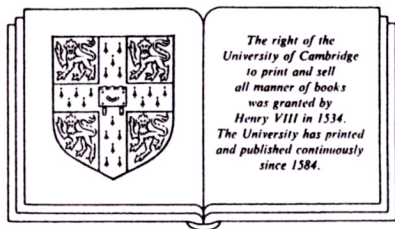


WOMEN WRITERS OF THE MIDDLE AGES

A Critical Study of Texts from Perpetua († 203)
to Marguerite Porete († 1310)

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Lying long in my bed of sickness, in the 1170th year of the Lord's incarnation, I saw – awake in body and spirit – a most beautiful image of womanly form, most peerless in gentleness, most dear in her delights. Her beauty was so great that the human mind could not fathom it, and her height reached from earth as far as heaven. Her face shone with the greatest radiance, and her eye gazed heavenward. She was dressed in the purest white silk, and enfolded by a cloak studded with precious gems – emerald, sapphire and pearls; her sandals were of onyx. Yet her face was covered in dust, her dress was torn on the right side, her cloak had lost its elegant beauty and her sandals were muddied. And she cried out . . . 'The foxes have their lairs, and the birds of the sky their nests, but I have no helper or consoler, no staff on which to lean or be supported by.'

The allegory Hildegard unfolds shows that, as in *Pastor Hermas*, this woman, who is both radiant with youth and (as the last words cited imply) weak with age, is Ecclesia. At the same time, like *Philosophia* at the opening of Boethius' *Consolatio*, her height reaches to heaven, and her dress is torn. Though so beautiful, Ecclesia has been maltreated and humiliated – not by false philosophers, as in Boethius, but here, as we soon learn, by unworthy priests.

Yet there is another such image in Hildegard's letters where womanly perfection and beauty, both in face and dress, remain untarnished. It is Hildegard's vision of heavenly Love (*Caritas*). Love, for Hildegard, is a girl (*puella*) with dazzling brightness streaming from her face; her cloak is whiter than snow and brighter than stars – and this cloak has no need of gems; her shoes are gold – not dark as onyx, like Ecclesia's. She holds the sun and moon, and embraces them; she has a sapphire image of a human being on her breast. 'And all creation called this girl *domina*.'⁵⁹

In the letter, the allegory unfolded from this vision is about creation and redemption; the details become as tradition-bound as those with Ecclesia had been. It is when we see these images in relation not only to their allegories but to that image of the bride of God which Hildegard wanted to embody in her disciples, that certain aspects of her thought cohere in an unexpected way. In paradise, the first woman was created – Hildegard tells us in *Causae et curae* – as the embodiment of the love that Adam felt. Eve, that is, was initially, in her paradisaical state, the glorious *puella* whom Hildegard describes in her vision. And insofar as the virgin brides on the Rupertsberg could still re-enact that paradisaical state, they could manifest something of the splendour of this *puella*. That, probably, is also why Hildegard (in the wake of Gregory of Nyssa, Scotus Eriugena and others⁶⁰) decided that the paradisaical love was so sublime that it was free of any carnal element. She who wrote so openly about women's sexuality in the context of medicine nonetheless retained an asexual concept of love in her ideal realm. Implicitly this tended to Manichaean fantasy – for it would follow that it was the sensual aspect of love which rendered it unparadisaical and tainted. I shall return to this problem below (vii).

Hildegard was the first of the women mystics who personified Love as a consummately beautiful womanly apparition. It is probably not through her direct influence that 'Lady Love' (*Minne, Amour*) becomes a protagonist in the writings of Mechthild, Hadewijch, and Marguerite Porete in the following century: there we must reckon with the convergence of diverse impulses – especially from vernacular personifications of human love, from the 'Sapiential' books of the Old Testament, and from Boethius. What Hildegard shows, however, is the extraordinary imaginative potential that was latent in a certain allegorical tradition. Even if her descriptions of *Caritas* and *Ecclesia* turn into elaborately constructed explications, they begin in something that she sees; and in telling what she sees, Hildegard informs these images with a vivacity that gives them momentarily the compelling power of myths. She does not disclose the identity of her figures at first: she captivates by infusing a sense of mystery in the descriptions. The allegoresis that nearly always (except in her lyrics) follows, roots the images again in a more conventional exegetic past. Thus in the allegorizing letters (as also in the one to Tengswindis) divergent and indeed contradictory impulses, towards unpredictable and towards predictable insights, can be traced in Hildegard's outlook.

