

## Article

# The Ecological Literacies of St. Hildegard of Bingen

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**Abstract:** Literacy is, literally, a question not of education but of the letter. More than that, it is the question of the letter in the two senses the word has in English: as a symbol of the alphabet and a piece of correspondence. It is my hypothesis that ecological literacies may learn a great deal from the literalization, or even the hyper-literalization, of the letter and that they may do so by turning to the corpus of twelfth-century Benedictine abbess, polymath, and mystic St. Hildegard of Bingen. After all, Hildegard, who was exquisitely attuned to the vegetal world, which was at the core of her theological and scientific endeavors, corresponded through letters with the leading personalities of her times and also invented a language, called *lingua ignota* (the unknown language) replete with *ignotas litteras* (the unknown letters). Who better than her can spell out the senses of ecological literacy?

**Keywords:** ecology; Hildegard; literacy; plants; philosophy; mysticism



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## 1. Taking Literacy Literally

Listing the principles of ecological literacy, David Orr notes that “all education is environmental education . . . by what is included or excluded, we teach the young that they are part of or apart from the natural world [1].” The totalizing assertion regarding “all” education—the kind of assertion that is prevalent nowadays, curiously, with respect to ecological issues—risks [2], nevertheless, contradicting both the spirit and the letter of ecology: the letter, because it situates on the same plane environmental and anti-environmental education (the latter incorporated into the former, which is its very opposite), and the spirit, because ecology does not comprise a totality but foregrounds singular connections among seemingly disparate beings, events, and processes.

That said, Orr has put his finger on something crucial, namely the vitality of contexts and their articulation with the texts of education. The matters of inclusion and exclusion that he focuses on participate in a dynamic interplay between contexts and texts in a relation that is not fixed once and for all; the ongoing shifts this relation undergoes belong to and, indeed, form the meshwork of ecology. Despite a clear contrast between environmental and anti-environmental attitudes I have referred to, the soft, permeable, and ever-mutating edges between texts and contexts are the sites of ecological action, beautifully expressed by Orr in the nearly homophonous terms of “they are part of or apart from.”

Another thing worries me in Orr’s approach, which is consistent with many others in the field: the move from literacy to education is too precipitous. We should take the time to consider literacy literally, on the terms dictated by this word and the phenomenon it designates. Before making any further observations on the subject, note that the call “to consider literacy literally” redoubles the root word *liter* in the noun and the adverb, inviting us to take our cues from it. The advocates of ecological literacy decline this invitation almost by default, for is not the sort of literacy they promote supposed to be, precisely, not literal but metaphorical, dealing not with the actual letters and readings of texts but with the multifaceted attunements to environmental processes? I take issue with this unarticulated or underarticulated premise and suggest that ecological literacy, similar

to Jewish and Christian mysticisms, upon which I will draw to make my argument, is actually *hyperliteral*, preceding the literal/metaphorical distinction. (I realize, of course, that a person whose understanding is hyperliteral might be considered dumb or, to put it less crudely, culturally illiterate. However, this is the sort of dumbness that we need, an afterglow of Socratic not-knowing that lets us see the world and ourselves otherwise.)

Literacy is, literally, a question not of education but of the letter. More than that, it is the question of the letter in the two senses the word has in English: as a symbol of the alphabet and a piece of correspondence. My hypothesis is that ecological literacies may learn a great deal from the literalization, or even the hyperliteralization, of the letter and that they may do so by turning to the corpus of twelfth-century Benedictine abbess, polymath, and mystic St. Hildegard of Bingen [3]. After all, Hildegard who was exquisitely attuned to the vegetal world, which was at the core of her theological and scientific endeavors, corresponded through letters with the leading personalities of her times and also invented a language, called *lingua ignota* (the unknown language) replete with *ignotas litteras* (the unknown letters) [4]. Who better than her can spell out the various senses of ecological literacy?

