

The Person and the Place—II: At Old St Julian's

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The weeping and wailing of Margery Kempe are so un-English a phenomenon, that it is no wonder if many of her fellow pilgrims reviled her as a hypocrite, a Lollard, and a 'right wicked woman'. It seems never to have occurred to her that most people went on pilgrimage in a somewhat holiday mood, and that therefore her pious table talk was, for them, entirely out of place, to say nothing of her habit of falling down and crying 'wonder loud' for compassion of Jesus. With foreigners she usually fared much better, simply because they did not understand the purport of her cries. They would make sympathetic remarks about hot weather and indigestion.

Both at home and abroad, however, Margery had her consolations. There were always the 'ghostly men who loved and favoured her', particularly when she cried. 'Worshipful clerks, both archbishops and bishops, doctors of divinity and bachelors also', encouraged her to believe that she was led by the Holy Ghost and by no evil spirit, and the list of these is certainly impressive. Arundell, the Archbishop of Canterbury, for whom the extirpation of Lollardy had become a grand mental fixation, actually gave her a letter of approval with special privileges in it. The Bishops of York, Lincoln and Worcester, the abbot of Leicester, the legate of Constance and a positive stream of hermits and friars of all the orders, so she tells us, found no fault with her, and approved of her wholeheartedly. Admittedly one often feels that wishful thinking has helped her imagination to embroider a casual remark into a eulogy here and there, but even so, at the end, the witnesses for the defence are fairly overwhelming.

It was probably about the year 1402 that Margery paid a visit to Norwich at our Lord's bidding, there to seek the approval of three acknowledged authorities in spiritual matters. This was some time before she began her pilgrimages abroad. Her first visit was to the Vicar of St Stephen's, Richard of Caister, a holy and humorous soul, to judge by his reaction to her request 'to speak to him an hour or two of the love of God after he had eaten'. For 'Benedicite!' he cried, blessing

her with amazement, 'what could a woman occupy an hour or two hours in the love of our Lord? I shall never eat meat till I know what she can say of our Lord God the time of one hour'. The conversation that followed gave mutual satisfaction. The second visit was to William Southfield, a Whitefriar, who said to her: 'Jesu mercy and gramercy, sister, dread not the manner of your living for it is the Holy Ghost working plenteously his grace in your soul. Thank him highly of his goodness'.

After these two encouraging interviews, she came at last to Dame Julian, the anchoress, to whom she showed the grace that God put in her soul, 'of compunction, contrition, sweetness and devotion, compassion with holy meditation and high contemplation, and full many holy speeches and dalliance that our Lord spake to her soul, and many wonderful revelations. These she showed to the anchoress, to know if there were any deceit in them, for the anchoress was expert in such things, and could give good counsel'. Margery then goes on to tell us exactly what the anchoress said, and it is interesting to observe that her report of this conversation is one of the fullest in her book. It was an interview that obviously made a deep impression on her mind.

'The anchoress', she writes, 'hearing the marvellous goodness of our Lord, highly thanked God with all her heart for his visitation, counselling this creature to be obedient to the will of our Lord God, and fulfil with all her might whatever he put in her soul, if it were not against the worship of God and profit of her even Christians, for if it were, it were nought the moving of a good spirit, but rather of an evil spirit. The Holy Ghost moveth never a thing against charity, and if he did he was contrarious to his own self, for he is all charity. Also he moveth a soul to all chasteness, for chaste livers are called the temple of the Holy Ghost, and the Holy Ghost maketh a soul stable and steadfast in the right faith and belief. And a double man in soul is ever unstable, and unsteadfast in all his ways. He that is evermore doubting is like the flood of the sea, the which is moved and borne about by the wind, and that man is not like to receive the gifts of God. What creature that hath these tokens, he must steadfastly believe that the Holy Ghost dwelleth in his soul. And much more, when God visiteth a creature with tears of contrition, devotion or compunction, he may and ought to believe that the Holy Ghost is in his soul.

