

The Julian Lecture 2021

Julian of Norwich in Troubled Times



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[2] All citations from Julian's *Long Text* [LT] are taken from the edition of the Sloane version of Julian's Showings, edited by Marion Glasscoe, Exeter Medieval Texts and Studies (Exeter, 1976; revised reprint 1993). All translations are taken from *Julian of Norwich, Revelations of Divine Love*, a new translation by Barry Windeatt, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford, 2015). My emphases throughout.

All who live by reason agree that God is eternal, and we must therefore think about what eternity means. This will clarify what the divine nature is and also what divine knowledge must be. Eternity is the whole, simultaneous, perfect possession of limitless life, which we can better understand perhaps by comparing it to temporal things. One who lives in time progresses in the present from the past and into the future. There is nothing in time that can embrace the entirety of his existence. He has no idea about tomorrow and has already lost his hold on the past. In this day-to-day life, he lives only in the transitory moment... What may properly be called eternal is quite different, in that it has knowledge of the whole of life, can see the future, and has lost nothing of the past. It is in an eternal present and has an understanding of the entire flow of time... And if you accept the distinction between the human and the divine present, then it would follow that, just as you see things in the temporal present, he must see things in the eternal present.

(Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, translated by David R. Slavitt. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press (2008). Book 5, Prose 6.

When Julian of Norwich's near contemporary Geoffrey Chaucer came to translate this climactic passage of Boethius, he found himself

^[3]engaged in a complex play of grammatical terminology. For the phrase 'One who lives in time progresses in the present from the past and into the future,' Chaucer carefully chooses to deploy terms relating to the tenses of verbs:

For alle thing that lyveth in tyme, it is present and procedith fro preteritz into futures (that is to seyn, fro tyme passed into tyme comynge), ne there nis nothing established in tyme that mai enbrasen togidre al the space of lif.

This Boethian engagement with the perennial problems of divine foreknowledge and predestination has long been one of the commonplaces of human discussions of the problem of suffering and the nature of human free will. Chaucer uses it extensively in *Troilus and Criseyde*, his great pagan love story set against the fall of Troy. His Troilus, trapped in the solipsistic contingencies of a pagan world view embodied by the arch pragmatist Pandarus, who chooses and teaches the need to make a virtue of necessity, is instead transfigured and philosophically energised by his love for Criseyde, and sees the force of his love for her as a manifestation of the love which moves the sun and the other stars, a love that 'of erthe and see hath governaunce'. In the troubled times of King Alfred's England, assailed by Viking invasion and destruction, Boethius was a key part of the Alfredian translation programme, one of the 'books most necessary for all men to know.' In the equally troubled and turbulent times of the fourteenth century, a calamitous century according to ^[4]Barbara Tuchman's famous book, assailed by wars, plagues, pandemics, civil and political disturbances, religious dissent and schism, and weather that was even worse than our own current climate, that left crops devastated and communities decimated, readers and translators turned back to Boethius in increasing numbers and with increasing urgency. It was not just the

millennarianists who thought that the world was going to hell in a handbasket.

Nor was it just philosophers who sought to engage with the notions of sin and freewill, the role of divine love and grace, and the ever present promise of the four last things: death and judgment, heaven and hell. In Norwich, initially in her own family and latterly in an anchorhold next to St Julian's church, a devout woman, a 'simple creature that cowde no letter' was engaging with these same issues and anxieties as she sought to develop an understanding of, and a way of recording and relating for the benefit of her fellow Christians, a series of sixteen visions that had been shown to her in early May 1373. Julian of Norwich's series of sixteen showings appeared over three days and two nights during a period of acute illness, a near-death episode during which she received the last rites and the viaticum. Drifting in and out of consciousness and sleep, she expects to die ('It is today doomsday with me', she tells those around her bed at one crucial moment). But she does not die and, after first recording most of her visions and her initial reactions to them in an ^[5]account that is known to scholarship as the *Short Text*, she spends many years in prayer and rumination on them, producing over time what we call the *Long Text*. The *Long Text* presents an astonishingly ambitious and original conception: to produce as faithfully as human language will allow, but as inevitably partial as fallen human language is bound to require, something of the complex, multi-modal nature of her engagement with the showings. Central to all of them is her grappling of the problem of sin, and her desire to fight against the linearity and causality of language to produce a mode of writing and reading that allows her to fight against the tension between human time and divine eternity, to challenge and seek to overcome that ineluctable sequence of tenses from preterit to

presents to futures that Chaucer's Boethius had defined as the nature of human existence.

Boethius often seems to be in Julian's mind as she traverses these challenging mental landscapes. It is impossible to know if she knew the book or had read it or heard it read, though copies were circulating in East Anglia during her lifetime. In any case, though she asks many of the same questions as Boethius, and on occasion seems to parody or ventriloquise argumentative voices that sound similar to his Lady Philosophy, Julian's engagement with these issues follows a very different trajectory to arrive at a similar destination.

[6] On several occasions, Julian seems to seek to enact the contrast between mankind's temporal present and God's eternal present through a deliberate disruption of our temporal expectations by the eruption of divine time into human linear time, an epiphany of disruptive and unexpected consequences. As early as chapter 3 of the *Long Text*, as she appears to be slipping to the brink of oblivion, her expected and apparently unavoidable passover into death is frustrated:

After this the other party of my body began to dyen so ferforth that onethys I had ony feleing, with shortness of onde. And than I went sothly to have passid. And, in this, sodenly all my peyne was taken fro me and I was as hele, and namely in the other party of my body, as ever I was afor. I mervalid at this soden change for methought it was a privy workeing of God and not of kinde. And yet by the feleing of this ease I trusted never the more to levyn; ne the feleing of this ease was no full ease to me, for methought I had lever a be deliveryd of this world. [LT. cap. 3]

[After this the upper part of my body began to die to such an extent that I hardly had any sensation. My greatest pain was my shortness of breath and the ebbing away of life. And then I truly believed that I was at the point of death. And suddenly, at that moment, all my pain was taken from me and I was as well, especially in the upper part of my body, as I ever was before. I was astonished at this sudden change, for it seemed to me a mysterious act of God, not of nature.]

