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## On the Vegetal Verge (With Saint Hildegard)

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### ABSTRACT

This article is a meditation, developed in dialogue with the thought of twelfth-century German mystic and saint Hildegard of Bingen, on the various senses of *the verge*. Besides connoting a temporal and spatial edge, the verge unites such apparently disparate things as virginity and virility, vigor and virtue, veracity and *viriditas* – Hildegard’s original term for the vegetal principle of “greening green,” allowing for the self-reproduction of all finite existence. I show how, in the shadow of vegetality, the verge sparks a series of sudden reversals in which, figured as “the greenest branch,” Virgin Mary is imbued with a greater strength than the Flower-Child she carries, and plant life is endowed with vigor animating the rest of creation.

### KEYWORDS

Hildegard; plants; vegetal life; sexuality; verge; theology

Let us listen for once to freshness. The voice of Hildegard von Bingen (1098–1179) is still fresh – ever-fresh, ever-green – despite having first sounded almost a thousand years ago. What resonates in it is nothing like the force of the monumental “classics” that are supposed to stay eternally relevant in their immovable veracity. Her figure is not that of a towering rock that overshadows the subsequent history of thought, let alone the inherently shadowy history of the unthought and the unthinkable but intensely and mystically experienced. It is, instead, that of a tree, of plantness or vegetality, of greenness and greening (*viriditas*), perpetually on the verge of self-renewal, reaffirming the promise instilled in creation. With a garden in her name and cosmic vegetality in her visions, Hildegard intuited the sonorous sorority of being and endeavored to express it in her symphony in green. The secret of her voice’s freshness is that its tonalities and modulations are the echoes of vegetal vitality, which, ostensibly mute, furnishes a language for singing the world as a whole. In her singularity, she exemplifies what happens when one indelibly ties one’s fate to the destiny of plants.

*In principio omnes creature viruerunt, / in medio flores floruerunt; / postea viriditas descendit.* “In the beginning, all creation was verdant, / in the middle, flowers blossomed; / later, the greening greenness came down” (Hildegard, *Ordo* 481vb, 253–254). Verdant is the virginal state of creation, a verge, from which existence commences in the absence of an absolute principle. Conceivably, flowers blossomed in the middle of the green beginning; however, the progression of these lines from Hildegard’s *Ordo Virtutum* (*The Order of the Virtues*) suggests otherwise. Just as angiosperms are relative latecomers

on the evolutionary scene, so flowers mark a departure from the universal greenness and greening of the beginning. Their vibrantly multicolored petals enchant and detract from that which is at once a color and not a color, namely *viriditas* saturating the flora as much as the formally non-vegetal realms. Flowers are, furthermore, a kind of centerpiece, placed in the middle of a natural-spiritual history Hildegard is writing. Slotted between the plenitude of the verdant beginning and the retreat of *viriditas* auguring de-creation, they are both the mediators and a midpoint on a downward slope ending with *ariditas*, the advance of dryness that poses a grave threat to the greening greenness of life.

Could Hildegard have foreseen the current devastating desertification of the world attributable to deforestation and global warming? Are these the palpable effects of the intangible retreat of *viriditas*? Whatever the answer, in *The Order of the Virtues* there is nothing inevitable about the history of life. We ought to “remember this: that the fullness which was created in the beginning / need not have run dry [*memor esto, quod plenitudo que in primo facta est / arescere non debuit*]” (*Ordo* 481vb, 260–261). The beginning recommences, time and again, from the vegetal verge that, finite yet resilient, pushes against the advent of dryness. It is not (or, at least, need not be) depleted in the end.

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In the beginning was spring. It began without anything verging on it and without it verging on anything: no winter behind, no summer ahead. But it was, in itself, a verge for the greening of existence. That is the initial *viriditas* Hildegard invokes, the condition of Adam and Eve, who lived like a pair of precious hothouse plants in the Garden of Eden. Their Fall is tied neither to the luxuriant green of vegetation nor to flowers but to fruit, corresponding to the moment of *viriditas* “coming down” (*viriditas descendit*). The fate of the fruit is to fall to the ground in the state of ripeness; eating from the forbidden variety that grows on the tree of knowledge of good and evil triggers the Fall of (unripe) humanity. By that time, which is the beginning of secular time and of world history, the initial spring is long over, the paradisiac plenitude of *viriditas* having drawn to a close. *Ariditas* is now the order of the day, but what prevents *viriditas* from running dry entirely?

