

THE WRITINGS OF MEDIEVAL WOMEN

An Anthology
Second Edition

*translations and
introductions by*
Marcelle Thiébaux

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To the Memory of My Parents
Anna Kirczow Thiébaux (1902–1988)
Martial Leon Thiébaux (1903–1988)

A Benedictine Visionary in the Rhineland

Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179)

Abbess, preacher, prophet, poet—Hildegard revealed in her writings an extraordinary genius and personal energy. The power and variety of her works are unparalleled among medieval women writers: she produced works of drama and lyric, music, mysticism, and cosmology. She made forays into scientific fields: the lore of animals and gems, and medicine (some of it admittedly folkloric). To accompany her three books of dazzling and encyclopedic allegorical visions, she left directions for the artistic illuminations that would elucidate her meaning.

Much of what Hildegard wrote contains autobiographical information. She dispatched hortatory letters, carrying on a voluminous, sometimes vehement correspondence with notable people of her day, among them Eleanor of Aquitaine and Henry II of England; Bernard of Clairvaux; popes Eugenius III, Anastasius IV, Adrian IV, and Alexander III; and the emperors Conrad III and Frederick Barbarossa.

After German emperors had appropriated vast powers in the previous century, and princes of state became guardians of the papacy, there followed a new period of unrest. During Hildegard's lifetime, the Church now wanted more control. Hildegard's contemporary, Pope Gregory VII, won supporters to his cause, and a schism developed. When Emperor Frederick Barbarossa endorsed one pope and Hildegard another, Hildegard unleashed a letter of rage against Frederick. "Listen to this, O King, if you wish to live," she threatened, "or else my sword will strike you!" Another of her scathing letters to the archbishop

of Mainz proved astoundingly oracular, for soon after she foretold his doom the archbishop was deposed and banished.

Other gentler letters passed between Hildegard and the neighboring Benedictine mystic, Elisabeth of Schönau. An important letter to Guibert of Gembloux, who served as her secretary, vividly describes the workings of Hildegard's visions, and the appearance in them of a mirroring "shadow of the Living Light." Further sources on her life emerge from two contemporary biographies by the monks Godefrid and Theodoric, for which Hildegard herself wrote a dozen passages. A later inquiry into her life and miracles, conducted in the thirteenth century for Pope Gregory IX, adds to her *Vita*.

The woman who would be known as the "Sybil of the Rhine" was born into a noble family at Bermersheim near Alzey. Hildegard recalls that her visions of great light began when she was five. From the age of eight, she lived at Disibodenberg, founded by the 7th-century Irish bishop, St. Disibod. The convent had stood for four centuries, but the admitting of women was recent. There her parents, Hildebert and Mechthild, had placed her, their tenth and last child, under the tutelage of the anchoress Jutta of Sponheim. The monk Volmar was another teacher, later to be her friend and secretary. The Benedictine house of Disibodenberg emphasized prayer and study, the reading of scripture and psalms, together with physical labor. For women this meant nursing, spinning, and weaving, but Hildegard's spiritual daughters also attained high skill in copying and illuminating manuscripts. Despite Hildegard's protestations of ignorance, she certainly studied Latin, although she may not have had the same kind of classical education in Ovid, Horace, Terence, and Virgil as Hrotswitha had in the Ottonian renaissance of the tenth century.

Hildegard reluctantly succeeded her beloved Jutta as *magistra* of the community in 1136. She was thirty-eight. Five years later, when she was nearly forty-three, she experienced a vision of stunning radiance in which a heavenly voice commanded her to write what she saw. She resisted, however, until sickness compelled her to record the succession of visions she experienced over the next ten years.

Sickness was for many mystics a fruitful source and accompaniment of their visionary life, as it would be for Elisabeth of Schönau and, in fifteenth-century England, for Julian of Norwich. Hildegard describes her bodily pains "in all her veins and flesh to the marrow," declaring that from her birth she was "entangled as it were in a net of suffering."¹ Debility would prevent the mystic from performing her usual tasks and serve to separate her from others. If sickness befell the woman who was unwilling to write or dictate her visions, relief came only when she finally consented to record them. Hildegard's visions formed the beginning of her first book, *Scivias* (*Know the Ways*), short for *Scito vias domini*, "Know the ways of the Lord." Pope Eugenius read parts of the *Scivias* before the Synod of Trier in 1147. He also examined Hildegard, ascertaining the authenticity of her visions. She answered his interrogations with truth and simplicity. Once she gained papal approval, she began to be famous.

The next year, 1148, Hildegard wished to found her own convent, a move that would give her greater independence. She was refused permission by Kuno, abbot of Disibodenberg, who probably intended to retain control over a community that was gaining renown. Hildegard's temper flared. She was adamant, "a rock of stone." She bitterly upbraided Kuno, calling him an "Amalekite," a member of the bedouin tribe named in Exodus 17.8 as enemies of the Israelites in the desert. Her further enfeebling sickness persuaded Kuno that divinity had a hand in Hildegard's affairs, and she was allowed to begin building the independent convent of Rupertsberg near Bingen on the Rhine. She moved with fifty nuns, all noblewomen, to the new site in 1150.

During this same period Hildegard was completing the *Scivias* with the aid of Volmar. She also had the help of her secretary-companion Richardis von Stade, to whom she was intensely devoted. When a transfer for Richardis was proposed to a position of authority in another convent, Hildegard wrote letters denouncing Richardis's brother, the archbishop Hartwig, who had sought the promotion for his sister. Hildegard wrote to Pope Eugenius as well, but did not succeed in stopping Richardis's departure. She suffered. When Richardis died within

a few years, Hildegard, now submissive to God's will, wrote a sympathetic letter to Hartwig.

She began her second book of visions, the *Liber vitae meritum* (*The Book of Life's Rewards*) (1158–1163), while traveling and preaching throughout towns and cities in Germany. Though chronically ill she made four preaching journeys from the ages of sixty to seventy-two, not shrinking from contact with large numbers of people. She visited Cologne on three occasions and was very taken with the St. Ursula legend, then at its height with the discovery of what appeared to be bones belonging to the saint and her companions. Hildegard composed thirteen lyrics honoring the saint. Her admirer and correspondent Elisabeth of Schönau, recorded her own visions of Ursula's band (see chapter 15), refashioning the legend in what would be its most influential form.

