

“A poor little female”

Some years ago, wrote the monk Guibert to his friend Radulfus, strange and incredible rumors had reached his ears at the Belgian monastery of Gembloux.¹ They concerned an old woman, abbess of the recent Benedictine foundation at Bin-gen-am-Rhein, who had gained such fame that multitudes flocked to her convent, from curiosity or devotion, to seek her prophecies and prayers. All who returned thence astonished their hearers, but none could give a plausible account of the woman, save only that her soul was “said to be illumined by an invisible splendor known to her alone.”² Finally Guibert, impatient with rumor and zealous for the truth, resolved to find out for himself. In the year 1175 he wrote to this famed seer, Hildegard, with mingled curiosity and awe. Surely she had received “rare gifts, till now practically unheard of throughout all ages”; in prophecy she excelled Miriam, Deborah, and Judith; but let her recall that great trees are uprooted sooner than reeds and keep herself humble.³ Meanwhile, perhaps she would deign to answer a few questions about her visions. Did she dictate them in Latin or in German? Was it true that, once she had spoken, she could no longer recall them? Had she learned the alphabet and the Scriptures as a child, or had she been taught by the Holy Spirit alone? As the abbess sent no reply, Guibert tried again some time later, having thought of more questions in the meantime. Did Hildegard receive her visions in ecstasy or in dreams? What did she mean by the title of her book, *Scivias*? Had she written any other books? And so forth.⁴

In the end the seer favored Guibert with a reply—a detailed account of the mode of her visions—which so overwhelmed him that he declared that no woman since the Virgin Mary had received so great a gift from God. Hildegard, he continued, “has transcended female subjection by a lofty height and is equal to the eminence not of just any men but of the very highest.”⁵ The white monks of Villers, with whom he shared her letter, saluted the abbess in even more exalted terms.

Hail, after Mary full of grace: the Lord is with you! Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the word of your mouth, which brings the secrets of the invisible world to men, unites heavenly things with earthly, and joins the divine to the human.⁶

In contrast, Hildegard herself had composed her reply to Guibert with characteristic modesty, stressing her own frailty and insecurity. Like any monastic writer, she adopted formulas of humility that had long been de rigueur; but, like Guibert and the monks of Villers, she also realized that her gender had no small bearing on her vocation. When she identified herself as *ego pauperula feminea forma*—“a poor little figure of a woman”⁷—she was

appealing inversely to the same complex of ideas that led the Cistercians to compare her to the Virgin. Mary, the handmaid of God, “humble and exalted above every creature,” typified for them a central paradox of Christianity: all who humble themselves will be exalted. But something other than Mary's personal humility and glory inspired the comparison. Lowliness, if not grace, could be generic; and, according to some of the most reputable theologians and scientists of the Middle Ages, it pertained generically to the bodies, minds, and mores of women.⁸ It followed that, if only the humble could be exalted, women had a paradoxical advantage—at least in theory. In practice, of course, this advantage was seldom apparent. To her admirers, therefore, Hildegard was a live epiphany of a truth that the social and even the religious establishment had done its best to suppress.

The dialectic cut both ways: a “poor little female” could be exalted to miraculous heights only on condition that her normal status remained inferior and subservient. Hildegard's activity as a prophet could seem divinely powerful only because it was humanly impossible. Thus, the very constraints that made her privilege so astonishing to her peers also gave it an added luster, which, in a more egalitarian Church, it could not have possessed. And Hildegard, no less than her contemporaries, accepted the paradox. Never did she suggest that, as a woman and a Christian, she had any “right” to teach or prophesy in the Church. Nor did she claim or demand equality with men. Rather, she insisted that God had chosen a poor, frail, untutored woman like herself to reveal his mysteries only because those to whom he had first entrusted them—the wise, learned, and masculine clergy—had failed to obey. She lived in a “womanish age” (*muliebre tempus*) in which men had become so lax, weak, and sensual—in a word, effeminate—that God had to confound them by making women virile.⁹ Choosing an instrument by nature frail and despicable, he proved again that he could work wonders despite all human order and disorder. “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no flesh might boast in the presence of God” (I Cor. 1:27–29).

It is this conviction that underlies Hildegard's prophetic call, announced at the beginning of the *Scivias*:

O frail human form from the dust of the earth, ashes from ashes: cry out and proclaim the beginning of undefiled salvation! Let those who see the inner meaning of Scripture, yet do not wish to proclaim or preach it, take instruction, for they are lukewarm and sluggish in observing the justice of God. Unlock for them the treasury of mysteries, which they, the timid ones, bury in a hidden field without fruit. Therefore pour out a fountain of abundance, overflow with mysterious learning, so that those who want you to be despicable on account of Eve's transgression may be overwhelmed by the flood of your profusion.¹⁰

Such was Hildegard's mission: to unlock the mysteries of Scripture, to proclaim the way of salvation, to admonish priests and prelates, to instruct the people of God. And all this was entrusted by God to a woman, despite the transgression of Eve, because “the wise and the strong” had fallen even lower than women.

At the close of this introductory chapter, I shall return to the question of female authority

and the strategies that a twelfth-century visionary could use to reinforce it. First, however, an account of Hildegard's career and of her prolific writings will serve to reveal the degree and types of authority that she actually claimed.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Our information about Hildegard's life is unusually thorough, for we possess several hundred letters written to or by the saint. Many of these contain biographical data. Hildegard's *Vita*, composed between 1177 and 1181 by the monks Gottfried of St. Disibod and Dieter of Echternach, incorporates memoirs dictated by the saint in the first person. A fragmentary *Vita* by Guibert of Gembloux provides further details. Other sources include chronicles, documents pertaining to the two monasteries founded by Hildegard, and the *Acta* compiled in 1233–1237 for her canonization.¹¹ These last deal chiefly with miracles of healing and exorcism ascribed to Hildegard, so their main historical value lies in the evidence they furnish about her cult.

Born in 1098 at Bermersheim bei Alzey, Hildegard was the tenth child of noble parents, who dedicated her to God as a tithe.¹² Three of her siblings also devoted their lives to the Church: one brother was a cantor at the Mainz Cathedral, another became a canon in Tholey, and a sister took the veil at Hildegard's convent. In 1106 the eight-year-old girl entered a hermitage near the flourishing monastery of St. Disibod to be raised by the highborn anchoress Jutta of Sponheim. From Jutta she “learned the Psalter,” in other words, she was taught to read Latin.¹³ Her further education was entrusted to the monk Volmar of St. Disibod, who would become her lifelong friend, confidant, and secretary. During her teens (c. 1112–1115) Hildegard made her profession of virginity and received the veil from Otto, bishop of Bamberg. In the meantime, the hermitage had grown into a full-fledged monastery observing the Benedictine Rule, and, when the mistress Jutta died in 1136, the nuns elected Hildegard as her successor. Five years later the abbess¹⁴ received her prophetic call and began to compose the *Scivias*, with the help and encouragement of Volmar and her favorite nun, Richardis von Stade. A thirteenth-century miniature shows the seer in action: illumined by fire from on high, she transcribes the heavenly dictation on wax tablets, while Volmar copies the corrected text into a book, and a nun stands by to assist her mistress (frontispiece).

From early childhood, long before she undertook her public mission or even her monastic vows, Hildegard's spiritual awareness was founded in what she called the *umbra viventis lucis*, the reflection of the living Light.¹⁵ Her letter to Guibert of Gembloux, written at the age of seventy-seven (1175), describes her experience of this light with admirable precision.

From my early childhood, before my bones, nerves, and veins were fully strengthened, I have always seen this vision in my soul, even to the present time, when I am more than seventy years old. In this vision my soul, as God would have it, rises up high into the vault of heaven and into the changing sky and spreads itself out among different peoples, although they are far away from me in distant lands and places. And because I see them this way in my soul, I observe them in accord with the shifting of clouds and other created things. I do not hear them with my outward ears, nor do I perceive them by the thoughts of my own heart or by any combination of my five senses, but in my soul alone,

while my outward eyes are open. So I have never fallen prey to ecstasy in the visions, but I see them wide awake, day and night. And I am constantly fettered by sickness, and often in the grip of pain so intense that it threatens to kill me; but God has sustained me until now.

The light that I see thus is not spatial, but it is far, far brighter than a cloud that carries the sun. I can measure neither height, nor length, nor breadth in it; and I call it “reflection of the living Light.” And as the sun, the moon, and the stars appear in water, so writings, sermons, virtues, and certain human actions take form for me and gleam within it.

Now whatever I have seen or learned in this vision remains in my memory for a long time, so that, when I have seen and heard it, I remember; and I see, hear, and know all at once, and as if in an instant I learn what I know. But what I do not see, I do not know, for I am not educated, but I have simply been taught how to read. And what I write is what I see and hear in the vision. I compose no other words than those I hear, and I set them forth in unpolished Latin just as I hear them in the vision, for I am not taught in this vision to write as philosophers do. And the words in this vision are not like words uttered by the mouth of man, but like a shimmering flame, or a cloud floating in a clear sky.

Moreover, I can no more recognize the form of this light than I can gaze directly on the sphere of the sun. Sometimes—but not often—I see within this light another light, which I call “the living Light.” And I cannot describe when and how I see it, but while I see it all sorrow and anguish leave me, so that then I feel like a simple girl instead of an old woman.

But because of the constant sickness that I suffer, I sometimes get tired of writing the words and visions that are there revealed to me. Yet when my soul tastes and sees them, I am so transformed that, as I say, I forget all pain and trouble. And when I see and hear things in this vision, my soul drinks them in as from a fountain, which yet remains full and unexhausted. At no time is my soul deprived of that light which I call the reflection of the living Light, and I see it as if I were gazing at a starless sky in a shining cloud. In it I see the things of which I frequently speak, and I answer my correspondents from the radiance of this living Light.¹⁶

A revealing passage in the saint's *Vita* suggests that, although Hildegard perceived this extraordinary light from her infancy, decades were to pass before she understood the light and the figures she saw in it as a gift from God. At the age of three, Hildegard told her biographer, she shuddered at the vision of a dazzling light that she was still too young to describe.¹⁷ When she was five she startled her nurse by looking at a pregnant cow and accurately predicting the color of the unborn calf.¹⁸ Often she foretold the future. In her teens, however, the naive and fragile girl finally realized that no one else could see what she saw. Embarrassed, she ceased to recount her strange experiences, although the visions continued. The girl confided only in her mistress, Jutta, who reported the visions to Volmar.

