

SCIVIAS

Hildegard of Bingen. Translated by Bruce Hozeski. Santa Fe, New Mexico: Bear & Company, 1986.

BOOK OF DIVINE WORKS, WITH LETTERS AND SONGS

Hildegard of Bingen. Edited by Matthew Fox, translated by Robert Cunningham, Jerry Dybdal and Ron Miller. Santa Fe, New Mexico: Bear & Company, 1987.

ILLUMINATIONS OF HILDE- GARD OF BINGEN

Text by Hildegard of Bingen with commentary by Matthew Fox. Santa Fe, New Mexico: Bear & Company, 1985.

Frances Beer



Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1176) is described by editor Matthew Fox as a "woman of tremendous stature and power who used her gifts to the utmost," "one of the greatest intellectuals and mystics of the West." Even these words of high praise seem like an understatement when the extent of her achievements is considered. Her creative output includes a mystical trilogy, medical/scientific treatises, poetry, music, a full-length morality play, and a stunning series of illustrations intended to clarify and make more accessible her visions. In addition she was an eminently successful administrator, conducted preaching tours up and down the Rhine, and carried on a voluminous cor-

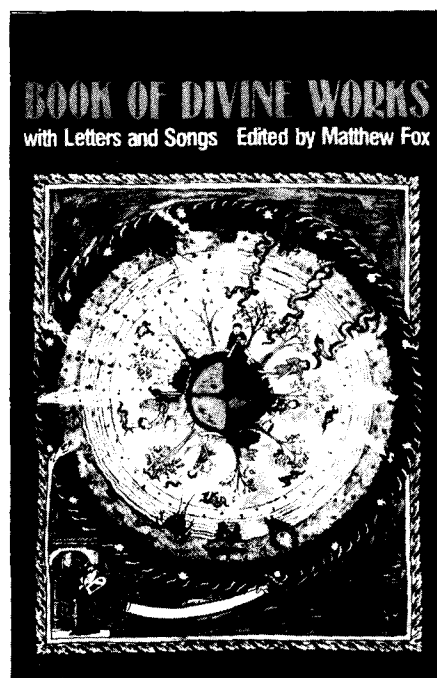
respondence with key religious and political figures of her day.

Life's main frustration for Hildegard must have been finding the time to fit it all in. But whatever obstacles may have stood between her and her goals were overcome sooner or later by her unwavering determination and sense of purpose. Early in life she was placed in a monastery at Disibodenberg by her parents — she was the youngest in an aristocratic Rhineland family — where an education and a full life of the spirit were available to her. Her tutor, Jutta, was herself a learned woman and must have instructed Hildegard well in the ways of administration as well as in matters more theological: by the time Hildegard was 38, when Jutta died, she was chosen unanimously to replace her as abbess. This profession she adhered to throughout her life, and pursued it vigorously and with great success; she brought renown to her house, moving to larger quarters at Rupertsberg when the old ones were outgrown, despite the objections of her male colleagues who did not like to see her prestigious group departing, with her fame and all the sisters' dowries, from their domain. After its move her community grew to include fifty women. Soon she established a second house across the Rhine, to which she travelled by boat twice a week.

Hildegard was actively interested in life within the convent — she and her sisters invented a secret language, for which she wrote the glossary, to be used in front of strangers, and she herself composed a cycle of hymns to be sung within the convent by the sisters — but this interest did not preclude her involvement in outside matters as well. Hildegard evidently did not experience a conflict between the *via activa* and the *via contemplativa*. During the period of her lifetime the question of papal supremacy was hotly disputed; the belief that church and state ought to be separate spheres steadily gained ground, and the continuing papal schism did much to undermine the credibility of the papacy. Concerned by the threat to papal authority, Hildegard urged a general strengthening and reform of the church at all levels, and it was this reforming impulse that was the incentive for much of her correspondence. She believed with absolute certainty that she was a chosen mouthpiece of God, and consequently did not hesitate to advise her clerical colleagues as to the deficiency of their behaviour. As Hildegard's reputation spread, the Pope was asked, and agreed, to give explicit sanction to her work. Once

she had received the papal seal of approval, she came more widely to be seen a source of spiritual and theological advice, and many of her remaining letters are in response to requests for such aid.

However impressive her record as an administrator, reformer and advisor may be, Hildegard's greatest claim to distinction is unquestionably her astonishing mystical life, coupled with her uncanny powers of recall which enabled her so minutely to document her visions and to provide in such fullness their allegorical explications. It is by now getting to be no surprise for us to discover that the achievements, even the existence, of gifted women in the past have been mysteriously erased from historical record. Still, it is unnerving to realize that the marginalization of someone as renowned in her own time as Hildegard could have been so effectively achieved. The fact



remains that until the past few decades her work had largely been lost sight of. A critical edition of her *Scivias*, for example, was only published in 1978. It will therefore be seen what a great contribution Bear & Company have made to the field of women's studies (not to mention the many other groups which will be interested in being able to experience Hildegard first hand) in bringing out English translations of these two key works, *Scivias* and the *Book of Divine Works*.

Scivias ("Know the Ways"), which divides into three main sections and includes a total of twenty-six visions, is rendered by the Hildegard scholar, Bruce Hozeski, into a clear and accessible Eng-

lish; the introduction includes an annotated outline of the work by Adelgundis Führkötter, an editor of the 1978 Latin edition of *Scivias*, which is authoritative and enormously helpful in sorting out the complexity of Hildegard's visions and interpretations. There is no doubt that the work is difficult. *Scivias* undertakes to describe the whole history of creation, from the fall of Lucifer to the Day of Judgment. Monumental as this project may seem, there is no hint of pride on Hildegard's part; nor does she linger over the "am I worthy?" question. To her the proposition is straightforward: she has been sent, and commanded to pass on, these revelations, an epic, encyclopedic series of images explaining such mysteries as the nature of the Persons of God, humanity's relation to the divine, the larger order of creation as a whole.

