

5-14-2004

Reinscribing the Corporal Semiotic in Julian of Norwich's Revelations of Divine Love

Joe Rochelle

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/honors_etd



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Reinscribing the Corporal Semiotic in Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love*

by

Joe Rochelle

Undergraduate honors thesis under the direction of

Lisi Oliver

Department of English

Submitted to the LSU Honors College in partial fulfillment of
The Upper Division Honors Program

14 May 2004

Louisiana State University

Table of Contents

- I. Laying the Pieces on the Table
- II. Introducing Dame Julian
- III. From Jerome to Julian
- IV. Mapping the Semiotic in Late Medieval Norwich

I.

Recent years have witnessed a revived interest in the life and work of Julian of Norwich, a fourteenth-century anchoress who after a series of sixteen visions recorded these *Revelations of Divine Love* to comfort her “even” Christians. An accessible Penguin Paperback edition of her *Revelations* attests to Julian’s newfound popularity, as does the fact that excerpts from her book have been included in the 7th edition of the *Norton’s Anthology*. Julian’s influence upon modern writers, most notably T.S. Eliot, Aldous Huxley, Annie Dillard, and Mary Gordon, has drawn attention from scholars of English literature who occasionally compare her to Chaucer.

Critical appreciation was preceded by that of the Anglo-Catholic contemplatives who travel every spring to the Norwich church where she made her home. The church was rebuilt into the Julian Shrine after being leveled in World War II and marks the center of Julian’s cult, where a priest celebrates mass four times a week, rosaries and shrine intercessions notwithstanding. Next door one finds the Julian Centre, which was constructed to serve the influx of pilgrims and visitors and claims to stock everything every printed about Julian, in any language, as well as a growing list of unpublished doctoral theses. Also operating out of her hometown are the Friends of Julian of Norwich, who host the Julian Festival every May. Thousands from around the world attend a noon mass followed by a picnic lunch and later lectures presented by those scholars like John Skinner and Elizabeth Obbard who have begun to take notice. The rest of the year many of these contemplatives, some as members of the religious Order of

Julian,¹ meet weekly for silent prayer in the Julian Gatherings that have sprung up in Episcopal churches across the English-speaking world.

Overlooking the question of Julian's literary merit, one sees that Julian owes her popularity in religious circles to the comfort she offers through her belief in mankind's inevitable rebirth. And so after centuries of neglect Julian demands critical attention, not for her sake or even that of the Christians for whom she writes, but for scholars who instead of traveling in the same critical ruts have the opportunity to say something new. Luce Irigaray advises us to

[L]isten: all round us, men and women sound just the same. The same discussions, the same arguments, the same scenes. The same attractions and separations. The same difficulties, the same impossibility of making connections. The same...Same...Always the same.

Listening, one hears sloppier feminists beginning to revive the same tired conversations when discussing Julian. Frances Beers, for example, writes:

[T]he fact that Julian may have been brought up to equate womanliness and motherhood with gentleness, and may herself have had a particularly close bond with her own mother, cannot in itself have given rise to her understanding of Jesus as Mother, which was (and still is) in direct contradiction to the orthodox view of the Trinity. (7-8)

While nothing can be gained from speculating about the bond between Julian and her mother, a lot can be learned from reading Bernard of Clairvaux, Aelred of Rivaux, William of Thierry, and Anselm, among others, all of whom use the common medieval

¹ Not to be confused with the Society of Julian, the self-professed "fraternal order dedicated to the advancement of Pagan religion."

topos of the maternal Christ. Feminist treatments of Julian need only to be more historically nuanced, and should not, as Thomas Long suggests, be entirely discounted. A responsible feminist critique mustn't bill Julian as a theological radical when her every progressive thought eventually bows before orthodoxy. It must respect her prayer that her "booke com not but to the hands of the[m] that will...submit to the feith of holy church" (Ch. 86).

This being said, a close reading of Julian's text could be better informed by the structuralist psycho-linguistic theory proposed by Julia Kristeva, which accepting the preeminence of two universal psychic structures in defining ego development, favors the semiotic heteroglossia of drives to the directed linear thought and speech patterns of the masculine symbolic economy. Correctly applied, one sees that Julian's language literally embodies many of the features of feminine textuality that feminists like Luce Irigaray long for. The *Revelations* are, significantly, filled with broken images: Jesus' heart is "cloven in two," the Servant of her famous parable turned away from his Lord, and the two-part soul is divided against itself. Kristeva observes that the mother is responsible for connecting the zones of her infant's fragmented body, a function performed in Julian's text by Jesus our Mother when he "knits" himself to his lovers thereby uniting the soul's substance and sensuality.

This corporal immanence of Julian's God cannot be properly understood through a framework that denies the primacy of the body. When Julian writes, "[o]ur good lord shewid him in dyvers manners, both in hevyn, in erth, but I saw him take no place but in mannys soule," it is clear that her maternal Jesus is not an external archetype (Ch. 81). This is again the case when in describing individual emergence into subjectivity she

writes that she “saw a body lyand on the erth, which body shewid hevyn and ogyley, without shappe and forme as it were a bolned quave of styngand myre. And sodenly out of this body sprang a ful fair creature, a little childe full shapen and formid, swifte and lively, whiter than lilly, which sharpely glode up onto hevyn” (Ch. 64). Six centuries later Flannery O’Connor wrote a story about the spiritually dissatisfied O.E. Parker who covers his body in tattoos, but “[t]he effect was not one intricate arabesque of colors but of something haphazard and botched” (514). It is only after whispering his first name that “all at once he felt the light pouring through him, turning his spider web soul into a perfect arabesque of colors, a garden of tress and birds and beasts” (528). This is to say that individuation, i.e. saying one’s name for the first time or rising from the formless mire, is a precondition of the bodily integration sought by a number of women, both Catholic and atheist, medieval and post-modern.

Achieving individuation,

The moder may leyen the child tenderly to her brest, but our tender moder Iesus, he may homely leden us into his blissid brest be his swete open syde, and shewyn therin party of the Godhede and the ioyes of hevyn...wher he seith ‘Lo, how I love the’ beholdand into his syde, enioyand. (Ch. 60)

The child or Christian can, in other words, only re-experience transforming maternal love in relation to Christ. Earthly mothers are wary of children who try to climb back into their wombs, whereas the Jesus of this passage points the way. This is why Julian can confidently write that

it is Jesus “out of whom we be al cum, into whom we be all inclosed, into who we shall all wyndyn,” (Ch. 53) [a]nd [that] our savior is our very

moder in whom we be endlessly borne and never shall come out of him
(Ch. 57).

Passages like these, I argue, are informed by what Kristeva labels the semiotic, the pre-lingual stage of ego development in which the mother and child enjoy uninterrupted objectless love. And while this structuralist model has lately been attacked by Nancy Fraser and Judith Butler, who claim that since the semiotic is doomed to repression it cannot restore feminine agency, one sees clearly in Julian's case that the opposite is true. Locating the semiotic in Julian's *Revelations* leads to the realization that features of her text anticipate the political, sexual, and linguistic transformation envisioned by French feminists and their more pragmatic American counterparts. She, for example, blurs logocentric subject/object distinction when she writes:

[T]he depe wisdam of the Trinitie is our moder and in him we arn biclosid; the
hey goodness of the Trinitie is our lord and in him we arn biclosid and he in us.
We arn beclosid in the Fadir, and we arn biclosin in the Son, and we arn beclosid
in the Holy Gost; and the Fadir is beclosid in us, and the Son is beclosid in us, and
the Holy Gost is beclosid in us. (Ch. 54)

Thus each person of the trinity is enclosed in us and we are enclosed in each person of the trinity. Each person of the trinity, furthermore, performs a separate role in Julian's soteriology while remaining part of the unified whole. The Godhead is then substantially linked to the human end of the equation by the middle person, who is the body's head and "we be al his members" (Ch. 51). This is preceded in chapter thirty-one with the observation that to his body "al his members be knitt." In restoring the corporal unity that is at once the beginning and end of feminine creativity, individuation is not lost, as

each unified “member” is charged with a different role. And so while “in the syte of God al man is on and on man is all man,” incredibly, neither Julian nor the members she writes for drown in semiotic fluid (75).

Feminists could learn a lot from this. It is true that under the gaze of a male director, on-screen female characters are rarely seen in their entirety, but rather as pairs of legs, arms, eyes, and breasts. But it is no good to only observe these fetishistic cinematic reductions and offer no hope for an alternative, as the American film critic Laura Mulvey does when she concludes that women never successfully negotiate Lacan’s mirror-stage. She is no Victor Frankenstein, who performs what would become the most noble of feminist operations when he attempts to reassemble the body’s dismembered pieces. Feminists have been trying and failing at Frankenstein’s experiment ever since without recognizing those religious women beyond their pale who have done so and succeeded. And while the monstrous results are never pretty, for there can be no female Shakespeare or De Mille so long as greatness lies in poetic or cinematic dissections, Julian is not regressing to debilitating primary narcissistic union, but becomes, to the contrary, a locus of Christian rebirth and agency from which the “beclosid” Christ enters the world. Confronting Julian’s text, more specifically the role played by semiotic signification in its production, will allow, if only for feminists, an imaginative escape from the scopophilic economy.