The perspectival change is signalled by the words *soden* and *sodeynly*, and the unexpected return to health marks her transit into a liminal state of stasis, poised between life and death and with little ^[7]sense of time passing, in which she will receive the showings that follow. Something similar happens when she is undertaking a protracted and harrowing deathwatch in the final moments of Christ's passion, marked by lingering observations of the dry dying of Christ and characterised by closely observed, probably first-hand experience of the inevitable sequence of physiological changes that were seen in her times as infallible signs of approaching death:

And I loked after the departing with al my myght and [wende] have seen the body al ded, but I saw hym not so. And ryth in the same tyme that methowte, be semyng, the life myght ne lenger lesten and the shewyng of the end behovyd nedis to be, sodenly, I beholdyng in the same crosse, he chongyd his blissfull chere. The chongyng of his blisful chere chongyd myn, and I was as glad and mery as it was possible. Than browte our lord merily to my mynde: 'Where is now ony poynte of the peyne or of thin agreefe?' And I was full merry. [LT. cap. 21][And I watched with all my might for the moment of his passing away and expected to see the body quite dead, but I did not see him so. And just at the very moment when, to all

appearances, it seemed to me that life could last no longer and there must be a revelation of his end, suddenly, as I was looking at the same cross, his blessed countenance changed. The change in his blessed expression changed mine, and I was as glad and happy as it is possible to be. Then our Lord brought to mind the happy thought, 'Is there any point now to your pain or your sorrow?' And I was very happy.]

Despite appearances (*be seming*) and the logic of human illness and suffering which requires Christ's death to happen, in that same instant of human time Christ changes his cheer and Julian's ^[8]deathwatch grief is transformed into joy. The lesson she learns from this is that there is no 'poynte' to her pain or grief, meaning both no temporal limit and also no purpose (this is polysemy is typical of Julian's semantic play). Christ is saying to her that her grief has no soteriological purpose, but also that in the eternal perspective of divine time and the divine plan, the grief that is derived from expectations of unavoidable death and bereavement in her earthly time serves no human purpose. God's logic does not follow the script of human expectations and is not subordinated to the imperatives of human time.

The point of the episode is not the death of God, but the transfiguration and transformation of human expectation into a divine view of redemption and new life. Rather than a human feeling compassion for the suffering humanity of Christ, predicated on the loss of loved ones through death, she instantly, suddenly, understands one of the most extraordinary lessons of her showings. It is Christ who shows compassion with us in our pains and passion, and that divine compassion gives her an early clue to how faith and love of God can help the time-bound human to rise above the vicissitudes of time and the terrors and tribulations of life. That

intense union with God that this envisages triggers escape from the terrors of linear time and a promised efflorescence into the joys of heaven:

I understode that we be now, in our lords menyng, in his crosse with hym in our peynys and our passion, deyng; and we wilfully abydyng ^[9] in the same cross with his helpe and his grace into the last poynte, sodenly he shal chonge his chere to us, and we shal be with hym in hevyn. Betwix that one and that other shal be no tyme, and than shal al be browte to ioy. [LT. cap. 21]

[I understood that we are now-in our Lord's intention dying on his cross with him in our pain and our sufferings; and if we remain willingly on the same cross with his help and his grace until the last moment, he will suddenly change his expression towards us, and we will be with him in heaven. Between one moment and the next there will be no time, and then everything will be turned to joy.]

This liminal state of wilful abiding (one of her key states necessary, she teaches us, for effective contemplative beholding), is marked by an escape from preterites and presents into an eternal present performed in her text by the incessant present participles that come to mark out the eternal outflowing of divine grace and mercy in Julian's view of the divine roles: *menyng*, *deyng*, *wilfully abidyng*. This intense identification and union with the Lord's meaning though our own pains and passions, even unto the laste poynte' of our own deaths, will *sodenly* change his *chere* and, like the repentant thief on Calvary, we shall be with him in heaven. Most tellingly, 'there shal be no tyme' in this sudden transition. It is an instant apotheosis into the eternal present of the Boethian God. It takes time for Julian to work

out and explain for us what this wilful abiding in God's meaning actually involves and how it can be achieved. But the structure and textual strategies of the showings are an exposition of ^[10]and an exercise in living with these dizzying changes of temporal perspective, these sudden and unexpected breakthroughs into the divine view of salvation history. For Julian the word 'soden' is a marker of ruptured time scales, of the interpenetration of the dogged and linear life we live in human time, marked with its burden of anxieties about the past, uncertainties for the present, and fears for the future, by the fizzing transcendence of the eternal present within which the scheme of salvation is always already being worked out. These sudden shifts of visual and temporal perspective indicate to her and to us as readers of her book the ways that our normal expectations are to be challenged and overthrown (passed over, as she often puts it). Consider the infamous hazelnut passage in chapter 5 (infamous because, as we shall see, there is no hazelnut):

