

Leeds Studies in English

Article:

Anna Maria Reynolds, 'Some Literary Influences in the Revelations of Julian of Norwick (c 1342-post-1416)', *Leeds Studies in English*, 7-8 (1952), 18-28

Permanent URL:

https://ludos.leeds.ac.uk:443/R/-?func=dbin-jump-full&object_id=134449&silos_library=GEN01



Leeds Studies in English
School of English
University of Leeds
<http://www.leeds.ac.uk/lse>

SOME LITERARY INFLUENCES IN THE *REVELATIONS*
OF JULIAN OF NORWICH (c 1342—post-1416)¹

By SISTER ANNA MARIA REYNOLDS, C.P.

Sixteen Revelations of Divine Love would be a remarkable book in any age; as a product of fourteenth-century England it is something of a miracle. To begin with, its author is a woman, a fact that at once challenged contemporary English convention, firmly set as that convention was against women's receiving mystical favours at all, and still more against their desiring to blaze them abroad, if such favours were actually experienced.² Moreover, despite the profoundness and sublimity of its subject-matter, the *Revelations* is written in the most lucid and expressive English prose, with just enough rhetorical device to place it unmistakably in the tradition of the *Ancren Riwele* and of Rolle.³ Most surprising of all, perhaps, the matter of this book, written in English by an anchoress at Norwich, has little in common with the works of those great spiritual writers to whose age and country she belonged: Rolle, Hilton, and the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*; and no affinities whatever with *The Book* of her famous contemporary and fellow-visionary, Margery Kempe of Lynn.

¹ For Julian's dates of *Revelations*, ch II; E. F. Jacob and H. C. Johnson, *The Register of Henry Chichele, Archbishop of Canterbury, 1414-1443* (Oxford 1937) II.95. This latter reference I owe to Dr H. E. Allen. Two further invaluable Julian references have been discovered by Dom Aelred Watkin, O.S.B. in wills dated 1404 and 1415.

² Both Hilton and the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, like the writer of the *Ancren Riwele*, were distrustful of such phenomena. See J. Morton, *Ancren Riwele*, Camden Soc LVII (1853), 224; P. Hodgson, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, EETS OS 218 (1944), ch IX; Rev J. B. Dalgairns, *The Scale of Perfection*, 2nd ed (London 1901), bk I, chs x-xI. Cf S. B. Meech and H. E. Allen, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, EETS OS 212 (1940) I.lxvii; p 259, note on 6/9 f; p 315, note on 126/14. Note also Julian's own fears expressed in ch VI of the shorter text of the *Revelations*; see Rev D. Harford, *Comfortable Words for Christ's Lovers* (London 1925), 42.

³ Cf R. W. Chambers, *On the Continuity of English Prose* (London 1932), xcvi-cii. See also Sister Agnes Margaret Humbert, *Verbal Repetition in the Ancren Riwele* (Washington 1944), 101-4.

Dame Julian's⁴ book is extant in four manuscripts, of which three are in the British Museum and one in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris. Of the British Museum MSS, Additional 37790 is mid-fifteenth century, Sloane 2499 mid-seventeenth century, and Sloane 3705 early eighteenth century. The Paris MS is a sixteenth-century manuscript.

This apparently simple manuscript relationship is, however, complicated by the following circumstances: Additional MS 37790 contains only about one-third of the matter contained in each of the other three;⁵ the neatly written Paris manuscript, though it gives Julian's name and has a fuller text than have the Sloane MSS, is slightly modernized in diction and has several inferior readings; while Sloane 2499, though a later manuscript and most carelessly written, with a number of doubtful readings, yet appears to preserve on the whole the idiom and vocabulary of a late fourteenth or early fifteenth-century original.

Several modernized versions⁶ and two foreign translations of all or part of the *Revelations* have been printed,⁷ and the task of preparing a critical edition has been undertaken in recent years by the present writer. In addition, numerous essays and two full-length studies of Julian and her writings⁸

⁴ Serenus Cressy, O.S.B., editor of the earliest-known printed version of the *Revelations* (1670) appears to have originated the title 'Mother Juliana'. Margery Kempe has *Dame Ielyan* (*The Book*, op cit 42); Additional MS 37790, *Iulyan*; Paris MS, *Iulyane* (genitive). The Sloane MSS do not give Julian's name.

