Fraught Boundaries: Julian of Norwich and the Shrine Madonna

Frederick Morgan

Discussions of space in any artistic work are hampered in the first instance by the many senses of the term. ‘Space’ can be used to discuss the geometric, mental, notional, social, theoretical, infinite or resolutely finite.¹ What is more, because art can produce these spaces *ad infinitum*, space in art is subject to the artist’s capacity for inflationary production. It can be conjured, expanded, contracted, dismissed or abstracted in accordance with the needs of the producer and the interpretation of the audience. No wonder then, that Henry Lefebvre dismisses any attempt at the study of space in art: ‘the problem is that any search for space in literary texts will find it everywhere and in every guise: enclosed, described, dreamt of, speculated about.’² While this multiplicity clearly presents us with a critical challenge, this does not mean that it is an unproductive area of enquiry. With regards to the primary focus of this essay, the works of fourteenth- to fifteenth-century anchorite, Julian of Norwich, Laura Miles clearly demonstrates the importance of spatiality in *Revelations of Divine Love*: ‘Julian again and again returns to approachable spatial metaphors of enclosure and inclusion.’³ However, it is clear that Julian does more than merely make

---

¹ This essay will contend primarily with the sense of ‘physical extent or area; extent in two or three dimensions’, s.v. ‘space’, *The Oxford English Dictionary* <www.oed.com> [accessed 6 February 2020]. Hereafter OED.
³ Laura Saetveit Miles, ‘Space and Enclosure in A Revelation of Love’, in *A Companion to Julian of Norwich*, ed. by Liz Herbert McAvoy (Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer Group Ltd,
use of spatial metaphor; she makes use of the multiplicity Lefebvre describes. It is true that Julian's space appears 'in every guise,' but this essay contends that the boundaries between these guises are difficult, porous, and above all, productive. To quote Mary Davlin, we must realise, like 'historians of art,' that 'space is syntax, a component in the expression of meaning.'

To borrow from spatial metaphor, this essay essentially forms a structural diptych. In the first section we will cover the dislocated spatiality evoked in Julian's writings and examine her relationship to the apophatic tradition exemplified in texts such as the Middle English Deonis Hid Deuinitie. The second section discusses this use of difficult space in relation to the dislocated bodies of Shrine Madonnas. These figures of Mary open to reveal figural sculpture within and so negotiate — in their own forms — the representational boundaries problematised in Julian's writings. This comparison is not intended to proffer causal links, but instead aims to explore the manifestations of these concepts across genre, medium and geographic boundaries. As Sally Moore and Barbara Myerhoff argue, 'any part [of a culture], can by a series of chains, be shown to touch, though often at some considerable remove, many others.' That point of contact ('touch') between all these works is a tension of competing spaces that challenges the audience with ruptures that simultaneously demand and deny interpretation.

I

In Physics, Book IV, Aristotle establishes a clear definition of what he terms 'place': 'Now a "place," as such, has the three dimensions of length, breadth, and depth, which determine the limits of all bodies.' Fundamentally it is the geometric place which holds a body, 'it appears that place is a surface-continent that embraces its content after the fashion of a vessel.' As Lefebvre observes, this can be conceived of in terms of a primiti-

7 Ibid, p. 315.
tive space; tactile, bodily and relational. In other words it is the distance between the self and the earth felt underfoot, the self and the hand that holds; in short, 'it is first of all my body'. This is a geometric space that can be seen, felt, even measured in its subjective bodily units — arms, legs and fingers. Moreover, this is the space (at least initially) that Julian evokes in her vision of God in Chapter 51 of Revelations:

The place that our Lord sat on was symple, on the erth barren and desert, alone in wilderness. His clothing was wide and syde, and ful seemly as fallyth to a lord. The color of his cloth was blew as asure, most sad and fair. His cher was merciful, the colour of his face was faire browne with ful semely featours; his eyen were blak, most faire and semely, shewand ful of lovely pety; and within him an hey ward, long and brode, all full of endles hevyns (LT 51/96–101) 9

The scene opens with a form in geometric 'place'. A body, like our own, sitting on an earth below and surrounded by a wilderness stretching out on all sides. The narrator's description functions as an approach through this geometric space; drawing in from an expansive view of landscape to the clothing of the figure, before finally focussing on the 'faire browne' face. It is at this point that Julian makes an abrupt shift. The familiar 'ful semely' features give way to striking black eyes and from these we move inward. Though Julian continues to describe motion in geometric terms, 'within him an hey ward'; we have entered a totally different kind of space, abstract and absolute. Mary Davlin notes that 'a sense of place in literature can express itself in realistic concrete description of physical environment or simply in a reliance upon the directional language of prepositions'. 10 In this

