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THE ARCTIC  
UNIVERSITY  
OF NORWAY

Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education, Department of Archaeology,  
History, Religious Studies and Theology

# **Ecstatic Pain: manifestations of physical pain in the visions of Julian of Norwich and their implications for *imitatio Christi***

**Cathinka Dahl Hambro**

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## Abstract

This thesis explores the manifestations of bodily pain in two visions received by the late medieval English mystical writer Julian of Norwich (c.1342-1416). During a serious illness in 1373, Julian received a total of sixteen holy visions that she subsequently wrote down in two versions; the so-called ‘Short text’ was written soon after Julian’s recovery, whereas the ‘Long text’ was composed after twenty years of contemplation and interpretation of the visions’ theological meaning.

A popular ideal in the later Middle Ages was that of *imitatio Christi*, that is, to experience and take share in Christ’s Passion. In a similar way as the incarnated Christ had suffered for his love of humanity, so devotional Christians desired to suffer the same pain for the love of, and compassion for, Christ. Through a phenomenological and hermeneutical reading of Julian’s visions seven and eight, I examine the significance of physical pain for the medieval ideal of *imitatio Christi*. In doing so, I identify and discuss two paradoxes that have immediate implications for the ultimate goal of *imitatio*: to experience union with God through identification with him. Despite the fact that such mystical experiences are, and were, considered highly spiritual or ecstatic, they are often described by the experiencers themselves as involving intense and excessive physical pain. Moreover, although the pain is described in such terms, it is also identified as joyous and ‘sweet’ and the experiencers often pray for the pain and rejoice in it when they receive it.

By applying works of phenomenologists such as Espen Dahl, Ariel Glucklich and Drew Leder, I explore 1), how the tension between the spiritual and the physical experience, and 2), the opposition between the unpleasant and the joyful pain may be explained phenomenologically. Moreover, I provide a comprehensive hermeneutical reading of the two visions under discussion, employing Paul Ricoeur’s *hermeneutical arch* as my analytical model of interpretation. In doing so, I read the visions in question as the climax of Julian’s spiritual journey from naive to deep understanding of her own experiences, her own self and God. I further argue that Julian through her *imitatio Christi* experiences a spiritual death of her old self, and a rebirth of a new, enlightened self.

## Foreword

The past four years of theology studies in Tromsø have been a feast, despite the constant time pressure and juggling between full-time work and studies. A number of people have contributed to making this both possible and joyful, and they all deserve a big ‘thank you’.

First and foremost, my most sincere and deepest appreciation goes to my supervisor and colleague Espen Dahl for inspiring discussions, classes, invaluable feedback and constant support. I am immensely grateful particularly for the fact that he made time to read and comment my work on a holiday and for being so available during the final, hectic stages of the process. I am looking forward to continued collaboration in the future.

Material from this thesis has been presented to and discussed with various people who deserve my appreciation for inspiration, useful comments and suggestions. I wish to thank my fellow students at the degree program for religious studies and theology for comments, questions and insights at the master’s seminar this spring. Thanks also to Roald Kristiansen for valuable feedback at the seminars and for some very useful references that I probably would not have come across myself.

I am lucky to have been included in two research groups at UiT, both of which have contributed to widening my perspectives regarding the material under discussion here. I am grateful to the members of the research group Phenomenology and Bodies of Knowledge for informative discussions on phenomenology. Furthermore, I wish to thank Linda Nesby for inviting me to participate in the research group Health, Art and Society (HAS). My work has been presented at HAS meetings at various stages in the process, and I am grateful to its members for their valuable feedback and for taking an interest in my project.

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# 1 Introduction

Vision literature, or accounts of holy visions, make up a large corpus within medieval devotional writing. These accounts can be fictional, semi-fictional, biographical or autobiographical. Autobiographical descriptions of holy visions or religious experiences are often referred to as mystical, forming the textual basis of what in modern times has been termed mysticism. This thesis explores the English mystical writer Julian of Norwich (c. 1342-1416) and two of her visions as described in her autobiographical account *Shewings* or *Revelations of Divine Love*, as they are often referred to.

Before I look at some definitions of medieval mysticism and holy visions in the Middle Ages, by way of introduction it seems uncontroversial to maintain that the medieval mystics or visionaries experienced what they perceived as one or several encounters with the divine, and that these encounters were of a highly spiritual character. Nevertheless, although these experiences were what we might today typically consider spiritual ‘out-of-the-body’ experiences, the medieval autobiographical accounts often describe them as highly physical and involving intense physical pain and suffering. Despite this, the pain is, although overwhelming, often also described as ‘sweet’; in fact, this duality or ambiguity of the physical experience characterises many of the experiences. How may this tension between the spiritual and the physical be explained?

In this thesis, I will undertake a hermeneutical and phenomenological reading of vision seven and eight of Julian of Norwich’s writings, and explore the implications of physical pain for Julian’s spiritual journey towards union with God and *imitatio Christi*. Julian’s mystical experiences appeared to her in sixteen visions during a serious illness from which she was expected to die in 1373. She recovered from her illness and subsequently wrote down her experiences first shortly after her recovery in what is referred to as ‘The Short Text’ before she elaborated on the theological meaning of her visions in ‘The Long Text’. It is ‘The Long Text’ that will form the primary text corpus for the present study.

Julian of Norwich has received much scholarly attention primarily for her theology of love and of God as mother. In recent times, however, her theological views on suffering have also been examined, for instance by Molly Field James in 2010, but Julian’s own pain is still relatively unexplored. In the present thesis, the medieval notion of *imitatio Christi* is a central and recurring theme. This motif has thus far not been sufficiently connected to Julian’s pain experiences. As far as I can see, an analysis of the significance of *imitatio Christi* in Julian’s

visions has not previously been undertaken, and I believe that such an investigation will throw new light on Julian of Norwich and her visions.

## 1.1 Late medieval mysticism and religiosity

The definitions of mysticism and what this concept involves abound, and the various definitions often reflect the prevailing attitudes to the concept at the period in which the definitions are made as well as the sympathies of the scholars defining the term, the academic discipline to which they belong and so forth. Although the Greek terms μυστήριον (mystery) and μυστικός (mystical) can be found in early Christian sources, the term ‘mysticism’ is a modern one,<sup>1</sup> and it should be kept in mind that this term was not used to describe themselves by those to whom we refer as ‘mystics’ today. As Julia Lamm has noted, Christian mysticism is ‘elusive and pluriform’ in its nature; there “is not one kind of Christian mysticism, which makes definition so difficult.”<sup>2</sup> However, the most influential, relatively recent definition seems to be that of Bernard McGinn, from the third volume of his seminal, multivolume work on the topic, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Mysticism*. Here, McGinn defines ‘mysticism’ as

a special consciousness of the presence of God that by definition exceeds description and results in a transformation of the subject who receives it.<sup>3</sup>

In the present study, my understanding of mysticism and of the mystic experience will be based on this definition. Nevertheless, I will alternate between various terms such as ‘experience’, ‘visions’ and ‘revelations’ with regard to Julian of Norwich’s mystical experiences, but mostly apply the term ‘visions’ as I consider this term to correspond closely to Julian’s own description of her experiences as *showings* (Middle English ‘shewings’). Another, much wider definition of the phenomenon is Barbara Newman’s, who describes mysticism as “a quest for experiential union with God.”<sup>4</sup> This definition also largely corresponds to the way in which I read Julian’s experiences, as will be shown in my analysis

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<sup>1</sup> Lamm 2013:2

<sup>2</sup> Lamm, 2013:1. Lamm provides an excellent review of the state of the art and the various definitions used through history.

<sup>3</sup> McGinn 1998:26

<sup>4</sup> Newman 2013:41

of visions seven and eight. McGinn's and Newman's definitions emphasise different aspects of the mystical experience: Whereas McGinn accentuates the experience of divine presence and the experiencer's personal transformation, Newman underlines the quest for divine union. As will be shown in chapter five, all these aspects are in play in Julian's mystical experience: I argue that in her quest for experiential divine union, she receives visions in which she experiences a divine presence. As a result, she undergoes a personal transformation and comes to know herself and God in new ways.

The experiences referred to within the study of Christian mysticism may be described in terms such as 'ecstasies', 'transcendental experiences', 'visions' or 'revelations', but not all these terms may apply to all the various experiences. Moreover, there are numerous examples of visions from the medieval literary history supposed to have been experienced by figures that are not commonly referred to as mystics. Thus, the terms and definitions are fleeting. In the title of this thesis, I have applied the term 'ecstatic', and I would argue that 'ecstasy' appropriately describes the mystical experience. According to Liddell and Scott's dictionary, the Greek word ἔκστασις – being a compound of 'ek', *out of* and 'stasis', *state, position, standing, condition* – suggests a definition along the lines of 'being set out of one's state or position', or, as Ariel Glucklich suggests, "standing outside oneself" or "in a state of trance".<sup>5</sup> The word thus closely corresponds to what we may call an 'out-of-the-body experience'. Glucklich connects the first of his definitions to a type of otherness, as "the self comes to experience itself in a radically new way as "other" than itself."<sup>6</sup> This largely corresponds to McGinn's definition of the mystical experience as "a transformation of the subject who receives it."<sup>7</sup> The second definition of ecstasy as being in a state of trance Glucklich connects to affect, as "an awareness of being in a positive (or negative) state of mind."<sup>8</sup> When it comes to mystical experiences, they are often described in terms of positive affect, such as "rapturous", "blissful" and "joyful".<sup>9</sup> The visions seem in every respect to have been multisensory and emphasise a deep connection between mind, body and affect. With regard to this connection, Corinne Saunders has noted that "[d]evotional literature relies on the notion

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<sup>5</sup> Glucklich, 2015:4

<sup>6</sup> Glucklich, 2015:5

<sup>7</sup> McGinn 1998:26

<sup>8</sup> Glucklich, 2015:5

<sup>9</sup> Glucklich, 2015:5

that affective experience can open the way to the soul's deeper understanding of the self and the divine – and potentially to visionary experience.”<sup>10</sup>

Despite the use of such positive terms, however, late medieval mystics also describe their spiritual experiences in terms of pain and suffering. In fact, pain and suffering largely characterises the Christian European medieval culture, largely due to the emphasis on identification with Christ and the imitation of his suffering (*imitatio Christi*) to which I will return later in chapter four and in my analysis in chapter five. Devotion to the Crucifixion and the Passion of Christ are central themes in the later Middle Ages, the holy is largely connected to pain, and the religious focus is on Christ's Passion. As Esther Cohen has noted, “[i]f, during the early Middle Ages, the Crucifixion was a minor detail in God's human biography, during the later Middle Ages the entire life became a prologue to the Crucifixion.”<sup>11</sup> This tendency finds resonance in the iconography of the Crucifixion, where focus shifts from representations of the victorious Christ in the early Middle Ages to the suffering Christ in the later medieval period (roughly 13<sup>th</sup> century onwards). It is also in the later Middle Ages that we find the flourishing of mystics who record their religious experiences in writing. The richest descriptions of physical pain comes in fact from the mystics' own autobiographical accounts or from their biographers, in narratives “constructed as a journey towards union with a beloved God, whose main manifestation was through pain.”<sup>12</sup> The majority of these mystics were women, and they often describe their experiences as frenzies of pain and suffering in compassion with Christ. We find in these writings that the mystics commonly pray to experience the pains of Christ, and these physical pains are supposed to have had both visible and invisible manifestations. St. Francis' visible stigmata wounds are the first recorded example of the phenomenon. Catherine of Siena supposedly experienced the same pains, but her wounds were internal. Caroline Walker Bynum has demonstrated women's special role in later medieval religiosity and how women dominated the mystical movement across Europe with experiences and expressions of pain, suffering and ascetic practices.<sup>13</sup> These women not only imitated Christ in their suffering, they also largely expressed their pain to the public and were known for doing so. Cohen relates how

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<sup>10</sup> Saunders 2016:414

<sup>11</sup> Cohen 2009:217

<sup>12</sup> Cohen 2009:120

<sup>13</sup> See Bynum, 1987, 1989

Colette of Corbie's face looked battered and disjointed on Fridays, when she meditated upon the passion. Margery Kempe's visions of the Crucifixion caused her to burst into tears, twisting and turning so that she looked like a madwoman in a fit.<sup>14</sup>

Moreover, in her study of late medieval Spanish mystics, Mary E. Giles suggests how the medieval female mystics' ecstatic behaviour came to function as a communicative vessel between the onlookers and the divine:

It is not far-fetched to imagine that, through the instrument of Sor María [of Santo Domingo, (1429?-1524?)], the listening spectators felt so strongly the power of God that they too underwent a kind of ecstasy. (...) In this state of consciousness they are ecstatically united with Sor María and through her with God.<sup>15</sup>

The mystics and their writings became immensely popular in devout circles across Europe in the later medieval period, among the learned and the unlettered alike. Julian of Norwich's contemporary, for instance, the English female mystic Margery Kempe is supposed to have been illiterate at the time, yet she was well familiar with her Swedish fellow visionary Birgitta of Vadstena (1303-1373), and sought out the place in which she had lived in Rome when Margery visited the Holy City in 1417. This demonstrates, according to Cohen, that "while visions were unexpected gifts for the few, they were carefully recorded and often transmitted from one country to another."<sup>16</sup> The popularity of the visions is thus attested by their distribution, and also by their manuscript transmission and translation.

How should we make sense of Julian's (or other mystical) experiences today? In our modern Western society, where nearly everything can be scientifically explained and we have become increasingly secularised to the extent that religion plays hardly any role at all in many people's lives, mystical experiences such as those explored in this thesis may seem easily dismissible as religious fanaticism and superstition. We may easily apply our modern insights to the pre-modern and explain away religious experiences with various psychiatric diagnoses, feverish hallucinations, self-injurious disorder or outright madness. In the Middle Ages, such

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<sup>14</sup> Cohen 2009:221

<sup>15</sup> Giles 1996: 312. Esther Cohen has noted in this regard that although some people admired the mystics' painful experiences as saintly, some also condemned them as "improper, even insane and demoniac." Cohen 2009:114.

