

# Visionary “Staycations”: Meeting God at Home in Medieval Women’s Vision Literature

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**I**N RECENT YEARS, urban twentysomethings and DIY-ers have popularized the idea of the “staycation”: using vacation time to stay at home (usually for lack of the cash required to travel to a more exotic locale) in a way that renders home life vacation-like, through sparkly cocktails or other homemade indulgences. Its slightly ironic usage does not undermine the “staycation’s” popularity. The “staycation” is cute, it’s catchy, and it has nothing to do with the Middle Ages.

However, with a touch of irony of my own, I would like to argue that something akin to the “staycation” *does* have currency in medieval religious literature. Witness, first of all, devotional manuals like the *Meditationes Vitae Christi* and its Middle English translation, Nicholas Love’s *Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, both very popular texts that encourage the reader to actively imagine herself as present at Christ’s crucifixion while sunk in meditation.<sup>1</sup> Love directly exhorts his reader to “make

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1. The *Meditationes Vitae Christi* “seeks to make [its audience] . . . see and feel, and to prompt the reform of her life by conforming it to the life of Christ,” as Lawrence F. Hundersmarck puts it in “The Use of Imagination, Emotion, and the Will in a Medieval Classic: The *Meditationes Vitae Christi*,” *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 6, no. 2 (2003): 46, doi: 10.1353/log.2003.0021. Extensive research has been done on the visualization and meditative practices encouraged by the *Meditationes* and Love’s adaptation. Among the most recent studies of this topic are David J. Falls, *Nicholas Love’s Mirror and Late Medieval Devotio-Literary Culture: Theological Politics and Devotional Practice in Fifteenth-Century England* (London: Routledge, 2016), which explores Love’s adaptation of the *Meditationes* and new ways of understanding the *Mirror’s* relationship to later medieval devotional literature and

þe in þi soule present to þoo þinges þat bene here written seyð or done of oure lord Jesu, & þat bisily, likyngly & abydyngly, as þei þou hardest hem with þi bodily eres, or sey þaim with þin eyen don”<sup>2</sup>: readers are to actively envision themselves as present at the events of Christ’s life, rendering his sufferings visible to the eyes of their minds in a conflation of worldly and supernal space and time. Anchoritic literature likewise encourages recluses to re-envision Christ’s Passion; as in the *Meditationes*, this mental work goes beyond mere visualization to have a powerful effect on the recluse’s sense of self and of place. Sarah McNamer calls this meditative work the production of an “imagined presence,”<sup>3</sup> invoking the sense of spatial dislocation that the meditant is to strive to achieve. For anchorites, enclosed as they are in a highly circumscribed and specific place that is intended to recall the otherworldly, this presence may be yet more vividly realized. Drawing on her analysis of the texts of the thirteenth-century *Wooing Group*, Ayoush Lazikani argues that anchorites are encouraged to “create access to God” through an intensely imaginative remembering of the Passion.<sup>4</sup> This “deeply active process that attempts to make him almost present”<sup>5</sup> transforms the space of the anchorhold into a point of direct, lived access to Christ’s body.<sup>6</sup> As such, affective meditation on the Passion can generate a willed transformation of space and time—an ever-present reminder of Christ’s suffering and death that defies linear temporality.

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praxis; and the collection of essays edited by Ian Johnson and Allan F. Westphall, *The Pseudo-Bonaventuran Lives of Christ: Exploring the Middle English Tradition*, Medieval Church Studies; 24 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), which explores the broader cultural phenomenon of the *Meditationes* and its textual transmission throughout later medieval Europe.

2. Nicholas Love, *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, ed. Michael G. Sargent (Exeter, UK: University of Exeter Press, 2004), 12-13.

3. Sarah McNamer, *Affective Meditation and the Invention of Medieval Compassion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 1.

4. Ayoush Lazikani, “Remembrance and Time in the *Wooing Group*,” in *Reconsidering Gender, Time and Memory in Medieval Culture*, ed. Elizabeth Cox, Liz Herbert McAvoy, and Roberta Magnani, Gender in the Middle Ages 10 (Woodbridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 2015), 80.

5. *Ibid.*, 82.

6. *Ibid.*, 83.

The asynchrony to which I refer here has much in common with Carolyn Dinshaw's notion of queer temporalities. Following Aron Gurevich, Dinshaw notes that "a generally figural outlook—constructing the present in relation to scriptural events, past and future—is fundamental to Christian theology and thus is potential in every Christian's everyday life." More radically, however, she argues that "a more drastic temporal break or rapture—moving from one plane to another, or even out of time into eternity altogether—is always a potentiality for the believer, if not ordinarily in the course of everyday life, precisely because of the multiple temporalities of this Christian doctrinal world."<sup>7</sup> Although I limit my attention in this essay to spatial transformations, they cannot be wholly separated from temporal transformations, as Christ's presence in his suffering and dying requires a queering of historical time—to use Dinshaw's terminology—as it is conventionally conceived. Anchoritic and devotional literature, in particular, encourages a simultaneous transformation of perceived space and time in the devotional experience, bringing the votary into a direct experience with the events of Christ's life or salvation history more broadly.<sup>8</sup>

Beyond these devotional and anchoritic guides, meditative "travel" to sites of eschatological events appears frequently in medieval religious

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7. Carolyn Dinshaw, *How Soon is Now? Medieval Texts, Amateur Readers, and the Queerness of Time* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 42.

8. On a related note, the Middle Ages saw a lively debate regarding the comparative value of physical and spiritual pilgrimage. This debate has a long history; as Brouria Bitton-Ashkelony observes, "From the fourth century onward, and especially in the Middle Ages, the conception of spiritual pilgrimage as the antithesis of earthly pilgrimage became widespread in monastic circles. . . . An emphatic preference for *peregrinatio in stabilitate* over *stabilitas in peregrinatione* was articulated in monastic rules, since physical pilgrimage came to be seen as contrary to the monastic way of life." Bitton-Ashkelony, *Encountering the Sacred: The Debate on Christian Pilgrimage in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 111. See also Jean Leclercq, "Monachism et pérégrination du IXe et XIIe siècles," *Studia Monastica* 3 (1961): 33-52; Giles Constable, "Opposition to Pilgrimage in the Middle Ages," *Studia Gratiana* 19 (1976): 123-46; and Gerhart B. Ladner, "Homo Viator: Mediaeval Ideas on Alienation and Order," *Speculum* 42, no. 2 (1967): 233-59, doi:10.2307/2854675. Maribel Dietz also explores early medieval attitudes towards monastic travel in *Wandering Monks, Virgins, and Pilgrims: Ascetic Travel in the Mediterranean World A.D. 300-800* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005).

writing. In conventual literature, for example, the transformation of the everyday into a locus of divine encounter is a central issue. As Els de Paermentier points out, in assuming the veil, women renounced their private identities, becoming, or attempting to become, ideal brides of Christ.<sup>9</sup> These women sought to reimagine themselves in such a way that they would embody an idealized spirituality—an endeavor that was collective and, in that sense, public. Embracing a public identity in this way had implications for the spaces in which they lived through the regulations that constrained their behavior in different parts of the convent. Thus, their inner lives became the only “place” for private “acts” of reflection and contemplation. As de Paermentier notes, “Private space, in the sense of room where nuns could withdraw from this collectivism related to the ‘public’, was confined to the non-physical level of their minds—that is, their meditation and communication to God.”<sup>10</sup> Through meditation and re-visioning of their surrounding spaces, cloistered nuns who followed strict rules of enclosure could find a way to inhabit the transcendent.

But what of those visionary transformations of space in which the mystic or meditant actually perceives, in her physical surroundings, visible evidence of divine presence? These transformations occur when the visionary’s physical location is overlaid with a transcendent mode of perception, as can be seen in the writings of, for example, Gertrude of Helfta, Julian of Norwich, and Margery Kempe,<sup>11</sup> all of whom were—at least occasionally or for a few moments—able to see through their worldly surroundings to a divine-imbued reality. In this essay, my focus is not on the deliberate recollection of Christ’s Passion, but on spontaneous visions of God that transform domestic space into a place of

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9. Els De Paermentier, “Experiencing Space through Women’s Convent Rules: The Rich Clares in Medieval Ghent (Thirteenth to Fourteenth Centuries),” *Medieval Feminist Forum* 44.1 (2008): 55–56.