---

9 Julian of Norwich, Revelations of Divine Love: The Short Text and The Long Text, ed. by Barry Windeatt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). All subsequent references are to this edition and are incorporated into the body of the essay. Long Text/Short Text are abbreviated to LT/ST respectively. Quotations are referenced (LT/ST, chapter number/line number(s)). All indented quotations will be rendered in modern English in the footnotes. This is not an act of translation, so much as transliteration for those unfamiliar with Middle English orthography. That said, more obscure words have been substituted to aid comprehension where appropriate. The place where our Lad sat on was simple, on the earth barren and desert, alone in the wilderness. His clothing was ample, and full seemly, as falleth to a Lord. The colour of his cloth was blue as azure, most sad and fair. His cheer was merciful, the colour of his face was fair brown, with full seemly features; his eyes were black, most fair and seemly, showing full of lovely pety; and within him and high-ward, long and brode, all full of endless heavens.
10 Davlin, p. 9.
passage, the audience must negotiate a difficult transition between these two ‘senses’. The issue is not that the new language of abstract movement does not have a meaning of its own.\textsuperscript{11} Rather, it is that the concrete dimensions have not acted as we might expect: a new paradigm has opened up but this does not mean that we lose our sense of the physical environment we have left behind. Instead, its geometric spatiality runs into and confuses Julian’s shift into the symbolic.

Julian’s narrative motions of ‘within him and heyward’ are both accepted symbolic movements, part of a ‘sociolect’ of tropes and images.\textsuperscript{12} We move into the self and up towards the divine.\textsuperscript{13} Indeed, later in the passage, Julian interprets the vision in these terms: ‘And this was shewid in a touch wher I sey “Myn understonyng was led into the lord”, in which I saw him.’ Yet, in Julian’s text this symbolic ascent into the Divine is the culmination of a movement through depicted reality, towards the figure in the desert. In other words, a movement through real space runs into and becomes conflated with a symbolic motion through abstract space. This spatial trip makes for uncomfortable reading, as readers resist the momentum dragging a geometric understanding across the hidden boundary and into the abstracted interior. This point of breakdown is exacerbated by Julian’s final paradox. Having delivered us to ‘endless heavyns’ we find it bound (‘long and brode’) by the spatiality of the preceding paradigm.\textsuperscript{14} It is in this confusion, this tangle of spatial frameworks, that we find the point of ‘rupture’ identified in our introduction; a point where the text’s underlying spatial frameworks are stretched to the point of breakdown. As this essay will argue throughout, this is not an accidental break but a conscious disruption.

An awareness of the difficulty posed by these spatial breaks is demonstrated by the sensitivity with which Julian (or contemporaneous scribes) handle these points of tension. We can see this clearly in the emendations

\textsuperscript{11} ‘Absolute space does have dimensions, though they do not correspond to dimensions of abstract (or Euclidean) space. Directions have a symbolic force,’ Lefebvre, p. 236.
\textsuperscript{13} Davlin stresses the latter point: ‘height is an especially significant spatial symbol, suggesting immense distance […] and the “otherness” or transcendence of God,’ p. 39
\textsuperscript{14} We might note similar contradictions in LT 67/2–4: ‘I saw the soule so large as it were an endles world […] In the midds of that syte sitts our Lord Jesus.’ Though Julian does caveat this by noting that the heaven is only seemingly endless, she nonetheless evokes an endless space that once again exhibits the features of boundedness (a centre). As Nietzsche observes: ‘in infinite time and in infinite space there are no terminal points.’ Friedrich Nietzsche, \textit{Le Livre du philosophe} (Paris: Aubier-Flammarion, 1969) quoted in Lefebvre, p. 181.
and expansions made between the Short and Long versions of *Revelations*. Chapter 13 of the Short Text provides us with another of the referential clashes previously discussed:

Fulle merelye and glalye ure Lorde lokyd into his syde and beheld and sayde this worde - *Loo, how I lovyd the* […] And with this same chere and myrthe he lokyd downe on the right syde, and brought to my mynde whare oure Lady stode in the tyme of his passion, and sayde, *Will thou see hire? (ST 13/1–8)*

In this passage Christ addresses us with the imperative (*Loo* [*Look*]) to gaze as he does into the open wound as he hangs on the cross. This is clearly an abstracted gaze, Christ’s position in space is figural rather than bodily. He does not merely gaze into himself, he gazes at his own broken organs: see ‘my herte be clovene in twa’ (*ST 13/3–4*). To gaze within himself Christ’s sight must be considered separately from its wider bodily context and so his spatiality becomes abstracted. In other words, we do not (instinctively) contort his imagined body to twist round on itself so the face can gaze inside its own flank. In this sense we, like Julian, make a distinction between ‘bodily’ and ‘gostly’ sight (*LT 51/4*). Christ is present, gazing, and imploring us to look into an abstracted space.