With the exception of this discerning monk, those around Hildegard do not seem to have understood her predilection for visions as a charism. It is impossible to say whether the child's peculiarity inspired or merely confirmed her parents in their pious wish to present her as an oblate, for they might have feared that her frailty and eccentricity would disqualify her for a normal married life. Monasticism in this period frequently served as a refuge for weak and handicapped children of the nobility.¹⁹ Even after Jutta's death, when Hildegard became abbess

of her convent, she did not at once take advantage of her authority to disclose her visions. It is significant that, after she had responded to the call of 1141 and begun to write, she never described any of the visions she had seen prior to that year. Only in retrospect, it appears, did Hildegard recognize these early experiences as a stage of preparation for her calling.

Despite her assurance of divine revelation, the seer sought further confirmation from the Church. In 1147 she wrote to St. Bernard, whom she greatly admired, to request his prayers and counsel. In this letter, the first of more than three hundred ascribed to her, Hildegard called herself “wretched and more than wretched in the name of woman,” and bewailed her sickness, insecurity, and fear; but she went on to describe her visions as “great marvels” revealed by the Spirit of God.²⁰ The abbot of Clairvaux endorsed Hildegard's gift, though with some reserve. Meanwhile, Volmar had told Kuno, abbot of St. Disibod, of his protegee's visions, and Kuno in turn informed Heinrich, archbishop of Mainz. When Pope Eugenius III, a Cistercian and disciple of Bernard, presided over a synod at Trier in 1147–48, Heinrich broached the matter of Hildegard's visions.²¹ Intrigued by his report, the pope sent two legates to the nearby St. Disibod to visit the seer and secure a copy of her writings. They returned with the still incomplete *Scivias*, from which Eugenius himself read publicly before the assembled prelates. The council was suitably impressed, especially as Bernard chose this moment to intercede for the visionary who had besought his aid. At his suggestion, Eugenius sent Hildegard a letter of greeting, giving her apostolic license to continue writing.²² From this point on, her fame and her circle of correspondents grew steadily until her death.

Once Hildegard had become a celebrity, her convent at St. Disibod began to attract so many postulants that the monastery could not house them. For this reason she decided to move, founding a new community at the Rupertsberg opposite Bingen—a site revealed to her in a vision.²³ The monks of St. Disibod, reluctant to lose their new source of prestige and revenue, opposed this plan. However, Hildegard used her family connections to secure the support of Heinrich of Mainz. At the same time, she fought the monks with passive resistance, taking to her bed with a paralyzing sickness that she ascribed to her delay in fulfilling God's will. This visitation finally won the skeptical Kuno's assent, upon which the seer immediately rose from her sickbed. The property was acquired, the convent built, and in 1150 Hildegard and eighteen of her nuns moved to the new foundation. She now began to struggle for independence from the monks, finally securing exclusive rights to the Rupertsberg property from Kuno and his successor in 1155. Three years later Heinrich's successor, Arnold of Mainz, granted the convent his protection and regulated the temporal and spiritual relations between St. Disibod and the Rupertsberg nuns. Throughout these negotiations, the seer's health continued to fluctuate in accord with the success or setbacks met by her plans. By 1165 the Rupertsberg had become so prosperous that Hildegard was able to found a daughter house at nearby Eibingen. This convent, now the Abbey of St. Hildegard, is still in existence, although the original Rupertsberg was destroyed during the Thirty Years' War.²⁴

In the meantime, the abbess continued her literary activities and gradually became a public figure. Her celebrated first book, *Scivias*, takes its short title from the exhortation *Scito vias Domini*, or *Know the Ways of the Lord*. After completing the *Scivias* in 1151, she began work on a major scientific and medical encyclopedia: *Nine Books on the Subtleties of Different Kinds of Creatures*. This work, also known as the *Book of Simple Medicine*, or *Physica*,

includes a comprehensive herbal, a bestiary, and a lapidary. Hildegard supplemented the encyclopedia with her *Book of Compound Medicine*, or *Causes and Cures*, a handbook of diseases and their remedies.²⁵ During the same period she continued to compose liturgical poetry and music, for which she was already well known by 1148.²⁶ Her songs would eventually be arranged in a cycle under the title *Symphony of the Harmony of Celestial Revelations*.²⁷ In 1158 she began the second volume of her visionary trilogy, the *Book of Life's Merits*, completed in 1163.²⁸ The third and last volume, *On the Activity of God* (or *Book of Divine Works*), occupied her between 1163 and 1173.²⁹

Hildegard's correspondence spans the three decades from 1147 to her death and ranges over all sectors of society, from popes, emperors, and prelates to abbots and abbesses, priests, monks, and laypeople.³⁰ By the mid-1150s her fame was such that Frederick Barbarossa invited her to meet with him at his palace in Ingelheim, although the content of their interview is not known.³¹ Between 1158 and 1161, despite a prolonged illness, Hildegard undertook the first of four extended preaching journeys. Traveling east along the river Main, she preached at communities in Mainz, Wertheim, Wurzburg, Kitzingen, Ebrach, and Bamberg, furthering the cause of monastic and clerical reform. The letters she sent to these communities after her visits indicate the tenor of her preaching. In 1160 she made another trip, this time south to Lorraine, stopping in Metz and Krauftal; on Pentecost she preached publicly in the cathedral city of Trier. Her third journey, between 1161 and 1163, carried her down the Rhine to Boppard, Andernach, Siegburg, and Werden. In Cologne she addressed clergy and people together.³² After another serious illness in 1167–1170, the seer, now in her seventies, undertook a fourth and final preaching tour in Swabia, visiting Roden-kirchen, Maulbronn, Hirsau, Kirchheim, and Zwiefalten.

While writing six major books, founding two monasteries, and preaching throughout Germany, Hildegard also found time for various occasional and controversial works. Among her opuscula are expositions of the Benedictine Rule and the Athanasian Creed, lives of her patron saints Rupert and Disibod, and solutions to thirty-eight theological questions propounded by Guibert and the monks of Villers.³³ A series of Gospel homilies, probably transcribed by her nuns in chapter, displays a strong originality despite the sketchy transmission.³⁴ Perhaps the oddest of all her works is the so-called *Unknown Language*, a list of about nine hundred artificial nouns and other words with an accompanying German glossary. The purpose of this invented language is unclear, although it includes many names for plants and herbs and may have been related to Hildegard's medical work.³⁵ More urgently, she was always willing if need be to engage in polemic. During the 1160s the Cathars were making headway in the Rhineland, and, at the request of a religious community in Mainz, Hildegard wrote a tract against them.³⁶ At about the same time Eberhard, bishop of Bamberg, requested her opinion in his christological quarrel with Gerhoch of Reichersberg. The saint's answer is an exposition of her own Trinitarian theology.³⁷

In political affairs Hildegard could take advantage of her aristocratic standing and her celebrity to obtain privileges from the great; but she could equally well oppose them, qua prophet, in the name of God. The most outstanding case is her double-edged relationship with Barbarossa. In 1163, several years after the meeting at Ingelheim, Frederick granted the

Rupertsberg an edict of imperial protection in perpetuity.³⁸ Ever since 1159 this emperor had been technically schismatic in backing a papal candidate of his own, Victor IV, against Pope Alexander III. Hildegard had taken no stance in the schism. But when Victor died in 1164 and Frederick named a successor, Paschal III, the abbess sent him a sharp rebuke, comparing him to an infant and a madman.³⁹ He remained obdurate, however, and on Paschal's death in 1168 appointed yet another antipope, Calixtus III. This time Hildegard thundered forth the wrath of God: "He Who Is says: I destroy contumacy, and by myself I crush the resistance of those who despise me. Woe, woe to the malice of wicked men who defy me! Hear this, king, if you wish to live; otherwise my sword shall smite you."⁴⁰ Even so the emperor did not relent, and the schism dragged on until 1177. Nevertheless, despite Hildegard's savage outbursts against Frederick, his letter of protection kept the Rupertsberg safe from all harm during the factional warfare.

The last years of Hildegard's life were marred by two further controversies. The first began in 1173 when her secretary, Völmur, who was also provost of the convent, died and the monks of St. Disibod refused to replace him. In this emergency Hildegard turned to Alexander III, whose rights she had so vehemently defended.⁴¹ By the pope's intervention she finally attained a new provost, Gottfried, who took advantage of his office to begin composing the saint's *Vita*. Gottfried himself died in 1176, but by this time Hildegard had found a new patron in Guibert of Gembloux. The ardent Walloon monk, inspired by his correspondence with the seer, eventually came to visit her in Bingen and became her secretary in 1177, remaining at the convent until after her death.

In 1178 the eighty-year-old abbess faced the gravest trial of her life: an interdict laid upon her community.⁴² The ostensible cause of this ban was the burial of an excommunicated nobleman in the Rupertsberg churchyard, although the deceased had been reconciled with the Church before his death. The canons of Mainz Cathedral demanded that his bones be exhumed, but Hildegard refused and instead solemnly blessed the grave with her abbatial staff. Philip, archbishop of Cologne, intervened for the abbess and found reliable witnesses to prove that the dead man had been absolved and deserved sacred burial. On their testimony the canons, in the absence of the usurping Archbishop Christian, then lifted the interdict. However, Hildegard's enemies managed to persuade Christian, who was attending the Third Lateran Council in Rome, that the canons' action infringed on his rights. Christian thereupon renewed the ban temporarily, in spite of the abbess's unrelenting protests. This interdict occasioned a lengthy epistle from Hildegard to the prelates of Mainz, including a passionate defense of the liturgical music that was forbidden to her nuns under the ban.⁴³ The sentence was not lifted until March of 1179, six months before the seer's death on September 17.