VII

To gain an impression of Hildegard's way of understanding the spiritual and physical universe, it is necessary to consider some of these contradictory impulses more fully. Here I shall concentrate on the two least-known sources: the series of unpublished letters in the Berlin manuscript, and certain key passages in *Causae et curae* (printed in 1903, in an often decried but never yet replaced edition).

Causae et curae takes us to the root of what is unreconciled in Hildegard's thought. As a medical writer, her whole inclination is to look at human beings in their empirical reality: they are organisms that can be accounted for in terms of physical principles. Not that she demarcates physical principles in any irrevocable way from metaphysical ones. Yet whenever she is writing of the human being (rather than of the soul or spirit), Hildegard's emphasis tends to be what in later periods would be called a materialist and deterministic one. The same holds true, for instance, and in a similar way, of the scientific and especially the medical writings of Avicenna. Yet Hildegard, like Avicenna, is also a committed mystic, one for whom the transcending of the physical world is of supreme importance. This, for both thinkers, was a source of keen tension: in the words of Marlowe's *Faustus* – 'O Ile leape up to my God: who pulles me downe?' Because they have a biologically oriented approach, the tension seldom breaks

out, for either Hildegard or Avicenna, in a simplistic conflict between a higher, immaterial principle and a material body prone to what is base – even though expressions reminiscent of this model do tend to occur. The biological emphasis, however, made the whole notion of a separable immaterial soul problematic, and – at least when one was speaking as a scientist – impossible. So one of the few ways open to the scientist–mystic of transcending the physically conditioned (or even fully determined) world, of leaping up to God, was by exploring – or creating – a psychological condition that is the inner counterpart of Manichaean myths.⁶¹ The concept of the soul rising victoriously over its irremediably corrupt body is then transfigured: the divine realm – which does not necessarily exclude the physical – rises, conquering that of Lucifer. At the same time Hildegard (again like her Persian predecessor) longs to withdraw from outright Manichaeism: in the last resort she wants to say, Lucifer has no veritable realm that is his own.

These disparate impulses are evident near the opening of *Causae et curae*. Here, and in the complementary *Physica*, even when Hildegard's thought comes close to that of her visionary writings, she never presents anything as revelation; here it is never 'the living light told me . . .', but rather her own, and perhaps her most personal, series of attempts to apprehend the cosmos. –

When Lucifer stretched himself out towards nothingness, the beginning of his stretching produced evil, and soon this evil, without radiance or light, flamed up in itself through jealousy of God,⁶² whirling and turning like a wheel (*ut rota*), and showed ignited darkness in itself. And thus evil fell away from good; neither did good touch evil nor evil good.

Yet God remained whole like a wheel (*ut rota*) . . . Now this wheel is somewhere, and is full of something. For if the wheel had nothing but an outer rim, it would be empty. And if perchance an outsider came and wanted to work there, this cannot be, for two craftsmen cannot exercise their craft in one and the same wheel. Oh humans, look at the human being! For it contains heaven and earth and other creatures in itself, and is one form, and all things hide in it.

This is what fatherhood is like. In what way? The round of the wheel is fatherhood, the fullness of the wheel is divinity. All things are in it and all stem from it, and beyond it there is no creator. Lucifer, however, is not whole, but divided in dispersion, since he wanted to be what he should not. For when God made the world, he had in his age-old plan that he wanted to become human.

And he made the elements of the world, and they are in man, and man operates with them.⁶³

The fluctuations of outlook are notable. At first there are two wheels – that of Lucifer and that of God, one evil, one good. Each is autonomous, neither impinges upon the other. This comes close indeed to Manichaean myth. Yet in the next paragraph the emphasis seems the very opposite of Manichaean: God is the outer part of a human wheel, that he fills with divinity, a wheel which, by being human, also comprises the rest of creation. The wheel is full, is perfect:

there is no room for an outsider, a Lucifer, to act in it. This seems a thoroughly optimistic affirmation of man, and of a cosmos directly and completely informed with divinity.

In the third paragraph cited, the optimism goes still further: now Lucifer is not regarded as having a wheel of his own at all – he is fragmented. He wanted to be what he should not: that is, he wanted to be God. But God, too, wanted to become something other, namely human, and his wish was fulfilled. The wheel that is simultaneously divine, human and elemental emerged.

