



Hildegard of Bingen

HILDEGARD OF BINGEN: SELECTED WRITINGS

TRANSLATED WITH AN INTRODUCTION AND NOTES BY
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I. Letter to Bernard of Clairvaux

Bernard of Clairvaux was an obvious person for Hildegard to appeal to for support as she pondered a radical change of course in her life and career. A widely known author and by then a venerable figure, Bernard was the abbot of the principal Cistercian monastery and head of the Cistercian order. He was also well placed to intervene on her behalf with a former monk of Clairvaux, Bernardo Pignatelli of Pisa, who had been elected Pope Eugenius III in the previous year. Bernard was an influential figure in the politics of Church and state, particularly in France and Germany, and at the time of her letter to him he had been preoccupied with preaching journeys in which he sought to gather support for the Second Crusade.

Hildegard to Bernard of Clairvaux, 1146 [Letter 1]¹

Venerable Father Bernard, you are held wonderfully in high honour by the power of God. You are a terror to the unlawful foolishness of the world; you burn in the love of God's son; you are eager to win men for the banner of the Holy Cross to fight wars in the Christian army against the fury

¹ [Letter I]: The standard numbering of the letters follows the edition of the letters by Lieven Van Acker, *Hildegardis Bingensis Epistolarium* CCCM 9i-9ia (Turnhout, 1991 and 1993) and the translation by Joseph L. Baird and Radd K. Ehrman, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen*, 2 vols (Oxford, 1994 and 1998). This in turn follows the original manuscript arrangement of the collected correspondence in which the letters are ordered hierarchically according to the rank and importance of the correspondent. Bernard's letter is clearly significant, for it is placed first, even before the various letters to the popes.

of the pagans.² Father, I ask you, by the living God, to attend to my questions.

I am very concerned by this vision which has appeared to me in the spirit of mystery, for I have never seen it with the external eyes of the flesh. I who am miserable and more than miserable in my womanly existence have seen great wonders since I was a child. And my tongue could not express them, if God's Spirit did not teach me to believe.

Most gentle Father, you are secure; in your goodness please answer me, your unworthy servant, for since I was a child I have never felt secure, not for a single hour! Could you search your soul, in your piety and wisdom, and discover how you are instructed by the Holy Spirit, and pour consolation upon me, your servant, from your heart?

For in the text I know the inner meaning of the exposition of the Psalter and the Gospel and other books shown to me in this vision, which touches my heart and soul like a consuming fire, teaching me these profundities of exposition. But it does not teach me writings in the German tongue — these I do not know — and I only know how to read for the simple meaning, not for any textual analysis.³ Give me an answer as to what you think,

² *the banner of the Holy Cross... pagans*: A reference to the preparations for the Second Crusade, fought between 1147 and 1149. To 'preach the cross' meant to obtain military support for the Crusade by preaching in towns and cities throughout the country. An account of such preaching (for the Third Crusade 1189-92), and the fervent support it could inspire, is given in the first chapter of *The Journey through Wales* by Gerald of Wales, trans. Lewis Thorpe (Harmondsworth, 1978), pp. 74-7.

³ *the simple meaning... textual analysis*: Hildegard claimed a reading knowledge of Latin, as acquired perhaps gradually and subconsciously by many years of participation in the liturgy and by meditated reading of the scriptures and the Fathers of the Church. Other than learning to read the Latin psalms, she had not had access to any formal study of Latin grammar or rhetoric. For a discussion of the ways in which Hildegard could have acquired Latin, see the article by M. Atherton, 'The Visions of Hildegard and the Silent Period. A Case Study of Language Acquisition', *System* 21, no. 4 (1993), pp. 503-508.

for I am a person ignorant of all teaching in external matters; I am taught inwardly, in my soul. Therefore I speak as one in doubt.

Hearing of your wisdom and piety I am comforted. Because there is so much divisiveness in people I have not dared to speak of these things to any other person except for one monk — whom I tested with regard to the integrity of his monastic life. I revealed all my secrets to him and he consoled me and convinced me that these are great secrets and things to be feared.

Father Bernard, I want you to reassure me, and then I will be certain! In a vision two years ago I saw you as a man able to stare at the sun without flinching, a courageous man. And I wept because I blush so much — because I am so timid! Good Father, through your kindness I have found a place in your soul, so that now, if you will, you can reveal to me through your word⁴ whether you want me to say these things openly or whether I should keep quiet. For I have great trouble with this visionary gift about how much I should say of what I have seen and heard. And sometimes, because I keep quiet, I am laid low by the vision and confined to my sickbed, unable to raise myself up. So I am sad, I lament before you: I am unstable with the movement of the wooden beam of the wine-press in my nature, the beam which grew at the prompting of the devil from the root in Adam (for which he was cast out as a wanderer in this exile world).⁵ But now I raise myself up, I run to you, I speak to you. You are not unstable, you ease the pressure of the wooden beam, you gain the victory in your

⁴ *through your word*: Hildegard hopes to receive an answer to her letter which she will 'hear' when Bernard's letter is read aloud.

⁵ *wooden beam... world*: The wooden beam of the wine-press (itself a common image in Hildegard) is linked by a chain of association with ideas of the tree of the Garden of Eden in Genesis and the root of the race of Adam. The associative method is typical of early medieval approaches to the exegesis and interpretation of scripture but is particularly common in Hildegard. It leads to her characteristic 'mixed metaphors', which occur particularly frequently in her songs.

soul! And it is not only yourself alone: you raise up the whole world to salvation! You are the eagle staring at the sun!⁶

And so I entreat you: by the brightness of the Father, by his wonderful Word, by the sweet humour of compunction, by the Spirit of Truth, by the sacred sound through which all creation resounds, by the Word from which all the world was created, by the height of the Father who through the sweet power of green vigour sent the Word to the Virgin's womb where it took on flesh like the honey in the honeycomb! May the sacred sound, the power of the Father, fall upon your heart and raise up your soul so that you are not passive and indifferent to the words of this correspondent, as long as you seek all things from God, from man or woman, or from the mystery, until you pass through the doorway in your soul and know these things in God.

Farewell. Be well in your soul, and strong in your certainty in God. Amen.



