

Julian reads Langland?

Nicolette Zeeman

In the introduction to his revised C Text edition, Derek Pearsall asks “what other writings of its time Langland’s poem is most like.” He drily replies to his own question, his wide reading and learning, as usual, carried lightly: “in the end an amalgam of Blake’s *Prophetic Books*, Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* and Eliot’s *Four Quartets* may seem to many readers the most evocative analogy.”¹ In this brief essay I will respond to Derek’s question similarly speculatively, but by invoking a text of Langland’s own time: Julian of Norwich’s *Revelations of Divine Love*.

I am not the first to make the comparison. In 1963, Elizabeth Salter stressed Langland and Julian’s shared emphasis on love and the endlessness of the spiritual pursuit.² Later, A. V. C. Schmidt and Barry Windeatt compared Langland and Julian’s revisorliness; David Aers noted striking “affinities” between Piers Plowman and the servant in Julian’s “wondrous example” of the lord and servant;³ others observed how Langland and Julian develop the idea of the crucified Christ’s “thirst” for humanity.⁴ Nicholas Watson has linked Langland and Julian as “vernacular theologians,” whose thought is fundamentally shaped by writing in the vernacular, along with a concomitant valuation of the created world and optimism about salvation.⁵ Barbara Newman has developed the parallel between Langland’s Piers Plowman

¹ William Langland, *Piers Plowman. A New Annotated Edition of the C-text*, ed. Derek Pearsall (Exeter, 2008), p.11. All citations of the C Text from this edition.

² Elizabeth Salter, *Piers Plowman. An Introduction* (Oxford, 1963), pp.89-90.

³ A. V. C. Schmidt, “Langland and the Mystical Tradition” and B. A. Windeatt, “The Art of Mystical Loving: Julian of Norwich,” in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England. Papers read at the Exeter Symposium, July 1980*, ed. Marion Glasscoe (Exeter, 1980), pp.17-38, 55-71; David Aers in David Aers and Lynn Staley, *The Powers of the Holy. Religion, Gender and Politics in Late Medieval English Culture* (University Park, PA, 1996), p.95. See Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love. The Short Text and the Long Text*, ed. Barry Windeatt (Oxford, 2016), Long Text, chapters 51-2 (citation, 51.1-2). I shall be citing the Long Text from this edition by chapter and line number.

⁴ *A Book of Showings to the anchoress Julian of Norwich*, ed. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh, 2 parts (Toronto, 1978), p.418; Nicholas Watson, “Conceptions of the Word. The Mother Tongue and the Incarnation of God,” *New Medieval Literatures* 1 (1997), 85-124 (pp.119-20); *The Writings of Julian of Norwich. A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman and A Revelation of Love*, ed. Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins (Pennsylvania Park, PA, 2006), p.94.

⁵ Watson, “Conceptions,” pp.113-22; “Visions of Inclusion: Universal Salvation and Vernacular Theology in Pre-Reformation England,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 27 (1997), 145-87 (pp.153-66, 170-72); also Pearsall, “The Idea of Universal

and Julian's servant, exploring how these figures link spiritual or eternal temporalities with ordinary, "lived" ones: just as Piers Plowman transforms from a working peasant manager (B.5-7) to a spiritual cultivator at the tree of *charite* (B.16) and a Christ-like church founder (B.19), so Julian's ordinary labouring servant in his soiled *kirtle* is transfigured by the realisation that he is not only Adam but also Christ, "fallen" into a suffering world to redeem it. The impact of their deeds is felt across Christian history.⁶

I will here further compare Langland's tree of *charite* sequence and Julian's *example* of the lord and servant. The "Short Text" of the *Revelations*, dated after 1373 when Julian claims to have had her visions, does not contain the *example*; it only appears in the Long Text, possibly written over a long period and not completed until after 1393.⁷ Julian explains that she did not report this vision in the earlier text because "the full understondyng of this mervelous example was not goven me in that tyme." She describes how later she was moved by "inner teaching" to analyse the vision further, all the while carefully leaving the source of this teaching ambiguous:

xx yeres after the tyme of the shewing, save iii monthis, I had techyng inwardly, as I shal seyen: "It longyth to the to [you should] taken hede to all the propertes and condition that weryn shewid in the example..." (51.56-7, 69-71)

Readers have noted the inextricability of vision, memory, reflection, interpretation and self-commentary – as well as their enigmatic relation to "the revealed" – here and elsewhere in Julian's thought and compositional practices. These various elements overlap in the "begynnyng of techyng," the "inward lernyng that I have understodyn therein sythen" and "al the hole [whole] revelation from the begynnyng to the end, that is to sey, of this boke, which our Lord God of his goodnes bryngyth oftentymes frely to the syte of myn understondyng" (51.61-4). Readers have also noted how across the Long Text as a whole Julian's descriptions of her visions acquire particularising and intensifying detail, revealing that her own sense of the notionally "original" visions is evolving as her understanding of them develops, along

Salvation in *Piers Plowman* B and C," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 39 (2009), 257–281.