Gaston Bachelard classifies this momentary abstraction as an ‘image’ that is the ‘product of an absolute imagination, [which] owes its entire being to the imagination.’ This image, by its nature, is a product of the instant and so resists verification: ‘to verify images kills them.’ Julian’s contorted Christ functions in the instant as an image in abstracted space but descends quickly into the uncanny when we attempt to verify its spatiality. This is why the next evocation of the gaze is so jarring (*And with this same chere and myrthe he loked downe on the right syde*). The conjunction returns the reader to the idea of sight but this is no longer the abstracted ‘image’. Instead, we are presented with the tropic glance down from the cross towards Mary standing beside him in geometric space. This is an

---

15 Full merrily and gladly our Lord looked into his side and beheld and said these words: *Look, how I loved thee* […] And with the same cheer and mirth he looked down on the right side, and brought to my mind where our Lady stood in the time of his passion and said: *Will thou see her*?


image that recurs throughout religious art of the period, as can clearly be seen in the Dutch Crucifixion Diptych.¹⁸

In this altarpiece the position of Mary and John clearly allows them privileged access to Christ’s wound. John is positioned so that his gaze forms a horizontal line across the two panels, while Christ’s closed eyes gesture down at the mourning Mary below.¹⁹ Indeed, these gazes are what draw a connection across the framed boundary; John gazes across, while Mary’s and Christ’s downturned faces create an offset mirror effect that clearly conveys the close bond between them. The diptych evokes the spatial relationship drawn on by Julian in the preceding extract and demon-

¹⁸ All images are credited in the appendix.
¹⁹ I say ‘gesture’ because at this point in the narrative passion Christ is dead. Julian’s conflation of his lifeless head falling limply with the active gaze represents a temporal breakdown which complements her spatial dislocation.
strates the importance of these tropic dimensions; we return to Davlin’s notion of ‘space as syntax’.20 However, by evoking this tropic scene, Julian unsettles the fragile dislocation of Christ’s gaze and body, established in the preceding imagery.21 We should be sensitive to the contemporary significance of this dislocation. The crucifixion is a familiar space, a central image embedded into Christian consciousness. The conflation of abstracted and geometric seeing problematises both by appearing to conflate their respective spatial practice. In so doing, Julian’s text breaks down the ‘radical’ distinction Bachelard establishes between metaphor and image and so threatens to ‘verify’ Christ’s abstracted gaze.

This was clearly a point of difficulty recognised by the editors of extant manuscripts. Though the fraught conjunction (‘And with this same chere...’) remains in the Long Text, the second gaze is broken from the first by a chapter break. These chapter breaks are clearly marked in surviving manuscripts of the Long Text such as BL Stowe MS 42 (Fig. 4). Of course, this split might be explained partly by the additions made to the passage. In Chapter 23, Julian builds further on the abstracted spatiality of the body-less Christ, so that rather than merely gazing into himself ‘he led forth the understandyng of his creature be the same wounds into his syde within’.22 Either the concrete evocation of abstracted motion or the pressure of more text could plausibly have prompted the restructuring of the original passage. However, the popularity of the devotional tropes evoked by Julian belie any suggestion that the break at this point was mere chance. In a culture ‘immersed in religious imagery’ it seems unlikely the evocation and problematisation of these recognisable tropes would have gone unnoticed.23 Indeed, though speculative, the placement of the break may plausibly be explained as an attempt to mitigate the interpretive unease engendered by the Short Text. Even if this was not the case, we can reasonably claim not only that Julian was creating ruptures between different spatial practices, but also that these points of tension were recognised either by Julian herself, or by later scribes.

The most obvious parallel for this productive breakdown can be found in the tradition of the via negativa. Indeed, a confrontation with the limitations of knowledge – with confusion – is in some sense a desired out-

20 Davlin, p. 6.
21 Windeatt suggests that Julian was clearly referring to a ‘traditional’ positioning of Mary, p. 221. For further examples see Fig. 5.
22 Italics are my own.
23 Davlin, p. 5.
come of apophatic theology. By offering a familiar portrait of Christ and then denying us an understanding of what lies within him, Julian clearly demarcates the limitations of human understanding. As she notes a few lines after her description of God in the desert, 'we owen to knowen and leyn that the Fader is not man' (LT 51/112–3). What is more, the fallibilities of human understanding are an important theme in Julian's writing: not only does she refer to Pseudo-Dionysius directly but she stresses elsewhere the importance of accepting human limitations.24 As she writes in Chapter 10: 'If God wil shew thee more, he shal be thy light. Thee needith none but him' (LT 10/8–9). That said, this is not an assertion that Julian necessarily read any specific works, but instead that she was clearly aware of their wider cultural significance. In this sense, the unapproachability of God's divine space – the difficulty of the transition – might be seen as an important didactic function of the passage. Vincent Gillespie and Maggie Ross argue further that Julian's paradoxes are important catalysts for spiritual revelation: contradictions that allow 'the creative tension between conflicting significations to generate a precious stillness, a chink in the defensive wall of reason that allows slippage into apophatic consciousness'.25 Paradox functions within this model as an escape from language and from rationality's cerebral frameworks. By escaping reason, 'she is led into the annunciation of truths whose annunciations deny language.'26 In this respect, Julian's evocation of ruptured space places her within a recognised pseudo-Dionysian tradition.

