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Source: *Mystics Quarterly*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (December 1986), pp. 171-178

Published by: Penn State University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20716761>

Accessed: 27-02-2019 19:26 UTC

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Vision and Revision in Four Quartets: T. S. Eliot and Julian of Norwich

Eliot attempted to find poetic form for his theological intuitions regarding the relationship of time and eternity in *Four Quartets*. The poem, written between 1934 and 1942, led him back to certain mystical traditions that had fascinated him in his youth, especially during the composition of “Little Gidding” (1941–42). As an undergraduate at Harvard he had not only read Evelyn Underhill’s *Mysticism* (1911),¹ but made an extensive personal study of the lives of the saints, including Teresa of Avila, Bernard of Clairvaux, John of the Cross, Madam Guyon, Walter Hilton, and also Julian of Norwich.² At a pivotal moment of self-discovery in “Little Gidding” (iii), he recalls his own pilgrimage to Little Gidding in Huntingdonshire in May, 1936. It is clear from what we now know of the poem’s provenance through Helen Gardner’s *The Composition of “Four Quartets”* (London, 1978), that Eliot was casting about in his second of five drafts for a figure from the English mystical tradition whose presence in the poem would complement the 17th-century devotional figures of Nicholas Ferrar’s Anglican community (including George Herbert) and, of course, Milton, all alluded to in section iii.

In the revisions of “Little Gidding” (iii, v) Eliot inserts powerfully reverberating phrases from Julian of Norwich’s *Revelations of Divine Love*.³ Little is known about Lady Julian herself, except that during part of her life she was an anchoress, a member of a small community of recluses probably loosely associated with the Benedictine order at Carrow near Norwich. We can ascertain from her own account in the *Revelations* (circa 1373) that she was granted a series of 16 remarkable visions or “shewings” at the age of “thirty and a half” in response to her petitions to Christ to enter more fully and deeply into his Passion. The English mystic, Margery Kempe, visited Julian during her lifetime and left a short account of her as a woman of Christian sanctity and practical wisdom. Julian’s style in the *Revelations* is concrete, earthy and unaffected. Yet her use of Trinitarian concepts and theological paradigms suggests that, though “unlearned” in the sense of not knowing more than a smattering of Church Latin, she is saturated in the scholastic traditions of her age. Certainly for Eliot, who echoes her crucially at the end of “Little Gidding,” she is an exemplar of the English mystic, admirable for her personal integrity, and as a contemporary of Walter Hilton and Richard Rolle, a product of the flowering of English

mysticism that occurred in the late 14th century.

Yet the question must be raised as to why Eliot settles on the figure of Julian of Norwich with her homely, concrete imagery and relatively uneducated, though deeply theological mind. He could have easily chosen one of his heroes from the great European tradition of mystical literature: Dante, John of the Cross, St. Teresa or St. Bernard. The superficial answer is that Eliot required a representative of the British or specifically English native strain; yet again, he could have focussed on Hilton, Rolle, Kempe, or, as he does in section v, drawn on the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* (c. 1370).

Eliot's reasons for choosing Julian at such a critical moment in the poem go deeper, however, than a mere need for a representative of the native tradition, but rather are imbedded in the kind of mystical writer he perceived her to be. His choice here penetrates to the very roots of their respective visions. The allusions to Julian reverberate powerfully because the lines he echoes from her *Revelations* proceed in both cases from a personal and theological struggle with the issue of time's relation to eternity. The echoes of Julian's phrases—"Sin is behovely," "All shall be well," and the "ground of our beseeching"—tie up the threads of the work, providing a sense of resolution to the problem of how to exist and move in time. In selecting Julian as characteristic of the English mystical line, Eliot has recovered a writer whose experience and corresponding movements of thought between the concrete and the abstract uniquely parallel his own imaginative movements.

Julian's methodology in the *Revelations* is determined by the nature of her experience, consisting of a series of intensely perceived visual images or "shewings" (as she calls them) raised to symbolic pitch, which she then revises, reinterprets and transforms through a fascinating process of what I shall call "re-vision"—a "seeing again" or kind of second entrance into what was originally given. Such moments in both Julian and Eliot are unlike Wordsworthian "spots of time" in that they are not sustained by the mind's participation in and reflection on external nature (though they may begin there), but by inward events in experience that open upon a timeless inner realm of direct visionary insight. Eliot's "moment in the rose garden" of "Burnt Norton" (i) is one of such timeless moments that yields the final vision of the Dantesque rose of heaven in "Little Gidding" (v). There is a sense that all nuances of meaning eventually explored by the poem are present implicitly in the original "garden" experience, but that the fuller unfolding of meaning requires a mental and emotional effort of reentry into that experience if it is to surrender its wholeness.