## 2. Literacy to the Letter

### 2.1. Environmental Correspondences

The first, and perhaps the most conspicuous, point about Hildegard's approach is the mutually exclusive relation between conventional literacy and theoglico-ecological literacy that she insists upon, especially in her letters. Writing to Eberhard, Bishop of Bamberg, Hildegard argues that her words are not really hers: "I am but a poor woman, looking out into true light, in which I have seen and heard the true vision of what I am expounding before you. And this exposition does not consist of my words, but of true light, which has no defects and which I hereby transmit [*ita expositum non verbis meis, sed veri luminis, cui numquam ullus defectus est, in hunc modum transmitto*]" (Epist. XXXIr, 9-11; CCCM 91, p. 83) [5]. In a more detailed fashion, Hildegard explains in a letter to Guibert of Gembloux, dating from 1175: "what I do not see, I do not know, for I am not educated [*indocta sum*], but I have simply been taught how to read. And what I write is what I see and hear in the vision. I compose no other words than those I hear, and I set them forth in unpolished Latin just as I hear them in the vision [*latinesque verbis non limatis ea profero quemadmodum illa in visione audio*], for I am not taught in this vision to write as philosophers do. And the words in this vision are not like words uttered by the mouth of man, but like a shimmering flame, or a cloud floating in pure air [*nubes in aere puro mota*]" (Epist. CIIr, 89-95; CCCM 91A, p. 262) [6].

If Hildegard's writing is a function of hearing, which is itself relayed in visions (hence, in a synesthetic experience that combines light and sound), then the letters and the words they form are the afterglows of divine light, of a flame or clouds floating across the sky. Her letters and words are elemental—not as the elements of a spoken or written human language but as the ramifications of the elements (fire, air, water, earth) that speak through her. They could not be any different from the writings of philosophers ("sicut philosophi scribunt") that, having lost touch with elemental languages, formalize the world in symbolic systems. The ecological literacies of her visions are, therefore, quite distant from that literacy which is implied by a polished Latin, by the Scholastics, and by the artificially constructed cultural frameworks for comprehending reality.

There is no doubt that, in part, the self-presentation of a polymath as ingenious as Hildegard in terms of a "poor woman," "uneducated", and barely literate, was a strategic stance to adopt in a male-dominated culture, dismissive of women's voices. Barbara Newman contends that "the problem of feminine authority was no less troubling for Hildegard herself than for her auditors, since she fully shared her culture's notions of female inferiority. No matter how strong the sense of the grace that animated her, she suffered from an almost equal sense of her own implausibility as a vessel. [7]"

However, this is only half the story. It does not seem, for one, that Hildegard "fully shared her culture's notions of female inferiority," since on multiple occasions she subverted

these notions from within, placing women (and virgins, starting with the Virgin Mary) in the position of strength and power (*vir*) compared to their male counterparts [3], (p.21). For another, the role of a medium, an intermediary, a messenger bridging different realms (in short, the angelic and hermeneutical role par excellence) is not only a strategic adaptation but also an ontological necessity assigning to the visionary the same structural place as that occupied by vegetation. Just as plants span the sky and the earth, the luminous and the dark, warmth and moisture, so the female mystic receives “true light” and “transmits” it to the rest of the world. Opening themselves up to solar energy, plants (or, more precisely, their chloroplasts) invent the first writing of light, a photography before photography; receiving the shimmering and fiery discharges of divine wisdom, cast in environmental terms, Hildegard channels theologically inflected ecological literacies.

