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Imagination and knowledge in Denise Levertov's "The Showings: Lady Julian of Norwich, 1342 – 1416"[1]

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Abstract:
Christian spirituality, Biblical characters, stories and images, and questions of faith have been a powerful fountain of inspiration for the British-American poet Denise Levertov (1923-1997). Strongly influenced by the thought on poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke, Levertov believed in the "experiential"

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dimension of a poet's vocation, the direct connection between what the writer feels through (experiences) and their creative work. This paper focuses on Levertov's poetic sequence "The Showings: Lady Julian of Norwich, 1342-1416", published in the collection Breathing the Water *(1987). "The Showings: Lady Julian of Norwich, 1342-1416" is the poet's personal response to the medieval mystical text known as* Revelations of Divine Love, *written by the English anchoress and mystic Julian of Norwich. The paper seeks to explore how Levertov approaches Julian's text and how she interprets its relevance for modern readers. Special attention is given to the concept of imagination, which, according to Levertov, is the perceptive organ through which it is possible, though not inevitable, to experience God.*

"Intelligence can never penetrate the mystery, but it, and it alone, can judge of the suitability of the words which express it. For this task it needs to be keener, more discerning, more precise, more exact, and more exacting than for any other." (Weil, 1952, p. 185)

Introduction

The present paper focuses on Denise Levertov's poetic sequence "The Showings: Lady Julian of Norwich, 1342-1416", published in the collection *Breathing the Water* (1987). The poem is Levertov's personal response to the medieval mystical text known as *Revelations of Divine Love* written between the 14th and 15th centuries by the English anchoress and mystic Julian of Norwich. Levertov's poetic reimagining and retelling of Julian's text introduces the poet's personal doubts, questions and statements of faith which were on her mind over a long period of time. The paper first introduces the biographical and poetical context within which *Breathing the Water*, and the studied poem in particular, appeared. After that, it presents the key ideas of the mysticism of Julian of Norwich, dealing primarily with the themes relevant for the understanding of Levertov's poem. The aim of the paper is to explore how Levertov interprets and responds to Julian's mystical experiences and how she makes them relevant for modern readers. Special attention is given to the concept of imagination, which had unique importance for Levertov as she believed it to be "the perceptive organ through which it is possible, though not inevitable, to experience God".

Denise Levertov and writing that enfaiths

"The actual feeling, the excitement, has essential value to the mystic; once the experience has been passed into the crucible of conceptual thought, and the emotional side of it neutralise, it has also been largely sterilised, from his standpoint", wrote Paul P. Levertoff in his book *Love and the Messianic Age* (1923, p. 2). His aim with the book was "to prove that traditional orthodox Judaism has no lack of spiritual fervour" (ibid., p. vii), by which is meant mystical fervour, "a knowledge of the inner being of God" (ibid., p. 2). The preface of the book is dated to St. Matthew's Day, 21 September. About a month later, on 24 October 1923, Paul Levertoff's

second daughter Denise was born. Paul P. Levertoff, a Russian Hasidic Jew who converted to Christianity, was a well-read scholar of Jewish and Christian mysticism, which, combined with his love of poetry,[i] had a crucial influence on the thought and literary work of his daughter Denise Levertov.[ii] As Edward Zlotkowski observes, "Given the fact that the Levertoff household was indeed Christian, as well as the fact that it would be to Christianity that Levertov would later return, the Christian elements in her childhood environment carry special importance. Nevertheless, they were not the only sources of religious influence. Hasidic attitudes and references also formed a part of the child's imaginative world" (1992, p. 464). Although Levertov always used Biblical images in her poems and "the celebration of mystery" […] was "the most consistent theme of her poetry from the very beginning" (Green, 2012, p. 144), the poems crucial to trace the growth of her faith were included in *Candles in Babylon* (1982) and *Oblique Prayers* (1984).

Levertov's journey to faith, from agnosticism to Christianity, was a gradual process of self-exploration, self-reflection and seeking,[iii] and writing poetry played an important role in it. For instance, *Candles in Babylon* contains the poem "Mass for the Day of St. Thomas Didymus", which Levertov began writing in October 1979. The poem began as "an experiment in structure" (1992, p. 249), inspired by a choral recital the poet attended, which consisted of parts of Masses from different historical periods. Admiring the concert as "a composed entity", she tried the same experiment in the poetic form, "basing each part on what seemed its primal character: the Kyrie a cry for mercy, the Gloria a praise-song, the Credo an individual assertion" (1992, p. 250). Initially conceived as "an agnostic Mass", the poem evolved into a different project altogether (ibid.): "When I had arrived at the Agnus Dei, I discovered myself to be in a different relationship to the material and to the liturgical form from that in which I had begun. The experience of writing the poem – that long swim through waters of unknown depths – had been also a conversion process".

In her 1990 essay "Work That Enfaiths", Levertov mentions several poems the writing of which helped her clarify and strengthen her faith: "Mass for the Day of St. Thomas Didymus", but also "The Task", and the poems inspired by Levertov's reading of Julian of Norwich and the Gospel (1992, p. 253). The poetic sequence "The Showings: Lady Julian of Norwich, 1342-1416" thus belongs to the time when Levertov was actively seeking answers to the questions regarding her beliefs by reading spiritual literature, including mystical authors such as Julian of Norwich, and building up her faith through writing poems.

