

Soul Meets Body: Examining Embodied Devotion in the Middle Ages

The traditional concept of the medieval European Christian mystic or monastic may conjure up images of detachment and rejection of the bodily, the earthly, the physical. What are the stereotypical ascetic and monastic or mystic lifestyles if not focused on denial of bodily pleasures (good food, fine clothes, material wealth, privacy, sexual fulfillment, etc.) in order to connect better with the metaphysical? We might imagine these religious devotees in sackcloth and constant prayer. Yet of course, as with any assumptions we might make about "people of the past" as a monolith, the truth is far more complex, and the art produced by mystic and monastic women of the Middle Ages tells us a very different story about how these women thought of themselves and their religious lives in conversation with the body and physicality. Here I will define "art" as broadly as possible (musical composition, rough sketches, tapestries, illuminated manuscripts, literary works, among others) and even include works that perhaps these women would not have thought of as "artistic," as this will become crucial to my argument. I believe that the monastic and mystic women of medieval European Christianity often saw their artistic endeavors as not a way of creating something beautiful but instead as a devotional spiritual practice and that these practices were often fundamentally rooted in bodily and sensory experience.

It may be useful for us to begin our discussion by discussing the psychological concept of embodied cognition, for it is foundational to this work. In general, embodied cognition is the principle that the act of "thinking" involves much more than just the brain, but that the rest of our body plays a crucial role in processing thought.¹ While the psychological and physiological

¹ Wilson & Foglia, "Embodied Cognition."

nuances of embodied cognition go far beyond the scope of this paper, the basic idea used here is this: what the body is doing *matters* for what is being conceived and processed in the mind. We have all heard of someone saying they are "going for a run to clear their head," an example of how easy it is to conceptualize that bodily engagement enables intellectual flow. This mention of "flow" here is intentional. Csikszentmihalyi's work on the topic was specifically sparked by watching artists paint and is often also applied to athletes and musicians who are using their bodies in significant and technical ways when they enter a state of "flow."² Interestingly, this concept was not unfamiliar to the mystic and monastic women of medieval Europe — and we have multiple sources of evidence for this idea.

In Horst Appuhn's 1968 entry in the *Lüneburger Blätter* on the "paradise garden" pillows made by the nuns at Ebstorf, he writes, that he is fascinated by the intricacy of their embroidery and creativity but that "erscheinen sie wenig brauchbar,"³ "they appear to be of little use." Why, then, would these nuns spend the hours and hours that were spent in creating these pillows for them to have no use at all by the end of it? Why would these nuns expend such creative energy by embroidering plants and flowers that are not any extant species, but rather fanciful inventions of their imaginations, if there was no use in creating them? One answer may be simpler than we might think. We do not have to attempt to locate some use for the finished pillows themselves because the act of creation *is* the use. The time spent making objects such as these could very well have been a devotional practice. But how would we know this? Terri Barnes' writings on the work of nuns might illuminate the path here: she writes in her article *Work as a Manifestation of Faith in the English Nunnery* about how nuns at Barking viewed their chores and responsibilities

² Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi.

³ Appuhn, 8.

in their abbey "as a form of prayer."⁴ Much of the work outlined in Barnes' article is physical labor, such as cooking and cleaning: work that both involves the body and might leave the mind free to contemplate spiritual issues. Yet we still have not bridged this divide between manual labor and artistic creation completely. After all, one might assume that the nuns saw the less pleasant physical tasks such as cleaning as a form of penance, whereas artistic creation is usually pleasurable to undertake.

Is it possible, then, that the nuns at Ebstorf and Barking, among others, were unwittingly using both manual labor and artistic creation to enter the aforementioned state of "flow" in which their minds were freed to better engage spiritually, even if they would not have had the specific terms and concepts with which to name this phenomenon? That may certainly be so. Indeed, I would go so far as to argue that they *did* know what they were doing; that their spirituality often relied not on denial or rejection of the body and bodily sensations, as it is so easy to assume, but on deep knowledge and appreciation for bodily sensation, and a knowledge that a connection with the body was crucial for a deeper understanding of Christian spirituality. Here, then, we might turn to the specific women with whom this project is concerned and examine how these principles might play out in their works.