II.

Writing from the interior of a dark and musty cell, the fourteenth century anchoress, Julian of Norwich, dispensed spiritual advice to pilgrims who sought counsel from the woman who had spoken to God. Little is known about her life. Curiously, only one date appears in Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love*, where in the second chapter she writes that

[t]hese revelations were shewed to a simple creature that cowde no letter, the yeere of our lord 1373, the viiith day of May; which creature desired afore iii gifts of God: the first was mende of his passion, the ii was bodily seknesse in youth at xxx yeeres of age, the iii was to have God's gift iii wounds.

Julian's text exists in long and short versions. Because the latter only describes the apparitions that are theologically developed in the longer, it is six times shorter. She mentions her age in chapter two of the short text, and once more in chapter three of the long text, writing that "when I was thirty yers old and halfe God sent me a bodely sekeness in which I lay iii dayes and nights; and on the fourth night I tooke all rights of holy church and wened not a levyd till day." Her curate was sent for and brought with him a crucifix. He told her to take comfort in the image of her maker, and when she did she "sodenly...saw the rede blode trekelyn down fro[m] under the garlande" (Ch. 4). Fifteen more visions would follow, and after making a full recovery, she would first write her short text of the *Revelations*, and the long one after another twenty years of contemplation.

There is only one extant copy of the short text, the Amherst MS, which is found in a medieval anthology that, excepting a Latin entry, is composed entirely of vernacular devotional literature, most of which is attributed to Richard Rolle. The vellum manuscript is in the British Library, B.L. Additional MS 37790, and was assembled in 1435, possibly for a religious community. The long text that would follow is preserved in its entirety in three MSS. The two Sloane MSS are also located in the British Library. B.L. MS Sloane 2499 was copied in the mid-seventeenth century, and B.L. MS Sloane 3705 sometime in the early eighteenth century. The third, MS *Bibliothèque Nationale Fonds anglais* 40, is estimated by Colledge and Walsh to date from the mid-seventeenth century (7). With the exception of three bequests,² nearly everything we know about Julian must be inferred from these texts. This is problematic, but the manuscripts are consistent with one another. Additionally, the Amherst MS was written only forty-two years after the completion of the long text, and only a decade or so after her death, all of which suggests that the surviving manuscripts are to be trusted.

That she was thirty when her visions occurred means that she was born in 1342 and probably died sometime after 1412, if a reference in a will does not refer to another anchoress who might have assumed our Julian's name and place after her death. While some of Julian's biography can be read between her lines, the most she explicitly says about herself is that she was sick at thirty and a half, an autobiographical snippet that for Julian is only important insofar as it demonstrates that God answered one of her prayers. And because they were apparently far less important, she makes no mention of either her

² Rodger Reed, rector of St. Michael's at Coslany, left two shillings to "Julian anakorite" in March of 1393. In November of 1415, a citizen of Norwich named John Plumpton left forty pence to "ankeress in ecclesia sancti Juliani de Conesford in Norwice." But as Grace Jantzen notes, these

given or assumed name. It is likely that upon enclosure the anchoress at the small parish Church of St. Julian and Edmund would have taken the name of the church's patron. The first printed edition of her *Revelations* (1670) closely follows the Paris MS and refers to her as "Mother Juliana, an Anchorete of Norwich." Her silence leaves her contemporary biographers scratching their heads, and in order to learn more than her name and station, one must consider *The Book of Margery Kempe*.

Margery's father was a burgess in the northern seaport of King's Lynn. Like Norwich, it was a city "where merchants engaged in profitable trade with the Baltic and other northern European ports" (3). After bearing fourteen children for her husband John, she decided to take-up vegetarianism and profess a vow of chastity. Margery often proves to be the celibate Julian's foil. This means that where Julian generally leaves out biographical details, Margery's writing is filled entirely with them, so much so that her *Book* is often referred to as the first autobiography. She is proud that she "was comyn of worthy kindred" and instead of spending her life in an anchorhold, she traveled widely within England (line 265). She visited Danzig and Norway and went on pilgrimages to Santiago, Rome, Jerusalem, and Aachen, where she writes that she saw four holy relics. God was always telling her to travel, and sometime in 1413, three years after she began praying for the end of sex with her husband, she was directed to seek the advice of the anchoress Julian who "was expert in swech thyngys and good cownsel cowd geuyn" (Ch. 38).

As God commanded her, she went to Norwich where Julian told her that she should listen in obedience to whatever God told her, so long as it was "not contrary to his

references, along with another in 1416, could refer to a subsequent anchoress by that name (20-1).

glory and the profit of her fellow Christians” (Ch. 42). The most striking thing in this passage, and what ultimately confirms it to be the advice of the *Revelations of Divine Love* author, is the importance that it accords to reason. A mystic, Julian seems to say, is not merely God’s mouthpiece, but a rational being who first listens and then must come to a judgment of her own, even if it takes twenty years.

Such was the case with Julian’s theodicy, revealed to her in her revelation of the Lord and Servant which, like the idea of Jesus as Mother, is not developed in the short text. This addition leads Denise Baker to conclude that Julian did not develop her interpretation of the fourteenth revelation until she wrote the long text. In this revelation, beginning in chapter forty-one of the long text, Julian provides God’s answer to her question about the nature of sin. Unable to understand His response, she asks, “A! lord Iesus, king of bliss, how shall I ben esyed? Ho that shal techyn me and tellen me that me nedyth to wetyn, if I may not at this tyme sen it in the?” (Ch. 50). God’s answer comes in chapter fifty-one, in a vision of “ii persons in bodyly lyknes.” The Servant (both Christ and Adam) leaves his Lord (God the Father), and running “in grete haste for love to don his lords will,” the servant falls “in a slade and takith ful grete sore.” In his humiliation, the fallen servant “cowde not turne his face to loke upon his loving lord, which was to hym ful nere.” This passage is important to my argument later on. At this point Julian is no disembodied spirit; hers remains a spirituality of corporeality. Fleshed out in this crucial passage, it contributes to the fact that her long text, as mentioned, took “her two decades of reflection to achieve an understanding of its meaning” (Jantzen 85). The reflective Julian thus stands in sharp contrast to seers like Hildegard of Bingen, who in a thirteenth century manuscript of her *Liber divinorum operum* is shown seated at her

desk in a trance, automatically inscribing her vision into wax tablets as a stream of red waves, which represents her God-given mystical illumination descending from heaven and entering her through her eyes. Lacan's famous remark on Bernini's *The Ecstasy of St. of Theresa of Avila*, that the look on Theresa's face could only be that of a woman in the throes of an orgasm, highlights the difference between Julian's reflective mysticism and the generally more ecstatic variety of the Iberian mystics.

Julian, in her concern for her fellow Christians, never prays for more revelations after the initial sixteen. She pulls back in order to relate her experience and follows the advice of Abelard who quotes Paul in his seventh letter to Heloise:

True enough, you give thanks but the other's faith is not built up. Thank God I am more gifted in ecstatic utterance than you, but in church I would rather speak five intelligible words for your instruction than ten thousand in the language of ecstasy. Brothers, do not be childish in your thoughts; be as innocent of evil as small children but grown men in your thoughts.
(Paul, 1 Corinthians 14.1, in Abelard 258)

Elsewhere Paul insists that women remain silent in church, but here Abelard expands Paul's audience, or is at least willing to count Heloise as a brother. She must, he writes, "refrain altogether from idle talk, while those of you who have been given the grace of learning must work to be instructed in the things which are Gods" (268). Julian too has this grace of learning and similarly writes in order to instruct others in their faith, never for her own edification. According to her reasoning, consideration for her fellow Christians always precedes the acceptance of a vision as genuine. This includes not only her own, but also that of the Church, as when concern for the commonweal leads her to

the “all shall be well” antithesis that proves impossible for her to reconcile with the Church’s teaching that the road is narrow. God taught Julian “to take it to al my even cristen, al in general and nothing in special” (Ch. 37). As a grown “man” in her thoughts, Julian never again prayed for another ecstasy, and as an anchoress she was to serve as a sort of medieval psychotherapist, guiding those, like Margery, that sought her advice while spending the rest of her time praying for the sake of Christendom.