Denise Levertov and Julian of Norwich

Julian of Norwich, born around 1342, is one of the most celebrated English mystics of the 15th century. Despite her prominence in spiritual history, little is known about her life, including her birth name – she is referred to as "Julian" because she lived as an anchoress at St. Julian's Church in Norwich. As an anchoress, she led a life of seclusion, devoted to prayer and contemplation. Julian's significant contribution to Christian contemplative literature, *Revelations of Divine Love*,[iv] was written after a series of intense visions during an illness in 1373, when she was around 30 years old. These 16 mystical visions, or "showings", profoundly influenced her theology and spirituality.

Julian's *Revelations of Divine Love* offers a unique and optimistic view of God's nature, emphasizing His love and mercy over wrath and judgment. Central to her visions is the image of Christ as a loving, nurturing mother, which challenges and expands traditional Christian imagery. Her notion of God's "motherhood" reflects a deep understanding of the divine's nurturing, life-giving qualities. A key concept in Julian's work is "oneing", which describes the mystical union between the soul and God. Julian presents this union not as a distant goal but as an ever-present reality, accessible through love and grace. Her emphasis on God's unconditional love and the idea that "All shall be well" provided solace during a time of widespread suffering and fear, including the Black Death and social upheaval in medieval England. Julian's visions have had a lasting impact on Christian mysticism. Her work has inspired countless theologians, writers, and spiritual seekers, particularly in its portrayal of a compassionate and intimate relationship with the divine. Julian's theology stands out for its hopefulness and for its focus on the immediacy of God's love, making her one of the most revered mystics in Christian history.

According to Donna Krolik Hollenberg, poems about Julian of Norwich were of supreme importance for Levertov and marked "revolution in her spiritual development" (2013, p. 362). Levertov first read Julian's *Showings* in 1983 (Green, 2012, p. 178) and two years later, she visited Norwich, which left a strong impression on her and intensified her interest in the mystic's experience.

Evidence of Levertov's inspiration by Julian can be seen already in her collection *Candles in Babylon* (1982). In its last poem "The Many Mansions", which follows after "Mass for the Day of St. Thomas Didymus", the speaker shows us "the world of the white herons / complete to the last hair of pondweed, a world the size of an apple" (1982, p. 116), reminding us of Julian's vision of "something small, no bigger than a hazelnut" (1901, p. 130). Julian's hazelnut represented "everything which is made" (ibid.), which, although small and seemingly

fragile, “lasts and always will, because God loves it; and thus everything has being through the love of God” (ibid.). Levertov’s world of the white herons, “perfect and undefiled, with its own sky, its air, / flora and fauna, distance, mysteries” (1982, p. 116), appears as a beam of hope in the collection the last part of which is entitled “Age of Terror”. While the words such as “terror”, “dread”, “war” and “death” occur in several poems in the collection, the poet laments “the tortured planet the ancients / say is our mother” (ibid., p. 87) and responds to political crisis of her time, there is also a voice of hope, albeit quiet, which sometimes alludes into mysticism: “our hope lies / in the unknown / in our unknowing” (“Mass for the Day of St. Thomas Dydimus”, p. 109). Levertov’s vision does not end with the world of the white herons, but the poet continues, “that it was not a fragile, only, other world, / there were, there are (I learned) a host, / each unique, yet each having/ the grace of recapitulating / a single radiance, multiform” (1982, p. 116). The poem thus brings forward the voice of a “modern Julian”, a mystic who recognizes, amidst the pains and horrors of today’s world, authentic hope and the importance of its sharing with others, “passing from hand to hand, although / its clarity dwindles in our confusion, / the amulet of mercy” (ibid.).

“The Task”, published in *Oblique Prayers* (1984), was, according to Levertov, partially inspired by her reading of Julian, in particular by the sentence “All shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well” which God addressed to Julian. This optimism was difficult to accept, both for Julian and for Levertov. The poet’s response is eventually also full of hope, and in the poem she creates a central image of a lonely God, a weaver who is “busy at the loom”, “absorbed in work”, and “hurries on” (Levertov in Lacey and Dewey, 2013, p. 729), “intent on creating harmony" (Hollenberg, 2013, p. 325). The weaver-God in “The Task” represents not only divine involvement but also the relentless forward motion of creation – much like Julian’s vision of God as a constant, nurturing presence in the world, interwoven with everything that exists, when she writes: “He is our clothing that for love wrappeth us, claspeth us, and all encloseth us for tender love, that He may never leave us” (Julian of Norwich, 1901, p. 10).[v] As the poem finishes, Levertov seems to accept the paradox of suffering and faith: even in the face of loneliness, terror, and uncertainty, God’s work continues, “intent on creating harmony”. This image aligns with Julian’s ultimate message of hope: “All shall be well.” Yet, for both women, this hope is not naive but hard-won – a belief in divine love despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. In Levertov’s poetic universe, much as in Julian’s mystical visions, the divine is intricately involved in the details of existence, constantly working towards the ultimate good, even when that good is difficult to perceive. The weaver-God “hurries on”, absorbed in the task of creating harmony, reflecting both the labour and the love embedded in divine creation.

Levertov's conclusion thus resonates with Julian's theology, affirming that while the world may appear chaotic, it is undergirded by a divine purpose – one that is not immediately visible, but steadily and lovingly woven into the fabric of existence.