We can see similar spatial breakdown in the Middle English translation of De Mystica Theologia: Deonise Hid Diuinite. As the text notes, God is:

euermore free – wiþinne alle creatures, not inclusid; wiþouten alle creatures, not schit oute; abouen alle creatures, not borne up; bineþe alle creatures, not put doun; behynde alle creatures, not put bak; before alle creatures, not dreuen forþe.27

24 LT 18/19-20 – I am accepting Barry Windeatt's claim that Julian conflates St Denis and Pseudo-Dionysius into a single figure in this passage, cf. Windeatt, p. 213.
26 Ibid, p. 63.
27 evermore free – within all creatures, not included; outside all creatures, not shut out; above all creatures, not borne up; beneath all creatures, not put down; behind all creatures, not put back; before all creatures, not driven forth, from Deonise Hid Diuinite, in The cloud of unknowing, and related treatises on contemplative prayer, ed. by Phyllis Hodgson (Exeter: Catholic Records Press, 1982), p. 124.
The text evokes a divine spatiality which manifests itself as a litany of contradictions. In each case the interpreter is offered and then denied a dimension of spatiality; we are denied the chance to place God. He is up but not above, below but not under, and so on. The variations systematically dismantle geometric space and continually re-invoke its dimensions, forcing the reader to linger at the point of breakdown. There are many similarities between this tortured spatiality and Julian’s own use of paradoxical space. However, key differences remain. Julian places stress on the sign by forcing it to bear two conflicting signifiers – both symbolic and realistic spatiality – but in this apophatic text we are denied the chance to make these connections. The signs lose their referentiality and the repeated variations contribute to this vacuum for, as Roland Barthes observes, ‘to repeat anything excessively is to enter into loss, into the zero of the signified.’ Barthes defines this loss, this ‘disfiguration of language’, as a kind of “bliss”, but this is not a release which Julian grants us. Hid Diuinite enjoins the reader to be “drawen [...] to þe souereyn substancyal beme of þe godliche derknes, alle þinges þus done awey”.

It functions as an escape from meaning, escape through the ‘chink’ that Gillespie and Ross describe. Julian’s use of space forces us to confront our alienation from God but this does not mean that we can ‘do away’ with spatiality. Ultimately, we must return back to meaning, back from the point of breakdown to a new sense of a conflicted sign. This is clearly true of the ‘Lord sitting in the desert’ scene previously discussed: both the approach to the figure in the desert and the symbolic movement within have meaning. The sensation of being torn between them and then overcoming this rupture is the reader’s primary experience of these transitions – not so much an “escape” as an uneasy suspension. This is much closer to model of negation evoked by T. S. Eliot in East Coker: ‘To arrive where you are, to get from where you are not, | You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy.’ The reader is forced to negotiate a fraught return to meaning across an interpretive break.

These ruptures are ‘uneasy’ because the mind resists being torn between competing frames of referentiality. This at least is the argument made by Lefebvre, who asserts that no system, ‘no science of space’, can accept ‘con-

---

28 Barthes, p. 41.
30 Deonise Hid Diuinite, p. 120. drawn [...] to the sovereign substantial beam of the Godlike darkness, all things thus done away.
tradictions in the nature of space. These contradictions are threatening because they unsettle human attempts to rationalise the world. Fundamentally, this is the source of the unease generated by Julian’s use of spatial transitions. These transitions are ‘grotesque’, at least in the technical sense espoused by Geoffrey Harpham. That is, they are works that ‘both require and defeat definition’. These moments are fleeting, Harpham argues, because artwork resists being ‘dominated both by metaphor and metonym […] the mind would not rest on that knife edge’. However, it is exactly this knife edge over which Julian lingers when she conflates perceptions of geometric and abstract spatiality. In so doing her writing chips away at the boundaries between these different kinds of perceived space. Lefebvre might argue that all these representational spaces exist on a continuum, but this does not conform with our perception (our ‘science’) of that space. Julian evokes demarcated categories but runs them into each other. These collisions create unsettling breaks – ‘ruptures’ – in the integrity of her representational space.

II

The Rites of Durham, a detailed description of Durham Cathedral’s inventory as it stood in the sixteenth century, gives us a valuable insight into pre-reformation materiality. It devotes considerable attention to the description of ‘a merveylous lyvelye and bewtifull Immage of the picture of oure Ladie socalled the Lady of boulton’. This statue is distinguished by one special property:

the Lady could be made ‘to open […] from her breaste downward. And with in þe said imagge was wroghte and pictured the Immage of our saviour, merueylose synlie gilded houldinge vppe his handes, and holding betwixt his handes a faire & large crucifix of Christ all of gold.’

32 Lefebvre, p. 292.
34 Ibid, p. 123.
37 Ibid, p. 30. to open […] from her breast downwards. And within the said image was wrought and pictured the image of our saviour, marvellously finely gilded holding up his
Though outwardly conventional, the depiction of Mary was periodically opened so that, ‘every man might se pictured within her, the father, the sonne, and holy ghost, moste curioslye and finely gilty’.

38 This statue did not survive the reformation but Elina Gertsman clearly identifies it as an English example of a medieval ‘Shrine Madonna’, a tradition of opening statues that flourished between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries (also referred to as ‘Vierge Ouverte’).

39 Over forty continental examples survive and, as Gertsman notes, there are considerably more documented cases (like the Lady of Boulton) that have left no material remains.