In this same time our lord shewed to me a ghostly sight of his homely loveing. I saw that he is to us everything that is good and comfortable for us. He is our clotheing that for love wrappith us, [halseth] us and all beclosyth us for tender love, that hee may never leave us, being to us althing that is gode, as to myne understandyng. Also in this he shewed a littil thing, the quantitye of an hesil nutt in the palme of my hand; and it was as round as a balle. I lokid thereupon with eye of my understandyng and thowte: 'What may this be?' And it was generally answered thus: 'It is all that is made.' I mervellid how it might lesten, for methowte it might suddenly have fallen to nowte for littil. And I was answered in my understandyng: 'It lesteth and ever shall, for God loveth it; and so allthing hath the being be the love of God. [LT. cap.5]

^[11]*[And in this vision he also showed a little thing, the size of a hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand, as it seemed to me, and it was round as a ball. I looked at it with my mind's eye and thought, 'What can this be?' And the answer came in a general way, like this, 'It is all that is made.' I wondered how it could last, for it seemed to me so small that it might have disintegrated suddenly into nothingness. And I was answered in my understanding, 'It lasts, and always will, because God loves it; and in the same way everything has its being through the love of God.]*

In the context of her stress on the enfolding, enclosing, envaginating maternal love of God Julian sees the whole of creation in the palm of her hand, the size of a hazelnut. She is shown the created universe from God's viewpoint, while at the same time feeling herself to be wrapped and embraced in the sustaining of love of God. She is simultaneously observing creation being sustained by God's love and aware of herself as part of that creation being enfolded by his love. She is being shown, and we are being taught, how to step out of linear time and causality and to hold ourselves in a profound and still awareness of the reality of God's sustaining power and love. The passage is devoid of movement, there is nothing kinetic: creation just is, and so are we, wrapped and embraced, held safe and still in the timeless presence of the almighty. Then a few chapters later, in chapter 11, the visual and temporal perspective is suddenly changed:

And after this I saw God in a poynte, that is to sey, in myn vnderstondyng, be which sight I saw that he is in al things. I beheld with avisement, seing and knowing in sight with a soft drede, and thought: 'What is synne?' [LT. cap. 11]

^[12]*[And after this I saw God in a point-that is to say, in my*

understanding and by seeing this I saw that he is in everything. I looked attentively, seeing and recognizing in that vision that he does everything that is done. I marvelled at that sight with quiet awe, and thought, 'What is sin?']

She sees God in a point. We have already seen that this term is used by her to describe a sudden instant of time, so the flash of illumination in her understanding teaches her that God, in a reversal of the previous image of him holding creation in his hands, is now 'in all things'. Moreover this indwelling is seen in her understanding: Julian is both describing a moment of highest grade perception and also telling us the 'point' in her psyche where she believes that she sees God. God is in everything, even in the very syntax that Julian uses to try and describe him. No wonder she is able to behold him 'with avisement', a very advanced state of deep mental comprehension. Indeed one might say that she is comprehending how she is comprehended, and trying to make that comprehensible to us as her readers. As she says at the end of her prayer at the end of chapter 6, 'his goodness comprehendith all his creatures and all his blissid works, and overpassith without end, for he is the endlashede.' Likewise Julian's ambition from early on in her text is to combine comprehension and overpassing through dizzying switches and changes of perspective and temporal register, to explore time and ^[13]eternity and to show how interwoven they are in the lives of all evencristens who seek God with a sincere heart.

Yet it is telling and entirely apposite that her 'beholding with avisement' here should be equally suddenly disrupted in the other direction. She is dragged back into ratiocination and temporal anxieties by the nagging question 'What is synne?'. The moments of epiphany and the sudden overpassing into divine time that she enacts in her showings are always intercut with her nagging sense of

the world, the flesh and the devil, pulling her back into the linear and the causal. Note how Boethian her self-consciously, almost parodically scholastic *quaestio* on sin here becomes:

and thought: 'What is synne?' for I saw truly that God doth althing be it never so litil. And I saw truly that nothing is done be happe ne be aventure, but althing be the foreseing wisdom of God. If it be happe or adventure in the sight of man, our blindhede and our onforesight is the cause, for the things that arn in the foreseing wisdom of God fro without beginning (which rightfully and worshipfully and continually he ledyth to the best end as they comen aboute) fallyn to us sodenly, ourselfe unwetyng; and thus, be our blindhede and our onforsighte, we seyen these ben happis and adventures; but to our lord God thei be not so. Wherefore me behovith nedes to grant that althing that is done, it is wel done, for our lord God doth alle; for in this time the werkyng of cretures was not shewid, but of our lord God in the creature; for he is in the mydde poynt of allthyng and all he doith. And I was sekir he doith no synne. And here I saw sothly that synne is no dede, for in al this was not synne shewid. And I wold no lenger mervel in this, but beheld our lord, what he wold shewen. [LT. cap. 11]

^[14] *[For I saw truly that God does everything, however small it may be. And I saw truly that nothing is done by chance or accident but everything by God's prescient wisdom. If it seems to be chance or accident in our eyes, our blindness and lack of foresight is the cause, for those things that are in the foreseeing wisdom of God from without beginning which he justly and gloriously and continually guides to the best conclusion as they happen-come upon us suddenly and*

unawares; and so, in our blindness and our lack of foresight, we say these things are chance or accident. So I understand in this revelation of love, because I well know that in the sight of our Lord God there is no chance or accident. Therefore I had to grant that everything which is done is well done, because our Lord God does everything; at this time the actions of human beings were not shown, but only those of our Lord God in human beings; for he is at the mid- point of everything, and he does everything, and I was sure that he does no sin. And here I saw truly that sin is no kind of deed, for sin was not shown me in all this. And I had no wish to keep wondering over this any longer, but looked at our Lord to see what he would reveal.]

