

Five Liturgical Songs

by Hildegard von Bingen (1098–1179)
Translated with an Introduction by Barbara Lachman

Feminists today, at the closing of the 20th century, can look to the 12th for inspiration in a woman who authored both scientific and visionary works, composed chants and a sung morality play, corresponded alike with notables and lowlies, and was prophetess, abbess, teacher: Hildegard of Bingen. She did have conservative ideas about the role of women outside the convent. Hierarchy was the order of her day, and she professed loyalty to the patriarchal hierarchy as it functioned in that great political machine, the medieval church. On the other hand, Hildegard had a remarkably modern attitude toward human sexuality and an acute awareness of the spiritual significance latent in the physical beauty of the natural world. Nor did she subscribe in any way to the idea that the Fall was caused by an evil endemic to Eve. She also fought long and hard to find her own voice, a struggle which cost her years of incapacitating illness and which she has described for us in detail.¹ She won the right to record her visions from the pope himself. In a synod of 1147–48, he officially confirmed her gift of prophecy.² As her work progressed, the illness subsided, but she was never entirely free of it.

Soon after Pope Eugenius had given her permission to write, Hildegard had a vision instructing her to move her women out from under the roof of the male monastery at Disibode to which they had been attached. When Kuno, the abbot, repeatedly refused to let her do so, she developed another crippling bout of illness. This time she appealed directly to the Archbishop of Mainz. He eventually supported her and saw to it that, in 1150, she moved and gained autonomy for her convent of Benedictine women. Being abbess on the Rupertsberg did increase both her authority and her creative output. She tells us that she was writing and collecting her cycle of songs between 1151 and 1158.³ She composed them for liturgical use in the convent, arranged them according to their themes and subject matter, and called them *Symphonia armonie celestium revelationum*, a title meant to indicate their divine source, their mystical but revelatory nature, and the position of music for Hildegard as the highest form of praise, which carried literal echoes from the heavenly spheres.

As her public authority increased with the completion of the first book of visions in 1157, Hildegard began to act as prophet and consultant by letter for the highest officials in church and state, as well as for a variety of more anonymous monks and nuns who relied on her prophetic powers to help them deal with their own responsibilities. Toward the end of her life, the Cistercian monks of Brabant, apparently the only community with whom she shared her songs,⁴ posed thirty-eight thorny theological questions to her which she undertook to answer.⁵ Finally, in response to requests from the people, she began to travel on the Rhine, to preach and teach, a feat that a century later was still forbidden to women, according to Aquinas.⁶

From the age of eight, Hildegard was fed on the rich æsthetic fare of Benedictine liturgy, whose ever-present chant provided a “way in” to deep contemplation and probably to altered states of consciousness. These were made manifest and recorded eventually in three large books of visions, usually explicit in their pictorial detail as well as the narrative of a heavenly voice which further describes and interprets each vision. Only in her early forties did Hildegard

develop skills for conserving and converting the powerful energy from her contemplative and visionary experience into artistic and social forms. Fairly early in her struggle for a voice, Hildegard acquired the resolute support of Volmar, her *magister* at Disibodenberg. He was far more skilled at Latin grammatical construction than she, and for about thirty years he devoted himself to helping her to write down many of her visions, following her to the convent on the Rupertsberg, never trying to edit what she dictated to him,⁷ and collaborating with her until his death. The other person whose testimony and unqualified encouragement were crucial to breaking Hildegard's protracted "foreground silence" was her sister nun Rikkarda. When Rikkarda was appointed abbess at Hildesheim, Hildegard sent letters to two archbishops, protests that reveal the depth of her feelings as well as her real pique and indignation at having a critical supporter snatched away.⁸ Volmar, Rikkarda, and a community of about fifty women with trained voices—all of whom sang seven offices and the eucharistic liturgy daily, plus matins at night—provided the milieu in which Hildegard composed her songs.

