

Article

Saint Hildegard's Vegetal Psycho-Physio-Theology

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Abstract: Besides a series of psycho-physiological correspondences between parts of the soul and physical processes, one finds in Hildegard's corpus an entire hagiography and a theography mapped onto parts of plants in a sort of spiritual botany. The analogies mixed together with the non-analogical emanations of *viriditas* are complex, insofar as they involve particular species of plants or plant organs, psychic faculties, and chief actors in the Judeo-Christian theological drama.

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Ancient thought was rife with analogies between seemingly disparate orders and kinds of existence. The microcosm and the macrocosm were seen as mirror images, reflecting the same underlying reality, contracted in the one case and amplified in the other. Perhaps the most influential of these accounts is the psycho-politics Plato sketches out in Book IV of his *Republic*. There, aspects of political organization correspond to parts of the psyche: the appetites are the lot of the workers, *thumos* (usually translated as “spiritedness”) is the province of the warrior class, and reason is the mark of philosopher-kings. The optimal state of the soul and of the polity is one where the three parts work in concert, in synergy or an alliance—*summachon* (440b)—such that spirit, represented in politics by warriors, takes the side of reason, that is, of the rulers, repulsing the urge to join in with the appetites and the masses. Should this delicate balancing act be successful, each sector of the psycho-political assemblage would perform its functions well, ensuring the maintenance of differences among them for the good of the whole.

At the physiological level, too, the microcosm and the macrocosm stood in a precise analogy to one another. In the bodies and senses of living beings, humans not excepted, ancient Greeks espied the combinations and temporary delimitations of the immense elements comprising the outside world: fire, water, earth, and air. According to this argument, the sense of vision is possible by virtue of the eye containing a small portion of fiery brilliance, which, rushing to meet the fire reigning in the world, is reunited with its native element. The health and constitution of the body is explicable, in this scheme of things, through the humors and their balanced or unbalanced blending (*krâsis*). Empedocles is probably the first Greek thinker to have identified the four elements he, curiously enough, vegetalized, calling them “roots” (*rhizōmata*) (Simplicius, *Physics*, 157–59). In the Hippocratic tradition, the work titled *On the Nature of Man* by Polybus details the four humors—phlegm, blood, yellow bile, and black bile—in parallel to the elements (V). Aristotle in *On Generation and Corruption* attributes to the elements particular physical characteristics—for example, fire is hot and dry, while the earth is cold and dry (331a–b)—that could then be transposed onto the states of healthy and sick bodies.

This last point is crucial to the theory of vegetal life that Hildegard of Bingen delineates in her *Physica*. Throughout the treatise, she characterizes plants as either hot (*calida*) or cold (*frigida*), such that “the heat of the herbs signifies the spirit [*animam*], and the cold, the body [*corpus*]” (Hildegard of Bingen 1855, I, Praefatio). (One might say, therefore, with an eye to Aristotle and another to Hildegard, that spirit is fiery and the body is earthy.) So, for instance, rye “is hot, but colder than wheat, and it has plenty of powers [*multas vires habet*]” (Hildegard of Bingen 1855, I, ii). The medicinal

and dietary properties of plants are indicative of how they regulate the balance of heat and cold, of bodily and spiritual realities, in the human patient. In keeping with ancient thought, they fine-tune the humors and adjust our elemental composition, warding off its excesses, whether by putting an end to dangerous inflammations or by preventing the dissipation of spiritual heat in the coolness of the body.

But there is more to the curative qualities of vegetation in Hildegard's system than first meets the eye, and more, also, than is explicable through a simple carryover of ancient medical and physiological perspectives to medieval European worldviews.

