Dictionary 2013, http://quod.lib.umich.edu). It is usually translated as “the size of a hazelnut”, but it can equally be the weight, bulk, mass or even, by extension, shape. Thus the “thing” corresponds with the image of Christ holding an orb—a small round object—in the palm of His hand, usually in the illustrations to Psalm 109 (“Dixit Dominus”), where the Father and the Son are depicted as identical twins sitting side by side. The orb is often decorated with tiny trees and animals, water and firmament, signifying the Creation (an amusing and enlightening dialogue between a medievalist and a planetary scientist about viewing our planet from the distance see Cohen 2016). Although these orbs appear in other media, famously in the thirteenth-century Westminster Retable, Psalters are still the most common place to find them—for example the well-known initial from the Luttrel Psalter on fol. 203r (http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/tp/luttrell/accessible/images/
A related iconography of The Lord Enthroned (Christ on his own, or surrounded by the devotees, holding an orb) is also frequently found in Books of Hours, e.g., the Hours of the Trinity section of the De Bois Hours (c. 1325–30), made in East Anglia and owned by Hawisia de Bois (Smith 2003, pp. 103–4, 107–9). The Middle English Matins of the Virgin in the Prymer even refers to Mary as “Blessid modir bi goddis 3ifte, in whos wombe was closed he that is hi3est in all craftis and holdith the world in his fist”, the final part reminiscent of the Christ with the orb image (Maskell 1846, p. 6; or Littlehales 1895, p. 2. The phrase itself also echoes Julian’s metaphor of us being “enfolded” and “beclosed” in God, see LT 5). A similar image is evoked in The Fifteen Oes, where Jesus is said to be holding the earth in his hand (Windeatt 2014, p. 197).

In this particular case, we have Julian apparently referring to the Dixit Dominus imagery in Chapter 51, where she explains that although the Son is now seated at the right hand of the Father in endless peace and rest,

> It is not ment that the sonne sittith on the right hand beside as one man sittith by another in this life—for ther is no such sitting, as to my sight, in the trinite. But he sitteth on his faders right honed: that is to sey, right in the hyest nobilite of the faders joy.

Alexandra Barratt has already drawn attention to this passage’s correspondence with the Dixit Dominus iconography and compared Julian’s interpretation of the Trinity to the image found in a roughly contemporary manuscript. The image in question comes from the Ormesby Psalter (Bodleian Library, Douce 366, fol. 147v), made in East Anglia and kept in Norwich cathedral at some point in the late Middle Ages, where Julian could have seen it. Barratt argues that, similar to the absence of the dove in this picture, Julian finds it difficult to locate the Holy Spirit within her revelations, and that the effeminate appearance of the Deity could have contributed to her reading of God (or, rather, Christ) as our mother (Barratt 2008, p. 51; Windeatt 2014, pp. 198–99). Given that these two types of iconography seem to have been equally popular at that period, Julian may well have drawn on both of them in her text.

Another possible source of the “hazelnut” image is also related to the Psalter, although indirectly. Rosary beads and prayers (vernacular and Latin), associated with Marian Psalters, became a popular form of monastic and especially lay devotional practice in the late Middle Ages; the earliest rosaries (dating from the late thirteenth—early fourteenth century, judging by the manuscript evidence) were most likely composed in the vernacular in the Middle Dutch and Middle German-speaking areas within the wave of religious reform movement (Winston-Allen 1997, pp. 18–19). Julian was certainly familiar with this practice and expected her readers to recognise it as well, referring to “bidding of beds, which arn seid boistrosly with mouth, failing devowe entending and wise diligens the which we owen to God in our prayors”, when attempting to describe the devilish audio-nightmare in Chapter 69 of the LT. Chaucer’s Prioress had a rosary, and it appears in many fourteenth and fifteenth century MSS illuminations, see, for example, Hodges 2005, pp. 108–10. They also appear on English misericords as an item sometimes specific to lay female devotion, see Christchurch Priory (late 13th century), Ely Cathedral (early 14th century), St Mary’s, Gayton (14th–15th century), Norwich Cathedral (15th century), St Mary’s, Enville (15th century). Julian herself may have used the rosary in her daily devotions, as “life-of-Christ meditations ... have characterized the rosary since the fourteenth century” (Winston-Allen 1997, p. 16). The late 14th-century Middle English devotional poem now known as *Pearl* probably replicates a rosary through its structure, with every stanza connecting to the next through a repeated key word, the last line repeating the first one, with twenty “circular” sections of five stanzas each and section XV having six stanzas instead, perhaps representative of the terminal/paternoster bead (Harwood 1991).