⁶ *the eagle staring at the sun*: The eagle is an image from the tradition of the bestiary, the class of book popular in the medieval period in which natural history is mixed with allegorical explanation. In Hildegard's thought, the eagle represents people who have the strength and maturity to understand the ways of God, who in turn is symbolized by the brightness of the sun and referred to traditionally as the 'Sun of Justice'. In a short letter of c.H50(?) to an Abbot at Busenberg [Letter 71], Hildegard uses similar imagery: 'The light in the light speaks to you. Be a good servant in your mind. Watch with a good will. Imitate the eagle that gazes at the sun rather than at the shadow of the shadow. Do not become tired of good works either! Instead, keep your hand on the plough with the strength of your mind. Feed your flock justly, as well as you can, with God's help. With all your strength, run with the eagle that gazes at the light so that you are not snatched away by listlessness. Flee also the darkness of impiety, just as God makes things clear in the cause of good will. For God wants you dead to the things of the world and alive to the life of sanctification. Now live for ever.'

2. The Action of the Will (from *Scivias* I, 4)

In a series of images based on her concept of 'greenness', this digression in the middle of Scivias 1, 4 presents some of Hildegard's ideas on anthropology. Perhaps written before the letter to Bernard, it has been compared to writings by Hugh of St Victor and Honorius of Autun and reveals how widely read she must have been, especially as she did not base the passage on one particular identifiable source. Drawing on wide knowledge, Hildegard describes her understanding of such ideas as the relation of soul and body, human understanding and the action of the will.



How the soul reveals its capabilities according to the capabilities of the body

The soul reveals her capabilities according to the capabilities of the body, so that in childhood she brings forth simplicity, in youth strength, and in the fullness of age, when all the veins of the human being are full, she brings forth her greatest strength in wisdom. In the same way a tree in its first growth brings forth tender shoots, goes on then to bear fruit and finally ripens that fruit to the fullness of utility. But afterwards in old age when a human being's bones and veins incline to weakness, then the soul reveals gentler strengths, as though tired of human knowledge. In the same

way, at the onset of wintertime, the sap of the tree withdraws from the leaves and branches as the tree begins to incline towards old age.

The human being contains three paths

A human being contains three paths: namely, soul, body and senses. On these three paths, human life runs its course. The soul fills the body with life and brings forth the senses; for its part the body attracts the soul to it and opens the senses; in turn the senses touch the body and draw the soul to them. The soul provides the body with life like fire flooding the darkness with light; it has two major powers like two arms: the understanding and the will. Not that the soul has these limbs to move herself about; rather she reveals herself in these two powers like the sun manifesting itself in the splendour of its light. Therefore human being, you are not a bundle of veins; pay attention to the knowledge of the scriptures.⁷

Human understanding

Human understanding is connected to the soul like the arms to the body. For just as the arm is joined to the hand and the hand to the fingers, so also there is no doubt that understanding proceeds from the soul and activates the other powers of the soul, by which it knows and recognizes human actions. For over all the other powers of the soul it is understanding which distinguishes what is good from what is bad in human actions. Un-

⁷ *you are not a bundle... knowledge of the scriptures*: Hildegard appears to mean: 'As a human being you are more complex than you imagine, and you will learn this when sacred writings are explained to you.' The phrase 'you are not a bundle of veins' translates the Latin 'quae non es sarcina medullarum'. The expression is an example of where Hildegard's words and images remain obscure and allusive. In the previous section (I, 4, 17) she has been speaking about old age and how the 'bones and veins incline to weakness', which perhaps gives a hint of her meaning.

derstanding is therefore a teacher through whom all things are known, for in this way he shakes out all things just as the wheat is separated from the stalks and husks; he examines what things are useful and what are useless, what things are lovable and what are hateful, what things belong to life and what to death.

Just as food without salt is bland, so also the other powers of the soul are weak and unknowing without it. Understanding is in the soul like the shoulders in the body, acting as the moving force behind the other powers of the soul, giving them strength like the shoulders give strength to the body. It is flexible, like the bend of the arm, discerning both the divine and the human in God. Thus human understanding works with true faith, for like the articulation of the fingers of the hand it can distinguish between many diverse actions. It therefore operates differently from the other forces of the soul. Why is this?

The will

The will warms an action, the mind receives it, and thought bodies it forth. The understanding, however, discerns an action by the process of knowing good and evil just as the angels also have an understanding that loves good and hates evil. And just as the body has a heart, so too the soul has understanding, which exercises its power in one part of the soul just as the will does in another.

How does this happen? The will in fact has great power in the soul. How does this come about? The soul stands, so to speak, in the corner of the house, that is, in the firm support of the heart, like a man standing in the corner of a house in order to survey the whole house and supervise its running. He raises his right arm to give a sign and points out things useful to the house as he turns towards the east. The soul does likewise on the

roadways of the whole body when she looks towards the rising of the sun. The soul uses the will, as it were like her right arm, as a firm support for the veins and the bones and the movement of the whole body, for the will directs every action, whether for good or ill.

The parable of the fire and the bread

The will is like a fire baking every action in an oven.⁸ Bread is baked in order to feed people and strengthen them so that they can live. The will is the force behind the whole of the action. It grinds the action in a mill, it adds yeast and kneads it firmly and thus carefully prepares the action, like a loaf of bread which the will bakes to perfection in the heat of its zeal. In so doing it provides human beings with a better food than bread for the activities they do. For while food is taken into the human body and used up, the action of the will endures within the human being until the separation of the soul from the body. And although the action will vary greatly in childhood, in youth, in maturity and in the declining years, nevertheless the will directs it stage by stage and brings it to perfection.



⁸ oven: The transforming effect of intense heat is a basic assumption behind this image of the will as a fire in an oven.

5. The Trinity (Scivias II, 2)

The illustration accompanying this vision of the Trinity in the Rupertsberg codex shows a series of three concentric coloured circles with a large figure of a man standing in the middle. The subtlety with which Hildegard uses imagery to explain the mysteries of the Trinity should be compared with her letter to Odo of Soissons on the same subject.



Scivias Part II, vision 2

Then I saw an extremely bright light and in the light the figure of a man the colour of sapphire, and it was all burning in a delightful red fire. And the bright light flooded through all the red fire, and the red fire through all the bright light, and the bright light and the red fire shone together through the whole figure of the man so that they were one light in one strength and power. And again I heard the living light speaking to me.

The three persons

Therefore you see ‘an extremely bright light’, which signifies the Father, who is without the stains of illusion, failure or deceit. And in the light is ‘the figure of a man the colour of sapphire’, which represents the Son, who is without the stains of hard-heartedness, envy or evil, and who before all time, according to his divinity, was begotten of the Father, but af-

terwards, in time, according to his humanity, became incarnate in the world. And 'it was all burning in a delightful red fire'; this is the fire without the stains of aridity, mortality or darkness, which represents the Holy Spirit, by whom the Only Begotten of the Father was conceived in the flesh, born in time of the Virgin and poured out his light, truth and brightness over all the world.