- (1) She is loath to exclude the plant kingdom from the spiritual sphere: physically expressed in heat, the powers (*vires*) of plants are the metaphysical reverberations of their *anima*—the animating principle, translatable as “soul” and, later on, “mind.” Such powers belong under the heading of *viriditas*, the greening green, the self-refreshing capacity of finite existence, which Hildegard originally formulated with reference to vegetal life.
- (2) The crafting of the first humans out of the earth makes them plant-like, as the very opening sentence in *Physica* intimates (*In creatione hominis de terra . . .*). It is from the earth that humans and plants have imbibed their *viriditas*, each partaking of the universal capacity in a singular way: “And the earth gave its greening green [*et terra dabat viriditatem suam*] according to the kind, nature, customs, and all the specific circumstances of the humans” (Hildegard of Bingen 1855, I, Praefatio). Whereas at its origins humanity soaked *viriditas* up directly from the earth and on a par with the vegetation that sprouted from it, the subsequent generations had to rely on the plants they consumed to keep receiving the gift of the greening green. Faithful to the offering of the earth, plants continued growing in a context-sensitive way, which apportioned to them the singular universality of *viriditas*. And, in this, they embodied the activity of the Holy Spirit deemed the common “root . . . in every creature [*radix . . . in omni creatura*]” (Hildegard of Bingen 2007, 24.3).

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Hildegard's approach to vegetal life is analogical and non-analogical all at once. The provenance of humans and plants from the earth means that the likenesses between tree sap and blood, plant fibers and veins, the harmfulness of some herbs and diabolical types of behaviors, and so forth (Hildegard of Bingen 1855, I, Praefatio) harken back to a shared cause (at least, when it comes to the formal and material types of causality in Aristotle). At this non-analogical level, the different biological orders and their corresponding parts are expressions of the same underlying reality.

The physical aspects of life are signs for particular regions of the spiritual world, since the soul “shows its powers according to the powers of the body [*secundum vires corporis, vires suas ostendit*]” (Hildegard of Bingen 1978, I.4.17). Though in corporeal existence heat stands for spirit and cold for the body, the difference between them dwindles once they are understood in terms of physical qualities expressing metaphysical insights. They are comparative terms, whereby cold is the privation of heat, just as bodily phenomena are deficient with respect to the powers of the soul. That said, the powers of the body are indispensable, because, without them, those of the soul would not have manifested themselves in the realm of appearance and, instead, would have stayed hidden on the model of a potential plant concealed in a seed or in a dormant root. The bodily sign, the body *as* a sign, lends effectiveness to the non-bodily entity it signifies; the body is that according to which the soul shows (*ostendit*) itself and is discernible. This effectiveness is the power of power, the actuality that leads purely spiritual causes out of their virtual isolation.

In Hildegard's psycho-physiology, then, the powers of the soul express themselves in the powers of the body indexed to that kind of soul. Thus, “in a person's infancy it [the soul, MM] produces simplicity, in youth—strength, and in adulthood, with all the person's veins full, it demonstrates its strongest powers in wisdom [*fortissimos vires suas in sapientia declarat*], as the tree in its first shoots is tender and then shows that it can bear fruit, and finally, in its full usefulness, bears it” (Hildegard of Bingen 1978, I.4.17). If there is an analogy here, it is not between plant and human souls or plant and

human bodies, but between the signs for the powers of the soul in the bodies of humans and plants. At their sharpest, the workings of the principle of vitality in a human result in wisdom (*sapientia*), which, rather than the perfection of a disembodied mind, is the culmination of the physiological developmental arc extending from infant “simplicity” through adult physical strength to a true maturity. The same principle activated in a tree attains its maximum physical expression in a fruit that supersedes the simplicity of the seed and the exuberance of vegetal growth. Viewed from the perspective of diverse existences, according to which the powers of this principle are singularly calibrated, the analogy is between wisdom and fruit; considered from the absolute vantage of the *Scivias* with their revealed wisdom, the analogous elements are the orders of souls and bodies that are much more internally homogeneous than we tend to imagine.

Against the background of such unexpected unity, it is hard to miss the Plotinian underpinnings of Hildegard’s analogies (and non-analogies). For Plotinus, the entire world, depicted as a gigantic tree, was the ramification of the One, thinking itself in the most varied shapes and processes into existence. When the One thought itself into being as growth in what Plotinus called *phutiké noesis*, the result was the kingdom of plants; sense-thought produced animals; and abstract thought accounted for the human emanation of the One (*Enneads* II.8.8, 10–20). Possible parallels among modes of thinking, let alone among their bodily expressions, pointed back to the structured self-development of the One.