This passage's disputation on chance (*happe* and *aventure*), on the wisdom and providence of God, on human blindness and divine foresight is deeply Boethian. In fact the passage precisely comments on and dramatises the lurch we have just seen from rapturously unified and instant beholding of God's being 'in a point' to a scattered and rancorous anxiety about the causes and effects of sin. In philosophical mode she observes that:

the things that arn in the foreseing wisdom of God fro without beginning (which rightfully and worshippfully and continually he ledyth to the best end as they comen aboute) fallyn to us sodenly, ^[15]ourselfe unwetyng; and thus, be our blindhede and our onforsighte, we seyen these ben happis and adventures; but to our lord God thei be not so. [LT. cap.11]

Key to Julian's showings is her growing understanding that the divine perspective on human sin is not the same as ours. Even at our most illuminated and even when in receipt of special graces, the blindness

of our human perspective and the shortcomings and limitations of our human causality will inescapably distract. So in chapter 15 she candidly describes very precisely her own oscillations between ease and anxiety, between rest and turbulence:

And after this he shewid a soveren gostly lekyng in my soule. I was fulfillid of the everlesting sekirnes migtily susteinid withoute any peynful drede. This felyng was so gladd and so gostly that I was in al peace and in reste that there was nothing in erth that should a grevid me. This lestinid but a while and I was turnyd and left to myselfe in hevynes and werines of my life and irkenes of myselfe that onethis I coude have patience to leve. There was no comfort nor none ease to me but feith, hope and charite, and these I had in truthe, but litil in feling. And anone, after this, our blissid lord gave me ageyne the comfort and the rest in soule, in likyng and sekirnes so blisful and so mycti that no drede, no sorow, ne peyne bodily that might be suffrid should have desesid me. And than the peyne shewid ageyn to my feling, and than the ioy and the lekyng, and now that one, and now that other, dyvers times I suppose aboute xx tymes. And in the same tyme of ioy I migte have seid with Seynt Paul: 'Nothing shal depart me fro the charite of Criste'. And in the peyne I migte have seid with Peter: 'Lord, save me, I perish'. This vision was shewid me, after myn vndestondyng, that it is spedeful to some soulis to fele on this wise, somtime to be in comfort, and somtyme to faile^[16] and to be left to hemselfe. God wille we knowen that he kepyth us even alike sekir in wo and in wele. [LT. cap. 15]

[And after this he revealed a supreme spiritual delight in my soul. In this delight I was filled full of everlasting certainty, powerfully sustained, without any fear to pain me. This feeling

was so joyful and so spiritual that I was wholly at peace, at ease, and at rest, so that there was nothing on earth that could have distressed me.

This only lasted a while, and my mood turned right round and I was left to myself, feeling depressed, weary of my life and disgusted with myself, so that I could hardly have the patience to go on living. There was no ease or comfort, as I felt, except faith, hope, and charity, and these I had indeed, but could feel them very little. And immediately after this our blessed Lord again gave me comfort and rest in my soul, with pleasure and certainty so blissful and so powerful that no fear, no sorrow, no pain bodily nor spiritual that one might suffer could have troubled me. And then I felt this pain again revealed to me, and then the joy and the delight, now the one and now the other, at different times, I suppose about twenty times. And in the moments of joy I could have said with Saint Paul: 'Nothing shall separate me from the love of Christ.' And in the pain I could have said with Saint Peter: 'Lord, save me, I perish.' This vision was shown me to teach me as I understand it that it is helpful for some souls to feel in this way: sometimes to be comforted, and sometimes to feel failure and be left to themselves. God wants us to know that he keeps us equally safe in sorrow and in joy.]

These sudden *peripeteia*, these overturnings of expectations, these sudden lurches from feeling fulfilled and at ease to being heartsick and tired of life, this veering between Pauline confidence and Petrine doubt, are part of the honesty of Julian's account of her own spirituality. About as far from traditional ladder theology as it is ^[17]possible to imagine, Julian acknowledges that living 'in time' is always shot through with the terrors of abandonment, the thirst of

spiritual dryness, and the fear that our maternal Lord will remove himself from our awareness. The sense of absence and desolation that she describes, she argues, is all part of the nurturing love of God, because these tribulations are sent to teach us how to properly calibrate our desires and our expectations. As she says much later: it is better for man to be taken from pain than for pain to be taken from man. The troubles of the present and our fears for the future have to be offset against our faith and confidence in the eternal unchanging present of God's still centring love:

But frely our lord gevyth whan he wille, and suffrith us in wo sumtyme. And both is one love; for it is Godds wil we hold us in comfort with al our migte, for blisse is lestinge withoute ende, and peyne is passand and shal be browte to nougte to hem that shall be savyd. And therefore it is not Godds wil that we folow the felyng of peyne in sorow and mornyng for hem, but sodenly passing over and holden us in endless likyng. [LT. chapter 15]

[But our Lord gives freely when he wills, and sometimes allows us to be in sorrow and both come from one love. For it is God's will that we keep ourselves in good spirits with all our might, for bliss lasts forever, and pain passes and will come to nothing for those who are to be saved. And therefore it is not God's will that we should be influenced by feelings of pain to sorrow and grieve over them, but quickly pass beyond them and hold on to the endless joy.]

[18] *Blisse* is lasting without end, pain is transient, and 'endless likyng' only comes after we have suddenly passed over, effloresced from time into eternity. As the great seventeenth-century Norfolk writer

Sir Thomas Browne memorably put it, 'In heaven there is no distinction of tenses.'



Yet Julian is both sufficiently experienced in the things of the world, sufficiently aware of the scale of suffering, tribulation and woe in the world, and sufficiently troubled with her own doubts about the nature and effects of sin, that she cannot rest on these Boethian platitudes, plangent and powerful though they are. So she spends most of her long thirteenth revelation (chapters 27-40 in the Long text) grappling with the tensions between tribulation and transfiguration, between pain and impassability, between the tedious but often terrifying teleology of human affairs and the transcendent atemporality of the divine realm.

