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Rude Strength**Gina Brandolino**

[T]he bleding continued a while til it migt be sene with avisement. And this was so plenteous to my sigt that methowte, if it had be so in kind and in substance for that tyme, it should have made the bed al on blode and a passid over aboute.¹

This passage, which I affectionately refer to as "the bloodbath scene," is from Julian of Norwich's description of Christ's bleeding during the Crucifixion as it was revealed to her in the Fourth Showing. While none of her renderings in *A Revelation of Divine Love* lack graphic specificity, I cite this passage as a particularly obvious example of Julian's penchant for enthusiastic description. Having received the vision while she lay ill, Julian suggests that, if it were present in actuality as it was in the Showing, Christ's blood would have saturated the bed she was confined to and overflowed. By allowing vision to spill into reality, Julian makes a crude but carefully wrought mess that I offer to you as an example of "rude strength."²

Rude strength is a term I learned from Walter Pater, who used it in 1873 in his Volume of essays titled *The Renaissance* to describe the essential quality of art in the Middle Ages. A fairly ingenuous first-year doctoral student, I read Pater's description and recognized precisely that quality of the literature of the Middle Ages that I find so compelling. Soon enough, however, it became clear that "rude strength" was not something Pater meant as a compliment; he was giving a description of medieval artistic efforts I have since learned that many who champion the Renaissance are apt to give. What Pater was identifying was a *lack*—a lack of conscious aesthetics, of a "purely artistic quality."³ The Middle Ages, in his estimation, produced art that was unpolished, roughhewn. I disagree with many of the conclusions Pater comes to concerning medieval art, but I still believe it has rude strength. I am amazed that he could so misrecognize a virtue for a fault.

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When Pater considered the rude strength of the Middle Ages, he surely did not have Julian of Norwich in mind, but I did—specifically, I had in mind the bloodbath scene and its direct, determined treatment of its extreme and gory subject. The virtue of this passage, I think, is its persistence, its insistence on explaining the mess it describes. It is, to borrow from the aesthetic approach of another era, the overflow of powerful feeling recollected with dogged determination. *A Revelation of Divine Love* is rife with these kinds of descriptions; Julian's analogies, explanations of her emotions, and theology are all related with the rough eloquence of exigency and furor. This is a story, the language of *A Revelation of Divine Love* demands, that needs to be told. Knowing that we have Julian's descriptions through a scribe only increases their imperative tone for me; behind the words I can hear her perseverance and caution. "I have something to say," I hear Julian of Norwich say between the lines of *The Showings*, "and I want to get it right." That is the virtue of her text, its rude strength.

I am quite familiar with this virtue; I grew up reaping its benefits. My father, along with his four brothers and sisters and my grandparents, immigrated to the U.S. in the 1950's from a small village in Italy. My mother was raised in the house adjacent to the tavern her parents owned and operated, and in which I myself spent a lot of time, when I was young, visiting my grandparents. What this means is that I grew up listening to people for whom, for one reason or another, language was often difficult, cumbersome, but who nonetheless had a lot they wanted to say.

These people were poor, uneducated, and foreign to the language they were speaking, or drunk, or simply speaking in the unaffected, slipshod discourse used by the working-class folks I grew up around. I listened to the stories my father's sisters told me, in awkward, broken English, about their lives in Italy. I sat with my seven year-old legs dangling from a barstool in the tavern drinking strawberry soda pop and overhearing conversations between my grandparents' patrons—it was there, in fact, that I heard my first bloodbath narrative when a steel worker explained a car accident he had seen on his way from the mill: "You shoulda seen it," I remember him exclaiming, "there was

blood on the road, blood on the car, blood on the cop. There was blood everywhere, an' then some!" I used to listen to my mother gossip on the phone, speaking as though every single topic was pressing, choosing just the right locution to allow her to say what she meant—so-and-so better "get the lead out" and get a job, or quit "livin' hard" and settle down, or stop thinking "that no-good guy hung the moon." When I read *The Showings*, I recognized Julian's voice as one of these voices. She speaks with the same urgency, struggle for clarity, and unfailing determination to make her point that I heard in the people I listened to as a child—and that, indeed, I hear in myself.

I would be remiss if I did not mention that it was listening to the people I grew up around that taught me to respect words, to care about language and narrative, and that eventually led me to study texts. That is the first benefit I reaped from my childhood of listening. The second is that it was by listening that I learned to talk, that I found my own voice: I have something of a rude strength

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of my own. The first member of my family to go to college, let alone pursue a graduate degree, the language I brought with me to school was not quite the typical language of the academy. It was the piecemeal language of immigrants, of the tavern, of the factories and warehouses where I worked before becoming a student. When I went to college, I could hear the difference between my voice and the others I heard in classrooms and in the books I read, but it was the only voice I had ready to hand, so I used it.