In contrast to Lacan, Freud theorized that mysticism was a severe form of regression, a return to the pre-oedipal state in which the mother still had a phallus. Mysticism is then perhaps to some extent a renunciation of sexual differentiation. Psychoanalysis is the only modern critical methodology that recognizes the centrality of wound/womb imagery, but Julian’s extended wound metaphor suggests instead a compassionate engagement of humanity, a penetration, Tillich would say, instead of withdrawal. Paul Molinari, one of the first critics to take Julian seriously as a theologian, wrote forty years ago that “The profundity of her book is clothed in such simplicity and directness of exposition that one may at first overlook its hidden value” (xvi). This warning is even more important today than when it was first offered. Today’s critic is no longer embarrassed to explicate a text with a critical methodology that for better and worse can reveal what no one really noticed before, yet will lead one straight to those textual features that confirms the ideology that one started with. Psychoanalysis can only take one so far, and begins to give out when it reaches the point at which it ignores the complexity of the spiritual metaphor and reads desire to return to the womb as mere regression. Writing as arguably the most important American psychoanalyst, Norman Brown insists:

Here is the point where we have to jump, beyond psychoanalysis: They know not of Regeneration, but only of Generation. Therapy must be rebirth; but psychoanalysis does not believe that man can be born again; and so it does not believe that man is ever born at all; for the real birth is the second birth. (54)

Freudian analysis, while often very helpful, can tell us little by the time we reach Chapter 41 of the long text, where Julian recounts her fourteenth vision. There God asks her “I am the ground of thi besekyng: first it is my wille that thou have it, and sythen I make the to willen it, and sithen I make the to besekyn it and thou besekyst it; how shuld it be that thou shuld not have thyn besekyng?” The answer should be obvious enough, but for Julia Kristeva, French feminist and practicing psychoanalyst, the analyst [and critic] should pay most attention to what motivates a question:

Yet isn’t the function of the analyst to pay heed to every question, not to answer them all, surely, but to displace, illuminate, or conjecture away the object of interrogation? Every question, no matter how intellectual its content, reflects suffering....Let us try simply to be receptive to this suffering, and if possible to open our ears to meaning of another kind. (*In the Beginning was Love: Psychoanalysis and Faith* xiii)

It has always been the case that God raises more questions for Julian than He and Freud can answer, but what is most interesting about Julian’s theology is that it anticipates the liberal theology of Bonnhoffer and Tillich by more than 500 years. The contemporary Anglican Bishop John Robinson writes in *Honest to God*:

To assert that ‘God is love’ is to believe that in love one comes into touch with the most fundamental reality in the universe, that Being itself ultimately has character. It is to say with Buber, that ‘Every particular *Thou* is a glimpse through to the Eternal *Thou*, that it is between man and man that we meet God ...Nevertheless, as Bonhoeffer insists, ‘God is the “beyond” *in the midst*’; ‘The transcendent is not infinitely remote but close at hand’. For the eternal *Thou* is met only *in, with and under* the finite *Thou*, whether in encounters with other persons or in the response to the natural order. (47)

Julian’s “God is love”³ refrain is thus a way of making close at hand “the most fundamental reality in the universe,” not a way of pushing away from that which is most insignificant. Julian’s Lord, like Buber’s *Thou*, it is ever present but usually ignored. Julian’s God in her master and servant parable is “the beyond in the midst,” or in the words of Tillich, “the ground of our being,” concepts which if not spatially equal, posit God closer to humanity than is traditionally the case. The original meaning of Julian’s phrase “ground of thi besekyng” is lost forever, but since the concept is an inversion⁴ that contradicts the prevailing (pre)modern cosmology that envisions a God “most high,” we

³ Fifteen years after asking after God’s meaning, Julian is “answerid in gostly vnderstonding, seyand thus: ‘Woldst thou wetten thi lords mening in this thing? Wete it wele: love was his mening. Who shewid it the? Love. Wete shewid he the? Love. Werfore shewid it he? For Love. (Ch 86)

⁴ The extent of the difference between Julian’s cosmology and the prevailing one will hopefully become clear by the end of the next chapter, particularly the way in which it signifies in the work of Jerome. What sets Julian apart is most apparent in chapter four, when as I have noted, the curate is called for. After he instructs her to look upon the face of her maker, she writes, “Methought I was wele, for my eyen were sett upwrightward into hevyn where I trusted to come be the mercy of God,” but she nevertheless assents, the point at which the visions begin. The significance of this passage is often overlooked. Staring up into heaven in search of comfort, like Bernini’s Theresa, leads her nowhere. It is only when she brings her eyes back down to earth to look upon the bloodied Christ and suffers with him that transfiguration becomes possible.

stand today in a much better position to understand what Julian meant by her phrase than did many of her contemporaries, if one will permit an operative comparison.

In *Les dialogues des carmelites*, the high-strung heroine escapes the “agitation” of revolution-era France, selfishly desiring to lead a heroic life by entering a convent. It is only later, from within the cloister, that she can understand what the Prioress meant by: “chaque priere, ceci celle d’un petit patre qui garde ses betes, c’est la priere du genre humaine.” The Prioress’s mindset can be better understood if we know what it is not, and for the sake of comparison, one might look to *Thais*. For Massenet’s otherwise forgettable masterpiece accurately depicts the ascetic mindset, according to which the decadence of Alexandria stands in opposition to a community of holy cenobites in the surrounding desert. This ideal teaches, like twentieth century Moody revivalism, that the world is a sinking ship to be abandoned, and so the best one can do is throw someone a life preserver. Athanael does as much for Thais when he snatches her from the city and brings her to a community of women.

This is the ascetic tradition of men like St. Simeon Stylites the Younger, who according to the *Lives of the Saints: For Every Day of the Year*, a terse but indispensable classic of traditionalist American Catholicism,

lived on platforms on top of columns in order to ensure solitude. Simeon ascended his platform at seven years of age. At the age of twenty, in order to avoid pilgrims, Simeon retired to a more inaccessible mountain refuge. After ten years, he established a monastery for himself, and at the same time, he had a column built there for himself. He lived on this column for the last forty-five years of his life. (229)

The obvious difference, that Simeon made his home atop a giant phallus while Julian retired to a uterine anchorhold, makes it important to remember that spatial constructs do not necessarily correspond to mental and spiritual ones. A man who exposes himself to the world can be much more reclusive than the woman who walls herself into a corner, especially when one retreats to what was one of the largest cities of medieval England. Grace Jantzen notes that in Julian's day,

[b]ecause of the hostilities with France, the ports to the south were in constant danger of piracy, and were in any case not well situated for commerce with England's chief allies and trading partners, Flanders and the Rhineland. Norwich, on the other hand, was sufficiently inland to be protected from pirates, and yet was served by the river Wensum, a river of sufficient size to allow Norwich to become an increasingly important port. The mouth of the Wensum in the north east of England made it geographically convenient for her continental neighbors, and Norwich became the gateway to England, connected by roads and waterways to London, York, Lincoln, and other important centres. The taxation of Richard II caused a growth of first wool and then cloth trade, much of which was via Norwich to Flanders (6).

Again, Norman Brown observes that "Where life is still within the cave, and we still unborn, the beginning of life (birth) is not exit from the womb, but entry into the cave (womb), the descent of the soul into the world of matter" (46). Leaving his master, the servant of Julian's parable stumbles and falls into the mud. Having been born, the question becomes how Julian does negotiate her way back to the Father, or rather back

into him. How does she move from the sort of embrace that, we will see, is characteristic of Jerome's spirituality to a penetration⁵ that leads her to her Father's uterine core?

Julian, assuming she had a good sense of humor, would laugh at these questions. She and her Servant go from master to matter to *mater*,⁶ and so Julian anchors herself, not because "the sheep which leaves the sheepfold is soon exposed to the bite of the wolf," (Jerome, *Vita Malchi*) but rather because "[a]ll walking, or wandering, is from mother, to mother, in mother; it gets us no where" (Brown 50). Academic wandering always circles back on itself and is, in final estimation, every bit as fruitless. If a critic respects Julian's vision it becomes essential for his or her text to eventually excuse itself. Doing this, it becomes clear that while Julian doesn't ascend, she doesn't exactly cry from the depths either. In her *Revelations of Love* she penetrates to the point where she finds herself back in the womb, "bicloyed" in the God that she never left.

⁵ Julian does penetrate and does not exactly write with her milk. This means that she can contemplate mystical "onying" because she appropriates the biggest tool of them all, the pen. She is, as is well know, the first recorded woman to have written a book in English.

⁶ Ideally, one will be thrice born. First, Christ falls into the Maiden's womb, at which time "God knitted him to our body in the maydens womb he toke our sensual soule..., in which onyng he was perfect man" (Ch. 57). Postpartum, the Christ-Adam falls into the mud of Julian's parable. Reconciliation leads, hopefully, to mystical rebirth, in which "we shall have our lord Ihesus onto our mede, and ben fulfillid of ioy and bliss without end" (Ch 82).

III.

