

# *Hildegard of Bingen: Visions and Validation*

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Some years ago, wrote the Flemish monk Guibert to his friend Radulfus, strange and incredible rumors reached his ears at the Benedictine monastery of Gembloux. They concerned an old woman, abbess of the Benedictine foundation at Bingen-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.”<sup>1</sup> Finally he, 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 let her keep herself humble.<sup>2</sup> 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 no reply was forthcoming, 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.<sup>3</sup>

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.”<sup>4</sup>

Unlike most visionary women of the later Middle Ages, Hildegard wrote not to relate her subjective experience of God, but rather to teach faith and

1. Guibert of Gembloux, Ep. 164, in *Analecta Sacra*, vol. 8, ed. J.-B. Pitra (Monte Cassino, 1882), p. 576 (hereafter cited as Pitra). All translations in this article are the author's.

2. *Ibid.*, Ep. 1, pp. 328–331.

3. *Ibid.*, Ep. 14, pp. 378–379.

4. *Ibid.*, Ep. 16, p. 386.

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morals on the authority of this experience which her works everywhere presuppose but seldom elaborate. Throughout her writings, the moral, doctrinal, and political aspects of her message far outweigh the element of personal religious expression. If labels are of any use, it would be safer to characterize her as a prophet rather than a mystic. Nevertheless, it is impossible to understand her prophetic activity apart from her visionary experience, for her visions provided both the material and the authority for her teaching. While it is true that her public career grew out of her visions, it is no less true that these visions assured her of a hearing which a “poor little female,” as she styled herself, could not otherwise have obtained.

To clarify the relationship between Hildegard’s visionary life and her prophetic mission is the purpose of this essay. To that end, we can distinguish three important and interrelated benefits which her visionary gift conferred: a direct experience of God, a source of unmediated truth, and a form of public validation. Some understanding of her inner life, her intense and mysterious mode of seeing, can explain why she insisted so vehemently on her lack of education, despite the wide reading which is evident in her works. On the other hand, the urgency of her need for validation, augmented by her gender, led her no less to insist on the absolute and infallible character of her inspiration. Together, these considerations can account for the otherwise baffling fact that this woman, who elsewhere stressed the importance of human collaboration with God, claimed for her own works a quasi-scriptural degree of inspiration and inerrancy.

From early childhood, long before she undertook her public mission or even her monastic vows, Hildegard’s spiritual awareness was grounded in what she called the *umbra viventis lucis*, the reflection of the living Light.<sup>5</sup> Her letter to Guibert of Gembloux, which she wrote at the age of seventy-seven, 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.

5. Although the standard medieval Latin glossaries do not give the meaning “reflection” for *umbra*, Hildegard uses this word to denote images reflected in the *fons vitae*, literally a shining pool or fountain. The *umbra viventis lucis* is a “shadow” with respect to the *lux vivens* itself, but because it is brighter than the light of common day, “reflection” (with its emanationist overtones) is the better translation.

The light which I see thus is not spatial, but it is far, far brighter than a cloud which carries the sun. I can measure neither height, nor length, nor breadth in it; and I call it “the 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.<sup>6</sup>

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 tells her biographer, she shuddered at the vision of a dazzling light which she was still too young to describe.<sup>7</sup> Later she began to perceive various forms in the light; she spoke freely of these visions to her hearers’ amazement. Sometimes she even foretold the future. In her teens, however, the naive and fragile girl finally realized that no one else could see what she saw. Embarrassed and afraid, she ceased to recount her strange experiences, although the visions continued. Even after she became abbess of her community in 1136, she did not take advantage of her new authority to disclose her visions.