Levertov's poem "The Servant-Girl at Emmaus (A Painting by Velazquez)" published in *Breathing the Water* (1987) also resonates with Julian's mysticism, embodying the notion of God's immanence in simple moments. Just as Julian finds profound meaning in the hazelnut, Levertov captures a divine presence in the ordinary, describing the servant girl as "leaning on her broom, gazing at / the miraculous bread" (1987, p. 82). Both writers see God's essence in small, seemingly mundane details, offering readers glimpses of the divine in everyday life.[vi]

"The Showings"

While "The Many Mansions", "The Task" and "The Servant-Girl at Emmaus (A Painting by Velazquez)" can be read without the reader's familiarity with the writings of Julian of Norwich, the poem "On a Theme from Julian's Chapter XX" and the poetic sequence "The Showings: Lady Julian of Norwich, 1342-1416"[vii] in *Breathing the Water* respond to Julian's work much more directly, as it is obvious already from their titles, and rely significantly on the reader's knowledge of the original text.

In the following analysis and interpretation of "The Showings: Lady Julian of Norwich, 1342-1416", we attempt to highlight specific features and literary qualities of Levertov's poetic response to Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love*, paying attention to identifying intertextual links between Julian's and Levertov's texts and reflecting critically on the latter.

Julian of Norwich in chapter 4 of the Short Version of her text confesses: "Everything that I say about myself I mean to apply to all my fellow Christians, for I am taught that this is what our Lord intends in this spiritual revelation" (1978, p. 133). This universal appeal of Julian's visions is mentioned repeatedly by her critics. John Trinick, for example, in his essay on Julian, writes admirably about the mystic and her book: "In […] the *Revelations of Divine Love*, we may experience the privilege of contact with a personality of singular and most loveable fragrance, burning with the steady glow of an intense concern for her 'even-Christian' – of whatsoever time, her own or the far future – for whose sake alone it is that she writes" (1955, p. 207). Similarly, in his preface to Julian's *Showings* Jean Leclercq claims that "Her teaching is timeless, meeting some of the urgent needs of those seeking God in our age and answering many of the crucial problems of spiritual development and contemplative consciousness" (1978, p. 1).

Once this idea of timelessness of Julian's visions is *fully* accepted, the text acquires, in a certain sense, a prophetic quality.[viii] According to M. Colman O'Dell, "Authentic prophecy always addresses people in a concrete historical situation" (1984, p. 86). Many scholars argue that while Julian's texts do not explicitly reference specific historical events, they are deeply influenced by the social and religious upheavals of her time, such as the Black Death, the Hundred Years' War, and widespread social unrest. Critics like Grace M. Jantzen (1987) and Denys Turner (2011) have pointed out that Julian's visions and theological reflections offer spiritual solace and hope to a society ravaged by suffering and fear. Similarly, Levertov responds to these same themes in her poetic reimagining of Julian's experiences when she writes:

> *She lived in dark time, as we do:*
> *war, and the Black Death, hunger, strife,*
> *torture, massacre. She knew*
> *all of this, she felt it*
> *sorrowfully, mournfully,*
> *shaken as men shake*
> *a cloth in the wind.*[ix] (Levertov in Lacey and Dewey, 2013, p. 778)

Mentioning the similarities between Julian's time and the late 20th century, Levertov suggests that Julian's vision, albeit experienced and written several centuries ago, may speak with the same strength and hope to the man in the modern time of crisis. To put it slightly differently, "Julian turns our eyes from looking *on* her to looking *with* her on the Revelation of Divine Love" (Warrack, 1901, p. xxx). Julian's vision of God's love becomes not merely a distant hope for the modern man, but an active, continuous reality.[x]

To understand Julian's vision, which is essentially embedded in 14th-century spiritual, cultural and social conventions, may represent a significant challenge for the modern reader. According to Margot H. King, "If we believe that there is something to be learned from the medieval mystics, *we must somehow learn to inhabit their universe*, to see the other world not as something alien to us" (1984, p. 149, emphases by the authors of the paper). Levertov addresses these challenges in her own way, relying on the specific means and tools that the use of the poetic language, or, in Levertov's thought, imagination, provides. As she explained in her essay "A Poet's View" (1984), "the imagination, which synergizes intellect, emotion and instinct, is the perceptive organ through which it is possible, though not inevitable, to experience God" (in Levertov, 1992, p. 246).[xi]

Julian's "homely images and metaphors whose concreteness helps us to see what she saw" (Bodo, 2007, p. 50) appealed strongly to Denise Levertov's imagination.[xii] Yet, it is important to point out that Levertov is quite selective in her choice of ideas taken directly from or inspired by Julian's text and to which she responds imaginatively. In the following text we explore how Levertov's "The Showings: Lady Julian of Norwich, 1342-1416" elaborates on two features of Julian's original text: 1) the mystical vision of "a little thing, the size of a hazelnut", an iconic and likely the most well-known image of Julian's writings, to which is closely related the message of God's immense love, and 2) biographical details about Julian.

Julian's hazelnut imagery in Levertov's poetic sequence

In *Revelations of Divine Love*, Julian of Norwich offers a powerful and enduring image in Chapter 5 that has captivated readers and mystics for centuries: the vision of a hazelnut. In this vision, Julian describes: "And in this He showed me a little thing, the size of a hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand, and it was as round as any ball. I looked upon it with the eye of my understanding, and thought, 'What may this be?' And it was generally answered thus: 'It is all that is made'" (*Revelations*, Chapter 5). The hazelnut, representing all of creation, highlights the smallness and fragility of the world, prompting Julian to marvel at how something so insignificant could endure. She wonders how such a small thing can continue to exist and is answered with a profound theological truth: "It lasts and ever shall, for God loves it. And so have all things their beginning by the love of God" (*Revelations*, Chapter 5).