The answer may lie in a juxtaposition of the first spring and the verge of regeneration it has become in the seasonal cycle. As we know it, the spring is a beginning that begins after the end, when the dead of winter has ebbed away. It announces the rejuvenation and, indeed, the resurrection, of nature, but also the replenishment of *viriditas*. After the Fall, spring is the impersonal prototype of Jesus, who reanimates the energy-matter of the Garden of Eden on the cross, with the wood of the cross – it, too, admitted into a sublime vegetal afterlife upon the cutting of the tree it was made of. His mother (*mater, materia*) is in close semantic and ontological proximity to that spiritual matter rooted in the world of plants. “You are that luminous matter [*es tu illa lucida materia*],” Hildegard observes in her “Antiphon for the Virgin” (*Symphonia* 10.12) where she also refers to Mary as *prima materia* (10.15), the prime matter or the primary matrix of redemption, the verge of another spring.

The descending part of the orbit in which *viriditas* rotates acquires a double meaning. It describes, on the one hand, the diminution of vegetal freshness, the drying up of creation’s self-renewing power that first afflicted Adam and Eve. On the other hand, it reflects the earthward movement of *viriditas* in a divine incarnation countering the steady approach

of *ariditas*. The ambiguity of greenness “coming down” is unavoidable: the figuration of *viriditas* in both Mary and Jesus obliquely repeats and undoes the drop that the Fall represents.

Still, Hildegard will refuse to identify Mary with a ripe fruit harboring the seed of salvation. Prior to fruit and flower, she greens; she is “the greenest branch,” *viridissima virga* (*Symphonia* 19.1), on which the flower of redemption will then blossom (“the time has come for you to blossom in your branches [*venit tempus quod tu floruisti in ramis tuis*]” [19.2]). We will return to this verge of the verge, to the virgin who is a *virga*, and unfold its (and her) multiple implications, complications, and co-implications. While the fruit falls down and leads to the downfall of humanity, the greenest branch lifts its leaves and the flower of redemption up. In a genuinely revolutionary move, time itself is rewound from its late fructiferous stage back to the middle (flower; Jesus) and to the incipient plenitude of *viriditas* (green branch; Mary). It flows back from the fall and summer to the spring, the period when sprouts emerge from the earth and buds give way to leaves, the infinitely reiterated vegetal surfaces exposed to the sun.

This exposure and openness, rather than the concealment of the seed in the fruit, define the being of Mary and Jesus alike. A pregnancy that is a blossoming, not a coming to fruition, departs from the strict teleology of accomplishment. A flower may or may not be productive of something else; it may or may not be an evanescent stage on a predetermined path to the fruit, in consonance with how the virgin conception and birth of Jesus deviate from the tenets of reproductive sexuality. In the greenest branch and its flower, *viriditas* is not exhausted, as it is, in various ways, in the fruit and in *ariditas*. Insubordinate to externally posited ends, it is full of itself alone, the infinite joy and enjoyment overflowing verdant being at its superficies, in the marvelous proliferation of open vegetal surfaces, the leaves and the flowers verging on the other (sunlight, insects ...). That is why “the fullness [*plenitudo*] which was created in the beginning / need not have run dry”: the second spring scintillates with the vigor of the first. And that is also why, thanks to the greenest branch, all that was dry (*arida*) “appears ... in full green [*apparuerunt ... in viriditate plena*]” (*Symphonia* 19.4): the very appearance of what appears is brimming with *viriditas* on its sentient surfaces.