⁵ It is not known which of the two versions, the longer or the shorter, was first composed, but internal evidence strongly favours the supposition that the shorter text was written soon after the visions were experienced, i.e. soon after 1373, and the longer in the course of the 'twenty yere' mentioned in the *Revelations*, ch LI, f 96b. For a suggested explanation of the relationship between the two versions see John Lawlor, 'A Note on the *Revelations* of Julian of Norwich', *Review of English Studies*, New Series II (1951), 255-8.

⁶ Chapter references in this article are to Miss Grace Warrack's edition of Sloane MS 2499, 11th ed, London 1940. Quotations are from the Paris MS of the *Revelations*; the capitalization and punctuation are modern.

⁷ A useful account of these versions is given in the Orchard Series edition of the *Revelations* by Dom Roger Hudleston, O.S.B. (London 1927), vii-ix. Tersteegen's (German) extract, which is not continuous, is based on the first edition (1670) of Cressy's modernization of the Paris MS. Dom Meunier's valuable French edition of Sloane MS 2499 — *Révélation de l'Amour Divine* (Tours 1925) — contains one curious error (p viii), viz the attribution of the Sloane chapter headings to the Paris MS.

⁸ R. H. Thouless, *The Lady Julian: A Psychological Study*, SPCK 1924; R. H. Flood, *St Julian's Church, Norwich, and Dame Julian*, Norwich 1937.

have appeared. All this activity testifies to the strong attraction to the modern mind of this medieval recluse.

Sixteen Revelations of Divine Love is a series of meditations made over a period of nearly twenty years,⁹ based on a vision of Christ in His Passion granted to the author when she was about thirty years old.¹⁰ In describing the circumstances under which the vision was experienced, Julian alludes to herself as 'a symple creature unlettyrde',¹¹ the precise significance of which statement is difficult to ascertain.¹² Her book in no way suggests an untutored mind. Though it contains, apart from Biblical sayings, but one direct quotation, the *Revelations* is nevertheless so full of scriptural allusion and imagery, so shot through with echoes of other spiritual writings, as to compel the belief that its author, through whatever medium, was familiar with at least the common stock of ideas in a vigorous mystical tradition, and with the classic expositions of those ideas. In the following pages an attempt, by no means exhaustive, is made to distinguish some of the literary influences apparently discernible in the *Revelations*.

By far the most important single influence is the Bible, both Old and New Testaments.¹³ This scriptural element is present in three forms: as more or less direct quotation; as the source

⁹ *Revelations*, ch LI *ad init.*

¹⁰ *Ibid*, ch III *ad init.*

¹¹ Paris MS, ch II, f 3a.

¹² It is just possible that the phrase means that Julian could not read; cf E. Power, *Medieval English Nunneries* (Cambridge 1922), 260. See *Dialogues of St Catherien of Siena*, trans. A. Thorold (London 1905), viii, and *Acta Sanctorum*, Oct. xiii, col 538, for similar information about two famous women mystics who were Julian's contemporaries. However, a later remark of Julian's 'I have techyng within me as it were the begynnyng of an A.B.C. . . .' (ch LI *ad fin*, f 103b-104a, suggests, if taken in its context, that she had at least mastered the art of reading. Dr H. E. Allen refers me in this connexion to Du Cange, *Glossarium mediae et infimae Latinitatis* (Venice 1736) IV for an example of *Lit(t)era* meaning 'Latin', and she suggests that Julian's 'unlettyrde' may have a similar connotation.

¹³ T. W. Coleman, *English Mystics of the Fourteenth Century* (London 1938), 149, remarks that Julian in the *Revelations* seldom quotes the Bible, and contrasts (*ibid* 163) the talk of Julian with Margery Kempe (*The Book*, 42-3) on this point. This distinction does not commend itself to the present writer, who finds the scriptural content of Julian's conversation identical in kind with that of the *Revelations*.

of concepts adopted and expanded by Julian; and as the unconscious borrowings of a mind steeped in the language and thought of the Bible. Examples of the first type are few in number; quotations are usually short and sometimes inaccurate, as if Julian were relying on her memory:

'Loo me here, Gods handmayden !'