⁶ Barbara Newman, "Redeeming the Time: Langland, Julian and the Art of Lifelong Revision," *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 23 (2009), 1-32; see also Windeatt, "Art of Mystical Loving;" *Writings*, ed. Watson and Jenkins, p.282; Watson, 'The Trinitarian Hermeneutic in Julian of Norwich's *Revelation of Love*', in *Julian of Norwich. A Book of Essays*, ed. Sandra J. McEntire (New York, 1998), pp. 61-90 (pp.82-3).

⁷ On the dating of the Short and Long Texts, see Julian, *Revelations*, ed. Windeatt, pp.xix-xx; Watson argues for a later dating of both texts, in "The Composition of Julian of Norwich's *Revelation of Love*," *Speculum* 68 (1993), 637-83.

with her thought more generally.⁸ There is little point, in other words, in speculating about an “ur” version of the lord and servant prior to what we actually have in the Long Text.

And there is one more component in this process: other texts, both Latin and vernacular. Although we do not know in what form Julian encountered these texts, her deep theological understanding (her allusions to Augustinian, trinitarian and redemption theology, or neoplatonic thought, for instance) and her immersion in later medieval devotional culture (the languages of medieval pastoralia and affective piety) are clearly reflected in the *Revelations*.⁹ Sometimes, as Vincent Gillespie has shown, Julian engages critically with other texts and genres of writing, as always, not by direct citation, but by loose forms of “pastiche” that allow her to acknowledge these discourses, while also distancing herself from them.¹⁰ However, many of the texts and theological traditions to which Julian alludes contribute positively to her own thought, no doubt shaping her memories of her visions and intervening in her interpretation of them.

Aers and Newman propose that, at some point over the many years of her compositional activity, Julian had read a B or a C Text of *Piers Plowman*, and that this reading shaped her portrayal of the servant.¹¹ Of course, such claims can only be speculative. Like Langland, Julian almost never clearly identifies sources and her originality is such that in the *Revelations* even familiar materials are transformed. Nevertheless, these claims have much going for them. In recent years Robert Adam and Andrew Galloway, amongst others, have documented Langland’s possible connections with an East-Anglian branch of the Rokele family, arguing that the younger Langland held benefices in Essex and Suffolk (possibly even southern Norfolk).¹² This ground-breaking research at the very least supports

⁸ See Watson, “Trinitarian Hermeneutic;” Newman, “Redeeming,” p.18; Windeatt, “Julian’s Second Thoughts: The Long Text Tradition,” in *A Companion to Julian of Norwich*, ed. Liz Herbert McAvoy (Cambridge, 2008), pp.101-15.

⁹ See, for example, Denise Nowakowski Baker, *Julian of Norwich’s Showings. From Vision to Book* (Princeton, NJ, 1994); Denys Turner, *Julian of Norwich, Theologian* (New Haven, 2011). For an extreme version of these claims, see *A Book of Showings to the anchoress Julian of Norwich*, ed. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh, 2 parts (Toronto, 1978).

¹⁰ Vincent Gillespie, “[S]he do the police in different voices’: Pastiche, Ventriloquism and Parody in Julian of Norwich,” *Companion*, ed. McAvoy, pp.192-207.

¹¹ Aers in Aers and Staley, *Powers of the Holy*, p.95; Newman, “Redeeming,” pp.23-4. For the proposal that Long Text, chapters 44-63 are a later interpolation into an already developed Long Text, see *Showings*, ed. Colledge and Walsh, pp.24-5 (chapters 51-63 only); Newman, “Redeeming,” pp.18-22; Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*, ed. Windeatt, pp.xxiv-xxv.