Nonetheless, between Plotinus and Hildegard, plants and humans switch places: for the Neoplatonist, the brightest thought is the one that grasps itself as thinking, which is the case in our abstract cogitation; for the Christian mystic, the greening green of *viriditas*, distributed into a whole range of powers, is apparent with the utmost vividness in plants. Plotinus must have had a premonition of theoretical problems in his attribution of the dimmest thinking to vegetal growth-thought, because, contemplating the One in his own manner (that is, exercising the capacity of abstract thought to think itself), he bestowed the shape of a tree onto the object of his contemplation. In a similar key, Hildegard writes that “the soul’s powers are like the form of a tree [*quasi arboris forma*]” (Hildegard of Bingen 1978, I.4.26).

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Besides a series of psycho-physiological correspondences, we find in Hildegard’s corpus an entire hagiography and a theography mapped onto parts of plants in a sort of spiritual botany. The analogies mixed together with the non-analogical emanations of *viriditas* are complex, insofar as they involve particular species of plants or plant organs, psychic faculties, and chief actors in the Judeo-Christian theological drama.

Let’s take a salient example. We have already noticed how Hildegard correlates the Holy Spirit to a root shared by all creatures. Further, she contends that “rational action . . . is the first root, which by the grace of God is fixed in every human [*rationabiliter operator . . . est prima radix quam gratia Dei fixit in omnem hominem*]” (Hildegard of Bingen 1978, III.5.32). Like the Holy Spirit, rational action is a universal root, operative in all, even if the scope of its operations is limited to “all humans”, whereas that of the Holy Spirit extends to the breath of life in “all creatures”. The root is an anchor and, simultaneously, a subterranean organ of nourishment vital to the entire plant. Deeper than and prior to the actual radicle on the spatiotemporal scales other than those of the world, the Holy Spirit is the ontological linchpin and source of sustenance for plants and other beings. It anchors beings in being, which, in medieval thought is God. As for Hildegard’s vision of human roots, it seems to replicate Plato’s view in *Timaeus* that we are “heavenly plants”, “for it is by suspending our head and root from that region whence the sustenance of our soul first came that the divine power keeps upright our whole body” (90a–b). Except that the rational root in Hildegard passes not only through the head but also through the hand, grounding humanity in doing, in the practical use of reason, to which “rational action” alludes, instead of the purely theoretical eidetic sphere.

Virgin Mary’s vegetal figuration is a branch—more precisely, “the greenest branch [*viridissima virga*]” (Hildegard of Bingen 2007, 19.1), “the branch . . . arisen from the root of Jesse” (Hildegard of

Bingen 1978, III.8.15)—and the branch, in turn, evokes intellect in Hildegard’s psychology: “the intellect in the soul is like the *viriditas* of branches and foliage on a tree” (Hildegard of Bingen 1978, I.4.26). A far cry from the prejudiced construction of the fragile and unstable femininity, Mary plays the role of a firm aerial support for the leaves and flowers (above all, the Flower) she carries, and it is along the same lines that she is the figure of the intellect in Hildegard’s scheme. The intellect is the ability to discern differences, to distinguish and select among a vast array of alternatives. Similar to rational conduct, it is not abstract ideation; “the intellect in the soul” comes replete with concrete contents, among which one chooses, just as “the *viriditas* of branches”, not to mention “the greenest branch”, appears before the senses covered with leaves. Exactly how intellect is the part of the soul most appropriate to the Virgin becomes clear once we highlight the fact that virginity for the sake of total devotion to God is, in the eyes of Hildegard, a spiritual *choice*, the highest discernment requiring tremendous fortitude if it is to be made repeatedly, reaffirmed in the face of temptation. The power of the intellect thus joins the semantic and conceptual chain, where *viriditas* is interlinked with virginity, vigor, and virility.

