THE INFLUENCE OF LATE MEDIEVAL CRUCIFIXION IMAGES ON THE SHOWINGS OF JULIAN OF NORWICH

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The Revelations of Divine Love,[1] composed by Julian of Norwich, reflects the first attempt by a woman to create in English a theological composition that gives insights into the meaning of Trinitarian love expressed in her understanding of divine providence and Jesus' saving passion. Scholars generally agree that Julian wrote the short text shortly after a visionary experience during prayer on May 13, 1373, and the more theological long text after twenty years of reflection on the meaning of the showings or visions. Julian records in both texts that during a severe illness, as a priest places a crucifix before her, her gaze transforms into a profound experience of union with the divine, communicated through vivid visual and auditory phenomena. In both texts, Julian takes the reader on a journey through scenes of the passion reminiscent of the stations of the cross or the cycle of the hours of the passion.

The strongly pictorial nature of the passion scenes leads many scholars to contend that Julian's prose account was influenced by artistic examples of the crucifixion.[2] This paper contributes to this discussion by analysing four passion scenes from the long text that indicate a possible influence from sculptures, illuminations or sketches of the crucifixion from Psalters, books of hours, or wall paintings. First, I will demonstrate how the formation of a sensitive visual memory through methods of prayer could inspire the integration of artistic renditions in the bodily sights that Julian describes; and then I will indicate how the cultivation of such a rich visual memory becomes the catalyst for explicating creative theological insights into the meaning of salvation.

Before we concentrate on the possible visual influences on the crucifixion images that inspire the portrait of the crucified Christ in the showings, we need to situate Julian's text within the context of methods of prayer that encourage visualisation. In the medieval world holy women expected visionary experience, as instruction in prayer from manuals such as Aelred of Rievaulx's (1110-1167) treatise for directing the life of an Anchoress, *De Institutione Inclusarum* indicates: 'a recluse should increase the love of Jesus in her soul by meditating on things passed, by meditating on things present and by meditating on things which are to come.'[3] Naturally this meditation would include visualising favourite scenes of the

passion. Furthermore, the Benedictine way of recollecting the scriptures, *lectio divina*, was also prevalent. This method of prayer involved the integration of visual, intellectual and spiritual knowing. Possibly influenced by this, Julian identifies three unified ways of knowing: 'bodily sight, words formed in my understanding, and spiritual sight'. (Svii:135; L1:9.192) Bodily sight refers to what she sees in the vision; the words formed in her understanding signify the insights she receives in her reason; and spiritual sight is the direct spiritual comprehension she comes to. *Lectio divina* facilitates these unified ways of knowing through the four moments, *lectio* (active reading), *meditatio* (meditating), *oratio* (praying) and *contemplatio* (contemplation). This includes reading aloud and memorising the scriptures in a way that integrates the mind, the heart, the will and the body. The first moment of *lectio divina*, *lectio* trains one to collect with the eyes or to gather into oneself what is there. The second movement, *meditatio*, evokes an aural and muscular memory by the repetition or murmuring of the sacred words and inscribes these images not just in the memory but in the whole body. Leclercq explains:

> This results in more than a visual memory... What results is a muscular memory of the words pronounced and an aural memory of the words heard... It is what inscribes, so to speak, the sacred text on the body and in the soul...[4]

Oratio, the third movement, then evokes a deeper heartfelt response or prayer of the heart. The transition to *contemplatio* inspires a change of consciousness marked by recession from ordinary sensate and intellectual awareness, towards subtly feeling immersed in the mystery of God. This union naturally includes connectedness with all of creation.[5] This education in developing a visual, aural and muscular memory would make Julian particularly adept at the transition to *lectio domini*,[6] where imagery of the crucified Christ becomes the text from which she reaches creative theological insights through the prayerful process of *lectio divina*.