'And the bright light flooded through all the red fire, and the red fire through all the bright light, and the bright light and the red fire shone together through the whole figure of the man so that they were one light in one strength and power.' This means that the Father, who is supremely just and uniformity, is not without the Son or the Holy Spirit; and that the Holy Spirit, who inflames the hearts of the faithful, is not without the Father or the Son; and that the Son, who is the fullness of fruitfulness, is not without the Father or the Spirit; for they are inseparable in the majesty of divinity, because the Father is not without the Son, nor the Son without the Father, nor the Father or the Son without the Holy Spirit, nor the Spirit without them; so these three persons exist as one God in one integral divinity and majesty, and the unity of divinity thrives inseparable in the three persons, because divinity cannot be separated, since it remains always unchanged without any mutability. But the Father is revealed through the Son, the Son through the beginning of created things, and the Holy Spirit through the incarnate Son. How is this? It is the Father who before time engendered the Son; it is the Son through whom all things were created by the Father at the beginning of creation; and it is the Holy Spirit who appeared in the form of a dove at the baptism of the Son of God towards the end of all time.

May the human race never cease to call fervently upon the one God in three persons

Therefore may the human race never cease to call upon me the one God in three persons, for I have revealed this to human beings in order that they might blaze all the more fiercely in love of me, since I sent my Son into the world through my love for them, just as John, my loved one, witnesses, saying: 'The love of God was disclosed to us in this: that he sent his only begotten Son into the world that we may live through him. His love is in this, not as we loved God but that he first loved us and sent his Son as a propitiation for our sins.' What does this mean? Because God loved us another salvation arose different from the one we had at our first origins, when we were the heirs of innocence and sanctity. For the heavenly Father revealed his love to us in our danger of punishment; for through his heavenly power he sent his Word alone and full of sanctity into the darkness of the world. And there the Word perfected all good things and through his mildness led us back to life. He led us back when we had been rejected for the impurity of our wrongdoing and were unable to return to the sanctity we had lost. What does this mean? It means that God's loving maternal embrace came to us through the fountain of life; his love nourished us for life; and in times of danger his love is our help, a deep and gentle love leading to penitence. How is this?

God has mercifully remembered his great work and his most precious pearl — the human being — whom he fashioned from the soil of the earth and inspired with the breath of life. How did he do this? He drew us to life through penitence, which never fails in its effectiveness, because the cunning serpent deceived us through his proud persuasions; but God cast him down through the penitence which reveals humility, a humility which the devil did not know or practise, for he did not know how to raise himself up to the path of righteousness.

Therefore the salvation of love did not originate in us, for we neither knew nor were able to love God for our salvation; rather, it came from our Creator and Lord, who loved his people so much that he sent his Son for our salvation, as leader and Saviour of the faithful, who washed all our wounds. Thus also he shed that sweet balm from which all the good things of our salvation flow.

Therefore, O human creature, you too should know that God is not affected by any adverse mutability, for the Father is the Father, the Son is the Son, the Holy Spirit is the Holy Spirit; these three persons exist indivisibly in the unity of the godhead. How does this come about?

The three powers of a stone

There are three powers in a stone and three in a flame and three in a word. In a stone there is moist greenness, palpable strength and red-burning fire. It has moist greenness so that it will not fall apart and disintegrate, and palpable strength so that it can provide habitation and defence, and red-burning fire so that it can be warmed and strengthened in its durability. Its moist greenness signifies the Father, who will never dry out or reach a limit to his power; its palpable strength signifies the Son, since he was born of the Virgin and could be touched and grasped; its red-burning fire signifies the Spirit, who is the fire and illumination of the hearts of the faithful. What does this all mean?

Imagine someone who comes into contact too often with the moisture and greenness of a stone and so weakens and falls ill;⁹ in the same way a foolhardy person who tries — in the instability of their thoughts — to look

⁹ *who comes into contact... and falls ill*: In medieval science, stones were believed to contain varying proportions of energy and moisture (fire and water), while in the medical lore of the period it was believed that an imbalance of the four elements in the human body could lead to ill-health (see 22).

upon God will perish in their faith. Imagine a people taking the palpable strength of stones to build their habitations and protect themselves against their enemies; in the same way the Son of God, who is the true cornerstone, is the habitation of the faithful people, protecting them against evil spirits. And imagine also the red fire, burning bright and lighting up the darkness; in the same way the Holy Spirit puts unbelief to flight, removing all the rust of iniquity.

Just as the three powers are contained within the one stone, so the true Trinity is contained within the true Unity.

The three powers of a flame

And just as there are three powers in the glowing heat of a flame, so the one God is in three persons. How is this? The flame consists of splendid brightness, purple vigour and fiery glow. It has a splendid brightness so that it can shine its light, a purple vigour so that it can maintain its existence, and a fiery glow so that it can burn. Consider the Father in the splendid brightness, for he sends out his brightness to the faithful through the goodness of his fatherhood; and in the purple vigour held within the flame and containing its strength, consider the Son, who assumed a body from the Virgin in which the godhead declared its marvels; and in the fiery glow perceive the Holy Spirit, who pours his fire over the minds of believers. But the flame will not be seen if there is no splendid brightness, or purple vigour, or fiery glow; in the same way, God is not worthily honoured in any place where neither the Father, Son, nor Holy Spirit is venerated.

Therefore just as three powers are discerned in the one flame, so three persons are to be understood in the unity of the godhead.

The three components of the human word

Three components may be noted in the human word, just as the Trinity may be considered in the unity of the Godhead. How is this to be done? A word is composed of sound, force and breath. A word has sound in order to be heard, force in order to be understood, and breath in order to be completed. In the sound of the word consider the Father, who expresses all things by his ineffable power; in the force of the word consider the Son, marvellously engendered of the Father; in the breath of the word consider the Holy Spirit, who burns gently within them. But if the sound is not heard, then the force does not operate and the breath is not raised; hence the word is not understood; because the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are not to be divided, for they function as one unanimous activity.