'And in the tyme of Joy I myght haue seyde with Seynt Paule, "Nothyng schalle departe me fro the charyte of Crist". And in the payne I myght haue seyde with Seynt Peter, "Lorde, saue me, I peryssch".'

'... thys is an awter of the Unknowyn God.'¹⁴

The second category of borrowings is more considerable than the first. Julian devotes nearly two whole chapters to the theme 'verely God is oure mother', a concept derived ultimately from such passages as Isaias XLIX.I, XLIX.I5, LXVI.I3, Matthew XXIII.37 etc, though the anchoress's immediate inspiration *may* have been Eckhart.¹⁵ Again, the imagery of 'God enjoyeth that he is our very spouse, and our soule his lovyd wyfe'¹⁶ comes from *The Canticle of Canticles*; and the metaphor of the soul as the City of God, which is mentioned in ch LI and developed in ch LXVII, comes from Psalms XLV, XLVII, LXXXVI, CXXI and CXXVI.

Borrowings of this type are also made from the New Testament. For example, the Pauline writings provide two figures highly important to Julian's thought: the duality of man's nature, expressed in Rom VII.15-25, 2 Cor IV.16 etc;¹⁷ and the image of the Church as the Body of Christ, found in I Cor 12-27, Rom XII.5, Eph I.23 etc.¹⁸

¹⁴ *Revelations*, ch IV, f 8b; ch XV, f 31a-31b; ch VIII, f 37a-37b. Cf Luke 1.38; Rom VIII.35; Matthew VIII.25, XIV.30; Acts XII.33. References are to the Douay Bible.

¹⁵ *Revelations*, chs LIX and LX. Cf *The Works of Meister Eckhart*, trans. C. de B. Evans (London 1924) 1.427. See also Sister M. Albert, O.P., 'God is Our Mother', *Life of the Spirit*, Blackfriars, May 1945; André Cabassut, O.S.B., 'Une Dévotion Médiévale Peu Connue: La Dévotion à "Jésus notre Mère"', *Revue d'Ascétique et de Mystique*, nos 99-100, Avril-Décembre 1949.

¹⁶ *Revelations*, ch LII, f 106b. For a short history of the image see Dom Cuthbert Butler, *Western Mysticism* (London 1922), 160. On the whole, the absence of erotic imagery in the *Revelations* is one of its salient characteristics.

¹⁷ Cf *Revelations*, chs XIX, LII.

¹⁸ Cf *Revelations*, chs LI, LIII, LIV etc.

What is described above as Julian's 'unconscious' use of scripture, namely the clothing in Biblical language of a theme not in itself Biblical, is by far the most pervasive of the three types of influence mentioned. Almost every page of the *Revelations* is steeped in Biblical reminiscence. The allegory of the Lord and the Servant, for example, is a marvellous blend of many scriptural ingredients: the fall of Adam, Isaias' Song of the Servant, the Parable of the Prodigal Son, the Labourers in the Vineyard, the Treasure hidden in the field, the Gospel accounts of the Passion — to name but the most obvious. Nor is this an isolated instance, for the same sort of thing is illustrated in chs X, XIV, LI etc of her work.¹⁹

The anchoress's spontaneous use of scriptural phraseology illustrates another aspect of the same unconscious borrowing, and seems to point to close familiarity with the text of the Bible, either in the Vulgate or in the vernacular:

' . . . the blessydfulle Trinitie made mankynd to *his ymage* and to *his lykenes* . . . '

' Whan God shulde make mannes body he toke the *slyme of the erth*, whych is a mater medelyd and gaderyd of all bodely thynges . . . '

' . . . *touch* we hym [Christ] and we shalle *be made cleene*.²⁰

It is interesting to observe that the shorter text of the *Revelations*, while showing scriptural influence in the first and third of the ways here indicated, does not to the same degree make use of Biblical concepts.²¹

As far as the Patristic writings are concerned there is some evidence in Julian's book of an acquaintance with the works of St Augustine of Hippo. Several Julian passages call to mind at once the writings of Augustine.²² This is one striking instance:

¹⁹ Cf Matthew xxvi.67, xiv.25-33; Luke xiv.16-17; Matthew vi *passim*.