¹² Robert Adams, *Langland and the Rokele Family. The Gentry Background to Piers Plowman* (Dublin, 2013); Andrew Galloway, “Parallel Lives: William Rokele and the

the possibility that versions of *Piers Plowman* could have been accessible in later fourteenth-century East Anglia. Readers have also continued to explore parallels between the writings of Langland and Julian. Cristina Cervone sees the two as instances of the “incarnational” poetics of later fourteenth-century English writing, noting their interests in polysemy, time, agency and the pervasive “personification” – and thus also narrativisation – of spiritual process. Curtis Gruenler has argued explicitly that Langland’s use of the rhetorical trope of enigma, that is, his poetic and narrative forms, may have influenced Julian.¹³

In this essay I will be focusing on the remarkably similar ways in which Langland and Julian narrate the Fall in the tree of *charite* sequence and the lord and servant *example*. In each case, a narrative of eager, loving desire leads seemingly accidentally, and yet also apparently inevitably, to a disastrous “fall.” I propose that Julian may have discovered in Langland’s narrative, with its distinctive and paradoxical combination of inadvertency and unavoidability, a method of engaging with the conceptual challenges posed by the Christian theology of the Fall and redemption, of human sin and divine love. She may even – in this unusually narrativised part of the *Revelations* – have discovered in Langland how to use narrative to think about theology. Whatever she took, like the poet himself, she more than made her own.

At the beginning of *Piers Plowman* B.16, the narrator again asks what *charite*, Christian love, really means. The personification Anima (Soul) describes “a ful trie [precious] tree” that grows in the human heart and whose fruit is *charite*. Anima’s mention of Piers Plowman, the spiritual figure who oversees the orchard, catapults the narrator into an ecstasy of joy and a visionary swoon:

“Piers the Plowman!” quod I tho, and al for pure joye
That I herde nempe his name I swowned after, *name, swooned*
And lay long in a love-dreem; and at the laste me thoughte
That Piers the Plowman al the place me shewed...¹⁴

In the metamorphic vision that follows, the fruit of the tree turns out to be human beings, imagined as capable of both enacting and “being” *charite*. The tree is supported by three *piles*

Satirical Literacies of *Piers Plowman*,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 40 (2018), 43-111 (for other recent work, see n.2).

¹³ Cristina Maria Cervone, *Poetics of the Incarnation. Middle English Writing and the Leap of Love* (Philadelphia, 2012); Curtis A. Gruenler, *Piers Plowman and the Poetics of Enigma. Riddles, Rhetoric and Theology* (Notre Dame, IN, 2017), pp.22-4, 272-3, 321, 311-28.

¹⁴ William Langland, *Piers Plowman. A Parallel-Text Edition of the A, B, C and Z Versions*, ed. A. V. C. Schmidt, 2 vols (2nd edn, Kalamazoo, MI, 2011), B.16.18-21; all citations of the B Text from this edition, medieval letters þ, 3, i and v altered according to modern usage.

– the power of the Father, the wisdom associated with the Son and the “help of the Holy Goost” – “the trinite it meneth” (B.16.24-63); these trinitarian connotations are foregrounded in the C Text, where the guide, now *Liberum Arbitrium*, leads the narrator to “a contre, *Cor-hominis* hit heihte” (“a country, called ‘man’s heart’”), where the tree, now called *Ymago-dei* (“Image of God”), has been planted by “the trinite” (C.18.4-9). Both texts thus insist on the trinitarian “image and likeness” that links God and humans, creator and created.

The B Text narrator then asks to taste “an appul.” The request is couched in a punning poetical and theological language that links the pursuit of *sapientia*, the loving and experiential knowing of “wisdom,” to the figure of “taste” via a supposed etymological relation to the Latin term *sapor* (“taste,” “savour”): “I preide Piers to pulle adoun an appul, and [if] he wolde, / And suffre me to assiaen [try] what savour it hadde.”¹⁵ This request, not just to eat the fruit of *charite*, but also to understand it inwardly and deeply, must be a good one. And yet it is this expression of eager and loving desire that leads the “fall” and loss of the fruit. Piers shakes the tree and, in an unexpected replay of the Fall at the Garden of Eden, the fruits (now named virginity, matrimony and widowhood) fall down, not just into the world, but into the hands of the devil:

And Piers caste to the crop, and thanne comsed it to crye. *?reached up, began*
 He waggede widwehode, and it wept after;
 And whan he meved matrimoyne, it made a foul noise,
 That I hadde ruthe whan Piers rogged, it gradde so rufulliche. *shook, cried*
 For evere as thei dropped adoun the devel was redy,
 And gadrede hem alle togideres, bothe grete and smale –
 Adam and Abraham and Ysaye the prophete,
 Sampson and Samuel, and Seint Johan the Baptist;
 Bar hem forth boldely – nobody hym lette – *prevented*
 And made of holy men his hoord *in Limbo Inferni*
 There is derknesse and drede and the devel maister. (B.16.75-85)

The Fall, but perhaps also sin more generally, seems to have happened without anyone intending it to. Langland’s narrative entirely sidesteps the ethical and theological languages of intentionality, prohibition, misdemeanour, rebuke and justification, as well as the etiological, analytical and theological, languages of causality, consequence or necessity. As he tells it (“And Piers caste to the crop...”), the Fall seems to have occurred, if not by accident, then as a chance or even random event. At the same time, the unwavering inclusivity and onward flow of the narrative (“evere as thei dropped adoun...”) latently

¹⁵ B.16.73-4. See Nicolette Zeeman, *Piers Plowman and the Medieval Discourse of Desire* (Cambridge, 2006), p.2.

conveys the sense that this was inevitable. Something similar again happens at the end of the scene, when Langland introduces the long-foretold coming of Christ, but describes it as the result of another wild and seemingly contingent action, as Piers angrily throws the second *pile* after the devil, “happe how it myghte”:

And Piers, for pure tene, that a pil he laughte,	<i>anger, seized</i>
And hitte after hym, happe how it myghte,	
<i>Filius</i> by the Faderes wille...	<i>the Son</i>
To go robbe that rageman and reve the fruyt fro hym.	<i>robber, take</i>
(B.16.86-9).	

David Aers long ago showed how so much of the complex meaning of this scene derives from the way that its narrative accumulates contrasting elements and allows their meanings to change as it progresses.¹⁶ Here I want to focus on some particular contrasts. First, despite Langland’s elaborate identification of the human and divine within the tree, his narrative still finds human sin within this relationship. Second, the combination of accident and inevitability within the narrative of the Fall allows the poet perhaps to acknowledge, but above all to sidestep, the etiological and theological issues of ethics, punishment and justification that it might be thought to raise. Third, this combination of accident and inevitability points, not just to the reparative work of the redemption, but also to something unchangeable underlying events, in the face of which human sin comes to look like a temporary aberration: divine love. Although Langland does not make these theological claims in so many words, narrative allows him to imply them.

But he does provide clues elsewhere in the poem. Crucial is the fact that the scene begins with the expression of the desire to understand and experience *charite*: in order to fulfil this request, it seems that human beings may also need to understand and experience something of sin. One version of this idea is the “felix culpa” (cited by Langland at B.5.484-9), the notion that the Fall was a blame-worthy act that allowed God to demonstrate his love for humanity. But this medieval commonplace acquires a ruminative, exploratory and *kyndely* (“natural”) form as the poem brings its pervasive language of experientialism to bear on it.¹⁷ We see this in the actions “experienced” at the tree of *charite*, but we also see it at the harrowing of hell, where Piers draws on the Stoic and proverbial commonplace of knowledge through opposites (“hadde they wist [known] of no wo, wele [happiness] hadde thei nought

¹⁶ David Aers, *Piers Plowman and Christian Allegory* (London, 1975), pp.84-109 (Aers himself denies that the Fall is represented here, pp.101-4).

¹⁷ Watson, “Conceptions,” pp.114-17; Zeeman, *Piers Plowman*, chapters 5 and 6; Rebecca Davis, *Piers Plowman and the Books of Nature* (Oxford, 2016).

known”) to suggest that there is some value in the encounter with sin and its suffering. She explains how God allowed Adam to sin, “sorwe to feele – / To wite what wele was, kyndelich [naturally] to knowe it” (B.18.204, 219-20). Underlying these lines is what I have elsewhere described as Langland’s “negatively revelatory” notion of natural experience – the self-knowledge and desire acquired by being apart from God while “in nature.”¹⁸ But Pees also goes on, altogether more surprisingly (and using the language of medieval chivalric romance¹⁹), to suggest that the divinity shares in this desire for natural experience: Christ “auntrede [adventured] himself and took Adames kynde [nature] / To wite what he hath suffred in thre sondry places...To wite what alle wo is, that woot [knows] of alle joye” (B.18.221-4). A similar notion of going out and return can be seen in the B.1 “leap of love” passage so well explicated by Cristina Cervone, where, divine love is imagined as a “plante of pees” that falls out of heaven, buoyed downwards by its own natural weight to participate in created nature, before rising back up to heaven, now (equally naturally) light as a linden leaf: “For hevene myghte nat holden it, so was it hevy of hymselfe, / Til hit hadde of the erthe eten his fille...”²⁰ In such passages we see Langland thinking about sin and failure in terms of the experiences of going out into the world and coming back, of falling and rising, even of chivalric “adventure” and return.