Therefore just as there are the three components of the word so also the heavenly Trinity is in one heavenly unity. And just as no moist greenness can exist or function in the stone without the palpable strength or the red-burning flame, and no palpable strength without the moist greenness or burning flame, and no burning flame without moist greenness or palpable strength; and just as no splendid brightness can exist or function in the flame without the purple vigour or the fiery glow, and no purple vigour without the splendid brightness or the fiery glow, and no fiery glow without the splendid brightness or purple vigour; and just as no sound can exist or function in the word without force or breath, and no force without the sound or the breath, and no breath without the sound or the force, for they act indivisibly in unison; so also the three persons of the Trinity exist inseparably in the majesty of the Godhead and cannot be divided from each other.

Human creature, understand that the one God is in three persons! But you imagine in the foolishness of your mind that God is so powerless that it is impossible for him truly to exist in three persons, but only barely to exist in

one! What are you thinking? God is truly God in three persons, the first and the last.

The unity of being

But the Father is not without the Son, nor the Son without the Father, nor the Father without the Son and the Holy Spirit; nor is the Holy Spirit without them, because the three persons are inseparable in the unity of divinity. How is this possible? The word sounds from the mouth of a human being, but the mouth does not make a sound without the word, and the word itself does not sound without life. And where is the word located? In the human being. And where does the word come from? Again, from the human being. And how does this happen? Through a living human being. Thus the Son is in the Father, and he is sent by the Father to this dark earth for the salvation of humankind and conceived by the Virgin through the Holy Spirit. He is the only begotten Son in the deity and the only begotten Son in the virginity; and he is both the only Son of the Father and the only Son of the Mother; for just as the Father engendered him alone outside time, so the Mother engendered him alone inside time, and she remained a virgin after the birth.

Therefore, O human creature, understand that there is one God in three persons, who created you in the strength of his divinity and who redeemed you from your lost state. Do not forget your Creator, as Solomon urges you, and as it is written.



9. Song for Saint Ursula

Hildegard reserved a special devotion for the martyrs of the faith such as Ursula, killed with her many companions at Cologne by the Huns during the Dark Ages, and she wrote two songs to be sung in her honour in church. The sequence as a type of song was intended to be inserted into the liturgy of the mass; divided into stanzas, its form gave scope for longer meditations on a particular theme. The exact date when the following sequence was composed is not known, but the lines spoken by Ursula's detractors ('In the innocence of her girlish ignorance, she does not know what she is saying') have an obvious application to Hildegard and the opposition she experienced in the early years of her life and work. Whether consciously or unconsciously, Hildegard may have identified with the pilgrim Ursula in her own plans for departure to a new community at the Rupertsberg.

O Ecclesia oculi tui. Sequence

O Church, your eyes are like sapphire,¹⁰
and your ears like Mount Bethel,¹¹
your nose is like a mountain of myrrh and incense,¹²
your mouth the sound of many waters.

¹⁰ *like sapphire*: Cf. Ezekiel 1:26, a vision of four-winged creatures: 'Above the expanse over their heads was what looked like a throne of sapphire...'

¹¹ *like Mount Bethel*: See Genesis 28:11-22, the story of Jacob's dream at Bethel, where he saw a stairway reaching from earth to heaven on which angels were ascending and descending; in the same vision he heard a voice promising that all peoples on earth would be blessed through his descendants.

¹² *a mountain of myrrh and incense*: Song of Songs (or Song of Solomon) 4:6: 'I will go to the mountain of myrrh and to the hill of incense.' See also Song of Songs 4:1-5, where the lover praises the various aspects of his bride in a series of similes which probably influenced the first few lines of Hildegard's poem. In the medieval commentary tradition, the lover of the Song of Songs was interpreted allegorically as Christ, while the bride was seen as the Church.

In a vision of true faith,
Ursula loved the Son of God,
she abandoned husband and worldly life
and gazed at the sun,
calling the fair youth and saying:

'I have eagerly desired
to come to you at the heavenly nuptials
and sit with you,
running to you on the pilgrim way like a cloud
racing through the purest air like a sapphire.'

And after Ursula had said this,
a rumour went through the people.

And they said: 'In the innocence of her girlish ignorance,
she does not know what she is saying.'

And they began to make fun of her,
singing their songs,¹³
until the fiery burden fell on her.

Then they all acknowledged her,
for rejection of the world is like Mount Bethel.
And they acknowledged also
the pleasant fragrance of myrrh and incense,
since rejection of the world had descended upon all.

¹³ *make fun of her, singing their songs*: The Latin has 'luder', 'to play', 'in magna symphonia', 'in great harmony'. As *The Book of Life's Merits* I, 5-6 shows (27), 'playfulness' is a fickle, malicious mockery, a vice to be remedied and defeated by true 'shame'. Sabina Flanagan, in *Hildegard of Bingen 1098-1179: A Visionary Life* (London, 1989), p. 137, interprets the passage differently, suggesting that the term *ludere* refers to games played on board ship as Ursula and her companions travelled on their pilgrimage.

Then the devil sent out his troops
to murder the most noble behaviour in their bodies.

And all the elements heard this with a loud cry
and they shouted before the throne of God:

‘Alas the red of the Lamb’s innocent blood
has flowed
at this betrothal.’

May all the heavens hear,
may they praise the Lamb of God in highest harmony,
because the ancient serpent’s throat
has been choked with necklace of pearls¹⁴
made of the material of the Word of God.



¹⁴ necklace of pearls: i.e. Ursula and her companions.

14. Three Political Letters

As Hildegard became established at Rupertsberg, she began to gain a reputation for prophecy and political wisdom as well as theological understanding, and it was in this role as adviser and prophetess that she became known as the ‘Sibyl of the Rhine’. Soon her direct advice was being sought, and given, in the current affairs of the German Empire and the Church. The letters here, though difficult to date precisely, illustrate aspects of this activity.

The letter to Pope Eugenius III is markedly different in tone from her earlier one to the same correspondent; the language is more apocalyptic, with the sword of divine justice circling in the air, and there is some intriguing animal imagery. It is tempting to relate the image of the bear to the new king of Germany, Frederick Barbarossa, who signed a political agreement with Eugenius at the Treaty of Constance in 1153.

The letter to Henry (Bishop of Liege 1145-64) is similarly urgent, with its imagery of dark clouds ominously threatening the mountain of flowers and gentle breezes. The dark clouds are a less precise kind of metaphor than that of the bear, but the implication is that the Church is somehow threatened. Henry was loyal to Barbarossa and took part in the first Italian expedition of 1154, attending the Emperor’s coronation by Pope Hadrian IV in 1155.