St Paul saith that the Holy Ghost asketh for us with mournings and weepings unspeakable, that is to say, he maketh us to ask and pray with mournings and weepings so plenteously that the tears may not be

numbered. No evil spirit may give these tokens, for Jerome saith that tears torment more the devil than do the pains of hell. God and the devil be evermore contrarious, and they shall never dwell together in one place, and the devil hath no power in a man's soul. Holy writ saith that the soul of a rightful man is the seat of God, and so I trust, sister, that thee be. I pray God grant thee perseverance. Set all your trust in God, and fear not the language of the world, for the more despite, shame and reproof that ye have of the world, the more is your merit in the sight of God. Patience is necessary unto you, for in that shall ye keep your soul'. 'Much was the holy dalliance', Margery says, 'that the anchoress and this creature had by communing in the love of our Lord Jesus Christ, many days that they were together'.

Now at first glance one might simply think how clever Mother Julian was, not to commit herself too far in approving of Margery's visions. She speaks in safely general terms that could apply to any manner of Christian life. No spiritual director ever went wrong by talking about the Holy Ghost as charity, and the Christian as his temple. But when one has read Margery's book right through, and recalls Julian's words, spoken at the beginning of this interesting career, it is apparent that the wise old anchoress had put her finger on the things that were to remain essentially Margery's problems until the end. Fundamentally it is a question of learning to trust that one is being led by the Holy Ghost. Margery's conduct was often so unusual, through no fault of her own, that the disapproval of her fellow men would often shake her confidence in the guidance of the Holy Ghost. She was only too willing to believe that she had got everything wrong, until subjected to formal examination on her catechism, when she would show herself a model child of the church. The story of her life is an object lesson in the hard apprenticeship to stability and steadfastness.

Then there is the question of her tears. She had not yet begun the ten years of screaming—that was to begin on Calvary—but she had already the gift of tears, to such a degree that her fellow men were scandalized and perhaps more jealous than suspicious if the truth were known. But here Julian is as categorical as ever. 'The Holy Ghost *maketh* us to ask and pray with mournings and weepings so plenteously that the tears may not be numbered'. She had to believe that her crying was a good thing. In any case there was nothing she could do about it, because she went blue and nearly choked when she tried to withhold her tears and cries. Finally there was the 'despite, shame and reproof that ye have of the world'. Margery was to have more than her fair share of this, when,

for instance, she was led in a white sacken apron, 'like a fool', by her unfeeling countrymen, deserted by them in most dangerous and difficult circumstances, and in her old age made to travel through unfriendly 'Ducheland' much faster than she could comfortably manage, so that the journey alone nearly killed her. 'Set all your trust in God', one feels, must have become her talisman, through the sheer repetition of humiliation.

For anyone interested in the otherwise unrecorded history of Mother Julian's dealings with people, this sidelight that Margery offers is a treasure. When we read the *Revelation of Love that Jesus Christ, our endless bliss, made in Sixteen Shewings, or Revelations particular*, we are conscious of a woman completely absorbed in thinking about God. We are far less conscious of Julian as a woman sharing in other people's lives. True, there is her admission that she was sufficiently curious about the salvation of a certain person, to ask our Lord for some definite information that he was not inclined to give. There are the constant references to her 'even Christians', and of course her whole theological outlook considers the general mystical body, and never herself *sola cum solo*. Still, it is not until one reads her actual words to Margery Kempe that one has a concrete instance of how she would attend to a need, and answer a problem. The contemplative side of her life is here complemented by a conversation, typical of hundreds that she must have had, that reveals how well earned her reputation was in the practical sphere.