Hildegard’s Mary is not *gratia plena* (full of grace) but *viriditas plena* (full of greenness and greening) or, better, she is *gratia plena* insofar as she is *viriditas plena*. Her plenitude graciously and gratuitously wells over in the material and maternal form of *viriditas*. This form has little to do with a hollow cask ready to receive any contents whatsoever. Instead, the essence is the skin of appearances, the surface with its essentially superficial feature: color. “Full of green” is fundamentally a matter of appearance, inscribed into the quasi-concept of *viriditas*, in which *how* something presents itself gains in significance over *what* is presented. A modality of existence prevails over abstract being in this phenomenology of the verge, where *spring* is a code word for the time of coming to appearance, the flourishing of and on the surface, and the confluence of greening and greenness.

At the same time, there are no metaphors and allegories in what Hildegard’s voice conveys. *Viriditas* is not the vigorous force of plants symbolically transposed onto other forms of life, including divine vitality, any more than the event of resurrection is a figurative interpretation of natural processes – for instance, the reawakening of vegetation after its wintery slumber. To Hildegard’s mind, the opposite is true. The rebirth of nature in the

spring reenacts the divine drama, which, in turn, plays itself out among disparate parts of plants and in distinct aspects of *viriditas*.

It is in a rigorously non-allegorical, non-symbolic sense that we, humans, are also plants: together we partake of the greening greenness that is undeniably more obvious and sensuously present in actual vegetation. *Viriditas* is, after all, the energy of creation and of recreation; the green essence it names is to be interpreted not only as an adjective that describes a real quality of things (that is, a certain color) but also as a verb that refers to the active making-green, the greening of the world in the course of its becoming-world. The energy of creation, transmitted through the divine word to the creatures, is irreducible to a pure potentiality devoid of substantive realization:

By the word of God, every creature is made both visible and invisible, and without it no being, no living spirit or greening greenness, endures [*Per verbum Dei omnis creatura tam visibilis quam invisibilis facta est, quae in nulla essentia, videlicet viventis spiritus aut viriditatis, subsistit*] (*Liber divinatorum*, I.iv.105, 252).

While plants are both visibly and invisibly green, humans retain only a trace of invisible greenness, not as a substantive quality but as an activity of making-green, connected to the creative energy boiling in the word. That is to say, the incarnation of *viriditas* in us is less perfect than in plants, insofar as its perceptible dimension is missing from human existence.

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We are plants *and* we are the others of plants. Can both assertions be equally and simultaneously valid? I should perhaps specify that we are the plants' others who stray from the energetic fullness we are enjoined to embody and who, regardless of our divagations, remain plants: camouflaged, unrecognizable, obscure. *Viriditas* is lopsided and perverted in us (or should we say that we *are* the perversion of *viriditas*?). Besides the lacuna of sensuously manifest greenness in human carnality, our enactment of *viriditas* turns it against itself, contributing to the global spread of aridity and causing everything fresh to wither. Now, if the word of God is verdant, if God's creative finger is green – “O, the greening greenness of the finger of God [*O viriditas digiti Dei*]” (*Symphonia* 42.1) –, then desertification and deforestation uproot the word and thwart divine energy. Bereft of visible greenness, humanity also rejects the invisible greening that binds us to the rest of creaturely life in an insistent repetition of the creative act. By contrast, religion reties the thread of *viriditas* always on the verge of being cut, whether in the spot where substantive greenness touches active greening, or there where the human creature undercuts itself along with its world. Hildegard attempts the rebinding in her unique style, adding her voice *via* vegetal mediations to the word of God, saying-naming-singing-thinking *viriditas*, from which she borrows, unable to contain it (or herself, for that matter), her own freshness. (The word and the thing it names are uncontainable; they flood – *cum ei viriditatem infundit*, “flooded with *viriditas*” – the ear and the flesh, like abundant morning dew that saturates the grass [*Symphonia*. 17.6]. Recall, in this regard, the *plenum* of sheer joy and enjoyment in the virgin conception.)