This revelation is crucial for Julian's mysticism, which emphasizes divine love as the sustaining force behind all creation. The hazelnut, small and vulnerable, symbolizes the entirety of creation, which exists and endures solely because of God's love.

Levertov draws significantly on this hazelnut imagery in her poem sequence "The Showings: Lady Julian of Norwich, 1342-1416", in particular in parts 1 and 4. Part 1 of the sequence begins with the speaker addressing Julian and "challenging" the mystic with the modern notion of black holes: "Julian, there are vast gaps we call black holes, / unable to picture what's both dense and vacant" (Levertov in Lacey and Dewey, 2013, p. 773).

Levertov's mention of the black holes and of the limits of human language to describe the phenomena of modern astrophysics and nuclear physics, may be seen as her attempt to suggest commonality between the secular scientific worldview and mystical experiences noticed by philosophers and scientists. Levertov's image of the black hole creates a powerful juxtaposition to Julian's image of a hazelnut. Both allude to the macrocosmic imagery of the universe before which the man – the poet, the mystic and the scientist – stands, in his current

knowledge, in awe, wonder and silence. As Andri Snaer Magnason writes, "No scientist has ever seen a black hole, which can have the mass of millions of suns and can completely absorb light. The way to detect black holes is to look past them, to look at nearby nebulae and stars" (2022, p. 10). We cannot fully grasp the concept of black holes, "to picture what's both dense and vacant", and, similarly difficult, the poet suggests, is for us to see "*a little thing, the size of a hazelnut*, and believe / it is our world" (Levertov in Lacey and Dewey, 2013, p. 774).[xiii]

In *The Showings*, Levertov reinterprets Julian's vision, seeing the hazelnut as a symbol not only of divine love but of the perceptive power of imagination. For Levertov, imagination is essential for perceiving divine truths hidden in the ordinary. In her essay *A Poet's View*, she writes: "The imagination, which synergizes intellect, emotion, and instinct, is the perceptive organ through which it is possible, though not inevitable, to experience God" (Levertov, 1992, p. 246). From the very beginning of her poetic sequence, the poet draws attention to the significance of imagination, of the inner and outer vision by words related to the vision, sight and imagination itself, such as "to picture", "imagined", "to imagine", "gaze", and "to see". From Levertov's perspective, imagination plays a central role in man's attempt to express experience and phenomena which lie beyond rationality and logic.

Understanding of imagination as a perceptive organ is central to Levertov's interpretation of Julian's hazelnut. Just as Julian sees divine love in the small and seemingly insignificant object, Levertov's poetry urges readers to look beyond the surface of everyday life and perceive the divine in all things, no matter how fragile or transient. In *The Showings*, Levertov extends the hazelnut metaphor, calling it a "macrocosmic egg" that "seems / in its complete roundness to contain all space / yet is itself contained" (*The Showings*, Part 5). This description highlights the paradoxical nature of creation – how something so small can hold vastness and divine meaning. Levertov's imaginative reflection on the hazelnut emphasizes that even the smallest part of creation reflects the grandeur of divine love.[xiv] Levertov emphasizes the smallness and fragility of the hazelnut, echoing Julian's awe at how it could persist. However, the poet introduces a contemporary concern, highlighting the challenge of recognizing divine care in a world filled with suffering and uncertainty. For both Julian and Levertov, the hazelnut represents fragility – the vulnerability of creation – but also endurance, as it is sustained by love.

A crucial aspect of both Julian's theology and Levertov's poetry is the concept of oneing – the mystical union between the soul and God. In *Revelations*, Julian writes: "Our soul is oned to him unchangeably, and he never leaves the soul" (*Revelations*, Chapter 53). This continuous union between the soul and God is fundamental to the mystic's understanding of divine love.

She sees this union not as a distant goal but as a present reality, in which every part of creation, symbolized by the hazelnut, is held in oneness with God.

Levertov builds on this idea of oneing in her poetry. The hazelnut, in its smallness, represents not only the whole of creation but the intimate connection between creation and the divine. In "On a Theme from Julian's Chapter XX", Levertov returns to Julian's vision of divine love and the assurance that "all shall be well." She writes: "...God's wounded hand reached out to place in the entire world—'round as a ball, small as a hazelnut'..." ("On a Theme from Julian's Chapter XX"). Here, Levertov connects the hazelnut to Christ's suffering, represented by God's "wounded hand". This image deepens the concept of oneing, suggesting that the union between God and creation is not separate from suffering but made possible through it. Levertov's use of this imagery reflects how divine love encompasses even the most painful parts of existence, uniting all creation with God. In both Julian's and Levertov's work, the hazelnut serves as a symbol of the oneing of creation with God. Julian's vision of the hazelnut, sustained by love, becomes in Levertov's poetry a metaphor for the mystical union that holds all things together, even in the face of doubt and suffering.