It is possible to read *Causae et curae* sorting its component parts in two divisions. On the one hand, the greater part of the work tends to a 'positive' orientation. There the natural, fertile world is affirmed; creation is accounted for on materialist lines; psychological and spiritual phenomena are explained with the help of a physical determinism that at times also has overtones of astrology; human sexuality is acknowledged without moral censure; human characters are established physiologically, without value-judgments. Contrasting with these are the 'negative' moments in the work, where the Manichaean impulses become strong. Then the whole cosmos is regarded as inexorably tainted by the Fall, Lucifer is seen as having won an autonomous realm in which he has dominion. This expresses itself particularly in the domain of sexuality, which in its existent form is a direct result of corruption and of the Fall. The primordial corruption displays its effects in three of the four possible human temperaments: only the sanguine still gives a reminiscence of the well-balanced nature of prelapsarian man, the other three – choleric, phlegmatic, and melancholic – betray that man is doomed to imperfection and frustration. The initial inner harmony is irretrievably lost, and it was that loss which caused a lack of outer harmony. Yet these attitudes – though they occur repeatedly – represent a much smaller proportion in the whole.

Near the opening, the two kinds of statement can be found starkly juxtaposed. On the one hand the affirmation of a fecund universe:

The sun in its circle is whole and full, and never fails; he sends his light into the moon when she comes near him, as a man sends his sperm into a woman.

On the other, a mythical static universe which became cankered and was lost:

Before Adam's Fall the firmament was immobile and was not whirled about, but after the Fall it began to be moved and whirled. Yet after the last day it will again stand immobile, as it was in the primal creation before Adam's Fall.

On the one hand there is harmonious parallelism:

For just as body and soul exist together and are strengthened by each other, so too are firmament and planets – they cherish and strengthen each other mutually. As the soul vivifies and consolidates the body, so too sun, moon and the other planets cherish and

strengthen the firmament with their fire. For the firmament is as it were man's head, sun, moon and stars are as the eyes, air as the hearing, the winds are as smell, dew as taste, the sides of the world are as arms and as touch. And the other creatures that are in the world are as the belly; but the earth is as the heart . . .

And yet this last parallel again leads towards a Manichaean type of fantasy – an unrelenting rivalry between the creating God and the envious Lucifer:

The abyss is as it were the foot and the walk of man. Thus when the devil hurtled down from heaven – he who wanted to sit and reign and who was unable to create and fashion any creature – God at once made the firmament, so that Lucifer would see and understand what things and what great ones God could fashion and create. Then too he set sun, moon and stars into the firmament, that from these Lucifer would see and recognize how great a glory and splendour he had lost.

In its main lines, Hildegard's theory of creation in *Causae et curae*, the theory underlying her varied medical and sexual insights in the work, is a naturalistic one. Without too great an anachronism we could call hers a materialist cosmogony. Certainly the Christian God is brought in at various points in the argument – yet nothing that is said of him has any intrinsic connection with the theory as such. Thus in the following chapter it is the elemental components, rather than any miraculous, 'supernatural' action, which are crucial to the divine experiment:

That there are only four elements:⁶⁴ There cannot be more than four, or fewer. They consist of two kinds: upper and lower. The upper are celestial, the lower terrestrial. The things that live in the upper ones are impalpable and are made of fire and air; those that move in the lower are palpable, formed bodies, and consist of water and mud.

For spirits are fiery and airy, but man is watery and muddy. When God created man, the mud from which he was formed was stuck together with water, and God put a fiery and airy breath of life into that form.

Later, by contrast, Hildegard seems to allow the orthodox Christian notion of God infusing the soul in the human body. Yet even there her language is of a materialist tendency: 'the living wind, which is the soul, enters this bodily shape by the will of the almighty God, and strengthens it and makes it alive and goes about in it everywhere, as a worm that weaves silk is covered and enveloped in the silk as in a house'.

Even though Hildegard here alludes to 'the will of the almighty God', the soul, in her earlier discussion, is thought of specifically in physical elemental terms: 'The soul is fiery, windy and humid, and it occupies the whole heart of man. The liver heats the heart, the lung covers it . . .' Most of all the soul is envisaged as the highest element: 'the soul is fire, which penetrates the whole body and vivifies the human being'. At the same time, three of the four elements are seen as the sources of man's 'spiritual' condition – of his affective and

intellectual aspects as well as of his power of movement: 'Man draws his sensuality and desire from fire; from air he draws thoughts and their power to roam; from water, knowledge and motion.'

Adam had a greater mode of cognition, but this too was brought about by physical means: it was through the 'cooking' of his powers (*viribus coctus*), while he slept, that he awoke as a prophet of heavenly things, endowed with all earthly knowledge and art. His knowledge is evoked also in a sexual metaphor: God gave Adam all creatures, that he might penetrate them with virile force (*virili vi eas penetraret*). He knew them (*scivit et cognovit*), 'for man himself is every creature'. Here the ultimately Aristotelian conception, of the knower uniting with what he knows, and the image of man as *summa* of all creation, blend remarkably with the biblical usage in which 'to know' has a sexual force.