The roughness of the “unpolished” conventional words and letters she operates with—what she denominates as her *verbis non limatis*: this was, probably, the colloquial sense of *illiteratus* in Hildegard’s time, since it “could indicate someone who had not been tutored formally, but who nevertheless could understand or even read something in Latin” [8]—thus directly corresponds to the rawness of the experience of revelations and, above all, to *other letters and words* bound by elemental grammars, in which this experience is wrapped. Insofar as they are not merely strategic, Hildegard’s professions of formal illiteracy are the underside of a plenitude that does not fit the usual forms and molds of written and spoken expression and that carries with it light and warmth, moisture and airy expanses, divine and ecological. (This inadequacy, this lack of fit, might have been one of the reasons behind Hildegard’s attempt to invent a new language that, aside from being “unknown” would no longer be a language of either representation or knowing, of a subject who grasps the world through the faculty of understanding. Rather than Nicholas of Cusa’s *docta ignoratio*, Hildegard spearheads an *indocta sapientia*. More on this later. In this sense, I cannot help but detect a certain ambiguity inherent in her admission, by Pope Benedict XVI, to the ranks of the Doctors of the Church in 2012. [9]) The aspects of her illiteracy, then, are distributed along two dimensions: the negative and the positive.

On the negative side of things, though not so much in line with apophantic theology, the non-polished words Hildegard writes down are the inheritors of her inspired understanding of the Bible that disallows a division of scriptural text into syllables and autonomous semantic units. In the preface to *Scivias*, she intimates: “When I was forty-two years and seven months old, a blazing fiery light [*coruscationis igneum lumen*] came from the open heaven and poured over my whole head and heart and breast like a flame. [...] Immediately I knew how to explain [*Et repente intellectum expositionis*] the books of the Psalter, gospel, and other catholic volumes of the Old and New Testament. However, I did not know how to interpret the words of their text, nor the division of syllables, nor the knowledge of cases and tenses [*non autem interpretationem verborum textus eorum nec divisionem syllabarum nec cognitionem casuum aut temporum habebam*]” (*Scivias* Prot.; CCCM 43, pp. 3–4) [10]. While, thanks to the flame that suffuses her entire being, she knows how to explain the holy books, she professes not to know how to interpret the words of the text with reference to everything formal literacy presupposes. I could say, in the spirit of Hildegard herself: formal *ill literacy* in need of a cure, as opposed to another sort of illiteracy, which may well be the cure when it is the obverse of ecological literacy.

The negativity of the understanding Hildegard attains through fiery suffusion repels both formalism and analysis, including the literal division of a text into syllables and letters. The mystical experience she invokes with reference to this divine-elemental force is one of absolute synthesis, which does not mean that everything just fuses into an undifferentiated whole, but, rather, that something other than analysis is required to do justice to singularity. What exactly? Nothing other than justice blended with love that, minutely adjusted to each, is incarnated in Christ as “the sun of justice,” *sol iustitiae*, “with the brilliance of burning love [*fulgorem ardoris caritatis*], of such great glory that every creature is illuminated by the brightness of his light” (*Scivias* I.3.3; CCCM 43, p. 43). That is why, also, the light and the heat of revelation cannot suffuse Hildegard’s head alone; they pour over her entire body,

including the breast and the heart, “like a flame.” Ecological literacies involve corporeality as a whole and the symphonies of living, ensouled bodies that Hildegard hears and relays in her poetic and mystical writings.

To be sure, we ought to overview Hildegard’s illumination in an alleged state of near illiteracy in the context of the tradition of medieval women, who found themselves in a similar predicament. “Whereas,” Christine Cooper-Rompato writes, “the gifts of sapientia are often given to men to assist their *scientia*, [ . . . ] more often than not, in women’s lives, sapientia is said to come to the wholly illiterate, who are blank slates waiting to be written on by God. For example, the Cistercian Ida of Louvain (d. 1300), who entered a convent later in life [ . . . ] was described as formally illiterate. Although ‘she had never been taught letters in her entire life,’ she is imagined to have an interior bookshelf that she could read inwardly, suggesting that sapientia provides an alternative to traditional literacy [8] (p. 66).” This alternative, however, is not simply a fast-tracked and generally inexplicable acquisition of the same knowledges and skills as those formally literate people come to possess after years of learning and arduous practice. The negative aspects of Hildegard’s illiteracy, tied to “non-polished words,” have to do with the non-analytic nature of her wisdom and the fact that it is not focused on the head alone. The purely synthetic, synesthetic, whole-body experience of knowing sets her apart from learned men and, at the same time, roots her in divine, elemental, and vegetal realms. It is there that the positive sense of illiteracy, as another kind of literacy, resides.

