

Julian of Norwich and the Muttering Fiend

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1.

As Dante descends into Hell, he encounters increasingly corrupt language. Guileful rhetoricians relate their histories to attract his sympathy, notably Ulysses, who defends his own quest for knowledge. Elsewhere infernal speech has eroded in other ways, and in canto XXI we learn that demons signal each other with farts.¹ Two instances of hellish babble perhaps communicate even less. Plutus's exclamation upon seeing Virgil and Dante, "Pape Satàn, Pape Satàn, aleppe," seems only partly intelligible, and farther down in Hell Nimrod, whom medieval writers believed to have built the Tower of Babel, shouts, "Raphèl mai amècche zabì almi."² Jeffrey Cohen comments on this moment's importance: "Linguistic differences were fundamental to medieval imaginings of race, a category of separation that yawned even wider when compounded by difference of religion," and Nimrod's "nonsensical declarative announces his absolute exclusion from Christian comprehension."³ Dante's whole poem, of course, builds toward just that comprehension. His journey becomes a quest for a perfect idiom: among the saved, language communicates the cosmos's workings to Dante, but among the damned, language tempts and confuses the pilgrim. In *De vulgari eloquentia*, Dante argues that language, which neither angels nor animals require, is particular to humanity,⁴ but as Cohen shows, language is important for Dante because it defines not only humanity but also the Christian community. Thus language deteriorates as Hell deepens, until in its pit

three traitors stop Satan's mouths. If Christ is God's incarnate word, then evil must be nonsense and, in Hell's lowest regions, silence.

Dante's poetry can provide a context for the anxieties around communication and nonsense that inform Julian of Norwich's *Revelation of Love*, a text begun later in the same century. Language's power to mark "exclusion from Christian comprehension" is no less important for Julian, who also searches for heavenly speech and represents Hell's forces as incoherent. Near her book's close, a fiend attacks her twice. In his first assault, he chokes Julian with his "pawes" and displays his "whit teth" as he gives her a "shrewde loke."⁵ When commentators discuss Julian's ideas about evil, they tend to focus their analyses on this first encounter with the fiend, perhaps because here she describes his features and his physical violence.⁶ But his second appearance is also important because there he switches tactics and assails Julian with noise. He tries to "stere" her "to dispere" with his babble:

the feende came againe with his heet and with his stinch, and made me fulle besy.
The stinch was so vile and so painfulle, and the bodely heet also dredful and
traveylous. I harde a bodely jangeling, as it had been of two bodies, and both to
my thinking jangeled at one time, as if they had holde a perlement with greate
besines. And all was softte muttering, and I understode not what they said. And
alle this was to stere me to dispere, as methought, seeming to me as they scorned
bidding of bedes which are said boistosly with mouth, failing devout intending
and wise diligence, the which we owe to God in oure prayer. And our good lorde
God gave me grace mightly to trust in him, and to comfort my soule with bodely

speech, as I shulde have done to another person that had been traveyled.

Methought that besines might not be likened to no bodely bisines. (341)

Like Nimrod's speech, the fiend's "jangeling" sets him apart from the Christian community, and indeed he can only parody the "bidding of bedes." Julian drowns out this "jangeling" by comforting herself "with bodely speech," praying aloud to avoid hearing the fiendish "muttering," or, in the Paris manuscript, "whystryn" (whispering). But before she manages to call on divine aid, "dispere" seems to haunt Julian. Why are the fiends (he seems to multiply)⁷ so threatening if she "understode not what they said"?⁸

Scholars admire Julian's "serenity," a calm that emerges from her conviction that all shall be well.⁹ Julian, after all, dwells little on Hell's torments, insists on a loving deity, and ends her text by declaring that "love was his mening" (379). Nicholas Watson remarks that Julian, Chaucer, and Langland share a concern with how to access truth, but he argues that Julian's "optimistic and intimate expectation of knowledge that is to come . . . distinguishes the *Revelation of Love* from most other products of the late medieval 'age of anxiety.'"¹⁰ We might think of Chaucer's noisy *House of Fame* or the competing voices in Langland's *Piers Plowman*, texts that insistently confront unintelligibility.

Julian allows such "jangeling" to trespass on her meditations less often, and rather than foreground dissonance, she focuses more on the hope that everything will become clear. Julian makes a familiar medieval distinction between human and divine perception, one that these poets would also endorse, even if they dwell more on the chaos that people see rather than the harmony that God sees: "And I saw truly that nothing is done by happe ne by aventure, but alle by the foreseing wisdom of God. If it be hap or aventure in the sight

of man, our blindhede and our unforsight is the cause” (163). Julian contrasts “the foreseeing wisdom of God” with the fallen world’s “happe” and “aventure,” and she trusts that humanity’s “unforsight” will eventually give way to firmer knowledge.

But even if Julian is confident that the noise will eventually dissipate, for an important moment incoherence erupts in her text. The fiend’s “jangeling” is a briefer but no less intense version of the noise in Langland’s and Chaucer’s works, and rereading Julian with this scene in mind, we can see the threat of incoherence emerge elsewhere, a threat she frequently suppresses. Communication is a central problem in the *Revelation*, and because Julian tries to interpret God’s “mening” (a word she uses often), an unintelligible antagonist poses an especially appropriate adversary. As Michelle Karnes notes, Julian imagines interpretation as a quest.¹¹ Speech and language are nearly as important to her quest as sight, so she must dispel the fiend for her spiritual journey to continue, lest she become unable to converse with her God, divine his “mening,” and allow that meaning to pass from her to her “evencristene.”¹² The fiend’s jangling insinuates that Julian’s interpretive efforts are hopeless, and her confrontation with him reveals that she, too, is a product of the late medieval “age of anxiety.”¹³

2.