Hildegard wrote her third and final book of visions, the *Liber divinorum operum* (*The Book of Divine Works*) between 1163 and 1173. In it she suggests a human microcosm, mapping the interconnections between humanity and the cosmos; between the human and divine Christ; between the physical body, with its humors, and the soul, with its emotions and capacity for salvation. An in-dwelling fiery force, the *ignea vis*, unites all aspects of the universe in a way that is tranquil, rational, and harmonious. The composing unity of this work contrasts with the swirling commotion of the *Scivias*.

In the last year of her life when she was over eighty, Hildegard became embroiled in a controversy when she agreed to the burial of a nobleman, said to be excommunicated, at Rupertsberg. She insisted that the dead man had been sanctified at the end. All the same, her convent was placed under episcopal interdict. Hildegard refused to yield, she appealed to a powerful ally, and the interdict was lifted. On September 17, 1179, according to her biographer, she went to meet her Celestial Bridegroom in a blessed death. The sky was said to be illuminated with circles of light and shining red crosses, as if to reveal to her sisters the visions she had received.

Hildegard's visions, converted into marvelous, even hallucinating poetry and prose, are characterized by lights, fires, smokes, and stench. Her universe abounds in geometric

forms—circle, square, and oval. Cosmic elements of earth, air, fire, and water are manifest through suns and stars, skies and winds, lights and shadows, mountains and grottoes. Society is represented by kings and soldiers and hunters. Edifices rear up with their stone columns and balustrades, towers and temples, altars and crosses. Birds, fish, and animals appear that are naturalistic or monstrous. Speaking or trumpeting through clouds, fogs, and winds are vivid human forms: men and women with massive body, feet, hands, head, and hair. Hildegard's womanly presences are august and potent, with intensely feminine bodies, breasts, and wombs. A pregnant Ecclesia continually teems with offspring. The Cosmic Egg, filled with stars, similarly imparts a sense of female fertility. For Hildegard, the feminine divinity in her writing is represented with maternal fecundity and procreative force, not—as among later German mystics like Mechthild of Magdeburg—with the bridal and erotic imagery of the celestial marriage.

In a characteristic vision, a light will pour over some central scene (such as a mountain, a river, or an abyss) while an apocalyptic human presence, a beast, or an architectural structure materializes. Following the revelation will be an explanation of its meaning. Colors are conspicuous. Christianity and holy scripture are associated with the redness of the Savior's blood. White is the color of martyrs, and the dove of the holy spirit. Greenness and greening—*viriditas*—have a peculiar meaning for Hildegard, associated with the divinely energetic life-force that pulses through all being. "The soul is the body's green life-force," states *The Book of Divine Works*.²

Hildegard's visions—startling, even hallucinating, in their brilliance—have attracted the notice of modern pathologists, who trace their source in her lifelong illnesses.³ And yet, the effective power of her visions, like those of seers from Elisabeth of Schönau to Joan of Arc, remains undiminished by scientific diagnosis. The mystic's gift was in some way dependent upon her physical suffering.

Passages 1–4, translated here from Hildegard's works, include her "Solemn Declaration" (*Protestificatio*) and selections from the first three visions in book I of the *Scivias*. The *Scivias* comprises twenty-six visions. The six visions of Book I trace the

history of God, humankind, and the world from the Creation and Fall to the promise of a Savior. In seven visions, Book II describes the redemption through Christ, as the Sun, and his mystic marriage with the Church at the foot of the Cross. Book III, in thirteen visions, represents through architectural imagery the rebuilding of salvation by divine powers, or virtues; the last days of the world; the last struggle against Satan; and the Church's entrance into the apocalypse of Eternity.

Passages 5–7 are taken from the *Liber Vitae Meritorum*. The *Book of Life's Rewards* is a vast cosmic psychomachia of verbal battles. Vices and Virtues, represented as universal forces, confront one another, using words as weapons. These verbal battles culminate in the triumphs of human goodness, with the Church's entrance into eternal glory. The book opens with a central figure of God. Hildegard's dazzled eyes behold him as a powerful, perfect, and transcendent Man, who reaches from the clouds to the depths of the abyss. He is the principle of all being, who guides human salvation on its course. Hildegard observes his cloud-shaped trumpet that blasts forth three winds. Above these hover three clouds: one fiery, one turbulent, and one luminous. These trumpeted winds of God's blowing invite comparison with Chaucer's windy, smoky trumpets in *The House of Fame*. Now Hildegard's verbal psychomachia unfolds. The book also dramatizes eternity's punishments and rewards. The last selection tells of the heavenly virgins, ecstatic companions of the Lamb. The scene is reminiscent of the biblical Book of Revelations, and anticipates the procession of 144,000 maidens in the fourteenth-century English *Pearl*.

A sample of Hildegard's gem lore appears in passages 8 and 9, from the book commonly known as *Physica*, or *Liber Simplicis Medicinae* (*The Book of Simple Medicine*). This work, together with her *Causae et Curae*, or *Liber compositae medicinae* (*The Book of Advanced and Applied Medicine*), belongs to Hildegard's great work on the natural sciences, the *Liber subtilitatum diversarum naturarum creaturarum*. The *Physica* lists in nine sections the basic and curative properties of plants, the elements, trees, stones, fish, birds, animals, reptiles, and metals. In the fourth book of the *Physica*, called *De lapidibus*, Hildegard composed twenty-six short chapters on precious stones: emerald, jacinth,

onyx, beryl, sardonyx, sapphire, sard, topaz, chrysolite, jasper, prasiolite, chalcedony, chrysoprase, carbuncle, amethyst, agate, diamond, magnet, ligurius, crystal, pearl—both true and false—carnelian, alabaster, chalk, and a category of "other gems."

Section 10 includes seven lyrics from the *Symphonia harmoniae caelestium revelationum* (*Symphony of the Harmony of Celestial Revelations*). The first two honor the Blessed Virgin Mary, the third celebrates St. Maximinus, and the fourth consists of an antiphon and responsory to St. Ursula, to whom Hildegard was especially devoted. There is a love song chanted to Christ by his virgin brides, written for the spiritual daughters of her convent. On ceremonial occasions, the nuns were permitted to wear bridal white, veils, and coronets, a custom that brought a rebuke from one of Hildegard's male critics. The last two lyrics are hymns to the green life-force, that *viriditas* which is one of Hildegard's pervasive presences.

In addition to these works, the letters, and the three visionary books mentioned above, Hildegard's opus includes her drama (the *Ordo Virtutum*), two books on her secret language (the *Lingua ignota* and the *Litterae ignotae*), a book of exegesis on the Psalms, the *Expositio Evangeliorum*, and two works of hagiography, honoring St. Rupert and St. Disibod.