Hildegard's *rota*, however, comprehends not only man and the physical world, but the presence of divinity. Though she has so keenly naturalizing a notion of the human soul, she also affirms the orthodox belief that such a soul can exist separately from its body after death – till the end of time, when they are reunited. Are these two viewpoints compatible? Hildegard believes them to be so, because for her the temporary separateness of the soul is as nothing to the triumphant reintegration of the *rota* that she envisages:

After the last day the soul will desire its dress from God, to draw that dress to itself . . . so too God has drawn to himself his dress, which was eternally hidden in him. And in this way God and man are one, as soul and body . . . As each thing has its shadow, so too man is the shadow of God, and this shadow is the showing of creation, and man is thus the showing of the almighty God in all his miracles . . . Thus the whole celestial harmony is the mirror of divinity, and man the mirror of all God's miracles.

Nonetheless, Hildegard also has moments where she seems to succumb to a fully Manichaean model for understanding the human soul. In a section headed 'Concerning the contrariety of soul and flesh' we read:

The soul is a breath striving towards the good, but the body strives towards sins; and rarely and at times hardly at all can the soul restrain the body from sinning; just as the sun cannot prevent little worms from coming out of the earth to the place that he is warming in his splendour and heat.

A similar tension exists in Hildegard's accounts of sex. There are 'medical' passages filled with an enraptured feeling for the beauty of the sexual act:

When a woman is making love with a man, a sense of heat in her brain, which brings with it sensual delight, communicates the taste of that delight during the act and summons forth the emission of the man's seed. And when the seed has fallen into its place, that vehement heat descending from her brain draws the seed to itself and holds it, and soon the woman's sexual organs contract, and all the parts that are ready to open up during the time of menstruation now close, in the same way as a strong man can hold something enclosed in his fist.

Not every detail in the attempted description is clear, but Hildegard seems to be thinking of two phenomena – vaginal contractions, and the squeezing of the man's organ by the woman's vaginal muscles – as the consummate physical expressions of a woman's passionateness, of that *delectatio* which begins in her brain and brings the man to his climax.

There are also 'metaphysical' passages that move in this direction, that try to project a wholly positive theology of sex. The beauty of the act is exemplified in the archetypal love-union:

When God created Adam, Adam experienced a sense of great love in the sleep that God instilled in him. And God gave a form to that love of the man, and so woman is the man's love. And as soon as woman was formed God gave man the power of creating, that through his love – which is woman – he might procreate children. When Adam gazed at Eve, he was entirely filled with wisdom, for he saw in her the mother of the children to come. And when she gazed at Adam, it was as if she were gazing into heaven, or as the human soul strives upwards, longing for heavenly things – for her hope was fixed in him. And so there will be and must be one and the same love in man and woman, and no other.

The man's love, compared with the woman's, is a heat of ardour like a fire on blazing mountains, which can hardly be put out, whilst hers is a wood-fire that is easily quenched; but the woman's love, compared with the man's, is like a sweet warmth proceeding from the sun, which brings forth fruits . . .

Then, suddenly, falls the Manichaean shadow: the love-making before the Fall was sweeter, because it was gentle rather than fiercely passionate:

But the great love that was in Adam when Eve came forth from him, and the sweetness of the sleep with which he then slept, were turned in his transgression into a contrary mode of sweetness. And so, because a man still feels this great sweetness in himself, and is like a stag thirsting for the fountain, he races swiftly to the woman and she to him – she like a threshing-floor pounded by his many strokes and brought to heat when the grains are threshed inside her.⁶⁵

Even here Hildegard does not write with distaste: the love-making she now evokes is still beautiful, though the *dulcedo* is of another kind. What seems inconsistent is that, in the first, ideal picture, she had evoked the man's ardour as something intense, like a mountain-fire, whereas now it seems as though Hildegard imagines the primordial love to have been devoid of ardour – 'as sweet as balm, as soft as air, as gentle'. And there are indeed a number of other passages of Manichaean inclination that bear this out. At times it sounds as if the human sexual impulse as such is a taint and a direct result of the Fall:

When man transgressed God's command, he was changed both in body and mind. For the purity of his blood was turned into another mode, so that, instead of purity, he now ejects the spume of semen. If man had remained in paradise, he would have stayed in an immutable and perfect state. But all these things, after his transgression, were turned into another and bitter mode. For man's blood, burning in the ardour and heat of lust, ejects a spume

from itself that we call semen, as a pot placed on the fire brings up foam from the water because of the flame's heat.