Late-medieval rosary beads, particularly those made in Flanders and its neighbouring regions, were sometimes made of, or looked like, nuts, but more curiously, the largest bead of the rosary (the terminal bead) was known as the prayer-nut in French (noix de prière; however, the German Betnuss seems to be a post-medieval term). Sometimes these were used as a separate prayer aid on their own (see Scholten 2016 for the most recent comprehensive discussion of the prayer nuts and
A number of fifteenth and early sixteenth-century examples of these survive, but there must have been many more—and probably earlier specimens too—given their highly perishable nature. A carved sphere, usually made of boxwood and about 4 cm in diameter, opens up to reveal two or more miniatures in high relief on devotional subjects, most commonly Crucifixion and a Marian scene (Annunciation or the Virgin with the Child). One of the smallest examples, an early sixteenth-century prayer-nut now in Hannover, Kestner-Museum measuring 2.5 cm, when opened reveals an iconographic juxtaposition of the two arguably most important events in the human history: the Fall and the Crucifixion. Juxtaposing such scenes is not uncommon in visual arts, especially in the Books of Hours, where in the Hours of the Virgin the Infancy Cycle goes hand in hand with the Passion Cycle, and Julian’s own near-conflation of the Fall and the Incarnation in LT Chapter 51, albeit theologically sound, can be at least partially inspired by medieval imagery. The Fall and the Crucifixion, Ascension, or Pentecost, and everything between them can easily qualify as “all that is made”, and one wonders if Julian was in possession of, or at least closely observed, one of these objects. As Frits Scholten observes, a prayer nut is an example of a “tactile cosmology”, a “pocket-sized representation of the world” (Scholten 2016, p. 67). According to Susan Stewart, one of the consequences of miniaturisations is “letting go of the narrative and concentrating on contextual information, with the result that an awareness of ‘temporal closure’ makes way for ‘spatial closure’”—something we observe in Julian’s text and in her own anchoritic enclosure (Stewart 1993, p. 48, cited in Scholten 2016, p. 181).

The concept of collapsing the infinity into a tight space (seeing God in a “point”, in Julian’s words, LT ch. 11; “The smallest unit of measurement until the introduction of the metric system was the point, equivalent to 0.2 millimeters, which is actually the same as the point of a needle or a pin”, Scholten 2016, p. 171) was familiar to medieval devotees, the most obvious example being the divinity of Christ confined within Mary’s womb, as physically expressed in the statues of “vierge ouvrante” (see Gertsman 2015)—“heaven and earth in little space”, as the famous Nativity lyric “There is no rose” points out, “the rose” once again linking us to the rosary. In the already-quoted passage from Chapter 5, the hazelnut’s littleness conveys an impression of “all that is made”, as Julian’s own text reflects her experience of infinity, composed and organized to express it as best as it can, even at the level of the text’s graphic and aural presentation. Here the fragile and tiny “hesil nutt” has a near homonym, “nowte”, while “littil” defines the nut both descriptively and orthographically because it is a palindrome, reflecting the closed loop of the rosary and the roundness of the “thing”.

The second striking example of the imagery found in Psalters is taken from Chapter 10, where Julian says:

One tyme mine understondyng was led downe into the see ground, and there I saw hill and dalis grene, semand, as it were, mosse begrowne, with wrekke and with gravel. Than I understode thus, that if a man or a woman were under the broade watyr, if he might have sight of God, so as God is with a man continually, he should be save in body and soule and take no harme.