1. A Solemn Declaration Concerning the True Vision Flowing from God: *Scivias*. Protestificatio

Lo! In the forty-third year of my temporal course, when I clung to a celestial vision with great fear and tremulous effort, I saw a great splendor. In it came a voice from heaven, saying:

"O frail mortal, both ash of ashes, and rottenness of rottenness, speak and write down what you see and hear. But because you are fearful of speaking, simple at expounding, and unlearned in writing—speak and write, not according to the speech of man or according to the intelligence of human invention, or following the aim of human composition, but according to what you see and hear from the heavens above in the wonders of God! Offer explanations of them, just as one who hears and

understands the words of an instructor willingly makes them public, revealing and teaching them according to the sense of the instructor's discourse. You, therefore, O mortal, speak also the things you see and hear. Write them, not according to yourself or to some other person, but according to the will of the Knower, Seer, and Ordainer of all things in the secrets of their mysteries."

And again I heard the voice from heaven saying to me: "Speak these wonders and write the things taught in this manner—and speak!"

It happened in the year 1141 of the Incarnation of the Son of God, Jesus Christ, when I was forty-two years and seven months old, that a fiery light of the greatest radiance coming from the open heavens flooded through my entire brain. It kindled my whole breast like a flame that does not scorch but warms in the same way the sun warms anything on which it sheds its rays.

Suddenly I understood the meaning of books, that is, the Psalms and the Gospels; and I knew other catholic books of the Old as well as the New Testaments—not the significance of the words of the text, or the division of the syllables, nor did I consider an examination of the cases and tenses.

Indeed, from the age of girlhood, from the time that I was fifteen until the present, I had perceived in myself, just as until this moment, a power of mysterious, secret, and marvelous visions of a miraculous sort. However, I revealed these things to no one, except to a few religious persons who were living under the same vows as I was. But meanwhile, until this time when God in his grace has willed these things to be revealed, I have repressed them in quiet silence.

But I have not perceived these visions in dreams, or asleep, or in a delirium, or with my bodily eyes, or with my external mortal ears, or in secreted places, but I received them awake and looking attentively about me with an unclouded mind, in open places, according to God's will. However this may be, it is difficult for carnal man to fathom.

Once the term of my girlhood was completed, and I had arrived at the age of perfect strength which I mentioned, I heard a voice from heaven saying:

"I am the Living Light who illuminates the darkness. I have, according to my pleasure, wondrously shaken with great marvels this mortal whom I desired, and I have placed her beyond the limit reached by men of ancient times who saw in me many secret things. But I have leveled her to the ground, so that she may not raise herself up with any pride in her own mind. The world, moreover, has not had any joy of her, or sport, or practice in those things belonging to the world. I have freed her from obstinate boldness; she is fearful and anxious in her endeavors. She has suffered pain in her very marrow and in all the veins of her body; her spirit has been fettered; she has felt and endured many bodily illnesses. No pervading freedom from care has dwelt within her, but she considers herself culpable in all her undertakings.

"I have hedged round the clefts of her heart, so that her mind will not elevate itself through pride or praise, but so that she will feel more fear and pain in these things than joy or wantonness.

"For the sake of my love, therefore, she has searched in her own mind as to where she might find someone who would run in the path of salvation. And when she found one and loved him,⁴ she recognized that he was a faithful man, one similar to herself in some part of that work which pertains to me. Keeping him with her, she strove at the same time with him in all these divine studies, so that my hidden wonders might be revealed. And the same man did not place himself above her. But in an ascent to humility, and with the exertion of goodwill when he came to her, he yielded to her with many sighs.

"You, therefore, O mortal, who receive these things—not in the turmoil of deception but in the clarity of simplicity for the purpose of making hidden things plain—write what you see and hear!"

But although I was seeing and hearing these things, I nevertheless refused to write for such a long time because of doubt and wrong thinking—on account of the various judgments of men—not out of boldness but out of the duty of my humility.

Finally, I fell to my sickbed, quelled by the whip of God. Racked by many infirmities, and with a young girl⁵ of noble blood and good character as witness—as well as a man I had

secretly sought out and discovered, as I have already said—I put my hand to writing.

While I was doing this, I sensed the profound depth of the narration of these books, as I have said. And despite the strength I experienced when I was raised up from my sickness, I carried out that work with difficulty to the end, completing it after ten years. These visions and these words took place during the days of Heinrich, Archbishop of Mainz;⁶ Conrad, Emperor of the Romans;⁷ and Kuno,⁸ abbot of Mount St. Disibodenburg under Pope Eugenius.⁹

I have spoken and written this, not according to the invention of my heart, or of any man, but as I saw these things in the heavens and heard and perceived them through God's sacred mysteries. And again I heard a voice from the sky saying to me, "Shout, therefore, and write this way!"

2. The Iron-Colored Mountain and the Radiant One: *Scivias*. Book I, Vision 1

I saw what seemed to be a huge mountain having the color of iron. On its height was sitting One¹⁰ of such great radiance that it stunned my vision. On both sides of him extended a gentle shadow like a wing of marvelous width and length.¹¹ And in front of him at the foot of the same mountain stood a figure full of eyes everywhere.¹² Because of those eyes, I was not able to distinguish any human form.

In front of this figure there was another figure, whose age was that of a boy, and he was clothed in a pale tunic and white shoes.¹³ I was not able to look at his face, because above his head so much radiance descended from the One sitting on the mountain.¹⁴ From the One sitting on the mountain a great many living sparks cascaded, which flew around those figures with great sweetness.¹⁵ In this same mountain, moreover, there seemed to be a number of little windows, in which men's heads appeared, some pale and some white.¹⁶

And see! The One sitting on the mountain shouted in an extremely loud, strong voice, saying: "O frail mortal, you who

are of the dust of the earth's dust, and ash of ash, cry out and speak of the way into incorruptible salvation! Do this in order that those people may be taught who see the innermost meaning of Scripture, but who do not wish to tell it or preach it because they are lukewarm and dull in preserving God's justice. Unlock for them the mystical barriers. For they, being timid, are hiding themselves in a remote and barren field. You, therefore, pour yourself forth in a fountain of abundance! Flow with mystical learning, so that those who want you to be scorned because of the guilt of Eve may be inundated by the flood of your refreshment!

"For you do not receive this keenness of insight from man, but from that supernal and awesome judge on high. There amidst brilliant light, this radiance will brightly shine forth among the luminous ones. Arise, therefore, and shout and speak! These things are revealed to you through the strongest power of divine aid. For he who potently and benignly rules his creatures imbues with the radiance of heavenly enlightenment all those who fear him and serve him with sweet love in a spirit of humility. And he leads those who persevere in the path of justice to the joys of everlasting vision!"