The hazelnut imagery from Julian of Norwich's *Revelations*, Chapter 5, plays a pivotal role in both her mysticism and Levertov's poetic reimagining. For Julian, the hazelnut represents the fragility of creation, but also its endurance through divine love. Levertov deepens this metaphor by exploring the role of imagination in perceiving these truths and by connecting the hazelnut to the concept of oneing – the intimate union between creation and God.[xv]

Lady Julian's life reimagined

The scarcity of biographical material about Julian presents a particular challenge for the modern reader who may find the medieval attitude of the mystic's humble anonymity culturally distant. Modern sentiment, which values the individual, contrasts with the religious worldview of Julian's age which emphasized man's insignificance and praised the complete submission and utter abandonment of the individual to God, in the imitation of the life and passion of Jesus Christ.

Levertov's poetic sequence mentions some facts which are known about Julian's life (e.g. "Thirty was older than it is now./ She had not married" (Levertov in Lacey and Dewey, 2013, p. 774), "she had two serving-maids, Alice and Sara,/ and kept a cat, and looked God in the face/ and lived" (p. 778)), and at the same time, the poet adds new, unique biographical scenes, which are primarily related to Julian's childhood.

"I understood none higher stature in this life than Childhood, in feebleness and failing of might and of wit" (1901, p. 159), wrote Julian in *Revelations*. As a response, Levertov's poetic sequence pays particular attention to this time in Julian's life. It has been noted already that for the poet, imagination is the key to understanding. Thus, to introduce the readers to Julian, Levertov writes: "To understand her, you must imagine…" (Levertov in Lacey and Dewey, 2013, p. 775). The images of home, its safety and comfort ("the dairy's bowls of clabber", "rich cream", "a cake of butter", "the swinging gate"), blend with the pleasant imagery of the natural world ("the midsummer gold", "humming of dandelions", the cuckoo, calves in the fields, the shepherd taking sheep to the pasture), and with those which belong to faith and religion (glass windows in the church, the cross, the Christ image).

In her interview with Emily Archer (1997), Levertov explained that her descriptions of Julian's childhood were inspired by her visit to a 14th-century farm in Wales: "It was a beautiful old Elizabethan stone farmhouse, and it was sunny, mid-summer weather, and going into the dairy there with its big flagstone floors, big slabs of slate, it was so cool in there, and the contrast of running in and out…". Using her own memories in combination with some fully imagined parts, Levertov not only reconstructs Julian's environment but also bridges the gap between the medieval mystic and the modern reader. By rooting Julian's mystical experiences in a tangible, familiar setting, Levertov allows contemporary readers to imagine the foundations of Julian's spirituality through accessible, everyday moments. This approach reflects Levertov's broader poetic practice of intertwining the sacred with the ordinary, suggesting that profound spiritual insights can arise from simple, sensory experiences. Her descriptions evoke a sense of intimacy and warmth, making Julian's later revelations feel more grounded in her early, lived experiences.

These homely and positive images from Julian's childhood are further expanded in part 4, where Levertov explores the *possible* source of the hazelnut imagery used in Julian's *Revelations*. Recognizing childhood as a formative phase of man's life, Levertov imagines that the roots of Julian's mystical experience might be traced back to her childhood, to her mother and brother: "her mother might have given / into her two cupped palms / a newlaid egg, warm from the hen; / just so her brother / risked to her solemn joy / his delicate treasure, / a sparrow's egg from the hedgerow" (Levertov in Lacey and Dewey, 2013, p. 776).

By imagining that Julian's vision has its *real* roots in her memories, Levertov does not discredit or devalue the authenticity of Julian's vision, but rather implies the intricacies of the mystical experience in which the ordinary *lived* experience may provide the mystic with the language and images to express the inexpressible.

In the following verses, Levertov connects several ideas mentioned before, as she weaves Julian's childhood, the hazelnut image and the world of modern readers:

> *God for a moment in our history*
> *placed in that five-fingered*
> *human nest*
> *the macrocosmic egg, sublime paradox,*
> *brown hazelnut of All that Is –*
> *made, and belov'd, and preserved.*
> *As still, waking each day within*
> *our microcosm, we find it, and ourselves.* (Levertov in Lacey and Dewey, 2013, p. 776)

In the scene above, little Julian receives an egg from her mother and/or from her brother. In these lines, Levertov expands on this and places it within the context of her own interpretation of Julian's vision. In using the image of "the macrocosmic egg", Levertov relies on a powerful universal symbol of life, fertility and femininity, which can relate to the mystic's image of God/Christ as a loving, nurturing mother. Levertov's choice of the egg is intentional, invoking its symbolic resonance within both spiritual and literary traditions. The egg, as a symbol of creation and potential, recalls the broader cosmic themes explored in both Levertov's and Julian's writings. The imagery of an egg, much like Julian's hazelnut, encompasses all creation. As Julian reflects on her vision, she holds a hazelnut in her hand and writes, "I saw that it is all that is made" (*Revelations of Divine Love*, Chapter 5). Similarly, Levertov's use of the egg signifies the encapsulation of life and creation, drawing attention to how something small can represent the entire cosmos and be sustained by divine love. Levertov's egg metaphor aligns also with Julian's maternal theology, where Christ is described as "our true Mother" who "feeds us with Himself" (*Revelations of Divine Love,* Chapter 60). By likening God/Christ to a mother, Julian introduces a nurturing dimension to divine love. Levertov builds upon this concept, using the egg as a physical manifestation of this nurturing aspect. In Levertov's work, the egg becomes a vessel for the feminine qualities of life-giving and protection, echoing Julian's emphasis on the maternal nature of Christ. The imagery of the egg thus deepens Levertov's reflection on Julian's vision, as it both contains and sustains life, just as the hazelnut does in Julian's vision. Levertov's interpretation of the egg also reflects her broader engagement with feminist spirituality. Through the egg, she engages the reader's imagination to perceive the