In chapter 77, when Julian has finished recounting her showings and is embarked on a series of summative discussions of her major themes, she looks back to the exploration of sin and suffering in revelation 13 and reports Christ as saying to her:

'Accuse not [thy]selfe overdon mekil, demandand that tribulation and thy wo is al for thy defaute; for I will not that thou be hevye ne ^[19]sorrowfull vndiscretly; for I tell the how so tho do, thou shalt have wo. And therefore I will that thou wisely know thi penance, and shalt then sothly seene that all thi living is penance profitable.' [LT. cap. 77]

['Do not accuse yourself too much, judging that your

tribulation and your unhappiness is all your fault; for I do not want you to be unreasonably depressed and sorrowful; for I tell you that, whatever you do, you will experience great unhappiness. And therefore I want you wisely to recognize your penance, which you are in constantly, and humbly to accept it as your penance, and then you will truly see that your whole life is a profitable penance.'

But the reassurances represented in this speech have been hard won. Christ's assertion that sin is inevitable in the world of time and tribulation ('how so tho do, thou shalt have wo') is underpinned here by a deliberate lexical substitution: words earlier used to describe sin, suffering and tribulation have now begin to be gathered together and replaced with the single word 'penance'. At the start of revelation 13, the initially incomprehensible assertion that 'Synne is behovabil, but al shal be wel, and al shal be wel, and al manner of thyng shal be wele', with its telling tension between present tense and future, between the transient present of man's fallen nature and the transcendently holistic life of the glorified soul, has been only gradually unpacked and explored. First, she moves to show that sin has a role in the salvation economy of God's plan. Chapter 27 opens with her wondering why God had not prevented sin from the outset:

then, she comments if synne had not a ben we should al a ben^[20] clene....al shuld a ben wele.'

But this use of conditional subjunctives suggests an optative alternative history that obviates the need for the incarnation. So this alternative history of salvation has to be surrendered. In the present reality of her life in time, sin is cause of all our pain, but once the hidden reason that God 'suffrid' sin to come is understood, she argues, we shall stand outside of the temporal present of clouded

perspectives, of our blindness and lack of foresight, and we shall 'endlessly ioyen in our lord God' (cap. 27):

And for the tender love that our good lord hath to all that shal be save he comfortith redyly and swetely, menyng thus: 'It is sothe that synne is cause of all this peyne, but al shal be wele, and al shall be wele, and all manner of thing shal be wele.' These words were seyde full tenderly, shewyng no manner of blame to me ne to non that shall be safe. Than were it a gret unkindness to blame or wonder on God for my synne, seith he blamyth not me for synne. And in these same words I saw a marvelous hey privyete hid in God, which privyete he shal openly make knowen to us in hevyn; in which knowyng we shal verily see the cause why he suffrid synne to come; in which syte we shall endlessly ioyen in our lord God. [LT. cap. 27]

[And because of the tender love which our good Lord has for all who shall be saved, he comforts us readily and sweetly, meaning this, 'It is true that sin is cause of all this suffering, but all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.' These words were said very tenderly, indicating no kind of blame for me or for anyone who will be saved. So it would be most unkind to blame God or marvel at him because of my sin, since he does not blame me for sin.]

^[21]Living in time inevitably exposes us to tribulation. In chapter 28 she shares the divine perspective in feeling compassion on humanity for the inevitability of its sufferings:

Thus I saw how Criste hath compassion on us for the cause of synne. And ryte as I was afor in the passion of Criste fulfillid with peyne and compassion, like in this I was fulfilld a party

with compassion of al myn even Cristen; for that wel, wel beloved people that shal be saved; that is to sey, Gods servants, holy church, shal be shakyn in sorows and anguis and tribulation in this world as men shakyn a cloth in the wynde. And as to this our lord answerid in this manner: 'A gret thing shal I makyn hereof in hevyn, of endles worshippes and everlestyng ioyes.' Ya, so ferforth I saw that our lord ioyth of the tribulations of his servants with reuth and compassion, to ech person that he lovyth to his bliss for to bringen, he levyth upon them something that is no lak in hys syte, wherby thei are lakid and dispisyd in thys world, scorned, rapyd and outcasten. [LT. cap. 28]

[So I saw how Christ has compassion on us because of sin. And just as I was previously filled with suffering and compassion at Christ's Passion, so now I was filled in part with compassion for all my fellow Christians; for these beloved people who will be saved that is to say, God's servants, Holy Church-will be shaken by sorrows and anguish and tribulation in this world, as a cloth is shaken in the wind. And concerning this, our Lord responded in this way, 'I shall make a great thing out of this in heaven, a great thing of endless glories and everlasting joys.']

There is nothing glib about this promise: Julian's existential struggle with suffering and sinfulness is worked out in dramatic fashion. In what form of the present is can sin be 'behovabil', not just redeemable, but necessary, and a function of divine intentionality?

[²²]She comes to realize that it is only in the divine eternal present that this can become true, driven by the divine imperative that all shall be well. The nuanced grammatical difference between 'everything will be well' and 'everything shall be well' is important to

note. Just as the divine thirst of Christ will last until all those that are to be saved are brought up into heaven, so too the divine intention to make all things new, to bring to completion the salvation of creation is expressed by nuanced choices of modal auxiliary verbs and mood.