<sup>16</sup> Cohen 2009:218

experiences were to a much larger extent considered very real and divine (although not all the visionaries were believed by their contemporaries and some were in fact considered mad). An important difference between then and now is precisely the way in which such mystical experiences were and are understood. While the medieval world allowed for these kinds of experiences and explained them in religious terms, the modern world explains them in medical terms of symptoms and diagnoses.<sup>17</sup>

In this study, I will do my best to understand Julian's experiences from within the context of her own *tempus* and *locus* and as far as possible attempt to understand them with medieval glasses regardless of how one might want to diagnose or dismiss her experiences when wearing today's modern glasses. In doing so, I will employ a phenomenological-hermeneutical approach to her experiences. My concern is how the visions and the painful experiences appeared to Julian. I will describe and analyse these experiences phenomenologically, before I incorporate my observations into a more comprehensive interpretative reading of the visions under exploration. Thus, I consider it irrelevant whether Julian received her visions in feverish hallucinations or whether she was driven mad with religious fanaticism. My point of departure is that Julian *did* experience these visions regardless of how they may or may not be explained, and that they, as well as the pain, was very real *to her*.

## 1.2 Research questions

The following research questions will be explored and discussed in this thesis:

1. In what way is the experience of physical pain significant or necessary for Julian's imitation of Christ (*imitatio Christi*) and her ultimate goal of union with God?
2. How do Julian's painful experiences contribute to her spiritual development?
3. How may the tension between the spiritual and the physical on the one hand, and the unpleasant and the sweet pain on the other be explained phenomenologically?

Methodologically, I will attempt at a hermeneutical reading of visions seven and eight of Julian's 'long text' through the use of Paul Ricoeur's 'hermeneutical arch', as my primary analytical tool and model for interpretation. My hermeneutical reading works on two levels:

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<sup>17</sup> Saunders:2016: 423

First, as a reading of Julian's visions as a spiritual journey in which visions seven and eight mark her experiential climax. Second, on a textual level, I will briefly discuss the development from Julian's short text to the long text written after twenty years of contemplation and interpretation of the visions' theological meaning. Julian's object of interpretation is her own visions and experiences. Ricoeur's model is particularly appropriate for the material under discussion due to his emphasis on the subject's *appropriation* of the object of interpretation. This allows for a reading of how Julian's own experiences and her interpretation of them is pointing to a *telos*, which is precisely the appropriation of her own experiences.

### 1.3 The scope and limitations of the project

Given the limited scope of this thesis, a number of choices have necessarily been made in order not to far exceed the frame of approximately 50 pages. To this end, a few remarks on the scope and limitations of the thesis, and the choices I have made underway in the process of writing, seem to be in place.

Medieval mysticism, in which physical pain forms part of the mystical experience, took shape during the later Middle Ages in Western Europe, as outlined above. That is not to say that there are no examples of mystical experiences from previous times or from other places, cultures or religions.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, this thesis concentrates on *Christian* mysticism in the *later* Middle Ages in *Western Europe*, primarily England.

Furthermore, in the last few decades, much attention has been given to gender aspects of both medieval mysticism and pain in the Middle Ages due to the dominant position of women's devotional life and literatures in this period.<sup>19</sup> Although I am convinced that a comparative analysis of Julian and one of her contemporary male mystics (e.g. Richard Rolle) for instance, or other gendered approaches would have yielded both interesting and valuable insights, the gender aspect has not been prioritised here.

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<sup>18</sup> See, for instance, McGinn's vols. I and II of *The Presence of God (The Foundations of Mysticism)* (1992) and *The Growth of Mysticism* (1994), Shantz, *Paul in Ecstasy: the neurobiology of the apostle's life and thought* (2009), Craffert, *The Life of a Galilean Shaman: Jesus of Nazareth in Anthropological-Historical Perspective* (2008), Glücklich, *Hurting the Body for the Sake of the Soul* (2001).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. e.g. Walker Bynum's *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religions Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (1987) and 'The Female Body and Religious Practice in the Later Middle Ages' (1989), Lichtmann in Chance (ed.), *Gender and Text in the Later Middle Ages* (1996) and McAvoy in McAvoy (ed.) *A Companion to Julian of Norwich* (2008)

Recent research on pain and religious experience, moreover, has largely taken on an interdisciplinary approach and suggested explanations to the phenomenon based on social sciences such as social anthropology and the so-called ‘hard sciences’ such as neurobiology, and cognitive science.<sup>20</sup> These approaches, too, have yielded fascinating new insights into the religious mind, but are outside the scope of this thesis. As a point of departure, regardless of how Julian’s experiences of pain may be explained scientifically or dismissed altogether, I will simply make the assumption that Julian of Norwich experienced a pain in her visions that was real *to her*. It is this pain that interests me in this thesis, not what we today might think of her pain or what caused it in modern scientific terms.

Lastly, the thesis is a motivic reading of the experience of pain and its meaning in Julian’s visions. To this end, I have chosen to focus primarily on visions seven and eight of Julian’s total of sixteen visions. The reason for this is simple: again, given the scope of this thesis, I considered a full analysis of her visions to be beyond the limits of what a 30 ECTS points dissertation might entail. If such a task was to be undertaken, an analysis of the entire sixteen visions would necessarily have been highly superficial. Moreover, as it is Julian’s experiences of pain in her ecstatic state of being that interests me here, the choice of visions seven and eight were natural, as these are the visions in which Julian expresses her experiences of physical pain. Since this is not a philological study of Julian’s texts, I have chosen to use the modern English translation of her *Shewings*, edited and translated by Colledge and Walsh (1978). However, the Middle English versions of both the long and the short text have been consulted underway.

## 1.4 Thesis outline

This thesis consists of six chapters (including the present introduction). In chapter two, I present my theoretical and methodological approach to the material under discussion, and explain my understanding of Paul Ricoeur’s hermeneutic arch, my key methodological model. Chapter three and four provides the backdrop and context for the analysis. Chapter three briefly outlines Julian of Norwich’s life and works as well as her religious experience, whereas chapter four gives an overview of the perception of pain in the later Middle Ages. In chapter five, I analyse and discuss Julian’s visions seven and eight in light of its context

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<sup>20</sup> See e.g. Glucklich 2001, 2015, Shantz 2009, Craffert 2008, Czachesz *Cognitive Science and the New Testament* (2017).

(given in chapter three and four), applying Ricoeur's hermeneutics and other theoretical approaches presented in chapter two. Chapter six provides a brief summary and concluding remarks.

## 2 Theoretical and methodological approaches

### 2.1 Pain and experience

Historical attitudes to and understandings of pain have only recently begun to receive scholarly attention, and is thus a relatively new field within historical studies. One of the very few scholars who has looked at perceptions and uses of pain in the Middle Ages is Esther Cohen.<sup>21</sup> In her pioneering book *The Modulated Scream* from 2009, Cohen argues that although pain as such remains the same throughout history, the uses, expressions of, responses to and attitudes towards pain vary considerably. Thus, she claims that her book is not *about* pain as such, “for pain itself cannot be known;<sup>22</sup> it is about what people thought and did about pain, how they conceptualized it, how they explained it to themselves and to others.”<sup>23</sup> She has further shown that until “little over a century ago, pain was accepted as a given. It could, if necessary be eased by various means, but nobody saw any reason to try and eradicate it in any and all pain situations.”<sup>24</sup> Thus, the alleviation of pain for the sake of ridding oneself of an evil that should be vanquished seems to be a relatively modern phenomenon. In our modern Western society, there seems to be a common expectation of comfort, and should pain arise, we swallow a painkiller or see the doctor, as pain seems to be considered an unnatural condition as opposed to a pain free, comfortable state of being. Pain should be suppressed and avoided by all means, not necessarily because the pain is harmful in itself, but simply because it is unpleasant. “Perhaps the greatest revolution in Western attitudes towards pain,” Cohen writes, “is the transition from attempts at controlling behaviour to attempts at controlling sensation. (...) In other words, modern Western society places an independent value upon the freedom from pain.”<sup>25</sup>

Although it is difficult to find good and satisfactory definitions of pain, we all have in common that we know what pain feels like. It is often difficult to describe, and the more intense the pain, the more indescribable it seems. Neurologists and biomedical scholars and practitioners have tried to explain what happens in the brain when mystics have their

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<sup>21</sup> Cohen 2003, 2009

<sup>22</sup> To modify this statement, I would rather argue that we all know pain, but we only know our own pain. Other people’s suffering cannot be known, however, although we may identify with it on the basis of our own experiences.

<sup>23</sup> Cohen 2009:3. The medieval perceptions and attitudes to pain will be presented in depth in chapter four.

<sup>24</sup> Cohen 2003: 195

<sup>25</sup> Cohen 2003: 195-196

transcendent or ecstatic experience. It is, however, impossible to say for certain what went on in the mystics' brain when they experienced ecstatic visions.<sup>26</sup>

Historical accounts are replete with descriptions and interpretations of other people's pain and pain behaviour. The mystical writers wrote about their own painful experiences, however, and they are thus highly important first-hand accounts of pain as an expression of compassion and suffering with Christ. When dealing with historical descriptions of pain, as with historical sources in general, we need to bear in mind that they are subjective accounts of pain experiences that need interpretation. However, when dealing with first-hand, autobiographical accounts, this is undoubtedly easier, as we only have to interpret the actual experiencer's account and not, for instance, second-hand accounts of other people's pain.

In my discussion of Julian of Norwich's accounts of ecstatic pain, I will apply concepts and ideas from the field of philosophy of religion and phenomenology, and discuss them in light of 1), the medieval mystics' description of pain experience as both excessively painful and sweet or joyous, and 2), the significance of physical suffering for the idea of *imitatio Christi*. To this purpose, I will draw upon scholars such as Ariel Glucklich, Espen Dahl and Drew Leder. Furthermore, in my reading of Julian's spiritual journey, I will apply Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics.

### **2.1.1 Pain and affect**

According to Ariel Glucklich, the role of physical pain within the realm of theology is unclear, and "has not received the systematic attention one might expect" until his own publication *Sacred Pain: Hurting the Body for the Sake of the Soul* appeared in 2001.<sup>27</sup> From a phenomenological perspective, the topic has, however, also been treated in various articles by Espen Dahl.<sup>28</sup> Dahl describes physical pain as an 'evil'. He elaborates, however, that there are instances of physical pain that are not necessarily evil such as "the pain of growth, pain as signals of danger, and *gains that can only come through pain*."<sup>29</sup> I consider the last element of this statement to be highly significant with regards to mystical experience and pain as a means of identifying with Christ in order to achieve a higher goal. The most immediate perception of

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<sup>26</sup> Glucklich 2015:5

<sup>27</sup> Glucklich 2015:2

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Dahl 2017, 2016a, 2016b, 2015, 2014

<sup>29</sup> Dahl 2017:396. My italisation.

pain is nevertheless that it is an evil, something we want to be rid of. Pain is never neutral, Dahl writes,

as it is already affectively charged as unpleasant. The pain is unpleasant because it is something that should not be, and we cannot help but to wish it to go away – with the words of Nietzsche: “Weh spricht: Vergeh.” What turns pain into suffering is the fact that once it has first occurred, it encapsulates the bodily experience, yet at the same time all you can do is to wish the pain to go away, or yourself to get away from the pain.<sup>30</sup>

It is not difficult to agree with this statement. Furthermore, not only do we experience through our bodies, as the Norwegian professor and psychiatrist Finn Skårderud rightly notes,<sup>31</sup> Dahl argues moreover that “pain is the human experience that to the highest extent manifests human embodiment.”<sup>32</sup> Nothing makes us more self-conscious than when we experience physical pain; although we’re not normally aware of our body and what we do with it when it functions normally, when we experience physical pain, we become overwhelmingly focused on our body and our pain. When we experience physical pain, we no longer *have* a body; we *become* our body, as Dahl notes.<sup>33</sup>

This has also been noted by Drew Leder. In his book *The Absent Body*, he undertakes a phenomenological reading of the body. He takes as his starting point the assumption that human experience is rooted in the body, but despite this, we are normally not aware of its presence. Leder thus asks, “why is the body so often absent from experience?”<sup>34</sup> When the body functions normally, we are largely unaware of its functions, we do not give a thought to the fact that we breathe or that our heart beats, yet those functions are vital to our very survival. This unawareness of our own body is what Leder terms ‘the absent body’. When everything is in order, the body is absent. Skårderud notes that we forget our bodies when we are healthy and positively engaged in other matters, and this, he says, is decisive for our ability to fully take part in the world around us.<sup>35</sup> Leder refers to this as ‘the ecstatic body’.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Dahl 2015:155 All quotes from Dahl 2015 are my own translation from the Norwegian.