In this article, I try to map the muttering fiend’s place among the various kinds of incoherence that Julian confronts. Although she overcomes the fiend and his noise, elsewhere she acknowledges interpretative difficulties, a kind of noisiness themselves in that they, too, challenge her efforts to read the world. Julian thinks about the medium through which she tries to know God, for instance, and at times seems intent on removing

that medium. *Meane* becomes another important word in her vocabulary: “the custome of our prayer was brought to my mind: how that we use, for unknowing of love, to make meny meanes. Then saw I sothly that it is more worship to God, and more very delite, that we faithfully pray to himselfe of his goodnes and cleve therto by his grace, with true understanding and stedfast beleve, then if we made all the meanes that hart may thinke. For if we make all these meanes, it is to litle and not ful worshippe to God” (143). Here Julian seems quick to propose clearing away the clutter of “meny meanes.”¹⁴ And just before this passage she indeed has an unmediated vision of Christ: “I conceived truly and mightly that it was himselfe that shewed it me, without any meane” (135). In some sense Julian’s quest succeeds immediately: she sees God directly, “without any meane.” But as this revelation ends, she says that she cannot show the reader the full extent of her vision: “But the gostely syght I can nott ne may shew it as openly ne as fully as I would, but I trust in our lord God almighty that he shall, of his goodnes and for your love, make yow to take it more ghostely and more sweetly then I can or may tell it” (157). Julian draws attention to language itself as a “meane,” a medium that, while imperfect, the fiend’s noise would overwhelm and render opaque.

Although Julian briefly manages to thrust aside all “meanes” in her first revelation, much of her text thinks about how she might know God. She goes on to discuss “meanes” more thoroughly: “For God of his goodnes hath ordained meanes to helpe us full faire and fele. Of which the chiefe and principal meane is the blessed kinde that he toke of the maiden, with all the meanes that gone before and come after, which belong to our redemption and to our endless salvation. Wherfor it pleaseth him that we seke him and worshippe him by meanes, understanding and knowing that he is the

goodnes of all” (143). Julian establishes the importance of “meanes” by explaining that Christ is the “principal meane” through which God makes himself known. Where before “meanes” seemed to get in the way, here they are the way. The “meane” intercedes between Julian and God’s “mening” (the two words seem suggestively entangled) even as it allows access to that meaning. Vincent Gillespie and Maggie Ross discuss these terms’ significance: “Julian’s showing has made the bleeding head resonate as an image in new and unusual ways; it *means* both the exaltation of the Trinity and the humility of the incarnation, but it can only do so because it is liberated from the *means* or hermeneutic repertories which clogged the arteries of contemporary devotional writing.”¹⁵ Although Julian may differentiate herself from the conventions of contemporary devotional writing, she does seem entangled in other “hermeneutic repertories.” She wants to remove the “mean” between herself and the divine, but at the same time she recognizes its necessity. The *Revelation* presents both a text (or a vision) and Julian’s ongoing analysis of that text, a structure that seems to imply that a “meane,” the very site where interpretation happens, is unavoidable.

Julian’s approach to “meanes” stands somewhere between the *Cloud* author’s and Langland’s. Langland, with his poem’s crowd of competing voices, lets in more of the world’s noise than Julian, and she in turn lets in more of the world’s noise than the *Cloud* author, who would shun language almost entirely. What Julian calls the “meny meanes” that we make “for unknowing of love,” those things that interpose themselves between us and God, the *Cloud* author describes as the “cloud of unknowing.” To begin to find one’s way through this cloud, he encourages brief prayers: “And rather it peersith the eres of Almyghty God than doth any longe sauter unmyndfully mumlyd in the teeth. And herfore

it is wretyn that schort preier peersith heven.”¹⁶ As in Julian’s text, where the fiend’s muttering sounds like “biding of bedes which are said boistosly with mouth,” here mangled prayers threaten contemplation. To avoid that possibility, the *Cloud* author recommends a “naked entent direct unto God” that eschews language as much as possible: “And yif thee list have this entent lappid and foulden in o worde, for thou schuldest have betir holde therapon, take thee bot a lital worde of o silable; for so it is betir then of two, for even the schorter it is, the betir it acordeth with the werk of the spirite.”¹⁷ To eliminate life’s distractions further, he advocates another cloud, the cloud of forgetting, so that between the mystic and the divine lies the cloud of unknowing, and between the mystic and the world lies the cloud of forgetting. With these short prayers and obscuring clouds, the *Cloud* author hopes to transcend fallen language.

Although Julian quickly shuts down the fiend’s muttering, she does not mistrust language to the extent that she reduces prayer to a single syllable. Like all mystics, she knows that language cannot describe her experience, for even when she does perceive divine intentions, she explains that she cannot always perfectly communicate them. But mystics present their shared mistrust of language differently.¹⁸ For Julian, words are a “meane,” things with which to approach divinity but not things to trust unreservedly. Her lists, for instance, suggest God’s richness: “I saw sothfastly that oure lorde was never wroth nor never shall. For he is God, he is good, he is truth, he is love, he is pees. And his might, his wisdom, his charite, and his unite suffereth him not to be wroth” (263). Julian gestures toward a splendor that defies representation. Denys Turner explains that “apophaticism,” speaking about divinity with the knowledge that words are ultimately inadequate, can result in pared-down language or a profusion of metaphor:

God is not an object of a particular kind of talk in the way that a number is the object of mathematical discourse, for God is not an object. And since all talk is about objects, all language fails of God. So you can either just stop “prattling about God” altogether, as Eckhart advises, or else do the opposite and make sure that you do *not* cull back the variety of talk about God to some restricted, pious, or “appropriate” domain. It is the same apophaticism either way, for if by way of speech nothing goes, everything does: in the matter of talk about God, if every word fails, every word should be tried.¹⁹

Julian chooses the latter approach. For her, more always remains to say about God and his book of creation, and her quest remains unfinished, her book “not yet performed” (379), because she refuses to “cull back the variety of talk about God.” The episode in which the fiend tries to choke Julian registers this faith in language because if successful, her adversary would silence her,²⁰ and this assault presages speech’s importance in his second appearance, when she uses her voice to pray over his “jangeling.”