The cultivation of a sensitive visual memory through the repeated use of *lectio divina* would enable Julian to respond to the extensive use of illuminations of the crucifixion as an aid to prayer for both vowed religious and laity.[7] In chapter one of the short text, Julian records her desire to have a recollection of Christ's passion, 'so that I might have seen with my own eyes our Lord's Passion which he suffered for me'. She then explains that the recollection she yearns for is like a picture of Christ's passion, 'as paintings of the Crucifixion represent, which are made by God's grace, according to the

Holy Church's teaching to resemble Christ's passion...' (Si. 125) While historians know little about the details of Julian's life, it is highly likely that since Norwich was the headquarters of the school of East Anglian art, Julian was exposed to images of the crucifixion from paintings in Norwich Cathedral. Records indicate that there was a retable of the passion during Julian's lifetime,[8] and crucifixion images in illuminated Psalters, missals or books of hours became increasingly popular during Julian's day.

The iconographic source that is the catalyst for the movement from visualising the cross to contemplative insights is a crucifix that a priest places in front of Julian's face as he remarks, 'I have brought the image of your saviour; look at it and take comfort from it'. (L1:3.180) It is uncertain whether this crucifix was made of wood, bone or bronze. A gilded and enamelled crucifix (c. 1400-1450)[9] found under the floor of St. Crouch, Norwich, or a similar, slightly later, bone crucifix (c. 1460)[10] sixteen centimetres long illustrate the realism that is typical of Gothic art: a serene face, a muscular body, the graceful folds in the drapery and a concentration on the five wounds of Christ in his hands, feet and side. Julian begins to focus on a crucifix similar to these examples, and parallel biblical portrayals of Christ's dying emerge (e.g. Mark 15:33). In her text she describes the room darkening while the animated figure of Christ, bathed in light, communicates profound insights into the mystery of divine love. Julian identifies the presence of the living Trinitarian God as the crown of thorns bleeds and the colours of the figure change like fading light, dimming the bright colours on the statue. Colours highlight Christ's dying, for his face changes from brown to blue, to purple, to greenish blue through to the sallow colour of death.

As contemplation continues, in the first revelation Julian sees a bodily sight of Christ crowned with thorns: 'I saw the red blood running down from under the crown, hot and flowing freely and copiously, a living stream.' (L1:4.181) Simultaneously, a spiritual sight of his familiar love evolves:

> I saw that he is to us everything which is good and comforting for our help. He is our clothing, who wraps and enfolds us for love, embraces us and shelters us for his love, which is so tender that he may never desert us. (L1:5.183)

The power of Julian's imagination to respond so sensitively to visual imagery suggests a familiarity with art created to make the passion moving and comprehensible for the faithful, such as the gentle, typological miniatures of 'The Deposition From the Cross' (c.1299-1321) painted by

Master B, in the St. Peterborough Psalter[11] housed in Julian's day at Peterborough Abbey in the Diocese of Norwich. This first of four representations of Christ's life in a series of Gothic frames on a page depicts John 19:14 as Joseph of Arimathaea embraces Christ and surrounds him in cloth. Mary on Christ's right and John on his left, both draped in generous, confluent folds of drapery, form a cocoon-like shape that also enclose his body in cloth. Another disciple, removing Christ's wounded hands from the cross, sways in line with the reposed body, creating a dynamic that rehearses Christ surrounded in linen cloths and laid to rest in the tomb. The modelling of the cloth and the textural effects of the dots and lines on the borders of the clothes all lead to the face of Christ. An interpretation could be that inspired by such imagery, the prayer of *lectio divina* animates a transposition in the dynamic. Christ surrounded by the cloth of his beloved disciples then hooks into a number of references from scripture such as Isaiah 61:10, and becomes the clothing which wraps and enfolds all humankind with love. In contemplating the bodily sight, insights flow that move beyond visualising a familiar loved scene, to subtly knowing she is communicating with God.