3. The Fall of Lucifer, the Formation of Hell, and the Fall of Adam and Eve: *Scivias*. Book I, Vision 2

Then I saw what seemed to be a great number of living torches, full of brilliance. Catching a fiery gleam, they received a most radiant splendor from it. And see! A lake appeared here, of great length and depth, with a mouth like a well, breathing forth a stinking fiery smoke. From the mouth of the lake a loathsome fog also arose until it touched a thing like a blood vessel that had a deceptive appearance.

And in a certain region of brightness, the fog blew through the blood vessel to a pure white cloud, which had emerged from the beautiful form of a man, and the cloud contained within itself many, many stars. Then the loathsome fog blew and drove the cloud and the man's form out of the region of brightness.

Once this had happened, the most luminous splendor encircled that region. The elements of the world, which previously had held firmly together in great tranquillity, now, turning into great turmoil, displayed fearful terrors.

[Hildegard hears a voice explaining the meaning of what she has seen:]

The "great number of living torches, full of brilliance" refers to the numerous army of heavenly spirits blazing forth in their life of blessedness. They dwell with much honor and adornment, for they have been created by God. These did not grasp at proudly exalting themselves, but persisted steadfastly in divine love.

"Catching a fiery gleam, they received a most radiant splendor from it" means that when Lucifer and his followers tried to rebel against the heavenly Creator and fell, those others who kept a zealous love of God came to a common agreement, and clothed themselves in the vigilance of divine love.

But Lucifer and his followers had embraced the sluggardly ignorance of those who do not wish to know God. What happened? When the Devil fell, a great praise arose from those angelic spirits who had persisted in righteousness with God. For they recognized with the keenest vision that God remained unshaken, without any mutable change in his power, and that he will not be overthrown by any warrior. And so they burned fiercely in their love for him, and persevering in righteousness, they scorned all the dust of injustice.

Now "that lake of great length and depth" which appeared to you is Hell. In its length are contained vices, and in its deep abyss is damnation, as you see. Also, "it has a mouth like a well, breathing forth a stinking, fiery smoke" means that drowning souls are swallowed in its voracious greed. For although the lake shows them sweetness and delights, it leads them, through perverse deceit, to a perdition of torments. There the heat of the fire breathes forth with an outpouring of the most loathsome smoke, and with a boiling, death-dealing stench. For these abominable torments were prepared for the Devil and his followers, who turned away from the highest good, which they wanted neither to know nor to understand. For this reason they

were cast down from every good thing, not because they did not know them but because they were contemptuous of them in their lofty pride.

"From that same lake a most loathsome fog arose, until it touched a thing like a blood vessel that had a deceptive appearance." This means that the diabolical deceit emanating from deepest perdition entered the poisonous serpent. The serpent contained within itself the crime of a fraudulent intention to deceive man. How? When the Devil saw man in Paradise, he cried out in great agitation, saying, "O who is this that approaches me in the mansion of true blessedness!" He knew himself that the malice he had within him had not yet filled other creatures. But seeing Adam and Eve walking in childlike innocence in the garden of delights, he—in his great stupefaction—set out to deceive them through the serpent.

Why? Because he perceived that the serpent was more like him than was any other animal, and that by striving craftily he could bring about covertly what he could not openly accomplish in his own shape. When, therefore, he saw Adam and Eve turn away, both in body in mind, from the tree that was forbidden to them, he realized that they had had a divine command. He realized that through the first act they attempted, he could overthrow them very easily.

The line "in this same region of brightness he blew on a white cloud, which had emerged from the beautiful form of a man, and the cloud contained within itself many, many stars" means this: In this place of delight, the Devil, by means of the serpent's seductions, attacked Eve and brought about her downfall. Eve had an innocent soul. She had been taken from the side of innocent Adam, bearing within her body the luminous multitude of the human race, as God had preordained it.

Why did the Devil attack her? Because he knew that the woman's softness would be more easily conquered than the man's strength, seeing, indeed, that Adam burned so fiercely with love for Eve that if the Devil himself could conquer Eve, Adam would do anything she told him. Therefore the Devil "cast her and that same form of a man out of the region." This means that the ancient seducer, by driving Eve and Adam from the

abode of blessedness through his deceit, sent them into darkness and ruin.

4. The Cosmic Egg: *Scivias*. Book I, Vision 3

After this I saw a huge creation, rounded and shaded and shaped like an egg.¹⁷ It was narrow at the top, wide in the middle, and compact below. At the circumference was a blazing fire¹⁸ that had a kind of shadowy membrane beneath it. Within that fire was an orb of glittering red flame,¹⁹ of such great size that the whole creation was illuminated by it. Above it were aligned in a row three little torches²⁰ that steadied the orb with their fires so that it would not fall. Sometimes the orb reared itself upwards, and many fires rushed to meet it, so that it then further lengthened its own flames.²¹ At other times it sank downwards and a great cold obstructed it, and the glittering red orb quickly retracted its own flames.²²

But from the fire around the circumference of that creation, a wind gusted forth with its tornadoes.²³ And from the membrane that was under the fire another blast boiled up with its whirlwinds, and they spread here and there throughout the creation. In that same membrane there was a dark fire so horrifying that I was not able to look at it.²⁴ This fire tore through the entire membrane with its force, full of thundering, storms, and the sharpest stones, both large and small. As long as it raised up its thunder, the brilliant fire and the winds and air were thrown into a turmoil,²⁵ and lightning flashes outdid the thunder. For that brilliant fire was the first to feel the thunder's commotion.²⁶ Below that membrane was the purest ether, which had no membrane under it. In the ether I saw an orb of dazzling white fire,²⁷ very great in size. Two little torches²⁸ were set brightly above it, steadying the white orb so that it would not swerve from its course. And in that ether, many bright spheres²⁹ were placed everywhere. Into these spheres the dazzling white orb emptied some portion of itself from time to time, sending out its radiance. And so, the white orb, hastening back toward the glittering red orb and renewing its own flames there, breathed forth those flames among the spheres. And from that ether, a

wind blasted forth with its tornadoes, and it whirled everywhere through that creation I spoke of.³⁰

Below that same ether I saw a watery air that had a white membrane under it. This air, blowing here and there, provided moisture to the entire creation. Now and then it would suddenly gather itself together, and with a great spattering spew forth a sudden torrent. Then it would softly spread itself and drop a caressing, gently falling rain. But from this place too, a wind gusted forth³¹ with its whirling force, and blew everywhere throughout that creation I spoke of.