After seven years of higher education, it is *still* the only voice I have most immediately at hand, so, although the language in which I write, carefully edited and mediated by the conventions of scholarly discourse, reflects at least some of my academic training, the language in which I speak still betrays my differentness in the academy. Now, among my fellow doctoral students, most of whom speak in calm, objective-sounding, and measured words, my language sounds even stranger than it did when I was an undergraduate. Often, I feel like my Italian aunts must have felt when they tried to articulate stories about their native village to me; I feel like I am translating my ideas. My language betrays my excitement, anger, and impatience, and I pause often to be sure that I'm being understood, making sense. "I have something to say," I hear myself saying behind my words, "and I want to get it right." When I teach, this is even more noticeable because I have more space at my command, more room to make use of as I gesture and pace out my words. I slide into my working-class vernacular much more easily, joke with my students, punctuate our discussions with damn-rights and hell-yesses. Last semester, a friend and colleague told me that, in class, when I explain my ideas or take issue with someone else's, or even when I just make a comment, I speak with a rough grace and intensity that makes me sound like the speaking equivalent of a bar fighter. He knows how I grew up and meant this as a compliment, but even if he had not, I do not think I could have taken it any other way.

But that was not always the case. I heard my fair share of insults about my background before I learned to take them as compliments. At the large research university where I began my graduate work, a university I commuted three hours round-trip three days a week to attend because I could not quit my job mopping floors and still afford to attend classes, one of my professors said one morning in class, in all seriousness, that people from blue-collar backgrounds could never succeed in the academy because, as children, they were not taught to value learning. I dropped out of graduate school after I heard that comment, which made me more aware than I ever had been of the difference between my fellow students and me—not just my speech, but my clothes, my posture, everything about me marked me as more than different now, as poorer, too poor to handle the big ideas these other students tossed around with ease and familiarity. A year later I enrolled in a smaller graduate program, hoping that the more intimate atmosphere would facilitate my acceptance. To a large degree, it did, and it was there that I began to recognize the virtues of my upbringing—often, vocally. Irritated, one of my professors suggested I abandon all thoughts of entering a doctoral program until I learned to stop trying to integrate my working-class roots into my academic career.

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Obviously, I did not follow his very bad advice, and I cannot say I have any reason to think that I should have. But this professor's words have remained with me, a reminder always in the back of my mind when I speak, write, and teach not to make the same error of judgment that he did about the relationship between my background and my academic career. My roots are not something that need to be left out, something inadequate—they are not a fault but a virtue. The economic poverty of my childhood does not translate into a poverty of intellect; the language I grew up

listening to and that I speak is not inarticulate or unenlightened, but a different way of being articulate and differently enlightened. I was taught to speak with excitement and even a little anxiety, but to be invested in and concerned about *getting said* what I had to say rather than *how* I said it. I speak in a voice largely foreign to the academy, but certainly not antithetical to it. It is, above all, *my* voice. It helps make me a good teacher, and my best scholarship comes from it. This voice is often halting, or reckless, or a little too fervent, but it has rude strength, and that, any way I look at it, is a virtue.

It is very convenient to misrecognize a virtue for a fault; doing so prevents whoever is doing the misrecognizing from really having to consider and make sense of things that may be complicated, or troublesome, or different. When Pater misrecognized the rude strength of the Middle Ages as a lack, it allowed him to herald the Renaissance as the era with a more sophisticated, more enlightened aesthetic sense. "These revelations were shewed to a simple creature that cowde no letter," says Julian of Norwich near the beginning of *A Revelation of Divine Love*, revealing what I take to be the wellspring of her rude strength, the source of all the power behind her text.⁴ A simple creature? I am not fooled. Julian's words, like the words of the people I grew up listening to, are not polished or eloquent in the conventional sense of the word, but they have a sophistication and enlightenment all their own, and most importantly, they *say something*. Their rude strength may prevent them from having the "real, direct aesthetic charm" that interested Pater, but, in itself, it is not a lack.⁵ It is the force that gets the story told *despite* the lacks. If it is a fault at all, then, it is a lucky one.

Making the connection I did between Pater's conclusions about the Middle Ages and Julian of Norwich has helped me come to terms with my own rude strength. I would like to say that I have always been this calm and self-confident about what marks me as different in the academy, but that isn't the case. I have learned, though, that I do not have to make excuses for my difference and that I do not have to be embarrassed of the qualities I have by virtue of my upbringing, qualities that allow me to make the work I do my own. I realized this one night when I was out with some other students in my doctoral program, people who did not yet know me very well. As we talked, I noticed one of the older students watching me with particular attention when I spoke. Obviously amused by the substance and quality of my contributions to the conversation, half-drunk, and trying very hard to condescend to me, he eventually pointed to me across the table and said, "Hey, you're poor, aren't you?"

Yes, well, we all have our faults.

Indiana University

Notes

1. Julian of Norwich, *A Revelation of Divine Love*, ed. Marion Glasscoe, rev. ed. (Exeter, 1996), p. 19.
2. Walter Pater, *The Renaissance* (Chicago, 1982), p. 2.
3. Pater, p. 19.
4. Julian of Norwich, p. 2.
5. Pater, p. 19.