JULIAN OF NORWICH'S HAZELNUT AS PARADOX

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My mother was a philosopher. I know, on the basis of some recent research done by Joe Petek on the history of the teaching of philosophy at Harvard, that she was the only student to whom Alfred North Whitehead ever gave an A+ in his graduate seminar on metaphysics and that the précis of her dissertation—on the problem of nonbeing in Plato's *Parmenides*—was the only piece of graduate student work he kept in his files.[1] By the time my younger sister was born in 1943, my mother had become a southern housewife, struggling to raise two little girls on the barely adequate salary my father brought home from his teaching job; she had also become a committed Christian. But she remained a philosopher.[2] So when

This text was first presented orally at a conference in the fall of 2022 to celebrate the republication of Susan Neiman's *Evil in Modern Thought* (2002), republished in 2015 in a Princeton Classics edition with a new afterword by the author. The conference was organized by Trip McCrossin of the Rutgers philosophy department and held at the New Brunswick Theological Seminary on September 30–October 2, 2022. A wide range of scholars spoke. I was among the nonphilosophers. My opening gambit was therefore an effort to justify inserting myself into a philosophical conversation.

1. For a partial account, see Henning and Petek, *Whitehead at Harvard*, 10–12. Joseph Petek discovered the dissertation précis after this book was published. See also Bynum, "My Life and Works," "The House," and "Who Does She Think She Is?"

2. Apropos the unwelcoming nature of the field of philosophy to women in the middle of the last century, I cite the cases of the four women at Oxford University of the generation just after my mother's, which have recently been the subject of two books: Lipscomb, *Women Are Up to Something*; and Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman, *Metaphysical Animals*.

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other teenage girls were arguing with their mothers about how short their skirts could be or how late they could stay out at night on dates, I was arguing with my mother about the problem of evil. How—given what we were learning about Nazi gas chambers and about Hiroshima and Nagasaki, what we were experiencing in segregated buses and schools, what had happened when a cross was burned on the lawn of the local synagogue around the corner from my house—*how*, given such things, could there be a good God? My mother had answers. But I think I became a historian in an effort to find *answers* to those *answers*. "You just think that because you were born in Virginia in 1911," I'd argue; or "... because you are a Christian, because you're a Democrat, because you're a woman ... not because it's TRUE." However crude or relativistic my retorts—I was only fourteen or fifteen, and my mother was a skilled interlocutor—historical situating became my defense against the supposedly definitive and objective answers of Ethics or Metaphysics, areas of expertise that I always imagined to be spelled with capital letters! Situating such answers historically—no matter how awkward the situating—seemed the only response to what I experienced as the inadequacy of my mother's answers, even though they claimed to be absolute truth.

I am still a historian. I still feel not only a historian's desire to win those long-ago adolescent battles against moral absolutes but also a historicist impulse to relativize all philosophical solutions by placing them in temporal and geographical context. Nonetheless, I also harbor an unhistoricist desire for—or at least an attraction to—ethical, epistemological, and metaphysical queries. Hence it is as a historian that I turn to a medieval thinker, whose approach to the problem of evil is far more sophisticated than she is usually given credit for, and suggest that there is something to be learned from taking her answers seriously.

Julian of Norwich was a recluse (or anchoress) in England in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. We know she was still alive in 1416 when someone left her a legacy in a will. She probably began her cloistered life in a community and later became a solitary recluse, walled up in a little cell off the church at Norwich, from which she could see the altar for services and offer spiritual advice to those who came to her window seeking it. (One of them was the well-known, eccentric holy woman and pilgrim Margery Kempe.)