*Viriditas* that verges on being cut is a corollary to the human perversion, to the perversion that is the human, traversed by a colossal energy asymmetry. The time of the verge is discontinuous, ruptured, and replete with tense expectancy: one state is about to end, and another promises to begin. Verging on something else entirely, an event is suspended at a point between the end and another beginning. So, a voice on the verge of speaking or

singing hovers between silence and sound, even if silence itself is vibrant, vibrating with the sonority of the verdant word that precedes and succeeds the utterance. A spatial position on the verge is similarly fragile, lodged at the edge of a narrow surface, shaped (should we seek guidance from etymology) as a twig, a shoot or a slender green branch. Everything is uncertain, twisting and turning between the point of an event and the edges of a surface, between a noun and a verb (*a verge* and *to verge*: energy's substantive and active-verbal expressions), between the visible and the invisible, the past and the future, the plant and the other plant or the plants' other.

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The verge is fragile, then, but fragility is not exempt from the verge's reversals, its tendency to swivel, to pivot on itself, to turn around its axis, as in the nutational movement of plant growth, to contradict itself and to thrive on its self-contradiction. Though tender, the shoot is strong; it shoots up from the earth and carries the leaves and the flowers skyward. When Hildegard calls Mary "a leafy branch [*frondens virga*]" (*Symphonia* 15.1), she is playing on the verge, with the verge that metamorphoses into the virgin and the branch (*virga*). More surprisingly yet, in her vegetal apparition, Mary is incredibly virile: "standing [*stans*]" in her nobility (15.2); setting "us, frail ones [*nos debiles*]" free (15.5); "raising us up [*erigendum nos*]" (15.9). In a vegetal carnival of sexual difference, the branch makes itself rigid and erect, its behavior prefiguring the male member, the penis, which once bore the same common name in Latin, *virga*.

We will come across other allusions to the virgin's virility, whereby she appears stronger than her son. Typically considered the antipodes of human sexuality, virginity and virility belong to a broad textual and contextual frame uniting them with vegetality, verdancy, vigor, life (*vita*), virtue, and veracity in Hildegard's oeuvre, not to mention with the verge itself. One consequence of this lineage for our discussion is glaring: the cut of *viriditas* factored into the human condition is the cut of castration. Our alienation from the actual greenness of the plant world and from the greening power of life emasculates us with reference to the masculine as well as the feminine connotations of *viriditas*, striking at the root *vir* before its branching out into virginity and virility. Healer that she is, Hildegard strives to cure, to rebind, this deep wound, around which human identity has in the meantime accreted as a petulant emanation of original sin. What are the treatments she prescribes?

- (1) *Cutting the cut*. Assuming that the forbidden fruit is the material cause of the sin, responsible for the castration of humanity, the mission of the Holy Spirit is to cut it off: "But you hold a sword ever / ready to cut off [*abscidere*] / what the poisonous apple [*noxiale pomum*] / brings forth through the darkest homicide [*nigerrimum homicidium*]" (*Symphonia* 27.5). With nearly surgical precision, in a kind of negation of the negation, Hildegard suggests cutting out that which cuts humans off from the root of life, that which kills the human in "the darkest homicide," whence humanity emerges *qua* humanity. Additionally, she proceeds to cut the fruit from the divine-vegetal genealogy she is writing, so that only leaves and flowers endure. We must fall out with the Fall, let it fall by the wayside, make a detour so as to return to the greening greenness before it has yielded its late and poisoned fruit. Perversity must be perverted, turned around, bent, inclined toward something or someone else, verging on another state, if the hope for a cure is to bear its non-fruit.