Between the aged saint’s serene confidence in her gift and her memories of an adolescence confused and cowed by the same gift, there lies a considerable psychological gap. This distance is bridged by a third autobiographical text,

6. Hildegard of Bingen, Ep. 2 in Pitra, pp. 332–333.

7. Gottfried of Saint Disibod and Dieter of Echternach, *Vita Sanctae Hildegardis* 2.16 (hereafter cited as *Vita*), in *Patrologiae cursus completus: series latina*, ed. J.-P. Migne, 221 vols. (Paris, 1841–1864), 197: col. 103AB (hereafter cited as *PL*).

the *Scivias* prologue, in which the seer records the prophetic call she received at the ripe age of forty-two, after decades of visionary experience.

It happened in the year 1141 of the Incarnation of God's Son Jesus Christ, when I was forty-two years and seven months old, that the heavens were opened and a fiery light of great brilliance came and suffused my whole brain and set my whole heart and breast afire like a flame—yet not burning but warming, as the sun warms an object on which it sheds its rays. And suddenly I came to understand the meaning of the book of Psalms, the Gospel, and the other canonical books of both the Old and New Testaments—although I could not interpret the words of their text, nor divide the syllables, and I had no knowledge of cases or tenses. Yet in a marvelous way, I had sensed the power and mystery of secret, wonderful visions in myself from girlhood, from the age of five, even to the present time.<sup>8</sup>

This experience, which marked the beginning of Hildegard's public and literary career, must have been a new theophany, different in kind from her previous visions. Henceforth the visions and the knowledge they imparted could no longer remain the seer's private possession, but had to be manifested for the good of all. What had begun as a child's idiosyncrasy now became a prophetic mission. But Hildegard also describes her experience as the infusion of a new kind of knowledge. "Suddenly" she understood the meaning of the scriptures, even though the heavenly vision did not overcome her deficiencies in grammar, which remained as a thorn in the flesh. Moreover, in a parallel text from the *Vita*, she expands the scope of this divinely imparted knowledge: "In the same vision I understood the writings of the prophets, the Gospels, and the other saints, and of certain philosophers, without any human instruction. And I expounded some of them, although I had scarcely any knowledge of literature, as an uneducated woman had taught me. I also composed chants with music in praise of God and the saints, with no instruction from anyone, although I had never learned either musical notation or singing."<sup>9</sup>

Significantly, the fullest of these accounts dates from a time when Hildegard's fame was well established and her mission nearly complete, when she no longer needed to authenticate herself before a doubting world. Even then it was only in response to Guibert's persistent inquiries that she troubled to relate her subjective experience, which might otherwise have gone unrecorded. The same may be true of the autobiographical texts in her *Vita*, which she probably dictated at her provost and biographer Gottfried's urging. It is clear that unlike many whom the world calls "mystics," Hildegard did not write primarily to reveal her spiritual life. Even her letter to Guibert is

8. Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, ed. Adelgundis Führkötter (hereafter cited as *Scivias*) in *Corpus Christianorum: Continuatio Mediaevalis*, vol. 43–43a (Turnhout, Belgium, 1966–) (hereafter cited as *CCCM*), pp. 3–4.

9. *Vita* 2.17 in *PL* 197: col. 104A, as emended by Peter Dronke from Berlin Ms. lat. 674, fol. 7v<sup>a</sup>, in "Problemata Hildegardiana," *Mittellateinisches Jahrbuch* 16 (1981): 107.

notably free of raptures and transports; she considers it a special grace that she has never suffered the “defect” of ecstasy.<sup>10</sup> The letter breathes coolness and sobriety, and its peculiar, groping expressions bespeak an author scarcely well versed in mystical theory. Hildegard simply tries, without affectation, to describe an experience for which she knows neither precedent nor parallel.