However, Langland also thinks about sin and failure in other ways. The great part of *Piers Plowman* after all illustrates his deep-seated and critical assumption that sin and failure are ubiquitous and inevitable. Across the poem more generally, this assumption tends to be expressed in an overtly moral form, as words, actions, speakers, persons and institutions are repeatedly judged to be culpable and subject to rebuke. Nevertheless, even here Langland often portrays the manifestations of moral decline in terms that foreground how difficult they are to identify – not just in others, but even in the self. In *Piers Plowman* sin and failure often occur in such ambiguous forms that they are genuinely hard to detect.²¹ The most widely-recognised example of this must be the poem’s narrator, periodically named Wil, for whom going awry often looks more like an unfortunate accident than an intentional act;²² but, once

¹⁸ Zeeman, *Piers Plowman*, pp.187-200, 226-44.

¹⁹ See Zeeman, *Arts of Disruption*, chapters 9-10.

²⁰ B.1.152-8; Cervone, *Poetics of the Incarnation*, pp.1-2, 106-23.

²¹ David Aers, *Beyond Reformation? An Essay on William Langland’s Piers Plowman and the End of Constantinian Christianity* (Notre Dame, IN, 2015); Nicolette Zeeman, *Arts of Disruption: Allegory and Piers Plowman* (Oxford, 2020), chapters 1 and 2.

²² See Zeeman, *Piers Plowman*, pp.64-78, 100-8, and passim; I develop a related argument from a psychological/psychoanalytic perspective in “Willing,” *Medieval Literature: Criticism and Debates*, ed. Holly A. Crocker and D. Vance Smith (London, 2014), pp.470-9.

we look, we see this phenomenon everywhere in the poem. Langland's conviction that moral decline is unavoidable, combined with his pervasive sense of the ungraspability of human intentions and the erratic nature of the will, provide telling contexts for what happens at the tree of *charite*. Here at the tree, Langland takes these thoughts one stage further, as he maps the notion of sin as "inevitable accident" onto a vision of the human that is simultaneously identified with the divine. It is narrative form, of course, that allows him to make this startling connection.

Julian surely learned a great deal from Langland. Like him, she uses narrative to cast the Fall as something that has taken place despite the apparently good desires of those involved. She too avoids any reference to sinful intentionality, prohibition, misdemeanour or rebuke, or to causality, consequence or necessity. For Julian the Fall is described as the "fall" of a *servant*, narrated seemingly artlessly ("and anon") and in a timeless present tense, told without the hint of an explanation and yet as if it could not have been otherwise:

The lord sitteth solemnly in rest and in peace; the servant standyth by, afor his lord reverently, redy to don his lords will. The lord lookyth upon his servant ful lovely and swetely, and mekely he sendyth hym to a certain place to don his will. The servant, not only he goeth, but suddenly he stirtith and rynnith in grete haste for love to don his lords will. And anon he fallith in a slade and takith ful grete sore. And than he gronith and monith and wallowith and writhith, but he ne may rysen ne helpyn hymself be no manner wey. (*Revelations*, 51.6-13)

The fall in the *slade* looks both accidental and yet unavoidable (in an earlier passage Julian asks about sin and comments, "nothing is done be happe ne by aventure... If it be happe or adventure in the sight of man, our blindhede...is the cause...in the syght of our Lord God is no happe ne aventure"; 11.5-11). The paradoxes of the narrative's involuntarism and unavoidability are intensified by its being cast in terms of mutual love: the lord "lookyth upon his servant ful lovely and swetely" and, at his command, the servant "suddenly...stirtith and rynnith in grete haste for love to don his lords will." The servant has fallen through his very eagerness to serve (51.30-31). Julian continues to excite the reader's affective responses as she explains that, although there was physical pain in the falling, the servant's real suffering was psychological and connected to feeling far from the lord, even if this was in fact not the case:

And of all this the most myschief that I saw him in was faylyng of comforte; for he cowde not turne his face to loke upon his lovyng lord, which was to hym ful nere, in whom is ful comfort. (51.14-16)

This sense of distance reveals that something that has changed in the servant, who is now "blinded in his reason and stonyed [stunned] in his mend [mind] so ferforth that almost he

had forgotten his own luf,” even though, poignantly, the lord is in fact still near him, assigning no blame and beholding him “ful tenderly...with grete ruth and pety.” Julian is more of an explicit theologian than Langland and theological questions – what is sin? what happens when you sin? does God still love you? what punishments or reparations are required? – are just under the surface here.²³ Nevertheless, as in *Piers Plowman*, these questions are posed in narrative form.²⁴

However, in Julian’s case, the full impact of the narrative (and the wider conceptual influence of *Piers Plowman*) only gradually emerges in the two incremental interpretations that follow. In the first interpretation, the servant is Adam at the Fall, but also all human beings since the Fall: in this one man “God beholdith alle man and his fallyng” (51.82-3). The *example* allows Julian to offer the most striking version of her crucially uncompromising view of sin as something dreadful to be undergone, “the sharpest scorge any chousyn soule may be smyten with” (39.1-2). Julian’s God, the counterpart to her non-intentionalist and “suffering” view of sin, is not a punishing God, precisely because it is sin that brings its own punishment: “than I saw that only paynys blamith [chastise] and punishith, and our curteis [courteous] Lord comfortith and socurryth [succours], and ever he is to the soule in glad cher...”²⁵ Julian then reveals her second interpretation, according to which the servant is also Christ. This interpretation leads to subtle meditations on how the servant denotes both the weakness of Adam and the perfection of Christ, but also their mysterious *onyng* (“oneness”). It also renders less important any notion of guilt residually associated with the servant’s fall, which is now also seen as the act of the loving redeemer:

Whan Adam fell, Godes Son fell; for the rythfull onyng which was made in hevyn,
Goddys Son myte not fro Adam, for by Adam I understond all man. Adam fell fro lif
to deth, into the slade of this wretchid world, and after that into hell. Gods Son fell
with Adam into the slade of the mayden wombe... (51.171-4)

By recasting the love and suffering of Adam as the love and suffering of the guiltless Christ for Adam – or at least overlaying the one with the other – Julian reveals that sin is only one

²³ 51.22-3; 51.28-34. For sustained theological readings of Julian’s thought here, see: Baker, *Showings*, chapters 3-5; Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt, *Julian of Norwich and the Mystical Body Politic of Christ* (Notre Dame, 1999), chapters 3-4; Turner, *Julian of Norwich*, chapters 3-4.

²⁴ Compare Gruenler, *Poetics of Enigma*, p.316; Bauerschmidt, *Julian of Norwich*, pp.162-73.

²⁵ 51.93-4. I give more weight to this suffering than Aers, *Salvation and Sin. Augustine, Langland and Fourteenth-Century Theology* (Notre Dame, 2009), chapter 5; emphasising the involuntariness of human suffering and its relation to that of Christ, see Bauerschmidt, *Julian of Norwich*, pp.99-107.

component, and perhaps not the decisive one, in this shared process of “falling” out into the suffering world, prior to the final return for those “that shal be savid”.²⁶ Audaciously, she explains that guilt and blame are not really the issue: “our Fader may, ne will, no more blame assigne to us than to his owen Son, derworthy Criste” (51.182-3). J. P. H. Clark has suggested that Julian’s source for this idea is Duns Scotus, who claims that the redemption was not “occasioned” by the event of the Fall, but that it was directly part of God’s pre-ordained plan from the very beginning; it is possible that Julian knew of Scotus’ theories, though, as Clark acknowledges, she emphasises God’s love more than his predestination.²⁷ In this respect, as in many others, Julian is close to Langland.