Continuing to upend gender stereotypes, Hildegard correlates Christ to a flower that “arose in an unplowed field, a flower [*flos*] so excellent that it will never wither from any accident of mortality, but in full *viriditas* will last forever” (Hildegard of Bingen 1978, II.6.24). The flower is analogous to the will—“the will like its [the tree’s] flowers [*voluntas autem quasi flores in ea*]” (Hildegard of Bingen 1978, I.4.26)—which channels the power to act, determining it in one way or another. A reasonable will relies on the discernments provided by the intellect for its resolution and self-determination. But the support it receives from them cannot be compared to standing on a flat rock, extraneous to whomever or whatever it provides a hard mineral foundation for. The intellect carries the will as a branch carries its flower or as Mary carries her Son. There is undeniable continuity between the carrying and the carried, to the point where the one passes into and for the other, the intellect blossoming into rational will, the branch bursting in flowers, Mary’s virginity issuing forth in a Child outside the confines of productive or reproductive sexuality. Ideally, this multifaceted continuity is protected from disruptions by the eventual fall of the flower or of the fruit it may metamorphose into in the botanical domain. The excellence of Christ-the-Flower’s unperturbed *viriditas* implies an incorruptible will, the fulfillment of discernment, and the eternal resolution of the intellect in the choice to redeem creation, to reinvigorate the quasi-divine capacity of creation to renew itself.

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I pause my fledgling account of vegetal psycho-physio-theology for a moment, so as to take up two climacteric objections. *First*, Hildegard’s tripartite analogies are volatile, their elements changeable from one work to the next and, at times, within the same manuscript. For instance, the theological equivalent of roots, which we have started to follow quite closely, shifts from the Holy Spirit in *Scivias* to the patriarchs and the prophets, whom Hildegard hails as “the happy roots [*felices radices*]” in *Symphonia* (Hildegard of Bingen 2007, 32.1). The Virgin, who in both these works has appeared as a green branch, is analogized, in *Scivias* as well, to grass: “My Son was born of the incorrupt Virgin, who knew nothing of any pain, but remained in the fresh purity of her integrity, like grass that flourishes in verdant glory when the dew falls on it from Heaven” (Hildegard of Bingen 1978, II.6.25). This vegetal personification accords with the view of the immaculate conception and birth as a flower that arose in an unplowed field, not with one that blossomed on the greenest branch. Then, again, the relation between the Mother and the Child is configured “as balsam [that] oozes from a tree [*balsamum ex arbore sudat*]” (Hildegard of Bingen 1978, II.3.13). What is going on here?

One can plausibly explain each modification by exercising strict exegetical discipline and hermeneutical vigilance. The case of roots is especially instructive in this regard. If the root ultimately grows at the nexus of universality and singularity, of the Holy Spirit or rational action and all creatures or all humans, then it is not a matter of indifference whether one begins at the universal or the singular end of the relation. As an analogue of the root, the Holy Spirit is the universal breath

of life, received in a singular fashion by each creature; the patriarchs and the prophets are, conversely, singular individuals, genealogical and theological-political roots that are universalized by virtue of their faith, visionary messages, or foundational acts. This divergence between points of departure applies, likewise, to rational deeds that represent, in Hildegard's tableau of mental faculties and behaviors, the psychic roots of humanity. Consistent with the primacy of the Holy Spirit, abstract rationality may impel a deed, assisting in its development from the embryonic stage (for instance, the initial resolve of the will) onward. At the other end of the spectrum, commencing from a singularity set on the path to universality, a deed may aspire to rationality as its end. The beginning is not simple and undivided; it may get under way from more than one threshold or verge. After all, the *arkhé* of the patriarchs is also the *first* root.

Such exegetical overtures are, nevertheless, bound to run into formal and material limits. Virgin Mary's transformation from a green branch into verdant grass is still explicable in virtue of an inner change in the spiritual geometry of Hildegard's text: superseding the verticality of the tree (the genealogical tree of Jesse, on the one hand, and the tree of redemption, on the other), on which the branch grows, is the immense divide between the grass stretching out below and the heavenly expanse above. There is a subtle move from immanence to transcendence in this transformation, from the uninterrupted course of ramified vertical and horizontal lines to the gap between what is above and what is below, traversed only by the dew that precipitates the immaculate conception. But when we set the other vegetal transcription of Mary and Jesus—into a tree and its sap—side by side with the relevant psychic analogy, the already overstretched exegetical imagination tears. According to Hildegard, "the soul in the body is like sap in a tree [*anima in corpore est velut succus in arbore*]" (Hildegard of Bingen 1978, I.4.26), which would turn Jesus into the soul, Mary into the body, the immaculate conception into an event of her "ensoulment", and Christ's birth into a kind of death, the soul leaving the body. That is a material limit (one of many) as far as the mutations in Hildegard's complex analogical apparatus are concerned.