<sup>31</sup> Skårderud 2008 ([http://www.psykologtidsskriftet.no/index.php?seks\\_id=42861&a=3](http://www.psykologtidsskriftet.no/index.php?seks_id=42861&a=3))

<sup>32</sup> Dahl 2015: 151

<sup>33</sup> Dahl 2015:153

<sup>34</sup> Leder 1990:69

<sup>35</sup> Skårderud 2008 ([http://www.psykologtidsskriftet.no/index.php?seks\\_id=42861&a=3](http://www.psykologtidsskriftet.no/index.php?seks_id=42861&a=3))

<sup>36</sup> Leder 1990:11-35

However, when the body fails to function normally, when we become ill or when we feel physical pain, we become all the more aware of it. This is what Leder refers to as ‘the disappearing body’.<sup>37</sup> The pain seizes the body and “places upon the sufferer (...) an *affective call*.”<sup>38</sup> He describes this call or seizure of pain thus:

I am seized by the pain in a way I am not by other experiences of the body. I can choose to look in the mirror or not, to pay attention or not to my kinesthesias. Even strong pleasures, such as those of sexual nature, may leave one’s thoughts wandering. Aesthetic, objective, or pleasurable self-encounters retain a large volitional element. With pain this is less the case, not only because of its typically involuntary etiology but because of the quality of the sensation itself.<sup>39</sup>

The central object of study in this thesis is Julian’s bodily experience of pain. The idea of pain as an evil, in Dahl’s words “as something that should not be”, presents a paradox in the mystical visions, however. Because although the pain is excessive, it is also described in terms of *positive* affect, the experiencers do not want it to go away. On the contrary, they have often prayed for it and they rejoice in it. To this account, Ariel Glucklich argues that the mystics’ pain experiences – and their desire for pain – cannot be fully understood without considering “the scientific and phenomenological terrain of positive affect.”<sup>40</sup> He goes on to ask whether “mystical experience [is] achieved or enhanced through bodily disciplines that include pain?”<sup>41</sup> Another question that arises when considering the mystics’ embracement of pain and their description of pain as sweet, is whether the views of phenomenologists such as Dahl and Leder are applicable to medieval material at all in their modern approach to pain as ‘an evil’ that should not be. To the medieval devotional practitioners, pain had a purpose, it definitely *should be*. In e.g. Dahl’s phenomenology of pain, pain is considered meaningless. Although he maintains that there are instances of pain that are not evil, and that gains may come through pain, the question remains whether Dahl fails to see the deeper positive meaning of pain that was considered so central in the later Middle Ages. I would argue, however, that the views of the phenomenologists referred to here are highly applicable to the

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<sup>37</sup> Leder 1990:69-100

<sup>38</sup> Leder 1990:73. The italisation is Leder’s.

<sup>39</sup> Leder 1990:73

<sup>40</sup> Glucklich 2015:1

<sup>41</sup> Glucklich 2015:3

material under investigation here insofar as they address the experience of bodily pain as something that turns the experiencer towards her own body and self, and centres the attention solely on the pain itself. But I will insist on a paradox that is not addressed by Dahl and Leder, namely the constructive meaning and positive affect of the pain, which I ultimately consider two sides of the same coin, as will be further addressed in chapter five. Despite this positive affect and meaning of the pain emphasised in the Middle Ages, however, Dahl's persistence on pain as aversive and unpleasant also still holds. It is merely one aspect of the pain, but it is nevertheless a highly significant aspect. Were the pain *not* also unpleasant and aversive, it would lose its purpose, for it simply would not be pain at all.

According to Glucklich, a "loss of self" is key to master pain in such a manner that it may lead to experiences of 'sweet pain' or intense joy. And here we encounter another paradox with regard to the phenomenologists referred to above who claim that it is precisely when we experience pain that it becomes impossible to forget or lose yourself. As Leder says, "[p]hysical suffering constricts not only the spatial but the temporal sphere. As it pulls us back to the *here*, so severe pain summons us to the *now*."<sup>42</sup> How, then, is this compatible with a loss of self? In chapter five, I will draw on these two observations – that physical pain leads to an intense here and now experience *and* that the joyous aspect of the pain simultaneously involves a loss of self – and argue that both are in play in Julian's visions. Moreover, I will argue that this paradox or tension finds resonance within the ideal of *imitatio Christi*.

### **2.1.2 Christ's humanity and *Imitatio Christi***

The term 'docetism' (from Greek δοκεῖν, 'seem') refers to the early Christian, primarily gnostic, controversial view that Christ was only seemingly human, and thus, being incapable of human suffering, his Passion was only an illusion. Although this view was officially rejected at the Council of Chalcedon in year 451, the mystery of Christ's humanity was still a central issue that was widely discussed and contemplated throughout the Middle Ages. The general view was, however, that although Christ's nature was divine and immortal, he was also human, and he had suffered the greatest pain possible, though voluntarily.<sup>43</sup>

The ideal of *imitatio Christi* evolved in line with this Christological idea of Jesus as both fully divine and fully human, and someone who had physically suffered on the cross as a

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<sup>42</sup> Leder 1990:74 The italisation is Leder's.

<sup>43</sup> Cohen 2009:214

human being. The desire to identify with Christ and take share in his suffering became the ideal for mystics, martyrs, ascetics and saints, and as a part of this aim, they prayed for and welcomed physical pain. Since Christ had suffered physically and not only seemingly, so the mystics' pain had ideally to be physical as well. Apparent, illusory pain would not sufficiently imitate Christ's real and physical pain. Rather, it might suggest, one can imagine, that Christ's pain was just spiritual and apparent rather than physical and real. Thus, I would claim that it was essential that the suffering in the mystical visions was physical. When the mystics experienced physical pain in their spiritual visions, they experienced real *imitatio* and communion with Christ both spiritually and physically.

As noted above, Dahl argues that pain is the one human experience that to the highest extent manifests human corporeality.<sup>44</sup> Following this, the physically manifested pain that the medieval visionaries experienced is the closest possible they could get to the ideal of *imitatio Christi*, as they through their spiritual experience of the divine perceive a union with Christ through physical suffering. The body is the channel through which they experience their vision. Referring to Merleau-Ponty, Dahl writes that the body is the "opening that unites the subject and the world."<sup>45</sup> In the mystics' holy visions, I will argue that the body is also the opening that unites the subject with God in painful harmony. And it is precisely because of this harmony, or unification with the divine that is obtained through suffering that the pain feels sweet or joyful. Dahl further writes,

that God becomes human means that he assumes human conditions. But why should pain serve as the touchstone for God's incarnation? Pain may serve as a touchstone because it to a higher extent than other phenomena proves how Christ's person, his 'I', is indissolubly connected to his body.<sup>46</sup>

Christ's suffering on the cross defines him as incarnated and human, since pain is the primary human experience that manifests our corporeality. Since the pain is so essential for the definition of the human, incarnated Christ, it also becomes essential to the ideal of *imitatio Christi*, through which the mystics may achieve union with the divine, the highest bliss and joy and their *telos* or ultimate aim.

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<sup>44</sup> Dahl 2015:151

<sup>45</sup> Dahl 2015:153

<sup>46</sup> Dahl 2015:156

## 2.2 Hermeneutics – the key methodological approach

### 2.2.1 What is hermeneutics?

Hermeneutics may be defined as a theory and methodology of understanding and interpretation within the fields of what we today call the human sciences in particular, but hermeneutics have also largely come to be applied within the social sciences. Among the hermeneutics' most notable representatives, we find philosophers and theologians such as Martin Heidegger, Rudolf Bultmann, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur. The so-called hermeneutic circle is particularly associated with the discipline, first developed by Heidegger in the first half of the twentieth century and later followed up by Gadamer in his seminal work *Warheit und Methode* ('Truth and Method') from 1960. Hermeneutics originated in the 1700 and 1800s as a theory on how to understand texts, and to begin with, it was developed as a method of interpreting difficult or unintelligible passages within the disciplines of theology and law. Later on, it came to be applied within the study of literature more generally, and hermeneutics, like philology, became a method of approach in order to reconstruct a text's 'original' meaning or the author's intention behind a text. During the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, however, hermeneutics takes on a philosophical turn and directs its focus more towards how the object of interpretation – be it a text, an artwork, the past or the memory – may be of relevance to us today and, not least, the self-perception ('Bewußtsein') we may obtain through understanding and interpreting the object of study. In other words, what our understanding of the object of interpretation may teach us about ourselves. The hermeneutic circle illustrates our gradual understanding as we interpret an object. We approach the object of interpretation with our preconceptions or our prejudices as part of our understanding, but this 'pre-understanding' based on our prejudices (whether positive or negative) is constantly corrected and altered as we interpret the object and thus gain new knowledge and understandings of the object of interpretation. Each time we learn something new about one part of the object, we have to correct our understanding of its entirety. Thus, we constantly understand the object in new ways. We acquire new understandings of parts and entirety in a circular movement and never reach an end point. In this way, the same object of attention may provide new answers and perspectives all the time, depending on the questions we ask. The method of interpretation may be described as a dialogical dynamic between the interpreter and the object of interpretation, in which the object provides answers that consequently leads to new questions, which again generate new answers, leading to new

questions and so on. In this way, our prejudices are put to the test, and need correction, and based on our experiences and new knowledge reached in this dialogue, we gradually acquire new and better understandings. Thus, the act of interpretation becomes a potentially infinite process, a circular – or rather spiral – movement in which our understanding of the object, both its parts and its entirety, is constantly revised and modified as we reach new understandings, and old perceptions and prejudices are dismissed as inadequate or wrong.<sup>47</sup>

If we take a text as a point of departure, we may thus imagine two levels of hermeneutics in two circles, one textual and one personal. The first circle entails the text itself and its various parts, and every new understanding of each part throws new light on the rest of the text and helps adjust our comprehensive understanding of the text. The other circle entails the text's meaning and the reader's own self-perception. Whereas the first circle remains within the limits of the text itself, the other circle goes beyond the text and its meaning, reflecting the relation between reader and text where the understanding of the text leads to new self-awareness in the mind of the reader. Thus understanding the text is not the ultimate goal of the process of reading; the *telos* is rather a new understanding of the self, for the self to come out of the process as 'other' than the one who started it.

### **2.2.2 Ricoeur's hermeneutical arch**

This view of the hermeneutical circle and how it may lead to new understandings of the self resembles Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutical model for developing critical understanding. Ricoeur illustrates the process from what he calls naive to critical understanding with a hermeneutical arch rather than a circle.<sup>48</sup> The cornerstone at the beginning of the arch marks the starting point of the process of understanding or interpretation. At this point, the interpreter sets to work only with her own preconceptions of the object of interpretation at hand. This is what Ricoeur refers to as 'naive interpretation'.<sup>49</sup> Gradually, as you begin to better understand new aspects of the object of interpretation, say for convenience a text, your understanding is adjusted and prejudices are dismissed. Each new aspect or part that is interpreted and understood contributes to furthering the comprehensive understanding of the text in its

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<sup>47</sup> Gadamer 2001: 329

<sup>48</sup> Ricoeur 1971a:148

<sup>49</sup> Ricoeur 1971a:148

entirety. This is what Ricoeur refers to as ‘stages’.<sup>50</sup> Every time you reach a new stage, your understanding becomes less naive and moves closer and closer to a critical, deeper understanding of the whole, referred to as ‘critical interpretation’.<sup>51</sup> In his discourse on hermeneutics in his essay ‘What is a Text? Explanation and Understanding’, Ricoeur seeks to overcome the distinction between explanation and interpretation advocated by the hermeneutic philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey. Dilthey refers the term ‘explanation’ back to the nomothetic, natural sciences, whereas he attaches ‘understanding’ or ‘interpretation’ to the idiographic, human sciences. According to Ricoeur, however, a text may also be explained on various levels (structurally, linguistically etc.), but explanation of a text is just one of many stages of the interpretation process towards the end point – the cornerstone at the far side of the arch:

to explain is to bring out the structure, that is, the internal relations of dependence which constitute the statics of the text; to interpret is to follow the path of thought opened up by the text, to place oneself en route towards the orient of the text.<sup>52</sup>

Following this trail of thought, philological investigations of a text also mark a stage on the path to critical understanding. Although they do not illuminate the entire text’s deeper meanings, they make up an important stage or station on the way to critical understanding that helps shed light on aspects necessary for our understanding of the text’s meanings. The stages provide the preconception with new understandings of the various aspects of the text, and together these are transformed into a deep comprehensive understanding of the whole, which constitute the ultimate goal of the process of understanding.

In Julian, the object of interpretation is her own visions and experiences. According to Ricoeur, the various stages are detours that need to be taken in order to obtain critical understanding; it does not come the easy way. Hence, the idea of an arch rather than a straight line from naive to critical understanding. The deep understanding, which marks the other cornerstone of Ricoeur’s arch, is also referred to as ‘*appropriation*’.<sup>53</sup> This appropriation at the end of the arch does not only entail a new and better understanding of the object of interpretation, but also a new understanding of oneself, the self-awareness that is acquired

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<sup>50</sup> Ricoeur 1971a:148

<sup>51</sup> Ricoeur 1971a:148

<sup>52</sup> Ricoeur 1971b: 123

<sup>53</sup> Ricoeur 1971a:150

through the process of interpretation. Interpretation as appropriation occurs not at the various stations underway, but at the final terminal, “the termination of the process”:

It lies at the extremity of what we called above the *hermeneutical arc*: it is the final brace of the bridge, the anchorage of the arch in the ground of lived experience. But the entire theory of hermeneutics consists in mediating this interpretation-appropriation by the series of interpretants which belong to the work of the text upon itself.<sup>54</sup>

Julian’s understanding of herself is naive before her illness sets in and she receives her visions. As she interprets her own experiences, she appropriates the insights she gains from her interpretation process and by acquiring these insights, she understands herself in new ways. As such, in a similar manner as the two circles outlined above, the reading or interpretation process works on two levels: it involves both interpretation in order to understand “what the text wants”<sup>55</sup> and through this process, the interpreter comes closer to a new understanding of the self, that is, a deeper self-perception or understanding of the ‘other’ or new self. This encounter between the object of interpretation and the self-perceptive interpreter is what Rudolf Bultmann refers to as *the existential (existentiell) encounter*.<sup>56</sup>

In my analysis of Julian’s visions, I suggest that a similar, implicit hermeneutical approach is at play in her understanding of her visions and of herself, and I will thus illustrate this by applying Ricoeur’s model on the material under discussion in the present thesis. In light of this model, Julian’s process of understanding works on several levels: on a textual level from the short to the long text, on the revelatory level, that is, relating to the understanding of the contents of her visions, and on the self-perceptive level, on how Julian’s visions lead her to a new perception of herself or to her ultimate goal – *imitatio Christi*.

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<sup>54</sup> Ricoeur 1971b:126. The italisation is Ricoeur’s.