Veneration of Hildegard as a saint began at once, and Pope Gregory IX opened proceedings for canonization in 1233. For technical reasons, this process was never concluded: the inquisitors did their work shoddily and failed to record names, dates, and places in their account of Hildegard's miracles.⁴⁴ According to Trithemius of Sponheim, further abortive inquiries were mounted in 1243 and 1317, but no records corroborate his testimony. Legend has it that the saint's miracles had ceased in the meantime because a steady stream of pilgrims had been disturbing the nuns, who asked the bishop if he might order their deceased founder,

under obedience, to work no more wonders.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, her local cult remained strong. Since 1940 her commemoration on September 17 has been observed as a double feast, by permission of the Sacred Congregation, in all Catholic dioceses of Germany.⁴⁶

SURVEY OF HILDEGARD'S WORKS

Hildegard's visionary oeuvre—rich, opaque, and unwieldy—is a phenomenon unique in twelfth-century letters; yet at the same time her books provide a compendium of contemporary thought. In the *Scivias* her emphasis is doctrinal; in the *Book of Life's Merits*, ethical; in the *Activity of God*, scientific. But despite their differences in content, the three volumes of the trilogy bear one unmistakable impress. Hildegard's is a world in which neither the distinctions of the schoolmen, nor the negations of the apophatic doctors, nor the raptures of the nuptial mystics have any place; yet no less than theirs, it is a world instinct with order, mystery, and flaming love. Her universe rings with the most intricate and inviolate harmonies, yet seethes with the strife of relentlessly warring forces. Things above answer to things below: the eyes of cherubim mirror the faces of saints, and the children of Eve shine like stars in heaven. Soul, body, and cosmos interact in patterns as dynamic as they are eccentric. And the living Light irradiates all—yet even at the heart of the cosmic dance, the power of darkness has its place, if only to lie prostrate beneath the feet of Love. The fragile soul, graced with the fateful knowledge of good and evil, torn by celestial yearnings yet prey to infernal promptings, makes its precarious way through the world under the guidance of Church and Empire, free at every moment to rebel or to obey.

In the *Scivias*, Hildegard's most famous work, the play of “visionary forms dramatic” shapes a comprehensive guide to Christian doctrine. Despite its outlandish imagery, in substance the book is not far removed from Hugh of St. Victor's summa, *On the Sacraments of the Christian Faith*, written only a decade or two earlier (c. 1134). Like Hugh, though less systematically, Hildegard ranged over the themes of divine majesty, the Trinity, creation, the fall of Lucifer and of Adam, the stages of salvation history, the Church and its sacraments, the Last Judgment and the world to come. She lingered long over the subjects of priesthood, the Eucharist, and marriage—all doctrines openly rejected by the Cathars; and she returned time and again to two of her favorite themes, the centrality of the Incarnation and the necessity of spiritual combat. In the third and longest portion, she described a vast architectonic structure that represents the “edifice of salvation”—the City of God, or the Church in the fullness of its divine and human reality.

Within the walls of this allegorical city dwell a host of women, the *Virtutes*, whose dress, attributes, speeches, and gestures express meaning down to the least detail. Although these Virtues may appear to be conventional figures in the tradition of Prudentius's *Psychomachia*,⁴⁷ they actually have a far deeper significance. For every virtue, Hildegard wrote, is in truth “a luminous sphere from God gleaming in the work of man”⁴⁸—not a personified moral quality, but a numinous force that appears in human form only because it empowers human action. The seer's German translators correctly render *Virtutes* as *Krafte*, not *Tugenden*, for the Virtues' moral significance is secondary to their divine, ontological power. Like Christ and the Church, the Virtues have a dual nature; they indicate, first, divine grace and, second, human

cooperation. Through them Hildegard conveyed her profound conception of synergy—salvation as the joint effort of God and humanity. (As we shall see, their feminine form is no mere accident of grammar.) The *Scivias* ends with an apocalyptic section, a cycle of hymns in honor of the blessed, and a morality play—by far the oldest example of this genre—in which the Virtues help a penitent soul to resist diabolic wiles and find salvation.⁴⁹

For students of medieval art, the *Scivias* is of particular interest because of the striking illuminated manuscript prepared at Hildegard's own scriptorium, most likely under her supervision, around 1165 (Wiesbaden, Hessische Landesbibliothek, Hs. 1).⁵⁰ This manuscript was ill-advisedly taken to Dresden for safekeeping during World War II and has been missing since 1945. Fortunately, however, the nuns of Eibingen had prepared a handwritten and hand-painted facsimile during the late 1920s, and it is from this copy (Eibingen, Abtei St. Hildegard, Cod. 1) that most of the illustrations in this volume are taken. The Rupertsberg *Scivias* paintings are unique, stylistically remote from the work of contemporary manuscript painters. Some in fact are reminiscent of early woodcuts. They have all the freshness of naïf art, and, like Hildegard's prose, they atone for a certain lack of finesse by their startling energy and originality. Although standard iconographic motifs can be recognized in them, they occur in unusual combinations, and many of the images are so eccentric that it is reasonable to posit a close working relationship between the visionary and the unknown artist—possibly one of Hildegard's nuns.

The *Book of Life's Merits*, the second volume of her trilogy, is organized around a single visionary figure. Hildegard here envisioned God in the form of a winged man (*vir*), whose head and shoulders rise into the pure ether. From his shoulders to his thighs, he is wrapped in a shining cloud; from thighs to knees, enveloped in the air of this world; from knees to calves, immersed in the earth; and his feet rest in the waters of the abyss. From the breath of his mouth issue three clouds—one flaming, one stormy, and one luminous—representing three orders of blessed spirits. This colossal figure surveys and sustains the cosmos, which unfolds around him, filling it with a boundless vitality. He is called *vir*, the seer explained, because from him proceed all strength (*vis*) and all things that live (*vivunt*). The eternity of God, which he embodies, “is a fire...not a hidden fire, or a silent fire, but an active fire” that animates the world.⁵¹ This divine immanence will be the major theme of the *Activity of God*. But in the present book, Hildegard was content to let the grandeur of God highlight the sins of men and women, which form her principal subject.

The book is carefully structured. In each of the first five parts, a brief vision of the Cosmic Man introduces a dialogue in which a group of Vices advertise their wickedness, only to be confounded by the corresponding Virtues. Unlike the Virtues, the Vices do not present their traditional feminine forms; rather, they are grotesques whose elements—part male, part female, and part bestial—reveal their moral deformity. Hardness of Heart, for example, is a dense cloud of smoke with no human features but a pair of great, black eyes, fixed on the darkness; Witchcraft has the head of a wolf, the body of a dog, and the tail of a lion; Self-Pity is a leper who wears nothing but leaves and beats his breast as he speaks.⁵² After each set of dialogues, Hildegard gave an exegesis of her vision, interspersed with Biblical glosses and theological commentary; explained the appearance of each Vice allegorically; and concluded by presenting the pains that Vice would merit in purgatory, together with penances the sinner might do here

and now to avoid them. In the sixth and last part of the book, she added brief descriptions of heaven and hell to complement this long *Purgatorio*.

On the Activity of God, at once the most systematic and the most digressive of Hildegard's books, presents a teeming moralized cosmos in which anything may symbolize anything else. After an overpowering vision of divine Love as the author and vital force of creation (see frontispiece), Hildegard recounted nine cosmological visions, which convey a mathematically precise yet intensely dynamic model of the world, superimposed on the human form divine and on the City of God envisioned in the *Scivias*. Once again, a versatile technique of allegoresis supplies links between the most disparate phenomena. Some of her interpretations are fairly conventional, as when she compared the sixteen principal stars to the doctors of the Church. Their number represents the ten commandments plus the six ages of the world, or the four corners of the earth times the four holy fears, or the eight beatitudes multiplied by the two forms of charity.⁵³ Other readings are more abstruse. In one section Hildegard worked out an elaborate set of correlations between months of the year, parts of the body, ages of life, and passions of the soul. Some of these, quaint though they seem, display a lively feeling for the depths of experience hidden in everyday life. The month of November, for example, is correlated with the knees, the age of senility or second childhood, and the pangs of remorse.

An old man, for fear of the chill, folds his limbs to warm himself by the fire, because he is naturally cold. Even so this month, which is cold every day and lacks the jollity of summer, is like the knees that a man bends in sorrow, remembering his beginnings—when with folded knees he sat like a captive in his mother's womb.⁵⁴

What sustains this phantasmagoria of symbols? Although its wealth of detail can seem turgid, its ordering principles are few and cohesive. First, Hildegard, in typical twelfth-century fashion, saw the world as a divine milieu in which every being is both a sign of the Creator's plenitude and a potential instrument for his action. Her outlook was profoundly theocentric. Second, within this divine milieu, the human being holds the place of honor as the image of God. And in the third place, because the most important activity in life is the salvation of the soul, the cosmos is to be read as one vast and complicated moral lesson. So at the heart of her book Hildegard set two long Biblical commentaries, one on the prologue of St. John's Gospel and one on the first chapter of Genesis. The Gospel text rightly precedes, for only the Word-made-flesh can interpret the creative Word uttered by God in the beginning. That same Word now addresses the believing soul from every nook and cranny of creation, as in the celebrated verse of Alan of Lille:

Omnis mundi creatura
Quasi liber et pictura
Nobis est et speculum.⁵⁵

For Hildegard, therefore, the moral interpretation of the east wind, the eyebrows, or the creation of fish was no decorative fancy, but mattered as much as the phenomena themselves; for all creatures were fabricated for man (*homo*), the body for the soul, and the soul for the glory of God.