In a 1148 letter to Pope Eugenius, Hildegard makes the following request: “Prepare this writing for the hearing of those who receive me and make it *viridem* with the juice of sweet flavor [*et fac illam viridem in suco suavis gustus*]; make it a root of the branches and a leaf flying into the face of the devil [*et radicem ramorum et volans folium contra diabolum*], and you will have eternal life” (Epist. II, 24–26; CCCM 91, p. 8). Non-polished words blossom into plant-writing or plant-speaking (“prepare this writing for the hearing of those who receive me”), branching out toward its audience without straying from the source. They ooze with *viriditas*, the ever-fresh power of finite creation capable of renewing or recreating itself. Having been suffused with divine fire, Hildegard lets it grow in her, mature, ripen, and be distilled in “the juice of sweet flavor” that combines warmth and moisture in a cocktail of *viriditas*. (The caveat here is that the ripeness of *viriditas* is the realization of its essential unripeness, greenness, indomitable youthfulness: the advent of the fresh, the refreshed, and the renewed.) Uncontainable, this liquid fire inundates Hildegard’s interiority, spilling into ramified vegetal formations that are sent further out into the world.

The scheme of ecological literacies I have just somewhat hastily sketched relates to Hildegard’s letter-writing, her exchange of correspondences, as much as her overall message (which, she would claim, is not really hers, but is only sent through her), the good news of *viriditas*. At the literal level of literacy, Hildegard sees her letters as harbingers of a divine ecology, as she reiterates in an epistle to Arnold, the Archbishop of Cologne, to whom she sends a book of her “true visions.” “I remind you,” she writes, “that it [the book] contains nothing originating from human wisdom nor from my own will, but rather it contains those truths which the unfailing light wished to reveal through his own words. Indeed, this very letter which I am now writing to you [*hoc ipsum quod tibi nunc scribo*] came in a similar manner, not from my intellect nor through any human mediation, but through divine revelation” (Epist. XIVr, 1–7; CCCM 91, p. 32). The here-and-now, *hoc et nunc*, of letter-writing is, itself, a trace of the immemorial, unrepresentable past and a sign of the equally overwhelming, uncontrollable future. It spotlights that which speaks through a differently literate subject: unfailing light, divine wisdom, plants, and the elements.

## 2.2. Environmental Alphabets

The other literal sense of literacy is the letter as a character in a system of writing. In Christian traditions, the contrast between the letter and the spirit of a text is often framed in terms of divergences between Judaism and Christianity, where the letter falls on the side of Judaic law and spirit designates the supplanting of law by Christian love. Some of

Hildegard's visions confirm the traditional take on Judeo-Christianity, and yet the question of the letter as a unit of inscription is far from secondary for the Benedictine abbess.

In a missive sent to Pope Anastasius in 1153, Hildegard states: "But He who is great and without flaw has now touched a humble dwelling [*parvum habitaculum tetigit*], so that it might see a miracle and form unknown letters and utter an unknown tongue [*ignotas litteras formaret, ac ignotam linguam sonaret*]. And this was said to that little habitation: You have written these things in a language given to you from above, rather than in ordinary human speech, since it was not revealed to you in that form, but let him who has the pumice stone [*ille qui limam habet*] not fail to polish it and make it intelligible to mankind" (Epist. VIII, 79-85; CCCM 91, p. 21).