A formal limit to the search for constancy and consistence among the analogies is drawn by the method readers follow and, consciously or unconsciously, ascribe to Hildegard herself. Her thought is not set in stone; it is futile to look up to it for solid connections and immutable shapes, such as those making up Kant's table of judgments, the categories, or schemata. Rather than a defect, the fluidity of her psycho-physio-theology bespeaks a methodology in tune more with vegetal processes than with the mineral world, itself subject to erosion, sedimentation, or diagenesis. The elasticity and, indeed, the plasticity of Hildegard's visions is none other than the elasticity and plasticity of plant ontology.

Parts of plants rarely remain self-identical as they grow, metamorphose, or simply fall off from their living host; the psychic, physical, and theological portions of Hildegard's "taxonomy", too, grow into and out of one another, interchangeable in their uniqueness. The rapid multiplication of analogies (and non-analogies), with religious figures or plant parts reiterated in a large array of combinations, is reminiscent of modular growth proceeding by repetition and, at the same time, redolent of a mindboggling diversity of vegetal shapes, colors, and sizes. (It bears noting that Hildegard associates these "sense data", insofar as they pertain to the tree of the soul, to the human senses (Hildegard of Bingen 1978, I.4.26). The association does not just articulate the objective and the subjective aspects of the senses; it goes a step further and expresses the human subject through the empirical variations of its vegetal object.) Hence, the formal limit to system-building on the basis of Hildegard's writings is an enabling one: it lets whomever approaches it intuit that the outlines of her method are as vegetal (mutable, metamorphosing, growing, decaying . . .) as the message it conveys.

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The *second* objection has to do with the role of fruits, including fruit-bearing capacities, in the analogies. Given that neither Mary nor Jesus is compared to fruit—the one corresponding to a branch, the other to a flower—they are both excluded from the purview of wisdom, to which this plant organ alludes. A fruit is the mature expression of planthood, coming on the heels of buds and flowers, while

wisdom is the mature expression of humanity. In this sense, Mary and Jesus, along with the very kernel of Christianity, are cardinally immature.

Yet, one may wonder, is maturity such a desirable thing? The fruit is where plant being is at its crest, the ascending curve all but finished and the phase of its decline and decay already setting in. In human old age, as Hildegard relates right after the fruit analogy, “the soul’s powers are gentler, as if from a weariness at human knowledge [*velut in taedio scientiae hominis*]; as when winter approaches the sap of the tree diminishes in the branches and the leaves” (Hildegard of Bingen 1978, I.4.17). Maturity is the precursor of rotting away. Mary and Jesus rebel against its inexorability as they welcome *viriditas* and shun the fully grown, ripe old age of the fallen world. An intellect and a will more astute than conventional wisdom, they extend themselves, open up to exteriority as a leafy branch and a flower, basking in the promise of life and spring. Anachronistically examined through this lens, Protestantism at its roots revived the inaugural immaturity of Christianity after its institutional fruit had grown overripe.

Jesus’s vegetal analogues in Hildegard’s oeuvre bypass the fruit, preceding and succeeding it in the shape of a flower and the result of fruit’s fermentation in wine. Bread is the afterlife of wheat and wine is the afterlife of grapes, theandric body and blood having left the state and the stage of decay behind. In a double viticultural analogy evincing the modular growth of Hildegard’s text, God-the-Father is the vine out of which the wine that is his Son flows (*ut vinum de vite sudat, ita et Filius meus de corde meo exiit*), and the Son himself is a vine yielding “liqueur from the sweetest and strongest fruit [*liquor de dulcissimo ac fortissimo fructu vitis*]” of “all merciful and true justice” (Hildegard of Bingen 1978, II.6.28). Having overcome death, the fermented products of vegetal afterlife, including first and foremost alcoholic spirits, border on spirit. In *Physica*, grapevine (*vitis*) anticipates the spiritualization of the body suffused with the heat of spirit. It is said to have “fiery heat and moisture in it. The fire is so strong as to change its sap into a flavor that other trees and herbs do not have” (Hildegard of Bingen 1855, I, liv). The medicinal properties of the plant are also conducive to the reversal of decay: the warm ashes of grapevine submerged in wine are supposed to help cure “flesh rotting around one’s teeth” (Hildegard of Bingen 1855, I, liv).