In the same way, the innate heavenly gift of melodiousness was lost:

Adam before his Fall sang like an angel and knew every kind of music . . . Just as, at his Fall, the holy and chaste manner of begetting children was transmuted into another mode of physical delight, so too the voice singing heavenly joys, which Adam had, was turned to a contrary mode of laughing and guffawing.

Here the implication is unmistakable: the 'other mode of physical delight' is unholy and unchaste. Manichaean fabulation has, for the moment, gained the ascendancy.

It is the naturalistic outlook in Hildegard which leads her to trying to account for human beings by physiological determinism. Thus, in love-making, the strength of the feeling of love in the man and the woman, and the strength of the man's semen, together determine the sex *and character* of the child. In the midst of expounding this, there is one brief nod in the direction of the Christian Creator, and scriptural authority is alleged to confirm the 'biological' account:

When the man approaches the woman, releasing powerful semen and in a true cherishing love for the woman, and she too has a true love for the man in that same hour, then a male child is conceived, for so it was ordained by God. Nor can it be otherwise, because Adam was formed of clay, which is a stronger material than flesh. And this male child will be prudent and virtuous . . .

But if the woman's love is lacking in that hour . . . and if the man's semen is strong, a male child will still be born, because the man's cherishing love predominates. But that male child will be feeble and not virtuous . . .

If the man's semen is thin, and yet he cherishes the woman lovingly and she him, then a virtuous female child is procreated . . .

If the man's semen is powerful but neither the man nor the woman cherish each other lovingly, a male child is procreated . . . but he will be bitter with his parents' bitterness; and if the man's semen is thin and there is no cherishing love on either side in that hour, a girl of bitter temperament is born.

The reference to the time of love-making would seem to have astrological implications: it is the particular hour that determines the result; and the strength of love, it is here assumed, could change from one hour to the next. In a later passage, it is specifically the moon that conditions the birth of children, both because the strength of the man's semen varies in accordance with the moon and because the weakness of the semen at certain times in the lunar month entails a biological deficiency – an innate lack of physical and moral *virtus* – in the child conceived at such a time:

The blood in every human being increases and diminishes according to the waxing and waning of the moon . . . When, as the moon waxes, the blood in human beings is increased, then both men and women are fertile for bearing fruit – for generating children – since

then . . . the man's semen is powerful and robust; and in the waning of the moon, when human blood also wanes, the man's semen is feeble and without strength, like dregs . . . If a woman conceives a child then, whether boy or girl, it will be infirm and feeble and not virtuous.

At the close of *Causae et curae*, in its surviving form, comes a far more elaborate lunar characterology, based on the day of the moon when a child is conceived. As the genuineness of the earlier passages has never been called in doubt, it is difficult to follow Schipperges in seeing this whole later section as an interpolation, 'diametrically opposed to all other pronouncements of Hildegard's'.⁶⁶ To give two examples of the procedure in this section:

One who is conceived on the first day after the new moon, when it receives its splendour from the sun, if a boy he will be proud and hard, and love no man except one who fears and honours him. He readily takes vengeance on people, [seizing] their fortune and all they possess. Yet he will be healthy in body and have no great sicknesses, though he will not grow very old. If a girl is born, she will always covet being honoured, and will be loved more by outsiders than by her household; and she is wicked in private, and always falls in love with strangers and newcomers, but is bad to her household and neglects them. She is physically healthy, though if an illness seizes her she gets very ill, almost to the point of death, and does not live long . . .

One who is conceived on the eighteenth day after the new moon, if a boy he will be a thief, and have such a longing to steal that he will in fact be discovered thieving; and ownership of land will be denied him, so that he wants to have almost nothing of his own of fields or vineyards or such things, but always to take away from others what is not his; and he is healthy in body, and as such will live long. If a girl is born, she will be astute and will behave foxily, and say almost nothing of what she has in her heart, but because of her evil habits she will deceive men by her talk, and bring honourable men to their deaths if she can. She is healthy in body, but sometimes plagued by insanity, and of herself she can live long; but behaviour such as that of this man or woman is troubling to God.