Julian further distinguishes herself from the *Cloud* author and underscores her own incomplete quest by declining to present herself as a teacher.²¹ In the *Vision Shown to a Devout Woman*, she disclaims a teacher’s authority in the same moment that she emphasizes that she is a woman: “Botte God forbade that ye shulde saye or take it so that I am a techere. For I meene nought so, no I mente nevere so. For I am a woman, lewed, febille, and freylle. Botte I wate wele, this that I saye I hafe it of the shewing of him that es soverayne techare” (75). She turns her “frailty” to advantage, however, dismantling the

teacher/student hierarchy by insisting that God communicates through her to all believers: “And thus wille I love, and thus I love, and thus I am safe. For I mene in the person of mine evencristene” (75).²² Disclaiming authority on these grounds allows her to appeal to her “evencristene” rather than to a spiritual elite: “In alle this I was mekille sterede in cherite to mine evenchristen, that they might alle see and know the same that I sawe, for I wolde that it were comfort to them” (151). The *Cloud* author begins his text much differently, warning “janglers” and other language abusers away: “Fleschely janglers, opyn preisers and blamers of hemself or of any other, tithing tellers, rouners and tutilers of tales, and alle maner of pinchers, kept I never that thei sawe this book.”²³ From the outset, this mystical treatise hopes to exclude “jangeling” and so addresses itself to a narrow audience. Because interpretation is central to Julian’s quest, she does not try to shed language or claim authority as readily as the *Cloud* author. She does not imagine herself as an instructor further along on her journey than her pupils (“This revelation was shewed to a simple creature unletterde” [125]) and remains as much in the middle of an interpretive project as her readers.²⁴

Langland, for whom a cloud of forgetting seems impossible, imagines the “meane” as layers of commentary, the varying definitions of Dowel that he encounters, definitions that offer only partial access to the knowledge Will wants. Like Julian’s *Revelation*, *Piers Plowman* represents its quest as a series of interpretations in which the quester encounters commentary but not an ultimately authoritative text. Julian’s relentless concentration on the scene of the cross, however, distinguishes her from Langland. As she overcomes the fiend during his second appearance, she focuses on the crucified Christ: “My bodely eye I set in the same crosse there I had seen in comforte afore that

time, my tong with speech of Cristes passion and rehersing the faith of holy church, and my harte to fasten on God with alle the truste and the mighte that was in me” (341). She tries to exclude the cacophonous threat by beholding the cross and by “rehersing” her faith. In some sense this passage is a microcosm of the *Revelation*, in which Julian again and again returns to her vision of the Crucifixion. Julian may foreground her interpretive process and its “noisiness,” but unlike Langland, she tries to keep out the everyday world’s clamor, even if she does not go to the *Cloud* author’s lengths. Langland fills his poems with what Watson and Jenkins call “specific reference to the world and its facts” (7). The crowd of folk in the field, the argumentative personifications, the alehouse, and the hayfield have no place in Julian’s revelations.²⁵

Despite their different attitudes toward the world’s noise, both the *Revelation* and *Piers Plowman* are commentaries on the idea that God is love. In her last revelation, Julian’s text achieves a crescendo effect as she again learns God’s meaning: “What, woldest thou wit thy lordes mening in this thing? Wit it wele, love was his mening. Who shewed it the? Love. What shewid he the? Love. Wherefore shewe he it the? Love” (379). In some sense, her whole text tries to understand this idea, and her book becomes a commentary on 1 John 4:8: “God is Love.”²⁶ This idea helps account for the *Revelation*’s repetition. Even if Julian cannot achieve perfect knowledge of God, she seems to move toward greater understanding, yet she often returns to the original vision, a certain set of ideas, and even similar phrases.²⁷ Versions of the Crucifixion vision recur in her text, as do variations of her famous assertion “all shall be well.” Like Langland, she circles about an idea she can never fully comprehend, a strategy of return and progress they share with theology itself. For the Pseudo-Dionysius, an early mystic, “theology moves in three

ways: on a straight line, in a circle, and in a combination of both—that is, in a spiral.”²⁸

Julian pursues God’s “mening,” knowledge above the spiral, at its center, and beyond the human intellect’s imperfections.

Both Julian and Langland also leave their texts in some sense unfinished despite lifelong efforts. In the fallen world, commentary continues indefinitely, striving to see the text face-to-face. *Piers Plowman* starts with Will’s desire to know how to save his soul, and something comparable motivates Julian’s *Revelation*, for like Langland’s poem, her book emerges from the tension between divine justice and mercy. Both writers, moreover, affirm that love is the answer.²⁹ *Piers Plowman*, Clergie says, has “set alle sciences at a sop save love one.”³⁰ But the revelation that love is God’s meaning only allows Julian and her readers to begin their journeys again,³¹ for in that same revelation, Julian remarks that her book “is not yet performed.” In affirming that love is God’s meaning, she returns to an early moment when she learns to find love at creation’s source. When she sees “a little thing the quantity of an haselnot” in her hand and asks, “What may this be?” God replies, “It is all that is made. . . . It lasteth and ever shall, for God loveth it. And so hath all thing being by the love of God” (139). Julian seems to have known all along, then, that love is God’s meaning, yet she must keep working to understand the lesson. God’s meaning always remains partially revealed, so her search must continue indefinitely, and indeed she says as much near the *Vision*’s beginning: “And this vision was a lerning to my understanding that the continual seking of the soule pleseth God full mekille” (161). Like Langland’s poem, Julian’s book ends with a beginning.

3.