Yet in the same chapter Julian comments that nothing hinders her from untrammelled beholding of God except sin. She is caught in an apparent paradox, but it is a paradox that works itself out by attention to modalities of time and by attentiveness to subtle differences in temporal perspective. In chapter 77 Julian reports that she has been almost overwhelmed with her sense that 'this place is prison and this lif is penance'. She has longed for delivery from the world by death to escape from its torments and uncertainties. But Christ's reassurance that 'how so tho do, thou shalt have wo' shapes a remedy for her and shows her that we have no agency in suffering or pain, except to seek out and co-operate with the grace of God:

This place is prison and this lif is penance, and in the remedy he will we enioyen. The remedy is that our lord is with us, keband and ledand into the fulhede of ioye; for this is an endless ioy to us^[23] in our lords menyng, that he that shall ben our bliss whan we arn there, he is our keper while we arn here.
[LT. cap. 77]

[This place is prison, and this life is penance, and he wants us to rejoice in the remedy. The remedy is that our Lord is with us, protecting us and leading us into the fullness of joy; for this is an endless joy to us, in our Lord's purpose, that he who will be our bliss when we are there, is our protector while we are here.]

The reason for the focus on the passion in Julian's early showings now becomes clearer. It is not just or even an extended exercise in devotional affectivity. Rather, its function is to show that Christ's overpassing pains in his passion become a way for us to pass over from the pains and tribulations of this passing life and to enjoy the sudden escape from time and linearity into the assurance of God's perspective:

for we be all in party nowtid, and we shall be nowtid followyng our master lesus till we be full purgyd: that is to sey, till we be fully nowtid of our dedly flesh and of al our inward affections which arn not very good, and the beholdyng of this, with al peynys that ever weren or ever shal be; and with al these I understond the passion of Criste for most peyne and overpassyng. And al this was shewid in a touch and redily passid over into comferte. [LT. cap. 27]

[for we are all in part set at nought, and we shall be set at nought, following the example of our master Jesus, until we are fully purged: that is to say, until our mortal flesh is made as nothing, and all our inward feelings which are not truly good. And in contemplating this, together with all the sufferings that ever were or ever shall be, I understand Christ's Passion as the greatest and most surpassing ^[24]suffering. And all this was shown in an instant and quickly turned into consolation.]

This is a clear echo of Philippians 2, the great kenotic hymn of humiliation and exaltation that provides one of the most vivid arcs of Christian spirituality. This is a chapter that Julian invokes in her *Short Text*, in one of her very few explicit citations of scripture in either version of the work:

Swilke paines I sawe that alle es to litelle that I can telle or saye, for it maye nought be tolde. Botte ilke saule, after the sayinge of Sainte Paule, shulde 'feeles in him that in Criste Jesus'.

But fascinatingly, Julian reverses the polarity of the usual readings of this kenotic hymn: rather than stressing that we should strive to feel compassion with Christ in his sufferings, she is effectively showing us that Christ feels compassion for us in his sufferings. The noughting of Christ in his incarnation and death requires a similar noughting from us so that we can be oned with the hidden intentionality of the divine plan. The pain of sin causes a sort of partial kenosis, but that process will not be fully realized until the imperative completion of the task ('we *shall* be nowtid'). Again, the temporal movement of this passage is fascinating. We *are* partly noughted; we *shall be* fully noughted: but beholding, a timeless state that for Julian brings a welcome escape from linear chronology and the onward teleology of tribulation and sin, will give us a perspective to be able to view all the pains that ever *were* or ever *shall be* in the ^[25]context of and through the soteriological (saving) lens of the passion of Christ, the 'most peyne and overpassing'. This gentle 'touch' readily allows her to pass over into comfort from grief. This passover is a temporary escape from the lived experience of tribulation, a taste of the comfort and bliss of the life to come.

However, Julian is taught that this peace and comfort comes at the expense of learning not to pry into God's privities, not to succumbing to 'curiosity of the wittes' as the *Cloud* author calls it. On two occasions, Julian seeks to know more than is good for her. But her desire for special knowledge is responded to with the exhortation *take it generally', a version of the Gospel exhortation '*ne solliciti sitis*' (Matthew 6:25), desire is replaced by assent, curiosity

with patience. Indeed living in time carries with it inevitable uncertainty. If we knew when we should be taken that would cause us to become restless and impatient:

And in this word, 'Sodenly thou shal be taken', I saw that God rewardith man of the patiens that he hath in abyding Gods will, and of this tyme, and that man lengith his patiens over the tyme of his living; for onknowing of his tyme of passing, that is a gret profitt; for if a man knew his time, he shuld not have patience over that tyme. [LT. cap. 64]

[26] For Julian, 'the fulhede of ioy is to beholden God in al' not to atomise him not local temporal manifestation of the divine plan, but to observe the totality, to try and cultivate a providential perspective that seeks to align itself with the Boethian eternal present. Taking it generally involves the cultivation of detachment from the causalities and sequentialities of earthly time, and to live in comfort with the great deed that God will do to make all things well, without seeking to enquire or analyse what it might be or how it might come about. In the synoptic chapter 77, after the end of the showings, Julian encapsulates this with another play of tenses when she offers us tools to deal with the terror of the times:

and sey we thus in our mening: 'I know wele I have a shrewid peyne, but our lord is almyty and may punish me mytyly, and he is al wisdam and can punish me skilfully, and he is all goodnes and lovith me full tendirly.' And in this beholdyng it is necessarye for us to abeyden; for it is a lovely mekeness of a synful soule, wroute be mercy and grace of the Holy Gost, whan we will willfully and gladly taken the scorge and chastening of our lord himselfe will geve us. [LT. cap. 77]

[And let us say this in our thoughts: 'I know very well that I have deserved severe pain, but our Lord is almighty and can punish me mightily, and he is all wisdom and can punish me with reason, and he is all goodness and loves me most tenderly.' And it is necessary for us to keep this in view: for it is a lovely meekness in a sinful soul, accomplished by the mercy and grace of the Holy Spirit, when we willingly and gladly accept the scourging and chastising that our Lord himself wishes to give us.]