A more confronting image of the divine pathos occurs at the end the first revelation in chapter seven of the long text:

> The great drops of blood fell from beneath the crown like pellets, looking as if they came from the veins, and as they issued they seemed brownish red, for the blood was very thick, as they spread they turned bright red. And as they reached the brows they vanished; and even so the bleeding continued until I understood many things. Nevertheless the beauty and the vivacity persisted, beautiful and vivid without diminution. The copiousness resembles the drops of water which fall from the eaves of a house after a shower of rain, falling so thick that no human ingenuity can count them. And in their roundness they spread over the forehead they were like a herrings scales. And at the time three things occurred to me: the drops where round like pellets as the blood issued, they were round like a herrings scales as they spread, they were like raindrops off a houses eaves, so many that they could not be counted. This vision was living and vivid and hideous and fearful and sweet and lovely. (L1:7.187-188)

At first glance, this passage depicts a repellent scene that confronts the contemporary viewer because of the grotesque descriptions of Christ's body bleeding. It is easier for us to place it in context when we consider that the scene is reminiscent of many crucifixion images similar to the crucifixion page, probably added to the Glorleston Psalter when the book passed to Norwich Cathedral Priory (c.1320-1330).[12] Just as in Julian's vivid example, the generous use of gold, rich vermilion, delicate blue, mauve, pink and ashen grey create an empathetic mood that helps the viewer comprehend

the depth of divine love. In this poignant illumination of Christ dying, the Italianate style emphasises the central figure of Christ by enlarging his body and making it hang heavily on a willowy cross. Mary, full of grief, focuses on the cross, while John weeps and looks away. Mary Magdalene clings desperately to the foot of the cross; as she gazes at Christ, drops of blood flowing from his wounded feet touch her mouth, suggesting a Eucharistic connection. The wound on Christ's right breast is predominant and open, with blood flowing copiously from it. Christ's crowned head is bowed, his eyes closed, his expression peaceful. An exquisite border of geometric and animal shapes frames the picture.

Julian's depiction of Christ bleeding carries the same precise, almost photographic, quality as the Glorleston crucifixion. As she meditates on specific details of Christ's suffering, she creates a free association with repetitive patterns of everyday images of pellets, drops of water falling from the eaves of a house and herrings scales, so that the image of Christ becomes confused with ordinary images of life, suggesting that the love of Christ creates an imprint on all creation. The blend of images occurs as if Julian scans the picture, rests on the body of Christ, moves to observe the details of the border and creates insights into the meaning of the passion. Through this free association that directs her to the redemptive nature of Christ's suffering, Julian can ascertain the paradox reflected in the image of the suffering servant of Isaiah 53:2, that this is a 'hideous and fearful' vision and at the same time, as in Ps 44:3 (Vulgate) a vision of beauty that is 'sweet and lovely'.

The last bodily sight leads Julian to the heart of Christ:

> With kindly countenance our good lord looked into his side, and he gazed with joy, and with his sweet regard he drew his creatures understanding into his side by the same wound; and there he revealed a fair and delectable place, large enough for all mankind that will be saved and will rest in peace and in love... And in this sweet sight he showed me his blessed heart split in two... (L10:24.220)

This sequence from Christ our clothing, who enfolds humankind in love, to the heart of God, reveals the progression of ideas about the meaning of Christ's passion that transcends visualisation, for it expresses the theological insight that the wounds of the passion become a safe and sure place of rest for wounded humankind. The wound in Christ's side that leads to his heart echoes the Johannine passion scene, (John 19:34) and the last supper discourse, especially John 14:2 and John 15:4. It also reflects Bernard of Clairvaux's (1090-1153) allegorical exposition on *The Song of Songs* that

connected the wounds of Christ with the clefts in the rock that become the home of the dove (Song of Songs 2:14) and the clefts or wounds that proved to Thomas that Christ was risen (John 20:27).[13] This concentration on the wounds of Christ exemplifies the ultimate signs of his love.