Although Julian confines the fiend to a few sentences, his noise seems to resonate across her writing, for her encounter with dissonance is limited neither to that short passage nor to her fascination with the problem of “meanes.” Much of her text is an effort to show that the cosmos itself does not “jangle” but operates according to a sacred harmony. Theological difficulties impede her quest, and she tries to quiet them as well. Perhaps most immediately, she wonders how eternal pain can coexist with divine love: “A, good lorde, how might alle be wele for the gret harme that is come by sinne to thy creatures?” (213). Her revelation that all shall be well conflicts with the Church’s teaching that divine justice damns sinners, but she professes that she believes in the institution’s doctrines despite her confusion over them.³² The formulation “all shall be well” tries to harmonize mercy and justice. Without this harmony, Julian cannot make sense of the world. Her parable of the master and servant, which also wonders why sin and suffering exist, poses a related interpretive problem, for she must understand why the servant falls, and her meditation on this short scene becomes the most extended section in her *Revelation*. Like many of her exegetical remarks, this passage does not appear in her text’s earlier, and in many ways less complex, version. As Julian ponders her revelation she seems to hear the world’s noise heightening.

Julian looks forward, though, to fuller knowledge, and sometimes she seems to explain divine meaning confidently: “Then he, without voys and opening of lippes, formed in my soule these wordes: ‘Herewith is the feende overcome.’ This worde said our lorde mening his blessed passion” (169). Julian learns the “mening” of Christ’s suffering, and his language, which seems hardly “bodely” because he does not open his

lips, contrasts with the fiend's "bodely jangeling." God uses special language to communicate his meaning to her directly, yet the word *mening* keeps appearing, which suggests that God's intentions require incessant pursuit and meditation. "The contemplative option is, in fact, a commitment to the ongoing experience of failure," as Roger Ellis and Samuel Fanous remark.³³ When she insists that her reading and ours must continue, Julian acknowledges this "failure," even if she would not use that word. After unpacking her parable of the servant and the master, she writes, "I sawe and understode that every shewing is full of privites" (277). Her showings may allow her to take God's meaning confidently, but she always takes only part of that meaning, for each revelation contains "privites." This partial knowledge incites a desire to know more: "The more that we know, the more shalle we besech, if it be wisely take. And so is our lordes mening" (249). Julian's insight addresses the possible tension between her often confident explication of Heaven's intentions and her sense that she cannot know them fully, for here she presents her assurance of God's plan alongside her conviction that she can never know enough of that plan: the "lordes mening" is that desire will increase with knowledge.

In some sense Julian's whole text attests to this principle that desire and knowledge may always increase, for she leaves the completion of her book to its readers: "This boke is begonned by Goddes gifte and his grace, but it is not yet performed, as to my sight. For charite pray we alle togeder, with Goddes wurking: thanking, trusting, enjoying. For thus wille oure good lorde be prayde, by the understanding that I toke in alle his owne mening, and in the swete wordes where he seth fulle merely: 'I am the ground of thy beseching.' For truly I saw and understode in oure lordes mening that he

shewde it for he will have it knowen more than it is” (379). Rather than thinking of her endeavor as “failed,” Julian refers to it as “not yet performed.” She learns that God is the ground of beseeching, both the impetus and the end of desire, and thus the “thanking, trusting, enjoying” do not end, as the progressive forms of these verbs suggest. And importantly, these continuous activities are not for Julian alone but for all her “evencristene.” Robert E. Wright observes that Julian cannot finish her book, because her readers must: “The performance of the book has less to do with the discursive function of language than with its comprehensive, fundamentally affective experience, the realization of the text in its readers.”³⁴ Almost above all, Julian seems interested in nourishing readerly desire. Love may be God’s meaning, but the text does not end with this discovery, because it requires the reader’s response, the “thanking, trusting, enjoying” that he or she must endlessly enact.

Because Julian looks forward to knowledge of the universe’s workings, the apocalypse (literally, “unveiling”) underpins an important part of her thought. She receives a glimpse of God’s plan for doomsday, when he will perform a marvelous “deed” and make everything well: “There is a deed the which the blisseful trinite shalle do in the last day, as to my sight. And what the deed shall be and how it shall be done, it is unknowen of alle creatures which are beneth Crist, and shall be tille whan it shalle be done. . . . This is the gret deed ordained of oure lorde God fro without beginning, treasured and hid in his blessed brest, only knowen to himselfe, by which deed he shalle make all thing wele” (223). Intent on shunning the noisy present, here Julian turns us toward the future. A secret hidden in God “shalle make all thing wele,” which is to say that something will someday make sense of the world and its suffering. Because this

passage prophesies a revelation, it implicitly imagines time as a narrative, a narrative that Julian and her “evencristene” are still learning to read. For Julian, this narrative will remain incomplete until the cosmic story’s end,³⁵ when the “gret deed” will give final shape to creation’s story and silence the fiend’s muttering, the fallen world’s jangling. Julian’s quest remains unfinished, and its object, the divine author’s “mening,” will not be fully articulable until this narrative’s conclusion.

Julian’s approach to reading the book of the world hews close to Frank Kermode’s discussion of fiction and the apocalypse in *The Sense of an Ending*, where he shows how ends make sense of beginnings. Kermode uses a clock’s ticking to explain fiction’s power to organize time: “The fact that we call the second of the two related sounds *tock* is evidence that we use fictions to enable the end to confer organization and form on the temporal structure.”³⁶ Endings confer significance on the interval: without an ending, an interminable series of “ticks,” or “happe” and “aventure” in Julian’s idiom, would follow upon each other shapelessly. We might say that the fiend’s babble represents the threat of “tick, tick, tick,” mere noise without a “tock” to make time meaningful. Organizing time keeps confusion at bay, and to oppose the fiend’s “jangeling,” Julian relies on coherent time, a story with a beginning and an end, as much as on coherent speech. Kermode goes on to acknowledge that stories require more complication than a “tick,” or beginning, and a “tock,” an ending: “*Tick* is a humble genesis, *tock* a feeble apocalypse; and *tick-tock* is in any case not much of a plot. We need much larger ones and much more complicated ones if we persist in finding ‘what will suffice.’”³⁷ What “suffices” for Julian? In some sense, for her the large and complex

Christian story occupies the middle place between “tick” and “tock,” a story that God will complete with his “gret deed,” the cosmic “tock.”