There are two versions of her "Revelations" or "Showings," written in Middle English; and the manuscript traditions are complicated and in certain ways suspicious.[3] Chapter 2 of the so-called Long Text says she received the revela-

3. All the translations of Julian that I quote and cite below, from both the Short and the Long Text, are from *Julian of Norwich: Showings*, translated by Edmund Colledge and James Walsh, published by Paulist Press. Their translation is based on their edition of the Middle English in *A Book of Showings to the Anchoress Julian of Norwich*, published by the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies. I have also consulted this edition. The discussion of the manuscript tradition I give here is based on the foreword and introduction to the Paulist Press translation, 15–119.

tions on May 13, 1373; and in chapter 2 of the Short Text, she says she was then thirty and a half years old. She received these visions—of the dying, then glorious Christ and of demons—when she was thought to be dying herself, and her mother along with others was present at her bedside. The short version of the visions was written down about 1378; the long version was then supposedly written about 1395, after she had come to understand elements of the visions that she says she did not at first understand. The short version exists in one manuscript from about 1450. The long version is complete only in a seventeenth-century manuscript, copied to look as if it were penned in a sixteenth-century hand, and we owe it to the school of Augustine Baker (1575–1641) and his group of Benedictine monks and nuns in exile in the Low Countries and France after the dissolution of the English monasteries under Henry VIII. The late date of this copy is somewhat troubling, although we do have an earlier spiritual anthology from about 1500 that has extracts of some of the most important parts of the Long Text. Thus, the Long Text is not itself a later seventeenth-century creation, and many of Julian's most characteristic teachings, found in the Long Text, are not seventeenth-century extrapolations or additions.[4]

Julian has been popular since the 1980s in two trends of feminist spirituality that I am not going to focus on here. One is the kind of sensitivity to the natural world that has been especially associated with the contemporary religious writer Matthew Fox and the twelfth-century visionary Hildegard of Bingen. Hildegard was a very different sort of visionary from Julian and much more of an Old Testament prophet, although neither woman was exactly a "mystic" in the sense in which the word is often used today of someone who wants to mount up a ladder of contemplative exercises to an encounter with God. The idea of what some contemporary spiritual writers call greenness (*viriditas*)—of God's presence in, and flowering in, nature—is found abundantly in Hildegard's *Scivias* and other writings.[5] We see this emphasis in Julian's homey, earthy language in such passages as this one, reflecting her idea that natural functions are good:

> A man walks upright, and the food in his body is shut in as if in a well-made purse. When the time of his necessity comes, the purse is opened

4. It should be admitted, however, that there is some inconsistency in how certain key issues, including the problem of evil itself, are treated both between the versions and within the Long Text. This inconsistency might reflect efforts of a later copyist or copyists to bring Julian's treatment of the issue into a consistent theological position, although it may also reflect her genuine agonizing over the problem. I cannot undertake a detailed analysis of this question here.

5. See, for example, Center for Action and Contemplation, "*Viriditas*." I do not want to suggest here that Hildegard's "greenness" and Julian's homey language belong in exactly the same category but rather to point to the topic, worthy of further exploration, of how and how far what we might call "nature language" characterizes the large amount of writing by religious women in the later Middle Ages in Europe. There is much recent scholarly discussion of Hildegard, as there is of Julian. On Hildegard, the classic work is Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*.

and then shut again, in most seemly fashion. And it is God who does this, as it is shown when he says that he comes down to us in our humblest needs. For he does not despise what he has made, nor does he disdain to serve us in the simplest natural functions of our body, for the love of the soul which he created in his own likeness. For as the body is clad in the cloth, and the flesh in the skin, and the bones in the flesh, and the heart in the trunk, so are we, soul and body, clad and enclosed in the goodness of God. (Long Text, 186)

We also see Julian's love for the natural world in her use of homey metaphors for even the suffering of Christ, although her vibrant language and sensitivity to nature may also be owing to her familiarity with the glorious language of the Psalter, which she would have prayed every day:

And . . . I saw the bodily vision of the copious bleeding of [Christ's] head persist. The great drops of blood fell from beneath the crown like pellets. . . . Nevertheless, the beauty and vivacity persisted. . . . The copiousness resembles the drops of water which fall from the eaves of a house after a great shower of rain. . . . And in their roundness as they spread over the forehead they were like a herring's scales . . . as they spread. . . . This vision was living and vivid and hideous and fearful and sweet and lovely [*note the simultaneity of opposites here*]; and in all this vision which I saw, what gave me most strength was that our good Lord, who is so to be revered and feared, is so familiar and so courteous, and most of all this filled me full of delight and certainty in my soul. (Long Text, 188)

This poetic sense of the world's beauty is reflected as well in Julian's answer to her persistent cry, repeated many times in the revelations: "How can all things be well when great harm has come through sin to your creatures?" (227). To which query, she answers, repeatedly: "all will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of thing will be well" (148–49, 229, 233, 237, 305, and elsewhere). How can such a beautiful world be corrupt? she is asking. How can *we* be corrupt?