When M. Krempe, a professor of natural philosophy, first meets Victor Frankenstein, his pupil, he has trouble understanding why anyone would have wasted his youth studying Aristotle and alchemy. He tells his student:

Every minute...every instant that you have wasted on those books is utterly and entirely lost. You have burdened your memory with exploded systems, and useless names. Good God! In what desert land have you lived, where no one was kind enough to inform you that these fancies, which you have greedily imbibed, are a thousand years old, and as musty as they are ancient? I little expected in this enlightened and scientific age to find a disciple of Albertus Magnus and Paracelsus. My dear Sir, you must entirely begin your studies anew. (Shelley 26)

This is, of course, the same reaction that a psychoanalytic critic often encounters. He is asked “to exchange chimeras of boundless grandeur for realities of little worth” (Shelley 27). These realities of little worth allow one to do the impossible, This is what sets the glories of psychoanalytic quackery apart from the tedium of legitimate psychology. In the words of M. Waldman, “The ancient teachers of this science...promised impossibilities, and performed nothing...But these philosophers, whose hands seem only made to dabble in dirt, and their eyes to pour over the microscope or crucible, have indeed performed miracles” (27). Yet he goes on to say, in opposition to M. Krempe, that “The labors of men of genius, however erroneously directed, scarcely ever fail in turning to the solid advantage of mankind” (28). Albertus Magnus and Paracelsus, while unimportant to my argument, don’t deserve their positions on the trash heap of discarded

unified field theories. The same applies to Lacan's psychoanalysis, which if misdirected⁷ is, I hope to circuitously show, ultimately redeemable, if only for the work of later analysts, particularly Julia Kristeva, who has a magnificent pipe dream of comparable grandeur.

Kristeva theorized that a child's language acquisition is prefigured by a pre-oedipal state of undifferentiated wholeness that she calls the semiotic, a period before Lacan's mirror-stage in which he believed the zones of the body are connected and the permanent subject/object boundaries erected. And while the symbolic must serve as a starting point, understanding the semiotic, as a purely theoretical metaphor, allows one to reach behind the language that it punctures and underpins. The uterine semiotic that organizes the non-linear poetic text is "[i]ndifferent to language, enigmatic and feminine, this space underlying the written is rhythmic, unfettered, irreducible, to its intelligible verbal translation; it is musical, anterior to judgment, but restrained by a single guarantee: syntax" (Kristeva 2174).

And while Kristeva's theory remains pure speculation, it works when discussing Julian precisely because it is so ambitious. "A Symphony" Mahler wrote, "must encompass the world." The same goes for any treatment of Julian of Norwich, who insists that "it is mor worship to God to behold hym in al than in any special thyng" (Ch. 35). It won't do much good to put Julian under the microscope. She was taught to express the comfort show her "al in general and nothing in special," (Ch.37) and warns us to "take not on thing after thy affection and liking and leve another" (Ch. 86). Her unified and circular text, with an organization that anticipates the anti-climactic diffused

⁷ Cognitive science seems to be discrediting him at every turn. See John Muller's *Beyond the Psychoanalytic Dyad : Developmental Semiotics in Freud, Peirce, and Lacan*, 1996.

sexuality of *écriture féminine*, resists fetishistic reduction. Like Luce Irigaray's, Julian's prose never ascends, never grows erect only to go limp. Hers, as we have seen, is the language of a horizonless feminine imaginary that knows no bounds. As Julian writes, "every shewing is ful of privities" (Ch. 51). For this reason the "gret dede" to come at the end of time, the one that will answer Julian's theodicy, or the question of how "all shall be well" and everyone go to hell who is supposed to, "shal nether be knowen in hevyn ner erth till it is don" (Ch. 36). This, however, is not an excuse to quit searching, for "the continual sekying of the soule plesith God ful mekyl; for it may do no more than sekyn" (ch. 10). The search, properly undertaken, is not to be an academic one in which one proceeds "presumyng to know his [God's] privy counsell" (Ch. 30). [T]he grete dede ordeyned ...[is] treasured and hid in his [Jesus's] blissid breast," (Ch. 32) writes Julian, so "the more we besy to know Gods privites⁸ the less we knowen (Ch. 33). It is only love of Christ that brings one into his breast, the seat of his wisdom. Linear readings of Julian's text do not work, especially here, where Julian answers one of her most important questions, namely what the role of a Christian and his religion should be, twenty six chapters before she asks it. Her answer, a spiritual love made corporeal, is also that of Luce Irigaray, who wrote in *When Our Lips Speak Together*:

We can never complete the circuit, explore our periphery: we have so many dimensions. If you want to speak "well," you pull yourself in, you become narrow as you rise. Stretching upward, reaching higher, you pull

⁸ Julian plays here on the double meaning of "privities," which means both "secrets" and "privates" in Middle English. Wisdom comes through loving engagement with the "privities," as opposed to intellectual exploration of them.

yourself away from the limitless realm of your body. Don't make yourself erect, you'll leave us. The sky isn't up there: it's between us. (216)

Julian, as evidenced when her curate attends to her, realizes that "the sky isn't up there" when she redirects her uplifted eyes to the crucifix he brings. The signs of Irigaray's feminine imaginary, not fully realized, will reemerge in Julian's Lord and Servant passage, where her Lord is always close at hand, and significantly sits upon the ground, "ful nere" to the despairing Servant (Ch.51). For now let it suffice to say that her habit of repeating and interrupting herself, a practice typical for dictated medieval texts to become characteristic of *écriture féminine*, exposes overlapping layers of feminine textuality that defy the dictates of linear symbolic logic. She manages to write a text that

has no plot in the usual sense. Julian's report of her visionary experience manifests a general progression from compassion to contrition to longing for God. Because she interlaces these themes with one another, the organization of *A Book of Showings* defies precise schematization."⁹

(Baker 34)

This is the conclusion to which most readers come after reading Julian's *Revelations*, or as Grace Jantzen puts it:

In spite of its clarity and simplicity of expression, her book in its final form is astonishingly complex, when taken as a whole rather than read for its edifying passages taken out of context. She has worked through her material with great care and precision; the result requires similar care, going back to reconsider earlier passages in light of later ones. A single

linear reading (or even several) cannot take the place of patient study: this is solid meat and requires a great deal of theological chewing. (89)

With this in mind, in this section I will lay the foundation for a structuralist interpretive framework, to be fully developed in the third chapter, by considering the way in which Jerome and the *Ancrene Wisse* alternatively allow and deny the construction of a feminine linguistic identity, so that it may be clear from which points Julian adheres to or departs from patristic tradition when I re-evaluate her use of maternal metaphors in the final chapter. These metaphors, as Irigaray, Baker, and Jantzen indicate, are woven onto a non-linear narrative structure that when considered with Jerome reflect a common feminine influence.

Yet feminists and their opponents interested in artistic agency have often questioned the extent of this influence, or whether it is even possible. When in *Sorties* Helene Cixous, the mid-1970s practitioner of *écriture féminine*, advocates “breaking the circuits” that Julian and Luce Irigaray would rather explore, she writes from a position even more anachronistic than Irigaray’s, whose argument here is in line with that of Camille Paglia, the most entertaining or infuriating of recent American anti-feminists. Yet still for Irigaray and Paglia, Western culture has been man’s work. Paglia argues in her greatest work, *Sexual Persona*, a sprawling project consuming over 700 pages and ten years of her life, that culture is created by homosocial men in an attempt to separate themselves from the eternal, natural feminine. She writes, “The very language and logic modern woman uses to assail patriarchal culture were the invention of men” (9). This holds true for the language of first-wave feminists like Simone de Beauvoir, but not so

⁹ This is why it is so important to take Julian’s advice at the end of her book, where she writes, “beware thou take not on thing after thy affection and lyking and leve another...But take

much for those of the second, women like Julia Kristeva and even Luce Irigaray, who, while bemoaning the suppression of the feminine imagination, gives voice to it in her diffuse prose. To deny the historical woman religio-artistic agency, like Irigaray, or worse, any aspiration to it, like Paglia, one must ignore the fact that “[a]ll ideas are the products of an environment: and in this case, the fathers’ thought-processes were the product of a female environment—that is to say an environment set up, maintained by and filled with (pious) females” (Cloke 6). This was as true for Julian’s environment as it was for Jerome’s, environments that neither critic has the time to examine after years spent making far more entertaining generalizations. And because “most...attest to an early female influence, specifically defined in terms of Christian piety, on their subsequent development,” one should have no qualms about using the theory of Luce Irigaray, a twentieth century French atheistic lesbian, or Paglia, an Irigaray-hating American one, to explicate Julian’s text. The pre-lingual semiotic feminine imaginary prefigures the metaphysical conceits of the subjects in question, conceits necessary for one to question another’s over-zealous application of post-modern literary theory. This is to say that even a narrow, historically specific reading of the *Revelations of Divine Love* eventually concludes, after examining two remarkably similar narrative styles, that French feminism was the product of a milieu anticipated by those of Jerome and Julian. In any event, at least for the die-hard structuralist, the semiotic is a super-historical, universal structure, making the question of temporal ideological difference moot.