<sup>55</sup> Ricoeur 1971a:148

<sup>56</sup> Bultmann 1985:246

### 3 Julian of Norwich: *Tempus, locus, persona et causa scribendi*

#### 3.1 Julian's life

Although the historicity of Julian of Norwich is beyond doubt, we know hardly anything about who she was, her upbringing, education or family. Most of what we do know comes from her own hand as information deduced from her two texts, commonly referred to as 'the short text' and 'the long text' of her *Shewings* – the term she uses herself to refer to her visions – or *Revelations of Divine Love*, which her works are also frequently referred to. We know from her own writings that she received her holy revelations in sixteen visions while she was suffering from a severe illness from which she was expected to die, and that this illness occurred when she was at the age of thirty in 'the year of our Lord one thousand, three hundred and seventy-three, on the thirteenth day of May'.<sup>57</sup> From this, we can infer that she was born around the year 1342-3. She also writes that her mother and a few others were present when she was lying ill, but we do not know who the others were, or if this means that she was living at home when she received her visions. She is known to have become an anchoress attached to the Church of St. Julian in Conisford at Norwich after she recovered from her illness,<sup>58</sup> and it is uncertain whether her actual name in fact was Julian or whether she took the name of the Church's patron saint at a later stage in her life. During the latter part of her life when she lived as an anchoress, she was well known for providing spiritual guidance to those seeking her counsel, and they are supposed to have come from both near and afar. Thus, although we have no evidence for the popularity of her writings in her own time, her mystical, spiritual insights must have been known by her contemporaries. One important witness to Julian's historicity and to her recognition during her own lifetime comes from the hand of her contemporary, the mystical writer Margery Kempe, who testifies that she sought spiritual guidance from Julian, and that Julian was at the time well known for her religious and spiritual teachings.<sup>59</sup> Liz Herbert McAvoy writes about her popularity and significance that

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<sup>57</sup> Long text, chapter 2, p.177. All quotations and references to Julian's own writings are taken from Colledge and Walsh's translation into modern English from 1978.

<sup>58</sup> Colledge and Walsh 1978a:18

<sup>59</sup> Colledge and Walsh 1978a:18

Julian's importance as a religious figure, if not a writer, seems to have been constant since the time of her own enclosure as an anchoress in 1393, surviving into the Reformation among the recusant nuns of Northern France, enduring well into the Victorian era and reaching its present crescendo during the course of the twentieth century and beyond.<sup>60</sup>

Julian's accounts of her visions are the earliest surviving literary texts written by a woman in the English language. This is remarkable in itself, but what is even more remarkable is the high literary and rhetorical quality of her works. In the second chapter of her long text, Julian describes herself as 'unlettered', but this is clearly an expression of false modesty on her part. Based on what we may deduce from her own writings, Colledge and Walsh, have concluded that although Julian herself claims to be ignorant ('lewd') and unlettered, this is "an often-employed rhetorical device, appealing for the benevolence of the reader" and that all she is in fact saying is that "when she received her revelations she lacked literary skills, skills which she later mastered better than most of her contemporaries."<sup>61</sup> They further describe her as a "master of rhetorical art."<sup>62</sup> According to Therese Novotny, scholars have been puzzled by Julian's high literary and rhetorical skills, since girls were denied access to traditional education in the fourteenth century. What, then, was the background for her academic training?<sup>63</sup> She seems to have been well versed in both the Latin Vulgate Bible and classical spiritual writings central to the monastic tradition of the Western Church. Thus, although we know nothing about what kind of education she may have received during her upbringing or how Julian received her academic training, her writings nevertheless demonstrate that she possessed substantial religious learning. Novotny demonstrates in her PhD dissertation from 2015 that other forms of education than traditional school or university based academic learning was available in medieval England that may have contributed to the development of her literary and rhetorical skills. Novotny argues that Julian "drew from a rich reservoir of rhetorical models. Norwich, her hometown, a city second only to London in size, was a cultural pool of oral discourse and visual art."<sup>64</sup> Novotny convincingly demonstrates this in her analysis of the oral and visual rhetoric that was accessible to anyone in fourteenth

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<sup>60</sup> McAvoy 2008:1

<sup>61</sup> Colledge and Walsh 1978a:19

<sup>62</sup> Colledge and Walsh 1978a:19

<sup>63</sup> Novotny 2015:1

<sup>64</sup> Novotny 2015:1

and fifteenth century England through the language, metaphors and allegories in prayers, hymns and sermons as well as in visual art. Thus, despite her own modest disclaimer on behalf of the quality of her work, we have in Julian's writings not only the first literary works written in the English vernacular by a woman, but also highly complex literary works dealing with major Christian spiritual and theological questions such as redemption, repentance, salvation, Christ's humanity and suffering, divine love and divine knowledge, but also with universal philosophical issues such as forgiveness, compassion and free will.

### 3.2 Manuscript transmission

With regard to the transmission of Julian's texts, the circulation seems rather sparse up until the mid-seventeenth century. Colledge and Walsh argues that one of the reasons why Julian's writings do not seem to have gained immediate popularity – compared to the works of other English mystics of the same period such as e.g. Richard Rolle – may be that “Julian's book is by far the most profound and difficult of all medieval English spiritual writings, with little popular appeal.”<sup>65</sup> Given that Julian herself was possibly without formal education, but nevertheless acquired the level of learning demonstrated in her works, the implication that her works were too difficult for a popular medieval readership may be slightly simplistic and underestimating on behalf of Julian's contemporaries, however.

Her visions have been known as a literary work to the public since a version of the long text in modernised language was first published in 1670 by the English Benedictine Serenus Cressy.<sup>66</sup> Only one copy of the short text has survived, found among other shorter spiritual works in the MS British Museum Add. 37790, also called the ‘Amherst MS’ after its last private owner. The handwriting of the manuscript has been dated to c. 1450. The British Museum bought the unique manuscript of the short text in 1900, after it had been passed from the hands of one private owner to the other since the Dissolution of the Monasteries in the 1530s and 40s. Only one surviving manuscript witness of the long text predates the Dissolution of the Monasteries. This manuscript has been dated to c. 1500. The manuscript now considered the most important witness is the MS Fonds anglais 40 from c. 1650, preserved in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris.<sup>67</sup> The first complete critical edition of both

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<sup>65</sup> Colledge and Walsh 1978a:22

<sup>66</sup> Colledge and Walsh 1978a:17

<sup>67</sup> Colledge and Walsh 1978a:21

texts appeared in 1978, in two volumes edited by Edmund Colledge and James Walsh, who also published a one-volume modern translation of both texts with a comprehensive introduction the same year. These editions form the textual basis for my study. The primary text witness on which Colledge and Walsh base their edition is the MS Fonds anglais 40, but all the known extant manuscripts of the texts have been consulted and form the basis of their edition and the critical apparatus.

### 3.3 Julian's illness and visions

We do not know exactly when Julian wrote the short text other than that it was soon after she received her visions. The long text was finalised around 1393. The short text consists of twenty-five chapters, the long text of eighty-six. In her introduction to the short text (chapters 1-3), Julian explains that she had wished for three gifts from God, the first being 'to have recollection of Christ's Passion', the second, to experience a bodily illness, and the third, to receive what she describes as 'three wounds'.<sup>68</sup> With regard to the first gift, Julian writes that she already thought that she had a sound understanding of Christ's Passion, but that she wished she could have been there by the cross with Jesus and Mary and the others so that she could have seen the Crucifixion with her own eyes and shared his suffering. She goes on to explain,

I desired a bodily sight, through which I might have more knowledge of our Lord and saviour's bodily pains, and of the compassion of our Lady and of all his true lovers who were living at that time and saw his pains, for I would have been one of them and have suffered with them.<sup>69</sup>

Concerning her illness, Julian prayed to God for the gift of a bodily sickness so severe that she would be close to death, and '[i]n this sickness I wanted to have every kind of pain, bodily and spiritual, which I should have if I were dying (...) and every other kind of pain except the departure of the spirit, for I hoped that this would be profitable to me when I should die (...).'<sup>70</sup> Her wish is granted, and on the fourth night of her illness,<sup>71</sup> she is given

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<sup>68</sup> Short text, chapter 1, p. 125

<sup>69</sup> Short text, chapter 1, p. 126

<sup>70</sup> Short text, chapter 1, p. 126

<sup>71</sup> In the long text (chapter 3, p. 179), Julian writes that this happened on the third night.

the holy rites, as she is not believed to live until the following day. However, she lived on for another three days before the priest is sent for. Upon his arrival, Julian is so ill that she cannot feel her own body and she cannot speak. She writes that the priest held a crucifix in front of her to look at and take comfort in. Then, at a time when she truly believes that she is about to die, all her pains disappear, and she receives her sixteen visions. It is in her visions that she receives the recollection of Christ's Passion and her third desire, the 'three wounds', these being the 'wound of contrition, the wound of compassion and the wound of longing with my will for God.'<sup>72</sup> These wounds would lead to her union with God, and she considers the illness a gift from God through which she received her visions and ultimately her final enlightenment as expressed in her theological accounts in the long text. Then follows the short description of her sixteen visions in chapters three to twenty-five.

The long text is supposed to have been written twenty years later and is almost four times longer than the short text. The short text must have been Julian's point of departure, as most of it is integrated into the long text. Thus, she builds on the short text already at hand, but after twenty years of contemplation and inner spiritual development, Julian elaborates both on the contents of her visions and, most importantly, on their theological and epistemological meaning. It is here, in her long text, that we find her fully developed spiritual wisdom and theology of divine love. Although we know little about Julian's life *before* she had her visions, Maria R. Lichtmann has noted that "we do know from the *Ancrene Riwe*, the Rule of Anchoresses and Anchorites, that meditations on the sufferings and Passion of Christ formed an integral part of the 'Devotions' expected of those leading this enclosed life."<sup>73</sup> We can thus easily imagine Julian meditating upon her own visions for twenty years in her solitary cell, and that as part of this religious practice she developed her teaching and gained new insights into the deeper spiritual meaning of her experiences before she wrote them down in the long version.

Julian's illness is the vessel through which she experiences her visions, but her short account of it is nevertheless valuable as one of very few first-person accounts of pain and illness by a woman from the Middle Ages. According to Esther Cohen, no women left as graphic descriptions of pain and illness as some men did, and although "there is no lack of self-

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<sup>72</sup> Short text, chapter 1, p. 127

<sup>73</sup> Lichtmann 1996:264

descriptive women's writings, the voice of the ill woman is silent on the whole."<sup>74</sup> This also largely applies to Julian when it comes to her own illness. Moreover, although Julian partly welcomes the pain she experiences in her visions, there are no indications implying that she exposed her body to self-inflicted pain (e.g. flagellation) or engaged in ascetic practices (e.g. holy anorexia) such as many of the saints examined by Caroline Walker Bynum in her book *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*.<sup>75</sup>

Whereas she describes and elaborates on the pains she shares with Christ in her visions, the only information she shares with her readers about her own illness – which was so severe that she was close to death and thus presumably also painful for her – is that her body felt 'dead from the middle downwards', then that the upper part of her body began to die, and that 'the greatest pain that I felt was my shortness of breath and the ebbing of my life.'<sup>76</sup> Perhaps disappointingly, this is all we get from one of the very few first-hand accounts we have in literary history of someone's experience of being on the point of death.<sup>77</sup> Although we can deduce little information about her illness from what she writes, her account of her visions are all the more elaborate, and provide invaluable information about her mystical experiences. Colledge and Walsh emphasise the uniqueness of her account in their introduction to the modern translation of the text, saying that

[h]ad it not been that she was convinced that she was divinely commanded to write down her record of her visions, she might have been no more today than one among the thousands of names of those who in medieval England lived as solitaries for the love of God, but of whom nothing else is known.<sup>78</sup>

Julian's visions are multi-sensory; she experiences what she calls 'bodily sights' and 'ghostly sights' and the characters she sees appear to her both physically and to her inward eye. Her pain is both physical and spiritual.

The visions of the Passion in which Julian experiences bodily pain are visions seven and eight. Thus, structurally, out of sixteen visions, these pain experiences form the climax of her revelations.

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<sup>74</sup> Cohen 2003:207

<sup>75</sup> At least we have no sources, autobiographical or other, indicating that she did.

<sup>76</sup> Short text, chapter 2, p. 128

<sup>77</sup> Colledge and Walsh 1978a:22

<sup>78</sup> Colledge and Walsh 1978a:19

Most of Julian's visions, however, revolve around God's divine love and provide insights into God's goodness and love for all of creation. One remarkable feature in her visions is her teachings on God as mother (from chapter 51 of the long text), for which she has received considerable scholarly attention from gender researchers and theologians alike. Julian has for the most part been considered an apostle of love, and it is her theology of divine love that has made her so well loved by so many through the ages. It is also her emphasis on love that finds resonance even today, among the learned and uneducated, the religious of various beliefs and the less spiritually inclined. As mentioned by way of introduction, however, it is only recently that her experiences of pain and suffering have started to receive scholarly attention. This thesis is meant as a contribution to this relatively new direction of scholarship on the visions of Julian of Norwich.

## 4 The medieval understanding of pain

... dolor, qui dicitur corporis, magis ad animam pertinent. Animae est enim dolere, non corporis, etiam quando ei dolendi causa existit a corpore, cum in eo loco dolet, ubi laeditur corpus. Sicut ergo dicimus corpora sentential et corpora uiuentia, cum ab anima sit corpori sensus et uita: ita corpora dicimus et dolentia, cum dolor corpori nisi ab anima esse non possit.

*... what is called bodily pain is rather to be referred to the soul. For it is the soul, not the body, which is pained, even when the pain originates with the body, the soul feeling pain at the point where the body is hurt. As then we speak of bodies feeling and living, though the feeling and life of the body are from the soul, so also we speak of bodies being pained, though no pain can be suffered by the body apart from the soul.*

Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, 2:760, book 21, chap. 3, English translation from 2:453

In order to explore what we might term 'mystical pain' in the middle ages, I consider it necessary to give an account of the medieval understanding of pain itself. Let me begin here by clarifying what I mean by 'mystical pain'. Mystical writers of the middle ages, throughout Europe, give accounts of pain experienced as part of their visions or mystical experiences, often in visions of Christ's passion (Julian), but the pain is also manifested in visible or invisible stigmata (St. Francis and St. Caterina of Siena) or pains described by the experiences as 'burning' or 'piercing' pains, as for instance in one of Teresa of Avila's descriptions of her ecstasies:

I saw an angel close by me, on my left side, in bodily form. This I am not accustomed to see, unless very rarely. (...)