40 The textual traces of the Lady of Boulton hint at an object which negotiated – in its own form – the uneasy boundary encountered in the previous section. Namely, a form caught between bodily and abstracted space. This is a tension that Gertsman clearly identifies when she describes the Shrine Madonna as ‘fraught: it is a threshold, a boundary, and so a marginal space’.

41 In this ‘fraught’ spatiality we find a possible parallel for Julian’s ruptured transitions. Indeed, this is a form which sits resolutely on the ‘knife edge’ that Harpham describes and over which Julian lingers. It should be stressed once again that this is not a comparison that makes the case for causal links. Instead, we are looking for a similarity of function, a similarity which might allow us to better place Julian’s ruptured spatiality within a wider cultural context.

Of course, while it is worth evoking the textual relic of an insular example, we cannot reduce the Shrine Madonna to a written description. Its power is a product of its material form and this is ill-served by encompassing everything in text or even in a dialectic of ‘object as text’. As Gertsman notes, the Shrine Madonna ‘invites a long gaze, and it invites a wandering gaze’.

42 For these visual purposes (and lacking surviving English examples of the practice) we shall be using a continental example from the early fifteenth century:

hands, and holding betwixt his hands a fair and large crucifix of Christ all of gold.

38 Ibid., p. 30.
40 Ibid, pp. 2–3.
41 Ibid, p. 19.
42 Ibid, p. 11.
As viewers we are confronted with Mary’s body in a state of perpetual transition. The arms of the interior – bodily arms like ours, emerging from a chest like ours – push apart its own outer form and reveal within a body melded into a throne for God the Father. The act of opening the statue is, by necessity, a negotiation of different kinds of spatiality. In this case the negotiation is a difficult one. We can see this clearly when we compare the Shrine Madonna’s body to Bachelard’s evocation of the idealised casket:

from the moment the casket is opened, dialectics no longer exist. The outside is effaced with one stroke, an atmosphere of novelty and surprise reigns. The outside has no more meaning. And quite paradoxical-
ly, even cubic dimensions have no more meaning, for the reason that a new dimension – the dimension of intimacy – has opened up.\footnote{Bachelard, pp. 85–86.}

Bachelard clearly demarcates a point of transition (the act of opening the lid) and then effaces the ‘outside’. This transition from one spatiality to another is seamless but this rhetoric of the instant ‘moment’ does not apply to the Shrine Madonna. Our ‘long gaze’ does not allow for the effacement of the geometric, bodily space of the unopened figurine. The new bodily interior is caught between an abstraction (a throne for the infinite divine) and its anatomically whole upper half.\footnote{It should be stressed that the architectural symbolism is not in of itself noteworthy. Indeed, there is clear scriptural basis for the discussion of Mary in architectural terms, (take for example Ezekiel 44:1–2: ‘This 3ate schal be closid […] for the Lord God of Israel entride bi it’). However, in the case above we are not allowed to lose the sense of the bodily Mary in our appreciation of the figural architecture. All Biblical quotations are taken from the Late Version of the Wycliffite Bible as found in The Holy Bible Containing the Old and New Testaments made from the Latin Vulgate by John Wycliffe and his Followers, ed. by Josiah Forshall & Frederic Madden, 4 vols, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1850). In using this material, I am not attempting to make any claims about Julain’s relationship to the Lollards.}

Indeed, the revelation of the ‘new dimension’ is afforded only by means of corporeal arms pushing at the body from within. These hands push and grasp in geometric space (a space we intuitively understand) but they grasp and push against a representation of heavenly space. As was the case with Julian’s narrative transitions, we find ourselves caught at the boundary between abstraction and referentiality. However, while Julian merely lingers, the materiality of the Shrine Madonna allows it to remain balanced on Harpham’s ‘knife edge’. In this case the material object escapes the subject’s attempts at definition. The Shrine Madonna allows the viewer to sustain an alien way of seeing and in this sense, to quote Bill Brown, ‘inanimate objects organise […] the animate world’\footnote{Bill Brown, ‘Thing Theory’, Critical Enquiry, vol. 28 no. 1, (2001), 1–22, (4).} The materiality of the object facilitates a way of looking that pushes the viewer into an interpretive hinterland. Incapable of ‘instantly’ negotiating the transition from one dimension to the other, we gaze suspended between two referential frames: the infant Christ hangs from superfluous arms, which in turn hang suspended on the heavenly space of the half-corporeal throne.\footnote{It should be noted that the old hands are often visible even after the Madonna is opened (Figs. 6–8).} This is a representational space in which neither abstract nor geometric spatiality can predominate.
This is an unsettling interpretive state. Indeed, as this essay has argued, our experience of these objects is characterised by Harpham’s definition of the ‘grotesque’. We are being confronted with an object that ‘both requires and defeats definition’, a contradiction which may in turn spur a subjective emotive reaction.\(^{47}\) In my personal – and unavoidably subjective – case, this reaction takes the form of deep unease.\(^{48}\) However, it is this very difficulty that allows the Shrine Madonna to engage with its miraculous subject matter. As Gertsman writes, the Shrine Madonna, ‘predicated in the rhetoric of revelation engage[s] with the two seemingly incommensurable spaces: the finite body of the virgin and the infinite world within her womb’.\(^{49}\) This engagement is achievable only by means of the uneasy – or grotesque – suspension. The meeting of the earthly and the divine in Mary’s womb becomes a point of spatial rupture because the Shrine Madonna attempts to represent both simultaneously. While there is certainly a gesture towards the apophasic, like Julian the object never affords the viewer an escape into contemplative space. We cannot abandon either referential frame (Mary as mother and Mary as divine vessel) and so we are torn between the two. Hence, a fraught suspension becomes the means of engagement with one of the central figures in Christian pantheon.