The character-traits in the majority of these lunar sketches are not flattering. The emphasis is always predictive: for each day an answer is given concerning the boy or girl conceived – how healthy will they be? how long will they live? If their state of health and length of life are physically determined, then how far are their personalities determined too? At times it sounds as if Hildegard thinks in terms of conditioning and inclinations rather than of complete determinism, at others not: the kleptomaniac cannot help stealing, yet his behaviour also offends God. Of those conceived on the twentieth day after the new moon Hildegard says categorically that the boy will become 'a bandit and homicide, and take delight in this', the girl, 'a poisoner, who gladly destroys men, and she will easily become lunatic, and will live long'. The medical, or pseudo-medical, context seems to preclude the questions of human will and responsibility, such as are crucial to Hildegard's *Liber vitae meritorum*. Here the sense of physical-medical laws, the heady excitement at the thought that complete predictability

might be possible, lead Hildegard to indulging in the part of the 'Rhenish sibyl'. As we shall see again among the Berlin letters, her prodigious gifts and magnetism led to her being besieged for advice; and pleas for intellectual or spiritual guidance, or for medical help, were often scarcely separable from more naïve demands for predictions, both about the here and the beyond. Hildegard assented to such pleas in varied ways, adapting herself often, it would seem, to the expectations of her correspondent. We do not know what she will have included in her complete *Subtilitates* – both *Causae et curae* and the related 'Berlin fragment' are too haphazardly assembled to give much help in ascertaining this. Thus theoretically the elaborate and fanciful lunar characterology at the close of *Causae et curae* might be an interpolation, and yet there is no cogent evidence, internal or external, in favour of this.

Another passage from this closing section, however, which is likewise rejected by Schipperges as inauthentic, seems to me to bear the clear stamp of Hildegard's thought, and to be a fine example of the 'materialist' orientation in her work. It concerns the concept of purgatory:⁶⁷

There are some unquenchable fires in the air, which are kindled through diverse actions of men; for these fires, which should have been for human glory, become punitive fires through men's evil deeds. So they descend to some places on earth, and there congregate, where too some rivers rise and flow forth, that draw heat and ardour from those fires, so that also by God's judgement some souls are tested in the fires and in the waters. But some streams from these waters at times flow into diverse regions among men – streams that are always hot, because they derive from the unquenchable fires. There are also some parts of the earth on which at times fire descends by divine vengeance, as is written: 'he rained coals of fire upon them, and the spirit of the storms is a part of their chalice'. And the earth and mountains and stones which that fire has touched will always remain burning, till the last day; and in the places that burn thus, streams sometimes rise that are hot with the same fire and flow warm. And men too, sometimes, by their art, brought streams to those burning places, in order to get warm through them . . . And these waters do not harm the men who use them for bathing in, but make them healthy, for the heat of the streams assuages the excessive heat in human beings and consumes their disordered humours.

Purgatorial fires are here described and explained naturalistically (with the same approach as, in the previous generation, the Chartres philosophers William of Conches and Thierry would have used).⁶⁸ They are physical fires and fire-created rivers that descend into the realms men inhabit. The last sentences cited re-establish the link with the medical tradition of taking hot baths for therapeutic effect. Purgatorial fires and boiling streams of divine chastisement are thus set on the same level of perception as volcanoes and thermal springs. Divine, human and natural forces can all play a rôle in bringing such phenomena about. There is a natural 'purgatorial' effect, which is medically beneficial, as well as a divinely intended moral one – and the two effects are, in the last resort, not different in kind.

One other notable instance of materialist analysis, earlier in *Causae et curae*, takes us back to the question of the physical determination of human character. Hildegard tries to work out the implications for personality of the four humoral temperaments, with a vividness and richness of detail unparalleled in earlier medical or physiognomic tradition.⁶⁹ What is particularly new and startling in her procedure is that she interprets the four humours fundamentally in terms of sexual behaviour, and that she gives a separate detailed account for four temperaments of women as well as for those of men. Such predictive physiological sketches of women are not previously attested. –

(*De sanguinea*) Some women are inclined to plumpness, and have soft and delectable flesh and slender veins, and well-constituted blood free of impurities . . . And these have a clear and light colouring, and in love's embraces are themselves lovable; they are subtle in arts, and show self-restraint in their disposition. At menstruation they suffer only a moderate loss of blood, and their womb is well developed for childbearing, so they are fertile and can take in the man's seed. Yet they do not bear many children, and if they are without husbands, so that they remain childless, they easily have physical pains; but if they have husbands, they are well.