10. *Ibid.*, 56.

11. Although I do not discuss *The Book of Margery Kempe* in this essay, Kempe repeatedly experiences visionary transformations of the world around her. Salient examples of this transformation include seeing the events of Christ’s Passion while on pilgrimage in Jerusalem, her tendency to “see” Christ in every attractive young boy that she comes across, and the apparition of Christ at her bedside or in her chamber.

divine union and contemplation—visions that effectively reconfigure the inhabited space of the mystic, visionary, or saint by re-presenting the divine within that very space. Such visions occur with some frequency in medieval vision literature and hagiography, where they may serve as a marker of the saint's holiness or as a reminder of the presence of God within the space of everyday existence. Encountering God within her domestic space—by which I mean the space of daily life, including conventual or devotional space—imbues the visionary's mundane surroundings with the charge of the divine. The spaces that these visions transform are typically common locations, shared by many: the space of the home, shared by the household; or the convent, shared by a nun's other sisters; even the anchorhold, apparently the epitome of privacy and reclusion, serves a public function, as Laura Saetveit Miles argues.<sup>12</sup> Rhetorically, then, descriptions of these transformations may serve a larger purpose for the readers of the vision narratives or hagiographies of which they form a part.

Of course, visionary re-visionings of inhabited space—which may be likened more readily to journeys between dimensions than to journeys between physical locales—are not truly analogous to the casual escapism of the modern “staycation.” Nevertheless, I retain the term as an entry-point into my analysis because I think that some of its connotations can be likened to important facets of visionary transformations of space: first, that ordinary places—be they in the home, church, or convent—may be dramatic points of access to the divine transcendent; second, that these sites may be radically transformative for the visionary or holy woman; and third, that confined women, such as nuns or recluses, could nonetheless experience a spiritually broadening and even quasi-omniscient

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12. The anchorhold “was a transitional space between earth and heaven, between church and community, a private fortress which she could not leave, nor could anyone enter—except God. . . . Yet, though she was dead to the world, her cell's physical attachment to the main parish church meant that she was also paradoxically trapped at the bustling centre of the very world she had rejected. . . . [Her] freedom for God was a privilege which connected the anchoress even more intimately with her parishioners, as she was expected to use that divine access to bring a new sense of holiness to the heart of the community.” Laura Saetveit Miles, “Space and Enclosure in Julian of Norwich's *A Revelation of Love*,” in *A Companion to Julian of Norwich*, ed. Liz Herbert McAvoy (Woodbridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 2008), 155.

perspective that moves them into positions of authority rivaling those of priests and clerics. Modern “staycations” perform similar functions, albeit on a much more banal level—providing transformative respite; enabling a change of attitude; and initiating an altered perspective or way of seeing the space of ordinary lived experience, in which the domestic realm is reframed to seem new and unfamiliar.<sup>13</sup> Finally, the public function of mystical narratives of spatial transformation bears a passing similarity to the “DIY-guide” structure of modern articles touting the virtues and pleasures of the “staycation,” albeit in a much more serious register.<sup>14</sup> Imbuing lived space with the palpable presence of the divine and suggesting that readers may share equally in that presence models a kind of direct access to God that sometimes bypasses—or at least supplements—clerical structures, reminding the reader of the extra-liturgical presence of the divine.

The focus of this essay is on the rhetorical implications of spontaneous visionary transformations of domestic space in two distinct but related genres: third-person hagiographic narratives and first-person visionary accounts. Both genres serve a didactic spiritual function, but their pedagogical approaches differ, and this difference is reflected in their uses of spatial transformations. In many first-person accounts, the impetus for writing is not only to transcribe the special graces that the visionary herself received, but also to impart to others the lesson that God is in all things and can be perceived even in the ordinary spaces of daily life. These texts function in part, then, as a guide for the reader’s own, subsequent experience of divine union. In hagiography, by contrast, instances of spatial transformation are used not to provide

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13. An online article called “How to Kick Back, Relax, and Vacation at Home,” for example, recommends rolling up the rugs and walking around barefoot to feel more like you’re in a beach house, <http://www.realsimple.com/work-life/life-strategies/staycation>, accessed June 29, 2016.

14. In a Google search for “staycation,” the first page of hits yielded—other than a few definitions—nothing but “How-to” guides: e.g., “16 Things To Do On A ‘Staycation,’” <http://www.forbes.com/sites/steveodland/2012/05/31/16-things-to-do-on-a-staycation/#54bf1c9717ff>; “How to Kick Back, Relax, and Vacation at Home,” and “How to Create a Memorable Staycation This Summer,” <http://money.usnews.com/money/blogs/my-money/articles/2016-06-29/how-to-create-a-memorable-staycation-this-summer>; all accessed June 29, 2016.

a way for the reader to emulate the visionary's experience, but rather to distinguish the visionary from her peers. In the *vitae* of many medieval holy women, transformational visions of domestic or conventual space figure as evidence of their sanctity; indicating the extraordinary holiness of the hagiographic subject, hagiographies use these transformations to underscore their subjects' difference from their peers and, by implication, their readers. In first-person visionary accounts, on the other hand, they function as illustrations and signifiers of divine intimacy, presenting the immediately inhabited, physical world as a potential point of access to God. In the latter cases, spatial transformations are a way to the direct, transformative encounter with the divine that is the driving force behind so much affective literature of the later Middle Ages and a primary goal of devotional and meditative practice. Such transformations are therefore used in the service of two different forms of exemplarity: the unattainable exemplar of the saint and the arguably more accessible example of the devoted mystic. Whether the mystical encounter is actually reproducible is a question beyond the scope of this essay, but visionaries such as Julian and Gertrude do seem to advance the possibility that their experiences will serve to some degree as imitable models of a divine encounter. The comparison between these two genres thus helps to illuminate their distinct, even competing, aims: to establish the visionary's fundamental difference from others on the one hand, and her essential sameness—the oneness of all souls in Christ—on the other.<sup>15</sup>

### Uncommon Sight: Domestic Transformations in Hagiography

In 1967 Michel Foucault coined the idea of the “heterotopia,” a place that is at once real and “outside of all places,” a site of juxtaposition of incompatible locales. These sites are where “all the other real sites that

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15. This competition is most vividly apparent in cases such as that of Beatrice of Nazareth. Beatrice's *Seven Manieren van Minne* is a guide to mystical union with God; however, her biographer's “translation” of her text in his *Vita Beatricis* rewrites it to demonstrate Beatrice's unattainable spirituality, which is manifest, he claims, through radical somatic symptoms on her flesh. See *The Life of Beatrice of Nazareth, 1200-1268*, trans. and ed. Roger De Ganck (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1999), 289-331.

can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted.”<sup>16</sup> Heterotopias are not exactly the transcendent spaces that are seen in visionary states, but they do provide the possibility of connecting with the supernal. As Liz Herbert McAvoy puts it, in articulating the heterotopia, “Foucault reconnects the spaces of our everyday lives with the sacred, the fantastmatic and the passions, all of which imbricate the physical places that we occupy in the construction of discrete, although simultaneously experienced spaces.”<sup>17</sup> In other words, ordinary spaces become “heterogeneous with meanings” when understood as participating in heterotopic transformations.<sup>18</sup> Focusing on Julian of Norwich, Miles points out that the characteristics of Foucault’s heterotopia are applicable to medieval mystics; of the six qualities that Foucault attributes to the heterotopia, the last three, Miles argues, are particularly relevant to medieval visionary dislocations. These are, first, the heterotopia’s ability to juxtapose multiple, incompatible places in a single site; second, an “absolute break with . . . traditional time”<sup>19</sup>; and, finally, the fact that “heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them permeable,” while the individual who visits the heterotopia must “submit to certain rites and purifications.”<sup>20</sup> According to Miles, these characteristics are especially true of and helpful for understanding anchoritic space, which is itself a paradoxical and contradictory combination of isolation and communitarian purpose.

Beyond the anchorhold, Foucault’s heterotopic principles can help us to make sense of the different uses of spatial transformations in first-person visionary and hagiographic literature. Whereas, as I will argue in the next section, first-person accounts suggest the permeability of these spaces and their accessibility to readers, hagiographies use them to close

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16. Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 24, doi:10.2307/464648.