We have two extant twelfth-century manuscripts of the *Symphonia*,⁹ yielding together the text and notated music for seventy-seven songs and for the morality play *Ordo virtutum*.¹⁰ The preponderance of songs for two particular women is striking: fifteen about the Blessed Virgin and thirteen about Ursula and her maidens,¹¹ as opposed, for example to three for Christ, one for the Trinity, and a few each for individual and local saints. Hildegard's picture of the Virgin is a composite of elements from Isis, Demeter, and Aurora, the Roman goddess of the dawn. The language, however, is almost entirely that of Wisdom literature. Wisdom makes regular appearances in Hildegard's visions and speaks as the Wisdom of God. We have recently learned a great deal about the Sophia-Sapientia figure from the recovery in this century of Gnostic documents and the studies resulting from them.¹² The consensus is that the female counterpart of the godhead in Gnosticism is the Wisdom of Judaism. In Proverbs 8:22–36 she appears as a goddess—that is, she both precedes and is instrumental in the creation of the world. She sings her own praises, saying that God himself possessed her¹³ in the beginning of his ways, that she has existed from eternity, and that she assisted and harmonized the creation of the various parts of the physical universe.

The Jewish Wisdom figure, *hokmā*, is further elaborated in the apocryphal books of Sapientia and Ecclesiasticus, both well known in the twelfth century because of their frequent use for key liturgical texts. In Ecclesiasticus 1:25, in Hildegard's Vulgate Bible, Wisdom begins to take on aspects of a tree. Ecclesiasticus 24 is a kind of midrash of Proverbs 8, in which Wisdom again proclaims herself as coming from the mouth of the Most High in the form of a cloud or mist and eventually taking root in the chosen people, where she becomes the tallest and most fragrant of trees. In the book of Wisdom in the Vulgate, we find that

she is a breath of the power of God,
and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty:
therefore nothing defiled gains entrance into her.
For she is a reflection of eternal light,
a spotless mirror of the working of God,
and an image of his goodness.
Though she is but one, she can do all things,
and while remaining in herself, she renews all things. [7:25-27]

The unity-in-diversity of this figure makes her the perfect mirror of creation and an image of God. At the same time, her fecundity and inviolate wholeness make it possible for Hildegard to incorporate her into an especially powerful composite figure of Mary.

Song number 13 is a sequence, composed for one of several feast days for events in the life of the Blessed Virgin. Liturgically, a sequence follows directly after the Alleluia section of the mass. Well over a thousand sequences were written during the medieval period; all but five were excised at the Council of Trent, largely because they had such great popular appeal and their subject matter tended to be popular and apocryphal. Structurally, Hildegard's sequence texts are not at all typical of twelfth-century practice, which was locked into an invariable pattern of strophic versification known as the "regular sequence." Hildegard's poetry is closer to the Hebrew Psalms, with its inherent parallelism underscored by the antiphonal singing by half-choirs of strophe and antistrophe. Here, as in the Psalms, each antistrophe either enlarges upon or contrasts with the strophe that it follows. The real structure in Hildegard's sequence texts hangs on her use and organic elaboration of key symbols. It is remarkably similar to our modern free verse with no discernible rhyme or specific scheme of syllables or lines.

Song number 71 is one of only two songs in the whole collection with no designation as to liturgical form or function. In it the Virgin is a wondrous tree. The song is freely composed, yet economically crafted. It feels much like a composition, and Hildegard may have added it to the cycle later in her creative life.¹⁴ In the first stanza, she suggests the mystical and divine conception of the virgin herself in an almost magical, chthonic way. In the fourth stanza I have translated the *ipsius* as referring directly to the Virgin, because I feel Hildegard has in mind the prophecy of Isaiah 45:8 ff. and makes a mystical identification between the earth (*terra*) and the Virgin's womb. It is also possible that Hildegard knew the Tellus figure from the "Exultet" of the Paschal Vigil, often pictured in eleventh- and twelfth-century Exultet Rolls of southern Italy¹⁵ as having nests and other fantastic things growing in her hair. In either case, the identification stands between the Virgin and a female earth figure.

Songs 38 and 39 take the form of an antiphon and responsory. Liturgically, an antiphon is typically a simple "one-liner" that attaches to a psalm or New Testament canticle for any monastic office. Its function is to place that psalm or canticle in a particular liturgical feast, season or day of the week. A responsory follows a lesson, usually in the long night office of matins. (This particular responsory does not represent the usual formal, responsorial structure with repetenda, although several of Hildegard's do.) The subject of both of these songs is women religious in general, the virgins of the Church. The prose texts are found word for word in the thirteenth vision of *Scivias*,¹⁶ Hildegard's earliest book of visions. Vision thirteen is a long *symphonia* or song to the Blessed Virgin in many different sections, praising different participants. In the antiphon, Hildegard makes a mystical identification between the sensual flowers of the Garden and the stones in the walls of the Heavenly Jerusalem. In the responsory, the women become an inverted tree, thereby acquiring cosmic dimensions. If the two are considered together, as they appear in the *Scivias*, starting with the small circles of their lovely faces, the circular movement becomes wider and wider, gathering an amazing amount of energy until it joins the very orb of the sun and moves still further to become the most comprehensive of circular embraces.