- (2) *Restitching the lost phallus*. Here is one of the oldest compensatory techniques on the books: a shaft of light becomes a powerful replacement for castrated urges, desires, and even organs. In her “Responsory for Virgins,” Hildegard exclaims: “O most noble *viriditas* / that is rooted in the sun [*que radicas in sole*] / ... You blush like dawn / and burn like a solar flame [*et ardes ut solis flamma*]” (*Symphonia* 56.1–2; 56.10–1). Through the virgin, who embodies *viriditas*, the rays of green greening reach every corner of the earth and give off light and heat, the two classical “powers of fire” enlivening portions of creation that have dried up and perished. Parallel to the history of metaphysics and its uneasy relation to vegetal life, divine *viriditas* operates a reversal: it flips the plant, so that the root is not in the ground below but in the sky above – “you are rooted in the sun,” *radicas in sole*. Rather than mired in unconscious existence, the root shines and burns, as it does in St. John, “the sweet chosen one,” “who in the most intense ardor / flashed forth as a root [*effulsisti, radix*]” (*Symphonia* 36.2–3). Plato put the plant in its human form upside down, rooted with the invisible filaments of the mind in the *topos ouranios* of ideas. Hildegard, for her part, does not sublimate vegetality: “rooted in the sun” is “the most noble *viriditas*.” The greening green of plants hinges on the life-giving power of the physical sun, not on the metaphysical double of the celestial body. To turn back to vegetality and the solar blaze, to the one through the other, is to turn down the virtual supplement of ideal light and eternal life.
- (3) *Discovering plenitude in a perceived lack*. Methodically, if also intuitively, Hildegard shifts the center of gravity in power relations in order to address the imbalance within *vir*, between virginity and virility. In fact, in the absence of fruit, her efforts involve the opposite of gravity: the corporeal elevation of vegetal growth. The branch is a mobile support lifting other plant parts, birds, insects, and small animals, while staying in touch with the terrestrial sphere. Mary hoists Jesus who carries the weight of the world on his shoulders. She is *virga mediatrix*, “the mediating branch,” for the blossoming of a “beautiful flower” (*Symphonia* 18.2; 18.7). Far from a mere receptacle, she plays Jesus’s part before he, himself, does. The middle of the middle, the mediator for Christ-the-mediator, she is nothing like a faded background for divine self-sacrifice. Though “only” a branch, she embodies *viriditas*, the vegetal life that flourishes in the middle between earth and sky, light and darkness, and that is the middle from which the world stems in its ongoing regeneration. On the vegetal verge, a beginning that is not absolute (that is, not arising *ex nihilo*) is the middle: the phrase “In the beginning, all creation was verdant” says as much, in the same breath saying and unsaying, contradicting the beginning. There, plenitude bursts through the appearance of lack, through the fundamentalist and productivist perspectives on the middle as *already not* at the fecund beginning and *not yet* at the fructified end.

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Hildegard’s third cure is an overarching intervention into the worlds of plants and humans under the sign of power, its relations destabilized and upended. The subtraction from a polarized scheme of things of the vegetal middle – the milieu of growth replete with its own meaning in excess of the logic of governing principles and commanding ends – mirrors the extraction of a rib from Adam for the purpose of creating Eve. “How great,” Hildegard writes, “is / in its power the side of man [*in viribus suis latus viri*] / from which God produced [*produxit*] the form of woman” (*Symphonia* 20.4a). In both



instances, the discarded and superfluous element, be it the “excluded middle” of vegetal becoming or the rib Adam could live without, is what bestows sense on the whole that gives it up.

Formal logic overtly excludes the middle in a foundational act tantamount to an admission to its inability to think life, growth, metamorphosis, in a word, movement, in its ample senses. Its practitioners construe the exclusion as an idiosyncratic strength, affording them crystal (mineral, not vegetal) clarity. In a cognate development, the historical disempowerment of women is a ruse thrown over the surplus of power that they *are*, as opposed to the one they *have*. The highest concentration of the power of man (*viribus viri*), Hildegard intimates countering formal logical axioms, is not in man; it lies or swirls on the side of woman, in the side Adam can no longer deem his own. The rib is a verge, an ersatz *virga*, stronger than the male member of which it is reminiscent. Crossing, as she is apt to do, from Adam and Eve to Jesus and Mary, from the rib to the branch, and from the forbidden fruit to the sublime flower, Hildegard dares sing: “O, the sweetest branch [*suavissima virga*] / ... what a great power [*magna virtus*] this is!” (*Symphonia* 21.1; 21.3).