If this is the case, a responsible feminist, after cutting Jerome some slack for living in the fourth century, can legitimately criticize him for his phallogentricity. But this is to be expected and hopefully a feminist reading of Jerome could state more than

the obvious. Kristeva, I maintain, allows us to appreciate the feminine influence that mitigates the misogyny of Jerome, a man who like Freud is perhaps misguided, but given his genius and influence, nevertheless demands consideration. Jerome's Latin translation of the Bible, after all, is still the Church's official version, and remained the unquestioned standard within Catholicism until Vatican II. Like Chaucer, who satirizes him in "The Wife of Bath's Tale," the feminist must make his peace with Jerome by rewriting him when necessary, but of course not before a historical nod.

Written in 384 C.E., Jerome's "How to Live as a Nun in a Profligate Society" eventually became his most famous letter. It is addressed to Eustochium, a girl from a patrician family who, wanting to become a nun, followed her mother to a convent in Bethlehem where she eventually became an abbess and Jerome's secretary. Jerome's letter poses the same interpretative problems presented by Julian. Those demanding a more Apollonian or phallic organization will probably find fault with the fact that "[t]he letter, though not completely lacking in structure, is somewhat diffuse in its arrangement and includes a digression on the categories of monks to be found in Egypt" (Petersen 169). This is, however, one of the most recognizable signs of any non-linear feminine narrative, one that does what Paglia thought was impossible and writes the feminine corporeality she correctly sees as having "no climax but only an endless round, cycle upon cycle" (7). Jerome begins this letter by invoking the Song of Songs, imploring the fifteen-year-old to "[j]oin the Eternal Bridegroom in a loving embrace." Grace Jantzen suggestively summarizes Julian's understanding of the soul by noting "that our substance is our created nature that flows out from God and is constitutive of the essence of our humanity as rooted in God" (142). Humanity's "essence," is of a piece with the "created

nature” that God ejaculates. Jerome, however, is an advocate of formative and mystical *interruptus*, because despite his erotic language, his two metaphorical lovers remain substantially distinct. It is here that the difference between Jerome and Julian is most pronounced, for the latter’s ideal of mystical union is embodied by Mary as she suffers with her crucified son. At this moment, Julian writes, “Christ and she were so onyd in love” (Ch. 18). As we shall see, the Father who deposits his essence is also, according to Julian’s vision, the Mother who receives it.

As he continues, Jerome alludes to Lot’s wife, “Never look behind...linger not in the surrounding plains. Escape to the mountains: otherwise you shall perish” (Jerome 18). The religious woman, separating from the womb, is implored to seek reunification in the embrace of the Eternal Bridegroom. In this instance, to look back is petrifying, and so the believer is here in flight with her beloved. “Remember,” Jerome writes to the girl’s mother, “she came from your womb, was nourished and grew strong on your milk...Are you indignant, then, because she wants to marry...a king?” (38). Fecundity was virtuous under the Old Law, when the world was “unpopulated,” which is why “lovely Rachel, a symbol of Mother Church, complained when her womb closed” (39).

Taking the desire to see the unprobed depths of the woman’s womb closed as evidence of his fear of primary narcissistic return to what Paglia calls the “chthonian, which means ‘of the earth’—but earth’s bowels, not its surface,” Jerome is not unlike the divided, impotent lover of Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach” (5). His fear of motherhood, a condition that the holy woman should leave behind her, translates into his desire to see Eustochium become erect and transcend it, to see her separate herself from the “fleshy muck of the generative matrix. There is no vision because there are no eyes.

Apollo's solar torch is put out; the heart of creation is blind. In nature's female womb-world, there are no objects and no art" (Paglia 93). Striving towards the illuminated world of reading, writing, and symbolic signification, what one might call the light at the end of the birth canal, Jerome writes that "Sight granted, you shall see a fiery chariot waiting to transport you to the stars" (20).

But Jerome's desire to separate himself from the oceanic, pre-symbolic mother exists in tension with his longing for mystical reunion, as when he writes "Keep this sentiment forever on the tip of your tongue: Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return" (55). In "The Hidden Host," the pragmatic American feminist Andrea Nye criticizes Irigaray's deconstruction of Plato's *Symposium* for its ignorance of "historical specificity." In the same way has criticism of Jerome often ignored his mystical streak to better explicate his misogyny. And because the Lacanian underpinning of the theory Nye examines argues for a permanent "split in the self between watching subject and mirrored object," (84) perhaps it cannot serve as an appropriate hermeneutic if one also wants to take Julian's "primary concern...for undisturbed joyful growth in wholeness" seriously (Jantzen 177). This growth is Jerome's concern too: when urging women to flee to the desert he has, at least in this instance, much more in common with Julian than St. Simon the Stylites and the desert fathers. But despite the difficulties that the irreparable ego split theorized by Lacan poses for a structuralist reading, it should be noted that the love that Nye celebrates is alien to both Jerome and Julian:

Diotimean talk¹⁰ between lovers “never contemplates an individual becoming”; sexual desire, for Diotima is not an impulse towards self-realization. Instead, in love the mortal subject moves beyond her own individual life into the lives of others. Pregnancy and birth, whether of body or mind, occur only when there is an “engagement” and a “being together.” (88)

For Julian and Jerome self-realization and “movement...into the lives of others” were one and the same, not mutually exclusive. Language comes not from “being together,” but from realizing that one is broken after encountering the Other from which one is separated. Julian begins writing when she realizes that, despite her substantial unity with Jesus, an individual’s substance and sensuality remain separate, a divide that resembles the split in the self that Lacan regards as “the precondition of culture itself” and believes “allows the construction of an alienated linguistic identity.” This point is essential to any argument that seeks to posit in either Jerome’s letter or Julian’s book a mystical semiotic. One must first refute Nye’s argument and establish that Jerome and Julian enter into the symbolic in the way described by Lacan. The question that needs to be answered before advancing to that of semiotic metaphoricity in the next chapter is that of ego construction, whether linguistic awareness and the consequent textual pregnancy comes from an “engagement,” as Nye maintains, or as Lacan has it, the realization of alienated otherness in the Mirror-Stage. For Kristeva to be right about the anticipatory semiotic, Lacan need first be right about the symbolic. I believe that he is, when in Jerome’s letter Mary constructs her linguistic identity opposite a seraphic other:

¹⁰ “Diotimean talk” is that which “seek[s] in love...the fruitfulness of interaction, the fecundity of dialogue,” to move us from “narrow sexual relations and an exclusive concern with one’s own

When Gabriel came in the shape of a man, announcing, "Hail, full of grace! The Lord is with you," Mary became consternated, speechless. Never had a man addressed her. Learning who he was, however, she spoke to him. One formerly terrified of men now without fear conversed with an angel. Realize, my dear, that you too may be the mother of God. "Take a great fresh tablet," Isaiah instructs, "and write on it with a pen of one swiftly carrying away spoils." (62)

Julian was historically and culturally far removed from Jerome, and while she does not fully share Jerome's ambivalence about uterine return, the fact that, as Helene Cixous has it, "Woman" is 'the dark continent' to which *woman* must return," one nevertheless sees that in both instances silence is unconquerable until the two recognize their objectness and construct alienated linguistic identities (xvi). More important, especially to theologies for which love is paramount, is their similar teaching on despair. When she sees the crucified Christ, Julian asks, "Is any payne like this?," to which he responds, "Helle is another payne, for there is despeyr" (Ch. 17). It is this theme of Jerome that Julian's Lord and Servant parable recapitulates. The Servant who trips and falls into the mud

cowde not turne his face to look upon his loving lord, which was to him
ful nere, in whom is ful comfort; but as a man that was febil and onwise
for the tyme, he entended to his felying, and induryd in wo, in which wo
he suffrid...grete peynes. (Ch. 51)

Nearly 1,000 years earlier Jerome wrote in "The Life of St. Mary the Harlot" that "it is no new thing to fall in the mire, but it is an evil thing to lie there fallen. Bravely return again

family, to "better" (not "higher"), more inclusive relationships (Nye 80).

to the place from whence thou camest,” but the rub is that as a sinner one hasn’t the courage to do so (198). Jerome’s Adam is entirely culpable, cut-off, at least temporarily, from the Lord he disobeyed. In the eyes of Julian, for whom sin was a non-thing, the fallen servant is blameless. You therefore need to, in the words of Paul Tillich, “*Simply accept the fact that you are accepted*” (Tillich in Sayers 125).