Note that Julian's answer is *not* that evil is not real. She does not say that the darkest spots on the canvas of nature are, so to speak, shadows, present only to make the overall design brighter—a traditional answer that has come down in the Christian spiritual tradition from Augustine of Hippo (and others), adopted by them from Middle Platonism or Neoplatonism. Instead, Julian says: "Sin [which here means human evil] is the cause of all this pain" (225). Indeed, one passage in the Short Text asserting that sin is "nothing" (166) is suppressed in the Long Text, where Julian says instead (stuck in paradox like my fourteen-year-old self): "And I saw that nothing hindered me but sin, and I saw that this is true of us all and so in my folly . . . I often wondered why . . . the beginning of sin was

not prevented. . . . But Jesus answered . . . : sin is necessary but all will be well" (224–25).[6]

I shall return to this point, but there is another aspect of Julian that I should mention first, because it is probably the most widely known outside academic circles. I am referring to the widespread use that was made of her *Showings* in feminist spiritualist discourse, especially in the 1980s and 1990s, to rewrite the patriarchal nouns and pronouns of Christian, especially Catholic, liturgy so as to reconceive the divine as a Father-Mother God. I do not want to say much about this aspect of her writings here except to note that much of the scholarship about "Jesus as Mother" (to which I contributed in the 1980s, building on the earlier work of the French scholar André Cabussut) was an exploration of devotional language used by men as much as by women and that, when used by men, it often expressed male psychological and religious needs.[7] Male writers of works of spiritual advice, prayers, or devotional treatises often referred to the "mothering" aspects of God as patient counseling that complemented a more "fatherly" tough love; indeed they described their own work in counseling others and in prayer as both maternal and paternal.

In contrast to such devotional and even psychological usage, Julian's complicated language is theological. In her theology, God both as Creator and as Redeemer is sometimes spoken of as both mother and father. Such assertions have little to do with images of birthing, bleeding, and feeding, and almost nothing to do with stereotypical notions (either medieval or modern) of compassion versus authority, nurture versus judging. For example, at one point where she says that all three persons of the Trinity are involved in what we as humans are, she says explicitly that Might is Father and Wisdom is Mother. Julian's point is ontological, not ethical or devotional, and it expresses a complicated idea of the human being as made double by all three persons of the Trinity: that is, as a unified being of substance and sensuality, in which what we would call affectivity is located more in soul/mind than in body. Behind this sense of us as unitary rather than (or in addition to) dual or triple probably stands, at least at a distance, as the Christian creedal understanding of the resurrection of the body (despite the dis-

6. In chapter 13 of the Short Text, 166, Julian writes: "O wretched sin, what are you? You are nothing. For I saw that God is in everything; I did not see you. And when I saw that God has made everything, I did not see you. . . . And when I saw our Lord Jesus Christ seated in our soul . . . I did not see you. And so I am certain that you are nothing . . . and all those who love you [Jesus] . . . will be brought to nothing with you." In this passage, "nothing" becomes very complicated; it both "is" and "is not." In the later reworking (Long Text, 224–25), Julian writes simply: "And so in my folly . . . , I often wondered why . . . the beginning of sin was not prevented. . . . But Jesus . . . said: Sin is necessary but all will be well. . . . But I did not see sin, for I believe that it has no kind of substance, no share in being, nor can it be recognized except by the pain caused by it." Such inconsistencies and changes between the two texts are fairly numerous and suggest that Julian continued to agonize over the problem of evil. Regardless of this reference to "has no kind of substance," however, she does not seem to be saying, in either the Short or the Long Text, that evil and sin are unreal.

7. Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 110–262; Cabassut, "Une dévotion médiévale," 234–45.

solution expected at death) and Julian's assumption that the body-mind-soul unit we are is *perduring*—created, but created to be, as that entity, eternal.[8] In any case, Julian's use of images of father and mother is immensely complicated and frequently misunderstood. So perhaps I might at this point just repeat what Deborah Levy's teenage protagonist says in the 2016 novel *Hot Milk*: "Julian [of Norwich] was a woman who wrote about the motherhood of God—she believed that God was truly a mother and a father. It was an interesting belief, but I can barely cope with my own mother and father."[9] My fourteen-year-old self would have agreed.

With these remarks as background on the Julian of whom modern readers typically hear, I want to focus now on the passage that my title indicates: Julian's vision of the hazelnut. It occurs in almost identical phrasing in both the Short and the Long Text (130–31, 183–84). I quote from the Long Text:

> At the same time as I saw this sight of the head [of Christ] bleeding, our good Lord showed a spiritual sight of his familiar love. I saw that he is everything which is good and comforting for our help. He is our clothing, who wraps us . . . and shelters us . . . surrounds us for his love, which is so tender that he may never desert us. And so in this sight I saw that he is everything which is good, as I understand.
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> And in this, he showed me something small, no bigger than a hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand, and I perceived that it was as round as any ball. I looked at it with the eye of my understanding and thought: what can this be? I was amazed that it could last, for I thought that because of its littleness it would suddenly have fallen into nothing. And I was answered in my understanding: It lasts and always will because God loves it, and thus everything has being through the love of God.
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> In this little thing I saw three properties. The first is that God made it, the second is that God loves it, the third is that God preserves it. But what did I see in it? It is that God is the Creator and the protector and the lover. For until I am substantially [*that is, in what I am*] united to him, I can never have perfect rest or true happiness. We need to have knowledge of this, so that we may delight in despising as nothing everything created, so as to love and have uncreated God.

What I want to emphasize here is not just the beauty of Julian's language, to which I referred before, but how very complicated and self-contradictory these few words really are. The hazelnut is all that exists; it is beautiful; God loves it and always will; yet we must also despise, as nothing, everything created, in the context of our delight in God. And what is the "all" that God is said in this pas-

8. For ways in which the idea of bodily resurrection underlies medieval, and especially scholastic, arguments about the person as a soul-body entity (not a separable soul), see Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 239–97.

9. Levy, *Hot Milk*, 144. Quoted in Dumitrescu, "In the Family," 27.

sage to love? Julian, like several late medieval mystical women (some of whom suffered for their unorthodoxy), struggles valiantly to understand whether the "all" that God loves and preserves is all Christians or all persons or all things, sometimes asserting that the holy church says "all Christians" but sometimes letting her language slip into an "all will be well" that includes in the "all" every being on earth.[10]

Even beyond this struggle to love and yet transcend the natural world and to find a God who promises that "all will be well" for a truly all-encompassing "all," Julian's hazelnut itself sums up and manifests the larger self-contradictions of the world. As she says, the hazelnut is all that exists. It is everything she speaks of in the *Showings*, an all whose inclusivity she sometimes struggled with but that here, in this passage, is everything that exists. Beautiful as it rests in her hand (and God shows it to her in *her* hand, not his), it is so small, so fragile, it could suddenly fall into nothing. It is not "eternal" in a theological sense, or even, long-lasting (billions of years) in the scientist's sense. It is utterly contingent—utterly dependent on God to sustain it at every moment—and yet it will last always because of God's power. In other words, it is contingent yet perduring, momentary yet eternal. It could simply *not exist*; it depends on something utterly outside itself. It is tiny and fragile, friable, vulnerable. Yet it *will* exist always because God chooses. In other words, it is contingent yet necessary. Contradictory. Paradoxical. And Julian asserts—simultaneously—both sides of the paradox.