Begun in 1141, *Scivias* was ten years in the writing; composition of the *Book of Divine Works*, described in the volume's introduction as her "most cosmological work," also occupied a decade, from 1163-73. This work is similarly comprehensive: the first two visions, for example, are entitled 'On the Origin of Life,' and 'On the Construction of the World;' not to be outdone, the ninth and tenth visions, 'Completion of the Cosmos' and 'On the End of Time' round out the history of creation. In between, along with images illuminating such puzzles as 'Human Nature' and the 'Meaning of History,' is the crucial sequence revealing the significance of the incarnation in the process of salvation. The tenth, and by far the longest, *visio* includes an account of the coming of the Antichrist — Satan's earthly agent — of his attempts to corrupt mankind by false preaching, and of his final defeat which recapitulates the origi-

nal fall of Lucifer into the "sulfur and pitch," but this time ensures that "the old serpent" has finally lost his sway over humanity.

The vastness of Hildegard's scope is only one of the many extraordinary aspects of her work. Another is a quality which might be called synthetic, or integrated (or, for that matter, holistic). Each individual is a microcosm reflecting the macrocosm that is God; each body contains the four elements, as does the creation; the body and soul should not be in opposition, but should work together; nature is at the service of human beings so that they, in turn, can work with nature; as the world is round, the Godhead is like a wheel and the creation like a cosmic egg; the natural world images God: as God is known through faith, so the sun's circumference is perceived by the eye. The Old Testament is seen to prefigure the New: Abraham's obedience foreshadows Mary's, the ram in the thornbush looks forward to Christ in her womb. The decline of the world (leading up to the coming of the Antichrist and the end of time) is represented in terms of a loss of *viriditas*, "greenness;" the time of Christ is seen as the summer of the world.

Despite its potential for harmony, however, Hildegard's universe is emphatically not one in which evil is simply perceived as loss of order, or the absence of good. Lucifer's fall has set the whole business of creation in motion — the tenth choir of angels must be restored — and his final defeat is its goal. Hildegard's positive images are in tension with negative counterparts: light is opposed by darkness, the luminous fire by black fire (elsewhere the gloomy fire, by the purest air); a figure representing Love stands upon a dreadful monster and a serpent, who is

biting the monster's ear: so Satan "fastens his jaws in strife." A multitude of torches burning with "serene brightness" is opposed by a menacing lake with a mouth that emits "burning smoke with a great stink."

Of course the presence of active evil in Hildegard's universe does not suggest a shaky faith. Indeed, the sin most repugnant to her seems to be one she calls "lukewarmness," which renders people "useless," too weak to do any good. Lucifer's might, the power and longevity of his malice, and his ultimate trouncing, only serve to illustrate the more convincingly God's unalterable omnipotence.

The volume containing the *Book of Divine Works* also includes forty-two of Hildegard's Letters and ten of her Songs (both words and music); each deserves a separate essay, so let it only be said that her genius inspires them both, in particular and appropriate ways, and that the translations, as in the *Book*, continue to be clear and effective. The book of Hildegard's illuminations provides an unparalleled chance to experience these creations first hand; twenty-five of them are reproduced here in glorious colour, and they are simply breathtaking. Matthew Fox has prepared a commentary to accompany them which is brimming over with his own evident enthusiasm, but unfortunately leaves the reader unable to determine where Hildegard leaves off and Fox begins. This can be frustrating; on the other hand, it seems clear that his passion for this extraordinary woman has provided much of the impetus behind Bear & Company's effort. So let's be grateful, and hope that the rest of her works are soon to follow.

GEORGE ELIOT

Gillian Beer. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986.

By Deborah Heller

Unquestionably one of the greatest English novelists — and, in the view of many, the greatest woman novelist in our tradition — George Eliot has nonetheless posed something of a problem for feminist critics. Despite her own exceptional learning and achievement, Eliot's fictional heroines, though often gifted with remarkable sensibilities and wide-ranging (if ill-focused) desires, never achieve much of anything, at best partially fulfill-

ing themselves only through the unexceptional "happy end" typically envisioned for women in Victorian society: a loving marriage and children (eg. Dinah Morris, Esther Lyon, Dorothea Brooke). Eliot's fictional alternatives to this ordinary destiny are inevitably crueller, bleaker, and, at the least, less satisfying (eg. Maggie Tulliver, Romola, Mrs. Transome, Gwendolen Harleth). Also, while the splendid metamorphosis of Marian Evans into George Eliot was in part made possible by her courageous decision to live openly with a married man, in her novels sexual 'irregularity' is always punished. Moreover, she sought acceptance in conventional terms for her unconventional choices, calling herself — and expecting to be called — Mrs. Lewes, and consis-

tently referring to her unsanctified union as a marriage. And, although she lived during a period of sustained feminist debate and activity, Eliot's own role in the woman's movement was, as Gillian Beer writes in her generous, new assessment of it, "peripheral and equivocal."

In her intellectually vigorous and engaging study of George Eliot for the "Key Women Writers Series" undertaken by the Indiana University Press, Gillian Beer (author of *Darwin's Plot: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth Century Fiction*) presents her task at the outset "as being the study of the novels in the light of their being written by a woman." From this perspective she examines, among other issues, the treatment of George Eliot by recent feminist critics,