Occasionally, vegetal metamorphoses in Hildegard’s analogies will correlate Jesus to fruit, notably “the strongest fruit [*fortissimus fructus*] that shall never fail” (Hildegard of Bingen 1978, II.6.32). Does this mean that Christian rebellion against mature wisdom ends in defeat? Not at all. Mutation into any plant part, not least the fruit, is the inalienable possibility of Hildegard’s living thought, so long as its mutability is not absorbed into an ideally immutable end toward which the teleological whole would be oriented as one. Becoming-fruit is not a coveted goal but yet another point of transition construed from the perspective of *viriditas* with its open-endedness and potentialities for self-renewal reversing the movement of ripening and decay, particularly by moving through decay to life itself. In addition, Jesus’s identification with fruit is highly qualified in the passage in question. The full sentence reads: “And as bread [*panis*] nourishes people, the Son of God nourishes believers in faith, for He is the strongest fruit that shall never fail.” As bread, his transubstantiated body is already the fermented “fruit” of wheat, in which decay has been overcome along with the tedium of human knowledge past its prime. The leap from flower freshness to plant afterlife imbued with spirit happens imperceptibly here, the strength of the fruit indistinguishable from the power of *viriditas*.

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Although the overall psychic corollary to the fruit is wisdom, Hildegard is careful to separate the early from the late varieties and assign the appropriate human manifestations to each. The mind, she insists, “is truly like the first bursting out of fruit [*animus vero velut primus erumpens fructus*]”, and reason “is like a perfectly mature fruit [*ratio autem quasi fructus in maturitatem perfectus*]” (Hildegard of Bingen 1978, I.4.26). What explains this seemingly hairsplitting differentiation? The mind (*animus*) is the yet undetermined, or underdetermined, conjunction of faculties and capacities to cognize and know the world. It is best understood as the principle of a uniquely human life, nearly overlapping in

this sense with the human soul (*anima*). Even young children have a mind, which some in the early modernity have construed as a blank slate, a *tabula rasa*. Now, reason takes time to develop, to be honed in a habitual practice of reasonable conduct, to slowly garner its juices from the accumulation of life experiences. With reason, the mind is further determined, swapping the state of mere potentiality for actuality, just as a fruit gradually gains its recognizable shapes and colors in ripeness. Wisdom is the culmination of this process, the fruit of fruit, as it were, the yield of a mind that learns to reason and grows to be reasonable. Human roots and fruits end up being caught in a virtuous circle, with reason receiving nourishment from rational action, which activates in practice the principle of rationality.

The next question is who the theological analogue of the fruit is. Hildegard's answer is: the Devil. "Diabolic persuasion", *diabolica persuasio*, inclines Adam to taste the forbidden fruit and be poisoned by its sweetness: "For in the taste of the fruit he knew by disobedience, a harmful sweetness [*noxia dulcedo*] poured itself into his blood and flesh, producing the corruption of vice. And, therefore, I feel the sin of the flesh [*peccatum carnis*] in me, and intoxicated by wrongdoing [*per culpam inebriata sum*], I neglect the purest God" (Hildegard of Bingen 1978, I.4.5). A fruit is fleshy and sweet in the state of ripeness, when it is prepared for being digested and for dispensing its wisdom. Thereafter, it lapses into over-ripeness, the harbinger of decrepitude and decay, reflected in the weariness and tedium of the wise. The marks decay mercilessly leaves on the flesh of a human or a fruit are the signs of an approaching end, of irreversible finality even, in the eyes of non-believers and sinners, who, as Hildegard has it, "neglect the purest God", precisely because they are committed to the flesh as the be-all and end-all of existence. A decaying fruit is still bristling with *viriditas* in anticipation of another beginning as it nourishes the seed, now primed for germination. But an alternative vision is required to register the positivity of decay, the vision that, not totally mired in the flesh and its sin, takes a second, panoramic look at the larger vegetal process and at the analogous spiritual course, without missing the flowery pre-existence and the afterlife of the fruit. "Diabolic persuasion" puts the fruit's *before* and *after* (the moments Hildegard privileges in her vegetal analogy to Jesus) out of sight. The "corruption of vice" displaces and eternalizes the temporal corruption of the flesh, which, on its upside, concocts fertile grounds for future growth.