I saw in his hand a long spear of gold, and at the iron's point there seemed to be a little fire. He appeared to me to be thrusting it at times into my heart, and to pierce my very entrails; when he drew it out, he seemed to draw them out also, and to leave me all on fire with a great love of God. The pain was so great, that it made me moan; and yet so surpassing was the sweetness of this excessive pain, that I could not wish to be rid of

it. The soul is satisfied now with nothing less than God. The pain is not bodily, but spiritual; though the body has its share in it, even a large one. (Ch. XXIX, 16-17)<sup>79</sup>

How, if at all, does the medieval concept of pain differ from our modern understanding of the phenomenon? If the medieval idea differs from ours, it is essential to keep this in mind in a discussion of Julian's experiences of pain, as applying our modern conceptions on her descriptions would be anachronistic. As already stated, I shall try to understand Julian's experiences on her own terms and within the medieval religious discourse of which she took part. In other words, I wish to explore how Julian herself and her contemporaries understood her ecstatic pain experiences. The quote from Augustine's *De civitate Dei* above marks an ideal point of departure for an exploration of pain in the Middle Ages. In fact, although the medieval sources and writers differ somehow in their dissemination of the notion of pain in the medieval period, as has been so skilfully demonstrated by Esther Cohen in her seminal work on the topic,<sup>80</sup> the general idea nevertheless seems to be based precisely on that of Augustine. Augustine, in his theory on pain, had revived the Aristotelian view that the sensations were part of the soul and that pain was a part of the sense of touch. Thus, being part of one of the senses, pain belonged to the human soul.<sup>81</sup> McKinstry and Saunders argue that

[b]ecause medieval thought was not predicated on Cartesian dualism, the dynamic relationship between mind and body was central to understandings of the human: all experience was embodied, and mind, body, and affect were intimately connected.<sup>82</sup>

Thus, although pain belonged to the soul, it was connected to the senses, and the sensations flowed from the soul and permeated the entire body.<sup>83</sup>

In what follows, my account of the perception and theory of pain in the Middle Ages is based largely on Esther Cohen's exploration of the topic in her book *The Modulated Scream: Pain in the later Middle Ages* and other works. As far as I am aware, her insights on the topic remain

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<sup>79</sup> Project Gutenberg's The Life of St. Teresa of Jesus, by Teresa of Avila (<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/8120/8120-h/8120-h.htm#129.0>)

<sup>80</sup> Cohen 2009

<sup>81</sup> Cohen 2009:171

<sup>82</sup> McKinstry and Saunders 2017: 141-142

<sup>83</sup> McKinstry and Saunders 2017: 175

unchallenged and authoritative. As reflected in the quotation from Augustine above, there was no clear distinction between body and soul in the pre-Cartesian thought world. Rather, as Corinne Saunders and Charles Fernyhough has noted, “[t]he distinction between mind and body was complex and more fluid than in post-Cartesian thought, complicated by ideas of the soul, by different views on where the body faculties were situated, and by the integration of thought and affect”,<sup>84</sup> and the medieval thought world saw a clear connection between mind, body and emotion. According to Corinne Saunders, emotions were understood as profoundly affective of both mind and body.<sup>85</sup> Thus, mind, soul, emotion, affect, intellect, the senses and the body were all closely interconnected in medieval thought, and it is not surprising, then, that this perception of body and mind also shaped the medieval understanding of pain, and how to relate to one’s own and others’ experiences of pain. Cohen has noted that the context within which the pain was experienced dictated the experiencer’s behaviour and expressions of the pain as well as how the sufferer was expected to deal with it: “For example”, Cohen writes,

the pangs of illness may legitimately be soothed and cured, but labour pains are the wages of sin, and must therefore not be assuaged. The context will dictate not only expectations, but also actual behaviour. (...) Within the historical context, martyrs in the arena were able to tolerate their pain with equanimity not because they were immune, but because their faith dictated such a display.<sup>86</sup>

Medical texts rarely describe patients’ behaviour, and we thus know little about what people in the later Middle Ages did when sick or in pain. However, in addition to seeing physicians and surgeons when the pain became precarious, people of the Middle Ages were equally inclined to seek relief through miraculous means, and a few sources concerning the healing effects of saints also give insight into the sufferers’ situation and behaviour before being healed.<sup>87</sup>

Alleviation of pain just for the sake of pain relief seems to have been relatively unknown. Rather, pain relief was sought in order to cure potentially dangerous or mortal illnesses, but not for the sake of alleviating the pain itself. Esther Cohen distinguishes

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<sup>84</sup> Saunders and Fernyhough 2016b

<sup>85</sup> Saunders 2016a:412

<sup>86</sup> Cohen 2003: 197

<sup>87</sup> Cohen 2009:133

between three types of pain situations in the Middle Ages: 1) physical illness or other involuntary pain, 2) pain situations in which the suffering was seen as honourable, and 3) pain as punishment or torture.

In the first situation, expressing pain and wanting to vanquish it was acceptable and understandable both for women and men. This type of bodily suffering was considered an alien pain with which the sufferers did not identify; it was a type of pain that had to be either endured or, if caused by a curable illness, treated by medical physicians or surgeons. Another option was to seek aid from saints believed to possess healing powers.<sup>88</sup> The second category, to which Julian of Norwich belongs, may be described as a religious or honourable pain, and the experiencers were expected to endure their pain whether they were martyrs, visionaries, saints or warriors. This type of pain was commonly sought and welcomed by the experiencers themselves. Mystics desired and prayed in order to experience the pains of Christ's passion. Others sought pain through ascetic practices such as excessive fasting, or other self-inflicted pains.<sup>89</sup> Martyrs and warriors perhaps didn't desire the pain, but neither did they fear it nor try to avoid it: "Feeling pain was a badge of honour, a test successfully taken, and the sufferers did not seek alleviation."<sup>90</sup> The sufferers belonging to this pain category strongly identified with their pain, accepted it and integrated it, regardless of whether the pain was self-inflicted or external.<sup>91</sup> In the last category, Cohen puts the various pains related to corporal punishments brought upon criminals. This type of pain was considered a "badge of infamy" rather than of honour.<sup>92</sup>

Pain and suffering were central themes in the European later Middle Ages, among theologians, mystics, legal scholars and physicians alike. But why this obsession with pain? Of course, illness and pain was common in the Middle Ages. They had less cures for treating diseases and alleviating pain, plagues occurred with regular intervals, wars and political unrest were part of many people's reality, and life expectancy was low. Taking this into consideration, one might think that people in the Middle Ages were toughened, that pain and suffering was such an everyday part of their reality that they paid little attention to it. Yet this does not seem to be the case. On the contrary, the focus on pain and suffering rather seems to gradually escalate through the Middle Ages and reach its peak in the thirteenth and fourteenth

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<sup>88</sup> Cohen 2003:199

<sup>89</sup> Cf. Walker Bynum 1987

<sup>90</sup> Cohen 2003: 197-98

<sup>91</sup> Cohen 2003:209

<sup>92</sup> Cohen 2003: 198

century, precisely around the time Julian of Norwich received her visions. On the other hand, one could argue that precisely because of the fact that pain, illness, plague and war was such an inevitable part of most people's everyday reality, pain was also naturally a central theme in their lives. Yet when considering earlier medieval chronicles and annals for instance, the statements they provide on suffering, deaths and disaster are rather dry and sober, and thus give witness to an entirely different treatment of life's painful realities. Esther Cohen has argued that the culture of pain in the later medieval times was unique in that

[i]t was not merely that behavioral norms in the face of pain changed. Late medieval pain culture was characterized by the multifarious ways in which pain was treated – even in fields of thought that we might consider irrelevant – and the tremendous *positive* significance identified with pain. Suffering was not to be dismissed, vanquished, or transcended: suffering was to be felt with an ever-deepening intensity.<sup>93</sup>

This focus on pain and suffering can largely be explained with the increasingly influential scholasticism in the later Middle Ages, as well as with Christianity and Christ's Passion. The permeation of scholasticism in all learned circles of medieval society ensured a worldview based on Scripture and the Church Fathers as well as classical learning that was interpreted in light of Scripture. Because pain was seen as such a central part of human and salvation history, with Christ's passion as its zenith, the focus on the phenomenon in the later Middle Ages is perhaps only natural. Furthermore, based on scholastic learning, patristic writings and Scripture, Christianity offered ways of regarding pain as useful and beneficial, as a way to perfect the soul on the path to salvation. Finally, the most profound way of doing this was through the Christian medieval ideal of *imitatio Christi*; the desire for union with God through empathy and identification with Christ's pains emphasised physical pain as something positive and meaningful, not as an evil that needed to be vanquished. The emphasis on the positive aspects of pain seems thus to be rooted in the religious quest for union with God and in the notion of pain as a way to perfect one's soul.

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<sup>93</sup> Cohen 2009:3

## 4.1 Perceptions of pain in scholastic learning

The learned men of theology, for they were primarily men, in the Middle Ages were trained in the scholastic tradition based upon the study of Scripture, the patristic writings and classical learning. Scholasticism was, in fact, the medieval science of human beings.<sup>94</sup> Although scholasticism as an academic discipline of critical thought emerged and took shape during the Carolingian era in the milieu around the Frankish court in the early Middle Ages (c. 9<sup>th</sup> century), the discipline became increasingly influential and popular in the thirteenth and fourteenth century, as it found its way into the newly established universities in the major European cities and scholars of all disciplines began to rediscover ancient Greek philosophy and learning. As is largely the case today, learnedness was demonstrated through knowledge of and from the authorities of the past, and these past authorities were cited and referred to when found convenient in order to prove a point or demonstrate authority. Not only theologians, but also scholars of other disciplines such as medicine and law were trained in scholastic learning, and most of the sources we have concerning the notion of pain and theories on pain from the later Middle Ages spring from scholastic writings. When it came to discussions of the connection of body and soul, for instance, Augustine's view cited above remained more or less unchallenged in learned circles throughout the Middle Ages.

The three learned classes that dealt with the concept of human pain were physicians, jurists and theologians, but while jurists and physicians treated the phenomenon as something that could be described and measured, theologians understood human pain as a central aspect of salvation history from the Fall through Christ's Passion till the Last Judgment.<sup>95</sup> Scholastic definitions of physical pain rarely, if at all, distinguish physical pain from the soul and human emotions, whereas medical descriptions attempt at giving the causes for pain rather than trying to define the pain itself.<sup>96</sup> Ultimately, given Christianity's uncontested position in the medieval world, the scholastic understanding of human pain also permeated medicine and law, which adopted the ideas developed within scholastic theology. Descriptions of pain and suffering from the later Middle Ages abound, and, as Cohen emphasises,

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<sup>94</sup> Cohen 2009:175

<sup>95</sup> Cohen 2009:168

<sup>96</sup> Cohen 2009:2

[t]he wealth of evidence from the later Middle Ages is an index of the interest and compassion, as well as the prurient curiosity and cruelty, which pervaded that society. A sensation worth expressing and recording rather than suppressing and eradicating stood a good chance of leaving its imprint upon the legacy of the period, and pain in the later Middle Ages did just that.”<sup>97</sup>

In addition to philosophical, theological, medical and legal explanations and interpretations of pain by professionals, pain was articulated and described by the sufferers in letters and autobiographical writings. Cohen notes that because of this massive focus on pain, “an intrinsically individual feeling became a social, religious, and cultural phenomenon.”<sup>98</sup> Within learned scholastic circles, discussions concerning Christ’s humanity were pivotal. And in order to understand Christ’s humanity, it was essential to understand humans and the human nature. In doing so, the human destiny was charted out according to the various stages of human suffering through biblical chronology from the Fall through the history of Adam’s descendants to New Testament history: “Scholars pondered why and how people suffered, what they must learn from their pain, and how to benefit from it or – very occasionally – avoid it.”<sup>99</sup> Moreover, theologians were naturally preoccupied with the afterlife and the pains that awaited the dead souls in purgatory, on judgment day, and in hell. Also, because it was believed that the dead would be revived with their body and senses intact; there was also the question of what post-resurrection bodies might feel.<sup>100</sup> With all these questions to occupy the theologians’ minds, the focus on pain becomes more understandable and comprehensible for modern readers. As regards Christ’s pain, the basic theological understanding, which was rarely, if at all, contested, was that due to his human (as well as divine) nature, Jesus had truly suffered on the cross.

According to Cohen’s analysis of the medieval learned discussions of pain, pain was regarded as a negative force working against the human will, and the assumption was that pain originated in the soul: “The idea that it might be an external physical force, acting upon a physical organism, never even arose.”<sup>101</sup> But although the sensation was part of the soul, the soul permeated the entire physical body with all its bones, flesh and organs. In discussions of

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<sup>97</sup> Cohen 2009:3

<sup>98</sup> Cohen 2009:3

<sup>99</sup> Cohen 2009:169

<sup>100</sup> Cohen 2009:170

<sup>101</sup> Cohen 2009:173

Christ's impassibility and suffering on the cross, it was established that the suffering of Christ's soul manifested itself in in all his senses and his entire body, as described by the preacher John Bromyard (d. c. 1352) in his preacher's manual *Summa praedicatorum*:

Thus, he made restitution in all his members and parts of his natural body. And just as man sins through all his senses, he who wished to give satisfaction for the sake of humans was punished in all his senses ... The head, whose beauty had no end, was crowned with thorns. The face that angels wished to look upon was spat upon by Jews. The ears used to listening to the singing of angels heard the blasphemies of the Jews. Both feet and hands that were joined to the world's ruler were affixed to the cross. His taste was afflicted with gall and his eyes with his mother's pain, so that by suffering he healed the sin our first parents and others had committed in all their senses and parts.<sup>102</sup>

Moreover, although there was a general belief in pain as a negative force *per se*, it could be turned into something positive and constructive: there was also a theological valorising of pain as a purifying force and of Christ's salvific pain for the entire humankind. Thus, although pain was unpleasant and sometimes repulsive, it was not evil; rather, it was in many regards useful and edifying.<sup>103</sup>

## 4.2 Holy Pain and *imitatio Christi*

In contrast to modern cultures, in which pain is regarded as an evil that should be annihilated or vanquished, religious and scholastic tradition in the Middle Ages thus regarded pain as morally beneficial and a way to perfect the soul. Pain was considered useful, "a key to unlock secrets of the human mind and body."<sup>104</sup> And due to Christianity's central place in medieval culture, the fear of what might happen in the afterlife was genuine and ever-present. Thus, the urge to perfect oneself in preparation for the next life must have been very real indeed, not least because it was believed that suffering in this life might help shorten the time in purgatory. Suffering and pain consequently became a favourite subject for later medieval writers and mystics alike. Evidence for how suffering could be useful for human virtue could

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<sup>102</sup> Bromyard art. 2:5-8, cited in Cohen 2009:212

<sup>103</sup> As opposed to Dahl, cf. chapter two.