Eve is not the sole point of reference for Mary’s virginal variation on the verge, however. Embracing both sides of sexual difference, the greenest branch that betokens the arrival of humanity’s second spring is also comparable to Adam: “Your leaves flourished [*floruisti*] / in another way /than Adam, who produced / the entire humankind [*omne genus humanum / produceret*]” (*Symphonia* 20.1b). Because Mary does not bear fruit, the virginal verge is not productive. Humanity proliferates on it otherwise: more exuberantly, more faithfully to the greening green of *viriditas* than a productivist ideology would allow. That ideology is at the heart of the Fall. The way Adam generates the rest of humanity is of a piece with original sin, albeit not in the usual sense of a maculate, stained conception (Eve is conspicuously absent here). He is fascinated with and drawn to the fruit at the expense of other plant parts, among them the flowers, judged meaningless in and of themselves, deficient and incomplete as the fruit’s mere anticipations or potentially empty promises. So much so that the obsession with fruitful productivity interferes with the flourishing that, besides its independent meaning and value, is the necessary precondition for fecundity.

Productivism and the teleology of fruition that informs it severely restrict the range of what may be legitimately engendered, not least in the human form. The tragedy is that, just as God “produced [*produxit*] the form of woman” from the verge that was Adam’s rib, so Adam produces (*produceret*) the human genus, bewitched by an exceptional product of plant kingdom, “the poisoned apple.” The exceptionality of the forbidden fruit is, precisely, that it is a *fruit*, serving as a model for successful accomplishment in our conduct in general and in sexual reproduction in particular.

All this makes God culpable not only as a *producer* of human forms and not only as the creator of the tree of knowledge but also as the giver of the first commandment, *Be fruitful and multiply!* The commandment transforms fruit into a verb in the plural imperative (the Hebrew *p’ru*) and mandates the couple’s fruition in its progeny. The forbidden fruit is, of course, not the same as any other kind of fruit, nor is it synonymous with fruitfulness as such. That said, it is not by a sheer coincidence that God’s positive command and prohibition both revolve around fruit: their entwinement means that to obey the divine order is already to sin, and to sin is to follow God’s injunction. This constitutive perversion does



not lend itself to being easily remedied; the bids to reverse it by keeping to an unequivocally righteous code of behavior are futile. Hence, the roundabout formulations of Hildegard's "cures."

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The virginal reconfiguration of humanity is meant, above all, to steer us away from the logic of achievement, according to which the process is overshadowed by, consummated, and consumed in the final product. An alternative energy is at stake on the verge: the fullness of leafing and flowering, the energy of the surface that, rooted in the sun, does not follow an inevitably entropic trajectory and that reinvents accomplishment on the hither side of fruitfulness. The path of *viriditas* is not a means to an end that, once actualized, would erase the tracks that led to it. The greening green is the means and the end, the one folded into the other, complicated and co-implicated in engendering (without producing) the finite sense of existence.

With vegetal freshness for a linchpin, unless it is a brush for painting green the human and the divine alike, Hildegard's energy does not derive from an unspoiled and undying metaphysical source, itself indistinguishable from conventional monotheistic God. *Viriditas* goes along with the birth and death of God, who is the same as and totally other than the deity of monotheism. Colored in with the greening green, the outlines of Mary and Jesus are discernible in the coming to appearance of growth and the decay of plants, beckoning with the afterlife of regeneration from dirt. The virginity of the verge that Hildegard celebrates is not the untouched, primordial purity of an ideal; on the contrary, the verge is originally contaminated by that upon which it verges, *viriditas* beginning in the middle, the beginning beginning in the middle. ... The greenest branch's fragility and strength, flexibility and carrying capacity, are, therefore, not analogous to the always rigid and thoroughly dried up erection of the metaphysical edifice left brittle by the retreat of vegetal freshness. Its movements oscillate between an ascent, hoisting the sublime flower of salvation, and a flourishing descent – incarnation, conception – that is other than the fall, or the Fall. Fulfilment abides between and within these movements.