17. Liz Herbert McAvoy, “Introduction: *In principio*: The Queer Matrix of Gender, Time and Memory in the Middle Ages,” in Cox, McAvoy, and Magnani, *Reconsidering Gender, Time and Memory*, 4.

18. *Ibid.*

19. Miles, “Space and Enclosure,” 156.

20. Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” 26.

the spaces off from readers, emphasizing the holy person's difference. Thus, in hagiography, the heterotopic site is open specifically to the holy subject and closed to other witnesses, and its incompatibility with the sites that it overlays is stressed.

Despite some clerics' wariness about visions as evidence of sanctity, hagiographies make frequent use of visions to showcase the holy woman's devotion and intimacy with the divine; visions of spatial transformations—especially visions at which others are unwittingly present—also serve to set her apart from her contemporaries and to clearly demonstrate her difference from those around her.<sup>21</sup> The following passage from the fourteenth-century *Life* of Birgitta of Sweden (1303–1373) demonstrates this use of the trope. A noblewoman and the mother of eight children, Birgitta became a recognized visionary and holy woman following her husband's death, working for church reform, dictating eight books of revelations, and founding the Bridgettine order. Her biography was written after she had become established as a mystic and during the process of her canonization; it is therefore expressly concerned with establishing her sanctity, and it was apparently successful in doing so—Birgitta was indeed canonized. Whereas most of Birgitta's visionary apparitions occur either in an unspecified location or in “the spirit,” and therefore not actually situated within her surroundings, at several points in the Latin *vita*, her hagiographers use the transformation of domestic space

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21. Medieval clerics and theologians issued frequent warnings about the perils of false visions and visionaries, and medieval spiritual advisors more generally counseled against desiring divine gifts such as visions because these could easily be manufactured by demonic forces. Roger Ellis and Samuel Fanous, “1349–1412: texts,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Mysticism*, ed. Fanous and Vincent Gillespie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 154. The extensive clerical concern with discriminating between demonic possession and divine inspiration most clearly expresses theologians' skepticism regarding visions; see, e.g., Nancy Caciola, *Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003); Dyan Elliott, *Proving Woman: Female Spirituality and Inquisitional Culture in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004); and Rosalynn Voaden, *God's Words, Women's Voices: The Discernment of Spirits in the Writing of Late-Medieval Women Visionaries* (Suffolk, UK: York University Press, 1999).

to emphasize her chosen status. The following early vision specifically takes place within her bedchamber:

Puella igitur Brigida, Christi sponsa, cum iam ad septimum annum attigisset etatis, vidit semel vigilans ex opposito lectuli sui altare et quandam dominam super illud vestibus fulgidis sedentem et habentem in manu preciosam coronam, que dixit ei: "O Brigida, veni!" Illa autem hoc audiens surrexit de lecto currens ad altare, cui dixit domina: "Visne habere istam coronam?" Cui annuente predicta domina inposuit coronam in capite, ita quod sensit tunc Brigida quasi circulum corone caput tangere. Rediens vero ad lectum, disparuit visio, quam tamen numquam poterat obliuisci.<sup>22</sup>

And so, when the girl Birgitta, the bride of Christ, had now attained the seventh year of her age, she once saw, while wide awake, an altar just opposite her bed and a certain lady in shining garments sitting above the altar. The lady had a precious crown in her hand and said to her, "O Birgitta, come!" And hearing this, she arose from bed, running to the altar. The lady said to her: "Do you want to have this crown?" She nodded, and the said lady put the crown on her head so that Birgitta then felt, as it were, the circle of the crown touching her head. But when she returned to bed, the vision disappeared; and yet she could never forget it.<sup>23</sup>

The rhetorical purpose of this apparition is to indicate Birgitta's uniqueness; she is singled out by God (through Mary) and chosen at a young age for the special status of holy bride. She is "wide awake" when she sees the vision—a key detail—and it represents a transformation of her private domestic space: her bedroom, near her bed. The location of the vision is likely an allusion to the bridal bed; this is an intimate space,

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22. "Vita b. Brigide prioris Petri et magistri Petri," in *Acta et Processus Canonizacionis Beate Birgittæ*, ed. Isak Collijn (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksells, 1924-1931), 616.

23. "The Life of Blessed Birgitta," in *Birgitta of Sweden: Life and Selected Revelations*, ed. Marguerite Tjader Harris, trans. Albert Ryle Kezel (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1990), 73.

and not just the intimacy, but the privacy of the location is important, underscoring its inaccessibility to others. Whereas the transformation of common, shared spaces in first-person vision literature suggests the permeability of these heterotopic sites' boundaries, Birgitta's vision closes her off from others, emphasizing her distinction.

In his *Life of Ida of Nivelles*, a thirteenth-century Belgian nun, Goswin of Bossut similarly uses the holy woman's perception of the transcendent within the domestic realm as evidence of her sanctity and difference. In this case, however, the vision occurs in the presence of others who are unable to share in Ida's experience:

Peracto autem Missae majoris officio, cum post Sextam introisset in refectorium cum caeteris, ecce, subito claritas magna circumfulsit eam, & radiis ejusdem claritatis oculi ejus reverberati sunt. Ipsa autem statim manica cucullae suae faciem suam operuit, ne claritatem eandem conspiceret; frustra tamen. Cum itaque, caeteris comendentibus, non comederet, ecce, inopinate, Dilectus ejus candidatus & rubicundus, quem elegerat ex millibus, scl. Christus Dñs in specie pueri duodenis ei astitit.<sup>24</sup>

When high mass and sext were over and Ida had entered the refectory with the others and begun to eat, suddenly an immense brightness shone around her (Luke 2.9; Acts 22.6) and her eyes were dazzled by its radiance. She covered her face with the sleeve of her cowl to avoid its glare, but in vain, since even thus it had access to her eyes! The others kept eating but Ida could not eat. Then, all unexpectedly, before her there stood her Beloved . . . namely, Christ the Lord, in the guise of a twelve-year boy.<sup>25</sup>

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24. Martinus Cawley, ed., "The Life of Ida of Nivelles," in *Lives of Ida of Nivelles, Lutgard and Alice the Leper* (Lafayette, OR: Guadalupe Translations, 1987), 54.

25. Goswin of Bossut, "The Life of Ida the Compassionate of Nivelles," in *Send Me God: The Lives of Ida the Compassionate of Nivelles, Nun of La Ramée, Arnult, Lay Brother of Villers, and Abundus, Monk of Villers*, trans. Martinus Cawley, *Medieval Women Texts and Contexts*; 6 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2003), 58-59.

Ida's vision begins with light, a light so intense that she cannot avoid it even when she covers her face. This detail implies that the light is received through her spiritual as well as her physical vision, and thus does not depend upon the perceptual capacities of her actual eyes (and that covering them will not obscure it). That "the others" (*caeteris*) in the refectory continue their meal undisturbed clearly marks Ida's difference: she alone recognizes the import of what is happening in the room and is too disturbed to eat.

Birgitta also experiences visions that others do not perceive: as a child, she sees the devil when she is "wide awake and playing with girls" (*Brigida staret ludendo cum puellis, vidit dyabolum vigilando*), a vision that terrifies her and that the others do not see,<sup>26</sup> and, as an adult, sees a "bright cloud" (*nubem lucidam*) out of which God speaks to her when she is at prayer in a chapel. In the latter incident, God tells Birgitta to inform her confessor that she "shall be [God's] bride and [his] channel, and [she] shall hear and see spiritual things" (*tu eris sponsa mea et canale meum et audies et videbis spiritualia*).<sup>27</sup> As in the vision of the altar in her bedroom, the dramatic transformation of her physical space marks an important turning point in her spiritual life—a moment in which she is marked as belonging to the divine. Her sanctified state gives her the ability to perceive the divine where others do not, and this perception is linked to her special selection by God.

Likewise, Ida's difference, as signaled by her perception of the supernatural in the everyday, is not only a difference in awareness: her intimacy with God is indicated by more than simply her ability to recognize the divine transformation that is occurring around her. Rather, Goswin notes that she receives more attention from Christ than the other nuns do, although Christ does attend to each nun individually. In a sense, Ida is the conduit for a divine visitation that benefits all of the nuns in the refectory, even as she profits the most from his appearance.

*Numquid de ceteris sororibus ei cura non erat? sed tantum illi soli assistens, soli arridebat? solam gratioso aspectu refovebat? Non, sed interdum per refectorium deambulans, regressus nunc isti, nunc*

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26. "Vita b. Brigide," 616; "Life of Blessed Birgitta," 74.