In 1917 the historian of science Charles Singer diagnosed Hildegard as a victim of “scintillating scotoma,” a form of migraine characterized by hallucinations of flashing, circling, or fermenting points of light.<sup>11</sup> Such a diagnosis may be correct; but unlike Singer, we must avoid the reductionist error of assuming that a physiological cause (or better, correlative) of the visions excludes the possibility of any higher inspiration. In fact, Hildegard herself was aware that the visions had some connection with her delicate health and frequent sickness. At the end of her last book, *On the Activity of God*, she describes her temperament as “airy”—that is, prone to suffer infirmities caused by wind, air, and rain—“so that she can by no means enjoy any security of the flesh.”<sup>12</sup> Yet she adds that “otherwise the inspiration of the Holy Spirit would not be able to dwell in her,” as if the Spirit were literally a wind to which she had been physically sensitized. Broadly speaking, Hildegard had learned to see her infirmity, like her gender, as one of those saving weaknesses through which the power of God could be manifest. But more specifically, as she explains in her letter to Guibert, somehow the light within her—the spiritual sky which she glimpses “in a shining cloud”—could direct her inward gaze here and there in mysterious accord with the actual sky and the changing weather. The “reflection of the living Light” is, as it were, a medium of spiritual perception attuned to material reality, yet it neither depends on nor interferes with the normal working of her senses. It is an internal mirror in which forms come and go at will, illumined by its own radiant brilliance. Hildegard compares the visionary forms she perceives in it to the heavenly bodies reflected in water. Curiously, she also believed that in the physical heavens people could not see the actual sun, moon, and stars, but only their reflections in the mirrored surface (*speculositas*) of the clouds.<sup>13</sup> Thus, exceptional microcosm that she was, she tried to correlate her inner experience with what she held to be true of the natural world.

10. According to Robert Javelet, “L’extase chez les spirituels du XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle,” *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*, vol. 4, pt. 2, col. 2113–2120, the word *extasis* used in this text is fairly rare in twelfth-century usage; *excessus mentis* was the preferred term. Hildegard’s pejorative understanding of ecstasy is also rare for her period.
11. Charles Singer, “The Scientific Views and Visions of Saint Hildegard,” in *Studies in the History and Method of Science*, vol. 1 (Oxford, 1917), pp. 1–55; reprinted in *From Magic to Science: Essays on the Scientific Twilight* (New York, 1958), pp. 199–239. See especially p. 232.
12. Hildegard of Bingen, *Liber divinorum operum* 3.10.38, in *PL* 197: col. 1038A. Hildegard may have suffered from rheumatism or from special sensitivity to the Föhn, the German south wind thought to cause a variety of physical and mental ills.
13. *Ibid.* 1.4.8, col. 810D.

It is noteworthy, too, that Hildegard distinguishes between the medium of the visions, the “reflection of the living Light,” and the visionary forms. The latter she understands as direct revelations from God, while the former is the stable condition of her being, uninterrupted from childhood to old age. This phenomenon of double vision, ordinary and extraordinary at once, enfeebled and exhausted her. On the other hand, she insists that had she not been so vulnerable, she would have been incapable of visions in the first place. Only the experience of the “living Light” itself, which we can interpret as a form of direct contact with God, brings relief and healing. But Hildegard describes this experience with extreme reticence, and never does it form the subject of her writings.

The seer speaks of a bright, incorporeal “heaven” within the soul, of a light which speaks and words which illumine, of a translucent medium which reflects both creatures (as well as entities like virtues and human acts) and the living Light itself. Such conceptions are typical of the light-metaphysics and epistemology inherited by virtually all twelfth-century theologians from Augustine on the one hand and pseudo-Dionysius on the other.<sup>14</sup> Augustine, for instance, compares the corporeal light in which the heavenly bodies shine to a certain spiritual light, “incorporeal and proper to itself,” in which we may perceive the similitudes of bodies through the mediation of angels. But “still other is that light by which the soul is illumined so that it may perceive all things with a true understanding, either in itself or in the light. For that light is God himself.”<sup>15</sup> Hildegard could easily have known this passage, which seems to furnish such an exact description of her “living Light” and its reflection, from Augustine’s Genesis commentary. Moreover, such texts could be multiplied indefinitely from the works of Augustine and his followers. Yet it is scarcely possible to believe that Hildegard was simply appropriating the Augustinian model to describe her experience. For both Augustine and medieval Augustinians, such light-speculation is, with rare exceptions, a blend of metaphysics and metaphor. Even where it receives an existential coloring, as in Richard of Saint Victor’s theology of contemplation, what is envisaged is a mystical ascent involving brief moments of ecstasy rather than a continuous illumination such as Hildegard’s.<sup>16</sup> In the end, her particular

14. For a thorough treatment of this complex subject see Klaus Hedwig, *Sphaera Lucis: Studien zur Intelligibilität des Seienden im Kontext der mittelalterlichen Lichtspekulation* (Münster, 1980); on Hildegard, pp. 65–69.