I maintain that a similar case can be made in regard to *Revelations*. The theological possibilities of difficult reconciliations can be seen in the parable of the Lord and the Servant:

> The lord lokyth upon his servant ful lovely and swetely, and mekely he sendyth him to a certain place to don his will. The servant, not only he goeth, but suddenly he stirith and rynnith in grete haste for love to don his lords will. And anon he fallith into a slade and takith ful grete sore. And than he groans and moans and wallows and writhes, but he ne may rysen ne helpyn hymself be no manner wey. (*LT* 51/8-13)\(^{50}\)

\(^{47}\) Harpham, p. 3.
\(^{48}\) It is important to caveat this statement as one person’s experience of these objects. I am aware that some find the open Shrine Madonnas beautiful, but to separate this analysis entirely from my own emotive response would be dishonest. My unease prompted much of the underlying research which built towards this paper. Of course, whatever emotive response they engender it is clear that these objects do prompt a reaction and I maintain that they are certainly grotesque in the value neutral sense that Harpham puts forward.
\(^{49}\) Gertsman, p. 48.
\(^{50}\) *The Lord looks upon his servant full lovely and sweetly, and meekly he sends him to a certain place to do his will. The servant not only goes, but suddenly he stirs and runs in great haste for love, to do his Lord’s will. And before long he falls into a valley and takes great sore. And then he groans and moans and wallows and writhes, but he may not rise, nor help himself in any manner of way.*
The spatial framework of the vision is ostensibly clear: this is geometric spatiality, albeit a vague one. The narrative is built on a series of third-person verbs placing and shifting the figures across, away, towards, and down. As Julian explains, there are two interpretations of the servant. The first is that he represents Adam. In this case we have a moral fall explained with reference to a familiar symbolic geography of divine distance and moral verticality. Adam, and by implication all men, are at a remove from the moral height of the Father. This didactic message is explained in absolutely geometric terms. The servant cannot see God because, writhing in the hollow, ’he cowde not turne his face to loke upon his lovyng lord’ (LT 51/14-15). This frustrated gaze relies upon a clear relational framework: the servant cannot see the lord because his view is obstructed by their relative positions. This is striking because Julian dismisses the visual imagery as she expounds its implications: ’at this poynte the shewing of the example vanished, and my lord led forth myn understondyng in syte and in shewing of the revelation to the end’ (LT 51/50–51). This ’sight’ proves to be divine, it is ’how God beholdith alle man and his fallyn’ (LT 51/82–3), not the earthly vision that Julian has earlier conjured. At this point we are confronted with a collapse of the spatial and abstract into a single category. We are presented with a ’gostly understondyng’ (LT 51/7) but one underpinned by an insistently geometric spatial framework. This paradigm is further complicated by the second sense introduced by Julian. Affecting a temporal collapse, Christ falls simultaneously with man.51 This is not a moral fall but a fall from heaven into ’the maydens wombe, falling into the taking of our kynde’ (LT 51/217). Christ falls through what we have established as symbolic space into flesh. More precisely into a valley (’slade’), with all its resonances to the swollen abdomen of a pregnant mother.52 At this point the variation of writhing, twisting, moaning takes on a new potent signification.53 These do not constitute a metaphor for the iniquity of sin, they are the movements of a baby felt against a pregnant

51 Note the resonance with 1 Corinthians 15:21: ’Deeth is bi a man, and bi man is a3enrisyngh fro deth.’

52 ’slade’ (n.): (a) Low-lying ground, a valley; a flat grassy area, glade, Middle English Dictionary Online <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED40756/trac?counter=1&search_id=2898090> [accessed 10 December 2018]

53 My thinking on these movements was influenced by Vincent Gillespie’s seminar: ’’The Moderhede of Kynd Love’: conception, labour, and delivery in the theology of Julian of Norwich’, Medieval English Research Seminar, 10 October 2018, English Faculty Building, Oxford.
stomach. Finally, Julian expands these potent movements to encompass all of Christ’s life ‘he myte never rysen al mytyly from the tyme that he was fallen into the maydens wombe till his body was slaine and ded’ (LT 51/228–30). This ‘fall’ relies on the same geometric framework as the simultaneous fall of Adam but it upsets the underlying abstraction. Adam feels the heavy impact of original sin in the ‘slade’, but this point of contact has now become tangible; the press of a baby against a mother, the trials of a turbulent life and the fleshy torments of the passion. Once again, the competing referential frames strain at Julian’s spatiality.