27. "Vita b. Brigide," 618-19; "Life of Blessed Birgitta," 78.

illi, modicum & modicum se praesentabat, saepiusque regressus ad illam, facie ad faciem, morosius ei prae ceteris assistebat. Merito quidem, quoniam ardentiori amore & vehementiori desideria Deum prae ceteris frequentissime alliciebat, Deo adhaerens, Deum in se trahebat & a Deo in Deum tota trahebatur. Sorores in refectorio materiali corporalibus epulis reficiebantur; reficiebatur illa in refectorio amoris, spirituali edulio pascebatur.<sup>28</sup>

In coming to visit his beloved bride, did this child [Jesus] have no concern for the other nuns? Was it Ida alone that he met with? Ida alone that he smiled upon? Ida alone that he let bask under his gracious gaze? Indeed not! Rather did he, from time to time, do the rounds of the refectory, coming along now to this sister and now to that, presenting himself one short moment at a time to each, only the more often to come back to Ida herself and stand face to face before her (Gen. 32.30) more lingeringly than the rest. And deservedly so, since her love was more ardent and her desire more vehement, and therefore she allured God more frequently than did the others. In clinging to God (Ps. 72.28) she was drawing God to herself and at the same time her whole self was being drawn to God by God (John 6.44, 12.32). As for the sisters, they, in the material refectory, were being refreshed with bodily foodstuffs; but Ida, in the refectory of love, was being refreshed and pastured on spiritual fare.<sup>29</sup>

Of particular importance here is the contrast that Goswin lays out between the “material refectory” (refectorio materiali)—the physical space that Ida shares with her fellow nuns—and the “refectory of love” (refectorio amoris) in which she alone is nourished, a contrast that is underscored by the repetition of the word “refectory.” The chiasmatic structure of the last sentence, which juxtaposes “reficiebantur” and “reficiebatur,” and the contrast between “corporalibus” and “spirituali” emphasize the distinction between the physical space and the spiritual

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28. Cawley, “Life of Ida,” 54 (first Villers insert).

29. Goswin of Bossut, “Life of Ida,” 59.

domain that overlies it. This passage identifies Ida as a conduit for divine grace that extends to her community while also singling her out as being in closer union with Christ than her peers. Her dual nature as conduit for and recipient of grace is conveyed through the use of space and perception: the refectory is doubled, appearing as both the physical room in which her body sits and her companions eat, and as a spiritual refectory “of love” where she is nourished by Christ. This doubling and transformation of the refectory, which retains its usual, physical character even as it becomes a site of divine union, is emblematic of Ida’s difference: she is at once present in the room with her sisters and apart, enjoying the company of Christ.

Margaret of Ypres (1216-1237), a beguine and one of Ida’s near-contemporaries, is also described as perceiving the supernal in and through her physical surroundings. Although Margaret never took orders—possibly lacking the money to do so—her commitment to religious practice ran deep; as a girl, she engaged in ascetic practices such as fasting on bread and water and scouring herself with thorns, and as a young woman—under the tutelage of the Dominican Friar Zeger—she renounced the world and strived to live a saint’s life within her family home. In his biography of Margaret, Thomas of Cantimpré presents her as cruelly mistreated by her family, peppering her story with domestic anecdotes.<sup>30</sup> While Margaret’s life is very different from Ida’s, Margaret also experiences a state of visionary transport. Unlike Goswin, however, Thomas shies away from describing this state in any detail. In fact, the *lack* of detail that Thomas provides underscores Margaret’s difference and her heightened spiritual state. Listening to a sermon that, through her intervention, had been blessed by a “golden hand” (*manus aurea*)<sup>31</sup> that

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30. Barbara Newman, “Introduction,” in *Thomas of Cantimpré: The Collected Saints’ Lives: Abbot John of Cantimpré, Cristina the Astonishing, Margaret of Ypres, and Lutgard of Aywières*, trans. Margot H. King and Barbara Newman, ed. Barbara Newman, *Medieval Women Texts and Contexts*; 19 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008), 37-38.

31. Gilles Gérard Meersseman, “Les Frères Prêcheurs et le mouvement dévot en Flandre au XIIIe siècle. [With an appendix containing ‘Vita Margarete de Ypris’],” *Archivum fratrum praedicatorum* 18 (1948): 122. Translation from Thomas of Cantimpré, “The Life of Margaret of Ypres,” in *The Collected Saints’ Lives*, 191.

appeared before her and the Dominican friar who preached it, Margaret sees herself lifted up into heaven:

*Ipsa autem ancilla Christi nec benedictionis sue parte frustrata, cum frater in sermonis fine illud sponse in Canticis: "Trahe me post te, curremus in odorem unguentorum tuorum" elevatis ad celos oculis exclamasset, statim vidisse visa est se trahi celitus et in excessu mentis subito rapi. Ibi autem quid viderit, estimare quidem possumus, sed non effari.*<sup>32</sup>

For her part, Christ's handmaid was not cheated of her share in the blessing. When the friar had lifted his eyes to heaven at the end of his sermon and exclaimed with the Bride, "Draw me after you; we will run in the fragrance of your ointments," she seemed at once to see herself drawn up to heaven and ravished in a sudden ecstasy. What she saw there, we can only guess but cannot say.<sup>33</sup>

Margaret's visionary rapture is triggered by the words of the sermon, but Thomas leaves to our imagination what she underwent in her ecstatic state. Where Goswin provides a detailed description of Ida's encounters with Christ, we are not invited to share in Margaret's vision.

Interestingly, the friar whose sermon prompted her rapture experiences a similar visionary displacement: after preaching, he "was filled inwardly with such sweetness of spirit that all day long he seemed to be strolling among the delights of paradise" (*tanta dulcedine spiritus interius replebatur, ut tota die velut inter paradysi delicias versaretur*).<sup>34</sup> The friar, like Margaret, receives a blessing from the sermon, and, again like Margaret, that blessing is figured in spatial terms; he is, or seems to be, in paradise. But although Thomas does not elaborate on what the friar experienced, the friar's spiritual journey is not qualified by the evasive maneuver that the biographer uses in his description of Margaret's transport. This difference creates the impression that Margaret's spiritual journey to Heaven is more obscure, more beyond our grasp—and therefore of greater divine intimacy—than the friar's. As with Ida, her

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32. Meersseman, "Frères," 122.

33. Thomas of Cantimpré, "Life of Margaret," 192.

34. Meersseman, "Frères," 122; Thomas of Cantimpré, "Life of Margaret," 192.

visionary travel sets her apart from others, marking her as holier than they—and, by implication, holier than the *vita's* readers.

But there is another difference between the descriptions of Ida's and Margaret's visionary transports, beyond the latter's ineffability: Ida's experience in the refectory emphasizes the duality of the space that she inhabits, its simultaneously material and spiritual qualities. The refectory is *at once* the material place of physical nourishment and the divinely imbued refectory of love, where the perceptive mystic receives spiritual nourishment. This duality is essential to the use of domestic spaces as means of accessing the divine through meditative and devotional activity. It is the ability to perceive (or, at least, to understand) the spiritual charge of everyday spaces—the movement along what Jaime Render refers to as the “vertical axis of contemplation”<sup>35</sup>—that enables the meditant or visionary to encounter God in the ordinary spaces of everyday life.

The simultaneity of the material and the spiritual realms that is essential to the visionary transformation of domestic space reflects what Margaret Wertheim characterizes as the “genuinely *dualistic* cosmology” characteristic of the medieval worldview. In her words, “the medieval world picture encompassed both a physical and a spiritual realm—it incorporated a space for body and a space for soul . . . both a physical order and a spiritual order”<sup>36</sup> which “mirror one another.”<sup>37</sup> It is, however, the spiritual that constitutes the truer order of reality.<sup>38</sup>

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35. Jaime Render, “Inner Space and Outer Regions in Medieval Meditative and Visionary Literature,” *The Dulia et Latria Journal* 2 (2009): 79.

36. Margaret Wertheim, *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace: A History of Space from Dante to the Internet* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 1999), 33. See also Carmel Bendon Davis, *Mysticism and Space: Space and Spatiality in the Works of Richard Rolle, The Cloud of Unknowing Author, and Julian of Norwich* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 245.