Hadrian IV was an Englishman and vigorous politician who at first honoured the Treaty of Constance by ousting the leader of the Senate, Arnold of Brescia, from Rome and by crowning Barbarossa as Emperor. But his agreement with King William I of Norman Sicily in 1156 brought a radical change of policy. In October 1157 a letter from Hadrian, delivered by his legates to the Diet of Besançon, provoked a bitter row with Barbarossa and his chancellor Rainald Dassel, who interpreted its requirements as a threat to imperial power. Hildegard’s letter to Hadrian presents a series of apocalyptic images and metaphors which, although bafflingly unclear, are of undoubted relevance to the events of Hadrian’s pontificate.

Hildegard to Pope Eugenius III, 1148-53 [Letters]

He who is not silent speaks — because of the weakness of those who are too blind to see, too deaf to hear, too dumb to speak — that robbers lie in wait by night with death-dealing weapons! And what does he say? The sword circles and turns, killing those who are evil in mind!

You in your person are a shining breastplate,¹⁵ the primary root, the presider at Christ's nuptials with the Church. But you are divided in your attentions. On the one hand your soul is renewed in the mystic flower that is the companion of virginity¹⁶ on the other, you are the branch of the Church.¹⁷ Listen to the One who strikes with his name and flows in the torrent; listen to him speaking to you: do not cast the eye from the eye, do not cut off the light from the light; but stand on the even path, lest you be accused for the sake of those souls who have been placed in your bosom. Do not allow them to sink in the lake of perdition through the power of the feasting prelates!

A jewel lies on the path, but a bear¹⁸ comes along. Seeing the beautiful jewel, he stretches out a paw to seize it and place it in his bosom. But suddenly an eagle appears, snatches the jewel, wraps it in the cover of his wings and bears it away to the inner courtyard of the palace of the king. That very jewel shines out its radiance in the presence of the king. And for love of

¹⁵ *breastplate*: Cf. the 'breastplate of righteousness' in Isaiah 59:17 and Ephesians 6:14; the 'breastplate of faith and love' in I Thessalonians 5:8; the 'breastplates of fire' in Revelation 9:17

¹⁶ *the mystic flower... virginity*: Eugenius was originally a Cistercian monk from Clairvaux, a monastic order with a strong interest in the contemplative life.

¹⁷ *the branch of the Church*: i.e. the Papacy.

¹⁸ *bear*: On a theological level, the bear could be a symbol of the devil, but on a political level, this is likely to be a reference to the Emperor Frederick Barbarossa, as Joseph L. Baird and Radd K. Ehrman suggest in the notes to their translation *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen*.

the jewel, the king presents the eagle with golden shoes¹⁹ praising him highly for his goodness.

You now, the viceroy of Christ, seated on the throne of the Church, choose for yourself the better part that you may be the eagle overcoming the bear! Adorn the inner courtyard of the Church in the souls entrusted to you, so that in your golden shoes you may come to the heights and remove yourself far from the intruder's grasp!

Hildegard to Henry, Bishop of Liege, 1148-53 [Letter 37R]

The living light says: the paths of the scriptures lead directly to the high mountain,²⁰ where the flowers grow and the costly aromatic herbs; where a pleasant wind blows, bringing forth their powerful fragrance; where the roses and lilies reveal their shining faces. But because of the shadows of dark living air, that mountain did not appear until the Son of the most High had enlightened the world. On that day, the sun rose from the dawn, illuminating this world so that all the people could see its aromatic herbs. That day was very beautiful, and sweet tidings came forth.

But O shepherds, now is the time for mourning and weeping, because in our time the mountain has been covered with a very black cloud so that it no longer sends forth its gentle fragrance. You, Henry, must be a good shepherd, noble of character. And just as the eagle gazes at the sun, ponder and consider how you can call back the wanderers and exiles and bring some light to this mountain, so that you will live, and so that you will hear

¹⁹ *golden shoes*: The idea is perhaps biblical; cf. Ephesians 6:15, where shoes are associated with the 'gospel of peace'.

²⁰ *the high mountain*: An image with many connotations. The basic idea is the place of salvation, which separates light and darkness and divides good from evil. The same image occurs in the vision of the man on the mountain in *Scivias* (25) and in the vision of the cosmic egg in *Scivias* I, 3 (20).

the most loving voice of the Judge on high: 'Well done, good and faithful servant.' Then your soul will shine with light like a soldier brilliant in the fight, who rejoices with his comrades because he has gained the victory.

Therefore, teacher of the people, fight for the good victory. Correct those in error, and so wash the mud from the beautiful pearls. Prepare them for the high king. Let your mind pant with great eagerness to call those pearls back to the mountain where the gift of God had its origin. May God protect you now and free your soul from eternal punishment.

Hildegard to Pope Hadrian IV, 1155 [Letter 9]

The one who gives life to the living says this. O man, you will sustain the fearful rage of lionesses and the great strength of leopards. You will experience shipwreck in the taking of spoils. For you have been given over to all those who seek refuge with you in their state of exhaustion. Nevertheless you have a ready understanding with which to pit yourself against the fierce behaviour of men. In raging at them you hang on firmly to the manes of the galloping horses which run ceaselessly along the tracks of plunder. But you fight against yourself when at times you favour the apparent probity of certain people if you hide the treasure-chests of those killed in conflict on the open roads. Therefore you will suffer a fierce battle. But you will destroy the movable goods of the rest, who will fall into the pit because of their asperity. Yet you have the power of the strong key²¹ which does not go willingly in the form of a ruby to the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

²¹ *the power of the strong key*: Cf. Matthew 16:19. 'And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.'

In your heart, therefore, seek the salvation of waters so that you do not fall into the whirlwind, and so that you may remain gentle to the distress and pain of those who are afflicted by the torment of many wounds, thus imitating your Saviour, who will redeem you. And God will not leave you, but you will see in his light.



IN PRAISE OF CREATION

20. The Cosmic Egg (from *Scivias* I, 3)

A famous image in Hildegard's work is that of the 'cosmic egg', a survey of the cosmos which forms the third vision of the first book of Scivias. This vision is descriptive, but also highly allegorical, and it is worth noting that although each detail of the description represents a physical object in Hildegard's universe, she also attaches a further significance to it in the life of faith and the events of history. In so doing she implies that human life and the universe are closely and inextricably connected, as microcosm and macrocosm. This ties in with her exalted view of the human being in Scivias 1, 3,17 (translated below), a characteristic attitude of the twelfth-century Renaissance.