Julian’s “expectation of knowledge that is to come” leads her to argue that while sin may seem inexplicable, like only so much muttering, it is ultimately “behovely.” She wonders why “the beginning of sinne was not letted,” and Christ replies that “Sinne is behovely, but alle shalle be wele, and alle maner of thinge shalle be wel” (209). Watson and Jenkins gloss *behovely* as “necessary or fitting, also good or opportune” (208). The “behovely,” then, fits into a larger design. In his study of Julian’s theology, Turner explains this term by likening it to part of a story. The “behovely,” he writes, “possesses not a law-like intelligibility of the kind that one provides when explaining something against the background of the causal mechanisms and sequences that generate it; the ‘just so’ of the behovely is not that of the scientific prediction that is borne out by events. What generates the expectation that the *conveniens* meets and fulfils is a particular story, the exigencies of a plot that just happens to have turned out in this way or that thus far and, so far as it has got, makes sense of what happens next.”³⁸ For Turner, the “behovely” (or “*conveniens*,” a theological term that Julian’s vocabulary may invoke) is neither determined nor contingent but, rather, something that satisfies a narrative logic. Sin and all the world’s “happe” and “aventure” need not exist, nor are they random and inexplicable: they fit into a story. Julian’s understanding of the “behovely” is part of her faith in a divine narrative, a narrative that she will understand when she arrives at its end. Meanwhile, she remains in the story’s middle, where something more is always about to happen.³⁹ This view sees life as something like a romance quest, which also tends to

delay any clarifying resolution and meanwhile allows its characters to wander in a confusing landscape full of trials.

The “behovely” fits into a scheme but not a readily apparent scheme, just the sort of situation to require an exegete. Kermode ends his study *The Genesis of Secrecy* with comments on interpretation that help us think further about Julian’s faith in the “behovely” and her confrontation with the muttering fiend:

For the world is our beloved codex. We may not see it, as Dante did, in perfect order, gathered by love into one volume; but we do, living as reading, like to think of it as a place where we can travel back and forth at will, divining congruences, conjunctions, opposites; extracting secrets from its secrecy, making understood relations, an appropriate algebra. This is the way we satisfy ourselves with explanations of the unfollowable world—as if it were a structured narrative, of which more might always be said by trained readers of it, by insiders. World and book, it may be, are hopelessly plural, endlessly disappointing; we stand alone before them, aware of their arbitrariness and impenetrability, knowing that they may be narratives only because of our impudent intervention, and susceptible of interpretation only by our hermetic tricks.⁴⁰

The “behovely” makes the world “followable,” to use Kermode’s language. For both Dante and Julian, the world is a “beloved codex . . . gathered by love.” Julian does not present herself as someone with privileged knowledge and would not claim to be an “insider,” but Kermode uses the word *insider* to refer to a literary critic, and Julian’s task

in the *Revelation* largely involves explaining her vision, unpacking the experience she recorded decades earlier in *A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman*. She is, in other words, an exegete, and indeed for Julian “more might always be said” about her revelation, which always contains further “privates” or secrets, much as “trained readers” can always say more about “world and book.” For Julian, this book is indeed a “structured narrative,” a story that contains a secret, a great deed “unknowne of alle creatures which are beneth Crist” that will make everything well. For the critic that Kermode describes and for Julian, “living” and “reading” are inseparable.

But even if Julian acknowledges that she cannot finish interpreting her revelations, she does not maintain that “world and book” are “hopelessly plural, endlessly disappointing.” The fiend represents that position. Where the “behovely” “fits” into a narrative and “makes sense of what happens next,” the muttering demon is an antinarrative impulse, mere nonsense. “Sin,” as Turner writes, “has no coherent narrative.”⁴¹ For Julian, God authors a “coherent narrative,” even if the fallen world is not prepared to follow it; sin, which aligns itself with chaos, cannot tell an intelligible story. For Julian, sin is part of a story but cannot offer one itself. The fiend embodies the threat of “arbitrariness and impenetrability,” two words that could sum up what Julian’s text resists most, and she tries to contain his chaotic energy by fitting him into a narrative, an interpretable framework. Her *Revelation*, then, contains both impulses that Kermode identifies in his comments on interpretation: Dante’s confidence that love binds the book of the world together in “perfect order” and the critic’s insight that that book may be a narrative “only because of our impudent intervention.” Julian registers the power of this second insight, even if she must reject that position in favor of the first.

4.

If the fiend “jangles” and God’s “mening” will elude Julian until the “gret deed,” what is the difference between her difficulties understanding God and her difficulties understanding the fiend? From a human, fallen perspective, God’s plan jangles too, for no one can perceive its structure.⁴² How does Julian distinguish her confusion over divine and diabolical communication? The end of Dante’s journey can offer a way to understand Julian’s interest in oppositions and her inquiry into God’s “mening.” As the poet moves through Paradise, he encounters more perfect language. When he meets Cacciaguida in *Paradiso*, Dante marvels that he cannot understand his ancestor,⁴³ an episode that echoes Hell’s incomprehensible speech. In other ways, too, Paradise continues to regenerate the deteriorated language that the pilgrim has encountered. As Dante navigates the spheres, he hears heavenly choruses rather than demonic cacophony.⁴⁴ The poem’s acrostics also suggest Heaven’s richly significant language, and the silence that Dante finds in Heaven mirrors the infernal quiet.⁴⁵ For Dante, this symmetry makes the book of the world more readable, more “followable.” He can follow the world if Hell inversely mirrors Heaven, for this cosmic arrangement allows him to divine “congruences, conjunctions, opposites,” in Kermode’s vocabulary. Dante sees the world as a pattern, a story, that reflects divine authorship and its plan for creation. He expounds an intricate organization that is anything but “hopelessly plural.”