²⁰ *Revelations*, ch x, f 21b; ch LIII, f 112b; ch LXXVII, f 162a. Cf Genesis 1.26, 11.7; Matthew VIII.3.

²¹ If the shorter text be the earlier of the two versions, the omission may then be accounted for by the fact that the teachings of which they form the kernel had not yet been given to Julian.

²² As there was, in Julian's day, an Augustinian friary in the very street where stood (until destroyed by enemy action in 1942) St Julian's Church, the anchoress could easily have become acquainted with the spirit and ideals of its friars.

'And than shall we alle come in to oure Lorde, oure selfe clerely knowyng and God fulsomly hauyng; and we endlesly be alle hyd in God — verely seyeng and fulsomly felyng — and hym gostely heryng and hym delectably smellyng and hym hall swetly swelwyng. And ther shall we se God face to face, homely and fulsomly . . . ' ²³ Cf St Augustine: 'Quid autem amo, cum te amo? Non speciem corporis, nec decus temporis, nec candorem lucis . . . Non haec amo cum amo Deum meum; et tamen amo quamdam lucem, et quamdam vocem, et quemdam odorem et quemdam cibum, et quemdam amplexum, cum amo Deum meum, lucem, vocem, odorem, cibum, amplexum interioris hominis mei . . . ' ²⁴

The only direct non-scriptural quotation in the *Revelations* is from Gregory's *Life of St Benedict*. 'For a soul that seth the Maker of all thyng, all that is made semyth fulle lytlylle ' ²⁵ is Julian's beautiful rendering of 'quia animae videnti Creatorem angusta est omnis creatura'. ²⁶

Possibly Julian was also familiar with the *Benjamin Minor* of Richard of St Victor, current in her day in an English translation usually attributed to the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*. ²⁷ She mentions Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite by name as 'Seynt Dyonisi of France'. ²⁸ She is quite likely to have known his *Mystical Theology*, also translated by the author of *The Cloud*, ²⁹ and perhaps his *Divine Names* through some similar channel. Julian's peculiarly Dionysian use of

²³ *Revelations*, ch XLIII, f 8ob.

²⁴ *Confessiones*, bk x, ch 6 (Migne, *Patrologia Latina* xxxii, col 782). Other Augustinian passages are found in *Revelations*, chs ix, LI etc. Cf *Epist. ad Parthos*, Tract. x (*PL* xxxv, col 2060); *In Ps. cxxix* (*PL* xxxvii, cols 1696-1703) etc.

²⁵ *Revelations*, ch viii, f 16b-17a.

²⁶ Gregory's *Life of St Benedict*, ch xxxv (*PL* LXVI, col 200). The use of this quotation by Julian is noted in Father Hudleston's edition of the *Revelations*, xii; by Dom Meunier, op cit 34; and by Dom David Knowles, *The English Mystics* (London 1927), 132.

²⁷ P. Hodgson, op cit lviii, lxxviii.

²⁸ *Revelations*, ch xviii, f 37a. Julian, like other medieval writers, erroneously identifies St Denis of France (martyred c 250 AD) with Denis the Areopagite, who was converted by St Paul's preaching (*Acts of the Apostles* xvii.34). See Butler, op cit 180-1; also Von Hugel, *The Mystical Element in Religion* (London 1908), II.92 f.

²⁹ Op cit lviii, lxxviii.

the word 'touch' (ἐπαφή) signifying God's direct action on the soul, her fondness for numbers (especially triads), and the numerous echoes in her book of Dionysius' thought suggest a knowledge of the Areopagite's writings, though it is worthy of note that her treatment of the problem of evil³⁰ owes little to that of Dionysius.