Even the angels exult in the good works of the saints, because man is the consummate work

of God, fashioned from the four elements to receive the splendor that was Lucifer's before he fell. While the angels were created as spiritual beings alone—pure instruments of praise—the human being is destined for both praise and work, possessing an earthen body as well as a fiery spirit. What is more, he is the very garment of the incarnate Word, the creature in whom God vested himself to display his royal majesty.⁵⁶ Yet this exalted view of human dignity is balanced—or undercut—by a dualism that goes so far as to claim that the sinful body can defile the pure soul even against its will. In a passage dealing with infants, Hildegard maintained that the newborn soul is pure as Adam in Paradise until the age of weaning, when the child's body and bones grow stronger. Then the teething baby wails in pain over the loss of its primal joy, because the soul, “oppressed against its nature, has been overcome by the body living in sin.”⁵⁷ Thus, Hildegard oscillated between a joyful affirmation of the world and the body, and a melancholy horror of the flesh—and its master, the devil. This anthropological tension is deeply rooted and ubiquitous in her works. Often, as we shall see, it takes the form of a dichotomy between a bold and affirmative use of sexual symbolism and a largely negative view of sexual practice.

In the last visions of the *Activity of God*, Hildegard turned from cosmology to history, ranging with equal assurance over past, present, and future. A panegyric on the Apostles leads to a critique of the contemporary Church, which in turn ushers in a passage of apocalyptic prophecy. Her views on the Antichrist are beside my purpose, but it is worth noting that, although her trilogy as a whole found few readers in her own age or any other, her prophecies held the interest of many generations.⁵⁸ John of Salisbury, in the seer's lifetime, asked Girardus Pucelle to scour her books for revelations about the papal schism and the unhappy fate of Rome.⁵⁹ In 1220, forty years after Hildegard's death, the Cistercian prior Gebeno of Eberbach compiled an anthology of her prophetic and apocalyptic writings. This influential text, entitled *Pentachronon* or *Mirror of Future Times*, survives in well over a hundred manuscripts—as compared with eleven for the *Scivias* and four for *On the Activity of God*.⁶⁰

The reason for this lack of readership is not obscure. Gebeno himself, one of Hildegard's admirers, had to admit in his preface that “most people dislike and shrink from reading St. Hildegard's books, because she speaks obscurely and in an unusual style—not understanding that this is a proof of true prophecy.”⁶¹ The saint's Renaissance eulogist, Trithemius of Sponheim, echoed Gebeno's opinion and ascribed the obscurity of Hildegard's style to her inspiration; “no mortal can understand” her works, he maintained, “unless his soul has in truth been inwardly reformed to God's likeness.”⁶² But even a devout reader must face difficulties other than those inherent in the matter. For Hildegard, despite her encyclopedic knowledge, never mastered Latin grammar well enough to write without a secretary to correct her cases and tenses.⁶³ Even with such assistance, her style suffers from redundancies, awkward constructions, and baffling neologisms; and her ideas often stretched her limited vocabulary to the breaking point.

Yet although the seer was self-conscious about her “unpolished” style, she seems to have cherished it as a mark that her inspiration must be divine because she herself scarcely knew how to write. When Guibert of Gembloux, with his humanistic love of eloquence, succeeded Volmar and Gottfried as her secretary, he and the abbess had a heated argument over the

question of style. Hildegard first commended the nuns who took her dictation, as well as her “only beloved son of pious memory, Volmar,” for contenting themselves with her *ipsissima verba* in all simplicity. Guibert, however, proposed the classic Augustinian argument that even wisdom needs the seasoning of eloquence: “inept” and “inharmonious” writing repels readers, but a becoming style moves and inspires them. Whether St. Hildegard was genuinely persuaded or merely desperate, she finally conceded:

When you correct [the *Life of St. Martin*] and the other works, in the emending of which your love kindly supports my deficiency, you should keep to this rule: that adding, subtracting, and changing nothing, you apply your skill only to make corrections where the order or the rules of correct Latin are violated. Or if you prefer—and this is something I have conceded in this letter beyond my normal practice—you need not hesitate to clothe the whole sequence of the vision in a more becoming garment of speech, preserving the true sense in every part. For even as foods nourishing in themselves do not appeal to the appetite unless they are seasoned somehow, so writings, although full of salutary advice, displease ears accustomed to an urbane style if they are not recommended by some color of eloquence.⁶⁴

This letter was written by Guibert in Hildegard's persona, and we may suspect that the eager monk exaggerated his own victory. Nevertheless, the *Life of St. Martin* as “corrected” by his eloquence can scarcely be recognized as Hildegard's. Purists can at least rejoice that their collaboration began only after the seer's major works were completed.

Yet despite its obscurity, Hildegard's style has a fascination of its own. As Peter Dronke has observed, “it is a highly individual language, at times awkward and at times unclear; the adjectives can be repetitious and limited in range, the interjections excessive. It is the language not of a polished twelfth-century humanist but of someone whose unique powers of poetic vision confronted her more than once with the limits of poetic expression.”⁶⁵ Although Dronke was writing of the seer's verse, his comments apply just as well to her prose works. For, despite her defective Latin, Hildegard could be a remarkably “poetic” stylist. It is not only that her writings are governed by symbolic rather than logical thought—a distinguishing feature of monastic vis-a-vis scholastic theology.⁶⁶ Even in the context of twelfth-century symbolics, Hildegard had no peer in her kaleidoscopic array of metaphors, her figures within figures, her synesthetic language. In the midst of a routine bit of exegesis, she would suddenly convey some new insight with an arresting turn of phrase, or use a familiar typological image in a wholly new sense. Expressive flashes of alliteration punctuate otherwise plodding texts. At times a passage will rise to a pitch of lyric intensity, almost to incantation, then as quickly return to bare expository prose.

One of the most distinctive features of her style is the contrast between her visions themselves—described in meticulous detail—and the far longer glosses furnished by a “voice from heaven.” Christel Meier has noted that Hildegard's visions are sometimes incoherent on the literal plane because their component parts are related not to each other but directly to the thing signified.⁶⁷ Hence the images do not immediately evoke the desired interpretation, as in conventional iconography; they require glossing by the celestial voice and the visionary forms themselves. All that is elusive and tantalizing in the visions takes on a fixed, unalterable sense

in the interpretations, as the evocative freedom of ambiguity hardens into the sharp precision of allegory.⁶⁸ Hildegard is one of the rare medieval authors who can be cited both as a textbook example of allegoresis and as a precursor of the Symbolist poets. And she is certainly the only twelfth-century writer to have composed hymns and sequences in free verse. Dronke has cited the liturgical cycle of Notker as a source of her inspiration,⁶⁹ but although Hildegard may have taken his cyclic form as a model, her own compositions bear little resemblance to the classic sequence. Her unrhymed, unmetrical songs, wholly unpredictable as to line division, length, and stanzaic pattern, follow the rhythms of thought alone. Their content belongs to the twelfth century, but their form anticipates the twentieth.

From a literary standpoint, the only authors who left an unmistakable mark on Hildegard's style are the Biblical prophets.⁷⁰ Like them she appealed to direct experience ("And I saw... and I heard"); like them she expressed her awe and terror before the Presence; like them she used metaphor and parable, attempting when all else failed to express the inexpressible with qualifiers (*velut, quasi, forma, imago, similitudo*). Like Ezekiel she gave the precise date of her calling.

Now it came to pass in the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, when I was in the midst of the captives by the river Chobar, the heavens were opened, and I saw the visions of God. (Ezek. 1:1)

It came to pass in the one thousand one hundred forty-first year of the Incarnation of God's Son Jesus Christ, when I was forty-two years and seven months old, that the heavens were opened.⁷¹

Like Jeremiah she did not trust herself to speak, but opened her mouth only by the command and power of God.

Then I said, "Ah, Lord God! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth." But the Lord said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a youth'; for to all to whom I send you you shall go, and whatever I command you you shall speak."

(Jer. 1:6-7)

But because you are timid in speaking and simple in expounding and unlearned in writing these things, tell and write them not in accord with human speech, or the understanding of human invention, or the will of human composition, but in accord with what you see and hear in the heavens above, in the marvels of God....

And again I heard a voice from heaven saying to me: "Cry out, therefore, and write thus."

Another aspect of Hildegard's prophetic style is her frequent, sometimes disconcerting change of grammatical persons. The voice from heaven often speaks in the divine first person; locutions like "My Son, Jesus Christ" indicate that God the Father is speaking through the seer. Without warning, however, the narration will suddenly shift from the first person to the third, as prophecy subsides into exposition. But even when Hildegard spoke in her own persona, she ascribed her words to the celestial exegete, whose voice thus interprets and governs the entire visionary opus. It is significant that, apart from her lyrics, she scarcely ever addressed God in

the second person; her writings are proclamation, not prayer.

Hildegard's style, then, clearly proclaims her prophetic self-awareness. Her correspondents, too, compared her to the Biblical prophets—from Deborah, Olda, Hannah, and Elizabeth to Balaam's ass.⁷² And, like the great seers of the Old Testament, she sought by all possible means to bring the people of God to repentance. To that end she used both threats of catastrophe and promises of grace, conveyed in graphic and often startling imagery. Exempla from Scripture, symbols from the world of nature, and prophecies of things to come could serve her equally well as vehicles for the critique of abuses, coupled with the call to renewed moral and spiritual zeal.

Typical of Hildegard's prophetic style is the sermon she preached in Trier on the feast of Pentecost, 1160.⁷³ It begins with a typical protestation of modesty: “I, a poor little figure without health or strength or courage or learning, myself subject to masters, have heard these words addressed to the prelates and clergy of Trier, from the mystical light of the true vision.” In the peroration that follows, Hildegard laments that because prelates neglect to “sound the trumpet of justice,” the four quarters of the earth are darkened: in the east the dawn of good works is extinguished, in the south the ardor of virtue is chilled, and in the west the twilight of mercy yields to midnight blackness. But from the north, the figurative realm of Satan, comes a hissing wind of pride, infidelity, and neglect of God.

This grandiloquent imagery sounds vague enough; but, reading between the lines, one can find more specific complaints. In the first place, the prophet opposed excessive clerical wealth: prelates, she said, shall find that the breadth of their estates has forged constraints for their souls. Their easy living has turned virile courage into feminine weakness, which has no strength to fight because man is naturally the head; and this effeminate age began “with a certain tyrant,” the source of all the Church's present woes. This “tyrant” is of course Barbarossa, whom Hildegard warily avoided naming; she had yet to declare open conflict with him. But her implicit message is clear: the German bishops, all too ready to accept imperial election and control, have become emasculated and lost the courage to oppose a now-schismatic emperor. After a long digression on the heroes of salvation history—meant to underscore the difference between obeying God and obeying men—Hildegard threatened a lax and worldly Church with the fate that it deserved.