37. Wertheim, *Pearly Gates*, 45.

38. *Ibid.*, 120. Jeffrey Burton Russell, Wertheim's major source, explores this dual conception of space as it manifests in the philosophical systems of the medieval West in *A History of Heaven: The Singing Silence* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997). Russell points out that the “moral cosmos, the cosmos as inherently meaningful, the Word uttered by God” was the primary focus of Aquinas and other philosophers of his time. “The Physical cosmos,” he continues, “is the allegory of the truly real cosmos, which is God's utterance or song” (126).

Wertheim is not precisely suggesting a dualism between body and spirit, but rather what I would call the doubled view of the world that is entailed by the perception of God as immanent in creation. In other words, through, beyond, and within the materially perceptible realm of creation is the spiritually charged otherworld of the divine, glimpses of which can be caught in the state of rapture, vision, or devotional meditation. Juxtaposing mutually contradictory locations—the mundane and the transcendent—these heterotopias expose the reality of God. In hagiography, however, access to the heterotopic fusion of these sites is limited; the holy woman is singled out, marked by God, and therefore capable of penetrating the boundary between this world and the next. While hagiographies encourage emulation of their saints, their didactic function is largely restricted to celebrating the extraordinary sanctity of their subjects, rather than instructing the reader in such an approach to God. First-person visionary literature, on the other hand, although not presented as do-it-yourself guides to achieving a glimpse of the supernal, nonetheless differ from hagiographies in suggesting the permeability of the divine realm. As heterotopias, then, they accentuate openness where hagiographies suggest closure, shifting the emphasis of the Foucauldian characteristics towards the common foundational quality of these spaces and away from their status as markers of difference.

### **Common Vision: Divine Immanence in Visionary Literature**

Gertrude of Helfta, a thirteenth-century visionary, writer, and nun, has an initial vision of Christ that fundamentally relates to the inhabited space of St. Maria's cloister, where she lives. She recounts this vision in the first chapter of the autobiographical Book 2 of the *Legatus memorialis abundantiae divinae pietatis*. The vision converts her to what she indicates is a truly religious life, distinct from the life of a nun "in name only" that she has previously led. She writes,

Igitur in praedicta hora dum stare in medio dormitorii et secundum reverentiam Ordinis obvianti mihi seniori caput inclinatum erigerem, astantem mihi vidi juvenem amabilem et delicatum, quasi sedecim annorum, in tali forma qualem tunc juvenus mea

exoptasset exterioribus oculis meis placiturum. Qui vultu blando lenibusque verbis dixit mihi: *Cito veniet salus tua; quare moerore consumeris? Numquid consiliarius non est tibi, quia innovavit te dolor?* Haec cum diceret, quamvis me corporaliter scirem in praedicto loco, tamen videbar mihi esse in choro, in angulo quo tepidam orationem facere consuevi, et ibi audivi sequentia verborum, scilicet: *Salvabo te et liberabo te, noli timere.*<sup>39</sup>

I was standing in the middle of the dormitory. An older nun was approaching and, having bowed my head with the reverence prescribed by our rule, I looked up and saw before me a youth of about sixteen years of age, handsome and gracious. Young as I then was [twenty-five years old], the beauty of his form was all that I could have desired, entirely pleasing to the outward eye. Courteously and in a gentle voice he said to me: “Soon you will come to your salvation; why are you so sad? Is it because you have no one to confide in that you are sorrowful?”

While he was speaking, although I knew that I was really in the place where I have said, it seemed to me that I was in the Choir, in the corner where I usually say my tepid prayers; and it was there that I heard these words: “I will save you. I will deliver you. Do not fear.”<sup>40</sup>

The apparition of Christ (for the handsome youth is, of course, he) is specifically situated in the dormitory, occurring in the moment that Gertrude bows in accordance with her monastic rule. But the vision then translocates to another specific space in the cloister, juxtaposing the different places that Gertrude routinely inhabits and charging them with salvific power. While Gertrude knows that she is in the dormitory, she seems to be in the Choir; the two material spaces are layered, the one upon the other. Further, she seems to be in the particular corner of the Choir where she typically offers her “tepid prayers” (tepidam orationem).

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39. Gertrude, the Great, of Helfta, *Oeuvres spirituelles*, t. 2.; *Le héraut, Livres I-II*, ed. Pierre Doyère, Sources Chrétiennes; 139 (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1968), 2.1.2.

40. Gertrude, the Great, of Helfta, *The Herald of Divine Love*, trans. Margaret Winkworth (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1993), 95.

Her experience of Christ in that very location radically reconfigures her habitual practice: the place that has been the site of her lukewarm, routine religious gestures is now the site of incipient mystical union.

Physical union with Christ occurs in the next passage of the *Legatus*, which adds yet another layer to her vision. Gertrude describes seeing a long, thorny hedge between her and the youth; as she is “almost fainting” (quasi deficiens) with desire for him, he lifts her up and places her beside him. It is then that she recognizes him as Christ.<sup>41</sup> The space of the dormitory has now been transformed not only into the Choir, but also through the apparition of this hedge, which signifies her distance from the divine and which is immediately overcome. The ordinary places of the cloister have become, in this vision sequence, intensely charged with the divine presence.

Gertrude (1256-ca. 1302) had lived at the convent of Saint Maria at Helfta from the age of about four,<sup>42</sup> and she received an extensive education there. The community of nuns at Helfta was remarkable for its literary output and mystical spirituality; in addition to Gertrude, Helfta in the late thirteenth-century was home to the prolific mystic Mechthild of Hackeborn; the beguine Mechthild of Magdeburg, author of *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* (*Das fließende Licht der Gottheit*), who took refuge there in her old age; and the renowned abbess Gertrude of Hackeborn. Textual collaboration seems to have been the norm at Helfta, as well. Gertrude’s own five-volume *Legatus memorialis abundantiae divinae pietatis* was authored by at least one other nun (Book 2 is the only one that Gertrude seems to have written herself), and Mechthild of Hackeborn’s visions were transcribed by other sisters at the convent.<sup>43</sup>

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41. Gertrude of Helfta, *Herald*, 95; *Leg.*, 2.1.2.

42. Officially a Benedictine convent, Saint Maria was essentially Cistercian in its practices. The issue of whether to call the convent Benedictine or Cistercian has been somewhat fraught in the area of Helfta studies.

43. For more on the composition of the *Legatus*, see Kurt Ruh, “Gertrud von Helfta: Ein neues Gertrud-Bild,” *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur* 121, no. 1 (1992): 1-20, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20658087>; Laura M. Grimes, “Writing as Birth: The Composition of Gertrud of Helfta’s *Herald of God’s Loving-Kindness*,” *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 42, no. 3 (2007): 329-45; and Anna Harrison, “‘Oh! What Treasure Is In This Book?’ Writing, Reading, and Community at the Monastery of Helfta,” *Viator* 39, no. 1 (2008): 75-106, doi: 10.1484/J.VIATOR.1.100115.

The intensely supportive and intellectually self-sufficient nature of this community may have contributed to Gertrude's impulse to present her visions as shareable points of contact with the divine and to locate them so specifically within the cloister. Gertrude's story of her spiritual transformation would have had dramatic implications for her first readers; in particular, as Ulrike Wiethaus argues, her visions' location in the convent may have helped her sisters to develop similar relationships with God through their own living spaces. The references to specific locations, Wiethaus posits, "create a certain coherence and communicability between mystical and non-mystical states—and between the mystical teacher and her students."<sup>44</sup> The ordinary, lived-in spaces of the cloister, such as the dormitory, can at a moment become the site of Christic union, and the lukewarm nun can be whisked into rapture in just as unexpected and immediate a fashion. Moreover, in Wiethaus's words, this use of spatial references would have "filled the literal spaces and thus daily routines of her monastery with the promise of spiritual encounters with the divine."<sup>45</sup> Gertrude's immediate audience—her sister nuns at Helfta—were, of course, intimately familiar with the places that she describes, and reading or hearing the *Legatus* while also living in contact with these spaces would have evoked "new spiritual insight and spiritual transformation."<sup>46</sup> Her visions are for their common profit and spiritual growth.

