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Visiting Norwich, a UNESCO City of Literature

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In early September 2019, I made a weeklong trip to the UK to present conference papers at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and the University of East Anglia (UEA). The programme schedule I received from the organisers of UEA stated that the three-day conference on Doris Lessing (1919-2013) would take place at the university's Julian Study Centre (JSC). I became curious about the name of the conference venue.

Upon arriving at the Julian Study Centre, I saw the adjacent building to the right named the Thomas Paine Study Centre that is home to the UEA Business School. I did not know much about Julian, but was familiar with the British philosopher Thomas Paine (1737-1809).

Norwich – where the University of East Anglia is located – is the first in England (and the second in the UK) to become a UNESCO City of Literature, followed by Nottingham and Manchester. All these triggered my interest in UEA's Julian Study Centre, Thomas Paine Study Centre and the scenic city of Norwich.

I knew Thomas Paine for his radical ideas and as a close associate of Mary Wollstonecraft's (1759-97) husband William Godwin (1756-1836). During my PhD years at the University of Portsmouth, I researched the Enlightenment feminism of Wollstonecraft and examined Paine's ideas to determine the extent of their influence on her. The French Revolution (1789-1799) and Paine's Rights of Man (1791) influenced Wollstonecraft's feminist arguments that she articulated in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). Paine's *Common Sense* (1776) inspired the call for American independence from British colonial rule.

One year after the French Revolution started, the Anglo-Irish politician Edmund Burke wrote *Reflections* (1790) in the form of political letter writing to denounce the Revolution and to promote “a defence of property, religion, and traditional values”. Burke actually offered “a remarkably prescient view of the chaos that lay ahead” of the French Revolution. He defended the French monarchy and regarded the Revolution as “a terrible mistake”.

Paine wrote *Rights of Man* as a reply to Burke's *Reflections* and to defend the Revolution. His opposition to the French monarchy was perceived as an implicit attack on the monarchy in Britain. This is because Paine asserted that people should have the right to choose their government whose key role is to protect them and their rights.

For his dissenting views, Paine faced sedition charges. He fled to France, was tried in absentia and sentenced to capital punishment. He lived in France and the United States

and never returned to England. Another radical intellectual Thomas Spence (1750-1814) was arrested – though not prosecuted – for selling copies of Rights of Man.

Paine was born in Thetford in Norfolk; and the University of East Anglia is located on the outskirts of the county's main city, Norwich. This explains the nomenclature of the Thomas Paine Study Centre at UEA.

What about the Julian Study Centre? I embarked on researching the question.

A contemporary of Geoffrey Chaucer (1343-1400), Julian of Norwich (1342-1416) was a visionary and theologian. She is “the first English woman of letters” – despite her disclaimer that she is a “symple creature vnlettyrde [unlettered]” – and the first woman to publish a book in the English language. A classic of the spiritual life, her XVI Revelations of Divine Love (1395) is a book of visions and epiphanies. She wrote its short version right after she supposedly had heavenly visions on 8 May 1373 night and the long one, roughly twenty years later. While Revelations is the first book written by a woman in England, Anne Bradstreet's *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America* (1650) is the first published work of a woman in the United States.

My research on Julian led me to visit St. Julian's Church in Norwich and the Julian Centre that is next to it and dedicated to her works. As an anchoress, she lived a reclusive life in the enclosed quarters of this church and thus came to be known as Julian. Her actual name is still unknown.

T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) came across Julian's theodicy during his Harvard years through Evelyn Underhill's book *Mysticism* (1911). He alludes to Julian in *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) and *Four Quartets* (1943). In “Burnt Norton” – one of the four poems in *Four Quartets* – Eliot says, “Except for the point, the still point, / There would be no dance and there is only the dance” (ll.20-21). This is an allusion to Julian's statement: “I saw God in a point by which vision I understood that He is in all things.” Victorian poet Robert Browning's oft-quoted statement in his verse drama “*Pippa Passes*” (1841), “God's in his heaven – / All's right with the world!” echoes Julian's devotional optimism: “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.”

Her message of hope and trust in God's “compassionate love” proved useful, as during her lifetime people of Norwich suffered from plague, poverty and famine. As a “spiritual counsellor”, she must have “counselled a lot of people in pain”. Interestingly, she compared mothers' love and care for children to God's grace for all humans, stating: “To the property of motherhood belongs nature, love, wisdom, and knowing – and this is God.” It is believed that Julian highly influenced the mystical orientation of postmodern

women writers such as Iris Murdoch (1919-99), Denise Levertov (1923-97) and Annie Dillard (1945-).

Apart from owning the first published woman writer in English, Norwich's literary legacy claims some important sites and landmarks. My literary exploration brought me to the John Jarrold Printing Museum in the city's Whitefriars area. It traces the history of a nineteenth-century printing firm that John Jarrold II (1773-1853) set up in Dallinghoo, Suffolk in 1815 and was moved to Norwich in 1823. John Jarrold is a pioneering figure in the British printing industry.

One literary-historical landmark in Norwich is the Rosary Cemetery (est. 1819) where a number of prominent writers are buried. They include the 1932 Nobel literature laureate John Galsworthy (1867-1933) who was married to a woman of Norwich and artist Leslie Davenport (1905-73), a member of the Norwich Twenty Group (est. 1944) – named so because its membership was originally restricted to twenty artists.

My visit to the stupendous Norwich Cathedral and exploring its literary connections gave me fascinating insights. In 1420, its Erpingham Gate was constructed by Thomas Erpingham (1355-1428) who is immortalised as a character in Shakespeare's historical play *Henry V* (1599). The author of *Fiue Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie* (1557), Thomas Tusser worked for the cathedral as a lay clerk. Poet and clergyman Richard Corbet (1582-1635) was bishop of Norwich Cathedral, and poet Henry Charles Beeching (1859-1919) was its dean. The character Leo Colston in L. P. Hartley's novel *The Go-Between* (1953) visits places in Norwich, including the cathedral. The enclosed place surrounding the cathedral features in John Gordon's fantasy fiction *The Giant under the Snow* (1968).

From the cathedral, I walked to Norwich Castle (est. 1066). Now a museum and art gallery, this Romanesque structure is the cornerstone of Norwich city centre. It is a popular site of literary exhibitions and has important historical significance.

The Writers' Centre Norwich (WCN), the University of East Anglia and other bodies hold national and international literary festivals and events in the city all the year round. In 1970, thanks to the initiative of writer and academic Malcolm Bradbury (1932-2000), UEA became the first British university to introduce a Masters programme in Creative Writing whose graduates include many literary giants, such as, Rose Tremain (1943-), Ian McEwan (1948-) and the 2017 Nobel Prize winner Kazuo Ishiguro (1954-).

Because of these and other literary significances, in 2012, UNESCO declared Norwich a "City of Literature" and it is by far one of 28 such cities worldwide.

On a final note, when discovering the literary richness of Norwich and writing this essay, I thought of various places in our country whose literary significance is largely unexplored. There are certainly many Norwiches in Bangladesh, which literary scholars and activists need to explore, preserve and promote.

Note: I am grateful to my hosts in Norwich – Aahil, Aisha and their parents.

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