Julian’s book also ends with a trajectory toward a heavenly chorus, one way that she tries to overcome the world’s “jangeling.” In her final revelation, she imagines the Last Judgment, where the saved celebrate God with one voice: “And then shalle none of

us be stered to sey in ony thing: ‘Lorde, if it had ben thus, it had ben wele.’ But we shalle alle sey with one voice: ‘Lorde, blessed mot thou be, for it is thus, it is wele. And now we see verely that alle thing is done as it was thin ordinance, or ony thing was made’” (379). A celestial choir has drowned out the demonic parliament. The day of doom promises clarity, as we have seen, and this “one voice” is both intelligible and united. “All” participate in this song, and *all* is an important word for Julian: it structures each form of her recurring assertion that “all shall be well and all manner of all thing shall be well.” Anything less than “alle” would let in dissonance. Because all can now “see verily that alle thing is done as it was thin ordinance,” here interpretation is no longer necessary, unlike in the fallen world, where the jangling fiend threatens to make interpreting that “ordinance” impossible to begin with. At the end of Julian’s journey, her commentaries have dissolved into a chorus.

Also like Dante, Julian explores the cosmic harmony by structuring her text around a series of oppositions. “Almost any passage in the *Showings*,” Lynn Staley observes, “yields rich evidence of Julian’s refusal to oppose systems to one another. If she at times distinguishes between modes of knowing, she does not admit any fundamental division.”⁴⁶ For Julian, the bodily and the spiritual, for example, do not contain “any fundamental division.”⁴⁷ Her wordplay gets at this idea: “A man goeth upperight, and the soule of his body is sparede as a purse fulle fair. And whan it is time of his nescessery, it is openede and sparede ayen fulle honestly” (143). Julian puns on *soule*, a word that means both “soul” and, as Watson and Jenkins note, “food or meal” (142). The passage seems to describe both the soul’s relationship to the body and food becoming waste in the digestive system. This pun implies that for Julian the human

reflects more than conflicts with the divine. The diabolical world also reflects God's image, however inversely, for in the *Revelation* the fiend's attributes—his jangling and his appearance—have holy counterparts. Julian's visions of Christ and the devil elicit comparison, for she dwells on their physical characteristics and imagines them both as young men.⁴⁸ The fiend is "a yonge man, and it was longe and wonder leen," a figure with "side lockes hanging on the thonwonges," "whit teth," and "pawes" (333). Earlier she had described Christ's "swete handes" (181) and "skinne and the fleshe that semed of the face and of the body was smalle rumpelde, with a tawny coloure, like a drye bord whan it is aged, and the face more browne than the body" (181, 183). Julian emphasizes Christ's "rumpelde" body as much as she emphasizes the devil's smelly, hairy body. The "red bloud" on Christ even seems to recall the fiend's "red" color (135, 333). Because the *Revelation* describes only these two figures, their parallels seem all the more suggestive. We can also see this logic at work when Julian uses similar words to describe herself and the fiend: both his noise and her rebuttal are "bodely" (as opposed to "ghostly"), and where she is "besy" the demonic parliament is full of "besines." But Julian also implies a difference between her "bodely speech" and the fiend's "bodely jangling," for she cannot liken his noise to any other "bodely bisines." Watson and Jenkins comment that this line "evokes the inverted ineffability of the scene, as far below words and metaphors as the divine is above them" (340). For Julian, as for Dante, human speech occupies a middle realm between diabolic language and divine language. Finally, Julian allows the fiend's jangling to play against her laughter: "Also I saw oure lorde scorne his malis and nought his unmight, and he will that we do so. For this sight, I laught mightely" (171).

Her laugh presages the fiend's noise during his second attack, but here "noise"—the mystic's laugh—signals triumph rather than despair.⁴⁹

Perhaps now we can see more fully why for Julian evil jangles. In the muttering fiend, she encounters heavenly language's unholy double. Julian's apophaticism mirrors the fiend's jangling, much as the fiend's description recalls Christ's or the pun on *soule* connects the bodily and the transcendent. Contradictions and ambiguities, far from undermining Julian's project, allow her to evoke God's incomprehensibility.⁵⁰ They are part of her conviction, even part of her evidence, that dissonance will one day become harmony. For Julian, the very fact, in other words, that the descriptions of the devil and Christ both confront us with their physicality, or that *soule* can mean something both corporeal and divine, implies cosmic design. Her text's anxiety emerges from the possibility that the noisy fiend will make this design unfollowable, and in an effort to overcome him, she must repeatedly divine "congruences, conjunctions, opposites," and those opposites especially suggest an underlying "structured narrative." They affirm that the world is "followable." The interpretive "noise" that Julian encounters—language's slipperiness, the unavoidability of "meanings," inconsistency between church teaching and her personal revelation—does not, then, ultimately coincide with the fiend's "muttering," which suggests that the world is arbitrary and impenetrable. Where Julian puns, the fiend can only jangle.