The cosmic egg

After these things I saw a huge form, rounded and shadowy, and shaped like an egg²² it was pointed at the top, wide in the middle and narrower at the bottom. Its outer layer consisted of an atmosphere of bright fire with a

²² *shaped like an egg*: The twelfth century did not believe in a flat earth. The image of the cosmos as an egg is not original to Hildegard, but she was clearly fascinated by it.

kind of dark membrane beneath it. And in that outer atmosphere there was a ball of red fire so large that all the huge form was lit up by it. Directly above the fireball was a vertical row of three lights which held it with their fire and energy and prevented it from falling.

At times the fireball rose upwards and was met by more fire, which caused it to shoot out great long flames. At times, however, the fireball moved downwards and encountered a region of great cold that caused it quickly to retract its flames.

From the outer atmosphere of fire, a wind blew storms. And from the dark membrane beneath, another wind raged with further storms which moved out in all directions on the globe. The dark membrane contained also a dark fire of such horror that I was unable to perceive it properly. The horror buffeted the dark membrane with a massive impact of sounds and storms and sharp stones great and small.²³ Whenever the noise arose it set in motion the layer of bright fire, winds and air, thus causing bolts of lightning to presage the sounds of thunder; for the fiery energy senses the first agitations of the thunder within it.

Below the dark layer, however, was the purest of ether with no membrane beneath it. Here also I saw a fireball, of great magnitude, filled with white-shining energy; it had two lights placed above it which held it and prevented it from passing beyond the circuit of its course. Situated everywhere throughout the ether were many bright spheres, into which the white fireball discharged its energy at regular intervals. It then rose up again to the red fireball where it recharged its fires and sent them forth again into the bright spheres. The ether also contained a wind, which poured out its storms and extended them all over the cosmos.

²³ *The horror... stones great and small*: As Frances Beer suggests, 'the vision is ultimately reassuring because it reveals how evil can exist and, at the same time as it is part of the creation, be counterbalanced and controlled by the forces of good'. See her *Women and Mystical Experience in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, 1992), p. 46.

Beneath the ether I could see a layer of watery air, which had a white membrane beneath it. It spread out everywhere, giving off water to the whole of the world. At times it accumulated quickly and sent out a sudden fall of rain with a great crash. But when it spread gently it sent forth soft rain with only gentle agitation. But from it there came a wind and storms which spread all over the globe.

And in the middle of these elements there was a sandy ball of great size which was so surrounded by these elements that it could not move in any direction. However, when the winds collided with the elements, the force of their impact set the whole world in motion a little.

And I saw between the north and the east the likeness of a great mountain, which showed great areas of darkness towards the north and a great light towards the east.²⁴ The darkness could not affect the light nor the light the darkness.

And again I heard a voice speaking to me from heaven.

Invisible and eternal things are made known through visible and temporal things

God, who created all things in his will, made them so that his name would be known and honoured. Through his creation ion he not only makes known visible and temporal things but also invisible and eternal things.⁴ Such matters are shown in this vision which you see.

²⁴ *between the north and the east... a great mountain... towards the east:* The great mountain separates good in the east from evil in the north.

The significance of the cosmos made in the likeness of an egg

‘I saw a huge form, rounded and shadowy, and shaped like an egg; it was pointed at the top, wide in the middle and narrower at the bottom.’ The large form which you see represents, on the level of faith, the omnipotent God, incomprehensible in his majesty, inconceivable in his mysteries, the hope of all the faithful. It was pointed at the top because at first human activity was naive and simple; later in the Old and New Testaments it became more wide-ranging; finally towards the end of the world it is to endure the narrow constriction of many troubles.

The position of the sun and the three stars and their significance

‘And in that outer atmosphere there was a ball of red fire so large that all the huge form was lit up by it.’ With the splendour of his brightness he shows that in God the Father is his ineffable firstborn son, the Sun of Justice, shining with burning love in such glory that all of creation was lit up by the brightness of his light.

‘Directly above the fireball was a vertical row of three lights which held it with their fire and energy and prevented it from falling.’ The function of the three lights is to show that when God’s Son descended from heaven to earth leaving the angels above him, he made known the things of the heavens to human beings existing in soul and body. By following his light they glorify him, casting all harmful error from them. They praise him as the true Son of God, who became incarnate of the true Maiden when the angel proclaimed him to them and when the human being — alive in soul and body — received him with faith and joy.

The sandy ball of the earth and its significance

‘And in the middle of these elements there was a sandy ball of great size which was so surrounded by these elements that it could not move in any direction.’ The ball represents humanity endowed with the gift of pro-

found contemplation, made in a wonderful manner from the clay of the earth, and living in the strength of the creatures of God. Human beings are so surrounded by the power of God's created things that they cannot be separated from them. The elements of the world are thus created for human beings and render them their service.²⁵ In the midst of the elements is the human being presiding over them by divine ordinance. As David says, inspired by God: 'Thou hast crowned him with glory and honour. Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands. This means that you, O God, have wonderfully created all things. You have crowned the human being with the splendid golden crown of the understanding and clothed him with the honourable robe of visible beauty. You have made him the ruler over your exalted and perfect works, which you have distributed justly and well throughout your creation. Over all other creatures you have granted the human being high worth and admirable dignity.

The meaning of the earthquake

You see in the vision that opposing winds come together, and the force of their impact sets the whole globe in motion a little. For when at any given time the creatures of God become involved with the knowledge of their Creator, so that with the sounding of the words one wonder follows another, then human beings, struck by the grandeur of this miracle, tremble in body and soul, pondering, in their wonder at this miracle, their own weakness and frailty.



²⁵ *The elements... render them their service*: The elements in medieval science are earth, air, fire (i.e. energy) and water; all are involved in human physiology, and for Hildegard the human being is seen as being at one with the world, as part of a positive view of nature and ecology.