In both Julian's and Eliot's struggle to recover and digest a remembered intensity, repeated return to the primary experience is not a mere intellec-

tual reassessment or analysis, but a second and revitalized experience related integrally to the first. In brooding over the original event, the mind reunites with the state of consciousness that produced it. Here experience becomes a continuous unfolding in which eternity is seen to be on a continuum with time, not a discrete or completed action. Therefore, what critics have seen as a modern tentativeness towards experience in Eliot is also present in the medieval anchoress, and proceeds in both from a sense that reality is by definition multi-dimensional and in constant process of change.

Both in their various ways are forced back upon the related struggle with language, since words, too, are part of a perishing, shifting fabric which is only sometimes capable of reflecting the eternal. In Chapter 45 of the *Revelations*, for example, Julian mentions a visual parable of a servant and his lord.⁴ In the original viewing of this scene (with the inward eye) she recognizes the servant as symbolic man, trapped hopelessly in his fallenness because of "original sin." The second time she returns to the experience twenty years later (as indicated in Chap. 51), the man is revealed from a double or typological perspective as both man and not man, Adam and Christ, the second Adam. She concludes that both levels of the allegory are ways of viewing or interpreting that enrich the experience. Her language is tentative and paradoxical partly because the vision has shown that man, though responsible, is not fully responsible for the problem of evil; that he is the victim of a larger struggle; and that Christ as the divine spirit in man acting in the role of a servant is actively redeeming time. Redemption, therefore, is not finished, was not finished on the cross—as shown to her earlier in the visions of Christ still being crucified. The result of her "shewing" is that she perceives herself not merely as the beneficiary of a historical act of vicarious atonement, but active in the process herself through her own suffering which is gathered up and made part of the suffering of Christ, the prototype of man.

The redemption or restructuring of time through perception as a theme in her work must have struck Eliot deeply and appears in his poetic meditation on time in a similar context. In "Little Gidding" the fugitive moments of time are seen as being redeemed by an act of historical Incarnation repeated in each individual. Incarnation in this sense entails a necessary commitment to time and a life fulfilled in acts of humility and prayer: "You are to kneel/Where prayer has been valid" (i). As in the medieval world of Julian's theology, such acts are being gathered up to create a place of sanity and sanctity which the speaker enters briefly in the poem through the historical intersection of the Little Gidding chapel where the 14th, 17th and 20th centuries merge into one place of recognition shared by the poet and his audience.

As Gardner argues, Eliot's choice of Julian gives depth and balance to the 17th-century references. In the composition of the poem, she informs us that they emerged in the act of revision, not being present in the first draft.⁵ This tells us again, not that the allusions were added as an afterthought in a purely literary-historical way to flesh out the poem, but that they evolved out of the poet's own struggle with similar personal and theological concerns. In Eliot's particular journey, the path through time leads back beyond the 17th century to earlier eras like the 14th, where the "dissociation of sensibility" he describes in his essay on the metaphysical poets had not yet severed mind and feeling, and it was still possible to write religious poetry that, as he puts it, would "extend the confines of human consciousness."⁶

In borrowing Julian's phrase, "Sin is behovely," Eliot as a modern poet enters the great mainstream of poets like the anonymous author of the medieval "Adam lay ybounden," and later major poets like Spenser and Milton who struggled with the idea of history as a "felix culpa" or "fortunate Fall." In a letter to John Hayward, Eliot writes (Sept. 2, 1942):

I forgot in my previous letter to give an explanation which bears on your query of *behovely*. This line and the two which follow and which occur twice later constitute a quotation from Juliana of Norwich. The beautiful line the presence of which puzzles you toward the end of page 11 comes out of *The Cloud of Unknowing*. My purpose was this: there is so much 17th century in the poem that I was afraid of a certain romantic Bonnie Dundee period effect and I wanted to check this and at the same time give greater historical depth to the poem by allusions to the other great period, i.e. the 14th century. Juliana and *The Cloud of Unknowing* represent pretty well the two mystical extremes or, one might say, the male and female of this literature.⁷