(*De flemmatica*) There are other women whose flesh does not develop as much, because they have thick veins and healthy, whitish blood (though it does contain a little impurity, which is the source of its light colour). They have severe features, and are darkish in colouring; they are vigorous and practical, and have a somewhat mannish disposition. At menstruation their menstrual blood flows neither too little nor too abundantly. And because they have thick veins they are very fertile and conceive easily, for their womb and all their inner organs, too, are well developed. They attract men and make men pursue them, and so men love them well. If they want to stay away from men, they can do so without being affected by it badly, though they are slightly affected. However, if they do avoid making love with men they will become difficult and unpleasant in their behaviour. But if they go with men and do not wish to avoid men's love-making, they will be unbridled and over-lascivious, according to men's report. And because they are to some extent mannish on account of the vital force (*viriditas*, lit. 'greenness') within them, a little down sometimes grows on their chin . . .

(*De colerica*) There are other women who have slender flesh but big bones, moderately sized veins and dense red blood. They are pallid in colouring, prudent and benevolent, and men show them reverence and are afraid of them. They suffer much loss of blood in menstruation; their womb is well developed and they are fertile. And men like their conduct, yet flee from them and avoid them to some extent, for they can interest men but not make men desire them. If they do get married, they are chaste, they remain loyal wives and live healthily with their husbands; and if they are unmarried, they tend to be ailing – as much because they do not know to what man they might pledge their womanly loyalty as because they lack a husband . . .

(*De melancolica*) But there are other women who have gaunt flesh and thick veins and moderately sized bones; their blood is more lead-coloured⁷⁰ than sanguine, and their colouring is as it were blended with grey and black. They are changeable and free-roaming in their thoughts, and wearisomely wasted away in affliction; they also have little power of

resistance, so that at times they are worn out by melancholy. They suffer much loss of blood in menstruation, and they are sterile, because they have a weak and fragile womb. So they cannot lodge or retain or warm a man's seed, and thus they are also healthier, stronger and happier without husbands than with them – especially because, if they lie with their husbands, they will tend to feel weak afterwards. But men turn away from them and shun them, because they do not speak to men affectionately, and love them only a little. If for some hour they experience sexual joy, it quickly passes in them. Yet some such women, if they unite with robust and sanguine husbands, can at times, when they reach a fair age, such as fifty, bear at least one child . . . If their menopause comes before the just age, they will sometimes suffer gout or swellings of the legs, or will incur an insanity which their melancholy arouses, or else back-ache or a kidney-ailment . . . If they are not helped in their illness, so that they are not freed from it either by God's help or by medicine, they will quickly die.

While the idea that the particular physical blend (*krasis*) of humours conditions character is of long standing in the West, and certain writers such as Vindician and Bede had characterized 'temperaments' (sanguine, phlegmatic, choleric and melancholic) in a way that orthodox Galenic medicine would not have sanctioned,⁷¹ Hildegard's portraits can scarcely be accounted for by the influence of one or more earlier theories. We must, I believe, reckon with a degree of free invention, as well as with the literary systematization here of popular images, or stereotypes, that had not previously surfaced in a learned context.

For Hildegard, then, the epitome of the 'sanguine' woman is the delicate and attractive lady, well-nurtured (the phrase 'subtle in arts' gives a hint of her privileged background), serene, able to show her love physically and to take delight in love-making. She is romantic, and basically uncomplicated; it is a misfortune if she does not marry and have children. The 'phlegmatic' evokes for Hildegard a more sombre, coarse-grained type – her dark colouring suggests she works outdoors and is no lady of leisure. She has cruder sexual instincts and cravings than the other, she is sturdy and commonsensical, and can also be fierce and domineering.

The 'choleric' woman is seen by Hildegard as laudable rather than lovable. She commands respect by her discreet and helpful behaviour, she is loyal and virtuous, yet somehow cold. After the gentle châtelaine and the smouldering, earthy working woman, we might say, comes the austere headmistress.

What of the last, the 'melancholic' type? She is described at greater length than the others. She is complicated and highly strung; she has more ups and downs than the rest, and is prone to suffer more both in body and mind than they. She is neither physically nor mentally suited to marriage. She has a quite different cast of mind from the others: she is *vaga in cogitationibus* – free-roaming in her thoughts. She is (to adapt today's typology) the neurotic – or the intellectual.

While Hildegard in her medical orientation projects these four temperaments

as if they were all on the same plane, she also, in her quasi-Manichaean moments, has a very different interpretation of melancholy. Then it is no longer one physiologically-based tendency among others, but a curse resulting from Adam's guilt. Before the Fall, human beings were naturally sanguine; but 'when splendour was quenched in Adam, the black bile (*melancholia*) curdled in his blood, whereby sadness and despair arose in him'. 'This melancholy is black and bitter and breathes forth every evil, and at times brings sickness to the brain and heart . . . It is natural to every human being, through the first suggestion of the devil.'