However, it is exactly this interpretive strain that allows the passage to engage with Christ’s dual nature. Only by bringing us to an interpretive ‘knife edge’ can Julian attempt to present Christ as an aspect of the Godhead simultaneously kicking against Mary’s womb. The same may be said of the simultaneous motion of Adam and Christ, which strains at the underlying representational framework but resolutely binds the suffering of Christ to the moral fall of man. If these are complex conflations it is because, like the Shrine Madonna, Julian’s text engages with ‘seemingly incommensurable spaces’.

It is in this sense that the breakdown and rupture of spatial frameworks is productive. To approach Christ necessitates an engagement with a duality that simultaneously demands and denies comprehension. To understand Christ’s space – the space of the womb (of man) and the symbolic movements from the Father into that flesh – the reader must enter a dimension that evokes and defeats the frameworks by which they might attempt to categorise it. If Julian’s spaces are grotesque (again in the technical sense advanced by Harham) it is because Christ is a fundamentally grotesque subject. As a result, Julian’s attempts to lead the reader’s ‘understonymng [...] into the lord’ (LT 51/124), necessitate a journey into a space which defeats classifications. Returning briefly to the opening passage and the man sitting in the desert, we can readily see how this model might apply: the movement within brings us closer to the Father and his endless heavens only by unsettling and alienating our spatial frameworks. What results is a confrontation with the difficulty of God facilitated by means of a language which Julian makes difficult. David L. Clarke argues that there is an ever-present threat of alienation in language: ‘this unnamed and unnameable Other, moreover, can always, at any turn, performatively disrupt human pretensions to knowledge, especially where those pretensions concern language’. As we have seen, this is a perform-

---

54 Gertsman, p. 48.
55 David L. Clarke, ‘Monstrosity, Illegibility, Degeneration’ in Monster Theory: reading
ative disruption achieved through language, but what Julian ultimately unsettles is our sense of place. In moving towards God, we move closer to an inevitable alienation. At this point we should return to the ‘Lady of Boulton’ and to the account that survives of the figure in use: ‘and every principia dait the said imagme was opened’.56 Though regular, the opening of the Durham Shrine Madonna was nonetheless an event, and that the primary experience of the statue would be with the familiar exterior. The opening of the Shrine and the unsettling encounter previously described should therefore be seen in this light; as a ‘performative disruption of human pretensions to knowledge’.57 Ultimately, this is what Julian achieves: an alienation of the familiar images of Christ affected through an alienation of familiar spatial frameworks. Gertsman argues that the Shrine Madonna ‘openly participates in [. . .a] discourse of alterity’.58 I argue that it is in this wider cultural discourse that we should ultimately place and attempt to appreciate Julian’s use of dislocated space.

Of course, to argue for appreciation is not to suggest that we can fully comprehend the unsettling spaces evoked in Revelations. However tempting it may be to explain or rationalise our way around these interpretive suspensions, doing so would reduce these feelings to ideas. Confrontation with the uncanny, with the difficult, is arguably a reader’s primary experience of these passages. In this sense the experience is ‘apophatic’. These moments create a sense of alienation, but this alienation is not from meaning but instead sustained in broken meaning. A sense of dislocation is afforded by the continued habitation of ruptured spatial paradigms. Bachelard writes that the poetic space ‘cannot remain indifferent space, subject to measures and estimates of the surveyor. It has been lived in, not in its positivity, but with all the partiality of the imagination’.59 To analyse how these spaces function – the brief of this essay – is the work of the surveyor (complete with measures and estimates). Yet, their power must be understood in terms of the immediate habitation of a space which is close to God and yet so interpretively unsettling. Ultimately, Julian affords the reader a sense of revelation only at the cost of a countervailing alienation. And so, like the Shrine Madonna’s broken body, the interpretive dislocation of Julian’s writings facilitates an otherworldly encounter.

---

56 *Rites of Durham*, p. 30.
57 Clarke, p. 41.
58 Gertsman, p. 82.
59 Bachelard, p. 19.
Understanding these moments in terms of encounter (or ‘experience’) is important because it allows us to properly appreciate how Julian shapes and mitigates these moments. Gillespie and Ross argue that Julian’s showings demand to be taken “globally, not locally” and it is in the wider relational world of Julian’s showings that we find the mitigation of these moments of interpretive unease.\textsuperscript{60} Turning for the last time to the Shrine Madonna, we should take note of the feature which remains unchanged throughout the bodily transition. The preservation of the face is a key component of almost all extant Shrine Madonnas and a single point of continuity through the process of opening.\textsuperscript{61} This is true of even the most abstracted bodies, such as that of the Virgen Abridera de Allariz (see below). Though this may reflect a subjective experience of the aforementioned ‘encounter’, this benevolent gaze has the potential to take on potent significance:

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{fig3}
\caption{Fig. 3
Virgen Abridera de Allariz,
Shrine Madonna
c.1280
Allariz
Museo de art Sacro del Convento de Sancta Clara
Ivory}
\end{figure}

An outward gaze affords the viewer a sense of personal recognition. This sense of personal encounter represents one possible escape from the uncanny transitions previously discussed and this same visage provides an assurance of divine affection that mitigates many of the difficulties posed

\textsuperscript{60} Gillespie and Ross, p. 58.
\textsuperscript{61} I have yet to come across a Shrine Madonna that breaks this rule. For further examples see Figs. 6–8.
by those transitions. I am reluctant to assign an intentionality or even a
universality of experience to this benevolent gaze, but it is a useful vehicle
with which to explore Julian’s writings; what must be caveated as personal
experience in the Shrine Madonna is much more clearly demarcated in
Revelations.