The "felix culpa" theme is worked out carefully and profoundly in Julian's *Revelations*. Beginning with the "shewing" of Christ on the cross, she asks why God allows his Son (and implicitly mankind) to endure the agonies and injustice of such a death. It is as if all the acute suffering of man as a whole is taken into her graphic portrayal of Christ crucified. The answer, as given by the intimate "voice," is not arrived at without struggle. Sin is "behoivable," that is, necessary or inevitable because the nature of reality is such that a man can only know the ultimate good through extremity and loss. Therefore he must pass through a testing—in terms of part iv of Eliot's poem, a purgation by fire, the keynote of "Little Gidding." Eliot, like Julian, assumes that sin—the half self-inflicted, half-inevitable descent of man into time is unavoidable, and ultimately utilized by the powers of good as a catalyst to bring about time's regeneration. The philosophical weight of his argument rests, like Julian's, on the notion that "only through time time is conquered" (BN, ii), and that as man's Fall was

not entirely of his own doing, so his redemption is effectuated by grace which must be received with humility. "Humility is endless," says Eliot (EC, ii). Here Julian and Eliot are united both in theological outlook and tone. Humility is endless for both because it is a receptive condition of the soul essential for growth. It is an acceptance of man's place on the scale of creation as a contingent being – not isolated from, but dependent on the life of the whole.

In Eliot's poem the theme of the right relation to time as a detachment that is not indifference (LG, iii) has precedents in Eastern metaphysics, works like the *Bhagavad-Gita* alluded to in "The Dry Salvages," iii, where Eliot ponders the significance of Krishna's injunction to Arjuna to enter the battlefield of time. Julian, unlike the author of the anonymous *Cloud*, is not a strong proponent of the "via negativa" kind of mysticism which ultimately rejects images as an approach to the imageless God, but a mystic who affirms images and signs as a valid means of connection to the eternal. Through her presence in the last sections of the poem, Eliot is able to address further the necessity of the descent into time and the right relation of the poet to the world of temporal images and symbols.

Critics have noted that section iii of each major division in the architecture of *Four Quartets* deals in some way with the problem of this descent into time. The structural patterning by which numerical sections correspond to each other formally and thematically allows him to link Dante (BN, iii) to John of the Cross (EC, iii) to Krishna (DS, iii) to Julian (LG, iii), thus raising English mysticism to its place as one of the local expressions of a universal set of values. Eliot comes down here on the side of mysticism that accepts the value of the temporal world, seeing it as a valid center of action. He denies implicitly all naive formulations of mystical doctrine that would separate the "via activa" from the "via negativa" or contemplative way, insisting rather on the notion that each has its place in a dynamic of contraries. Julian and the author of the *Cloud* are in harmony or, like the Puritans and Loyalists of section iii, "folded in a single party." The speaking voice of the poem affirms images and symbols, while recognizing at the same time that they are only fragmentary illuminations of an ineffability. Man may accept the limitations of time by embracing it as "a pattern of timeless moments" (LG, v).

In the letter to his friend John Hayward cited above, Eliot reveals another reason for his intense interest in Julian. She represents to him the "female of this literature" or the feminine pole, and therefore counterbalances his use of the author of the *Cloud* in section v ("With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling"). By "female" Eliot means, I think, the receptive, faithful, hopeful, intuitive side of the mind, that "reason above reason" which assures the raging intellect through Julian's words (as

spoken to her by Christ) in the closing lines of the poem that “all shall be well.” This succinct phrase of assurance has a tremendous emotional impact due to its context—following upon sections of intellectual search, questioning and self-doubt. As such, it operates as a kind of refrain, sealing off section v and preparing the reader for the final symbol of the white rose of heaven. Julian’s words of assurance do not offer an easy or simple resolution to either the *Revelations* or Eliot’s *Quartets*; its affirmation is hard won and evolves out of the struggle of the many voices and moods in Eliot’s poem, just as Julian’s vision of Christ enthroned in the center of man’s heart (Chap. 67) unfolds out of her exploration of the image of the crucified Christ. Spiritual equanimity comes after contending with doubts as to the validity of her visions, and arriving at a sense of the slow redemption of time as an ongoing process.

Setting the two works side by side in this way makes it clear why Julian would appeal to a twentieth-century poet writing a philosophical meditation on time, and why Eliot could join his voice to hers so effectively. Both writers deal with direct and authentic experience of the timeless moment in time. Both emphasize individual (even subjective) perception interpreted over a lifetime of struggle. Both are poets of vision and revision, not in the ironic sense used by Prufrock, trapped within his own subjective consciousness, but in the visionary sense of the metaphysical poet attempting to mediate in words his glimpses of eternity. And I unreservedly call Julian a poet because of the evocative and symbolic power of her language, its natural rhythms and concreteness. Both tentatively grope to regather the fuller significance of a revelation that came sporadically in bits and pieces, and the respective literary words issuing out of such experience have a sense of never being complete or final.