In the psychic matrix mapped onto the fruit, Adam and Eve are guilty of impetuosity. By eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, they desire to gain direct access to wisdom, not rooted in rational action and detached from cumulative growth that experiential maturation affords. The fruit they grasp following an apparent shortcut is, simultaneously, unripe and overripe, unsustainable for the branch/intellect saddled with the green issue of an underdetermined mind. Hildegard goes as far as to suggest that, in their haste, the first humans did not even properly taste the forbidden fruit and certainly did not digest it: "for they tried to know the wisdom of the law with their intelligence, as if with the nose, but did not perfectly digest it by putting it in their mouths, or fulfil it in full blessedness by the work of their hands For, by the Devil's counsel [*suggerente diabolo*], they turned their back on divine command and sank into the gaping mouth of death [*barathrum mortis*]" (Hildegard of Bingen 1978, II.1.8).

The aesthetic superficiality of smelling or tasting without digesting the fruit/wisdom when time itself is not yet ripe spells out not only impetuosity but also, at the level of its consequences, an upheaval and reversal in the relation between the digesting and the digested. Adam and Eve are swallowed up by that which they intend to swallow, dragged down into the abyss of death, yawning in the dark pit of an enormous impersonal mouth, or incorporated into the cavernous expanse of death's hungry belly, the other meaning of the Latin *barathrum*. That an abyss opens up on the surface of the taste buds (elsewhere in the Scivias Hildegard calls upon the readers to conquer in themselves "what was sown in the last of sin by the taste of the fruit [*ex gustu pomi*]" [Hildegard of Bingen 1978, I.2.24]) is another piece of corroborating evidence for the vegetal operativity of sin and redemption. What is vitally important to plants resides on their ontic and ontological surfaces, on the unfurled leaf and blossoming flower, the entire vegetal being extending itself toward its other (light, the elements, insects, and so forth). Vitality is, as Hildegard has disclosed, concentrated in the color green, abounding with

life itself. The superficiality of taste, contrasted to the depth of digestion, is homologous to the primacy of appearance over hidden essence in vegetality. Not to be dismissed as a purely sensuous, almost ornamental addition to a rational being that is the human, the tasting of fruity sweetness is a key factor in the Fall.

There is a theological precedent to the about-face of digestion in the Christian tradition, albeit in a diametrically opposed context. I am referring to St. Augustine's notion of communion. Ventriloquizing Jesus, he proclaims in *Confessions*: "I am the food of the fully grown; grow and you will feed on me. And you will not change me into you, like the food your flesh eats, but you will be changed into me" (VII.x.16). To consume the body of Christ is to be metabolized and incorporated into divine existence; to eat of the forbidden fruit is to be absorbed into death and inexistence. Whatever the extent of its sublimation, spiritualization, and divinization, digestion is a feature of the Aristotelian *to threptikon*, of plant-soul comprised of the capacities for nourishment and reproduction. Despite a reversal in the roles played by the eater and the eaten, their relation is assimilated to vegetal dynamics and mechanisms.

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Skipping back from the fruit to the flower, we may recall that, according to Hildegard, Jesus blossomed either on the greenest branch or in an unplowed green field that was Mary. In the latter scenario, he was "a flower born in a field though its seed was never sown there [*flos nascitur in agro non seminato semine*]" (Hildegard of Bingen 1978, III.8.15). There is no labor involved in his conception or birth, neither the kind of labor that refers to work nor the one that refers to parturition. And that is good. In the same breath, however, Hildegard chastises those "fruitless plants that spring up easily [*facile nascuntur*] by themselves from the ground", seeing that "the fruit-bearing varieties must be sown and planted with great labor [*magno labore*]" (Hildegard of Bingen 1978, III.9.20). Such plants are the weeds (*inutilis herba*) in her psycho-physio-theological taxonomy, namely the vile members who outnumber the virtuous and "surpass them in power." Rooted in themselves alone, in their own will and desire, they are uprooted not only from God ("not rooted in my decrees [*aut ordinationis meae radicatis*]" [Hildegard of Bingen 1978, III.9.20]) but also from the rational practice that anchors the human. The highest and the lowest, the Flower of redemption and weeds, converge on the untilled grounds of exemption from work.