Notes

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1. Dante, *Inferno*, trans. Jean Hollander and Robert Hollander (New York: Random House, 2000), XXI. 137–39.
 2. *Ibid.*, VII. 1, XXXI. 65.
 3. Jeffrey J. Cohen, “Kyte Oute Yugilment: An Introduction to Medieval Noise,” *Exemplaria* 16, no. 2 (2004): 267–76, at 271.
 4. Marianne Shapiro, “*De Vulgari Eloquentia*”: *Dante’s Book of Exile* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 49. Dante discusses these ideas in book I, iii.1–2.
 5. Julian of Norwich, *The Writings of Julian of Norwich: “A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman” and “A Revelation of Love,”* ed. Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 333; hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by page number.
 6. See, for example, Jay Ruud, “‘I Wolde for Thy Loue Dye’: Julian, Romance Discourse, and the Masculine,” in *Julian of Norwich: A Book of Essays*, ed. Sandra McEntire (New York: Garland, 1998), 183–205; and Judith Dale, “‘Sin Is Behovely’: Art and Theodicy in the Julian Text,” *Mystics Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (1999): 127–46. David F. Tinsley, “Julian’s Diabology,” in McEntire, *Julian of Norwich*, 224, however, argues that the “second assault is more serious. The stench of his presence assails her, fueled, if one gives credence to Gregory’s exegesis, by thoughts of lust. She also hears voices which she cannot understand, but they seem to her ‘as they scorned byddyng of bedys which are

seyde boystosly with moch faylyng' (69.648) ['as if they were mocking the recitation of prayers which are said imperfectly' (Colledge and Walsh 648 n. 8)], thereby invalidating one of the sinner's strongest weapons against possession." I hope to argue that the fiend's noise also invalidates another of Julian's "weapons," her ability to read the world and interpret God's "mening."

7. And appropriately, the fiend seems to have no name, making him perhaps even more threatening to the well-ordered medieval universe. See Dale, "Sin Is Behovely," 131.

8. In hagiography, holy women frequently confound less articulate pagans and demons. For instance, when Saint Frideswide, an Anglo-Saxon saint whose life is recorded in a fourteenth-century manuscript, overcomes a devil, he creates a clamor: "Heo made the croys, and he fley away with noyse and grete cheste." Sherry L. Reames, ed., *Middle English Legends of Women Saints* (Kalamazoo: TEAMS, 2003), 28. Cohen, "Kyte Oute Yugilment," 271, compares Dante's confrontation with Nimrod with Saint Cecilia's confounding of Almachius in the *Second Nun's Tale*. Like Julian's *Revelation*, these texts all represent intelligible speech muffling devilish noise. Also see Elizabeth Petroff, *Body and Soul: Essays on Medieval Women and Mysticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 105, which argues that holy women typically suffer demonic attacks only to become "transformed, gaining the ability to 'read' the events of the world around them."

9. See Zina Petersen, "'Every Manner of Thing Shall Be Well': Mirroring Serenity in the *Shewings* of Julian of Norwich," *Mystics Quarterly* 22, no. 3 (1996): 91–101, at 91: "The remarkable distinguishing feature in the writings of Julian of Norwich is

the tone of deep serenity that emerges even when she is describing the most overwhelming of her visions. She is gentler than most if not all of her past or contemporary Christian thinkers when discussing such topics as the human body, preferring to praise God for the body's functions rather than condemn the flesh as part of the mortal world to be subdued and cast off." Nicholas Watson, "The Trinitarian Hermeneutic in Julian of Norwich's *Revelation of Love*," in McEntire, *Julian of Norwich*, 61–90, at 63, differentiates Julian from Chaucer and Langland by noting her "assurance" and "optimism." Somewhat similarly, Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 195, comments on "Julian of Norwich's need for a God of comfort and mercy beyond justice, a mother God who promises that 'all shall be very, very well.'"

10. Watson, "Trinitarian Hermeneutic in Julian of Norwich's *Revelation of Love*," 63.

11. Michelle Karnes, "Julian of Norwich's Art of Interpretation," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 42, no. 2 (2012): 333–63, at 356.

12. In both the short and long versions of her text, the word *evencristene* contributes to Julian's emphasis on her participation in a community of readers and believers. See, for instance, Julian, *Writings*, 75, 151.

13. Some critics find the demonic presence in Julian's text less threatening. Steven Fanning, "Mitigations of the Fear of Hell and Purgatory: Julian of Norwich and Catherine of Genoa," in *Fear and Its Representations in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, ed. Anne Scott and Cynthia Kosso (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2002), 295–310, argues that Julian's assertion "all shall be well" means to soften the fear of

Hell, in contrast to sterner medieval writers. Julian indeed does not emphasize the punishments that await sinners in the afterlife, and Wolfgang Riehle, *The Secret Within: Hermits, Recluses, and Spiritual Outsiders in Medieval England*, trans. Charity Scott-Stokes (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014), 230, explains that for Julian, sin “causes more pain than hell . . . , so that she, like most other mystics, gives no description of hell.” The threat that the world does not make sense, a possibility that the fiend seems to embody, preoccupies her more than any physical hellish torments.

14. Perhaps unsurprisingly given her interest in removing “meanes,” Julian prays directly to God and avoids intermediaries, rarely mentioning possible intercessors. See Joan M. Nuth, *Wisdom’s Daughter: The Theology of Julian of Norwich* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 158. Julian does rely on Mary’s intercession but invokes saints sparingly.

15. Vincent Gillespie and Maggie Ross, “The Apophatic Image: The Poetics of Effacement in Julian of Norwich,” in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England: Exeter Symposium V*, ed. Marion Glasscoe (Suffolk, U.K.: St. Edmundsbury Press, 1992), 53–77, at 63–64.

16. *The Cloud of Unknowing*, ed. Patrick J. Gallacher (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute, 1997), 65–66.

17. *Ibid.*, 37.

18. Karnes, “Julian of Norwich’s Art of Interpretation,” 346, explains that “although acknowledging the limitations of human understanding, Julian displays a fundamental faith in language. She stands apart from those mystics who bemoan its inadequacies, most famously the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*.”

19. Denys Turner, *Julian of Norwich, Theologian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 25.

20. C. E. Banchich, “Julian of Norwich’s Articulations of Dread,” in *Fear and Its Representations in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, ed. Anne Scott and Cynthia Kosso (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2002), 311–40, at 336.