First, we might turn to the work of Hildegard of Bingen, having established the very basics of this link between the bodily and spiritual experiences for religious Christian women of medieval Europe. We would be remiss not to start with *Scivias*, a fantastically visual text that is deeply preoccupied with the act of creation. Hildegard's cosmologies and etiologies as presented in *Scivias* are perhaps her most recognizable works today, and for good reason. Hildegard spends much of Book 1 of *Scivias* describing the act of creation, and therein describing rather fantastic

⁴ Barnes, 75

images of the universe's origins. Most notable, perhaps, is her "cosmic egg" depicting the earliest stages of creation, and this preoccupation with creation might be interesting to us as we think about why Hildegard chose to work within so many modes in her lifetime. On the topic of multimodality, the illustrations of *Scivias* are nearly inextricable from the content of its text, as they both clarify Hildegard's ideas and enhance the work's lush sensory nature, therefore providing us with a multimodal experience as we engage with her spiritual ideas.

Of course, we know that Hildegard is preoccupied with senses and the body from many of her other works as well. The *Ordo Virtutum* deals with sound and music to engage multiple senses, while writings such as *Physica* and *Causae et Curae* deal with the literal workings of the body. Barbara Newman, in her book *Sister of Wisdom*, takes note of this and points specifically to Hildegard's scientific work on the body and the number of ways in which she describes the divinity of the physical. For example, Hildegard had her nuns dress extravagantly for certain feasts,⁵ and of course there are the numerous folk remedies she suggested and laid out for many bodily maladies⁶ or her many theories on the workings of the human body, specifically when it comes to gynecology. Perhaps Newman sums it up best when she writes early in her book that "Hildegard oscillated between a joyful affirmation of the world and the body, and a melancholy horror of the flesh."⁷ Newman's scholarship is some of the most thorough on Hildegard's view of femininity and thus begins to illuminate Hildegard's ideas of physicality as well.

Yet Newman is not the only scholar to draw this link between the body and the spirit when it comes to Hildegard's work. Margot Fassler's discussions of Hildegard's music are very much interested in how the music affects the other senses as well as the body in general. In

⁵ Newman, 163.

⁶ Newman, 109–10.

⁷ Newman, 27.

Fassler's chapter for Voice of the Living Light, entitled *Melodious Singing and the Freshness of Remorse*, she examines at length how the musical lines of Hildegard's compositions, particularly in the Ordo Virtutum, affect in the singer or listener a similar emotion or theme as the words being sung. Particularly, Fassler speaks of how the singing of Hildegard's musical repetitive phrases can be a form of meditation for the nuns. She writes that "they are sounding icons for study and meditation on the words and phrases of their luxuriant imagery, meant to conjure up pictures in the mind of the vibrant colors and verdure they depict, each singer/listener mentally painting as she can, each being taught and transformed through the process."⁸ Here, then Hildegard's music is specifically both meditative and pedagogical; one is taught and grows in their faith as they sing, ruminating on the messages being sung. Again, here, we are brought back to this idea that engaging the body might "clear the mind" and allow a greater sense of focus, and Fassler seems to be saying that Hildegard was fully aware of the "flow" effect centuries before it would enter the cultural lexicon.

Having addressed Hildegard, the most obvious subject for this kind of study, we may now turn to less obvious manifestations of this principle. Julian of Norwich, as a writer rather than a visual or textile or musical artist, might not be the most natural choice for study when we think of art as embodied. Yet her writings and her visions are inseparable from physicality. They are born of physical sensation, as she places their origin with her grave illness and near-death experiences. Julian discusses at length the pain she encounters, and, at times, she specifically requests to be afflicted bodily to better commune with Christ. Julian writes that the three things she desires are "recollection of the Passion ... bodily sickness ... [and] three wounds."⁹ All three of these "gifts" she wishes to receive from God are centered on the body, and two of them are

⁸ Fassler, 161.

⁹ *Showings*, Long text, ch.2

centered on her own body (as opposed to that of Christ). This, perhaps, is our most clear indication that mystic and monastic women who, like Julian, have "removed" themselves from the outside secular world, are not at all rejecting the physical. Julian, instead, identifies that to better experience Christ for herself, she needs to root that experience in her own body. Julian's implication here is that she cannot fully experience the Passion and the suffering of Christ without experiencing it for herself in her own body; watching it unfold (as she also does) is not enough. For Julian, the fully embodied sensory experience is necessary.

Julian's preoccupation with the body does not end there, though. Some of her most unforgettable visions, surrounding the Passion, discuss at length the treatment of Christ's physical body (bleeding, drying out, being visibly colored and disfigured) and describe this in such vivid terms that the imagined sensations are almost inescapable. These visions are centered firmly around a body, that of Christ, and around the physical, mortal, and earthly experience Christ had. Julian does not shy away from the explicit and the uncomfortable but instead draws out her description of the state of Christ's painful death and the pain that she experienced watching it. By verbalizing her pain here, she draws the reader in to share in this, to experience this secondhand pain with her, and invites them to understand that bodily sensation and spiritual devotion are not opposites but rather partners.