Biblical text presents labor as one of the punishments God meted out to Adam for the original sin. To be specific, agricultural work complicates life, makes life precarious, forces humans to keep close to the soil, which frequently will not respond to their efforts, until the very final moment when they return to the earth as corpses (Gen. 3:19). This is the burden Jesus eases, redeeming sinful humanity by breaking "the tree of Adam's death and perdition" (Hildegard of Bingen 1978, III.6.35). (Following another, equally vegetal, rendition of the event, Jesus does not break the tree that sparked off the original sin but substitutes for it the tree of the cross, "nailed down to the tree, to abolish what had been done through the tree that occasioned sin" [Hildegard of Bingen 1978, III.2.21]). In other words, Jesus obviates work; his birth, life, and even death are the supreme play, free of labor, yet absolutely serious and passionate, solemn in their heralding of sabbatical existence. Those who refuse hard work out of the sheer stubbornness of their capricious wills also engage in play, albeit in violation of God's punishing command and without the burden having been lifted by redemptive self-sacrifice. For Hildegard, then, labor is bookended on the one side by the paradisiac leisure Christianity seeks to recover and on the other by the laziness of the apostate, uprooted from divine and human grounds for sustainable growth.

Physica interprets agricultural labor in light of the contribution it makes to vegetal "goodness" and utility. "Plants which are sown by human labor [*per laborem hominis seminantur*]", Hildegard writes in that manual, "and spring up and grow gradually, are like domestic animals which are nourished with care in the home. By the labor with which they are planted and cultivated, they throw off the acidity and bitterness of their moisture" (Hildegard of Bingen 1855, I, Praefatio). Within

Hildegard's theologically inflected natural history, the interval between the Fall and salvation requires the continuous work of restoring the earth's *viriditas*, of purifying its emissions, transforming them from the terrestrial "sweat" (*sudor*) that irrigates harmful plants to "moisture" and "juice", *humor* and *succus*, that bring forth beneficial plants and fruit-bearing trees (Hildegard of Bingen 1855, I, Praefatio). The earth is purified by tending to what grows upon it, provided that it is cultivated "with care"—*cum sollicitudine*—without domination, allotting enough time for plants to attain their good.

In anticipation of Jesus's own redemptive blossoming, agricultural work is the scaled-down, labor-intensive, unremitting, caring redemption of the earth, its sweat mirroring the sweat of Adam's brow, with which he and his descendants gain their daily bread. Lest we push the comparison too far, our sweat is not merely analogous to that of the earth, which is converted into moisture and juice thanks to the expenditure of human efforts. Once redeemed in the Sabbath of existence, the divine curse lifted, the earth and the human will stop sweating. Freedom hinges on redemption *through* work and on the redemption *of* work, with plants and the earth for our partners in the emancipatory venture.

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Hildegard detects in the human a condensed image of the entire creation, a small facsimile of the world. As she notes: "the human contains in itself the likeness of heaven and earth [*homo similitudinem coeli et terrae in se continet*]" (Hildegard of Bingen 1978, II.1.2). It turns out that this likeness—or these likenesses: two in one and one in two—are the soul and the body, the "circle, which contains clarity, breath and reason as the sky has its lights, air and winged creatures [*volatilia*]" and "the receptacle containing humidity, germination, and birth, as the earth has its fertility, fruition, and animals" (Hildegard of Bingen 1978, II.1.2). Plants and animals, with the exception of birds and perhaps winged insects, seem to be relegated to the earthly domain and, therefore, excluded from the bright and airy expanses of the soul. As Hildegard will realize while elaborating her vegetal analogies, however, plants are no worse than humans in spanning the heavenly and the earthly realms, inasmuch as they strive to the clarity of light above and to the humidity and the cradle of germination below. Rather than banish plants from the circle of ensouled beings, Hildegard will acknowledge that they are at the core of the human soul, exclaiming: "Understand, o human, what you are in your soul [*Unde, o homo, intellige quid in anima tua sis*]" at the conclusion of her intricate soul-tree analogy (Hildegard of Bingen 1978, I.4.26). She will give the Socratic injunction, *Know thyself!* a peculiar twist: *Know that you are a plant and, furthermore, that your knowledge, hued with fading green, is an afterglow of vegetal growth.*

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