[27] In a typical Trinitarian sequence, she plays with potentiality, omnipotence, and Divine will: God is almighty and *may* punish, he is all wisdom and *may* punish, but because he is all goodness he chooses to do neither but, instead, he endlessly 'lovith me ful tenderly'. The beholding of this truth is, Julian urges, something for us to abide in: to stand aside from causality, logic, sequence, process. This willful abiding is always a hallmark of meekness as Julian understands it, a paradox of intention that seeks to escape from temporality and stand on the threshold of eternity.

Consider how Julian plays with tenses and moods in this long passage from Revelation 13 celebrating the providential goodness of God:

it longyth to the ryal lordship of God to have his privy councell in pece, and it longyth to his servant, for obedience and reverens, not to wel wetyn his conselye. Our lord hath pety and compassion on us for that sum creatures make them so besy therein; and I am sekir if we wisten how mekil we shuld plese hym and ese ourselfe to leven it, we wolden. The seynts that be in hevyn, thei wil nothyng wetyn but that our lord will shewen hem, and also their charite and their desire is rulid

after the wil of our lord; and thus owen we to willen like to hem: than shal we nothyng willen ne desiren but the wille of our lord like as thei do; for we arn al on in Goddis menyng. And here was I lernyd that we shal trosten and enjoyen only in our savior blisful Iesus for althyng. [LT. cap. 30]

[it is fitting for the royal lordship of God to keep his private counsels undisturbed, and it is fitting for his servant, out of obedience and ^[28]respect, not to wish to know his counsels. Our Lord has pity and compassion on us, because some people busy themselves so anxiously about this; and I am sure that if we knew how much we should please him and set our minds at rest by leaving it alone, we would do so. The saints in heaven wish to know nothing but what our Lord wishes to reveal to them, and their love and their desires are governed according to our Lord's will; and so we ought to wish to be like them. Then we shall not wish nor desire anything except the will of our Lord, just as they do; for we are all one in God's purposes. And here I was taught that we are to trust and rejoice only in our Saviour, blessed Jesus, for everything.]

To desire to know God's privy council, to live with a hunger to subordinate God's omnipotence into the teleology of linear history, is to guarantee failure and disappointment. God reserves the right to move in mysterious ways. This sort of busy work, this Martha-like worry, is self-consumingly unproductive. Instead Julian shifts into conditional moods to construct a parallel but radically alternative, subjunctive mode of relating to God: if we knew how much we *should* please God and ease ourselves if only we *could* trust in the wisdom and compassion, then we *would* eagerly do it:

And thus our good lord answerid to al the question and

doubts that I myte makyn, sayeing ful comfortably: 'I may makyn althing wele; I can maken althing wele and I wil make althyng wele and I shall make althyng wele; and thou shal se thiself that al manner of thyng shal be wele.' That he seyth 'I may', I understand for the Fader; and he seith 'I can', I understand for the Son; and where he seith 'I will', I understand for the Holy Gost; and wher he seith 'I shall', I understand for the unite of the blissid Trinite, iii persons and ^[29]one trouthe; and where he seith 'Thou shal se thiselfe', I understand the onyng of al mankynd that [shalle] be save into the blisful Trinite. And in these v words God wil be onclosid in rest and pece; and thus shal the gostly threst of Criste have an end; for this is the gostly thrist of Criste: the luflongyng that lestith and ever shal, til we se that syte on domysday. For we that shal be save, and shal be Crists ioye and his blis, some be yet here, and some be to cum; and so shal sum be in to that day. Therefore this is his thirst: a love longyng to have us al togeder hole in him to his blis, as to my syte; for we be not now as f[u]lly hole in him as we shal be then. [LT. cap. 31]

[And so our good Lord answered all the questions and doubts that I could raise, saying most comfortingly, 'I may make all things well; I can make all things well, and I will make all things well, and I shall make all things well; and you will see for yourself that all manner of things shall be well.' Where he says 'I may', I understand this to apply to the Father; and where he says 'I can', I understand it to apply to the Son; and where he says 'I will', I understand it to apply to the Holy Spirit; and where he says 'I shall', I take it for the unity of the blessed Trinity, three persons and one truth; and where he says 'You will see for yourself, I understand it to refer to the union with the blessed Trinity of all mankind who shall be saved. And with

these five sayings God wishes us to be enfolded in rest and in peace; and so Christ's spiritual thirst will come to an end. For this is the spiritual thirst of Christ: the love-longing that lasts and ever shall, until we see that revelation on Judgement Day. For some of us who shall be saved, and shall be Christ's joy and his bliss, are still here, and some are yet to come, and so will some be until that day. Therefore this is his thirst: a love-longing to have us all together wholly in him to his delight, as it seems to me; for we are not now so fully, so wholly, in him as we shall be then.]