15. Augustine, *De Genesi ad litteram* 12.30–31, *Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum latinorum* (Vienna, 1866–), vol. 28, pt. 1, p. 425. For the analysis of Hildegard’s visions in Augustinian terms I am indebted to Kent Kraft, “The Eye Sees More than the Heart Knows: The Visionary Cosmology of Hildegard of Bingen” (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Wisconsin, 1977), chap. 2.

16. Richard of Saint Victor, *Benjamin Minor*, trans. Grover Zinn, *The Twelve Patriarchs* (New York, 1979), p. 130.

mode of seeing, with its visions within visions, its pathology and its glory, remains *sui generis*. To her contemporaries the gift appeared “strange” and “unheard-of,”<sup>17</sup> and we must finally concur.

Ernst Benz, in his phenomenology of visions, characterizes Hildegard’s as not only “prophetic” but also “didactic” (*Lehrvisionen*). As other examples of the didactic genre, he cites the letters of John to the seven churches in the Apocalypse, the *Shepherd* of Hermas, the *Showings* of Lady Julian of Norwich, and the visions of Swedenborg. In all these writings, as in Hildegard’s, the visionary images are interpreted by a heavenly exegete who provides extensive theological and moral glosses. “Nowhere,” as Benz observes, “are the stylistic and methodological parallels with the corresponding contemporary forms of exegesis, preaching, apologetics, even catechesis, so striking and so easy to trace as in didactic visions.”<sup>18</sup> In principle this holds true of Hildegard’s works, even though her eccentric style makes her sources notoriously difficult to trace.<sup>19</sup> Yet the wide knowledge and erudition apparent in her works poses a serious problem for the reader who wishes to trust her veracity, because she claims direct verbal inspiration and states repeatedly that she has acquired her knowledge “without any human instruction.” This is no mere topos of humility, but a claim to high authority. It is tempting to think, with Maura Böckeler, that Hildegard absorbed learning “almost without noticing it, like the air we breathe,” and did not realize the extent of her own culture.<sup>20</sup> But the pages of this “simple, untutored woman” are so redolent of old manuscripts that, unless we are to charge her with duplicity, a stronger explanation must be offered.

In the *Scivias* prologue, Hildegard relates that the fiery light of her vision suddenly filled her with a clear understanding of the scriptures. Yet as a Benedictine cloistered from the age of eight, she had known the Bible from childhood, and her acquaintance with it had been broadened and deepened by more than three decades of liturgical life. It is hardly possible that she mastered the biblical texts, in the ordinary sense, only after her meeting with the fire from heaven. More likely she is speaking of a privileged gnosis, surpassing both “cases and tenses” and the kind of knowledge purveyed, for example, by the masters at Paris. But if this is the case, the same condition must also apply to her “revealed” comprehension of more erudite texts and of music. Peter Dronke interprets Hildegard only “as saying that, because of a

17. Ep. 92 in *PL* 197: col. 313A; Ep. 9 in Pitra, p. 348; Ep. 1 in Pitra, p. 328.

18. Ernst Benz, *Die Vision: Erfahrungsformen und Bilderwelt* (Stuttgart, 1969), p. 160.

19. To date, the best studies of Hildegard’s sources are Hans Liebeschütz, *Das allegorische Weltbild der heiligen Hildegard von Bingen* (Leipzig, 1930); Bertha Widmer, *Heilsordnung und Zeitgeschehen in der Mystik Hildegards von Bingen* (Basel, 1955); Peter Dronke, “Problemata Hildegardiana,” pp. 107–117.