Eliot, of course, is tentative as only a 20th-century man can be, having lost (from his viewpoint) the advantage Julian takes for granted of writing within a coherent Christian community. Yet, by making Julian his contemporary, Eliot joins his voice to hers to recreate within the framework of the poem the old picture of time informed by timelessness. There is a similar movement in the language of both from concrete depictions of experience to abstract ideas and concepts. There is in both a rapid shifting between the poetic (lyrical, elevated) and the prosaic (mundane, conversational). Julian can use an image as concrete as that of the hazelnut and as abstract as that of the geometrical point (a figure Eliot also uses in the “still point of the turning world”) to represent God’s love for man. Eliot is more self-consciously literary, more aware not only of recording and relating inward and outward experiences, but of creating a literary artifact—a carefully wrought poem with suggestive analogies to musical form. Unlike Julian, he carries into his work an awareness of French symbolism and of

modernism with its skepticism, ambiguities and tensions about the question of the objectivity of spiritual reality. Yet both of them achieve a kind of intimacy with the audiences that makes us feel we are also participants in a reconstruction of experience that is both personal and universal.

Eliot's poem, like Julian's *Revelations*, is at once meditative, theological, poetic and devotional. What stamps both works is the ability of the writers to forge fresh and original language within a context of traditional religious symbolism and belief. Both seem to be reporting on a reality that is expansive and more subtle than the traditional doctrinal formulations that have been employed to contain it. At the same time, both works would not have been possible outside of the context of the authors' immersion in the world of Christian theological and poetic tradition. Eliot gains his world view and ideology self-consciously and painstakingly, while Julian inherits hers, but both find the tensions and fusions of tradition and innovation aesthetically fruitful. Their works suggest that so-called "mystical experience" can only be received and interpreted in a given cultural context; yet that something of the experience transcends the categories of any particular orthodoxy.

The universality of the ending of "Little Gidding" is not an artificial imposition of resolution on the tensions of the poem, but grows out of its concerns as a whole:

And all shall be well and
All manner of thing shall be well
When the tongues of flame are in-folded
Into the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one.

This synthesis is not final, but emotionally and intellectually satisfying within its context as a partial resolution through language to the problem of time, leaving one with the same sense of well-earned certitude discoverable in the final sections of Julian's turbulent *Revelations*. Behind both works historically stand periods of conflict: in the case of Julian, the Plague, the Hundred Years' War in Europe, and the first rumblings of breakdown of the medieval "synthesis"; in Eliot's, the First and Second World Wars, the bombings of London, and the apparent dissolution of intellectual order and religious belief. Out of both comes a sense of the possibility that individual vision can be nourished and survive, to quote Eliot, "under conditions/That seem unpropitious" (EC, v); that what we choose to focus on is significant because behind the disorder of the present lies the durability of an impeccable, timeless world. In *Four Quartets* Eliot achieves more than an aesthetic religion, for he arrives at a kind of grounded belief which the allusions to Julian help to support and make objective.

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Notes

- 1 Helen Gardner, *The Composition of "Four Quartets"* (London, 1978), 69.
- 2 Lyndall Gordon, *Eliot's Early Years* (New York, 1977), 60. Gardner notes additionally that Eliot's mind may have turned to the English mystics "on account of the death of Evelyn Underhill in June, 1941" (69).
- 3 For the purposes of this article I shall be using the Colledge edition of the text: Edmund Colledge and James Walsh, eds., *A Book of Showings to the anchoress Julian of Norwich*, 2 vols. (Toronto, 1978). This edition is a reconstruction of Julian's original East Anglian and Northern dialect drawn from both the long and shorter versions of the text. Gardner informs us that Eliot used a reprint of the 1670 edition by Serenus de Cressy, one Fellow of Merton, Chaplain to Lord Falkland, and later a Benedictine at Douai (71). A useful modernization with helpful background notes is the Penguin edition of the *Revelations of Divine Love*, translated and introduced by Clifton Wolters, 1966.
All references to Eliot's *Four Quartets* will be drawn from the Faber edition (London, 1944; rpt. 1983). Relevant sections of the poem are abbreviated in the text as follows: BN = "Burnt Norton"; EC = "East Coker"; DS = "The Dry Salvages"; LG = "Little Gidding."
- 4 Colledge, II, 488.
- 5 Gardner points out that Eliot asked his friend John Hayward to excise from the first draft of the poem an adaptation of the first four lines of the liturgical prayer "Anima Christi sanctifica me." In the revision of that draft he replaced it with the famous phrases from Julian (69).
- 6 T. S. Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets*, (London, 1957), 169.
- 7 Gardner, 70.