Indeed, Gertrude does not relate her vision in order to distinguish herself from her sister nuns or single herself out as an especially holy recipient of grace. She explicitly describes herself as hypocritical and weak in faith; she says that she had built up a "tower of vanity and worldliness . . . although, alas, I was—in vain—bearing the name and habit of a religious" (*nitebaris turrim vanitatis et curialitatis meae . . . quamvis heu! inaniter nomen et vestem Religionis gestarem*)<sup>47</sup> and repeatedly

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44. Ulrike Wiethaus, "Spatial Metaphors, Textual Production, and Spirituality in the Works of Gertrud of Helfta (1256-1301/2)," in *A Place to Believe in: Locating Medieval Landscapes*, ed. Clare A. Lees and Gillian R. Overing (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 133.

45. *Ibid.*, 136.

46. *Ibid.*, 137.

47. Gertrude of Helfta, *Herald*, 95; *Leg.*, 2.1.2.

describes herself as unworthy.<sup>48</sup> These expressions of humility may be conventional, but rhetorically they function in a manner entirely different from the descriptions of holy women and their visions that we find in third-person hagiography. Whereas the latter descriptions emphasize the inimitable holiness of their subjects, Gertrude's (and others') first-person accounts more typically emphasize the recipient's supposed lowliness, reminding the reader that God is capable of working in even the least worthy soul. The inclusion of visions that transform domestic space, I contend, exemplifies this generic difference. Far from the contrast posited between Ida, Margaret, or Birgitta and their contemporaries in the visions discussed in the first part of this essay, Gertrude's vision—like the others that I will discuss below—reminds the reader of divine immanence: God's presence in even the most ordinary spaces and the possibility of his breaking through at any time or in any place. This reminder creates avenues for the reader to experience, or at any rate contemplate, divine union in her own life.

The use of space in medieval mystical literature has been the subject of several recent studies.<sup>49</sup> Carmel Bendon Davis, in her book *Mysticism and Space*, argues that spatiality can be applied to mystical experience to “reconcil[e] . . . the theological and the social parameters of mystical experience.” In other words, focusing on space (in its many meanings) “allows mysticism to be understood as both a social construct in its exterior representations and yet, interiorly, as an authentic experience of God. This is achieved,” Davis goes on, “by considering the mystical experience as being not only an exclusively ‘inner’ apprehension but also an embodied one that takes place in what I designate as *mystical space*.”<sup>50</sup> While Davis's conception of “mystical space” is more expansive than the physical, inhabited space that I am concerned with here—she takes

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48. She refers to herself as “indigna” (*Leg.*, 2.21.1) and “indignissima” (*Leg.*, 2.22.1); she also calls herself “the most worthless of your [God's] instruments” (*vilissimum instrumentum tuum*, *Leg.*, 2.20.2; *Herald*, 122).

49. The excellent collection of essays edited by Elizabeth Cox, Liz Herbert McAvoy, and Roberta Magnani, *Reconsidering Gender, Time and Memory in Medieval Culture* (note 4), while not specifically about space, engages deeply with the intersections of temporality and spatiality, especially as it relates to feminist concerns.

50. Davis, *Mysticism and Space*, 5.

into account all aspects of “the multifaceted space of mystical experience and its subsequent representations (social and textual),” including the conditions under which mystics lived<sup>51</sup>—her approach emphasizes the possibility of regarding visionary transformations of space as simultaneously rhetorical (or socially constructed) and as an authentic means of accessing or conceiving of divine union. Her conception of space also retains the importance of embodiment to mysticism, recognizing that many mystics experienced the divine through their bodies, even if—as in the case of, for example, Julian of Norwich—the falling-away of the body is one of the central components of the mystical encounter.

Central to Davis’s argument is the “mystical *mise en abîme*”: the idea of “successive, perhaps concentric, layers of space as analogous to the various strata of experience that are constitutive of mystical space,” at the center of which is God.<sup>52</sup> Conceived in spatial terms, the mystical experience dramatically illustrates divine immanence, showing the divine to be within the individual soul as well as fully containing the material world. It is this duality—the idea, developed by Augustine, of God as both container of and contained within all creation<sup>53</sup>—that makes possible the broader devotional utility of mystical accounts. By demonstrating the co-existence of the supernal within the material, these accounts offer readers a point of access to divine union, reminding her that even the ordinary space around her may be the site of an experience of God’s presence. Hagiography, on the other hand, tends to veer away from this use of the transformative vision. While visions such as those discussed in the first part of this essay may emphasize the presence of God in the material world, their purpose is not to encourage the reader in her own devotional contemplation, but rather to underscore the holy woman’s difference, her special and unusual relationship with God.

Monastic experience in general suggests the potential commonality

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51. Ibid. Her fullest definition frames mystical space “as a space encompassing, and being encompassed by, physical space, social space, and textual space, with the possibility of God both ‘outside’ all those spaces as the initiator of mystical experience, and at the core of all spaces as the focus of the experience and, additionally, as present within all the other spatial strata” (6).

52. Ibid., 7.

53. Ibid., 36–38; Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.3.

of the direct encounter with God and its grounding in a shared physical space. Focusing specifically on the Rich Clares of Ghent, De Paermentier argues that the link between physical space and an opening to union with God can be discerned in the relationship between “public” and “private” space in medieval nuns’ lives. She argues that regulations concerning the nuns’ behavior in the space of their convent had the effect of reducing the scope of the nuns’ private space and “largely push[ing it] to the spiritual level.” But even this internal sphere, De Paermentier contends, was partially regulated by specific instructions and guidelines for spiritual practice.<sup>54</sup> The argument that claustration and its regulations direct the monastic towards divine union reinforces the idea that a domestic vision could be transferrable—that inhabited space (and its visionary or devotional transformation) could lead the meditator into an intimate experience of God.

One possible purpose of spatial transformations in first-person visions, then, is to direct the reader towards a mystical encounter of her own. By anchoring her visions in specific locations and devotional contexts, Gertrude suggests that common places and times can provide openings to the supernal. It is noteworthy that, elsewhere in the *Legatus*, the liturgy prompts many of Gertrude’s visions, frequently triggering intimate contact with Jesus through liturgically appropriate re-presentations of events from his life.<sup>55</sup> For a nun, praying the liturgy and attending Mass is a shared experience, one that her sister nuns would have immediately understood on a lived, embodied level. Gertrude’s

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54. De Paermentier, “Experiencing Space,” 65.

55. For treatments of the relationship between the liturgy and Gertrude’s spirituality, see Mary Forman, “Visions ‘Brimful of Love’ during Christmas and Candlemas Liturgies in Gertrud of Helfta’s *Legatus* II.16: A Study in *Lectio Divina*,” *Mystics Quarterly* 32, no. 3-4 (2006): 1-18, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20716530>; Cyprian Vagaggini, *Theological Dimensions of the Liturgy: A General Treatise on the Theology of the Liturgy*, trans. Leonard J. Doyle and W. A. Jurgens, rev. ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1976), 740; Jean Leclercq, “Liturgy and Mental Prayer in the Life of Saint Gertrude,” *Sponsa Regis* 32 (1960): 1-5; Jessica Barr, *Willing to Know God: Dreamers and Visionaries in the Later Middle Ages* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2010), 71-89; and Claire Taylor Jones, “*Hosta jubilationis*: Psalm Citation, Eucharistic Prayer, and Mystical Union in Gertrude of Helfta’s *Exercitia spiritualia*,” *Speculum* 89, no. 4 (2014): 1007.

grounding of many of her visions in this experience suggests their potential commonality: not only would her sisters have been present for many of her visionary transports, but their catalysts are available to them, too.