Clearly the ascetic tradition represented by Jerome is, despite a few readily apparent similarities, far removed from the affective spirituality of medieval England, when, according to Denise Baker,

around A.D. 1000, the figure of the majestic Christ on the crucifix is gradually displaced by the suffering Christ: the calm features of the regal Son of God distorted to express the anguish of the tortured Son of Man, the royal crown replaced by a crown of thorns, and the erect body of the victor twisted into the battered torso of the victim. (16)

Beginning in England, this transition, if more gradual than the recent one which saw the rainbow suspended Jesus of *Godspell* replaced by Mel Gibson’s flayed Savior, was just as thoroughgoing. Baker believes that Anselm erects the movement’s theological framework with his *Cur Deus Homo*, wherein he rejects what has come to be known as the Devil’s rights theory. It was

based on an analogy with the feudal custom of *diffidatio*...the Devil had certain rights over humankind because they had repudiated their fealty to God through original sin. Humankind could be released from the Devil’s dominion only if they voluntarily returned to God or if Satan violated the rules governing his legitimate claim over them. The former course was

impossible, but the latter was achieved when Satan unlawfully extended his authority by taking the life of the sinless Christ. (17)

This English soteriology is obviously more legalistic than that offered by Jerome, who instructs Eustochium to “murmur this over and over again, ‘On my bed at night I have sought Him Whom my soul adores’” (34). Anselm was not the first to use erotic imagery to describe the soul’s relationship with Christ, nor was his defeat of the Devil’s rights theory so decisive as Baker would like to think, rather the Piedmontese’s argument is indicative of the much broader Latinization of the English Church.

The *Ancrene Wisse*, an early thirteenth century anchoritic rule first written for three “holy sisters,” is one of the first vernacular texts to reflect the new zeitgeist “characterized by increasing preference for analogies taken from human relationships, a growing sense of God as loving and accessible, a general tendency towards fulsome language, and a more accepting reaction to all natural things, including the human body” (Bynum 130). The *Ancrene Wisse* exemplifies this new domestic imagery, offering such pearls as “the fig-tree is a tree that bears a sweet fruit called figs” (66). In it women are no longer held to a masculine religious ideal, which in turn meant that women were no longer celebrated for cutting off their noses or undergoing gratuitous mastectomies.

But for all its feminine emphasis, the *Ancrene Wisse* author is often more prohibitive than Jerome. It, for example, advises the anchoress to “give your advice only to women” (28). The author also complains that the “woman who ought to be an anchoress sometimes sets up as a scholar, teaching those who have come to teach her, and wishes soon to be recognized and known among the wise.” Speaking is bad enough, and no mention is made of writing. While Jerome saw in Mary’s response to Gabriel a

model for feminine dialogue, the *Ancrene Wisse* author observes that “Our Lady St. Mary...did not speak words of information to the angel, but in a few words asked him about those things which she did not know” and then promptly shut up (29). He continues:

Our dear Lady St. Mary, who ought to be the model for all women, spoke so little that we find her words recorded in Holy Scripture only four times, but because she spoke so seldom her words had weight, and great power.
(33)

The Mary of the *Ancrene Wisse* demonstrates what Luce Irigaray believes happens when the female imaginary turns in upon itself after privileging “the maternal over the feminine.” Her perpetual virginity and silence are what ensure her high status, but

[b]y closing herself off as volume, she renounces the pleasure that she gets from the *nonsuture of her lips*: she is undoubtedly a mother, but a virgin mother; the role assigned to her by mythologies long ago. Granting her a certain social power to the extent that she is reduced, with her own complicity, to sexual impotence. (30)

But virginity does not always entail silence, nor are the lips of a virgin necessarily sutured, even when prohibited from kissing the hand of her confessor or teaching young girls, as the English Cistercian Aelred of Rievaulx insists (4). This is perhaps the biggest problem with Kristeva’s structuralist theory, the heterogeneous drives are organized and unified when repressed by the paternal symbolic. As Nancy Fraser stubbornly observes, this cannot “help us understand how, even under the conditions of subordination, women participate in the making of culture” (180).

But to say that something is not politically expedient is quite different from saying that it is false. And if Kristeva's theory is conceptually flawed and reinscribes feminine political and creative subordination, the pragmatic model advanced by Fraser, which "treats languages as sets of multiple and historically specific institutionalized practices," can only speculate (177). So while some suggest that Julian became an anchoress after losing her family in an outbreak of the plague, there is no evidence to support such a claim, other than the centrality of maternity to her *Revelations*. It is, however, clear that Julian never sacrifices lesbian or autoerotic love after professing what would have been either a vow of perpetual virginity or chastity. In the end, it is a structuralist, not a culturally specific reading, which reveals Julian to have been more than a Marian matrix.

IV.

Considering narrative structure in the last chapter, we saw that Jerome negotiates between his fear of maternal regression and what he recognizes as the inevitability of it. This is what makes Jerome of “How to Live as a Nun in a Profligate Society” different from Jerome the polemicist, responsible for “Adversus Jovinium” and the subject of Chaucer’s brutal wit. He stands at the edge of the symbolic and hesitates. Jerome believed that the flesh was something to be mastered, the womb something to be sealed off instead of explored. That such a belief should persist despite the influence of the women he wrote for and about should come as little surprise, because as Naomi Goldenberg notes:

The dominant theme in Western thought since Plato has been that the body is a vehicle for a higher entity—mind or soul. The body is thought of as being a temporary place where mind soul or psyche resides. General knowledge, it is believed, develops in the mind. Religious knowledge, however, is thought of as emanating from something even higher than the mind or soul. Various terms—gods, forms, archetypes—are used to refer to the thing outside of mind, the thing which informs the mind (175).

Julian, in contrast, does not see the distinction so sharply as Jerome, Jung, and Plato do, and makes an interesting study for any feminist trying to re-textualize the body. When queer theorist Judith Butler takes exception with what she considers Kristeva’s repudiation of female homosexuality, she asks, “if poetic language must participate in the symbolic order in order to be culturally communicable...where are we to find a convincing ‘outside’ to this domain?” (171). The answer is that there isn’t one, but this is

a cop-out. If poetic language cannot be found outside the symbolic, its role inside it is not beyond words. “Because aside from the breast,” Domna Stanton notes, “the semiotic privileges the archetypal maternal voice and rhythms....By extension the semiotic produces alliterations, anaphoric constructions, lexical repetitions or lapse which, for Kristeva, perturb the logic of the signifying chain” (166). In effect Butler’s criticism is ancillary to the old idea that “the true unity of Being transcends both linguistic expression and the very particularity that language entails” and therefore not worth talking about (Katz). Alternatively Steven Katz asks, “[D]oes the close study of mystical language, of mystical literary sources...reveal a more complex and very different picture of the way things are, sincere claims to the contrary notwithstanding?” (4). In order to proceed towards this end, at least given the path we have followed thus far, it is necessary have a clear understanding of the semiotic before attempting to restore it to its proper place as guarantor of Julian’s agency. As Terry Eagleton describes it,

The child in the pre-Oedipal phase does not yet have access to language..., but we can imagine its body as criss-crossed by a flow of ‘pulsions’ or drives which are at this point relatively unorganized. This rhythmic pattern can be seen as a form of language, though it is not yet meaningful. For language as such to happen, this heterogeneous flow must be, as it were, chopped up, articulated into stable terms, so that in entering the symbolic order this ‘semiotic’ order is repressed. This repression, however, is not total: for the semiotic can still be discerned as a kind of pulsional pressure within language itself, in tone rhythm, the bodily and material qualities of language, but also in contradiction,

meaninglessness, disruption, silence and absence. (Eagleton in Leland 125)

In order to speak, Jerome, the “silver tongue of the West,” must repress the drives that lead one to mystical self-realization, the state where the once impermeable subject/object boundaries of the symbolic order collapse into the undifferentiated heterogeneity of the semiotic. For Kristeva, semiotic or “[p]oetic language...always indicates a return to the maternal terrain, where the maternal signifies both libidinal dependence and the heterogeneity of drives” (Butler 166). As we have seen, the repressed semiotic is discernible in the non-climactic circularity of Jerome’s narrative structure, as well as in the admission that he will return to the Mother. Kristeva’s conclusion that “the mother’s separation from the girl-child...is never fully completed” applies equally to Jerome (Butler 167). But Jerome nevertheless advises us to flee, like a bird escaping a trap, not only from the “profligate society,” but from the objectless, paradoxical state of heterogeneous unity found in the melting embrace of the soul’s beloved.

These are boundaries that can be explored through the object-relations theories elaborated upon by Julia Kristeva, but first developed by Melaine Klein, a child analyst and contemporary of Freud whose stock is not very high at the moment. As Janet Sayers explains,

There is much to dislike about her work. Particularly odious and questionable—both factually and therapeutically—is her emphasis on hate, envy, and badness as effect of an instinct toward death and destruction existing innately....Nevertheless, despite her emphasis on hate, Klein’s approach to therapy is also very promising in emphasizing...

transformation from self-division between good and bad into wholeness and health through the grace of recognizing and feeling gratitude and love for what is good. (148)

So even if one crosses the river, leaving behind Klein, who considered the experience of mystical oneness a sign of mental illness, and pitches his tent with Marion Milner, who believed that “recovering our earliest sense of oneness with another is crucial to our being psychologically alive, creative, and well,” there is no reason to burn the bridge that leads us there, especially if it leads to the restoration of feminine agency. There is, in fact, much in Julian’s *Revelations* to recommend a Kleinian or Kristevan interpretation, the most important being the centrality of motherhood to the vision of both women and Julian.