In the midst of these elements was a sandy globe³² of great size, and the elements enveloped it in such a way that it could slip neither here nor there. But occasionally, when the elements clashed together in alternation with the winds I mentioned, they caused the sandy globe to be moved to some degree by their force.³³

And I saw between the North and the East what seemed to be a huge mountain. Toward the North it had much darkness, and toward the East it had much light, so that the light was unable to extend to the shadows, nor could the shadows extend to the light.³⁴

5. The Three Trumpeted Winds of God: *Liber Vitae Meritorum*. Vision I, Part 1

I saw a man of such height that he touched everything from the summit of heaven's clouds down to the abyss. From his shoulders upward he was above the clouds in the clearest ether. From his shoulders down to his thighs, he was below the clouds, and in the midst of another white cloud. From his thighs to his knees he was in terrestrial air, and from the knees to his calves, in the earth. From his calves downward to the soles of his feet he was in the waters of the abyss, so that he was standing above the abyss. And he turned toward the East so that he was gazing both East and South. His face flashed forth with such brightness that I could not look at him completely.

At his mouth he had a white cloud shaped like a trumpet, which was full of a rapidly ringing din. When he blew the trumpet it blasted three winds. Each wind had a cloud above it: a fiery cloud, a turbulent cloud, and a luminous cloud. The winds were holding those clouds up. But the wind that had the fiery cloud above it remained in front of the man's face. The other two winds, with their clouds, descended to his chest, and there they spread their blasts. The wind before his face stayed there, and blew from the East to the South.

In the fiery cloud was a living fiery multitude, who were all together in one will and one conjoined life. And before them was spread a tablet full of wings everywhere, which flew with God's commands. When God's commands lifted that tablet on which the Wisdom of God had written its secrets, this multitude zealously examined it together. When they had examined these writings, the power of God rewarded them, so that they resonated together in a single chord of music like that of a mighty trumpet.

The wind that had the turbulent cloud above it blew with the cloud from the South to the East, so that the length and breadth of the cloud were like an open city square. Because of its extent, it could not be grasped by the human intellect. On that cloud was an enormous crowd of the blessed, who all possessed the spirit of life, and who were too numerous to count. Their voices were like the rushing of many waters, and they said: "We have our dwelling places according to the pleasure of the One who has brought forth these winds. And when shall we receive them? For if we were to have our clouds, we would rejoice more than we do now."

But the crowd that was in the fiery cloud responded to them in voices full of psalms: "When the Divinity takes hold of his trumpet he will breathe forth lightning and thunder and burning fire toward the earth. And he will touch the fire that is in the sun, so that all the earth will be moved; and it will come about that God will make manifest his great sign. And then in that trumpet all the tribes of earth and all the families of tongues will shout, as well as all who are inscribed in that trumpet, and here you will have your dwelling place.

The wind over which the luminous cloud was hovering, together with that same luminous cloud, spread itself from the East to the North. But very great shadows, thick and horrible, were coming from the West, and spreading themselves toward the luminous cloud. But the shadows were unable to proceed beyond the luminous cloud.

Within that luminous cloud a Sun [Christ] and a Moon [the Church] appeared. In the Sun there was a lion, and in the Moon a horned goat. The Sun shone above the heavens and through the heavens, and on the earth and beneath the earth, and so it proceeded in its rising and returned to its setting. But as the Sun was moving, the lion advanced with it and in it, plundering and despoiling as they went. When the Sun returned, the lion went back with it and in it, and roared greatly for joy. The Moon, too, in which there was a horned goat, gradually followed the rising and setting of the sun. Then the wind blew and said, "A woman will bear a child, and the horned goat will fight against the North."

In the shadows there was a crowd of lost souls beyond number. When they heard the sound of those singing from the South, they turned away, since they did not wish their society. The leader of these lost souls was called the "Deceiver," for they all follow his works and have been smitten by Christ, so that they are powerless. And all of these were crying in sorrowful voices, saying, "Woe, woe to the injurious and dreadful deeds that flee from life and travel with us toward death."

Then I saw a cloud coming from the North, which extended itself toward these shadows. This cloud was barren of all joy and happiness, for even the Sun did not touch it or extend to it. It was full of evil spirits, who were drifting here and there on it, and contriving to set traps for me. These spirits began to blush with shame on account of the Man. And I heard the old serpent saying among them, "I will make my strong men ready for the bulwarks, and I will fight with all my strength against my enemies."

Then among the men he spat out of his mouth a foamy froth, full of filth with all the vices, and puffed them up with mockery and said, "Ha! Those who are named suns because of their luminous deeds, I will drive them to the baleful, horrible

shadows of night." And he blew out a loathsome fog which covered all the earth like the blackest smoke, and from it I heard a great roaring that thundered forth. It roared, "No man will worship another God unless he sees and knows him. What is this, that man cherishes what he does not recognize?" In that same cloud I saw different kinds of vices, each in its own image.

6. Worldly Love and Celestial Love: *Liber Vitae Meritorum*. Vision I, Part 1

The Words of Worldly Love:

The first figure had the form of a man and the blackness of an Ethiopian. Standing naked, he wound his arms and legs around a tree below the branches. From the tree all kinds of flowers were growing. With his hands he was gathering those flowers, and he said:

"I possess all the kingdoms of the world with their flowers and ornaments. How should I wither when I have all the greenness? Why should I live in the condition of old age, since I am blossoming in youth? Why should I lead my beautiful eyes into blindness? Because if I did this I should be ashamed. As long as I am able to possess the beauty of this world, I will gladly hold on to it. I have no knowledge of any other life, although I hear all sorts of stories about it."

When he had spoken, that tree I mentioned withered from the root, and sank into the darkness of which I spoke. And the figure died along with it.

The Reply of Celestial Love:

Then from that turbulent cloud of which I spoke I heard a voice replying to this figure:

"You exist in great folly, because you want to lead a life in the cinders of ashes. You do not seek that life which will never wither in the beauty of youth, and which will never die in old age. Besides, you lack all light and exist in a black fog. You are enveloped in human willfulness as if enwrapped with worms. You are also living as if for the single moment, and afterward you will wither like a worthless thing. You will fall into the lake

of perdition, and there you will be surrounded by all its embracing arms, which you with your nature call flowers.