'The Divided Heart' (c.1400s),[14] from an unnamed Carthusian manuscript, gives an example of how the connection between Christ's wounds and heart was popularised in England in Julian's day. On the left of the picture, a marginal notation of a poem written in a vertical bar gives instructions to the illustrations. On the right, floats a crude, linear drawing of Christ patterned with wounds. His wounded right hand, dripping with blood, points to an enlarged, stylised sketch of his heart, while his left hand, also wounded and dripping with blood, points to the wound in his breast that is the gateway to the locus of his love. A beloved follower, possibly a Carthusian, prays before the emblems of love. While there are minimal spatial effects, and limited use of colour, pale wash colour, probably red, emphasises the wounds of Christ and gives them some sense of depth. Central to the viewer is the flat, shield-like open heart with five emblematic wounds. The words, 'This is the measure of the wound. For love Christ suffered for our redemption', surround the largest central wound.

In the tradition of this allegorical iconography of the passion, Julian also sees Christ looking into his side. Her unwavering attention to the wound enables her to gain deeper understanding that this bodily wound is the pathway to God. Subsequently, she moves from external observation to actually entering the wound, observing a fair and delectable place, large enough for all humankind, in the body of God. Julian's dialogue however, takes her beyond the conventions of the sombre expression in the passion scenes in the Carthusian representation of Christ. Paradoxically, just as in the experience of giving birth, Christ's earthly labouring is an experience of joy because it ultimately transfigures all humankind. In this way Julian transforms the suffering of the crucifixion into a labour of love.

The extremely visual nature of the images of the crucified and glorified Christ in the *Revelations of Divine Love* suggests that Julian was immersed in a rich visual tradition of art works of the crucifixion. What I have hoped to show in this paper, however, is that mere reflection on these images could not have produced the sophisticated theological insights that emerge in the showings. A rich visual memory that cultivates sensitivity to visionary experience and the prayerful method of *lectio divina* enable Julian to synthesise visual, affective and intellectual knowing through

contemplative experience. Thereby, Julian becomes a great theologian who gives profound insights into the meaning of divine love.

REFERENCES

1 Translations are from E. Colledge, and J. Walsh, *Julian of Norwich Showings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978). S represents Short Text, L Long Text. I also quote revelation number, chapter number and page numbers.
2 Cf. D. Nowakowski Baker, *Julian of Norwich's Showings* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 40, for a good summary of these conclusions.
3 J. Ayto, & A. Barratt, eds, *Aelred of Rievaulx's De Institutione Inclusarum* (London: Oxford University Press, Early English Text Society), Ms Bodley xiij:680-683,17. The translation is mine.
4 J. Leclercq, trans. *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God* (C. Misrahi, trans. New York: Fordham University Press, 1974), p. 73.
5 M. Casey, *The Art of Sacred Reading* (Australia: Dove, 1995) p. 38.
6 V. Gillespie, 'Strange Images of Death: the Passion in Late Medieval English Devotional Writing' in J. Hogg, ed., *Zeit, Tod und Ewigkeit in der Renaissance Literatur*, (Salzburg, 1987) pp. 111-59. Gillespie sees this as a movement away from *lectio divina*. I consider that a flexible use of *lectio divina* would easily enable such a transition.
7 Cf. R. Calkins, *Illuminated Books of the Middle Ages* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1983), p. 277.
8 O. E. Sanders, *A History of English Art in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1932) fig. 55, 173-174.
9 B. Pelphrey. *The Theology and Mysticism of Julian of Norwich* (Austria: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universität Salzburg, 1982) p. xviii. This figure is on display at St Peter's Hungate, Norwich. Undated, discovered beneath the floor of St. Crouch, Norwich in 1838. The drawing is by Pelphrey.
10 P. Lasko, and N. Morgan, *Medieval Art of East Anglia* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1973) p.55. This figure from a crucifix was found on the sight of London and Counties Bank High Street Clochester. The style is quite like the crucifixion illumination found in the Abingdon Missal dated 1461.
11 Brussels Biblioithèque Royale Ms 9961-61. cf. L. Freeman Sandler, *The Petersborough Psalter in Brussels and Other Fenland Manuscripts* (London: Harvey Miller, 1974) p. 29.
12 I am indebted to Baker, 43, for pointing to the possible connection of this Psalter to Julian.
13 cf. *On the Song of Songs* :28.i.
14 R. Woolf, *The English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1968), Imago pietatis, BM. Add. Ms.37049, plate 1.