divine in the everyday, just as Julian's hazelnut draws the mystic closer to understanding God's infinite love. The egg, like the hazelnut, becomes a small but profound object through which divine truth is revealed, embodying both fragility and boundless potential. This symbolic parallel between the egg and Julian's hazelnut reinforces the mystical connection between the physical and spiritual realms. As Julian writes, "In this little thing I saw three properties: the first is that God made it, the second is that God loves it, and the third is that God keeps it" (*Revelations of Divine Love*, Chapter 5). In Levertov's interpretation, the egg similarly represents something small yet precious, continually created, loved, and sustained by divine power. By expanding on this symbol, Levertov brings Julian's vision into a contemporary context, allowing modern readers to connect with the timelessness of Julian's mystical insights. In the last two lines, Levertov suggests why Julian's vision continues to resonate today. It is important to notice how the poet crafts these lines, how they are evocative rather than precise. Thus, "still" can be understood both as an adjective (motionless, suggestive of prayer or a peaceful state of mind) and an adverb (until now). This duality creates a rich ambiguity, inviting readers to engage with the text on multiple levels. By utilizing "still" in this way, Levertov invokes a sense of timelessness in Julian's insights, suggesting that her mystical visions continue to resonate across centuries. The phrase "waking each day within" can be interpreted as standing separately, emphasizing the act of daily "internal" spiritual awakening. This interpretation aligns with Julian's understanding of spirituality as a continuous journey rather than a singular event. Julian writes in *Revelations of Divine Love*, "He shows me that we are all one, and this realization is for the soul to know in every moment of time" (Chapter 10). Levertov echoes this idea of daily awakening, suggesting that spiritual growth is an ongoing process, one that requires active participation in the present moment.

Alternatively, the phrase can be connected to "our microcosm", reinforcing the intimate relationship between individual experiences and the broader cosmos. The term "microcosm" implies that each person embodies a reflection of the greater universe, resonating with Julian's notion that "the whole of creation is contained within the smallest thing" (*Revelations of Divine Love*, Chapter 5). This connection emphasizes how Julian's mystical visions speak not only to her own experiences but also to those of every individual, affirming the relevance of her insights in contemporary spiritual contexts.

Levertov's evocation of both personal awakening and universal connection invites readers to reflect on their own spiritual journeys. By framing Julian's vision as a source of enduring truth, Levertov highlights the power of mystical experiences to transcend time and space, urging readers to embrace their own "internal" awakenings in their daily lives. The

richness of Levertov's language, combined with her ability to draw from Julian's profound insights, underscores the lasting impact of Julian's mystical theology on modern spirituality.

From creation to redemption

The sixth part, which is the final part of the sequence, contains a culmination of Levertov's response to Julian's *Revelations*. At its very end, we find expressed what we believe is for Levertov the central question of the whole text and, we may assume, also of the poet's own spiritual seeking.

Levertov expresses a great admiration for the mystic's "certainty/ of infinite mercy" (Levertov in Lacey and Dewey, 2013, p. 778), which Julian might have had as she witnessed the vision with her own eyes, "with outward sight/ in your small room, with inward sight/ in your untrammelled spirit" (ibid.). This certainty of faith/God/infinite mercy, together with the personal acquaintance with God such as Julian experienced, is what the speaker of the poem (or the poet herself), does not possess, and her longing after it finishes the whole text of the sequence: "knowledge we long to share:/ *Love was his meaning*" (ibid.).[xvi]

Levertov's choice of the verb "long" (instead of, for instance, "hope", "wish" or "desire") carries a special significance, if seen within the context of Julian's original text. In Julian's *Revelations*, the mystic writes: "I conceived a mighty desire to receive three wounds in my life: that is to say, the wound of very contrition, the wound of kind compassion, and the wound of steadfast longing toward God" (1901, p. 5). Levertov's *longing* to share Julian's knowledge echoes Julian's own desire of longing after God. Both can be viewed as "wounds": in the mystic's case "longing" expresses the evidence of God's love, in the poet's case, an absence of firm knowledge. Thanks to her choice of the verb "long", Levertov's ending of the text can be interpreted positively. From the perspective of the common paradox in mystical experience, the absence of God is the evidence of His Presence. Longing becomes an act of faith and hope. God's love is always seeking and saving, as it has been expressed by Julian: "This vision was shown to me to teach me to understand that every man needs to experience this, to be comforted at one time, and at another to fail and to be left to himself. God wishes us to know that he keeps us safe all the time, in joy and in sorrow, and that he loves us as much in sorrow as in joy. And sometimes a man is left to himself for the profit of his soul, and neither the one nor the other is caused by sin" (1978, p. 140).

Julian's acknowledgment of the necessity of experiencing both comfort and desolation reflects a profound understanding of the human condition, suggesting that such experiences are integral to the spiritual journey. This idea resonates with Levertov's exploration of longing,

wherein the act itself is framed not merely as a passive yearning but as an active engagement with the divine. As Levertov writes, “Longing is the way we are drawn to the presence of God” (1987, p. 87). This notion of longing as a dynamic process emphasizes the belief that such desire is an inherent part of faith, transforming absence into an opportunity for spiritual growth.