If Margery's sidelight complements, a further factor that we still possess may be said to complete the diptych of Julian at her prayers and in her pastoral work. This is the still eloquent framework to the picture—her cell at Norwich. It has been restored and enlarged, but with perfect respect and understanding. The original dimensions are visible in outcrops of the old foundations. The original floor level can be easily judged by the squint into the church, which has been kept at the height it was when Julian lived there. To stand on the spot where the most individual and beautiful thing in English spirituality came into being, is to realise suddenly the exact dimensions of Julian's world. For the hermitage was very tiny, and she lived there many, many years. It was not all joy and light and beauty for her, as we can judge by the lines that sum up so perfectly the less exalted side . . . 'I was turned and left to myself in heaviness and weariness of my life, and irksomeness of myself, that scarcely I could have patience to live. There was no comfort nor none ease to me, but faith, hope and charity. And these I had

in truth, but little in feeling'. This is the only time in the *Revelations* that she speaks of the depression which our own common sense must insist was often repeated, as she was visited by all the inevitable discomforts of cold and fasting, aridity and illness, at different times during her long life. But the cramping claustrophobia being once essentially overcome, one can see how her life must have flourished in the little square that she never left.

On one side of the room was the squint into the church where she received holy communion, and no doubt listened to hellfire parish sermons. On the other side was her window onto the world. Between these two her life was poised and sustained. The world was always there, for St Julian's alley then, as now, was only a hundred yards of passage-way off the Carrow road, a busy thoroughfare, with the noise of the river traffic only a little beyond it. One can imagine the commotion, the distractions, the 'swearing of great oaths' that used to upset Margery Kempe so much.

It cannot have been just the one person Julian mentions specifically in the *Revelations* about whom she questioned our Lord on the matter of salvation. It was all of them, and her interest in them was a deep personal involvement, something that busied and worried her, because her *Revelations* had made it so plain that all men are Christ. She was caught up on either side in Christ—here, in the service of her union with him, and there, in the service which they expected of her. The Lord for whose compassion she sorrowed, as she saw the blood run down from the garland, 'hot and freshly and right plenteously as it were in the time of his passion . . . the same that suffered for me', must always develop, in the enclosed life, into the Christ who is all man, Adam. 'Right as I was afore in the Passion of Christ fulfilled with pain and compassion, like so . . . I was fulfilled with compassion of all mine even Christians'. In the sight of God, all man is one man and one man is all man, she tells us, in what was to her the most wonderful example of all, that of the Lord and the Servant. 'In all this our good Lord showed his own son and Adam but *one* man'. 'All mankind that shall be saved by the sweet Incarnation and blissful Passion of Christ, all is the manhood of Christ'.

The parallel with Langland is too close to overlook, however fortuitous it may be, for it is so typical of the fourteenth century tradition: 'For our joy and our hele, Jesu Christ of heaven / in a poor man's apparel pursueth us ever / and looketh on us in *their* likeness / and that with lovely cheer'. 'I stand before thee', said the Servant to the Lord,

in Julian's vision, 'in Adam's kirtle', It was Christ in the kirtle of the flesh, ragged and torn. But the important thing was that it was Christ. Having been blessed with this insight, it is no wonder that Julian's understanding and compassion should bring people flocking to her, and make her a precious part of their lives, an experience unlikely to be forgotten. This was the pattern of salvation, so simple that our Lord told her that he had nothing to add to it. By thinking on it, she would understand always more in the same. The example of the Lord and the Servant, she says, was sufficient food for thought for twenty years. Into this perfect pattern it was easy for her to fit everyone, and give each one the confidence that however heavily the 'scathe of Adam's falling' seemed in him, it was infinitely overcome by the 'glory of Christ uprisen'. Thus the exhortation to Margery to trust and to love; to be constant, and to have no fear.

The English Mystics and their Critics

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Professor David Knowles, when still a young Downside monk, published in 1927 a short survey, *The English Mystics*, which workers in this field have used and quoted and respected as one of the first appraisals to be both popular and scholarly, free alike from prejudice and enthusiasm, of the reputations of some spiritual writers of later mediæval England. In that same year, Hope Allen produced her vast study, *Writings Ascribed to Richard Rolle*, and since then much else has been accomplished. She assisted in the sensational discovery and the publication of the *Book of Margery Kempe*; and although most of us have come to deplore her methods, her ebullience and many of her contentions, we who have followed her have all learned and profited much from Hope Allen's tireless devotion to her subject. Professor Arnould's text of Rolle's *Melos*, Professor Hodgson's critical editions of *The*