21. Critics often make this contrast. See, for instance, Denise N. Baker, “Julian of Norwich and the Varieties of Middle English Mystical Discourse,” in *A Companion to Julian of Norwich*, ed. Liz Herbert McAvoy (Suffolk, U.K.: D. S. Brewer, 2008), 53–63, at 61; David Aers and Lynn Staley, *The Powers of the Holy: Religion, Politics, and Gender in Late Medieval English Culture* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 173; and Barry Windeatt, “The Art of Mystical Loving: Julian of Norwich,” in *The Showings of Julian of Norwich*, ed. Denise N. Baker (New York: Norton, 2005), 196–209, at 196–97.

22. See James Simpson, *Reform and Cultural Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 445: “Julian saw it herself, and she is instructed by God, but that ‘self’ is immediately reformulated to include all her fellow Christians, just as what she learns from God is precisely that her learning is common.”

23. *Cloud of Unknowing*, 22.

24. Windeatt, “Art of Mystical Loving,” 197, makes a related observation: “The state of Julian’s inner life is not always something different from her writing, unlike Hilton or the *Cloud author*, who write from an achieved viewpoint on their material in order to instruct a known individual.”

25. Unlike Margery Kempe, who witnesses various moments of Christ's life, Julian continues to extract ideas from variations of the same revelation. Julian's close attention to the cross, though, is not unique. Her theology participates in the fourteenth-century emphasis on Christ's suffering body. See Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 258–59.

26. Nuth, *Wisdom's Daughter*, 39.

27. *Ibid.*, 25.

28. Quoted in Turner, *Julian of Norwich*, 4.

29. Watson, "Trinitarian Hermeneutic in Julian of Norwich's *Revelation of Love*," 100.

30. William Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, ed. A. V. C. Schmidt (London: J. M. Dent, 1995), XIII. 125 (p. 211).

31. Windeatt, "Art of Mystical Loving," 205, discusses this connection: "*Piers Plowman*, like *Pearl*, is often described as being circular in structure, which usefully conveys how the poems (after exploring the issues they raise) return essentially to their starting point, leaving the reader better equipped to begin again."

32. Julian, *Writings*, 157, 225: "But in all thing I beleve as holy church precheth and techeth"; "For I beleved sothfastly that hel and purgatory is for the same ende that holy church techeth for."

33. Roger Ellis and Samuel Fanous, "1349–1412: Texts," in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Mysticism*, ed. Samuel Fanous and Vincent Gillespie (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 133–62, at 152.

34. Robert E. Wright, "The 'Boke Performyd': Affective Technique and Reader Response in the *Showings* of Julian of Norwich," *Christianity and Literature* 36, no. 4 (1987): 13–32, at 28.

35. See Diane Watt, "Saint Julian of the Apocalypse," in *A Companion to Julian of Norwich*, ed. Liz Herbert McAvoy (Suffolk, U.K.: D. S. Brewer, 2008), 64–74, at 74.

36. Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 45.

37. Ibid.

38. Turner, *Julian of Norwich*, 43–44.

39. Ibid., 65–66.

40. Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 145.

41. Turner, *Julian of Norwich*, 65.

42. Mystics had to guard against false revelations, for visions could just as easily come from the devil as from God. "Truth and error co-exist at every stage of the spiritual process," Ellis and Fanous explain: "What contemplatives think they understand may, on closer scrutiny, turn out to be an illusion" ("1349–1412," 151). As Riehle, *Secret Within*, 212, observes, however, Julian does not worry about this possibility. But perhaps this traditional concern manifests itself as her concern about the fiend's jangling. Julian, in other words, does not worry that her vision is false but, rather, that the world defies explanation.

43. Dante, *Paradiso*, trans. Jean Hollander and Robert Hollander (New York: Random House, 2007), XV. 38–42.

44. In his commentary on *Paradiso*, Robert Hollander documents “a profusion of hymns in this heaven . . . six musical outbursts in all.” *Ibid.*, 672.

45. Turner, *Julian of Norwich*, 114.

46. Aers and Staley, *Powers of the Holy*, 177. Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*, 238, finds a similar logic at work in Hildegard of Bingen’s writings: “Like any living metaphors, Hildegard’s tropes are patient of inversion. This is particularly true of Ecclesia’s femininity, which makes her not only virginal and fertile but also highly vulnerable to corruption. Despite the tower of the Spirit, which is her eternal security, the joyful mother can become a sorrowful mother in history, and the virgin bride can be ravished.” The idea also structures parts of *Piers Plowman*. Meed, for instance, can become both just reward and bribe. Turner, *Julian of Norwich*, 194, explains that this doubleness is a symptom of the fallen world: “As fallen beings, we are conflicted. As conflicted beings, necessarily we construe the world, ourselves, God, and the relationships between all in conflicted, fractured, and dualistic terms.”

47. Riehle, *Secret Within*, 220, argues that Julian “draws a novel conclusion from divine incarnation: since God descended not only into human substance, but also into human sensuality, and even dwelt in it, sensuality, most remarkably, can no longer be considered the chief cause of sin.”

48. Dale, “Sin Is Behovely,” 133.

49. In Margery Kempe’s text, “noise” also functions positively. Zina Petersen, “Authoritative Noise: Margery Kempe’s Appropriation of Unique Ritual and Authority,” *Magistra* 8, no. 2 (2002): 84–118, explains that Kempe’s weeping bolsters her claims to authority.

50. Cynthea Masson, “The Point of Coincidence: Rhetoric and the Apophatic in Julian of Norwich’s *Showings*,” in McEntire, *Julian of Norwich*, 153–81, at 174, argues that Julian uses oppositions to evoke this ineffability: “The rhetoric of opposites remains, from beginning to end, a crucial structuring device in the *Showings*. Julian cannot fully represent God; she can, however, rhetorically reconstruct the coincidence of opposites—a concept rooted in Christ, the embodiment of coincidence between the human and the divine.”