Because while Julian’s childhood goes unmentioned in her *Revelations*, her relationship with God is most frequently expressed, at least where Jesus is concerned, as a relationship between mother and child in which it is assumed that the mother always acts in her child’s best interest. Her words that “[a]ll shall be well” are those of a mother consoling her distraught child who is not yet ready to understand how this will be possible. The answer lies beyond symbolic logic and is confirmed through the Mother’s lexical repetition. In the meantime the child can only “cling” to her, and so for Julian ignorance becomes a reason to strengthen her faith, rather than abandon it. This “feebleness and failing in both capacity and understanding,” understood as her recognition of the limits of symbolic signification, is what leads her to conclude that “in this life there is no higher state than childhood” (Ch. 63). Her refrain that “he [Jesus] is

made for love: in which love God endlessly kepyth him¹¹” (Ch. 44) expresses her concept of reciprocal love, a concept that develops from the mother/child bond in which “the child lovith the moder and ilk on of the othe[r]” (Ch. 63). For just as one desires to again enter into Christ, so to does he desire to live in us. It is what she calls “his thirst: a love longyng to have us al togeder hole in him” (Ch. 31). Christ “holdyth us with ruth and pite as childer[n], inocentes and vnlothfull”—what more could a child want (Ch. 28).

Klein would likely answer that this idealized mother is a pre-oedipal construct and explain Julian’s reciprocated love by pointing out that the mother who takes pleasure in feeding her infant is for her child “primarily only an object which satisfies all his desires—a good breast, as it were—[who] soon begins to respond to these gratifications and to her care by developing feelings of love towards her” (308). And what better breast than that of Christ, who, instead of milk, nourishes the faithful with his blood “most plentivous as it is most pretious” (Ch 12). Because while God made water for our “bodily comfort” the liquid he prefers to sustain his children with is his blood (Ch.12).

According to Julian, Christ’s passion provides the opportunity for being united “in onehede of charitie with al myn eveyn cristen; for in this onehede stond the life of all mankind that shall be savid” (Ch. 19). The mystical “oneing” is the practical end of Julian’s theology, an outgrowth of her early emphasis on unitive nursing that teaches that “we shal never have ful rest til we sen hym verily and clerly in hevyn” (Ch. 47). While this is a thoroughly Augustinian sentiment, by identifying Jesus as our Mother Julian

¹¹ In an unconscionable new-age slight of hand, Grace Jantzen translates this passage as “we are made for love: in which love God endlessly keeps us” (88). Archaic words can always be explained with footnotes, and so the scholars, no matter how brilliant, who need to translate Julian’s easily understandable Middle English usually does it to push a dream-catching, incense-huffing spirituality. This seems to be where Julian scholarship is headed, not to mention popular appreciation.

speaks also of the infant's desire for maternal, semiotic identification. Klein saw in her patients a desire "to get back through the narrow passage into the womb and occupy the position of a new baby" as arising when the patient begins to imagine his parents making love (Segal 101). Whether or not young Julian ever imagined her parents having sex, along with the questionable impact that such a thought would have upon her, is immaterial. For whatever the reason, Julian's desire, if not literally than at least figuratively, is, in a line reminiscent of Norman Brown's, to return to "our savior [who] is our very mother in whom we be endlessly borne and neve[r] shall come out of him" and unlike Jerome, she nostalgically looks forward to it (Ch. 57).

But now what—having piped the songs of experience with Klein, is it possible to return to the world of Wordsworthian oneness? As a mystic, Julian, like Blake, does not ask us to, but the critic left grasping for straws must shoot for an answer. And if he or she does this through the imposition of a Structural hermeneutic, the entire exercise will become pointless the moment it cannot accommodate feminine agency. This would mean that the holistic vision Poulenc presents at the end of *Les Dialogues* in the form of a steady, anti-climactic decrescendous *Salve Regina* need not be replaced by the waxing, solitary one of Sartre. It is then no longer essential to find "outside" verification of the semiotic, as Judith Butler insists.

Drawing from Kristeva, Janice Doane and Devin Hodges conclude that the pre-oedipal mystical mother-child dyad must be broken by either the father or a paternal metaphor if the child is to enter the symbolic order:

For a man and for a woman the loss of the mother is a biological and psychic necessity, the first step on the way to becoming autonomous. Matricide is our

vital necessity, the sine-qua-non of our individuation, provided that it takes place under optimal circumstances and can be eroticized...[I]t is transposed by means of an unbelievable symbolic effort, the advent of which one can only admire.

(Doane 55)

The “unbelievable symbolic effort” is even more incredible in Julian’s case. The archetypal canvas she stretches for her transposition is the biggest one in the Western imagination—God. The eroticization of the cunilingual spear-wound on Christ’s side that the child-like Julian nurses from¹² is indisputable when the images begin to appear laterally in several fifteenth century devotional manuals. Copied for Burgundian and Bohemian noblewomen, in every instance they give one the impression of a gaping vagina. Not exactly surprising, for as Paglia observes, “That the female genitals do resemble a wound is evident in those slang terms ‘slash’ and ‘gash’....Flower, mouth, wound: the Gorgon is a reverse image of the Mystic Rose of Mary” (48). Julian is a bit subtler. She writes, “God enioyeth that he is our fader, God enioyeth that he is our moder, and God enioyeth that he is our very spouse, and our soule is his lovid wife” (Ch. 52). In chapter thirty-six she writes that “tenderly our lord God toucht us and blissfully clepyth us, seyand in our soule: ‘Lete be al thi love my dereworthy child. Entend to me, I am enow to the, and enioy in thi savior and in thi salvation.” Like a mother and lover, “he kepyth us so tenderly” and “touchyth us ful privily” (Ch. 40). She presents the mother-child dyad enjoying an incestuous love characteristic of the semiotic order that the interjected Father interrupts with his taboo (Ch 52). Because return is impossible so long as one stands in the symbolic, it can only be held out only as a primordial and

¹² The spear wound is vaginalized when she enters Christ’s womb through it, a wound that remains the bloody breast of the pelican topos.

eschatological given. It is, therefore, only after entering and harnessing the symbolic that Julian can entertain returning to the pre-oedipal semiotic. She is not paralyzed, stuck in the no-man's-land with Jerome, because she has achieved psychic individuation, which provides her with the language necessary to frame the gaps through which she can see her substantial unity with God.¹³

For Kristeva, “[d]rives involve pre-Oedipal...energy discharges that connect and orient the body to the mother” whose body “is therefore what mediates the symbolic law organizing social relations” (2172). In the same way is talk of a “Mother Church” that is the “Bride of Christ” to be expected, considering how the Church was in her time the most active of such organizing forces (i.e., dictating what drives were socially acceptable, providing outlets for some, while insisting upon the repression of others). If Kristeva is correct that the mother is the mediator who “connect[s] the zones of the fragmented body,” Julian’s longing to “be brought into him [Jesus our Mother] again by grace” can only be possible if Christ is our mother, a mother who “works in diverse ways for us, so that our parts are held together” and in whom “our parts are oned” (Julian in Jantzen 130). She goes on to speak of “our fractiousness,” and teaches that one’s only hope is the “whole love” of “our blessed Savior [that] will heal us perfectly and make us one with him” (170). This is to say that after falling through the womb and into the ditch it is only possible for the fragmented self to find completion in the figure of a mother.

¹³ In speaking of the eventual reunification of the two-part soul, Julian writes what Jantzen quite accurately translates as, “And in this way these two shall be brought together as one, yet they shall both be known separately in heaven without end” (88). Thus heaven is the Father’s kingdom of psychic differentiation to which one is brought by the mother that Kristeva believes mediates the transition. Julian explicitly writes that our Mother brings us to our Father, and elsewhere that “[o]ur wylyth, [and] our moder werkyth” (Ch.59). Her I-love-yous draw the child into the symbolic *patria*.

With this in mind, it becomes possible to appreciate the importance of Marian devotion as well as Julian's development of the Jesus "our true Mother" concept. If "the contest between the two modes of signification is stacked in favor of the symbolic," as Nancy Fraser writes, Julian gives voice to the transgressive and creative impetus behind it. The agency that American feminists see as denied by Kristeva's theory is restored by it when her definition of motherhood is expanded. Butler believes that Kristeva's "reification of the paternal law...denies the varied meanings and possibilities of motherhood as a cultural practice" (170). Shelia Delany, who in "The Somaticized Text" examines corporeal semiotics in hagiographer Osbern Bokenham's *Legends of Holy Women*, refutes this pragmatic criticism. The Norwich-educated Bokenham was familiar with work of his older contemporary, Julian of Norwich, and understood that "family as a social institution is as fragile and fragmented as the human body. The birth that Bokenham wanted to validate was the birth into faith" (107). His once-pagan St. Margaret, patroness of childbirth, imbibes Christianity from her saintly wet nurse and escapes from the belly of a dragon after being swallowed alive. Like Julian's Servant, "[s]he was thus thrice born: from mother, nurse, and dragon." This leads to Jantzen's conclusion, that "The anchorhold may be a tomb, but it is also a womb: a womb in which Christ comes to new birth in the anchoress, and through her into the world" (xviii).