Julian’s *example* shares many elements with Langland’s tree of *charite*, albeit in a new and distinctive constellation. Like Langland, she emphasises the substantial identity and intense love that bind human beings and God;²⁸ like Langland, she combines this with a narration of the Fall that seems to be both an accident and yet inevitable; like him, she describes the Fall simply as a “fall” down or away into the world, an experience of being far from God. And what about the protagonists here? Many readers have likened Julian’s servant to Piers Plowman. However, given that Julian reads the servant as both Adam and Christ, maybe we should recall that at the B Text tree of *charite*, although Piers shakes down the fruit, it is the fallible narrator’s desire to taste the fruit that catalyses this act. Two figures are involved in Langland’s scene as in Julian’s, and in each text two figures participate in the “fall.” These figures are also involved in the desire to make it good: although Piers throws the *pile* of Christ into the world, at the end of Langland’s scene the narrator wakes looking around for Piers, but also, implicitly, for the figure of Christ, whose life he has just been dreaming. Julian’s servant, of course, turns out to be that Christ. The final point of comparison between these two scenes, of course, is the fact that both present the theological conundrum of human sin and divine love in the form of a strangely mysterious story.

Like Langland, Julian provides other contexts for reading this scene. In the chapters that follow, she ruminates on the ways that human *kynde* (nature) is “made rytefully onyd to [unified with] the maker, which is substancial kynd onmade [uncreated]” (53.34), but also on the way that Christ lived and suffered alongside human beings in their shared and vulnerable

²⁶ 37.11. Baker points out that in the *Revelations* sin “ensues” from separation from God, not the other way around (*Showings*, p.99).

²⁷ J. P. H. Clark, “Time and Eternity in Julian of Norwich,” *Downside Review* 109, no.377 (1991), 259-76 (pp.272-3); but see Baker, *Showings*, pp.74-5, 111-16.

²⁸ Baker, *Showings*, chapter 5; Watson, “Trinitarian Hermeneutic.”

sensualite (chapter 55). Her explorations of Jesus “as mother” hinge on the idea that human beings came from God and will return to him, but also on the thought that every aspect of Christ’s relationship to human beings, even the crucifixion, is a kind of “birthing” (58.33-6; 60.11-19). Underpinning these explorations is a pervasive idea of mutual inherence, whereby the Christ who will take human beings back into himself also seeks to dwell within his creation. The shared “falls” of Julian’s narrative of Adam and Christ are part of an embracing and cyclical theology of divine love, of going out and return. David Wallace has even observed that Julian’s Christ, who like an adventuring knight “worshipfully presentith his Fader in hevyn with us,” shares motifs of *aventure* with Langland’s Christ, who “auntrede himself” for humanity.²⁹

At the same time, and also like Langland, Julian raises questions about the nature of human intentionality and volition and their role in sin. Arguably, she goes further than Langland in sidelining the ordinary will – and even sin itself – in those who will be saved:

For in every soule that shal be savid is a godly wil that never assentid to synne ne never shal. Ryth as there is a bestly will in the lower party that may willen no good, ryth so ther is a godly will in the heyer party, which will is so good that it may never willen yll but ever good.³⁰

Julian describes the ordinary human will (the “bestly will”) as so unstable and troubled that it can scarcely be comprehended; boldly, she proposes that it has a kind of contingency that makes it, at least for those “that shal be savid,” finally irrelevant.³¹ And here maybe Derek Pearsall has something humorously insightful to say to us. In a late essay, he criticises Langland’s modes of argumentation – “Langland pressing forward eagerly and urgently but constantly being thwarted” – and compares the poet to “the servant in Julian who rushes to serve his lord but trips over and falls flat in the mire.” But perhaps Derek is here also really referring to Langland’s “error-prone” narrator, sometimes named Wil; if so, Derek has seen something important about how Langland and Julian portray the fallen subject.³² In their writings, failure does indeed often look like something that “just happens.”³³

The subtle and audacious narrative theologies of Langland and Julian overlap in many ways. It may be that the anchorite puzzled over *Piers Plowman* and that her reflections

²⁹ 55.2; see also 63.2-5; Wallace, personal communication.

³⁰ 37.11-14. At the same time, Julian’s “godly wil” of those who will be saved also looks nothing like any recognisable version of volition: see Zeeman, “Willing,” pp.472-5.

³¹ Watson nevertheless describes Langland’s “sense of the depth of human corruption” as “more vivid than Julian’s” (“Visions,” p.165).

³² Pearsall, “The Idea,” p.276; personal communication.

³³ For a different reading, see Aers, *Salvation and Sin*, chapter 5.

shaped her own original thought in the *Revelations*. Nevertheless, their thought is not the same. We might recall that, while Julian's loving, ever present servant-Christ remains emblematic of her deep confidence that "synne is behovabil" and that "al manner of thyng shal be wele" (27.8-9), at the end of *Piers Plowman* the narrator is old and the *plowman* is still lost somewhere out in the world.