This quality of paradox undergirds much of what Julian asserts elsewhere: her sense that the world is simultaneously beautiful and corrupt, her struggles with defining the all/not all that is saved and eternal, her long parable of the servant who violates the commands of his master and is simultaneously both the fallen, evil human being and the son of God (Jesus) whom God raises up. My point, however, is that this complicated awareness (this saying of "yes" and "no" simultaneously) that runs throughout Julian's writings (and those of some of her contemporaries) is not a philosophical or theological confusion. It is not resistance to church dogma, not wishful thinking, not merely a cry of pain at suffering and evil. It is an approach to the world that is *lived*, more than thought or argued, enacted in ritual more than argued in philosophy or theology. When it is expressed, it is expressed in images, as in Julian's hazelnut, momentary and forever, fragile and permanent, contingent and necessary.

I am not here using the term *paradox* as if it means logical contradiction.[11] The paradox I am talking about is paradox as it is lived—as we are caught in it:

10. See above, notes 4 and 6.

11. At the conference on Neiman's book, the philosopher Allen Wood defined paradox as the kind of logical and unacceptable contradiction we often face as human beings. Examples he gave of such paradoxes were: that we die; that our hearts are broken; that the causes we advocated for (gave our lives to) die when we do, because they die for and with us. Wood's understanding of paradox as a kind of radical, existential contradiction is not what I mean by the term and not what Julian's spirituality exemplifies.

affirming and denying it at the same time. The paradox I see in Julian is not even saying "no but yes . . . ," "dead but alive . . . ," "evil but good . . . ," seriatim, one after the other, in argument or syllogism. It is the *simultaneity* of opposites. Indeed, we cannot *say* this paradox at all, because speech is after all linear, although I understand Julian's description of the hazelnut as an effort to say the unsayable. Hence paradox is not contradiction, not a combination or synthesis of differing aspects; nor is it a violation of the integrity of opposing concerns through compromise. Like riddle, it cannot be explained by the elimination of one of its poles, solved by reduction to something else, or even accurately set forth in discursive exposition. It is, rather, as the fifteenth-century philosopher, theologian, mystic, and humanist Nicholas of Cusa explains: the simultaneous assertion and performance of opposing values—the "coincidence of opposites."[12]

Thus, the paradox I see in Julian is what some of our best anthropologists try to describe—that is, paradox lived in ritual. Indeed, paradox is what ritual and image do. They say—enact—the two opposites at once. As the anthropologist J. C. Heesterman explains in his book *The Broken World of Sacrifice*: "Sacrifice deals with the riddle of life and death, which are intimately linked and at the same time each other's absolute denial. The riddle cannot be solved, it can only be reenacted."[13] Hence paradox is something we do—not something we can say. *Riddle* is a good word for what Julian claims she *lived* when, in the pain of death, she *at that moment* experienced total joy—the two simultaneously—yes and no together. A riddle is what her hazelnut is—contingent and necessary, friable and permanent, everything and yet of no value—characteristics that are contradictory and cannot coexist, but in experience somehow do.

To point up the contrast between paradox and argument, simultaneity and linear exposition, I turn to the Nobel Prize–winning poet Louise Glück, who expresses something of the same sense of the beauty of God's creation that we find in Julian. But in Glück, all is linear, all is motion, all is change. In her poem "Retreating Wind" from *The Wild Iris* (1992), Glück writes (also speaking, as Julian sometimes does, in God's voice):

When I made you, I loved you.
Now I pity you.
I gave you all you needed:
bed of earth, blanket of blue air—
. . . . . .
Your souls should have been immense by now,
not what they are,
small talking things—

12. Bynum, *Wonderful Blood*, 254–55. See also Bynum, *Christian Materiality*, 267–68; Bynum, "Why Paradox?," 432–55.

13. Heesterman, *Broken World of Sacrifice*, 2, 8, 15, 41–43, 45–48.

I gave you every gift,
blue of the spring morning,
time you didn't know how to use—

Glück's sense is of the motion and momentariness of the world, whereas Julian asserts that, in the moment of her seeing, God simply maintains the complete fragility of the hazelnut. For Julian, the world is utterly fragile and utterly lasting; Glück mourns that, whatever the tiny ball is for us, it will not *for us* last.[14] She writes:

Whatever you hoped,
you will not find yourselves in the garden,
among the growing plants.
Your lives are not circular like theirs:
your lives are the bird's flight
which begins and ends in stillness—
which *begins* and *ends*, in form echoing
this arc from the white birch
to the apple tree.[15]

Neither Glück the poet nor Julian the visionary denies the radical impermanence, the ever-present contingency, of the world. Yet where Glück mourns change and our responsibility for it, Julian asserts foreverness in the moment of fragility—contingency and permanence together (not in a sequence, but in the same moment). She lives the paradox, not by writing (which is serial—one word after another) but in a vision, by seeing smallness and permanence together.

Julian does not offer her revelations as any sort of explanation or theory of evil. Nor do I. It would certainly not have helped me argue with my philosopher mother when I was fourteen years old. And now—when we face the destruction we are inflicting on the hazelnut of our world—it is hard not to react more as Glück does than with Julian's vision. But understanding paradox helps me as a historian understand the odd, confusing, in some ways self-contradictory text that Julian's *Showings* is—understand and account for the power it has had for readers that goes beyond the well-intentioned use some current writers have made of its pronouns and its imagery. Moreover, my understanding of paradox does not depend, in the final analysis, on acceptance of Julian's belief in and conception of God. For despite all our theorizing, sophisticated or superficial, strained or accomplished, we do at least sometimes experience our world as paradoxical, not argue it to be thus, but experience it thus—contingent and necessary, good and evil—not serially but simultaneously. I suggest that if we do have such

14. In a sense, then, Glück articulates Allen Wood's sense of the utter unacceptability of the paradox of our mortality and our lost causes. See note 11 above.

15. Glück, *Wild Iris*, 15. I have quoted the verses of Glück's poem somewhat out of order.

experiences, it is in ritual, not argument: in whatever we do in ritual moments, rather than in anything we say.

If we think about some of the most horrible moments of our past decades: Auschwitz, Pol Pot's Cambodia, the mowing down of children in Uvalde,[16] we have done something ritually if we have found any way to respond at all: bringing flowers to school fences, putting stumble stones in German streets where people trip over them, collecting dirt from lynching sites in the American South (with Bryan Stevenson's justice project).[17] What we have done (all we have found to do) is ritual acts: placing the flowers, digging the earth, tripping over our guilt in stones. While we are waiting (waiting in vain) for arguments and solutions, we *experience* the simultaneity of is and ought. We do not heal evil; our acts are not a solution to it. But we do—in ritual—sometimes *live in the contradiction* of is and ought to be, hope and despair, evil and good. I do not think one needs to believe in or worship a deity in order to live in the contradiction. But I think we do sometimes, almost instinctively, respond this way. We bring living flowers and stuffed toys to the place of dead children. We do sometimes laugh and feel simultaneous joy and despair at funerals. It is not just cant to talk about "celebrating a life" as the *New York Times* does in its memorial pages. Even at Uvalde there were moments, only moments but nonetheless moments, for the families to experience what their children had been.

I think that even for us today, in our own rather inadequate memorial and funeral services, we may for at least an instant inhabit the simultaneity of good and evil, contingency and necessity—the paradox of our world. For our world *is* that paradox. And understanding it thus may be something of what it means to say that we cannot write poetry after Auschwitz; we cannot create novels about Pol Pot; we cannot bear seeing or displaying as art the body of Emmett Till. We cannot make anything linear from evil. But we nonetheless act. We do ritual; we rest for a moment in the simultaneity of paradox. Perhaps all we can do is continue the rituals we have always had, in which good and evil exist and are experienced not serially but paradoxically, simultaneously, together.

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16. I wrote this article in the summer of 2022 when the slaughter at Uvalde (May 24, 2022) was still raw in our memories. Here I take it as a paradigm of the sort of gun violence all too frequent in the United States.

17. See Neiman, *Learning from the Germans*; Stevenson, *Just Mercy*.

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