Moreover, Levertov’s poetic language serves to deepen this understanding, illustrating how longing can act as a spiritual compass. She notes, “It is in the ache of longing that we find the pulse of faith, resonating through our lives like a whispered promise” (1987, p. 95). This sentiment aligns closely with Julian’s assertion that God permits solitude for the benefit of the soul, “for the profit of his soul” (1978, p. 140). Both writers emphasize that moments of absence or struggle can lead to profound revelations about divine love and connection.

Levertov’s interpretation of longing encourages readers to embrace their own experiences of desire and struggle as valid components of their spiritual lives. In a world where the search for God can feel fraught with uncertainty, Levertov highlights that longing is not a deficiency but a meaningful aspect of faith. She reflects, “In our yearning lies the seed of hope, waiting to be nurtured into understanding” (1987, p. 92).

Ultimately, both Julian and Levertov articulate a vision of spirituality that acknowledges longing as a vital aspect of the human experience. By illuminating the interplay between absence and presence, Levertov enriches our understanding of faith as a dynamic journey, affirming that the desire for God is a universal thread woven through the tapestry of existence. As Julian eloquently states, “In this little thing I saw three properties: the first is that God made it, the second is that God loves it, and the third is that God keeps it” (1978, p. 130). In this way, both writers affirm that the experience of longing ultimately leads to a deeper, more intimate connection with the divine, making their insights relevant for seekers of all ages.

Conclusion

For the modern reader, the mystical vision of Julian of Norwich may seem to be part of a medieval universe culturally distant from our own. Denise Levertov, as a poet and spiritual seeker, took the mystic’s text and responded to it from her unique, late-20th-century perspective. Through her poetic sequence, Levertov becomes a mediator, an interpreter of Julian’s actual experience received directly from God, for the modern reader. Although the poet finds the vision quite perplexing and challenging, as is obvious from the first part of the sequence, the following parts offer evidence that her main concern is not with “the nature” of the vision itself. Through her imaginative exploration of Julian’s vision, Levertov attempts to answer the question of how and whether a (modern) human being can relate to (Julian’s) God

at all. Levertov is interested in practical hope, in knowing how to live a God-centred life in today's world. She acknowledges that the search for God requires both courage and creativity, reflecting Julian's assertion that "God wishes us to know that he keeps us safe all the time, in joy and in sorrow" (1978, p. 140).

As to the question of "*how* can a modern human being relate to God", Levertov's "understanding" of Julian's mysticism leans on imagination as her primary tool of faith. Through her poetic sequence, Levertov urges us to look beyond the surface of life, to use imagination as a tool for spiritual perception, and to recognize the unity of all creation with God, no matter how small or fragile it may seem. The imagery of the hazelnut, small yet encompassing the entirety of creation, serves as a profound metaphor for the interconnectedness of all life. Levertov's poetic imagination invites readers to embrace the mystery of faith, challenging them to find God not just in grand revelations but in the quiet, everyday moments of existence.

While the mystical tradition, to which Julian belongs, reminds us that it is not possible to approach God through categories of causality and rational concepts, the power and symbolic potential of poetic imagination enables Levertov to get closer to God. She recognizes that the divine transcends human understanding and yet can be approached through metaphor, symbol, and the personal experiences of longing and love. Levertov writes, "In the act of longing, we touch the divine" (1987, p. 89), reinforcing the notion that longing itself can be a form of spiritual connection.

As to the answer to the second question, concerning the possibility to relate to the notion of God's immense, all-embracing love, Levertov's text remains hopeful, yet ambiguous. While she attempts to fully accept Julian's radiant and consistent faith in God as Love, amidst which evil, corruption and sin are only shadowy, insignificant and irrelevant presences, her concluding lines remain open-ended. This openness reflects the complexity of faith in a modern context, where the presence of doubt and struggle coexists with the pursuit of divine connection. Julian's unshakeable knowledge, her faith beyond questions, continues to be an enigma for Levertov. As she grapples with these profound truths, Levertov ultimately acknowledges the limitations of human understanding: "There are moments when the heart aches with uncertainty, yet it is precisely in these moments that the desire for God grows stronger" (1987, p. 95). Thus, Levertov leaves readers with a sense of both the challenge and the beauty of faith – a journey marked by longing, discovery, and the unwavering hope that divine love endures, transcending time and circumstance.

Endnotes:

[i] The mentioned book *Love and the Messianic Age*, for example, begins and finishes with the poems by the English devotional lyricist George Herbert, "The Search" and "Clasping of Hands", respectively. As her biographer Dana Green mentions, Denise loved the English poet also, together with Henry Vaughan, Traherne, Wordsworth and Keats (2012, p. 11).

[ii] Denise Levertov had complex relationships with her parents. As she admitted, as a young woman, she was very reluctant to read her father's works and she found him inaccessible and distant. However, a few of her later poems offer much evidence of attempts at reconciliation and understanding. For instance, the poem "In Obedience", published in *Overland to the Islands* (1958) was described by Levertov as "an elegy for my father" (in Green, 2012, p. 42). The last line of the poem, "now that I love you too late" (in Boland, 2013, p. 75), is particularly striking as it may be an illusion to St. Augustine's famous words addressed to God, "Late have I loved you" from his *Confessions*. Paul Levertoff translated Augustine's spiritual autobiography into Hebrew. Making this allusion, Denise Levertov might suggest that she had been reading her father's translation of Augustine and became familiar with his work as she had promised before he died.