A single instance must suffice to illustrate Julian's affinities in thought with Pseudo-Dionysius. The eleventh chapter of her book begins: 'And after this I saw God in a poynte . . . by which syght I saw that he is in al thyng . . .'³¹ It is hard to believe that this statement owes nothing to the following utterance of the Areopagite, in which, after remarking that Existence belongs to the 'Absolute and Transcendent Goodness' in an incomprehensible and concentrated oneness, he goes on: 'All the radii of a circle are concentrated into a single unity in the centre, and this point contains all the straight lines brought together within itself and unified to one another, and to the one starting-point from which they began . . .'³²

Julian's debt to earlier and contemporary English writings is chiefly one of form. But there is a similarity in spirit to the *Ancren Riwle*, as well as some obvious, though probably unconscious, borrowings.³³ This indebtedness to the *Ancren Riwle* is most likely due to Julian's close acquaintance with the earlier book, which is just what one would expect, since the *Riwle* was written for anchoresses. With *The Cloud of Unknowing* the *Revelations* have little in common, despite the fact that both works deal primarily with the higher forms of mystical experience. The homely spirit of *The Scale of Perfection* is more akin to that of the *Revelations*; but the scope of Hilton's book is wider, and the speculative element, so surprisingly present in the *Revelations*, is absent from *The*

³⁰ *Revelations*, ch xxxii. Cf Dionysius, *Divine Names*, ch iv (Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* III, col 731).

³¹ *Revelations*, f 22b.

³² *Divine Names*, ch v (PG III, col 821). The translation is that of C. E. Rolt, *The Divine Names and Mystical Theology of Pseudo-Dionysius* (London 1920), 137.

³³ See *Revelations*, ed Warrack, 152, note 2.

Scale. The two writers express at least one truth in identical terms³⁴ and several others in similar form.³⁵

While Julian may have known the writings of Richard Rolle, there is little evidence in her book to support such a conjecture. The two mystics differ fundamentally in temperament; and one may reasonably doubt whether the rather emotional style of the Hampole hermit would be congenial to the rationalizing mind of the anchoress; all the more so as most of Rolle's treatises³⁶ were intended for souls less advanced in the way of virtue than was Julian. On the other hand, Rolle's devotion to the humanity of Christ, his predilection for the Passion as a subject of meditation, and the vivid pictorial quality of his English writings in particular, find their counterpart in the *Revelations* of Julian.³⁷

The Book of Margery Kempe is not likely to have been in circulation during Julian's lifetime,³⁸ but Margery paid a visit to Julian and they had a long talk together on the subject of Margery's trials.³⁹ *The Book* is in strong contrast to the *Revelations* in tone and subject-matter, and would scarcely have appealed to the reticent nature of the anchoress.

This brief survey must suffice to show the truth of the contention that the subject-matter of the *Revelations* not only shows little trace of English formative influence, but differs strikingly in important respects from contemporary religious treatises. For it is less theoretical, less ascetic and severe in tone than *The Cloud*; more limited in scope, more personal and speculative than *The Scale*; more intellectual in approach than Rolle's writings; and more spiritual than *The Book of Margery Kempe*.

³⁴ Noted by Coleman, op cit 148.

³⁵ See *Revelations*, ed Warrack, 140, note 2. For a theory about the possible mutual influence of Julian and Hilton see *Scala Perfectionis*, a French translation by Dom M. Noetinger and Dom E. Bouvet, O.S.B. (Tours 1923) II.191-3.

³⁶ Eg *Amending of Life* and *Fire of Divine Love*.

³⁷ Many of the lyrics on the Passion composed in Julian's day possess the vividness of detail and intimate personal tone found in both the *Revelations* and the writings of Rolle. See C. Brown, *Religious Lyrics of the Fourteenth Century* (Oxford 1924), nos 64, 67, 76, 79 etc.

³⁸ See *The Book*, op cit li.

³⁹ Ibid 42-3.

Since Julian was a contemporary of several famous continental women mystics and ecstasies, it is interesting to inquire how much she has in common with them and to what extent she was influenced by them. It has been suggested that the *Revelations* may reflect an acquaintance with the letters of St Catherine of Siena,⁴⁰ and it is not unlikely also that she had at least heard of the revelations of St Bridget of Sweden⁴¹ as well as those of earlier women visionaries like St Gertrude and St Mechthild von Hackeborn. Even if this is true, however, their chief importance for Julian was that their writings helped to establish a new spiritual fashion, as it were, and possibly weakened contemporary English prejudice against female mystics. With the actual writings of these women (those of St Catherine perhaps excepted) Julian's work appears to have but few points of contact. While Catherine, Bridget and Dorothea of Prussia in their writings are 'prophetical or practical, intent on finding and interpreting the intensely active and world-reforming will of God',⁴² there is a detachment and remoteness, an absence of topical allusion and denunciation in the Englishwoman's book, that contrast strangely with the writings of her continental sisters.⁴³