Thus melancholy is both the tragic aspect of human existence since Adam and (when Hildegard writes as physiologist) a tendency particularly acute in men and women of a certain humoral 'complexion'. In men, according to Hildegard, it expresses itself far more grimly than in women: they become not only bitter and mean, but show a cold, vicious sensuality that is barren of love. Hildegard does not explicitly compare her two uses of the term, yet we could conclude from what she says that those who are melancholic by temperament are the ones who will experience the tragic condition of fallen man more intensely than others, the ones most prone to be maladjusted by it.

Hildegard, I submit, understood herself as a melancholic woman. If we juxtapose with her description of the type another key passage in *Causae et curae* (cited below), and relate these passages to all she tells us of herself in the autobiographic notes in the *Vita*, the implied diagnosis is clear. Shortly before her character-sketches, she had made a distinction between the two 'precellent' *humores* (sanguine and phlegmatic), which she also calls the *phlegmata*, and the two following (choleric and melancholic), which she calls *livores*. For human beings – at least since Eden – these four must all be well tempered if they are to achieve physical and mental health. And yet there can be rare exceptions, where the person is unbalanced, but beneficially so:

If one of the *livores* extends itself beyond measure in superfluity in any human being, the *humores* cannot be at peace in him, save only in those human beings whom God's grace has infused, either in strength, like Samson, or in wisdom, like Solomon, or in prophecy, like Jeremiah, or certain pagans such as Plato and those like him. And where others in such cases go mad, these will in this situation be bravest in excellence through the grace of God, for this grace allows them to be in a certain changeable condition, so that they are now ill, now well, now afraid, now strong, now in sadness, now in joy. And God brings about the relief in them, so that when they are ill he makes them well, when fearful, he makes them strong, when sad, he makes them joyful.

The passage refers to both the choleric and the melancholic *livor*. Samson is an outstanding example of the first: Hildegard notes in choleric men their virility, their mighty limbs, their sexual exuberance and the strength of all their passions – 'they direct their eyes like arrows at the women they love . . . their

thoughts are like a blast of tempests'.⁷² The others – Solomon, Jeremiah, Plato and those like him – are, in Hildegard's view, those who could most easily go mad, but who, by a special grace, can also be the abnormally gifted ones.⁷³ The fluctuations of mind, oscillating between illness and revival, fear and a sense of firm purpose, belong with the portrait of the melancholic, and with Hildegard's self-portrait. Here she is implicitly placing herself at the side of those melancholics to whom God gave an overwhelming grace, as of wisdom or prophecy, making them both 'unbalanced' and exceptional. Solomon, for Hildegard, was the author of both the bitter Ecclesiastes and the ardently joyful Song of Songs – these, we might say, were his oscillations. In Jeremiah, grief and prophecy were inseparable. As for Plato, it is not certain what traditions Hildegard knew. (I have found no clear indication, for instance, that she had read the Latin *Timaeus*.) But at least in Augustine's *City of God* she will have found a memorable tribute to Plato's exceptionality ('*excellentissima gloria claruit, qua omnino ceteros obscuraret*'), as well as praises of 'those like him' – the *Platonici* – for their many 'prophetic' anticipations of Christian beliefs. She may also have known from one of Jerome's letters (*Ep.* 53, 1) an anecdote about how God could make the virtuous philosopher strong, so that, 'captured by pirates and sold to a most cruel tyrant . . . imprisoned, chained and enslaved, Plato still was greater than the man who bought him'.

This accords well with Hildegard's thoughts: that where others might go mad, a man like Plato 'will in this situation be bravest in excellence through the grace of God'. Beyond this, Hildegard's notion of Plato's psychological make-up, brilliant but unstable, may be entirely her own surmise. In the legends and anecdotes concerning Plato, assembled and discussed by Novotný and by Riginos, I have found nothing comparable, save for an isolated testimony, in an eleventh-century Arabic life of Plato (by al-Mubashshir ibn Fātiq), that Plato wept incessantly – a testimony that is very unlikely to have reached northern Europe by Hildegard's lifetime.⁷⁴

VIII

The Berlin manuscript Lat. Qu. 674 contains a series of fifty-six letters by Hildegard, of which the great majority, uniquely preserved here, have remained unknown.⁷⁵ With one exception, the letters' opening salutations are omitted in this collection: the copyist was not concerned with their personal or historical aspects, but wished to make of each letter a small treatise or homily. Thus he or she⁷⁶ furnished nearly every piece in the collection with a title intended to stress what was exemplary, to give the contents an evident spiritual application: these titles often fit the actual subject-matter poorly. It is only occasionally possible to