But now the law is neglected among the spiritual people, *whp* scorn to do and teach what is good. And the masters and prelates sleep, while justice is abandoned. Hence I heard this voice from heaven saying: O daughter of Sion, the crown will tumble from your head, the far-flung pallium of your riches will be drawn in and confined to a narrow measure, and you will be banished from region to region. Many cities and monasteries shall be dispersed by the powerful. And princes will say: Let us take from them the iniquity that turns the whole world upside down among them.

The prophecy continues: because of their injustice and conspicuous wealth, priests will be persecuted and the Church purified. “Virile times” will return with warfare, by the judgment of God, and afterward there will be a renaissance of prophecy, learning, and reverence. Even secular people will be converted by the example of their superiors to a holy way of life. Finally, the Antichrist will arise, but God will crush him as a craftsman smashes the useless

works in his shop.

At the end of her sermon, Hildegard returned to her most pressing message. Once, in a vision, she saw the city of Trier aglow with Pentecostal fire so that its streets glistened like gold; but now it is so defiled that fiery vengeance from its enemies will fall upon it, unless the city repents like Nineveh in the days of the prophet Jonah. A medieval chronicler might easily see Hildegard's prophecy confirmed by the internecine warfare, the growing breach between Frederick and the German clergy, and the confiscation of church lands that resulted from the continuing papal schism. But even the political message, like the apocalyptic and the visionary language, remains subordinate to the overriding ethical demand. "Repentance" here entails, but is not limited to, restoration of the proper authority and autonomy of the German bishops. It also requires absolute fidelity to the Word of God as set forth in Scripture, tradition, and—not least—the seer's own prophetic writings. This breadth of intention may be one reason why Hildegard was often deliberately vague about names and events, although she did not hesitate to take sides in current affairs. Like the Biblical prophets, she preferred to veil her advice in symbolic language that could apply to a wide range of situations.

In addition to preaching and apocalyptic, Hildegard's prophetic activity extended to the private sphere. Of her many correspondents, the priests and monastics—by far the majority—wrote to ask her for prayers, counsel, and revelations concerning their personal and communal lives. Her answers, dictated "by the living Light," present a miscellany of visions and teachings, often of very general import. But sometimes the questions are more specific: Should I resign my abbacy or persevere? How can we monks correct our fraternal bickering? Are our relics genuine? How can we exorcise a woman obsessed by devils? Should we receive the erring brother who wants to return? And laypeople asked: Are my kinsmen suffering in purgatory? Will my husband recover from his illness? Should I take my inheritance case before the emperor? Hildegard did not always answer such questions: sometimes she explained that God had not shown her everything, or that it was better for the writer not to know. But in trying to reconstruct her daily life and work, we must not forget the constant stream of messengers and pilgrims who honored and sometimes plagued her with these requests. And while we cannot survey the whole of her correspondence, we can imagine her as a woman among women by looking at three letters to persons of widely differing rank: an abbess, an empress, and an afflicted matron.

Much of Hildegard's activity was directed toward monastic reform. We may take her letter to Sophia, abbess of Altwick, as typical both of contemporary monastic problems and of the seer's characteristic imagery in writing of women. Sophia, like so many twelfth-century superiors, yearned to lay down the burden of pastoral care, which weighed heavily upon her, in exchange for an eremitic life "in the solitude of some little cell."⁷⁴ But to the seer, this seemingly pious wish was a snare and a delusion.

O daughter born of the side of man, and figure formed in the building of God: why do you languish so that your mind shifts like clouds in a storm, now shining like the light and now darkened?... You say, "I want to rest and seek a place where my heart can have a nest, so that my soul may rest there." Daughter, before God it is useless for you to cast off your burden and abandon the flock of *God*, while you have a light to illumine it so that you can

lead it to pasture. Now restrain yourself, lest your mind blaze in that sweetness which would greatly harm you in the vicissitudes of the solitary life.

In the lure of the hermitage, Hildegard saw only a spurious and irresponsible pietism. Far better is the onerous but necessary care of souls in fidelity to a vow once taken. With but one exception, she gave the same counsel to all the abbots and abbesses who raised this question—although in each case she claimed to have a special revelation for her correspondent.⁷⁵ Collectively, then, the letters express an aspect of Hildegard's concern for effective and vigilant pastoral care at all levels, while her imagery varied with each correspondent's personal need. In this letter to Sophia, she began by comparing the abbess to Eve, then figuratively to Ecclesia—the “new Eve” taken from the side of Christ, the new Adam, to be God's living temple. The greeting reinforces Hildegard's explicit message on the symbolic level: it is by fulfilling her appointed task of leadership in the Church that Abbess Sophia will also live out her feminine role as a *figura* of it.

In her dealings with the secular powers, Hildegard was not always as harsh as she was with Frederick. One of her letters, addressed to “Bertha, queen of the Greeks”—otherwise Irene, wife of the Byzantine Emperor Manuel Comnenus—was apparently written to console the German-born empress for her failure to bear a son.⁷⁶ Hildegard greeted the empress respectfully, but with the authority that befits a prophet.

The breath of the Spirit of God says:...By a stream that rises from a rock in the East the filth of other waters is cleansed, for it runs swiftly and is more useful than other waters, because there is no corruption in it. So it is with those to whom God grants a day of prosperity and a glowing dawn of honor, and whom the north wind does not oppress with the rough blast of hostile foes. Therefore look to him who has touched you, who seeks a burnt offering from your heart and the keeping of his commandments. Sigh to him, therefore, and may he give you the joy of offspring as you desire, and as you petition him in your need. For the living eye regards you and wishes to have you, and you shall live forever.

We do not know whether Bertha had asked Hildegard especially to pray she would bear a son, and the saint made no rash promise. What is noteworthy in Hildegard's letter, beyond the usual exhortation to trust God, is her analogy between the queen's noble status and the mountain stream, which purifies the land because it flows from the heights. The powerful whom God has exalted to prosperity and honor should likewise set an example of gratitude and virtue for the realm. But, while admonishing the empress and promising the salvation of her soul, Hildegard refused to prophesy her earthly future.

The seer stressed this limitation of her fortune-telling abilities when writing to a woman of much humbler rank, one Sibyl of Lausanne.⁷⁷ This matron's circumstances are not clear from Hildegard's two surviving letters to her, but she seems to have been bereaved by a complicated family tragedy. Hildegard called her a “daughter of the woods,” so perhaps she had tried to adopt the life of a recluse. Whatever the woman's predicament, Hildegard carefully delimited the role she herself was able to play in it.

Sibyl, handiwork of God's finger, amend your unstable way of life, and do not exert

yourself in mental agitation. You cannot excuse yourself by this means, for God discerns everything. But God does not bid me to explain his judgments upon you, but rather to pray for you, because certain people are now watching out for revenge on account of what your parents did. For sometimes God stretches out his lash even to the third and fourth generations. Yet trust in the Lord that he may deliver you from the sword of your enemies, even though your daughter has been seized by them.

I, however, speak more about the salvation of souls than about the fates of men, so I often say nothing about these things. For the Holy Spirit pours out not revelation to confound people's crimes, but just judgment. Now may God set you in the field of life that you may live forever.⁷⁸

Hildegard's private epistles, compared with her public sermons, reveal that she felt more confident in predicting events on a grand scale than in foretelling individual fates. To her friend Sibyl she gave no more than the pious counsel, consolation, and prayers that any Christian might offer, although she still wrote with an assured authority. Yet in a second letter to this woman, she displayed another and more spectacular charism.

This time, the hapless Sibyl had been suffering from an issue of blood, like the sick woman described in Mark 5:25–34. In the name of the visionary Light, Hildegard proposed a cure.

Place your trust in God. But around your chest and your navel set these words, in the name of him who orders all things rightly: “In the blood of Adam death arose; in the blood of Christ death was restrained. In that same blood of Christ I command you, blood, to cease your flowing.”⁷⁹

This charm, like many others in the *Book of Simple Medicine*, lies on the borderline between sacraments (in the broadest sense) and sympathetic magic. According to Hildegard's *Vita*, the remedy worked;⁸⁰ it is but one of many miraculous cures ascribed to her. Oddly enough, however, her medical books are unique among her writings in that they make no claim to any prophetic or visionary inspiration. The fact that she wrote them on her own initiative, so to speak, suggests that although she took a strong interest in medicine, she considered this aspect of her work less authoritative than her spiritual and ethical teaching. Nevertheless, there can be no doubt that her flair for unconventional healings, like her vivid apocalyptic and her audacious preaching tours, fired the imagination of her peers. Sensational gifts, after all, attract even pious attention more readily than serious calls to a devout and holy life. So Hildegard's renown as a creature blessed among women rested, for Guibert and other saint-watchers throughout the empire, on acts and claims more mysterious than the zeal of her teaching. Above all, it rested on her famed experience as a “seer of the living Light”

THEOLOGY AND THE PROBLEM OF FEMININE AUTHORITY

Hildegard's visions not only supplied her with a message; they also assured an audience for it. Were it not for the visions, she would never have preached or written at all, and she even maintained—echoing a theme as old as Moses—that in spite of them she was hardly eager to prophesy. But it is no less true that, had she not claimed her gift as a mark of divine authority, no one would have listened to her. Many have suggested that, in an age when the Apostle's

command that “no woman is to teach or have authority over men” (I Tim. 2:12) was rigorously enforced, it was only through visions that a religious or intellectual woman could gain a hearing. This is not to say that such visions were necessarily rooted in the desire for authority; but the visionary could not help knowing that, although men might perhaps heed a divinely inspired woman, they would have little patience with a mere presumptuous female.