The saints in heaven simply behold the godhead, and we should strive to do the same. We should not be so busy about desiring to ^[30]know and asking for and expecting rational explanations for the existence of sin. That way lies misery and hardship. But seeking to identify with, co-operate with and unite ourselves with the will of God brings stability and stillness, rest and ease, security and relief from sickness: in terms of Philippians 2 it allows us to cultivate the mind that was also in Christ Jesus. We should trust and enjoy (meaning share and participate in). That is the way to becoming whole in Christ. Again the passage pivots on the tenses moods of verbs. As always, Julian is doing theology through her virtuosic but remarkably simple and fundamental grasp of linguistic temporalities: her play here with the absolute power of God the father (I may); the operant power of the Saviour (I can); the transformative power of the Spirit proceeding from the others through grace (I shall); and the results of this perichoretic sharing of *potentia absoluta* and *potentia ordinata*, being that we shall ourselves see that all shall be well. Within this ring of words, five verbal wounds that are manifestations of wholeness and integrity of the divine plan, God sits enclosed in rest and peace. The auxiliary verbs, shifting verbal tenses and changing moods create a centripetal force drawing us towards the

still centre that is God. This is highly sophisticated Trinitarian theology being performed through simply iterative and anaphoric phrasings. In her very first revelation, she speaks of the 'pretious coroning with thornys; and therewith was comprehended and ^[31]specified the Trinite with the incarnation and unite betwix God and man soule,..., in which all the sheweings that follow be grounded and onyd', so here the perichoresis of verbal tenses enacts a grounding and oneing of man's essential nature and of our escape from time and terror to beholding and bliss.

Of course, in this life the beholding and bliss will always be fleeting. But the still serenity of the divine command of tenses resonates into the calm assurance of Christ's utterances to her throughout the showings. God never shows anger, never castigates or challenges. He speaks in the calm assurance of the eternal present where all shall be well.

It is not that we stop being aware of sin, it is that we adopt a kind of double focus that allows us to behold God's grace and love from an eternal perspective while recognising our own sin and feebleness in our own temporal present. This is a work of mercy, a remedy for tribulation, and indeed a profit of tribulation (she deliberately borrows these two terms from contemporary texts addressing the problems of human suffering in time) and it takes place out of human time, but in a paused moment, a suspension of the onward pulse of linear time: the showing takes place 'in time of mercy and grace' when God reveals the true providential perspective of creation history to us. This sustains us in our seeking, our abiding and our trusting ^[33]natures. Julian warns against being pulled away from the beholding of God to the barren and fruitless beholding of the self:

I understode this man is chongeable in this lif, and be frelte

and overcummyng fallith into synne; he is onmytye and onwise of hymself, and also his wil is overleyd; and in this tyme he is in tempest and in sorow and wo, and the cause is blindhede, for he seith not God; for if he sey God continually he shuld have no mischevous felyng, ne no manner steryng the yernyng that servyth to synne... And therefore we failen oftentymes of the syte of hym, and anon we fallen into ourself, and than fynde we no felyng of ryth-notwte but contrarioust that is in ourself, and that of the elder rote of our first synne with all that followyn of our contrivans, and in this we arn traveylid and tempestid with felyng of synnys and of peynes in many dyvers manner, gostly and bodyly, as it [is] knowen to us in this lif [LT. cap. 47]

[I understood this: man is changeable in this life, and falls into sin through frailty and being overcome; in himself he is weak and foolish, and also his will is overwhelmed, and during this time he is in turmoil, and in sorrow and misery, and the cause is blindness- because he does not see God; for if he saw God continually he would have no harmful feelings, nor any sort of prompting to the craving that is conducive to sin [...]. And therefore we often lack the sight of him, and at once we fall back upon ourselves, and then we find no feeling of anything but the contrary spirit that is in us, and that stems from the ancient root of our first sin, with all that follows of our own contriving, and in this we are troubled and shaken with the feeling of sin and of suffering in many different ways, both spiritually and bodily, as this is known to us in this life.]

A similar point is made in chapter 64:

^[34] *And ryte as in the first worde that our good lord shewid,*

menyng his blissfull passion-'Herwith is the devill overcome-ryte so he seid in the last word with full trew sekirness, menand us all: 'Thou shalt not ben overcommen.' And all this leryng in this trew comfort, it is generall to all my even cristen as it is aformseid, and so is Gods will. And these words: 'Thou shalt not ben overcome', was seid full sharply and full mightily for sekirness and comfort agens all tribulations that may comen. He seid not 'Thou shalt not be tempesteid, thou shalt not be travelled, thou shalt not be disesid', but he seid: Thou shalt not be overcome.' ... God will that we taken heede at these words, and that we be ever myty in sekir troste, in wele and wo; for he lovith and lekyth us, and so will he that we love him and lekin him and mytily trosten in him; and al shal be wele. And sone after al was close and I sow no more. [LT. cap. 68]

[And just as in the first words that our good Lord revealed, referring to his blessed Passion-'In this way the devil is overcome'-just so he said the last words with the greatest certainty, referring to us all, 'You shall not be overcome.' And all this teaching of true comfort applies in general to all my fellow Christians, as is said before, and it is God's will that it is so. And these words, 'You shall not be overcome', were said very distinctly and very powerfully for assurance and comfort against all the tribulations that may come. He did not say, 'You shall not be perturbed, you shall not be troubled, you shall not be distressed', but he said, 'You shall not be overcome.' God wants us to pay attention to these words and always to be trusting strongly and surely in good times and bad; for he loves us and is pleased with us, and so he wishes us to love him, and be pleased with him, and strongly trust in him; and all shall be well. And soon afterwards everything was at a

close, and I saw no more.]

[35] Julian urges us to take heed and take hold of these words as a clear perspectival statement of the sustaining intentionalities of the divine plan and presents them to us as the enfolding of the showings in a comprehensive divine strategy to offer support in the terrors of our times, in our troubled transit through what Chaucer's Boethius calls the preterites, presents and futures of earthly life. The temporal tactics of Julian's text are designed to deliver to each 'evencristen' a flavour of the Boethian 'eternal present', audaciously presenting her audience with 'an understanding of the entire flow of time' 'so that it has knowledge of the whole of life, can see the future, and has lost nothing of the past.'

Vincent Gillespie