Perhaps it is even stranger that Julian seems to have more in common with the Flemish and German male mystics of her century than with her own native brethren.⁴⁴ The writings of Ruysbroeck, Tauler and Suso furnish many parallels with her work in imagery and ideas,⁴⁵ while Johannes Eckhart would

⁴⁰ See *Catholic Encyclopaedia* VIII, St Catherine of Siena. For an account of the English Austin Friar, William Flete, and his relations with St Catherine, see A. Gwynn, *The English Austin Friars in the Time of Wycliff* (Oxford 1940), 161 f. Sister M. Albert, O.P., in a study as yet unpublished, finds a strong similarity in outlook between St Catherine and Julian. The present writer feels that, despite a fundamental spiritual kinship, there is a dynamic quality in the Italian mystic's method which differentiates her completely from the English recluse.

⁴¹ St Bridget died in 1373 and was canonized in Oct 1391. Cf *The Book*, 95.

⁴² W. P. Cummin, *The Revelations of St Birgetta*, EETS OS 178 (1929), 125, note on 1/1.

⁴³ This may be due to the fact that Julian, as a recluse, was withdrawn from external affairs, while these other women mystics lived all or most of their lives 'in the world'.

⁴⁴ For commerce with Flanders at this period see F. Blomefield, *History of Norfolk* (1739-1775. 5 vols), II.61-3.

⁴⁵ Dom Meunier, *op cit*, quotes several instances.

appear to have influenced her strongly.⁴⁶ Julian's tendency to speculate, her concrete imagery and a certain forthrightness of expression would certainly seem to give her kinship with this great German thinker. And while this resemblance may be accidental, it is a tempting surmise that two of the English writer's most daring pronouncements — on the Motherhood of God⁴⁷ and the 'godly wylle' (the only passage in her book which approaches unorthodoxy) — owe either their form or their matter, or both, to the Dominican.⁴⁸ Compare, for instance, the content of the following passages, the first from Julian, the others from Eckhart:

' . . . in ech a soule that shall be safe is a godly wylle that nevyr assentyd to synne ne nevyr shall; whych wyll is so good that it may nevyr wylle evyll but evyr more contynuly it wylllyth good and werkyth good in the sight of God . . . ' ⁴⁹

' . . . the soul has a spark in her which has been in God eternally, life and light. And this spark is conveyed into every man together with the soul. It is pure light in itself and is always censuring sin and urging to virtue . . . The spark of the soul cannot be extinguished either in hell or heaven . . . ' ⁵⁰

' . . . the spark of the soul is [God's] light striking down from above, the reflection of his divine nature and ever opposed to anything ungodly . . . a permanent tendency to good; aye, even in Hell it is inclined to good . . . ' ⁵¹

Nevertheless, despite these apparent reflections of foreign influence in her book, Julian contrives triumphantly to preserve her own personality. 'The first English Woman of Letters', as Miss Underhill styles her,⁵² 'she is as original as a Christian writer can well be',⁵³ and yet, at the same time, she is securely

⁴⁶ It is possible that Julian had a Dominican confessor or director; the Dominicans were a great power in Norwich in Julian's day.

⁴⁷ See above, p 21, note 15.

⁴⁸ See Knowles, op cit 144.

⁴⁹ *Revelations*, ch LIII, f 111a.

⁵⁰ *The Works of Meister Eckhart*, op cit II.113.

⁵¹ *Ibid* 1.88.

⁵² *Cambridge Medieval History* VII.807.

⁵³ Knowles, op cit 131.

entrenched in the religious traditions of her age. *Sixteen Revelations of Divine Love* is unique in this respect, that it combines the fervour of the continental women mystics with the speculativeness of the continental male mystics, and adds to both the sanity, balance and sobriety characteristic of English mysticism.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Acknowledgments are due to Mr R. M. Wilson, University of Sheffield, under whose supervision the writer of this article prepared an edition of Sloane MS 2499 for the M.A. degree of Leeds University.