From the beginning I have argued that Julian, as a recluse, was an active participant in the world. The rebirth that Jantzen speaks of entails participation in a signifying chain quite different from the one that restrains Jerome. Julian, as mentioned, believed all to be endlessly birthed and enclosed by our Mother. Entry into the symbolic does not necessarily entail a suppression of artistic agency when Julian is re-baptized in

the semiotic font. Bokenham's St. Katherine, a captive princess, making the case for Christianity, "began, standing before the temple gate, to expand her thesis with diverse illustrations, and with syllogisms and arguments she eloquently made her point" (128). The outraged pagan prince calls for all the philosophers in his kingdom to refute her, and dropping the pretense, Katherine asks permission to, "speak my mind plainly, without rhetoric, in words bare of formal argumentative disputation" (131). The philosophers are afterwards left stupefied and convert to Christianity. Semiotic language thus interrupts and redirects phallic discourse. Julian too is a master logician, but realizes the limitations of symbolic signification. Her prose is propelled by and from a semiotic love that conditions rebirth from Jantzen's anchoritic womb. Discussion of Julian will continue to center around her spiritual rebirth, which serves contemplative Christians well but sounds monophonic to the postmodern feminist. Spiritual rebirth is worthless if it leaves her infertile, and so Julian makes a text that incorporates the features of a feminine imaginary that lead her to achieve a degree of individuation that Irigaray and Cixous can still only dream of.

The more interesting rebirth happens when Julian, unlike Heloise, realizes that she needn't become a man. This conclusion comes sometime in the twenty years she spent examining her visions, when she realized that the sexual difference she denies in her Mother/Father God is something to be acknowledged until one's reunion with Her/Him. With this honesty she drops the party line and offers a creative response that differs from that of earlier female mystics like Hildegard of Bingen, whose "views of women remain within the time" and "in no sense could...be regarded as a pioneering feminist" (Maddocks 176). Hildegard's habit of apologizing for her feminine *faiblesse* is

a trait that she does not share with Julian, who drops from the long text this womanly apology found in chapter six of the short text:

Botte for I an a womann, shulde I therfore leve that I shulde nought
telle yowe the goodness of god, syne that I shall ye welle see in the
same matere that folowes after, if it be welle and trewlye takynn.
Thane schalle ye sone forgette me that am a wreche.

As Colledge and Walsh note, this “expostulation that she is a woman who is not teaching but merely repeating what has been revealed to her of divine love...[is] not found in the long text” (60). In this progression Julian ascribes to Mary a status greater than creation. Mary, “knowyng the greteness of [her] maker and the littlehede of herself that is made, caused hir sey full mekely to Gabriel: ‘Lo me, Gods handmayd’” (Ch. 4). “In this sight,” Julian continues, “I undestoode sothly that she is mare than all that God made beneath hir in worthyness and grace” (Ch. 4). Thus once again the mother’s role becomes essential for Julian’s regeneration, so that even if the importance of motherhood is largely written out of the Bible, says Kristeva in “Stabat Mater,” it becomes possible, in time, for the assured but self-effacing Julian to restore the role to its proper status.

Works Cited

Section I.

Beer, Frances F. *Women and Mystical Experience in the Middle Ages*. Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 1992.

Flannery O'Connor. "Parker's Back." *The Complete Stories*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971.

Julian of Norwich. *A Book of Showing to the Anchoress Julian of Norwich*. Colledge, Edmund and James Walsh, eds. 2 vols. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1978.

Section II.

Abelard, Peter and Heloise. *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*. Trans. Betty Radice. New York: Penguin, 1974.

Baker, Denise Nowakowski. *Julian of Norwich's Showings: From Vision to Book*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1994.

Brown, Norman. *Love's Body*. New York: Random House, 1966.

Hoeber, Hugo. *Lives of the Saints: For Every Day of the Year*. 2 vols. New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co. 1993.

Jantzen, Grace. *Julian of Norwich: Mystic and Theologian*. New York: Paulist Press, 1987.

Julian of Norwich. *A Book of Showing to the Anchoress Julian of Norwich*. Colledge, Edmund and James Walsh, eds. 2 vols. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1978.

Kempe, Margery. *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Barry Windeatt, ed. Harlow, England: Longman, 2000.

Kristeva, Julia. *In the Beginning Was Love: Psychoanalysis and Faith*. Trans. Arthur Goldhammer. European Perspective Series. New York: Columbia UP, 1987.

Molinari, Paul. *Julian of Norwich: The Teaching of a 14th Century English Mystic*. London: Longmans, Green and Co. 1958.

Robinson, John A.T. *Honest to God*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1963.

Section III.

- Aelred of Rievaulx. *De institutione inclusarum*. Eds. John Ayto and Alexandra Barratt. London: Oxford UP, 1984.
- The Ancrene Riwe* (The Corpus MS.: Ancrene Wisse). Trans. M.B. Salu. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1956.
- Baker, Denise Nowakowski. *Julian of Norwich's Showings: From Vision to Book*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1994.
- Bynum, Caroline Walker. *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the Middle Ages*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1982.
- Cloake, Cloake. *'This Female Man of God': Women and Spiritual Power in the Patristic Age, AD 350-450*. New York: Routledge, 1995.
- Fraser, Nancy. "The Uses and Abuses of French Discourse Theory" 177-94. *Revaluing French Feminism: Critical Essays on Difference, Agency, and Culture*. Eds. Nancy Fraser and Sandra Lee Barthky. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana UP, 1992.
- Irigaray, Luce. *The Sex Which is Not One*. Trans. Catherine Porter. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1985.
- Jantzen, Grace. *Julian of Norwich: Mystic and Theologian*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2000.
- Julian of Norwich. *A Revelation of Love* (Revelations of Divine Love). Ed. Marion Glasscoe. University of Exeter Press, 1993.
- Nye, Andrea. "The Hidden Host: Irigaray and Diotima at Plato's Symposium". 77-93. *Revaluing French Feminism: Critical Essays on Difference, Agency, and Culture*. Eds. Nancy Fraser and Sandra Lee Barthky. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana UP, 1992.
- Jerome, St. *The Satirical Letters of Jerome*. "How to Live as a Nun in a Profligate Society". 17-68. Trans. Paul Carroll. New York: Gateway Editions.
- Paglia, Camille. *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*. New York: Vintage Books, 1991.
- Petersen, Joan M. *Handmaids of the Lord: Holy Women in Late Antiquity*. "Eustochium: The Theology of Feminine Asceticism". 169-217. Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1996.

Sayers, Janet. *Divine Therapy: Love, Mysticism and Psychoanalysis*. London: Oxford UP, 2003.

Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein*. Ed. J. Paul Hunter. New York: Norton, 1996.

Section IV.

Butler, Judith. "The body politics of Julia Kristeva". 163-76. *Revaluing French Feminism: Critical Essays on Difference, Agency, and Culture*. Eds. Nancy Fraser and Sandra Lee Barthky. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana UP, 1992.

Colledge, Edmund and James Walsh, eds. Julian of Norwich. *A Book of Showing to the anchoress Julian of Norwich*. 2 vols. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1978.

Doane, Janice and Devon Hodges. *From Klein to Kristeva: Psychoanalytic Feminism and the Search for the "Good Enough" Mother*. Ann Arbor: Michigan UP, 1992.

Eagelton, Terry. "Lacanian Psychoanalysis and French Feminism: Toward an Adequate Political Psychology". 113-35. *Revaluing French Feminism: Critical Essays on Difference, Agency, and Culture*. Eds. Nancy Fraser and Sandra Lee Barthky. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana UP, 1992.

Goldenberg, Naomi. *Returning Words to Flesh: Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Resurrection of the Body*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1990.

Klein, Melanie. *Love, Guilt and Reparation & Other Works*. New York: Delacorte Press, 1975.

Kristeva, Julia. "From Revolution in Poetic Language". Trans. Margaret Waller. Ed. Vincent B. Leitch. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. New York: Norton, 2001. 1285-1290.

Maddocks, Fiona. *Hildegard of Bingen: The Woman of Her Age*. New York: Doubleday, 2001.

Osbern of Bokenham. *Legends of Holy Women*. Trans. Shelia Delany. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992.

Paglia, Camille. *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*. New York: Vintage Books, 1991.

Sayers, Janet. *Divine Therapy: Love, Mysticism and Psychoanalysis*. London: Oxford UP, 2003.

Segal, Hanna. Introduction to the Work of Melanie Klein. New York: Basic Books, 1964.

Stanton, Domna C. "Difference on Trial: A Critique of the Maternal Metaphor in Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva". *The Poetics of Gender*. Ed. Nancy K. Miller. New York: Columbia UP, 1986.