However unexpected this picture of sea-bottom diving may seem to us now, a user of an illustrated Psalter would immediately think of the image of David in water, beginning Psalm 68 (69), ‘Unto the end, for them that shall be changed; for David. Save me, O God: for the waters are come in even unto my soul. I stick fast in the mire of the deep: and there is no sure standing. I am come into the depth of the sea: and a tempest hath overwhelmed me’ (e.g., St Omer Psalter, fol. 54v, https://medieval.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/catalog/manuscript_3971; Luttrell Psalter, fol. 121v, http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Add_MS_42130) As the fifteenth century progressed, David could also be replaced by more generic nudes in water, male and female (Scott 1996, Tables I and III). Similar imagery is evoked in the Psalm 139:9–10, which usually had no illumination in the Middle Ages, with some notable exceptions (e.g., the eleventh-century Harley Psalter, British Library MS 603, http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/record.asp?MSID=18402&CollID=8&NStart=603).
Julian is surprised to be shown no Jews and no Purgatory or Hell, which contributes to her doubts about the nature and the orthodoxy of her revelation—particularly given that Doom pictures were common enough in East Anglia, primarily as west-wall church murals (Cf Psalters: Ps 38 Dixit custodiam (e.g., Macclesfield or Ormesby Psalters) depicts Christ before Pilate, with unpleasant-looking Jews.). Almost no images of Purgatory appear in English devotional manuscripts, although the locus itself was a major concern for the late-medieval believers, as demonstrated by Birgitta of Sweden’s and her copycat Margery Kempe’s prophecies, and it is certainly extremely unlikely to find these in Psalters and Books of Hours (see http://www.medievalbooksofhours.com/learn). Betrayal scenes feature in these books only occasionally, and the earlier Crucifixes are quite laconic, with Jews or Roman soldiers usually featuring in the more elaborate compositions of contemporary altarpieces, such as the late 14th-century Despenser Altar in Norwich cathedral. Equally, the Judgment is not usually a part of a more conventional illustrative programme. When Julian states that today is “the Domesday for me” she is probably partly referencing illuminated Apocalypses of the first half of the fourteenth century and perhaps even the famous bosses of the Norwich cathedral cloister, about which she must have at least heard.

Less obvious yet plausible examples of sources of Julian’s imagery found in Psalters and Hours include the just over-the-knee long, worn-out “kirtle” of the Servant. It simultaneously reminds us of the clothes of the delving Adam (most famously in the Canterbury Cathedral twelfth-century stained glass), or Christ as a gardener in the “noli me tangere” scene (more typical for the fifteenth-century continental iconography, as in British Library King’s 5 of 1405, fol. 23r (http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/ILLUMIN.ASP?Size=mid&IllID=3579)—the English Hours and Psalters preferred depicting Christ with labarum, not spade), and of the loincloth of the Crucifixion from the late thirteenth and fourteenth century, which is more substantial than the later diaper-type, more typical from the fifteenth century onwards. It is particularly noticeable in the Deposition scene found in books, with Christ’s loincloth hanging down to the ground, his floppy arms around the person below the cross, both embracing (Julian’s “enfolding”) and flapping like a drying cloth from Chapter 17 of the Showings. One also wonders if the famous defecation passage in Chapter 6 of the Paris manuscript of the LT could have been inspired by the manuscript marginalia similar to those found in the Gorleston Psalter and its “colleagues” (http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=add_ms_49622_fs001r).

3. Conclusions

Despite her (perhaps unconscious) dependence on the images and illuminated books, Julian gently criticizes their over-use as devotional means, as she says in the same Chapter 6:

And at the same time, the custom of our prayer was brought to my mind, how that we use for un-knowing of love to make many means. Then saw I verily that it is more worship to God and more very delight that we faithfully pray to himself out of his goodness . . . , than if we made all the means that heart can think of. For if we make all these means, it is too little and not full worship to God.