Non-polished words make their return, now with the injunction that they *must* be polished in order to become intelligible. Rather than simply raw, these words are spelled with "unknown letters" and resound in an "unknown tongue"—the letters and language of divine revelation. Their ecological dimension, in turn, is twofold. First, unknown letters and words materialize when a "humble dwelling" is "touched" by the infinite, meaning (within Hildegard's semantic pluriverse) the ecological formation of humanity itself as much as her own disquietude, the equivalent of an electric charge her body and soul receive from God. After all, in Hildegard's writings, "touching, kissing, and embracing are humanity itself and the only dwelling worthy of human being, [3], (p. 137)" Second, the term *habitation* resonates, whether consciously or not, with the ancient Greek *oikos* that is at the foundations of ecology (as well as of economy). It is a dwelling not serving as a place of refuge from the other but as an opportunity for exposure to and constitution in its exposure by alterity. The other portion of ecology is the Greek *logos*, speech or discourse, which, as Hildegard has it, remains faithful to constitutive alterity, to the other who has touched one. Its faithfulness hinges on retaining a mystery, the unknown, even in letters and words, that, nonetheless, call for a mediator who would polish and ready them for human understanding.

Still, Hildegard warns, in the same letter to Pope Anastasius, whom she admonishes somewhat harshly for coming to terms with the secular authority of the emperor [11], that the time to translate her unknown letters and words into intelligible signs has not yet arrived: "... healing will come forth from the heart when the dawn appears like the splendor of the first sunrise. Those things which will follow in the new desire and the new zeal, however, must not be spoken now [*Que vero sequuntur in novo disederio et in novo studio, dicenda non sunt*]" (Epist. VIII, 77-78; CCCM 91, p. 21). Ecological literacies obey the law of seasonality, vegetal rather than mineral. According to this law, healing, reborn desire, and zeal must ripen before coming to understanding. It makes no sense within the mineral paradigm that the building blocks of an unknown language cannot be polished as soon as they are written or the moment they resound. Healing and renewal need time, the period it takes for the sweet juices of *viriditas* to be refined and distilled. This period will coincide with the delay between, on the one hand, the initial formation and utterance of unknown letters and words and, on the other, their polishing and translation, their ripening and distillation, their being cast into the light of universal intelligibility.

As for the materiality of the letters in Hildegard's unknown language, Jonathan Green contends that her familiarity with the Greek alphabet is one of the sources to pay attention to [12]. For her part, Sarah Higley suggests that Hildegard "may have seen Hebrew letters; just as striking is the resemblance of her alphabet to Old Hebrew or Aramaic characters, but without a corresponding equivalency. [13] (p. 60)" Higley immediately adds, "it is unlikely that Hildegard was copying directly from any of these alphabets; her letters are most likely her own invention, showing merely an acquaintance with and an imitation of other alphabets, rather like one who has seen a foreign alphabet and loosely bases her own inventions on its remembered letters. [13] (p. 61)."

Why is an impressionistic connection to Hebrew in particular significant? For several reasons. Given the conjectured role of Hebrew inscription in *lingua ignota*, it is no longer possible to dismiss Judaism as the rigid letter of the law incompatible with the spirit of

love in Christianity: just as the Judaic scriptural source continues to inspire and nourish Christian theology, so Hebrew letters tacitly underly and motivate (“without,” as Higley aptly puts it, “a corresponding equivalency”) the Christian visionary’s unknown language. Furthermore, in the kabbalistic tradition, the letters of the Hebrew alphabet are not only units in a conventional writing system but the media of and the mediators for creation. In light of the fascinating—both tense and symbiotic—relation of Jewish and Christian mysticisms, chances are that Hildegard was abreast of this doctrine and that, by implication, she viewed her “unknown letters” in their full cosmic and ecological scope.