The Unknown Language

The Unknown Language (Latin *Lingua ignota*) presents something of a puzzle. It was compiled in the middle period 1151-8, before work began on *The Book of Life's Merits*. As in many medieval glossaries, the words are classified rather like a thesaurus, and arranged in a hierarchical list beginning with expressions for God, angel and human being, and finishing with the names of trees, plants, herbs and animals. For an impression of the style of the language, the following examples are of interest:

ENGLISH	LATIN	LINGUA IGNOTA
God	Deus	Aiguonz
angel	angelus	aieganiz
saint	sanctus	ziuienz
Savior	Salvator	Liuionz
devil	diabolus	diuueliz
spirit	spiritus	ispariz
Human	homo	Inimoiz

In this small sample, a few patterns of word formation emerge which would repay further study.²⁶ As to the question of how the 'unknown lan-

²⁶ *word formation*: The root *aieg* seems to be important, as do the endings *-nz* and *-iz*. Other examples not listed above suggest influence from Latin or German, e.g. *vanix*, 'woman', perhaps from Latin *vanitas*, 'vanity', *falschin*, 'poet', perhaps from Middle High German *valsche*, 'false', and *sonziz*, 'apostle', possibly related to the *sonus* or 'sacred sound' to which Hildegard frequently referred. For more information on Hildegard's language, see Marie-Louise Portmann and Alois Odermatt (eds), *Wörterbuch der unbekannten Sprache* [Dictionary of the Unknown Language] (Basel, 1986).

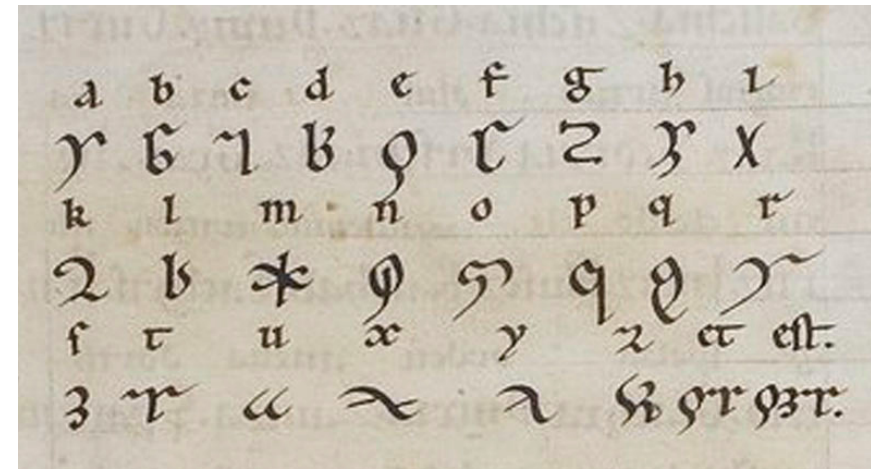
guage' was used, a satisfactory answer has not yet been offered. It has been suggested that it was a secret language for communication between the nuns at the Rupertsberg. Alternatively, as a passage in *The Book of Life's Merits* indicates, it may have been purely a sacred language, and this conjecture is supported by a text in which words from the language occur. In a song on the dedication of a church, Hildegard replaces standard Latin words with her own expressions from the *lingua ignota*. Although the theme and inspiration for the piece is the well-known vision of Revelation 21:2, 'And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband', the result has an additional sense of mystery appropriate to a vision of heaven.

The original text of the song is as follows, with non-Latin words in *italics*, and a modern English translation:²⁷

O *orzechis* Ecclesia
 armis divinis praecincta
 et hyazintho ornata,
 tu es *caldemia* stigmatum *loifolum*
 et urbs scientiarum.
 O, o, tu es etiam *crizanta*
 in alto sono et es *chorzta* gemma.

[Church *immeasurable*,
 protected by divine armour,
 and decorated with hyacinth,
 you are the *perfume* of the wounds of the peoples
 and the city of all kinds of knowledge.

Oh you are also *adorned*
 in deep music, a *gleaming* gemstone.]



²⁷ The original text... English translation: Pudentiana Barth and Immaculata Ritscher (eds), *Hildegard von Bingen. Lieder* (Salzburg, 1969), no. 67 and Barbara Newman (ed.), *Hildegard of Bingen. Symphonia*, 2nd edn (Ithaca, 1998), no. 68; for a discussion of the song, see Newman, *Symphonia*, pp. 316-17.

A Vision of Love (from the Book of Divine Works I, i)

This excerpt from 'The Book of Divine Works, written in the period 1163-73/4, sees Hildegard's visionary gifts at their height. Beginning with a vision reminiscent of the prophet Ezekiel, Hildegard moves to a paean of divine immanence as embodied in a figure who is at once Love, Wisdom and Power. Its nearest equivalents are the sapiential tradition of the Old Testament Apocrypha, notably Wisdom of Solomon 7-8, and its theme is summed up in Ecclesiasticus 24:1, which states that 'Wisdom shall praise herself, and shall glory in the midst of her people'.



1. And I saw as amid the airs of the South in the mystery of God a beautiful and marvellous image of a human figure; her face was of such beauty and brightness that I could more easily have stared at the sun. On her head she had a broad band of gold. And in that golden band above her head there appeared a second face, like an old man, whose chin and beard touched the top of the first head. Wings protruded from behind the neck of the figure on either side, and rising up clear of the golden band their tips met and joined overhead. On the right, above the sweep of the wing, was an image of an eagle's head, and I saw it had eyes of fire in which there appeared the brilliance of angels as in a mirror. On the left, above the

sweep of the wing, was the image of a human face, which shone like the brightness of the stars. These faces were turned towards the East.

But from each of her shoulders, a wing extended down to the knee. And she wore a tunic like the glory of the sun and in her hands she carried a lamb like the bright light of day. But beneath her feet she trampled a monster of dreadful appearance, black and venomous, and also a serpent, which had fixed its teeth into the right ear of the monster and wound the rest of its body across its own head, and had stretched its tail on the left side.

2. The figure spoke: I am the supreme fire and energy. I have kindled all the sparks of the living, and I have breathed out no mortal things, for I judge them as they are. I have properly ordained the cosmos, flying about the circling circle with my upper wings, that is with wisdom. I am the fiery life of divine substance, I blaze above the beauty of the fields, I shine in the waters, I burn in sun, moon, and stars. And I awaken all to life with every wind of the air, as with invisible life that sustains everything. For the air lives in greenness and fecundity. The waters flow as though they are alive. The sun also lives in its own light, and when the moon has waned it is rekindled by the light of the sun and thus lives again; and the stars shine out in their own light as though they are alive.

I established the pillars that support the whole circle of the earth. I made the winds, and, subject to them, the wings of the winds, which are lesser winds. Through their gentle force, these contain the stronger winds and prevent them from showing their full strength with great danger; in the same way the body covers the soul and contains it lest it breathe out and expire. And conversely also, just as the breath of the soul strengthens and sustains the body so that it does not weaken, in the same way the stronger winds energize the subsidiary winds to carry out their appropriate tasks.