20. Maura Böckeler, “Der ‘einfältige’ Mensch—Hildegard von Bingen,” in *Wisse die Wege*, German translation of *Scivias* (Berlin, 1928; 5th ed., Salzburg, 1963), p. 386.

divinely granted intuitive gift, she could master learned texts without difficulty, notwithstanding her fairly rudimentary schooling.<sup>21</sup> This is true as far as it goes: no reader can fail to observe either Hildegard's intelligence and learning or her painful ignorance of grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic. Yet if she had thought the value of her gift lay chiefly in the ability to master learned texts, she would surely have cited them. In fact, the only authors she ever quotes are God and the writers of scripture.

The paradox of Hildegard's *docta ignorantia* must be resolved not in terms of how much she knew, but of how she knew. Augustine, once again, asserts in the *Soliloquies* that "God is the intelligible light in whom, by whom, and through whom there shine for the intellect all things that intelligibly shine."<sup>22</sup> Such an illumination of the mind, for Hildegard, is no longer an abstract or analogical explanation of knowledge, but an immediate experience which bears more on the modality of her knowing than on the objects of her knowledge. When she tells Guibert that "as if in an instant I learn what I know," she seems to imply that all her knowledge, gleaned from whatever source, suddenly acquires the depth and vividness of direct intuition. David Baumgardt aptly compares her experience to "what Jakob Boehme once called being caught in an intellectual downpour. Memories, observations, and conscious interpretations of the observed and remembered are . . . squeezed together in one moment."<sup>23</sup> Because of this illumination, Hildegard refuses to grant the name of "knowledge" to any insight unless it has come to her energized by the divine light and the heavenly voice. Conversely, whatever she receives in and through this light takes on for her the character of lived, experiential truth. In more conventional terms, one might say that her illumination concerns not *verba* but *res*, not the words of scripture or philosophy but the realities of which they speak. It is these realities which she claims to know in truth, as they exist in the living Light; hence the number of books she happens to have read about them becomes immaterial. So trivial is book learning, in fact, that only through the minor fiction of denying it entirely can she be faithful to the greater truth of the Light.

It has often been 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, only through visions could a religious or intellectual woman gain a hearing.<sup>24</sup> This is not to say that such visions were necessarily rooted in the desire for authority; but the visionary could not help knowing that while men might perhaps heed a divinely inspired woman, they would have little patience with a mere presumptuous female. Hildegard minces no

21. "Problemata," p. 108.

22. Augustine, *Soliloquies* 1.1.3, *PL* 32: col. 870.

23. David Baumgardt, "The Concept of Mysticism: Analysis of a Letter Written by Hildegard of Bingen to Guibert of Gembloux," *Review of Religion* 12 (1948): 282-283.

24. See for instance Jean-Noël Vuarnet, *Extases féminines* (Paris, 1980).

words when it comes to declaring the source of her authority. Following John (Apoc. 22:18–20), she hurls scathing threats in God's name at anyone who dares to tamper with her books:

As for anyone who rejects the mystical words of this book, I the Lord will stretch forth my bow against him and pierce him with the arrows of my quiver, I will cast his crown from his head, and I will make him like those who fell upon Horeb when they murmured against me. But as for anyone who curses this prophesy, let that curse which Isaac uttered come upon him.<sup>25</sup>

And these things are true, and he who is true wished them to be truly revealed in this fashion. Wherefore if anyone, through an overweening pride in his own writings and opinions, adds anything to them in contradiction, he is worthy to suffer the pains here described. Or if anyone removes anything from them through perversity, he is worthy to be removed from the joys here revealed.<sup>26</sup>

Let no man be so bold as to add anything to the words of this book and expand it, nor to delete anything and abridge it, lest he be deleted from the book of life and from all the bliss that is under the sun. . . . But anyone who presumes to do otherwise sins against the Holy Spirit; so that neither here nor in the world to come will his sin be forgiven him.<sup>27</sup>