There are numerous indirect clues to her acquaintance with the kabbalistic tradition. Worth citing among these clues are the parallels between Hildegard’s Mary and the feminine aspects of divinity with regard to *šekīnah*; [14] the symbolic links between God and fire as in *kavod* (glory) and in the Christian mystic’s experience of revelation; [15] (pp. 45–46) or the implicit association of the virtues in *Ordo Virtutum* with *sefirot*, the ten emanations of the divine, for instance, “in the *Book of Light*, a twelfth-century kabbalistic work that originated in Provence but was compiled in part by German pietists. [15] (p.46)” The image of the crown of God in *Scivias* II.9.25 is an identical twin of *keter* (crown), one of the highest *sefirot* according to the Kabbalah [3], (p. 119). In what Barbara Newman calls “the sapiential theology of the high Middle Ages, [16]”, *Sapientia* and *Caritas* in Hildegard correspond to the *sefirot* of *hokmah* and *hesed*, respectively. The list goes on, but the main purpose of this small hermeneutical exercise has been already accomplished: it supports the hypothesis that the script of twenty three letters pertaining to *lingua ignota* likely shared the mystical nature of kabbalistic writing.

In the oldest known book of the kabbalistic corpus, *Sefer Yǒṣīrā*, dating from the third or fourth century BCE, the world is created from, among other things, the “ten *sefirot* of nothingness” and “twenty-two foundation letters [‘esrim v’šayim ‘otiot yesod]” (1:2) [17]. The letters are drawn, “engraved and carved,” from breath (*ruah*), formlessness and emptiness (*tohu va’bohu*), water (*mayim*), clay (*tit*), and fire (*esh*) (1:11-12)—that is to say, from the elements and elemental void. They are, literally, ecological literacies, not interpreting but bringing forth, not reading but writing the world. Hildegard’s twenty-three letters add an extra one to the twenty-two of the Hebrew alphabet. This *plus-one* designates an excess—the excess of *viriditas* over the singular occurrence and hierarchy of creation, over the world of static identities, and over itself. While borrowing the fecundity of kabbalistic letters, Hildegard destines them to the healing of the world, its regeneration at the time of a new dawn. For now, though, as she confides in Pope Anastasius, these things “must not be spoken,” or they must be spoken and written in a yet unknown language, which lets them appear even as it respects the prohibition.

As we return to this epistle, the words “has now touched a humble dwelling, so that it might see a miracle and form unknown letters and utter an unknown tongue” shimmer with another light. *Lingua ignota* and *ignotas litteras* are imparted to Hildegard by God in a similar manner that *viriditas*, a self-refreshing power of finite existence, is passed on from the Creator to creation. It is a gift that cannot be contained, that cannot be absorbed in its being received, or that, in the course of being received, surpasses the narrow confines of the dwelling that welcomes it [6] (p. 114). This is true with respect to *viriditas* as much as Hildegard’s divine inspirations, including *lingua ignota*: they flow from the same source and overflow every vessel that contains them. Except that, while emerging as a variation on the theme of *viriditas*, *lingua ignota* is also meant to facilitate the flow of this self-refreshing capacity at the right time (hence, it keeps the valve of the secret, of the unknown, closed for now).

In Hildegard’s *Vita*, a rhetorical question is raised: “Who truly does not marvel that she brought forth with miraculous harmony a song, sweetest of melodies, and published characters never before seen with a language unheard of before now? [quis vero non miretur, quod cantum dulcissime melodie mirabili protulit symphonia et litteras non prius visas cum lingua edidit antea inaudita?]” (CCCM 125, p. 20) [18]. Along with *viriditas*, the symphoniality of being in Hildegard is one of the keys to an ecological theology, where the body resonates

with its soul and ensouled bodies with each other and with the rest of creation [3], (p. 53ff). Not by mere accident the previously unpublished alphabet and unheard-of language are mentioned on a par with *symphonias*: they are the texts and the contexts of mystical ecology, weaving in and out of one another under the aegis of *viriditas*. Any consideration of ecological literacies in Hildegard’s corpus must take its bearings from their interrelation.

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