"But I am the column of celestial harmony, and I am attendant upon all the joys of life. I do not scorn life, but trample underfoot all harmful things, just as I despise you. I am indeed a mirror of all the virtues, in which all faithfulness may clearly contemplate itself. You, however, pursue a nocturnal course, and your hands will wreak death."

7. The Celestial Joys of the Virgins: *Liber Vitae Meritorum*. Book VI, Part 6

In that same brightness I looked, as if through a mirror, upon air having the purity upon purity of the most transparent water, and radiating from itself the splendor upon splendor of the sun. The air held a wind which contained all the green life-force of the plants and flowers of paradise and earth, and which was full of all the scent of this greenness, just as summer has the sweetest scent of plants and flowers.

In that air, which I regarded as if through a mirror, were those beings arrayed in the most gleaming robes, seemingly interwoven with gold; they had long sashes encrusted with the most precious stones, that hung from the breast to the foot. From them, moreover, breathed forth the intensest fragrance like that of spices. And they were girded round with belts ornamented with what seemed to be gold, gems, and pearls beyond human understanding.

Encircling their heads they wore crowns of gold intertwined with roses and lilies and stems studded with the most precious stones. When the Lamb of God called to them, the sweetest breath of wind, coming from the mysteries of Divinity, touched those stems so that every kind of lyre song, and lyre and organ music, rang out from them, together with the voice of the Lamb. No one else sang except for those wearing the crowns. Indeed the others were listening to it and rejoicing in it, just as one rejoices in beholding the splendor of a sun not seen before.

And their slippers were so transparent, so bathed in light that they seemed to be shod with a living fountain. Sometimes they stepped forth as if walking on wheels of gold, and then they were carrying their lyres in their hands and playing the lyres. Then they understood and knew and spoke a strange tongue that no one else knew or could speak. I was not able to see the rest of their ornaments, of which there were more.

For while they had lived in the world in their bodies, they had acknowledged their faith in the Creator, and had performed good works. They now, therefore, existed in this blessed tranquillity of bright joy. And since, in the purity of their minds, they had eschewed the fleeting vanities of fleshly delights and had ascended by the Law's commands into the love of the true, burning sun above, they possessed the air having the purity upon purity of the most limpid water, and the splendor upon splendor of the sun radiating forth.

Because of their most sweet desires, which they had proven to God and mortals through the green life-force of their virginity, and the flower-bloom of their minds and bodies when they poured forth the good savor of many virtues—for they had been kindled with ardor by the Holy Spirit—they felt that breath which contained all the green life-force of the plants and flowers of paradise and earth, and which was full of the scent of all greenness, just as summer has the sweetest scent of plants and flowers.

8. Preface on Precious Gems: *Physica*

All stones contain fire and moisture. But the Devil abhors precious stones. He hates and despises them, because he remembers that their beauty shone within him before he fell from the glory that God had given him, and also because precious stones are born of fire, and fire is where he receives his punishment. For he was defeated by God's will and plummeted into the fire. Just so, he was conquered by the fire of the Holy Spirit, when humanity was snatched from his jaws by the Holy Spirit's first breath.

Precious stones and gems arise in the East and in those regions where the sun is especially hot. For the mountains that are in those zones contain a very high temperature like that of fire because of the sun's heat. The rivers in those regions flow and boil continuously because of the sun's excessive heat. Occasionally, a flood gushes forth from those rivers and, swelling, flows upward toward those burning mountains. When the same mountains, burning because of the sun's heat, are touched by those rivers, they hiss wherever the water touches fire or the rivers splash their foam, like a fiery iron or fiery stone when water is poured on it. In that place the foam sticks like a burdock. In three or four days it hardens into stone.

But after the flood of these waters subsides so that the waters return again to their streambed, the foam which had clung in several places to the mountains becomes thoroughly dry, depending on the various hours of the day and the temperature of those hours. And, depending on the temperature of those hours, they acquire their colors and their virtues. As they dry they harden into precious stones. Then from various places they loosen like fish scales and fall into the sand.

When the flood of those running streams rises again, the rivers carry off many stones and conduct them to other countries, where they are found by men. The mountains I mentioned—on which gems of such quality and number are born in this manner—glitter like the light of day.

So precious stones are engendered by fire and by water, and therefore they contain fire and moisture within themselves. They possess many virtues and great efficacy so that many benefits can be brought about by their means. These are good and worthy effects and useful to mankind—not effects of corruption, fornication, adultery, hatred, murder, and similar things that lead to sin and are inimical to man. For the nature of precious stones procures the worthy and the useful, and wards off the perverse and evil, just as virtues cast down vices and just as the vices cannot operate against the virtues.

There are, however, other gems that are not born of those mountains or in the manner described. They arise from certain other, harmful things. From these, according to their natures, good or evil can be brought about with God's permission. For

God beautified the foremost angel as if with precious stones. He, Lucifer, seeing them glitter in the mirror of divinity, gained knowledge from this. He recognized that God wished to create many wonderful things. Then his spirit grew proud because the beauty of the gems in him shone forth against God. He thought his power was equal to God's, even greater than God's. For that reason his splendor was extinguished.

But just as God saved Adam for a better destiny, so God did not abandon the beauty and virtue of those precious stones, but desired them to remain on earth with honor and praise, and for medical use.

9. The Emerald: *Physica*

The emerald is formed in the morning of the day and in the sunrise, when the sun is powerfully situated in its sphere and about to set forth on its journey. Then the greenness of the earth and the grasses thrives with the greatest vigor. For the air is still cold and the sun is already warm. The plants suck the green life-force as strongly as a lamb sucks its milk. The heat of the day is just beginning to be adequate for this—to cook and ripen the day's green life-force and nourish the plants so that they will be fertile and able to produce fruit.

It is for this reason that the emerald is powerful against all human weaknesses and infirmities; because the sun engenders it and because all of its matter springs from the green life-force of the air.

Therefore, whoever suffers a malady of the heart, the stomach, or the side, let that person carry an emerald so that the body's flesh may be warmed by it, and the sick one will be healed. But if diseases so overwhelm the patient that their tempest cannot be resisted, then let the patient place an emerald in the mouth so that it may be wetted by the saliva. Let the body frequently absorb the saliva, warmed by the stone, and then spit it out. The sudden attack of those diseases will then in all likelihood cease.

If a person falls down, stricken by epilepsy, place an emerald in the patient's mouth while he is still lying down, and

presently the spirit will revive. After the patient is raised up and the emerald is removed from the mouth, let the patient look attentively and say, "Just as the spirit of the Lord fills up the earthly sphere, so let his mercy fill the house of my body so that it may never again be shaken." Let the patient do this for nine consecutive days, in the morning, and the cure will follow. But the patient should always keep the same emerald and gaze at it daily in the morning, all the while saying these words. And the sick person will be made well.