In these brazen confrontations with her readers, daring them to accept all or nothing, Hildegard betrays both more and less than total assurance. Texts such as these, interwoven as they are with references to her own simplicity, frailty, and femininity, insist on her authority with a defiance proportional to her fear that her books would indeed be concealed, altered, abridged, ridiculed, or ignored. In her *Vita* she tells how, when she was founding her new monastery at the Rupertsberg, many people asked "why so many mysteries should be revealed to a foolish and uneducated woman, when there are many powerful and learned men," and some wondered whether she had been seduced by evil spirits.<sup>28</sup> Even some of her own nuns rejected her and refused to move to the new foundation. Although no documents attacking Hildegard are extant, she refers 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 remarks in one place that "now, to the scandal of men, women are prophesying."<sup>29</sup> 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

25. *Scivias* 3.13.16, pp. 635–636.

26. Hildegard of Bingen, *Liber vitae meritorum* 6.68, in Pitra, p. 244.

27. *Liber divinorum operum* 3.10.38, in *PL* 197: col. 1038C.

28. *Vita* 2.22, in *ibid.*, col. 106CD.

29. "Ein unveröffentlichtes Hildegard Fragment," 4.28, ed. Heinrich Schipperges, in *Sudhoffs Archiv für Geschichte der Medizin* 40 (1956): 71. For criticism of Hildegard see *Vita* 2.34 in *PL* 197: col. 115C–116D and Ep. 116 of Tengsrich of Andernach in *ibid.*, col. 336B–337A.

that she was transcribing exact dictation from the living Light could suffice both for herself and for her readers. In this respect, we can usefully compare her apologia with the claims of two contemporaries, a man and a woman, who were likewise confident of inspiration from on high.

Rupert of Deutz, a German Benedictine whose overall theological outlook has much in common with Hildegard's, remarks in the preface to his Apocalypse commentary that "no revelation, knowledge, prophecy, or teaching comes about unless the understanding, which is proper to the mind, is brought to bear on the images perceived through vision."<sup>30</sup> Rupert maintains that not only biblical revelation, but all true doctrine in the church is revealed through what Augustine called *visio intellectualis*. Such vision comes, according to Paul, "not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father" (Gal. 1:1). It is not surprising that Hildegard echoes the same words in the *Scivias* prologue, where they recur time and again as a leitmotif. Rupert himself did not pretend to be a visionary or prophet in the same sense as Hildegard, but he did sometimes recount dream visions to lend authority to his doctrine, and he firmly believed that these were sent by God. At least one contemporary, Honorius of Regensburg, praises him as a teacher "illuminated by the Holy Spirit through visions."<sup>31</sup> Although Rupert's dreams are quite unlike Hildegard's visions in that they involve no extraordinary charism and their content is purely subjective, they do serve a similar purpose of validation. In one such vision, for example, Rupert explains that at the time of his dream he was despised by his fellow monks and too poor even to buy parchment to write. Then Christ came to console him: "But I saw the Wisdom of God; somehow I saw the incarnate Word, Christ the Son of God, all golden—his whole body as it were formed of gold; and from him living waters poured into me with a rush, flowing through many pipes which protruded on every side of his body. Through such a figure did he not comfort the poor man and speak his own words? This same Wisdom says, 'I love those who love me' [Prov. 8:17] . . . and again, 'I, Wisdom, have poured forth streams' [Ecclus. 24:40]."<sup>32</sup> In this vision Christ as Sapiientia compensates the dejected pauper with infinite wealth and the frustrated writer with infinite wisdom. Not by coincidence, the vision is addressed to Rupert's patron, Abbot Kuno of Siegburg, whom he thanks for supplying him with money and parchment so that he can now write and pour fourth the living waters of doctrine which he has received.<sup>33</sup>

30. Rupert of Deutz, *Commentariorum in Apocalypsim* 1.1, in *PL* 169: col. 851C–852A.

31. Honorius of Regensburg [Augustodunensis], *De luminaribus Ecclesiae* 4.16, *PL* 172: col. 232A.

32. Rupert of Deutz, *In Regula Sancti Benedicti* 1, *PL* 170: col. 480C.

33. Kuno, a friend of the archbishop of Cologne, offered Rupert a refuge in Siegburg in 1116, after his attacks on simony had aroused such hostility that he no longer dared to publish his works in Liège. For Rupert's biography see John van Engen, *Rupert of Deutz* (Berkeley, 1983).