The divine gaze and the accompanying assurance of divine presence
form an important backdrop against which we experience Julian’s spatial
ruptures. ‘The face of the crucifix’ (*LT* 3/20), sitting at the foot of Julian’s
bed, is the starting point for her subsequent visions and a continual physi-

cal presence. Variations and refraction of this gaze are evident throughout
the visions and indeed at all of the points of transition discussed in this
essay. This can be seen most clearly in the interpretive lenses applied to
the running servant. As Christ falls into the womb and we fall with Adam
into sin, Julian assures us that the Lord ‘loked upon his servant continually
– and namely in his fallyng’ (*LT* 51/101–2), whether or not he is himself
seen. The approach towards the Lord sitting in the desert is marked by
this same gaze conveyed by those striking black ‘eyen’. These are both the
point of entry to boundless heavens and an assurance of his benevolence,
as Julian explains, ‘the semely blakheede of the eyen was most according
to shew his holy sobirnes’ (*LT* 51/121–2). Even as we look in at the figures of
the text, Julian ensures that they gaze back at us. Though these assurances
may not be points of engagement in their own right, this gaze permeates
our experience of Julian’s text. Our response is mitigated, shaped and me-
diately by an ever-present voyeur, and the assurance of love that presence
provides. Ultimately, this is one of the means by which we affirm that ‘al
shal be wele’ (*LT* 27/24–5) and the means by which alienation touches on
the sublime. The unease of the interpretive knife edge is never an unease
felt in isolation.

Where then does this leave us? If we have moved over the course of this
essay, it is by engaging with medieval culture beyond the textual. This is
challenging because the evidence we have is necessarily fragmentary. Yet
comparison has a utility beyond the establishment of causal links. Gilles
Deleuze writes that to understand something, ‘you should look for a com-
pletely different idea, elsewhere, in another area, so that something passes
between the two which is neither the one nor the other’.52 This essay sits at
the tenuous boundary between the Shrine Madonna and Julian’s text. It is
this space that provides a point of entry and its unease is mitigated only

---

52 Gilles Deleuze and Claire ParnetMa, *Dialogues II*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Bar-
by whatever insight that entry affords. In this case, insight into a spatiality which is broken, uneasy and, more importantly, revelatory. As we have seen, Julian makes use of this uneasy interdependence to encompass the difficult spaces of the divine. In this fashion, for a tortured moment, the reader might come close to the incommensurate space behind those enigmatic eyes.
Bibliography

PRIMARY

Anon, Denis Hid Diaunite in The cloud of unknowing and related treatises on contemplative prayer, ed. by Phyllis Hodgson (Exeter: Catholic Records Press, 1982).


The Holy Bible Containing the Old and New Testaments made from the Latin Vulgate by John Wychiffe and his Followers, ed. by Josiah Forshall & Frederic Madden, 4 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1850).

Rites of Durham, ed. by Fowler, T. J. (Durham: Andrews & Company, 1903), <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uva.x004440571;view=1up;seq=12>, [accessed 5 December 2018].

SECONDARY


Lefebvre, Henri, The Production of Space, tr. by Donal Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell,
Moore, Sally F. and Myerhoff, Barbara G., Secular Ritual (Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, 1997).
Varnam, Laura, The Church as Sacred Space in Middle English Literature and Culture (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018).
APPENDIX

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig. 1 Image reproduced courtesy of The Philadelphia Museum of Art, <https://www.phil museum.org/collections/permanent/102845.html> [accessed 6 December 2018]
Fig. 2 Image reproduced courtesy of mybrokenfist.com, http://www.mybrokenfist.com/ blog/vierge-ouvrante-awesome [accessed 6 December 2018]
Fig. 3 Images reproduced courtesy of user ‘Josercid’, https://www.flickr.com/photos/88068852@N05/9255266095/in/photostream/ [accessed 6 December 2018]

![Image of a book page]

Fig. 4
Seventeenth century
BL. Stowe MS 42
Fig. 5
Pax, The Crucifixion
C.1400
Image my own

Fig. 6
Shrine Madonna
C. 1410
Vienna, Dom Museum

![Shrine Madonna](image)

**Fig. 7 Shrine Madonna**
Fifteenth century
Autun, Musée Rolin

Image reproduced courtesy of user ‘Patrick’ https://www.flickr.com/photos/morio60/12011944803/in/album-72157639798580576/ [6 December 2018]
Fig. 8
Shrine Madonna

C. 1300

New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art