Shorn of omnipotence, the "virginal branch [*virginea virga*]" of Christ's birth (*Symphonia* 58.3) delineates a new set of coordinates for energy and power, which turns out to be all the more powerful the more it gives up the illusion of being all-powerful. Its transvaluation of actuality and potentiality occurs on the verge of another day, "as if at dawn [*quasi aurora*]" (*Symphonia* 22.10). From the standpoint of the powers that be, nonetheless, the branch and the flower blossoming on it are powerless: playful, superficial, colorful, "merely" ornamental, childish, forever immature inasmuch as they do not culminate in a fruit. But that is the perspective of the preceding day, which is already over, which is always-already over, happily at its end before having actually ended. There is no arguing with the partisans of a fruitful dusk, insensitive to verges, to the virginity of time that recommences each year in the spring, each day at dawn, and each moment in the risky leap to the next, also complete in itself. Impenetrable to them is the accomplishment one may attain not in closure and not in the round enclosure of the fruit but in the opening of existence, in the unfurling leaves and petals. In this vein, I read Hildegard's lines: "Today a closed gate [*clausa porta*] / has opened to us [*aperuit nobis*] /that which the serpent choked in a woman. /So the flower of Virgin Mary / gleams at dawn" (*Symphonia* 11.1–5).

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The account of Hildegard's "verginal" thought I have presented thus far is based largely on her *Symphonia*. In other writings, however, she seems accepting of the fruit that, in the tradition of the Augustinian exegesis, signifies the works of faith. For example, her mystical visions collected in *Scivias* contain affirmations of this sort:

The mercy of God's grace, like the sun, will illuminate the person, the breath of the Holy Spirit, like the rain, will water him, and so discernment, like the tempering of the air, will lead him to the perfection of good fruits [*ad perfectionem bonorum fructuum ducit*] (*Scivias* I.4.25).

Even more troubling for our argument are certain formulations on the subject of virginity as "the most beautiful apple among all the apples of the valley [*pulcherrimum pomum inter omnia poma convallium*]" (*Scivias* I.2.24). (To be fair, she still omits – cuts? – fruit from the delightful splendor of paradise, "which blooms with the *viriditas* of flowers and grass and the charms of aromatic herbs" [*Scivias* I.2.28].) What is responsible for the sea change in her relation to fruit?

I see two possible explanations. First, the poetic form of *Symphonia* with its melodic consonances, such as *virginea virga*, may be propitious to the essential superficiality of the greening green that does not seek its ultimate satisfaction in the fruit. The hymns shed the informative (or, in technical terms, the constative) function of language in favor of singing the praises of Jesus and Mary, God-the-Father and the Holy Spirit, the saints, and the Church. Apparently ornamental, they let language flourish and blossom without forcing it to bear fruit. Second, deeply engrained differences among plant parts, especially those relevant to the physical and metaphysical distinction between surface and depth, vanish as soon as one surveys them with the fresh gaze of *viriditas*. Regarded from the middle that is not swallowed up in the end, the energy of the greening greenness surging in the measure in which it is "realized," the fruit is as open as the leaf. The unbolting of the gates at the dawn of another day may have to do with a perspectival switch from the fetish of a deep essence, withdrawn and enclosed in itself, to essence's gleaming on the surface of things, a *fleur de peau*.

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How far are we from the verge? How close to it? Have we ever left it behind?

Despite telltale signs of the encroaching geophysical and existential desert, *ariditas* is not yet victorious and it doesn't have to be, as Hildegard reminds us. While we are living (which means – beyond the biological, psychological, social, and spiritual processes associated with these multiple registers of life – repeatedly and often unawares touching and being touched on the verge of non-life by a revitalizing freshness), there is still some *viriditas* in us. Thus, there is vegetality and divinity in us, each passing into the other in all their sublimated, sublime, and ineluctably perverse guises. Life remains powerfully virginal and fragilely virile on the verge that is *in* us, its razor-thin spatiotemporal surface turning the core of the human inside out. But the flexibility of the virginal verge is not infinite: life's marvelous and multifaceted capacity for self-reinvention may, more or less abruptly, come to a non-fruitful end. The question for today – for *our* today, a verge different from Hildegard's dawn – is how to hear the voice of freshness, with which ears to receive it, when desert aridity verges on a final triumph, when the flourishing verge is on the verge of ...

## Disclosure statement

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## Notes on contributor

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