This awareness can explain some of the vehemence with which Hildegard insisted on her inspiration, even to the point of claiming verbal inerrancy. In her *Vita* she told how, at the time of her move to the Rupertsberg, many asked “why so many mysteries should be revealed to a foolish and uneducated woman, when there are many powerful and learned men,” and some people wondered whether she had been seduced by evil spirits.⁸¹ Even some of her own nuns rejected her and refused to move to the new foundation. Although only one letter attacking Hildegard is extant, she referred in several places to her detractors. Some resented the severity, others the novelty of her monastic discipline; some questioned her pretensions to divine wisdom; and many must have been appalled at conduct unbecoming to her sex, for she remarked in one place that “now, to the scandal of men, women are prophesying.”⁸² The more vulnerable she knew herself to be, the more emphatically she needed to proclaim that it was not she but the Holy Spirit who spoke. To that end, only the certitude that she was transcribing exact dictation from the living Light could suffice both for herself and for her readers.

The problem of feminine authority was no less troubling for Hildegard herself than for her auditors, since she fully shared her culture's notions of female inferiority. No matter how strong her sense of the grace that animated her, she suffered from an almost equal sense of her own implausibility as a vessel. No doubt, as she struggled to overcome this diffidence, the aristocratic ease born of rank and privilege helped her more than she realized. But, in order to come to terms with her God-given authority, she needed to reconcile it with her gender in a strictly theological fashion. Two complementary means to this end—two strategies of validation, as it were—lay at hand. In the first place, as we have seen, Hildegard took her strongest stand on what seemed to be her worst disability—“feminine frailty.” Because the power of God is perfected in weakness, because the humblest shall be the most exalted, human impotence could become the sign and prelude of divine empowerment.⁸³ In Hildegard's eyes this negative capability compensated for her meager schooling and her poor health as well as for her gender. Her second mode of validation was more oblique, less conscious and deliberate. It lay in accentuating the feminine aspects of the divine, which the following chapters will explore at length. But these two strategies, apparently so opposed, are not unrelated. To see the feminine as a species of incapacity and frailty, yet also as a numinous and salvific dimension of the divine nature: herein lies the characteristic strain of what I have called Hildegard's “theology of the feminine.”

Before I turn to examine her visions in detail, it will be useful to see how these two themes were worked out, on a much smaller scale, by a woman closely associated with Hildegard. Her protegee Elisabeth, a young nun at the monastery of Schonau near Bingen, modeled herself from an early age on the seer across the Rhine. In 1152—five years after Hildegard was vindicated by Eugenius III and one year after she published the *Scivias*—the younger nun's visions began. According to her brother, editor, and staunchest supporter, Ekbert of Schonau, the twenty-three-year-old Elisabeth “was visited by the Lord and his hand was with her, doing

in her the most marvelous and memorable deeds in accord with his ancient mercies. Indeed, it was given to her to experience ecstasy and to see visions of the secrets of the Lord, which are hidden from mortals' eyes.”⁸⁴

Temperamentally, Elisabeth resembled Hildegard in many ways: she shared the older woman's physical frailty, her sensitivity to spiritual impressions of all kinds, and her need for public authentication to overcome initial self-doubt. Just as Hildegard had written in her uncertainty to Bernard, the outstanding saint of the age, so Elisabeth wrote to Hildegard—and, like the abbot of Clairvaux, the abbess of Bingen knew how to console her young protegee while warning her to remain humble. In a characteristic and revealing image, Hildegard told Elisabeth to be like a trumpet, which resounds not by its own effort but by the breath of another.⁸⁵ In fact the analogy fit Elisabeth better than Hildegard herself, for the younger woman lacked her admired mother's independence and originality. Many of her visions were inspired by the queries of Ekbert and other patrons, and often they echo Hildegard's in content, imagery, and style.⁸⁶

By 1158 the author of the *Annates Palidenses* found it natural to link the two visionary nuns in a single notice: “In these days also God displayed the signs of his power in the frail sex, that is, in his two handmaidens Hildegard on the Rupertsberg near Bingen and Elisabeth in Schonau, whom he filled with the spirit of prophecy and to whom, through the Gospel, he revealed many kinds of visions, which are extant in writing.”⁸⁷ The chronicler's reference to “the frail sex” shows once again that contemporaries could not overlook the issue of gender, whether they found in it occasion for praise or for blame. No less than Hildegard, Elisabeth felt this liability keenly. While she was still in doubt about publishing her visions, she feared that some people would dismiss them as satanic delusions or mere feminine fancies (*muliebria figmenta*).⁸⁸ And when, like Hildegard, she felt herself called to prophetic preaching, she needed assurance that God would help her fulfill what she felt to be a masculine role. Hence the angel of the Lord commanded her, “Arise,...and stand upon your feet, and I will speak with you; and fear not, for I am with you all the days of your life. Play the man (*viriliter age*) and let your heart take courage.”⁸⁹

In one sense, Elisabeth's path should have been easier than Hildegard's simply because the older nun could provide a model for her. Her *Book of the Ways of God* (1156) obviously takes its title, though not its subject matter, from the *Scivias*. Elisabeth gracefully acknowledged this debt in her vision of a pavilion filled with books that, an angel tells her, have yet to be revealed before the Day of Judgment. The angel shows Elisabeth her own volume, still unwritten, with the words: “This is the *Book of the Ways of God*, which is to be revealed through you after you have visited Sister Hildegard and heard her.’ And indeed.” Elisabeth added, “so the prophecy began to be fulfilled as soon as I had returned from seeing her.”⁹⁰ Like Hildegard, too, Elisabeth wrote a treatise against the Cathars⁹¹ and a collection of hortatory epistles to religious. Her best-selling book on St. Ursula fostered the cult of that same legendary saint to whom Hildegard wrote some of her most powerful lyrics. Elisabeth could also trust her patron to support her in the face of difficulties. For instance, when Elisabeth felt herself in jeopardy because someone had been circulating a spurious prophecy in her name, and because various disasters she had predicted did not come to pass, she could write to

Hildegard in confidence that the abbess of Bingen would clear her name.⁹²

On the other hand, the older visionary had sources of security that her protegee lacked. First, from a secular standpoint, she could count on support from a powerful circle of friends, relatives, and churchmen—including St. Bernard, the archbishop of Mainz, and the pope. Elisabeth had only her devoted brother. Second, Hildegard seems to have had fewer doubts about the authenticity of her call, although she did fear its consequences. Elisabeth began more hesitantly still. Not only did she endure sickness and short-term paralysis, like Hildegard; she also suffered from profound depression, anorexia, suicidal temptations, and demonic apparitions, which alternated for a long time with her more wholesome visions. Whereas Hildegard stressed that her visions seldom interfered with her normal functioning, Elisabeth experienced hers in ecstasy, usually accompanied by agony. This state of inner turmoil gradually subsided, and, as the visionary became more confident, her writings became more objective—less concerned with her personal sufferings and more closely connected with the liturgical year, the needs of her community, and the theological interests of her friends. Her later works thus reflect not only Hildegard's influence but also the successful resolution of her early conflicts. The conflicts themselves, however, were worked out in her initial *Book of Visions*, where the problem of feminine authority emerges as a persistent theme. Elisabeth's ways of coming to terms with her prophetic role, through the instruction and consolation received in her visions, can serve as a preview of Hildegard's more sustained and ample development of this same problematic.

One obvious reply to detractors was available in the Old Testament, whence exempla of feminine courage had been drawn from time out of mind. Elisabeth did not hesitate to invoke the great mothers of Israel:

People are scandalized that in these days the Lord deigns to magnify his great mercy in the frail sex. But why doesn't it cross their minds that a similar thing happened in the days of our fathers when, while men were given to indolence, holy women were filled with the Spirit of God so that they could prophesy, energetically govern the people of God, and even win glorious victories over Israel's enemies? I speak of women like Hilda, Deborah, Judith, Jael, and the like.⁹³

In the seer's reference to “men...given to indolence” we can again recognize Hildegard's complaint about “effeminate times,” which justify feminine leaders.

Further support for the notion of empowered women comes from the visions themselves. It is not surprising that Elisabeth, in her distress, should receive comfort from the Virgin; but it is more striking that she should see Mary dressed like a priest, standing beside the altar vested in a chasuble and a glorious crown.⁹⁴ In another vision Elisabeth beheld the apocalyptic woman clothed with the sun, who turned out to be neither Mary nor the Church but “the sacred humanity of the Lord Jesus” weeping over the iniquity of the world.⁹⁵ Elisabeth's brother was upset by this identification, so at his bidding she asked her next heavenly visitor “why the Savior's humanity was shown to me in the guise of a virgin and not in the form of a man.” She received a conventional answer, namely that this vision could refer to the Virgin Mary as well as to Christ. But the initial interpretation was not withdrawn. To Elisabeth's inspired imagination, it appeared that if Christ is both divine and human he must also be female as well

as male. Both these visions obliquely validate the seer's authority through and despite her sex. In one of them a woman appears in a powerful male role, and in the other Christ himself appears as a woman.⁹⁶

In a different vein, the *Book of Visions* closes with a text even more reminiscent of Hildegard. Elisabeth had seen Nebuchadnezzar's vision (Dan. 2:31–33) of a great statue with a head of gold, chest of silver, belly of bronze, legs of iron, and feet of clay; and she interpreted this image as the apocalyptic Christ. The feet of clay in her vision represented Christ's human body and soul, and she wanted to know why these were so frail while the iron and bronze, symbolizing the Church, were so strong. The answer she received is this: “all the virtue and strength of the Church grew out of the Savior's weakness, which he incurred through the flesh. The weakness of God is stronger than men. This was well demonstrated by a figure in the first parents, when the vigor of bone was taken from Adam that Eve might be made; that the woman might be confirmed whence the man was made infirm” (*inde firmaretur mulier, unde infirmatus est vir*).⁹⁷ Here Elisabeth, like Hildegard, associated the paradox of saving weakness with the reversal of normal gender roles, whereby men become weak and women strong. Earlier she had seen Christ's humanity in the guise of a woman; now that same humanity is represented by the fragile feet of clay, which, paradoxically, confer strength on the woman Ecclesia.