As she lists these means: praying to Christ’s flesh, blood, Passion, death, wounds, His Mother, His Cross, the “special saints” and the “blessed company of heaven”, a Book of Hours again comes to mind, with its images, its Hours of the Virgin and of the Cross and the litanies of saints, often “special”, that is customised for the use of the owner. She, however, is far from dismissing them altogether, stating that “it pleases [God] that we seek him and worship him through [these] means, understanding and knowing that he is the goodness of all”. This is not necessarily a sign that Julian is trying to avoid accusations of being a Lollard, who rejected devotional images; she could have been thinking of such “means” becoming luxury status symbols, used for showing off rather than true devotion, as ridiculed by her French contemporary Eustache Deschamps in the case of Books of Hours:
A book of hours, too, must be mine, where subtle workmanship will shine, of gold and azure, rich and smart, arranged and painted with great art, covered with fine brocade of gold; and there must be, so as to hold the pages closed, two golden clasps (Panofsky 1953, p. 68).

The images of Julian’s own book are not physical, gilded pictures on expensive velum, but mostly mental, which she, in turn, “forms in our understanding”. This modesty continued in the manuscript of the Passion of Christ by Michael de Massa made for Julian’s neighbour, Miles Stapleton (MS Bodley 758), whose daughter Emma later became an anchoress in the Carmelite priory not far from St Julian’s (perhaps influenced by Julian herself, whom she must have known) and whose other daughter, Ela Brewes (grandmother to Margery Brewes of the first Valentine letter fame), inherited the book in 1443 (Hill 2006, p. 175; Meale 2009, pp. 83–84). It contains one simple monochrome illustration: the opening Crucifixion, the only colour added being the red of the blood. What is remarkable about this image is that, in keeping with Julian’s words, only “Christ’s friends” are present, including the medieval scribe and illuminator. In her earlier life Julian expressed a strong wish to be at the Cross with Mary Magdalen (LT 2), and here we have the hem of the saint’s garment breaking the frame of the image, overhanging it towards the viewer, connecting the two dimensional with the three dimensional, the inanimate with the live, the past with the present, in a truly mystical fashion.

As an author of a contemplative text, Julian is certainly pushing beyond imagery, but the roots of her revelations are nonetheless to be found in these very means she both criticises and defends. It is difficult to accept that Julian included an apology for devotional images, found in her ST, only out of fear of being mistaken for a Lollard (“Notwithstandinge that I leeved sadlye alle the peynes of Criste as halye kyrke shewes and teches, and also the paintinges of crucifexes that er made be the grace of God aftere the techinge of haly kyrke to the liknes of Cristes passion, als farfurthe as manes witte maye reche—noughtwithstondinge alle this trewe beleve, I desirde a bodlye sight, wharein I might have more knowinge of bodelye paines of oure lorde oure savioure, and of the compassion of oure ladye, and of all his trewe louvere that were belevande his paines that time and sithene” (Julian of Norwich 2006, p. 63). However, even if it was the case, the apology was removed from the LT altogether. Affective piety, whether its practitioners want it or not, is grounded in everyday materiality, in the inevitability of the embodied-ness, embedded-ness of the mind, of the word made flesh, and it is only natural that we may wish to study the fruit of these devotions through the workings of our own bodies, such as the ability to see, produce, and describe images. The age of multidisciplinarity increasingly means that we cannot separate the study of the human culture from the study of human physiology. Far from eliminating the mystery and trying to know “our Lords privy councell” (LT, ch. 30), or reducing Julian to a set of symptoms, reading the Revelations with psychology and mind science reminds us of how the unfathomable complexity of our organisms create the “difference in sameness” (McGilchrist 2010, p. 53), and how physical processes, affecting a brain just like ours, led to the creation of a work which has a power to amaze, comfort, inspire, frustrate, and puzzle over six hundred years later.

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