As a second example, the thirteenth-century beguine Hadewijch of Brabant has visions in shared space—in her case, while praying the canonical hours in church—that suggest a path to divine union for her readers. Although Hadewijch’s visions are intensely personal, critics have argued that they are also a form of “mystagogy,” or “the representation of mystical experience as a pedagogy for the reader’s spiritual development.”<sup>56</sup> Within this framework, we can read her locating of the visions at specific sites and during specific canonical hours as establishing points of contact with the shared experiences of her audience. In the following example, the convergence of church rite with her own desire for love and her knowledge of how to seek it produces her vision. In Vision 7, she writes:

Te enen cinxendaghe wart mi vertoent in de dagheraet. Ende men sanc mettunen in de kerke ende ic was daer. Ende mijn herte ende mine aderen ende alle mine leden scudden ende beveden van begherten. Ende mi was alst dicke heeft gheweest, soe verwoedeleke ende soe vreseleke te moede dat mi dochte, ic ne war minen lief ghenoech ende mijn lief en vervulde minen niet, dac ic stervende soude verwoeden ende al verwoedende sterven.<sup>57</sup>

On a certain Pentecost Sunday I had a vision at dawn. Matins were being sung in the church, and I was present. My heart and my veins and all my limbs trembled and quivered with eager desire

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56. Barbara Zimbalist, “Quotation and Imitation in Hadewijch’s *Visioenen*: The Visionary and the Vernacular Voice of Christ,” *Ons Geestelijk Erf* 83, no. 3 (2012): 217, doi: 10.2143/OGE.83.3.2182882. For more on Hadewijch’s pedagogy, see Veerle Fraeters, “Handing on Wisdom and Knowledge in Hadewijch’s *Book of Visions*,” in *Women and Experience in Later Medieval Writing: Reading the Book of Life*, ed. Anneke Mulder-Bakker and Liz Herbert McAvoy (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 149–68.

57. Hadewijch, *Visioenen*, ed. Frank Willaert (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Prometheus, 1996), 78 (vis. 7, lines 1–10).

and, as often occurred with me, such madness and fear beset my mind that it seemed to me I did not content my Beloved, and that my Beloved did not fulfill my desire, so that dying I must go mad, and going mad I must die.<sup>58</sup>

Hadewijch is a challenging writer, and her account of the desire for God obscure; she observes, in fact, that it is inexpressible in language and cannot be understood by those “who never apprehended Love as something to work for with desire, and whom Love had never acknowledged as hers” (al die, die de minne nie ne bekinden met begherten werken ende die vore minne nie bekint ne waren).<sup>59</sup> Yet she attempts to describe this desire and also the knowledge of Love, which led her to a vision of a great eagle and a complex vision of Christ as both child and man.<sup>60</sup> While the focus of her vision is on the inner orientation that led to the state of visionary rapture and not on the specific place in which it occurred, its location in church and its timing (Matins on Pentecost) ground the experience in a place and time that would be familiar to and replicable by her audience.

The didactic element of first-person spatial transformations in visionary literature—visionary “staycations,” to return to my earlier term—works in two ways. First, they demonstrate to readers the immanence of the divine in the mundane. In a second, related move, they are capable of wedding the particular theological implications of the mystical experience to the vision text’s concern for the broader salvation of souls; they suggest that not just the individual reader, but Christians in general can benefit from the visionary’s experience. This latter concern is especially apparent in Julian of Norwich’s *Vision Showed to a Devout Woman*, also called the Short Text of the *Showings*. Throughout the *Vision*, Julian navigates a productive tension between the personal quality of her visions and their applicability to her “even cristens” (her fellow Christians). In an oft-quoted passage, she writes,

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58. Hadewijch of Brabant, *The Complete Works*, trans. Mother Columba Hart (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1980), 280.

59. Hadewijch, *Complete Works*, 280; *Visioenen*, 78 (vis. 7, lines 18–20).

60. *Ibid.*, 80–82 (vis. 7, lines 57–93).

Botte God forbede that ye shulde saye or take it so that I am a techere. For I meene it nought so, no I mente nevere so. For I am a woman, lewed, febille, and freylle. Botte I wate wele, this that I saye I hafe it of the shewing of him that es soverayne techare. Botte sothelye charite stirres me to telle yowe it. For I wolde God ware knawen and min even christene spede, as I wolde be myself, to the mare hatinge of sinne and loving of God. Botte for I am a woman shulde I therfore leve that I shulde nought telle yowe the goodenes of God, sine that I sawe in that same time that it is his wille that it be knawen? And that shalle ye welle see in the same matere that folowes it after, if itte be welle and trewelye taken.<sup>61</sup>

Julian's reference to her sex and her disclaimers about teaching and preaching have rightly been the focus of much critical discussion. The passage also, however, underscores the importance of the visions' broader applicability and purpose: to profit others. As she points out earlier in the same chapter of the *Vision*, her visions "shulde be to everilke manne the same profitte that I desirede to myselfe . . . for it is comon and generale, as we ar alle ane. . . . For if I loke singularlye to myselfe, I am right nought. Botte in generale, I am in anehede of charite with alle mine evencristende."<sup>62</sup> This refrain of commonality, which hinges on the oneness of all Christians, appears in a variety of ways throughout both the *Vision* and the *Revelation* (or Long Text). Vincent Gillespie notes that the interpretive strategies demanded by Julian's writings elicit a state of "beholding" in the reader that is parallel to Julian's own;<sup>63</sup> her writing therefore becomes a means for her readers to experience something like her own visionary state. Instruction—not simply witness—is the primary purpose of Julian's writings.<sup>64</sup> In Robert Wright's words,

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61. Julian of Norwich, "A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman," in *The Writings of Julian of Norwich*, ed. Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 6.35-43.

62. *Ibid.*, 6.13-15, 19-20.

63. Vincent Gillespie, "'[S]he do the pollice in different voices': Pastiche, Ventriloquism and Parody in Julian of Norwich," in McAvoy, *Companion to Julian of Norwich*, 193.

64. The universal impulse behind Julian's writing can be seen in what McAvoy

“The experience of the showings—hers mystical, theirs [her readers’] literary—does not alone suffice”; rather, the shared communication of the visions and the readers’ movement towards a greater love of God are her goals.<sup>65</sup> The visions appear to Julian personally, but their object is general and communal.

Although to a lesser extent in Julian than in Gertrude, the transformation of domestic space is one way that Julian renders her visions applicable and comprehensible to a larger audience. As Miles argues, space—both the physical space of the anchorhold and the inner space of her visions—is vital to Julian, and an understanding of how these spaces work contributes to our grasp of her theology.<sup>66</sup> Julian’s imagery reflects complex negotiations of space: the hazelnut, simultaneously in Julian’s hand and containing all that is made; the entry into Christ’s side; the vision of the soul like a city in the middle of her heart, containing Christ enthroned within it.<sup>67</sup> These images culminate in the idea of the mutual indwelling of Christ and the soul, but at the same time their complexity and resistance to rational understanding reflect the incomprehensibility of this intertwined relationship.<sup>68</sup> The concept of space is thus crucial

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calls the “gestation of a ‘new’ language with which to express an intensely embodied experience of mystical unity which incorporates both male and female.” Liz Herbert McAvoy, “For we be doubel of God’s making’: Writing, Gender and the Body in Julian of Norwich,” in McAvoy, *Companion to Julian of Norwich*, 173. A number of scholars have remarked upon how the differences between the *Vision* and *Revelation* indicate the revelations’ didactic purpose, as Julian refines her text to more directly instruct the reader. See, e.g., John C. Hirsh, *The Boundaries of Faith: The Development and Transmission of Medieval Spirituality* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 71; Denise Nowakowski Baker, *Julian of Norwich’s Showings: From Vision to Book* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 54; and Felicity Riddy, “Julian of Norwich and Self-Textualization,” in *Editing Women: The Thirty-First Annual Conference on Editorial Problems*, ed. Ann M. Hutchinson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 101–24.

65. Robert E. Wright, “The ‘Boke Performyd’: Affective Technique and Reader Response in the Showings of Julian of Norwich,” *Christianity and Literature* 36. no. 4 (1987): 16.

66. Miles, “Space and Enclosure,” 154.

67. *Ibid.*, 157–58.

68. “Mutual indwelling of the soul and the unmade, unformed Godhead cannot be explained by metaphors bound by the rigidity of earthly space. By constantly layering,

to Julian's theology, and her language guides the reader towards thinking in spatial terms. The homeliness of Julian's imagery also signals the presence of God in the domestic, as Ena Jenkins argues; images such as the hazelnut, raindrops, and the scales of a fish are "grounded in . . . the domestic world in which she was formed."<sup>69</sup> While the complex negotiations of space in the *Showings* reflect Julian's theological complexity, these deceptively simple images recall readers to ordinary experience in the inhabited world.