It was through reflection on the humanity of Christ, considered in all its multifarious richness, that Elisabeth came to accept both feminine weakness and feminine strength. Her theology of the feminine, like Hildegard's, has its roots in the charismatic woman's need for authentication in a mistrustful world. But both visionaries finally transcended that need. In the chapters to come we shall see how Hildegard, blending the high traditions of sapiential thought with received ideas about women and weakness, was able to achieve a distinctive, tense, and highly energized interpretation of the Christian faith.

1. Portions of this chapter have previously appeared in my article “Hildegard of Bingen: Visions and Validation.” *Church History* 54 (1985): 163–75.

2. Ep. 164, Pitra 576. All translations in this book are mine unless otherwise noted.

3. Ep. 1, Pitra 328–31.

4. Ep. 14, Pitra 378–79.

5. Ep. 16, Pitra 386.

6. Ep. 21, Pitra 395. This letter bears the name of Guibert, but the monk later advised Hildegard's nuns that his brothers at Villers had written and sent it without his knowledge (Ep. 22, Pitra 396).

7. Ep. 2, Pitra 332.

8. Philippe Delhaye, “Le dossier antimatrimonial de *I'dversus Iovinianum* et son influence sur quelques écrits latins du XIP siècle,” *Mediaeval Studies* 13 (1951): 65–86; Vern Bullough, “Medieval Medical and Scientific Views of Women,” *Viator* 4 (1973): 485–501; Julia O'Faolain and Lauro Martines, eds., *Not in God's Image* (New York, 1973); Marie-Thérèse d'Alverny, “Comment les théologiens et les philosophes voient la femme.” *Cahiers de civilisation médi-évale* 20 (1977): 105–29.

9. Fragment IV. 28, p. 71. For the *muliebre tempus* see Ep. 13 (PL 197:167b), Ep. 26 (185c), Ep. 49 (254cd).

10. *Scivias* I. 1, p. 8.

11. For the *Vita* and *Acta* see PL 197: 91–140. Guibert's *Vita* appears in Pitra 407–14. Other documents pertaining to Hildegard can be found in A ASS September, vol. 5, 629–701; *Maimer Urkundenbuch*, ed. P. Acht, vol. 2, pt. 1 (Darmstadt, 1968); *Annales Zwifaltenses maiores* ad 1142 (MGH. SS. 10, p. 56); *Vita S. Gerlaci* 8, A ASS January 5; *Chronicon Alberici* ad 1141, 1153 (MGH. SS. 23, p. 842); *Gesta Senoniensis Ecclesiae* IV. 15 (MGH. SS. 25, p. 306); Vincent of Beauvais, *Speculum historiale* 27. 83 ad 1146 (Douai, 1624; rpt. 1965). The fifteenth-century humanist Trithemius of Sponheim referred to Hildegard in many of his writings. See his *Chronicon Hirsaugiense* ad 1149, 1150, 1160, 1180; *Chronicon Sponheimense* ad 1136, 1148–1150, 1179, 1498; *Catalogus illustrium virorum Germaniae*, p. 138; *De scriptoribus ecclesiasticis*, p. 281, all in *Opera historica*, ed. Marquand Freher (Frankfurt, 1601; rpt. 1966).

12. *Vita, auctore Guiberto* 1, Pitra 408.

13. *Vita* 1. 2, PL 197: 93ab.

14. Hildegard's title is normally given as *magistra* or *preposita*, with such honorifics as *mater*, *domina*, and *sponsa Christi*. The title *abbatissa* appears only in a document addressed to her by Frederick Barbarossa in 1163.

15. Hildegard used the word *umbra* to denote images reflected in the *fons vitae*, which is literally a shining pool or fountain. The *umbra viventis lucis* is a “shadow” with respect to the *lux vivens* itself, but the shadow is nonetheless brighter than the light of common day.

16. Ep. 2, Pitra 332–33.

17. *Vita* 2. 16, PL 197: 103ab.

18. *Acta* 7, PL 197: 136b.

19. Pierre Riché, “L'Enfant dans la société monastique au XII^e siècle,” in *Pierre Abélard — Pierre le Vénéral: Les courants philosophiques, littéraires et artistiques en Occident au milieu du XII^e siècle*. Colloque international de Cluny, 1972 (Paris, 1975): 692–93.

20. Ep. 29, PL 197:189–90. For a corrected edition of this letter see *Echtheit* 105–8.

21. *Vita* 1. 5, PL 197: 94–95.

22. Ep. 1, PL 197: 143ab. On Bernard's role see Jean Lederqcq, *La femme et les femmes dans l'oeuvre de saint Bernard* (Paris, 1982): 52–56.

23. *Vita* 1. 6, PL 197: 95cd.

24. For a history of these communities see Maria Brede, “Die Kloster der heiligen Hildegard Rupertsberg und Eibingen,” in *Festschrift* 77–94.

25. *Subtilitatum diversarum naturarum creaturarum libri novem*, ed. Charles Daremberg and F. A. Reuss in PL 197: 1117–1352; *Causae et curae*, ed. Paul Kaiser (Leipzig, 1903). Closely related to these works is the fragment from Berlin Cod. lat. 674, edited by Heinrich Schipperges. This text consists of medical and theological notes or *sententiae* arranged in haphazard order, but often parallel to material in the *Causae et curae*. Although the manuscript tradition for Hildegard's medical works is weak, their authenticity is attested in three contemporary lists of her works: LVM Preface, Pitra 7; Ep. 8, Pitra 346; *Vita* 2. 4, PL 197: 101a.

26. Odo of Soissons to Hildegard, Ep. 127, PL 197: 352a: Dicitur quod elevata in coelestibus multa videas, et multa per scripturam proferas, atque modos novi carminis edas, cum nihil horum didiceris.

27. *Hildegard von Bingen: Lieder*, ed. Pudentiana Barth, M. -I. Ritscher, and Joseph Schmidt-Gorg (Salzburg, 1969). I am currently preparing a new critical edition with English translations of the *Symphonia*. For a discography of the music see Appendix A.

28. *Liber vitae meritorum, per simplicem hominem a vivente luce revelatorum*, Pitra 7–244. All citations from this work refer to Pitra's edition.

29. This work is usually cited as *Liber divinorum operum*, its title in the Mansi edition reprinted in PL 197: 741–1038. But the earliest manuscript, prepared at the Rupertsberg c. 1170–1174 (Ghent, Universiteitsbibliotheek Cod. 241), gives the title *De operatione Dei*. This manuscript, which records authorial revisions and corrections, is the basis for Albert Derolez's critical edition now in progress. My translations in this book are based on the ms readings, but I have supplied references to the printed text for convenience.

30. Migne printed 145 of Hildegard's letters in PL 197, together with epistles addressed to the saint, and Pitra added another 145. Eleven more have been edited by Francis Haug in *Revue benedictine* 43 (1931): 59–71. The Berlin MS. Cod. lat. 674 contains 44 letters, of which 12 have been recently edited by Peter Dronke in *Women Writers of the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1984): 256–64.

31. Frederick to Hildegard, Ep. 27, PL 197: i86bc: Notum facimus sanctitati tuae, quoniam ea quae praedixisti nobis, cum Ingelheim manentes, te ad praesentiam nostram venire rogavimus, jam in manibus tenemus.

32. For the text of her sermon see Ep. 48, PL 197: 244–53.

33. For these works see PL 197: 1037–1116. Pitra edited the *Prooemium to the Life of St. Disibod*, 352–57, and the *Epilogue to the Life of St. Rupert*, 358–68. The latter composition, which includes several songs and a homily, was apparently intended for liturgical performance by the nuns on their patronal feast.

34. *Expositiones quorundam evangeliorum*, Pitra 245–327.

35. Fragments in Pitra 496–502.

36. “De Catharis,” Pitra 348–51.

37. Ep. 14, PL 197: 167–71.

38. *Mittelrheinisches Urkundenbuch* I, no. 636, p. 694: Ipsum itaque locum cum sanctimonialibus et possessionibus sub nostram imperialem protectionem suscipientes, statuimus et imperiali edicto sanctimus, ne aliquis advocatiam eiusdem loci sibi usurper, verum ab omnibus infestationibus et iniuriis imperiali dextera et Maguntini archiepiscopi auxilio liber semper et securus existat.

39. Ep. 37, Pitra 523–24; *Echtheit* 128.

40. Ep. 127, Pitra 561.

41. Ep. 4, PL 197: 154–56.

42. See correspondence between Hildegard and Christian, archbishop of Mainz, Epp. 8 and 9, PL 197: 159–61; cf. *Acta* 6, PL 197: 135b.

43. Ep. 47, PL 197: 218–21.

44. Odoricus Raynaldus, *Annates ecclesiastici ad 1237*, no. 50 (PL 197: 88a): cum enim

habeatur in depositionibus testium ad nostram praesentiam destinatis, quod eadem multos curaverat daemónicos et infirmos, nee personae, nee loca, nee tempora designantur; neque reperitur in eis quid vel quae magistra dixerit.

45. *Acta* 10, PL 197: 138c.

46. Helmut Hinkel, “St. Hildegards Verehrung im Bistum Mainz,” in *Fest-schrift* 385–412; Hildebrand Fleischmann, *Hildegard-Eigenoffizium* (Freiburg and Regensburg, 1952).

47. See Adolf Katzenellenbogen, *Allegories of the Virtues and Vices in Mediaeval Art*, trans. A. J. Crick (London, 1939).

48. *Scivias* III. 3. 3, p. 375.

49. A fuller version of this play, the *Ordo virtutum*, exists independently of the *Scivias* and may be related to Hildegard's *Symphonia*. See “The Text of the *Ordo Virtutum*,” ed. Peter Dronke, in *Poetic Individuality in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1970): 180–92. There is a performance edition with music edited by Audrey Davidson, *The Ordo Virtutum of Hildegard of Bingen* (Kalamazoo, 1985).