[iii] As Levertov explains in her essay "A Poet's View" (1984), "the movement has been gradual; indeed, I see how very gradual and continuous only when I look back at my own poems, my private notebooks, and the many moments throughout the decades when I stepped up to the threshold of faith only to turn away unable to pass over" (in Levertov, 1992, 242).

[iv] Her work is often considered the first book in English known to be written by a woman.

[v] Imagery of God as a weaver or as a subtle net which encloses all creation is popular among mystics. For instance, the poem attributed to the 14th century Kashmiri mystic Lalleshwari, known as Lal Ded, says: "The Lord has spread the subtle net of Himself across the world. / See how He gets under your skin, inside your bones" (Hoskote, 2011, without page number).

[vi] Similarly, the maternal imagery of God, central to Julian's theology, finds a mirror in Levertov's work. Julian writes of Christ as "our true Mother" who "feeds us with Himself" (1901, p. 297). In "Mass for the Day of St. Thomas Didymus", Levertov also evokes nurturing imagery as she writes, "Mother Earth, in your enduring womb, you keep us / through times of horror and grace alike" (1982, p. 109). Both texts communicate a vision of the divine that is deeply maternal, nurturing, and intimate, providing comfort amid trials.

[vii] Although "The Showings: Lady Julian of Norwich, 1342-1416" was written before "On a Theme from Julian's Chapter XX", the latter poem comes first in the collection.

[viii] Peter F. Anson writes that "both anchorites and anchoresses were always regarded as prophets and counsellors, occupying in medieval England a position not unlike that held by the Old Testament prophets in Israel" (1932, p. 239).

[ix] The last three lines are in Levertov's poem in italics as they come from Julian's text itself (See Chapter XXVIII, p. 58).

[x] Levertov's interpretation of Julian's text as addressed to the modern world and society, not only to the individual reader of today, is evidenced in her simultaneous use of the first-person plural ("you ask us to turn our gaze", "Julian of whom we know", "knowledge we want to share") and first-person singular ("I turn to you"). Interestingly, Jean Leclercq in his essay on medieval women recluses writes that "the most solitary of solitaries must pray in plural, because he prays in the name of all and for the benefit of all" (1978, p. 78).

[xi] In her later poem "What the Figtree Said" (in *Evening Train*, 1992), Christ is described as "the Poet / who spoke in images" (Levertov in Lacey and Dewey, 2013, p. 906), who, in Levertov's poetic interpretation did not curse the fig tree for its barrenness, but people's "dullness, that withholds / gifts *unimagined*". (Levertov in Lacey and Dewey, 2013, p. 906, italics in the original).

[xii] It is interesting to observe that scholars and critics are not immune to imaginative speculations to better understand Julian's narrative. Thus, Grace Warrack writes about the possible background of Julian's imagery: "perhaps her own exquisite picture of Motherhood – of its natural (its 'kind') love and wisdom and knowledge – is taken partly from memory, with that of kindly nurse, and the child, which by nature loveth the Mother and each of the other children, and of the training by Mother and Teacher until the child is brought up to 'the Father's bliss'" (Warrack, 1901, p. xxi - xxii). Ritamary Bradley,

commenting on Julian's images of drops of Christ's blood, "their roundness as they spread out on his forehead was the scales of herring" (Julian quoted in Bradley, p. 296), suggests that "Julian may have been cleaning fish somewhere in England, watching the heavy rains flooding down the eaves in a sudden rainstorm. Perhaps she had seen stray pellets (the small stones shot from cross bows) lying in the grass. It is from such experiences that she drew her language for the bodily visions" (1987, p. 296).

[xiii] Remaining in the macrocosmic imagery, Julian's vision of a hazelnut also invites the comparison with modern space exploration. For Lyanda Lynn Haupt suggests that "Julian delighted in her holy little hazelnut, presaging the modern view of earth as a 'pale blue dot' given us by astronauts" (2021, p. 216).

[xiv] The image of the world or cosmos compressed to something very small is commonly found in poetry of mysticism. For instance, the 14th-century Sufi mystic Mahmud Shabistari wrote that "If you look intently at each speck of dust, / In it you will see a thousand beings" (2019, p. 43). Similarly, the 14th-century mystic Lal Ded suggested that "This world, / compared to You - / a lake so tiny / even a mustard seed / is too large for it to hold" (in Hirshfield, p. 122). The English poet and mystic William Blake in his poem "Auguries of Innocence" famously wrote: "To see a World in a Grain of Sand/ And a Heaven in a Wild Flower".

[xv] The poet also draws attention to the relationship between the Creator and creation and refers to what is the great paradox of Julian's vision: the hazelnut contains all that is created, which must necessarily include the mystic herself.

[xvi] A similar sense of the spiritual longing of modern man has been aptly expressed in Christian Wiman's recent book *Zero at the Bone. Fifty Entries Against Despair:* "What one wants as one grows older is some assurance that between the endless errands that crush the soul and the sudden warbler that ignites it, between the bills and births and meals and funerals, all the graces and losses of any life attended to no matter how erratically or imperfectly – under it all there *must* exist some intact tissue of meaning. Not meaning such as one might fully articulate or grasp, but a deep instinctive sense, an *assurance*, that in the incorrigibly plural swirl of life there abides some singularity of being, however fleeting its presence" (Wiman, 2023, p. 227).

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