In Song 59, the little antiphon for *Sapientia* again has to do with that wonderful circular motion characteristic of the winged, singing seraphim of Isaiah 6:23 and which Hildegard

attributes to the virgins in the responsory above. These three wings may be one side of a pair of three; they may also be a female counterpart to the working of the Trinity. At any rate, it is characteristic of Hildegard to value so highly the physical property of moisture, which of course has mystical significance from Isaiah 45. Connected in the natural world to greenness and fertility, moisture opposes aridity, as in number 71 above. The power of the sun is always a fertile, moist heat and radiance for Hildegard.

Hildegard's texts are all mystical, sometimes syntactically tortured, dealing with "divine mysteries" but, like the "O Antiphons" for Advent, at the same time absolutely immediate, liturgical, designed to make present to the body and accessible to all the senses something hidden, mysterious, eternal. Certainly these songs are about divine, larger-than-life themes and doings. They are also suggestive of a role for women in salvation history that was at least heterodox in the twelfth century. What the virgins continually do is to build in the dawn, "ante-luciferum."¹⁷ They are building the New Jerusalem just as the Virgin Mary is, Isis-like, re-membering the mystical body of Christ, the new people. The assumption that lies behind all of Hildegard's songs about women is that women have a radical and charismatic role. Naturally, this applies in the songs to women religious, but the fact remains that the idea of a truly effective and respected charismatic ministry for women or men had hardly been operative since the days of primitive Christianity, whence it was rapidly replaced by a meticulously organized hierarchical priesthood of men.

Institute for Research in History, New York City

Song 13, about the Virgin Mary (Sequence, *O virgo ac diadema*)

O rod and crown, royal garments of the King.
You in your fastness are like a fortress.

You came into full leaf and flowered through a sequence
Other than the way in which Adam brought forth the whole human race,

Hail, hail!

From out of your womb has come the other life
Which Adam had stripped from his children.

O flower, you did not sprout forth from the dew,
Neither from drops of rain, nor did the atmosphere fly you from above,
But divine radiance brought you forth in a glorious green shoot.

O green branch, God had foreseen your flowering
On the first day of his Creation.

And out of his Word he made a golden vessel,
Praiseworthy maiden.

What great strength is in the side of man,
From which God brought forth the form of woman
Whom He made the mirror of his every jewel
And the embrace of all his Creation.

In response the heavenly instruments sing in chorus,
And the entire earth wonders, praiseworthy Mary,
That God has loved you so intensely.

How intense is the wailing and lamenting
That grief in guilt flowed into a woman
Through the serpent's resolve.

For the very woman whom God empowered to be the mother of all,
Tore out her own heart with the wounds of ignorance
And conferred abounding anguish on her descendants.

But you, Aurora, a new sun came forth from your womb
Who cleansed all of Eve's guilt
And through you conferred a blessing on all people that is greater than
Eve's harm.

Therefore, Salvatrix, you who extended the new light to humanity,
Gather together the limbs of your Son for the heavenly harmony.¹⁸

Song 71, about the Virgin Mary (*O viridissima virgo, ave*)

Greetings, greenest branch
Who came forth on a spirit-filled
Quest for knowledge of all that is holy.

Since this is the time
When you have flourished in your branches,
Let there be greetings to you,
Greetings

Because the moist, vital heat of the sun has sweated into you
As it releases the pungent odor of balsam.

For in you has blossomed the beautiful flower
Which has given fragrance to all the spices
Which were dry.
And they have appeared all in full greenness.

Because of you the heavens gifted the meadow with dew
And every land has been made abundant,
Since your womb has brought forth wheat
And since the birds of heaven have made their nests in you.

At last is there food made for humanity
And great joy for the banqueters.