<sup>104</sup> Cohen 2009:4

be found in Scripture and patristic writings; for instance, Gregory the Great's commentary of the Book of Job enjoyed massive popularity in the later Middle Ages, and was translated into several vernaculars.<sup>105</sup>

Pain signified the entire human history and destiny. Pain had entered the world through the Fall and culminated in Christ's passion for the sake of humankind, and pain awaited every human being on the Day of Judgment and in afterlife.<sup>106</sup> Furthermore, pain represented *imitatio Christi*, and devout Christians desired first-hand experiences of pain in order to better comprehend Christ's passion and thus wilfully inflicted pain upon themselves or prayed to God to inflict pains upon them.<sup>107</sup> Pain and suffering was thus charged with meaning, symbolism, and purpose, and this was expressed and acted out in various ways. Sufferers were expected to articulate and express their pain through conduct and voice; for instance,

[i]t was inconceivable to late medieval burghers that flagellants parading through their streets, whipping themselves and their colleagues, should act as though the lashes of the corded whip were no more than a caressing breeze. They were expected to cry out loudly under the whip. (...) Unless pain was articulated, the louder the better, its meaning was lost.<sup>108</sup>

Ultimately, the meaning of pain was to understand Christ's sufferings. Christ had suffered and died for humankind, and human salvation was founded on his pain. The ideal way to perfect one's own soul in preparation for the afterlife was to attempt to fully comprehend this through imitating his pain. Although it was believed that Christ's was the ultimate and most extreme experience of pain, devotional Christians strove to imitate it, and it is this desire to comprehend and imitate Christ's pain that is testified in the various expressions of holy pain from the later Middle Ages; from the flagellants' practices of self-whipping to Catherine of Siena's holy anorexia and Julian of Norwich's painful visions of the Crucifixion just to mention a few examples. And whereas pain was often considered divine punishment, this type of pain was perceived as a gift from God and received as such. Catherine of Siena, for instance, prayed to God to receive holy stigmata. Her prayers were answered, but the stigmata

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<sup>105</sup> Cohen 2009:4

<sup>106</sup> Cohen 2009:6

<sup>107</sup> Cohen 2009:5

<sup>108</sup> Cohen 2009:5

were internal and could thus not be seen by others although she could feel them.<sup>109</sup> Holy pain also came in the shape of raptures, fits and illness. Cohen writes that Colette of Corbie (1381-1447) distinguished between two types of illness: natural illness, which should be treated by physicians, and holy illness that she considered to be a gift from God. This was not to be treated by any means, although these were the worst pains, “gripping her entire body so that she could never sleep and barely drew breath for an hour in eight days. The pain was so severe that her companions could hear her sinews creaking, blood flowed from her mouth, and she admitted that her head felt like a boiling pot.”<sup>110</sup> These pains were meant to perfect her soul and bring her closer to God. Pierre de Vaux, Colette’s biographer, describes her holy pain thus:

Sometimes she was tortured by fire, like St. Lawrence ... and that martyrdom usually lasted for a whole night. Sometimes she was tortured like St. Vincent, sometimes she was crucified. Sometimes she was excoriated like St. Bartholomew, sometimes she froze, sometimes she boiled; and sometimes it seemed to her that her heart was breaking open ... Sometimes it seemed to her, and she felt it in her senses thus, that under her belly she had a blazing torch that burned her completely; at other times that she had burning coals at the roots of her eyes consuming them; or that sharp irons pierced her whole body and all her limbs from end to end.<sup>111</sup>

This enormous focus on Christ’s pain, the usefulness of pain and its purgative effects thus developed into a culture of pain in which many of the mystical writers of the period embraced suffering in their strive to imitate their saviour. Moreover, it was through the attempts at fully understanding the humanity of Christ and his suffering that scholars of the later Middle Ages developed what Cohen has termed “an entire historical human psychology and physiology.”<sup>112</sup> The question remains, however, to what degree the scholastic learning of the time affected devotional lay people such as Julian of Norwich. For the unlearned laity, there might not have been many points of contact. For the lettered laity belonging to the more educated strands of society, scholastic learning most probably had some influence. Nevertheless, it seems safe to say that whereas theologians and philosophers formulated and

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<sup>109</sup> Cohen 2009:121

<sup>110</sup> Cohen 2009:123

<sup>111</sup> Pierre de Vaux: *Vita beatae Coletae*, cited in Cohen 2009: 123

<sup>112</sup> Cohen 2009:208

discussed theories concerning body and soul, pain and Christ's passion and humanity, the devotional writers *lived* and *experienced* the pain and thus integrated and practiced the suffering theorised by the scholastics.

## 5 Analysis of Julian's visions VII and VIII

*If we endure with him, then we shall also reign with him. (2 Timothy 2:12)*

When Julian describes her three desires in her introduction to both the short and the long text, she employs terminology of pain: to experience Christ's suffering, a severe illness and to be given three 'wounds' by God. This foreshadows her mystical experience and reflects the significance of pain in her visions.

### 5.1 Julian's pain experiences: summary and initial reflections

In visions seven and eight, Julian's bodily experiences are highlighted, and she describes experiences of actual, physical pain. In vision seven (chapter 15),<sup>113</sup> Julian first visualises a "supreme spiritual delight"<sup>114</sup> free from pain before everything changes and she feels abandoned and such despair that she "hardly had the patience to go on living."<sup>115</sup> These two opposite feelings alternate over and over again in this vision:

And then again I felt the pain, and then afterwards the delight and the joy, now the one and now the other, again and again, I suppose about twenty times. And in the time of joy I could have said with St. Paul: Nothing shall separate me from the love of Christ; and in the pain I could have said with St. Peter: Lord, save me, I am perishing. (...) For it is God's will that we do all in our power to preserve our consolation, for bliss lasts forevermore, and pain is passing, and will be reduced to nothing for those who will be saved. Therefore it is not God's will that when we feel pain we should pursue it in sorrow and mourning for it, but that suddenly we should pass it over, and preserve ourselves in the endless delight which is God.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Unless otherwise noted, my text references are to the long text.

<sup>114</sup> Long text, chapter 15, p. 204

<sup>115</sup> Long text, chapter 15, p. 204

<sup>116</sup> Long text, chapter 15, p. 205

In vision eight (chapters 16-20), Julian experiences a revelation of Christ's Passion. Her vision, which she refers to as "a bodily sight", is described in full, she spares no detail. Colledge and Walsh has noted with regard to this description of the Passion that Julian "wishes to show how completely her first prayer was answered, to have recollection of the Passion."<sup>117</sup> She goes on, then, to describe her own pain, which she refers to as being part of a "ghostly sight":

[t]his revelation of Christ's pains filled me full of pains, for I know well that he suffered only once, but it was his will now to show it to me and fill me with mind of it, as I had asked before. And in all this time that Christ was present to me, I felt no pain except for Christ's pains; and then it came to me that I had little known what pain it was that I had asked, and like a wretch I regretted it, thinking that if I had known what it had been, I should have been reluctant to ask for it. For it seemed to me that my pains exceeded any mortal death. I thought: Is there any pain in hell like this pain? And in my reason I was answered: Hell is a different pain, for in it there is despair.<sup>118</sup> But of all the pains that lead to salvation, this is the greatest, to see the lover suffer. How could any pain be greater than to see him who is all my life, all my bliss and all my joy suffer? Here I felt unshakably that I loved Christ so much more than myself that there was no pain which could be suffered like the sorrow which I felt to see him in pain.<sup>119</sup>

Next, in chapter eighteen, Julian visualises the Virgin Mary and Christ's followers at the cross mourning Christ, and she feels their grief and pain out of love for Christ, "for when he was in pain, we were in pain."<sup>120</sup> This reflects the second 'wound', that of compassion. She is shown Mary's compassion for Christ, and how those others around him who were close to him felt compassion for Christ and for Mary. Thus from identification with Christ's pain in chapter seventeen, she now relates how she identifies with the mother of God and his followers in their sorrow and pain. She goes on to explain how all of God's creatures capable of feeling pain suffered because of Christ's Passion, even "those who did not recognize him suffered

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<sup>117</sup> Colledge and Walsh 1978a:43

<sup>118</sup> Short text formulation: "in my reason I was answered that despair is greater, for that is a spiritual pain. But there is no greater physical pain than this; how could I suffer greater pain than to see him who is all my life, all my bliss and all my joy suffer?" Short text, chapter 10, p. 142. This is an interesting instance of a fairly clear distinction between spiritual and physical pain. It is also interesting to note that this distinction has been omitted in the long text.

<sup>119</sup> Long text, chapter 17, p. 209

<sup>120</sup> Long text, chapter 18, p. 210

because the comfort of all creation failed them, except for God's powerful, secret preservation of them."<sup>121</sup> This happens, she states, because of the "great unity between Christ and us".<sup>122</sup>

In chapter nineteen, Julian is tempted to look away from the cross upon which her eyes are fixed and towards heaven, but she resists the temptation, acknowledging that she "would rather have remained in that pain until Judgment Day than have to come to heaven any other way than by him."<sup>123</sup> Thus here, Julian expresses her insight that it is through the suffering of Christ's pain that a place in heaven is gained.

Another insight comes to her in this vision. Although she had previously regretted that she had ever prayed for the pain she now experiences, Julian now realises that this regret is "the reluctance and domination of the flesh", to which her soul does not approve and God does not put any blame. Her exterior, her flesh, feels regret and pain, whereas her interior, her soul, is exalted and blessed, "it is all peace and love (...) and it was in this part of me that I powerfully, wisely and deliberately chose Jesus for my heaven."<sup>124</sup>

In chapter twenty, Julian contemplates her vision of how Christ, who is the "highest, most majestic king" came to suffer the most painful death, he who is the most honourable was the most humiliated and despised. Most importantly, Julian apprehends that because of his love for humanity, "he willingly chose suffering with a great desire, and suffered it meekly with a great joy."<sup>125</sup> She concludes the final chapter of this vision with the following summary in which she addresses the three wounds that she had prayed to God to receive:

It is God's will, as I understand it, that we contemplate his blessed Passion in three ways. Firstly, that we contemplate with contrition [1] and compassion [2] the cruel pain he suffered; and our Lord revealed that at this time, and gave me strength and grace to see it [3].<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Long text, chapter 18, p. 210-211

<sup>122</sup> Long text, chapter 18, p. 210

<sup>123</sup> Long text, chapter 19, p. 212

<sup>124</sup> Long text, chapter 19, p. 212

<sup>125</sup> Long text, chapter 20, pp.213-214

<sup>126</sup> Long text, chapter 20, p. 214

## 5.2 Pain experience as *Imitatio Christi*

This last quote from Julian catches some of the essence of the concept of *imitatio Christi* and the paradox of suffering and joy in the pain experiences. What lies at the basis of the concept of *imitatio Christi* is the desire to suffer with Christ, to share in his Passion and through this pain identify fully with Christ and gain knowledge of and union with God. Thus, in line with this ideal, the way to God is through pain. However, as Christ suffers with joy because of his love for humankind, in a similar manner mystics experience a pain that is also full of joy. In visions seven and eight, Julian's physical experiences are clearly at the forefront; more so, in fact, than in any of her other visions. "No matter how theologically abstract her reflections become," Lichtmann writes concerning Julian's visions more generally, "they are never merely scholastic, but are continually grounded and fed by the *experience* of her visions. Again and again, she reminds us of the experiential character of her way of knowing by the use of the phrase 'I saw'."<sup>127</sup> Whereas the term 'vision' semantically refers to the sight – the faculty of vision – and is thus traditionally associated with more distanced observation, Julian in visions seven and eight actually physically participates in the experience with her entire body, not only with the eye.

When we experience intense physical pain, we no longer just *have* a body, we *become* our body, as noted by Dahl.<sup>128</sup> Precisely because of the overwhelming presence of our body when we suffer pain (in opposition to Leder's absent body), it becomes impossible for us to focus on anything else but our body and our pain. Leder has pointed to the paradox that although the body "is our ground for experience, yet it tends to recede from direct experience."<sup>129</sup> But this is quite the opposite when the visionary experiences Christ's suffering. This makes the shared suffering with Christ so powerful. In line with Leder and Dahl's phenomenological observations outlined in chapter two, when Julian experiences intense physical pain during her vision of and contemplation on Christ's suffering, her suffering with Christ becomes her sole centre of attention. She cannot escape the pain because she experiences it with and through her own body. Thus the phenomenological observation as laid out by Dahl and Leder that we focus completely on our own body when we experience pain becomes equivalent with focusing on Christ, since Christ's pain is Julian's pain and vice versa.

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<sup>127</sup> Lichtmann 1996:266. My italisation.