50. On this manuscript see Louis Baillet, *Les Miniatures du Scivias de Sainte Hildegarde* (Paris, 1911); Hans Fegers, “Die Bilder im *Scivias* der Hildegard von Bingen,” *Das Werk des Kunstlers* 1 (1939): 109–45; and Christel Meier, “Zum Verhältnis von Text und Illustration im überlieferten Werk Hildegards von Bingen,” *Festschrift* 159–69. The paintings are reproduced in color in the CCCM edition of the *Scivias* and in Matthew Fox, *Illurrinations of Hildegard of Bingen* (Santa Fe, 1985).

51. LVM I. 32 and 1. 39, Pitra 17 and 19.

52. LVM 1. 16, p. 12 (Obduratio); V. 8, p. 186 (Maleficium); II. 17, P. 68 (Infelicitas).

53. DOD 1. 2. 42, PL 197: 786d–87b.

54. DOD 1. 4. 98, PL 197: 883CCL

55. The whole created world is like a book, a picture, and a mirror for us. Alan of Lille, *Rhythmus alter*, PL 210: 579a.

56. DOD I. 4. 105, PL 197: 889bc.

57. DOD 1. 4. 42, PL 197: 836c–37a.

58. Charles Czarski, *The Prophecies of St. Hildegard of Bingen* (Ph. D. Diss., University of Kentucky, 1983); H. D. Rauh, “Hildegard von Bingen,” in *Das Bild des Antichrist im Mittelalter: Von Tyconius zum deutschen Symbolismus* (Munich, 1973): 474–527

59. Visiones et oracula beatae illius et celeberrimae Hildegardis, quae apud vos sunt [mittite]. Quae mihi ex eo commendata est et venerabilis, quod eam dominus Eugenius specialis charitatis affectu familiariter amplectebatur. Explore etiam et rescribite, an ei sit de fine huius schismatis aliquid revelatum. Praedixit enim in diebus papae Eugenii, quod non esset, nisi extremis diebus, pacem et gratiam in Urbe habiturus. PL 199: 220c. On this subject Hildegard remarked, “De schismate Ecclesiae non jubet me Dominus loqui, sed gladium suum vibrat, et arcum suum tendit.” Ep. 64, Pitra 534.

60. Fragments of Gebeno's work appear in Pitra 483–88, under the title *Speculum futurorum temporum*. The complete text has never been edited.

61. Gebeno of Ebernach, *Speculum Prologus* 3, Pitra 484–85.

62. **Trithemius**, *Chronicon Hirsaugiense* ad 1149, in *Opera historica* 132.

63. See Ildefons Herwegen, “Les collaborateurs de Ste. Hildegarde,” *Revue benedictine* 21

(1904): 192–203, 302–15, 381–403; *Echtheit* 143–53.

64. Guibert of Gembloux, Ep. 29. 25–27, Pitra 431–33. For Guibert's argument cf. Augustine, *De doctrina Christiana* IV. 3 and IV. 26 (CCSL 32, 117 and 134–35)–

65. Dronke, *Poetic Individuality* 178–79.

66. For this distinction see Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*, trans. Catherine Misrahi (New York, 1961): 233–86. Two good introductions to twelfth-century symbolics are M. -D. Chenu, *Nature, Man, and Society in the Twelfth Century*, trans. Jerome Taylor and L. K. Little (Chicago, 1968); and M. -M. Davy, *Initiation à la symbolique romane, XII^e siècle* (Paris, 1964).

67. Christel Meier, “Zwei Modelle von Allegorie im 12. Jahrhundert: Das allegorische Verfahren Hildegards von Bingen und Alans von Lille,” in Walter Haug, ed., *Formen und Funktionen der Allegorie* (Stuttgart, 1979): 78.

68. Kent Kraft has compared the shifting imagery of the visions with the commentary, which “spans them out and freezes them, 'frame by frame,' as it were.” *The Eye Sees More than the Heart Knows: The Visionary Cosmology of Hildegard of Bingen* (Ph. D. Diss., University of Wisconsin, 1977): 104.

69. Dronke, *Poetic Individuality* 157; Peter Dronke, “Problemata Hildegardiana,” *Mittellateinisches Jahrbuch* 16 (1981): 116–17.

70. Cf. Adelgundis Fiihrkotter, introduction to *Scivias* xviii.

71. This passage and the next are from *Scivias*, *Protostificatio*, 3–6.

72. Epp. 75 (PL 197: 297c); 6 (157c); 92 (313a).

73. The quotations that follow are from Ep. 49, PL 197: 254–58.

74. Ep. 100, PL 197: 321–22. On twelfth-century ambivalence and antagonism toward the abbatial role see Pierre Salmon, *The Abbot in Monastic Tradition*, trans. Claire Lavoie (Washington, 1972): 95–99; and Caroline Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley, 1982): 154–59

75. For similar advice cf. Epp. 32, 33, 37, 42, 44, 66, 70, 74, 77, 78, 86, 101, 108, and 112 in PL 197; and Epp. 39, 57, 61, 63, 76, 83, 89, 98, 118, 137, 138, 151, and 159 in Pitra.

76. Bertha of Sulzbach, sister-in-law of Conrad III, married Manuel Comnenus in 1146 and bore one daughter. See Ep. 81, Pitra 542.

77. Or “Sibylla trans Alpes” as in the ms heading of Ep. 36, Pitra 521. At this period “Sibylla” should probably be taken as a proper name rather than an epithet.

78. Ep. 125, Pitra 560–61. This same letter, with the proper name and the reference to Sibyl's daughter deleted, appears as Ep. 88 in PL 197: 309d-10a, where it is addressed to the provost of a monastery in Koblenz. The editor has conflated Hildegard's letter to Sibyl with another to Bertha, a matron of Fulda (Ep. 43, Pitra 526). As Schrader and Fiihrkotter have pointed out (*Echtheit* 160–71), the so-called Riesenkodez (Wiesbaden, Hess. Landesbibliothek Hs. 2), from which most of the letters in Migne's collection are taken, often falsifies the addresses of otherwise authentic letters in order to exalt the rank of Hildegard's correspondents.

79. Ep. 36, Pitra 521.

80. *Vita* 3. 40, PL 197: 119cd.

81. *Vita* 2. 22, PL 197: 106cd.

82. Fragment IV. 28, p. 71. Cf. *Vita* 2. 34, PL 197: 115C–16CI; and Ep. 116 from Tengswich, abbess of Andernach (336b–37a), a searching critique offered in ironically courteous terms.

83. Cf. Barbara Newman, “Divine Power Made Perfect in Weakness: St Hildegard on the Frail Sex,” in L. Thomas Shank, ed., *Peace-Weavers*, vol. 2 of *Medieval Religious Women (Kalamazoo, 1987)*.

84. Elisabeth of Schonau, *Liber visionum* I. 1, in F. W. E. Roth, ed., *Die Visionen der heiligen Elisabeth und die Schriften der Äbte Ekbert und Etnecho von Schönau* (Brünn, 1884): 1. On Elisabeth see Kurt Koster, “Das visionäre Werk Elisabeths von Schonau: Studien zur Entstehung, Überlieferung und Wirkung in der mittelalterlichen Welt,” *Archiv für mittelrheinische Kirchengeschichte* 4 (1952): 79–119; Josef Loos, “Hildegard von Bingen und Elisabeth von Schonau,” *Festschrift* 263–72.

85. Ep. 45, PL 197: 217d. This letter probably answers not the epistle of Elisabeth printed in Migne but an earlier letter of hers. For English translations see Kathryn Kerby-Fulton and Dyan Elliott, “Self-Image and the Visionary Role in Two Letters from the Correspondence of Elizabeth of Schonau and Hildegard of Bingen,” *Vox Benedictina* 2 (1985): 204–23.

86. The mountain, city, and column described in the *Liber visionum* are particularly reminiscent of *Scivias*, Book III, and the stylized dialogues between the prophet and God or his angel also recall Hildegard.

87. *Annales Palidenses* ad 1158, MGH. SS. 16, 90.

88. Elisabeth, *Liber visionum* I. 1 in Roth, *Visionen der heiligen Elisabeth* 1.

89. Elisabeth, *Liber visionum* 1. 67 in Roth, *Visionen der heiligen Elisabeth* 32. Cf. Ezek. 2:1, Matt. 28:20, Ps. 26:14.

90. Elisabeth of Schonau, *Liber viarum Dei* 6 in Roth, *Visionen der heiligen Elisabeth* 91.

91. See Raoul Manselli, “Amicizia spirituale ed azione pastorale nella Germania del seculo XII: Ildegarda di Bingen, Elisabetta ed Ecberto di Schonau contro l'eresia catara,” *Studi e materiali di storia delle religioni* 38 (1967), fasc. 1–2: 302–13.

92. Ep. 45, PL 197: 214d–16d. The passage in which Elisabeth styled herself “magistra sororum quae in Schonaugia sunt” is an interpolation.

93. Elisabeth, *Liber visionum* II. 1 in Roth, *Visionen der heiligen Elisabeth* 40. Cf. St. Ambrose on Deborah: “In order to enthuse the souls of women, a woman judged, a woman decided, a woman prophesied, a woman triumphed and, in the midst of the fighting troops, taught men the art of war under feminine command. In the mystery, however, the struggle of faith is the Church's victory,” *De viduis* 8. 49–50, PL 16: 362–63.

94. Elisabeth, *Liber visionum* 1. 6 in Roth, *Visionen der heiligen Elisabeth* 6. The vision probably derives from the iconography of Mary in priestly vestments as a personification of the Church. See Ilene Forsyth, *The Throne of Wisdom: Wood Sculptures of the Madonna in Romanesque France* (Princeton, 1972): 23–24 and figs. 112–21.

95. Elisabeth, *Liber visionum* III. 4 in Roth, *Visionen der heiligen Elisabeth* 60–61.

96. Cf. Gertrud Jaron Lewis, “Christus als Frau: Eine Vision Elisabeths von Schonau,” *Jahrbuch für Internationale Germanistik* 15 (1983): 70–80. On the femininity of Jesus, an important minor theme in twelfth-century writers, see the title essay and references in Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*.

97. Elisabeth, *Liber visionum III*. 31 in Roth, *Visionen der heiligen Elisabeth* 87.