Therefore in you, sweet Virgin,
Every joy is in abundance—
All those Eve disparaged.
Now let there be praise to the Most High!¹⁹

Songs 38 and 39: Antiphon and Responsory about the Virgins

(Antiphon, *O pulchrae facies*)

You beautiful faces

Beholding God and building in the dawn

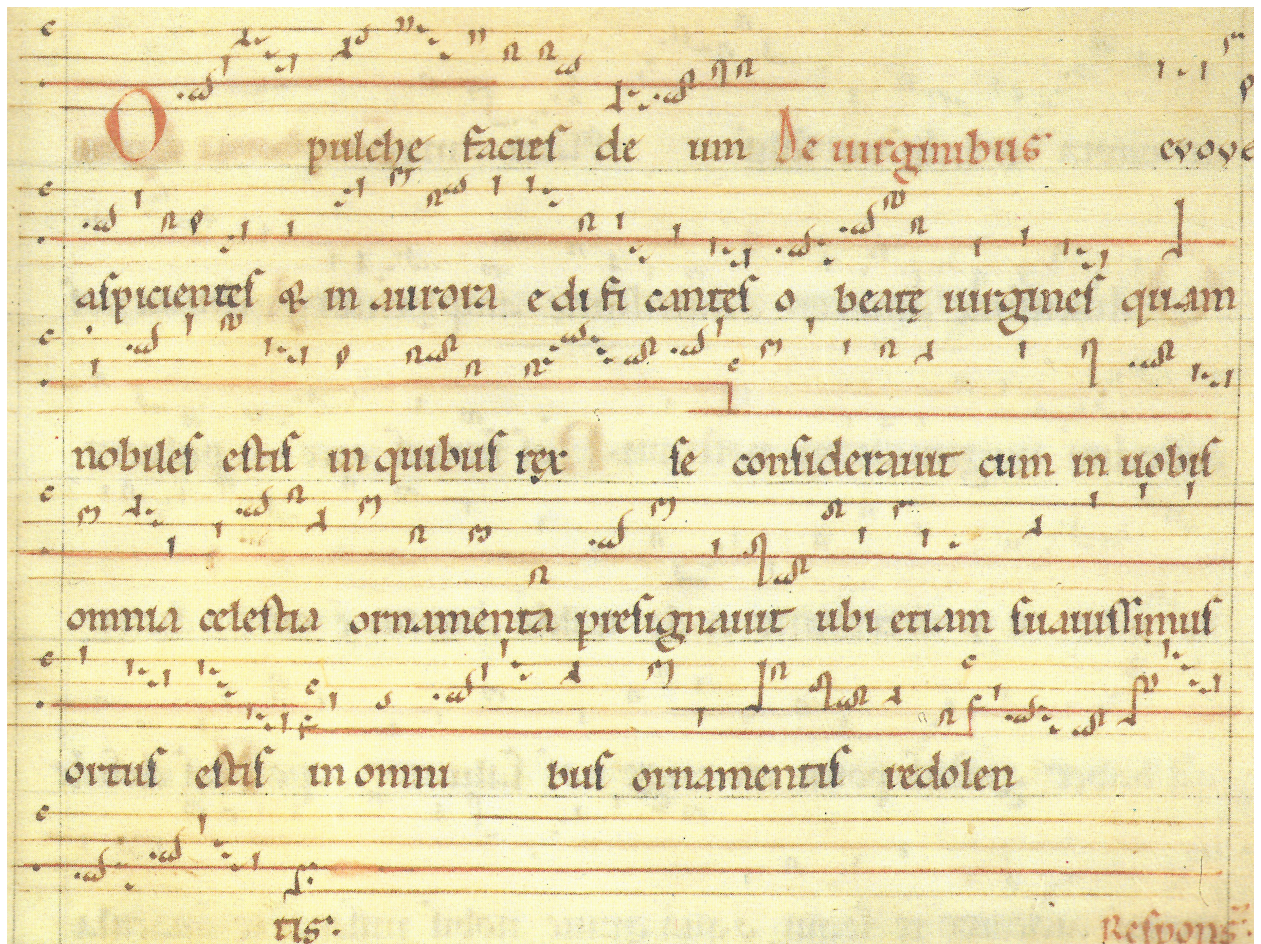
How noble you are.

In whom the King reflected himself

When he showed forth in you all the heavenly jewels;

And as you are also redolent with the odor of all those jewels

You are also the sweetest garden.²⁰



(Respond, *O nobilissima uiriditas*)

You most glorious greenness,

You take root in the sun,

And in clear day-brightness

You shine forth in a wheel

Which no earthly excellence comprehends;

You are encircled

By the embraces of the divine mysteries.²¹

Song 59: O Power of Wisdom (Antiphon, *O virtus sapientiæ*)

You power of Wisdom,
In circling, you have encompassed
All things by embracing them in the
 One course that carries life.
You have three wings:
One soars on high,
Another draws fertile moisture from the earth,
 The third flies everywhere.
Let all due praise be to you, Wisdom!²²