Indeed, Julian's experiences with the body were so important to her spiritual understanding that she may have written the Long text of *Showings* in part to expand on this concept. Laura Godfrey, in her essay *Revising the Body in Julian of Norwich's Revelations*, argues that between the composition of the Long and Short texts, Julian revised several phrases specifically to focus further on the body and her physical ailments and to show that a large part of what made her revelations so powerful is the way she is experiencing them bodily. At times,

Julian feels completely numb and disconnected from her body; at others, she is in great pain and or experiencing Christ's suffering in her own body. This, Godfrey writes, allows Julian to "form a more complex narrative of the connection between bodily suffering and spiritual growth,"¹⁰ thereby again linking her religious and spiritual development to the experiences and sensations (or lack thereof) located in her body.

Of course, Julian is not alone in understanding the desire to locate spirituality inside the body. While Jeffrey Hamburger discusses a wide range of monastic art in his book *Nuns as Artists*, he gives particular attention to the recurring image of a heart as a home. Of the illustration of this concept, done by the unnamed nun at St. Walburga whose art runs through the entire volume, Hamburger writes, "The drawing conjures up an interior space, mental as well as physical, where the nun could enter into an intimate devotional dialogue with Christ."¹¹ This explicit linking of the imaginary image and the physical experience reminds us of Julian's invitation to her readers to feel the pain of Christ that they read about on the page, and also adds a new layer to our study as we imagine the devotional space as physically located within one's body. By imagining their hearts as houses in which an encounter with the divine would happen, the physical body becomes a sacred place in which they may commune with God, a "holy of holies" placed within their chests. Again, here we demolish the conceptual divide between the incorporeal, heavenly spirit and the profane, earthly body, as these become one when a nun sees the dwelling-place of the divine as situated within her own mortal body.

Julian also gives us a similar image not long after she describes the Passion, as she is reassured by Christ. She writes, "He drew his creature's understanding into his side by the same

¹⁰ Godfrey, 75.

¹¹ Hamburger, 151

wound; and there he revealed a fair and delectable place, large enough for all mankind."¹² Here we see almost an inversion of the nun from St. Walburga's vision of the heart as a home. There, the divine could live inside a person's body, and here, all people may live inside the body of the divine. Of course, Hamburger is quick to point out that this idea of either a person's heart or Christ's heart as a home is unheard of in the modern era; he notes its "dissemination to the widest possible audience"¹³ by the early 1600s, but states that "medieval readers, however familiar they were with the topos of the heart as a house, hardly ever encountered it translated into images."¹⁴ If the image from St. Walburga is the most complete and complex of only three medieval images depicting this idea, we might wonder why an image such as this came to be in a specifically monastic context, and from an untrained artist such as this nun was. This image was so important to her, so crucial in her mind that she felt the need to draw it, quite intricately, but why? Of course, it could have been useful for her to look at the image and remember the idea of her heart as a house, but certainly, other objects and texts could have served that same purpose for her. I would argue that it very well could have been because she, like so many other artists throughout history, wanted to meditate on this image through the process of engaging herself physically, to use the very body on which she was meditating and imagining as a home for the divine as she made her imagined image into something tangible.

Of course, all this barely scratches the surface of how these women's multisensory, multimodal methods of engaging with spirituality are rooted in the body. Yet it does allow us to begin to conceptualize why all these mystic and monastic women, across countries and centuries, conceptualized their spirituality as deeply rooted within bodily and sensory experiences.

¹² *Showings*, Long text, ch.24

¹³ Hamburger, 152

¹⁴ Hamburger, 152

Doubtless, there are countless other works by religious women of this period and area who were engaging with this link between the physical and the mental and used that, as they created art of many kinds, to process and express their feelings and beliefs. Yet even from these few case studies, we can see a pattern, that of these women engaging with their senses and with the divine simultaneously and situating their spirituality and even the divine presence *inside* their bodies. This, then, would complicate the idea that a monastic and/or mystic retreat from the outside and secular world involves and even necessitates a rejection of the bodily, mortal, fallible, and earthly. Rather, this would perhaps imply that we should put in its place the idea that this version of asceticism *requires* an engagement with the body and a reverence for the senses and modes in which one can experience their own body to engage with the divine. The body and the soul, then, are not so separate as one might think; it seems that women like Julian, Hildegard, and countless others believed this centuries ago.

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