In another vision, the monk dreams that because Kuno has protected him against his opponents, Rupert is able to sing a responsory honoring a martyred theologian so loudly that he can drown out a hostile antiphonal choir, “with a strong voice that seemed to me wonderful to hear because of its beauty.”<sup>34</sup> The most striking of these dreams is one in which Rupert expresses, through a frankly homoerotic image, his sense of union with Christ. He adds that although this “overwhelming flood of love” soon passed away, “from then on I opened my mouth and I could by no means cease from writing—and to this moment, even if I wished, I cannot be silent.”<sup>35</sup> Like Hildegard’s, Rupert’s visions express his sense that, despite opposition, he cannot do other than he does because Christ, who has chosen him, fills him with overflowing wisdom. The dream visions provide him with a bulwark against detractors, a rationale for his literary career, and an assurance that the reader is receiving authentic heavenly truth. But Rupert, as a male religious writing in a highly traditional genre (exegesis), did not have to face opposition nearly as severe as Hildegard did, whether from his peers or from his own psyche; and his claims are correspondingly less strident. His visions adorn and authenticate his writings, but they do not determine the whole, and the inspiration he avows is of a far more general and less challenging sort than hers.

Elisabeth, a young nun at the monastery of Schönau near Bingen, modelled herself from an early age on the seer across the Rhine. In 1152—five years after the Council of Trier, where Hildegard was vindicated by Pope Eugenius III, and one year after the *Scivias* was published—the younger nun’s mystical visitations began. 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. By 1158 the author of the *Annales 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 Schönau, 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.”<sup>36</sup>

The chronicler’s reference to “the frail sex” shows again that contemporaries could not overlook the issue of gender, whether they found it an occasion for praise or blame. No less than Hildegard, Elisabeth felt this liability

34. Rupert of Deutz, *De Trinitate*, dedicatory epistle, *CCCM* 21: 120.

35. Rupert of Deutz, *De gloria et honore Filii hominis* 12, *CCCM* 29: 383.

36. *Annales Palidenses* ad 1158, in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica: Scriptores*, vol. 16 (Berlin, 1826–) p. 90.

keenly. She debated whether or not to publish her visions, fearing that some people would dismiss them as satanic delusions or mere feminine fancies (*muliebria figmenta*).<sup>37</sup> 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 commands 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.”<sup>38</sup> Seeking exempla for her unconventional role, Elisabeth evokes 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.”<sup>39</sup> The disparaging reference to indolent men echoes Hildegard’s lament that she lived in an “effeminate age” which called for feminine leaders: because men had become womanish, God had to save his honor by making women virile.<sup>40</sup> Both visionary women felt, on one level, that their validation as prophets required a blurring, or fusion, or full ironic reversal of stereotyped sex roles—a state of affairs they found sanctioned by the visions themselves. Elisabeth, for example, beheld “the sacred humanity of the Lord Jesus” in the form of a virgin, the apocalyptic woman clothed with the sun.<sup>41</sup> In another vision, the Virgin Mary appeared to her in the vestments of a priest.<sup>42</sup> Hildegard likewise perceived the feminine form of a virtue, Pure Knowledge, clothed in a bishop’s pallium to indicate her role as model for the prophetic office of the clergy.<sup>43</sup> Since this vision is described in one of Hildegard’s letters to a negligent bishop, it is reasonable to interpret the numinous female as a double for the seer herself.