Notes

1. See, in particular, Hildegard's Preface to *Scivias*, in *Padrologiæ cursus completus*, ed. Migne (Paris: Garnier, 1882), vol. 197, cols. 383–86, which describes a classic case of what Tillie Olsen calls "foreground silence" (*Silences* [New York: Delacorte Press/Seymour Lawrence, 1978], p. 10). Hildegard first began writing in her forty-third year, and the issues which failed that "foreground silence" rendered the tone of her autobiographical writings simultaneously strident and defensive. In her letters, for example, inflated prophecies and moralistic judgments are punctuated by assurances that she herself is nothing but a vessel, a mouthpiece. She herself adds nothing; she only receives and passes along, very passively, what is given to her.
2. The gift of prophecy is a technical term, one of seven gifts or *charismata* bestowed in extraordinary cases by the workings of the Holy Spirit. More common in the Apostolic Age than later, they were always subordinated to the power of hierarchy. The gift of prophecy, which specifically concerns the manifestation of supernatural knowledge by words or signs for the good of others, is a gift permitted to women, with certain qualifications as to its use.
3. See the "Prologue" to Hildegard's second book of visions, *Liber vite meritorum*, in *Analecta sacra*, ed. Pitra (n.p.: Typis Sacri Montis Casinensis, 1882), 8:7–8.
4. Fifty-seven of the songs are included in the Villarensen Codex (V), which Hildegard had sent to the Cistercians.
5. The thirty-eight questions and solutions are in Migne, ed., vol. 197, cols. 1038–54.
6. See S. T. 45, 177, 2 and passim. In the Blackfriars Latin and Eg. ed. (1969), this in vol. 45, which deals with "Prophecy and Other Charisms."
7. See Hildegard's letter to Guibert of Gembloux describing her requirements for secretarial help and complimenting the late Volmar for the admirable way that he never overstepped these requirements, in Pitra, ed., 431–33.
8. This correspondence is in Migne, *PL*, vol. 197, cols 156–63.
9. The Villarensen Codex, now housed at the Abbey of Dendermonde in Belgium and referred to as (V) or (D) is the earlier (ca. 1175) and does not contain the morality play. The Riesenkodek, referred to as (R), from the decade following Hildegard's death and also executed at the convent at Rupertsberg, is now at the Hessische Landesbibliothek in Wiesbaden. This was reproduced

in facsimile in 1913. See Joseph Gmelch, *Die Kompositionen der heil. Hildegard* (Düsseldorf: Schwann, n.d.).

10. See Pudentiana Barth O.S.B. M. Immaculata Ritscher, and Joseph Schmidt-Görg, *Hildegard von Bingen: Lieder* (Salzburg: Otto Muller, 1969) for complete edition of music, Latin texts, and German translations. I have used the Latin text and numbering of this edition for my translations, which are the first in English for these particular songs.

11. Saint Ursula, a virgin martyr, enjoyed a cultic revival in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries which spread from Cologne to the lowlands. Hildegard's songs for her are passionate and lyrical, filled with language from the Canticle of Canticles. It is clear that Hildegard treats the story of Ursula, not as a legend, but as a true *Passio*.

12. See, for example, E. H. Pagels, "What Became of God the Mother? Conflicting Images of God in Early Christianity," in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 2, no. 2 (Winter 1976): 293–303.

13. Although most English translations of Proverbs 8:22 say "The Lord created me," the verb in the Vulgate Bible is *possedit*.

14. Peter Dronke, "The Composition of Hildegard of Bingen's *Symphonia*," *Sacris Erudiri*, vol. 19 (1969–70), suggests the late compositional date for no. 71 also.

15. See, for example, plate 7 in M. Avery, *The Exsultet Rolls of South Italy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1936).

16. See Migne, *PL*, vol. 197, *Scivias* 3, 13, col. 732B.

17. This is part of a key mystical text for Hildegard from Psalm 109:3 (Vulgate). For example, it is spoken by the "most beautiful girl" and "sovereign lady" identified as Love or Charitas in epistle 30, *PL*, 197, cols. 192D–193A.

18. See Barth *et al.*, eds., pp. 224, 226 for Latin text.

19. See *ibid.*, p. 286, for Latin text.

20. See *ibid.*, p. 256, for Latin text.

21. See *ibid.*, p. 258, for Latin text.

22. See *ibid.*, pp. 276 and 278, for Latin text.

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