Anyone who suffers especially from headache should hold the emerald before the mouth and warm it with his breath, so that the breath moistens it. The sufferer should then rub the temples and forehead with the moisture. Let it be placed in the mouth and held there for a little while, and the patient will feel better.

Whoever has much phlegm and saliva should heat up a good wine, and then place a linen cloth over a small vessel and the emerald upon the cloth. Pour the warm wine so that it flows through the cloth. This should be done again and again, as if one were preparing lye. Then consume at frequent intervals a mixture of that wine with bean flour, and drink the same wine prepared this way. It purges the brain so that the phlegm and saliva will be lessened.

And if one is gnawed by worms, place a linen cloth on the sore, and on this the emerald, and tie another strip of cloth over it like a poultice. Do this so that the stone may thus grow warm. Keep it there for three days, and the worms will die.

10. Lyrics: *Symphonia Harmoniae Caelestium Revelationum*

O tu, suavissima virga

O you, most delightful branch,
putting forth leaves from the rod of Jesse,
O what a great splendor it is
that Divinity gazed at a most beautiful girl

—just as the eagle fixes his eye on the sun—
when the heavenly Father strove toward
the Virgin's brightness
and he wanted his word to be made flesh in her.

Now when the Virgin's mind was illuminated
by God's mystical mystery,
miraculously a bright flower sprang forth
from that Virgin—
with the celestial!

Glory to the Father and the Son
and to the Holy Spirit,
as it was in the beginning—
with the celestial!

O splendidissima gemma

O brightest jewel,
and serene splendor of the sun,
the fountain springing from the Father's heart
has poured into you.
His unique Word,
by which he created the primal matter of the world
—thrown into confusion by Eve—
the Father has forged this Word, as humanity,
for you.

Because of this, you are that lucent matter, through
which that same Word
breathed all the virtues—
just as it drew forth all creatures
from primal matter.

Columba aspexit per cancellos

The dove gazed through the latticed window screen:
before her eyes, the balsam's fragrant moisture
flowed from the luminous Maximinus.

The sun's heat flamed forth
and glittered among the shadows;
from them arose the jewel
of which the purest temple was built
in the virtuous heart.

He stands, a lofty tower made of
the tree of Lebanon, of cypress,
and ornamented with carnelian and jacinth;
he is a city surpassing the arts of all artificers.

He runs, the swift stag, to the fountain
of purest water, flowing
from the most potent stone,
which has refreshed with sweet perfumes.

O makers of unguents and colors, who dwell
in the sweetest greenness
of the gardens of the king,
you rise up to perfect the holy sacrifice
among the rams.

Among you shines this artificer,
this rampart of the temple,
he who desired the wings of an eagle
so that he might kiss Wisdom, his nurse,
in the glorious fecundity of Ecclesia.

O Maximinus, you are the mountain and the valley:
In both you appear, a high edifice,
where the horned goat sprang forth
with the elephant,
and Wisdom dwelled in delight.

You are strong and sweet in sacred ceremonies:
 in radiance you ascend the altars
 as a smoke of spices
 to the pillar's summit of praise.

There you intercede for the people,
 who reach to the mirror of light—
 to whom there is praise on high.

Antiphon: O rubor sanguinis

O crimson blush of blood,
 you who have streamed from that eminence
 bordering on divinity,
 you are a flower
 which the wintry serpent's blast
 has never withered.

Responsory: Favus distillans

A trickling honeycomb
 was the virgin Ursula;
 she yearned to clasp the Lamb of God.
 Honey and milk are beneath her tongue—
 for she gathered to herself
 a garden yielding fruit, and the flower of flowers
 in a throng of virgins.

And so, in the most noble morning light,
 be glad, Daughter Zion,
 that she gathered to herself
 a garden yielding fruit, and the flower of flowers
 in a throng of virgins.

Glory be to the Father and the Son
 and the Holy Spirit,

for she gathered to herself
 a garden yielding fruit, and the flower of flowers
 in a throng of virgins.

O dulcissime amator

O sweetest lover,
 O sweetest embracing love,
 help us to guard our virginity.

We have been born out of the dust, ah! ah!
 and in the sin of Adam:
 most harsh is it to deny
 one's longing for a taste of the apple.
 Raise us up, Savior Christ.

Ardently we desire to follow you.
 O how difficult it is for us, miserable as we are,
 to imitate you, spotless and innocent
 king of angels!

Yet we trust you,
 for you desire to recover a jewel
 from what is rotten.

Now we call on you, our husband and comforter,
 who redeemed us on the cross.
 We are bound to you through your blood
 as the pledge of betrothal.
 We have renounced earthly men
 and chosen you, the Son of God.

O most beautiful form,
 O sweetest fragrance of desirable delights,
 we sigh for you always in our sorrowful
 banishment!
 When may we see you and remain with you?

But we dwell in the world,
and you dwell in our mind;
we embrace you in our heart
as if we had you here with us.
You, bravest lion, have burst through the heavens
and are descending to the house of the virgins.
You have destroyed death, and are building life
in the golden city.

Grant us society in that city,
and let us dwell in you,
O sweetest husband,
who has rescued us from the jaws of the Devil,
seducer of our first mother!

O viriditas digiti Dei

O green life-force of the finger of God,
through which God sets his planting,
you gleam with sublime radiance
like an upright column.
You are full of glory
in the completion of God's work.

O mountain's height,
you will never be overthrown
because of God's indifference.

Solitary you stand
from ancient times as our defense.
Yet there is no armed might
that can drag you down.
You are full of glory.

Glory be to the Father and the Son
and the Holy Spirit.
You are full of glory!

O nobilissima viriditas

O noblest green life-force,
you are rooted in the sun
and in pure white serenity.
You illuminate in a wheel
what no excellence on earth can encompass.
You are encircled in the embrace
of the divine retinue.

You redden like the morning
and burn like the flame of the sun.

NOTES

1. Richard Kieckhefer, *Unquiet Souls: Fourteenth-Century Saints and Their Religious Milieu* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1984), p. 57, remarks on the mystic's "heaven-sent affliction" of illness and its role in achieving ecstasy.