<sup>128</sup> Dahl 2015:153

<sup>129</sup> Leder 1990:1

The suffering represents *imitatio Christi*. And as the whole point and the desire is to focus on Christ and his Passion, Julian and her fellow mystics *welcome* the pain in order not to lose this focus. Skårderud argues that when we are healthy, we forget our bodies, and that this way of forgetting ourselves is decisive for our ability to fully partake in the world around us. For *imitatio Christi* the opposite applies: if one wants to fully take part in Christ's Passion, the body is the vessel through which Christ's suffering manifests itself in the most concrete way. Through the bodily pain, it becomes impossible to forget the body or the pain, and thus it is through pain that the identification with Christ may be experienced at its most intense. The pain enhances the mystical experience. Precisely because one becomes so aware of the body through pain experience, pain is the most powerful way of experiencing real empathy and identification with Christ. Due to the intense pain experiences, it is impossible for Julian to lose focus on Christ's suffering, because she feels it, *experience*, the pain with her own body, and the pain is inescapable, beyond description. Through pain, in line with the phenomenological view presented here, Julian focuses entirely on her own body. But because her pain imitates Christ's suffering she experiences *Christ's* pain on *her* body and thus her focus is also solely on Christ. This is as far from Leder's absent body as one can get, this is the intensely *present* body. With this, a new paradox arises, however: when the mystics experience a typical out-of-the-body experience, their body becomes more present than ever. It is as if their *ek-stasis* becomes corporeal.

This way of focusing the attention on Christ through bodily suffering may be one reason for welcoming the pain. But although the pain is excessive, it also feels "secure and safe", the Julian does not want it to go away. On the contrary, she has prayed for it and rejoice in it: "I would rather have remained in that pain until Judgment Day than have come to heaven any other way than by him", Julian writes.<sup>130</sup> And the sweetness of the pain is often as intense as the pain itself. For instance, Cohen notes that the mystics often use expressions such as "a sweetness that cannot be described" or "a pain beyond description".<sup>131</sup>

This also represents a paradox for modern readers who consider pain an evil to be vanquished. I would argue that the joyful pain experience is closely connected to the intense physical manifestation of the suffering: it is through intense pain that the visionary experience the most powerful identification with Christ's Passion because it is impossible to focus on

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<sup>130</sup> Long text, chapter 19, pp. 211-212

<sup>131</sup> Cohen 2009:15

anything else. And since Julian's desire is exactly to identify with Christ, this pain experience is a fulfilment of her desire, and thus also joyful. But there is more to it than this: as Christ voluntarily suffered the greatest pain with joy because of his love for humanity, so Julian and her fellow mystics desire to suffer the greatest pain for the love of Christ with joy. It was in his suffering that Christ's love for humankind became manifest; his Passion is the ultimate act of love. In a similar manner, Julian and her fellow mystics desire to demonstrate their love for Christ by imitating his Passion. This, then, becomes the ultimate identification with Christ and through this pain Julian experience union with him, the ultimate joy and *telos*.

At the same time as the pain involves a bodily presence, an intense physical here-and-now experience, I would argue that the joy connected to the pain experience paradoxically involves a *loss of self*, and that the out-of-the-body experience is also manifested in an ecstatic joy. Thus, the paradox is retained in the mystical experience: it is both intensely physical and ecstatic at the same time, both spiritual and corporeal, painful and joyful. There is, as Skårderud has noted, an "equivalence between physical experience and religious experience," since the visionary's physical pain equals Christ's pain, and *imitatio Christi* is the ultimate religious experience.<sup>132</sup> Thus, the most excessive physical pain experience – Christ's Passion – corresponds to the ultimate religious experience.

But this paradox also reflects the paradox of Christ as both fully human and fully divine, and is in line with the Church's idea of Christ's humanity and corporeality and ability to suffer and die despite his divinity. Following the Christological idea of Jesus as fully human who physically suffered as human, the mystics in their imitation of Christ fully experience physical pain through their spiritual visions. They experience union with God both spiritually and physically.

Was this paradox between the spiritual and the physical as prominent in the fourteenth century, however? Taken Augustine's statement about bodily pain referred to in chapter four into consideration, bodily pain in fact belongs to the soul. Because the senses belong to the soul, and pain is experienced through the senses, all suffering can be traced back to the soul. Cohen states that "[b]y the mid-fourteenth century, pain was credited with a purely metaphysical ancestry. It was born of cognition, memory, imagination – anything but stones

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<sup>132</sup> Skårderud 2008 ([http://www.psykologtidsskriftet.no/index.php?seks\\_id=42861&a=3](http://www.psykologtidsskriftet.no/index.php?seks_id=42861&a=3))

and blows.”<sup>133</sup> This may explain that what we consider a paradox between the physical and the spiritual was not necessarily regarded as such in the later Middle Ages. However, it does not mean that physical pain did not exist, that it was not *real*. Rather, it may explain the *real* pain in the spiritual ecstasies. In Augustine’s statement that it is “the soul feeling pain at the point where the body is hurt”, lies a recognition on the part of the body. The body is hurt, he says, although it is the soul feeling the pain. Thus, I would argue that this perception of pain and its referral to the soul does not, in fact, conflict with the phenomenological observations discussed above. Rather, it provides an explanation to how the medieval mystics might trace the physical pain back to the soul. Today we might find it difficult or impossible to explain how physical pain might arise from spiritual experience, pain is either inflicted from or by an external source or from within the *material body*. When our body hurt, we try to find biomedical explanations. When we cannot find obvious medical explanations to the mystics’ experiences, we look to the brain and try to find out what goes on in the brain, also a part of the physical body. In the Middle Ages, they looked to the soul. Because pain is born of cognition (which we would refer to as the brain, but medieval people considered the soul), it provides explanation to the real pain in the visions although no external physical force has inflicted the pain.

With regard to this paradox, Maria Lichtmann has noted that most of Julian’s visions are in “bodily form”, and that “she advocates the concrete nature of her experience.”<sup>134</sup> In Julian’s own words, she says in her introduction to the short text that she “desired a bodily sight, through which I might have more knowledge of our Lord and saviour’s bodily pains, and of the compassion of our Lady and of all his true lovers who were living at that time and saw his pains”.<sup>135</sup> Thus, quite explicitly, Julian desires to feel his pains on her own body. “The Passion of Christ is taken in bodily,” Lichtmann states,

in the sense that it is both perceived as ‘bodyle syghte’ or sensate image and that it is undergone in her own bodily illness. The fruits of these corporeal experiences are her ‘wounds’, which though spiritual, bear the stamp of their bodily origin. Moreover, it is

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<sup>133</sup> Cohen 2009: 174

<sup>134</sup> Lichtmann 1996:267

<sup>135</sup> Short text, chapter 1, p. 126

significant that Julian prays for the concrete wounds of bodily sickness rather than the spiritual *blessure d'amour* of Origen.<sup>136</sup>

Thus in line with Christ's Passion, Julian desires her own suffering to be physical, in order to feel the same pains as those experienced by Christ. Her aim, however, is spiritual: the three wounds and the ultimate union with God, but it is achieved through the bodily *imitatio Christi*.

Although the scholastics emphasised Christ's Passion and humanity, and the ideal of *imitatio Christi* was prominent among mystics, saints and martyrs throughout Europe in the later Middle Ages, Lichtmann nevertheless states that Julian

is in the forefront in expressing an emphatically incarnational view of Jesus, and an emphatically Christocentric piety. Just as divine and human, spirit and matter (as Holy Spirit and Mary's flesh), came together in the Incarnation, so fleshly humanness was the most appropriate vehicle of the Divine and body the most appropriate receptacle of spirit. The doctrine of incarnation is clearly the source of Julian's affirmation of the body.<sup>137</sup>

Both Cohen and Walker Bynum have emphasised female mystics' prominent position when it came to physical pain experience and how they fully immersed in their identification and suffering with Christ. For example, Cohen states that when "[r]eading the letters of St. Catherine of Siena, (...), one gains an impression of a woman intoxicated and exalted with pain. Her identification with her sufferings is absolute. Body, soul and sensations are united in one passionate quest for the mystical experience."<sup>138</sup> Here, again, the joyous aspect of the pain is highlighted. It is as if the intense experience of identification with the divine leads to a joy that exceeds even the bodily pain and exalts the suffering individual out of her body and into a holy union with the divine. Ariel Glucklich comments on this when he says that an individual who "continues to carry out practices (often painful) that eliminate the perception of agency will experience intense and elevated (ecstatic) states of joy. Loss of self is key

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<sup>136</sup> Lichtmann 1996:266

<sup>137</sup> Lichtmann 1996:264

<sup>138</sup> Cohen 2003:212

here.”<sup>139</sup> He goes on to refer to an experience seemingly of this kind related by Bernard of Clairvaux in his work *On Loving God*:

When a movement of love (*affectus*) of this sort is experienced so that the intellectual soul is drunk with love and forgets itself, becoming almost an empty vessel of itself, it marches right into God, and adhering to him, becomes one spirit with him ... I would call a person blessed or holy to whom anything such as this very occasionally, or even just once, was granted as an experience while still in this mortal life – and that is a rapture of scarce a moment’s duration.<sup>140</sup>

Julian seems to have a similar exalted, spiritual experience as a result of her *imitatio* in vision eight. In her account of her ninth vision, we can read that her “understanding was lifted up into heaven”.<sup>141</sup> This, according to Colledge and Walsh, “seems to describe a ‘rapture’ in the traditional sense. She had been in the severest bodily and mental anguish, and suddenly she is taken out of herself.” It is as if this exaltation following her pain experiences becomes a ‘reward’ from above, and in her ninth vision she is shown three heavens and she envisions how Christ suffered because of his love for humanity, and she sees that God’s love “was without beginning, it is and shall be without end.”<sup>142</sup> I suggest that this ‘reward’, the joy and insight gained from the intense pain in the *imitatio* experience is what Dahl identifies as non-evil physical pain, but rather as “*gains that can only come through pain.*”<sup>143</sup>

Although pain and suffering are central themes in Julian’s visions, and particularly in visions seven and eight, it is, as demonstrated above, significant that Julian’s desire for suffering is not for the pain itself, but because she sees experiences of pain as ways of focusing her attention on God and obtaining knowledge of God which again will lead to eternal bliss. Julian thus acquires her wisdom through experiencing pain on two levels: her illness and her visions of the Passion, the climax of her revelations. And the wisdom she acquires is one of

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<sup>139</sup> Glucklich 2015:14

<sup>140</sup> Quoted in Glucklich 2015:14

<sup>141</sup> Long text, chapter 22, p. 216

<sup>142</sup> Long text, chapter 22, p. 217

<sup>143</sup> Dahl 2017:396. My italisation.

God's eternal love for humanity. Thus, as Molly Field James has noted, "Julian puts suffering in the context of divine love."<sup>144</sup>

## 5.3 The hermeneutics of Julian's visions

### 5.3.1 Experiential level

Julian's visions, both her written accounts and her own spiritual journey, may be read hermeneutically in accordance with Ricoeur's arch as explained in chapter two. On one level, Julian's visions may be read as a spiritual journey from naive theological understanding to deep or critical understanding. According to such a hermeneutical reading, we might say that at the first cornerstone of the arch we find the naive Julian praying for a severe illness, an experience of Christ's suffering and the three 'wounds'. Among the various stages on her journey to the next cornerstone of the arch are her illness, the various visions of which number seven and eight mark the peak of the arch before Julian experiences exalted, joyful visions of heaven and divine love. Finally, she comes out of her visions and recovers from her illness at the other end of the arch as a new Julian with a new self-perception, deep insights and understandings. This is the renewed self-perception emphasised by the hermeneutics referred to in chapter two, or what Ricoeur has termed *appropriation*.

The climax of Julian's visions is her physical pain experiences and *imitatio* of Christ's Passion. As noted above, this also marks the peak of Julian's journey towards her union with God, and, being the focus of this thesis, I will concentrate on this 'stage' of the hermeneutical arch. Skårderud has noted that "the sick or suffering body is directed towards itself", because it becomes focused on itself when in pain.<sup>145</sup> On Julian's spiritual journey, however, I would rather argue that her sick and suffering body directs itself towards *God* in her quest for knowledge of and union with him. The body is, moreover, the channel through which Julian experiences her visions, and it is thus through her bodily pain that she ultimately, at the other end of the arch, unites with God in her *imitatio*.<sup>146</sup> And it is precisely because of this experience of unification with the divine through illness and suffering that the pain feels

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<sup>144</sup> James 2010:77

<sup>145</sup> Skårderud 2008: [http://www.psykologtidsskriftet.no/index.php?seks\\_id=42861&a=3](http://www.psykologtidsskriftet.no/index.php?seks_id=42861&a=3) (my translation)

<sup>146</sup> Cf. Dahl 2015:153

sweet or joyful. The body is the ecstatic and mystical medium through which direct experience of pain becomes Julian's way to God. "It is as if the contemplative senses," Lichtmann writes, "that until she knows with her body, in her marrow and bones and in every cell, she will have no basis for knowing Christ at all."<sup>147</sup> It is through these pains of the passion – for which she has prayed to God – that Julian receives her first 'wound', that of contrition. As Colledge and Walsh notes, Julian

finds herself repenting her one-time aspiration to suffer the same pains as Christ and those who stood by his cross; but she is enabled, through 'reasoning by question and answer' to understand that this pain of Christ which she is now sharing is the purification which she had asked for; it is truly redemptive, because it proceeds from her love for him."<sup>148</sup>

Here, we see Julian's own hermeneutical process at play through her theological interpretation and reasoning of her own questions and answers, when she asks, in chapter seventeen:

I thought: Is there any pain in hell like this pain? And in my reason I was answered: Hell is a different pain, for in it there is despair. But of all the pains that lead to salvation, this is the greatest, to see the lover suffer. How could any pain be greater than to see him who is all my life, all my bliss and all my joy suffer? Here I felt unshakably that I loved Christ so much more than myself that there was no pain which could be suffered like the sorrow which I felt to see him in pain.<sup>149</sup>

In the hermeneutical process that is Julian's spiritual journey, the object of interpretation is herself and her mystical experience. She thus interprets her experiences in her mind as they appear to her, and draws conclusions underway within her own reasoning. And every new insight leads to the next which ultimately leads to the appropriation of her own visions, union of body and soul, human and divine at the end of the journey.