The struggle for authentication could take a still more direct form. In one egregious example, Elisabeth tells Hildegard about a clash between her abbot and her angel. It seems that the young nun’s superiors, fearing that the alleged angel was really a demon in disguise, commanded her under obedience to ask him whether he and all her visions were truly from God.

37. Elisabeth of Schönau, *Liber visionum* 1.1, in *Die Visionen der heiligen Elisabeth und die Schriften der Äbte Ekbert und Emecho von Schönau*, ed. F.W.E. Roth (Brünn, 1884), p. 1.

38. *Ibid.* 1.67, p. 32. Compare Ps. 26:14.

39. *Ibid.* 2.1, p. 40.

40. Hildegard of Bingen, Fragment 4.28, p. 71; Ep. 13 in *PL* 197: col. 167B; Ep. 26 in *ibid.*, col. 185C; Ep. 49 in *ibid.*, col. 254CD; *Liber divinorum operum* 3.10.7, in *ibid.*, col. 1005AB.

41. Elisabeth of Schönau, *Liber visionum* 3.4, pp. 60–61.

42. *Ibid.* 1.6, p. 6.

43. Hildegard of Bingen, Ep. 23 in *PL* 197: col. 180C–181A.

Although she felt this to be a presumptuous demand, Elisabeth complied and the angel gave satisfaction. Nevertheless, at his next appearance, he turned away his face and kept his distance, threatening never to return unless the abbey would placate his wounded honor. So Elisabeth won: the abbot and his monks served the Mass of the Holy Angels, the nuns chanted psalms in their honor, and the next time the abbot planned a preaching tour, he pointedly asked Elisabeth to consult her angel first. The angel then vindicated his chosen friend: "Blessed are they who hear the words of your exhortation and keep them, and take no offense at you" (see Lk. 7:23).<sup>44</sup> The story, humorous yet poignant, offers a classic case of the triumph of charismatic over institutional authority, showing at least one way a beleaguered visionary could authenticate her call. A similar incident occurred in Hildegard's life: once, when her abbot resisted her visionary call to found a new monastery, she took to her bed with a paralyzing sickness which, by a miracle, could not be cured until the abbot bowed to the will of God.<sup>45</sup> Her illness, like the petulance of Elisabeth's angel, shows that at least in some cases one woman's faith could move the mountain of a skeptical man's resistance.

We have seen that all three writers—Rupert, Elisabeth, and Hildegard—regarded their visions both as a medium of divine inspiration and as a source of vindication against real or potential opponents. Where they differed, we can observe a direct correlation between the intensity or rarity of their experience and the audacity of their claims. Rupert, who received his visitations through the relatively common vehicle of dreams, acknowledged that he had been inspired by the divine Wisdom but felt no compulsion to deny the human element. At the opposite pole Hildegard, whose visionary life was the most intense in degree and unusual in kind, went so far as to claim verbal inerrancy and to disclaim all merely human knowledge. In addition, the two visionary women shared a preoccupation with the ridicule that could be or was in fact aroused by their gender, and consequently with authentication through and despite their sex. Thus many of their visions obliquely sanctioned a role reversal by presenting men as negligent or weak, women as prophetic or powerful, and aspects of God as feminine.<sup>46</sup> In cases of conflict, divine authority could override that of a powerful male, such as an abbot, and thus vindicate the visionary. To account for the exceptional claims of a woman like Hildegard, we need to consider both the dynamics of mystical illumination per se and its refraction through the cultural and psychological prism of gender.

44. Elisabeth of Schönau, *Liber visionum* 3.19, pp. 72–73.

45. *Vita* 2.7–8, in *PL* 197: col. 96–97.

46. For the feminine dimension of God see Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias* 3.9.25, pp. 538–539; Ep. 30 in *PL* 197: col. 192D; *Liber divinorum operum* 1.1, in *ibid.*, col. 743–744, and 3.8, col. 979–981. I discuss this subject at length in my forthcoming book, *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine*.