2. See Marie-Hélène Moya, "Le Symbolisme sacré des couleurs chez deux mystiques médiévales: Hildegarde de Bingen; Julienne de Norwich," *Les Couleurs au Moyen Age*, *Sénéfiance* No. 24 (Aix-en-Provence: Université de Provence, 1988): 255-272; Peter Dronke, "Tradition and Innovation in Medieval Western Colour-Imagery," *Eranos Jahrbuch*, 1972.

3. Oliver Sacks, *Migraine: Understanding a Common Disorder*, (Berkeley, 1985); John F. Benton, "Consciousness of Self and Perceptions of Individuality," in *Renaissance and Renewal in the Twelfth Century*, ed. Robert L. Benton and Giles Constable (Cambridge: Mass., Harvard UP, 1982), pp. 267-268. Sabina Flanagan discusses Hildegard's migraines in her chapter "Potent Infirmities," in *Hildegard of Bingen: A Visionary Life* (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 200-206.

4. The monk Volmar of Disibodenberg, Hildegard's secretary.

5. This was Richardis von Stade, toward whom Hildegard felt deep affection.

6. Heinrich I of Wartburg, archbishop between 1142 and 1153.
7. Conrad III (1138–1152), who died on crusade in the Holy Land.
8. It was Kuno (fl. c. 1136–1155) who had attempted to bar Hildegard's move to Rupertsberg.
9. Eugenius III (1145–1153). After examining Hildegard, Eugenius gave her permission and encouragement to continue writing her books. This authorization proved a stroke of inspiration or good fortune during a time when it was possible for popes and councils to condemn and burn such books.
10. Notes 10 through 16 represent in abbreviated form the explanations Hildegard receives from the One sitting on the mountain. The iron-colored mountain signifies the strength and immutability of God's eternal realm. The One who has stunned Hildegard's vision is the same One who, reigning over all the spheres of earth and heavenly divinity in unwavering brightness, is incomprehensible to the human mind.
11. The shadow is the sweet, gentle protection of the blessed Defense. It both admonishes and chastises, justly and affectionately, showing the way to righteousness with true equity.
12. This figure is Fear of the Lord (*Timor Domini*). Armored by the keen sight of good and just intentions, he inspires in human beings his own zeal and steadfastness. His acute vigilance drives away that forgetfulness of God's justice that often afflicts mortals.
13. The boylike figure in white shoes is the poor in spirit. In pale submission to God, it puts on a white tunic and faithfully follows the gleaming white footsteps of the Son of God.
14. The radiance descending from the One on the mountain is the shining visitation from that One who governs all creatures, pouring down the power and strength of his blessedness.
15. The living sparks cascading down from the One on the mountain are the many potent virtues that emanate from him. These virtues ardently embrace and soothe those who truly fear God and love poverty of spirit, enfolding them with their aid and protection.
16. The men's heads, some pale and some white, appearing in the little windows, show that human actions cannot be hidden. The pale, dull-colored ones indicate those who are lukewarm and sluggish in their deeds, and therefore dishonorable. The white and shining ones are those who are vigilant.
17. Notes 17 through 34 represent in abbreviated form Hildegard's allegorizations of what she sees. The firmament is Almighty God, in-

comprehensible in his majesty and unfathomable in his mysteries, the hope of all the faithful.

18. In this fiery circumference, God consumes those who are outside the true faith with the fire of his vengeance, but those remaining within the Catholic faith he purifies with the fire of his consolation.
19. The sun, explained allegorically as the solar Christ, or the Sun of Justice, whose fiery love illumines all things.
20. Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn represent the Trinity, their descending order showing the earthward descent of Christ.
21. The Sun's lengthened rays signify the fecundating power of the Father, at the time of Christ's incarnation, by which the heavenly mystery was effected in the Virgin Mary.
22. This sinking indicates Christ's descent to earth to put on wretched human form and physical suffering, after which he ascended again to the Father, as the Scriptures record.
23. Each of the four speaking winds carries a specific report. The first wind, coming from the South and located in the fiery circumference, is God's word. God the Father reveals his power through the just words of his truth.
24. The North wind, boiling up from the dark region of fire, is the Devil's insane and futile speech.
25. Cosmic storms are provoked by the sin of murder, which brings on heavenly retribution. These storms pelt creation with thunder, lightning, and hail.
26. Divine majesty foresees the crime of murder and punishes it.
27. The Moon, to be understood also as the unconquered Church.
28. Venus and Mercury, to be understood also as the Old and New Testaments guarding the Church.
29. The stars in the ether signify the many splendid works of piety appearing everywhere in the purity of the faith.
30. The West wind, emanating from the purest ether, spreads the strong and glorious teachings of the faith.
31. The East wind, blowing from the humid, airy region, brings salvation through true speech and sermons, with the inundation of baptism.
32. The globe is earth, surrounded by the elements in commotion. Human beings on earth, though connected to the elements, are meant to rule over them.

33. These are divine miracles that shake the bodies and minds of mortals.

34. The mountain is the great fall of man. It stands between diabolical wickedness and divine goodness, between the Devil's deceit—which leads toward damnation—and the light of redemption. The peak of the mountain points downward into the earth's green-growing particles, or grains; its base is rooted in the white membrane of air.

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 CHAPTER 15

Handmaid of God

Elisabeth of Schönau (1128/9-1164/5)

Hildegard of Bingen received at least one visit and three letters from her younger contemporary, Elisabeth of Schönau, a gifted and tormented Benedictine mystic who also lived in the Rhineland. Both women were visionaries who had been ordered to spread the word about their divine revelations. Their names were linked in their lifetimes as two women whom God had endowed with the spirit of prophecy. But Elisabeth had suffered mockery, and she defends herself to Hildegard against those who expressed doubt about her extraordinary and debilitating visions. She also explains her method of keeping a little book at her bedside in which to record them.

As a young girl of twelve Elisabeth had entered the Benedictine double monastery of Schönau in the diocese of Trier, not far from Cologne and the Rhine. The monastery was a recent foundation (in 1114) of the count of Laurenberg, with whose house Elisabeth's family had some connections. No medieval *vita* was written about her, it appears, though inferences can be made about Elisabeth's noble background and kinfolk in the church. One great-uncle was the Bishop of Munster, and she had relatives among the nuns of the Augustinian monastery of St. Andernach. What we know of her is assembled from the autobiographical portions of her visions and her letters, and from her brother Ekbert's testimony, both in his introduction to her works and his letter about her death (*de Obitu*) to their cousins.

Six years after her parents dedicated her to the monastery of Schönau, Elisabeth took the veil. Given to acute depressions and nervous crises, even a wish for death, Elisabeth spoke of her mind being clouded with shadows, sadness, and depression. She