What marks the end of Julian's spiritual journey at the far end of the hermeneutical arch is the transformation of her self as a result of what she has experienced in her visions. The illness that brought her to the verge of death may be read as a metaphorical death of

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<sup>147</sup> Lichtmann 1996:267

<sup>148</sup> Colledge and Walsh 1978a:44

<sup>149</sup> Long text, chapter 17, p. 209

Julian's old self, and her climax, her shared suffering with Christ in his death on the cross marks a rebirth of a new, transformed self. Thus, his passion becomes her passion. This spiritual death and rebirth underlines the idea of *imitatio Christi*: to Julian, death and rebirth of the self has actually taken place in full identification with Christ. The stages in Julian's journey are thus not primarily marked externally; they affect Julian's inner being as a loss of her old self and a rebirth of a new more insightful self. Moreover, this identification leads to a new stage on her spiritual journey, for passion generates compassion, one of her desired 'wounds', and a paradigm example of gains that may come of pain, and which may contribute to the soul's perfection through pain, the appropriation of her desires and insights. Thus, the compassion generated from passion moreover highlights the medieval idea that pain had a meaning and purpose.<sup>150</sup> Furthermore, the enhancement of Julian's compassion through pain highlights how her pain – in the true spirit of medieval thought – contributes to the improvement of her soul.

In her discussion of seventeenth century conversion literature as a forerunner for the modern pathography, Anne Hawkins launches the term 'regeneration paradigm'. The term is equally fitting for the hermeneutical arch outlined with regard to Julian's spiritual journey, as the regeneration paradigm implies "the belief that it is possible to undergo a process of transformation so profound as to be experienced as a kind of death to the 'old self' and rebirth to a new and very different self."<sup>151</sup>

Julian enters the stages of her journey voluntary, with a desire to undertake participation in Christ's Passion, in recognition of Christ's volitional suffering for humanity. Lichtmann argues that the intentionality of Julian's experience and desire to suffer and undergo her spiritual transformation leads to the unification of her body and soul in the end: "A suffering that is willed, desired, and actively chosen as was Julian's, as part of a larger context of meaning and purpose, is transformed into something more."<sup>152</sup> Her interpretation of herself goes through God in her imitation of him, as one stage on her spiritual journey. In becoming one with the divine through imitation and identification, her knowledge of herself and of God converge.<sup>153</sup> And it is through this appropriation of her experiences that Julian

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<sup>150</sup> As opposed to e.g. Dahl 2015

<sup>151</sup> Hawkins 1990: 547

<sup>152</sup> Lichtmann 1996:267

<sup>153</sup> Cf. Dahl 2916b

finally acquires knowledge of God. Julian comes out at the other end of the arch as a new self, an ‘other’ than the Julian who entered the hermeneutical process.

As Julian reaches the end of her spiritual journey as a new self, her last vision fades and her illness depart from her as a storm that subsides. Her experiences gives way to a flow of new insights into the meanings of the visions, “culminating in the final insight that the meaning of the whole experience was Love.”<sup>154</sup> As Christ suffered for love of humanity, so Julian suffered her pain for the love of Christ, and her pains were granted her by God through his love for her as a means through which she could perfect her soul and experience the ultimate joy of knowing God. This insight is prefigured in vision nine immediately after Julian’s pain experiences have subsided and she experiences a sudden shift from ecstatic pain to exalted joy. Vision nine reveals to her “not only our solidarity with Christ in his own human condition during his Passion, but the immediate connection between the joy and the glory of the risen Christ and the glorified Church in heaven.”<sup>155</sup>

Julian begins her spiritual journey praying for an illness through which she would experience the pains of Christ’s passion, and she is granted her wishes. Through her experiences she receives her three ‘wounds’ for which she has also prayed: the wound of contrition when she in her excessive pain regrets having asked to experience the Passion, the wound of compassion which leads directly from her identification with Christ, Mary and the disciples and which further leads to the third wound, a longing for and knowledge of God. Glucklich states, in line with medieval thought, that “[f]or the Christian practitioner the pain is always meaningful (pointing to a *telos*).”<sup>156</sup> In Julian’s vision, the *telos* is union with the divine through *imitatio Christi*. Thus, the painful experience of identification with Christ points directly to the ultimate meaning which is the highest bliss and joy. Julian comes back to life from her near-death experience, but she comes back as a fundamentally different person, as an ‘other’ than the Julian who commenced the journey by praying for illness and suffering. When she comes out of her mystical experience, she perceives herself in new way. The new self-perception leads to union with God, as one cannot know God without first knowing oneself. In this hermeneutic dynamic between the interpreter who continuously adjusts her

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<sup>154</sup> Lichtmann 1996:274

<sup>155</sup> Colledge and Walsh 1978a:46

<sup>156</sup> Glucklich 2015:13. The meaning of the Passion is, however, an essential topic within systematic theology, and there is as such no general agreement in modern theology that pain is always meaningful, although that might have been the case in medieval times. Cf. Moltmann 2001.

pre-conceptions and her naiveté in her inner dialogue with herself as she experiences her visions, their meanings are revealed to her as Julian, in line with Colossians 3:10 puts on “the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.”

### 5.3.2 Textual level

Julian’s spiritual journey is reflected on the textual level. Here, the development from the short text to the long text over a period of approximately twenty years marks the hermeneutical process. On the textual level, the first cornerstone of the arch, Ricoeur’s ‘naive interpretation’ is Julian’s short text. Here, Julian has written down her experiences more or less directly after they appeared to her. She has not yet had time to digest her experiences and contemplate their theological meaning. During the approximately twenty years from her experience to the appearance of the long text, however, Julian has time to contemplate upon her visions in her solitary cell. Moreover, she has the opportunity to put words to her experiences and the wisdom gained from her visions as a spiritual counsellor to visitors from both near and afar.

Due to her contemplation and her interpretation of her own visions, the development of her theology is visible from the short to long text not only by the fact that the long text is more elaborate and theologically weighty, but also from revisions and omissions. For instance, Colledge and Walsh state with regard to Julian’s description of her own pain experience in the eighth vision (chapter 17 of long text) that

[t]he long text here may seem to lose some of the clarity and force which the short text has when it cites from the Christological hymn in Chapter 2 of Philippians (‘But each soul should do as St. Paul says, and feel in himself what is in Christ – Chapter x, p. 142). She may have decided that Paul’s words were not so apposite as she had once thought. He is inviting the Philippians to imitate Christ’s humility and obedience, not to experience directly his bodily sufferings. Doubtless she also found it inappropriate to exhort others to share in his experience, as she had done, especially since she discovers that she herself can hardly tolerate her participation in his pains.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Colledge and Walsh 1978a:44

The various stages of the arch are marked by Julian's contemplation and interpretation of various aspects of her visions, of each new insight she gains during her twenty years of contemplation and development of her theology. What she has seen, the various levels and layers of meaning, continue to perplex her for twenty years, but she clearly also continuously arrives at new and deeper insights, which mark new stages of the hermeneutical arch of interpretation. Also here, Christ's Passion and the body are at the centre, just as the bodily visions form the centre of the long text, as Lichtmann has argued:

Julian's experience of the body – her bodily sickness, her healing, her intensely physical visions of Christ's passion – informs nearly every dimension of her book of *Shewings or Revelations*. From the bodily experiences recorded in the first, short text of her visions comes a plethora of insights in the long text, the fruit of twenty years' reflection on the visions and their meaning.<sup>158</sup>

Lichtmann has further drawn a parallel between Julian's written account of her physical experiences to Johannine theology of the Word becoming flesh. In a similar manner as the Word became flesh with incarnation, so Julian's theology is "incarnated in the bodiliness of her sickness and in her visions, and once that Word is made flesh in her flesh, it renews itself as Word, becoming theology again in her long text's theology of the body."<sup>159</sup> Thus, Lichtmann argues, Julian's "written text then becomes a hermeneutic of the text written into her body and her visions."<sup>160</sup>

The long text marks the cornerstone at the other end of the arch. And with the completion of the long text, Julian has come to a deep understanding of her visions and their theological meaning. That is not to say that she stopped meditating upon her experiences once the long text was finished, but she has arrived at a new critical understanding of what her visions were all about, which is revealed by Julian in her more fully developed theology of love, her *Revelations of Divine Love*.

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<sup>158</sup> Lichtmann 1996:264

<sup>159</sup> Lichtmann 1996:265

<sup>160</sup> Lichtmann 1996:265

## 6 Concluding remarks

Julian's long version of her sixteen visions from c. 1393 is the final testimony of her spiritual journey, with her elaborate and profound theological insights. Her journey began more than twenty years before, when she as a naive and probably uneducated woman prayed to God to receive a severe illness, to experience Christ's Passion, and to receive the three 'wounds' of contrition, compassion and a longing for God. Julian's prayers are heard; she receives her visions while lying ill, presumably in pain, the climax of her visions (number seven and eight) are immensely painful, and, as part of her mystical experience she receives her three 'wounds'.

It is not without significance that all Julian's desires are related to, and described in terms of, pain. As demonstrated in this thesis, pain was a central theme in medieval theological thought, and the foremost ideal was to imitate Christ's Passion and identify with his suffering. The ultimate goal with such an ideal was union with God – to come to know God and experience harmony with the divine.

In my introduction to this thesis, I set out to explore three research questions, the first being in what way the experience of physical pain is significant or necessary for Julian's imitation of Christ (*imitatio Christi*) and her ultimate goal of union with God. An important theological topic during antiquity and the Middle Ages was Christ's humanity and whether Christ had been able to experience physical suffering during his Passion. In the later Middle Ages, the general idea was nevertheless that the incarnated Christ was fully human (and fully divine), and that he therefore suffered physically like a human being. In fact, he suffered the most intense pain imaginable because he suffered for the entire humanity. Moreover, he suffered voluntarily for the love of humankind. This view was the point of departure for devotional Christians who desired to take share in his pain. Like Christ, they suffered voluntarily, they *prayed* to experience the pain, and they did it for the love of Christ. Like Christ had rejoiced in his pain for humanity, they rejoiced in their pain for Christ. Thus, because of the belief that Christ had truly suffered physically the most severe pain, in order to imitate his Passion, and through this imitation experience divine union, Julian's pain also had to be physical.

Furthermore, from a phenomenological perspective I have argued in this thesis, in line with scholars such as Dahl and Leder, that when the body is in pain we become entirely focused on our body and our pain. Our body's presence becomes inescapable when it suffers physically, whereas when it functions normally we are not aware of its presence, it is, in

Leder's terms, 'absent'. Thus, when Julian suffers physically in her imitation of Christ, she becomes fully focused on her own body and pain which is also Christ's pain. As such, it is through bodily pain that she can focus most intensely on Christ and consequently experience union with him.

My second research question was how Julian's painful experiences contribute to her spiritual development. The question is partly answered above. Moreover, through her pain, she first receives the 'wound of contrition', because she experiences regret for ever having desired such excessive pain. She thinks it must be like the pains of hell. But then she realises that this pain that she experiences is a different one from the pain one receives in hell, because hell's pain is one of despair, whereas Christ's (and her) pain is one of love and compassion, and this pain leads to salvation.<sup>161</sup> Through her pain experience, moreover, she develops her second 'wound of compassion' as she shares in the grief of Mary and the rest of Jesus' followers who were present at the cross. These two 'wounds' are prerequisites for her third wound, her longing for knowledge of God which she receives at the end of her spiritual journey. In my analysis, I have shown this spiritual development by applying Ricoeur's hermeneutical arch from naive to deep understanding. Her painful experiences is her developmental climax, the *imitatio* per se. Through her experience of the Passion, she experiences a death to her old self and a rebirth of a new, enlightened self. At the end of Julian's journey, she has come to know both herself and God in new ways, she has, in Ricoeurian terms, *appropriated* her own visions and insights.

Although Julian comes out of her mystical experience as a new person with deeper insights, she does not manage to put these properly into words until twenty years later, however. In her first attempt, the insights she has received are not fully digested. With this, she embarks upon a new hermeneutical journey, through the writing of the short text soon after her experience until she arrives at a fully developed theology in her long text twenty years later. Lichtmann has beautifully described how these two journeys, that of her own experiences, and the process from short to long text are interconnected. She deserves to be quoted at length:

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<sup>161</sup> Long text, chapter 17, p. 209

The key to Julian's hermeneutics (...) of all her visions is that all the theology found in the long text is contained first in the visions. (...) The word of the suffering Christ inscribed in her body's illness is rewritten to be interpreted in and from the visions. The long text completes the three-stage process of theology, embodiment in visions, and new theology. Yet, in another sense there are no stages, no heights, no ascents but a continued *deepening* of her initial knowing.<sup>162</sup>

My last research question asked whether the tension between the spiritual and the physical on the one hand, and the unpleasant and the sweet pain on the other may be explained phenomenologically. I have demonstrated in chapter five that these two paradoxes – the spiritual and the physical, and the unpleasant and the sweet – are closely related. The mystical, painful experiences involves, as noted above, a bodily presence, but it also involves a loss of self, an out-of-the-body experience. Because Christ suffered with joy for his love of humanity, so Julian finds joy in her suffering due to her love for Christ. And it is this positive affect, the intense joy, that leads to Julian's loss of self. The whole mystical experience thus becomes a phenomenological paradox: the body is intensely present in its negative affect, yet the positive, joyous affect of love simultaneously leads to a loss of self. It is in this act of love that Julian in her *imitatio* loses her old self and is reborn as a new, insightful self in which she has appropriated her experiences. Thus, although her initial desires and her experiences are closely connected to pain, Julian comes out of her ecstasies not as an apostle of pain, but as an apostle of love.

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<sup>162</sup> Lichtmann 1996: 269-70

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