Thus I am concealed in things as fiery energy. They are ablaze through me, like the breath that ceaselessly enlivens the human being, or like the wind-tossed flame in a fire. All these things live in their essence, and there is no death in them, for I am life. I also am rationality, who holds the breath of the resonant word by which the whole of creation was created; and I have breathed life into everything, so that nothing by its nature may be mortal, for I am life.

And I am life: not the life struck from stone, or blossoming from branches, or rooted in a man's fertility, but life in its fullness, for all living things have their roots in me. Reason is the root, through which the resonant word flourishes.

Therefore as God is rational, how could it be that he did not act, since he allows all of his works to flourish through the human being whom he created in his own image and likeness and in whom he marked out all creatures according to their measure? But it was in eternity that God wished to create his great work - the human being - and when he had completed that work he entrusted human beings with all creation so that they could create with it in the same way that God created his work, that is, humanity.

So I am the helper, for all living things burn through me; and I am steady life in eternity, without beginning or end, the same life which is God in motion and activity; and yet this one life has three powers: eternity is the Father, the word the Son, and the breath connecting the two the Holy Spirit, and similarly God signified the same in human beings in whom there is body, soul and rationality.

The fact that I 'blaze above the beauty of the fields' means this: the earth is the matter from which God makes man and woman. The fact that 'I shine in the waters' signifies the soul, for - just as water flows through all the earth - the soul permeates all of the body. 'I burn in sun and moon'; this refers to rationality, and the 'stars' are the innumerable words of rationality.

'And I awaken all to life with every wind of the air, as with invisible life that sustains everything.' This signifies that whatever grows and matures is animated and preserved through air and wind, and it deviates in no way from the power within.

3. And again I heard a voice from heaven, which spoke to me:

God, who created all, made humanity in his own image and likeness, and in them he marked out both the higher and lower creatures. He had such love for humanity that he destined them to take the place from which the falling angel had been ejected, and he ordained them for the glory and honour which the angel in his bliss had lost. This is shown by the vision you see. For when you see 'as amid the airs of the South in the mystery of God a beautiful and marvellous image of a human figure', this signifies the Love of the heavenly Father in the strength of his unceasing divinity, beautiful in its selectivity, and marvellous in its gifts of mysteries, appearing in the human figure because, when the son of God assumed human flesh, he redeemed lost humanity through the service of Love. This is why the face was 'of such beauty and brightness' that you 'could more easily have stared at the sun', because the abundance of Love emanates in such brightness of gifts that it far surpasses all exercise of human understanding (by which it can discern diverse ideas in the soul) - so far, in fact, that no person can grasp such abundance with their senses. This signifies symbolically that things may be perceived through faith that cannot be seen visibly with the eyes.

4. 'On her head the human figure had a broad band of gold', because only universal faith, diffused round the whole ambit of the earth and originating in the bright splendour of the first dawn, can encompass in all devotion the great abundance of true Love, namely that God in the humanity of his son redeemed human beings and confirmed them with the downpouring of the Holy Spirit, so that one God is acknowledged in the Trinity who without temporal beginning before eternity was God in the Godhead.

‘And in that golden band above her head there appeared a second face, like an old man’; this signifies the all-surpassing goodness of the deity, without beginning or end, who succours the faithful, because his ‘chin and beard touched the top of the first head’, and so by his disposition and protection of all, God touches the height of utmost Charity, in which the Son through his humanity leads lost men and women back to the heavens.

5. ‘Wings protruded from behind the neck of the figure on either side, and rising up clear of the golden band their tips met and joined overhead.’ This means that the love of God cannot be separated from the love of neighbour, since they proceed from the virtue of Charity in the unity of faith, and through great longing they encompass that faith. And the holy Godhead covers the immeasurable splendour of his glory from human beings for as long as they remain in the shadow of death, deprived of the heavenly tunic which they lost with Adam.

6. ‘On the right, above the sweep of the wing, was an image of an eagle’s head’, and you saw it had ‘eyes of fire in which there appeared the brilliance of angels as in a mirror’. At the heights of triumphant subjection, then, when a person submits to God and conquers the devil, she is carried aloft in the joy of divine protection. And, fired by the Holy Spirit, when she raises up her mind and fixes her gaze upon God, then the blessed spirits appear in her in plain sight and offer to God the devotion of her heart. The eagle thus symbolizes the spiritual men and women who in full devotion of mind and in contemplation frequently gaze upon God like the angels. Therefore the blessed spirits, who ceaselessly contemplate God, rejoice in the good works of just people, and they show these works to God with their own natures, and so they continue their praise of God and never come to an end, for they will never exhaust his fullness. Could anyone ever count all the innumerable wonders which God brings about through his power and might? Indeed for the angels there is a brightness as of many

mirrors, and through this brightness they see, but no one is as active or as powerful as God, since no one is like him, and he is not subject to time.

7. Before the beginning of time, God held in his foreknowledge everything that he has since made. Outside of any moment or passing of time before eternity, all things visible and invisible appeared in the pure and sacred godhead, as trees and other created things when close to water are reflected in it; and though they are not actually in the water physically, nevertheless an accurate shape appears there. When God said ‘Fiat, let there be...’,¹ at once all those things that did not have bodies assumed a physical shape - all those things which he had seen in his foreknowledge before the beginning of time. Just as in a mirror all things are reflected that stand before it, so all his created works appeared in holy divinity outside the passage of time. And how could God be empty of the foreknowledge of his works, since each of his creatures — once it has assumed physical form — is whole and perfect in its designated function; for the holy Divinity knew in advance how he would be present as thought, knowledge and function. A beam of light reveals the form of a created thing through its shadow, and likewise God’s pure foreknowledge perceives the form of every creature before it is embodied. Each thing that God intended to create in his foreknowledge, before it was bodied forth, shone out according to his likeness; and in the same way a man or woman will catch sight of the sun’s splendour before they actually see its substance. And just as the splendour of the sun indicates the sun itself, so also the praise of the angels reveals God, for it cannot ever be that the sun is without its light, and in the same way neither can the deity be without the praise of the angels. So the foreknowledge of God came first, and his work of creation followed; and if his foreknowledge had not preceded, then his work would not have appeared, for you can tell nothing by looking at a person’s body until you see their face: but when you see the person’s face, then you can praise their body. In this way a human being contains within him or her both the foreknowledge of God and the activity of God.