Throughout both the *Vision* and the *Revelation*, doubleness of vision—perceiving the presence of the divine in the material world and negotiating between her bodily visions and spiritual understanding—is a constant theme. This movement is most obviously signaled in Julian's reflections on how she saw, which I discuss below; however, as McAvoy argues, linguistic markers of temporality also indicate the double-space and double-time of her visions. The shift between linear, sequential narration and divine disruptions—frequently marked with the word "sodenly," indicating a temporal break as well as a change in vision—demonstrates that the transformation of space is also a transformation of time.<sup>70</sup> McAvoy sees this as a feminine temporality, subverting "phallic" linearity and thereby extending the applicability of her visions to a broader audience.<sup>71</sup> While McAvoy is primarily concerned

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inverting and repeating images of enclosure Julian effectively convinces the reader of both the loving presence of an eternally enclosing divinity and the incomprehensibility of that presence." Miles, "Space and Enclosure," 161.

69. Ena Jenkins, "Julian's *Revelation of Love*: A Web of Metaphor," in McAvoy, *Companion to Julian of Norwich*, 183.

70. Gillespie also comments briefly on the disruptive effect of "sodenly" in Julian's narratives, seeing its use as one strategy for performing the unpredictability of "divine logic" in the text. Gillespie, "[S]he do the police," 198.

71. Liz Herbert McAvoy, "Gendered Strategies of Time and Memory in the Writing of Julian of Norwich and the Recluse of Winchester," in Cox, McAvoy, and Magnani, *Reconsidering Gender, Time and Memory in Medieval Culture*, 105. Also commenting on the applicability of Julian's visions to a broad audience, Christopher Abbott argues that Julian presents herself as the non-mystical reader, enabling the reader to identify with her and vicariously receive her revelations through the descriptions of the visions. Christopher Abbott, *Julian of Norwich: Autobiography and Theology* (Rochester, NY: D. S. Brewer, 1999), 21.

with temporality, her comments pertain to the transformed spatiality of Julian's work, as well: by locating her visions within these radical, spontaneous disjunctures, she indicates their universal potential—the idea that they could break through the mundane at any moment, in any place.

Within her visions, too, the multiple ways of seeing that Julian describes perform the overlaying of the spiritual upon the mundane and point to the ubiquity of God. Her revelations appear to her both bodily and spiritually; for example, in section 8 of the *Vision*, her bodily vision of Christ's face suffering the effects of the Passion leads to a spiritual vision of "God in a pointe," which she sees "in mine understandinge" (rather than "with bodely sight," as she sees Christ's face).<sup>72</sup> As Marion Glasscoe explains, Julian uses "ghostly sight" to refer to the spiritual insights that she gleans from her visions, whereas the "bodily sight" signifies what she perceives with her eyes (while "word formed in my understanding," another recurring phrase, refers to the linguistic perceptions that she receives while in a visionary state).<sup>73</sup> The visions seen with her bodily eye focus on the revelation of Christ's torments upon the crucifix; Julian witnesses his suffering and death in the actual crucifix that is held before her as she suffers her own illness, and this witnessing brings her to a fuller, experiential understanding of his salvific pains.<sup>74</sup> The specific details of his physical suffering—for example, the drying and shriveling of his face<sup>75</sup>—express the spiritual import of his death; his dryness, then, indicates both his "bodily" thirst and the "gastelye" thirst<sup>76</sup> that is "the luff-linge that lastes and ever shalle to we see that sight [the unity of humanity in the trinity] atte domesdaye."<sup>77</sup> The visions of Christ's physical suffering to which Julian alone is privy lead directly to a deepened spiritual understanding of the significance of his Passion.

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72. Julian of Norwich, "Vision," 8.9 and 8.1.

73. Marion Glasscoe, *English Medieval Mystics: Games of Faith* (London: Longman, 1993), 223.

74. Miles argues that Julian's motionlessness in her illness, by freeing her from temporal constraints, enables the "apophatic immensity" of her visions. Miles, "Space and Enclosure," 158.

75. Julian of Norwich, "Vision," 10.1-11.

76. *Ibid.*, 10.13.

77. *Ibid.*, 15.12-13.

Julian's bodily visions signify the transformation of her material surroundings and indicate the presence of the divine in her sickroom, and these visions are also associated with the applicability of her visions to her fellow Christians. As she says, "ye that heres and sees this vision and this teching that is of Jhesu Criste to edification of youre saule, it is Goddes wille and my desire that ye take it with als grete joye and likinge as Jhesu hadde shewed it yowe as he did to me."<sup>78</sup> The text makes the vision—and its associated lessons—virtually visible to the reader. Critics have noted that Julian's descriptions of her visions could function as a kind of map to devotional meditation on the Passion.<sup>79</sup> As such, the intensely graphic detail included in her descriptions of the bodily visions invite the reader into a vicarious experience of them, allowing us to undergo textually what Julian experienced visually. This process is an extension of anchoritic meditation. In Lazikani's words, "The anchorhold is a space that immerses [one] in the suffering and delectable body of Christ"<sup>80</sup>: the "deeply active" process of remembering Christ's body that anchorites are exhorted to undertake effects a spatio-temporal displacement through the memorializations of Christ's Passion. Julian's text—and her visions, and her meditations on the visions—function in much the same way, transforming first her sickroom and then her anchorhold into sites of divine union. And the text itself, by guiding the reader through her experiences and reflections, makes the book into a vehicle for a similar displacement.

## Conclusion

Although this essay is by no means exhaustive in its analysis of the use of spatial transformations in visionary and hagiographic texts, it does, I hope, point beyond these few specific examples to some more general implications for medieval religious literature. In particular, I would stress the way that this single trope can be deployed for two significantly different ends: in the case of hagiography, to mark the absolute difference

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78. *Ibid.*, 6.7-10.

79. Denise Baker discusses the relationship between Julian's experience and programs of devotional meditation in *Julian of Norwich's Showings: From Vision to Book*.

80. Lazikani, "Remembrance," 83.

between the holy woman and everyone else, and, in the case of (at least some) first-person mystical narratives, to gesture towards the common ground shared by the holy woman and her fellow Christians: her sameness. It is worth emphasizing, however, that the importance of the visionary's sameness does not negate the essential otherness from society experienced—and even, perhaps, sought—by the mystic. Susannah Mary Chewning emphasizes the importance of the mystic's separation from others, pointing out that “the mystic does exist, paradoxically, in a type of *figurative* exile even from within a community” in that she is “separated spiritually and emotionally” from others.<sup>81</sup> Her difference and figurative exile, Chewning argues, “afford[s] her[...] some sense of empowerment by means of her own uniqueness, both within and without” her immediate community.<sup>82</sup> Rhetorically, however, the mystic aligns herself with others who may wish to make the same journey, enabling the reader to desire and imagine a similar encounter of her own.

This double use of the trope also reflects the mystic or holy woman's role as an exemplar. In first-person visionary accounts, the “staycation” narrative represents a form of exemplarity for the divinely gifted mystic and a path to mystical union for the (presumably less fortunate) reader. In hagiography, however, the exemplar is unattainable, fundamentally different from her fellows and the reader, but serving nonetheless as a devotional model to which to aspire. She also, in this case, exemplifies divine grace; the reader is thus able to serve as a textual witness to God's work in the individual human soul, presumably deepening her devotion as a result. At a fairly obvious level, this difference between the genres points to the sharp distinction between hagiographic and first-person mystical narratives, reminding us of the importance of reading such texts within their genres and with attention to their divergent purposes. More interestingly, it lets us see the unitive intent of much medieval mystical and visionary literature, which frequently sought to bring the reader into

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81. Susannah Mary Chewning, “Gladly Alone, Gladly Silent: Isolation and Exile in the Anchoritic Mystical Experience,” in *Anchorites, Wombs, and Tombs: Intersections of Gender and Enclosure in the Middle Ages*, ed. Liz Herbert McAvoy and Mari Hughes-Edwards (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2005), 104.

82. *Ibid.*, 112.

a closer relationship with God, even as it purported to describe a single individual's experiences.

A hallmark of the mystic is her ability to see through this world, to perceive God's immanent being within all of creation. The mystic thereby lives at what Render calls the nexus of the horizontal temporality of daily living and the vertical perception of the divine; at this nexus, "the objects in the vision space are signs pointing to presence,"<sup>83</sup> and her immediate surroundings, as ordinary as they are, become perceptible indicators of God. By showing, with unmistakable vividness, the presence of God in her domestic space, the world itself is changed and, as in Gertrude's case, the visionary herself is radically reconstructed—made to see the world, God, and her own soul in dramatically new terms.

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83. Render, "Inner Space," 87.