

VIRGIN WORDS:
HILDEGARD OF BINGEN'S LINGUA IGNOTA
AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF IMAGINARY
LANGUAGES ANCIENT TO MODERN¹

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for Manuela, inspired logodædalian

In a noted passage from his *Philosophical Investigations*, Ludwig Wittgenstein turns away for a moment from his demonstration that it is impossible to construct a genuinely “private” language to recall an earlier argument in which he had proposed that the meaning of a sign cannot be fixed through a private act of naming (or

¹ A preliminary version of this essay appeared (accompanied by a legion of typesetting errors) in *Modernité au Moyen Age: Le défi du passé*, ed. Brigitte Cazelles and Charles Méla, in *Recherches et Rencontres* 1 (Geneva: Droz, 1990). The present expanded and bibliographically complete redaction has benefitted much from the thoughtful comments of numerous colleagues and friends, among whom I should like to single out Anne Wilson Doueihy, Herbert Marks and, most especially, the late John Winkler.

“a private ostensive definition”). Anyone who asserts that an individual is able to forge a truly private and autonomous system of symbols, Wittgenstein writes,

forgets that a great deal of stage-setting in the language is presupposed if the mere act of naming is to make sense.²

It is perhaps worth pausing for a moment to explore the metaphor of “stage-setting” in human language. Why, after all, must a name’s meaning, its ability to “make” sense, be dependent upon theatrical props which have already been put in place? Is it not enough for a word to mean in the privacy of one’s home? For Wittgenstein, as for the modern skeptical tradition as a whole, the answer is “no.” A true *Geheimsprache*—a “private” or “secret” language—is not possible because meaning is not an event that simply “happens” when an individual imposes a name upon a given sensation or object for which he or she claims to find no existing proper noun. Such a private act of ostension can, in Wittgenstein’s view, serve as only the most preliminary of linguistic *hors d’oeuvres*. This is because the mere act of naming already presupposes a complex set of cognitive operations; operations which, in turn, ensure that words cannot occur in a simple one-to-one relation to their referents. The event of meaning begins to “happen” only when words are used in relation to other words, when they give up their claim to a subjectivist referentiality. For our neologism to “make” sense, then, it will have to be placed in circulation. It will have to be sent away

² The full passage reads:

“What would it be like if human beings shewed no outward signs of pain (did not groan, grimace, etc)? Then it would be impossible to teach a child the use of the word *tooth-ache*.” —Well, let’s assume the child is a genius and itself invents a name for the sensation! —But then, of course, he couldn’t make himself understood when he used the word. —So does he understand the name, without being able to explain its meaning to anyone? —But what does it mean to say that he has “named his pain”? —How has he done this naming of pain?! And whatever he did, what was its purpose? —When one says “He gave a name to his sensation” one forgets that a great deal of stage-setting in the language is presupposed if the mere act of naming is to make sense. And when we speak of someone’s having given a name to pain, what is presupposed is the existence of the grammar of the word *pain*; it shews the post where the new word is stationed.

I cite the third edition of *Philosophical Investigations* ¶ 257, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987). The argument returns to Wittgenstein’s presentation in paragraph 26 ff. of private ostensive definitions.

from the private scene of naming and cast in a new public role. The stage-setting into which it is thrust is at once the theater of other words, a cognitive grammar and an intersecting social world. There it will figure as a differential sign within the larger language game: the system of rules and regulations that permit both the training of a community of speakers and the consensual verification of proper and improper use.

Wittgenstein's argument against the existence of private languages, as interpreters such as Kripke and Fogelin have pointed out, raises as many questions as it answers.³ Yet, setting all potential objections aside, what is striking about the "private language argument" is the remarkable pervasiveness of the notion that Wittgenstein is attempting to debunk. At least since the Enlightenment, Western philosophy has sought to found the edifice of knowledge on some sort of ineradicable private ground: whether the subjective self-certainty of Descartes's *cogito ergo sum*, the positive evidence of the senses or some fundamental set of human "givens" which can subtend all logical propositions.

Moreover, in the Western literary tradition the urge to forget the cognitive-linguistic "stage-setting" and to identify writing with the return to a pure act of naming and/or the pursuit of certain lost original names has proven irresistible. Caught up in a world of warring tongues, a public world of shifting signs with shifting meanings, a world in which the wordsmith does not so much possess actual power as hover nervously around power's perimeter, writers have continually dreamed of a language before the decline into history, politics and theater. Although hardly private in a restrictive technical sense, such utopic languages or *uglossias* remain firmly rooted in the metaphysics that subtends the myth of linguistic privacy. As such they cannot be viewed as a mere extension of that localized form of verbal invention which Horace identified with the poet's special license to "issue words [i.e. neologisms] stamped with the mint-mark of the day"⁴—a call to

³ Saul A. Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language: An Elementary Exposition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982); and Robert J. Fogelin, *Wittgenstein*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1987). The bibliography on this topic is considerable, but see Fogelin's notes for the major entries.

⁴ See *De arte poetica* (lines 58–62):

Licuit semperque licebit
 signatum praesente nota producere nomen.
 ut silvae foliis pronos mutantur in annos,
 prima cadunt; ita verborum vetus interit aetas,
 et iuvenum ritu florent modo nata vigentque.

assume one's own evanescent contemporaneity in the face of perpetual flux. Rather, the deeper urge behind *uglossias* is supratemporal. Haunted by the dream of a transcendental or demonic signifier so deeply woven into the fabric of being that it is invested with physical and supra-physical powers, their inventors seek out a sign that would collapse every binary opposition between interior and exterior, subject and object, private and public, creator and created, phenomenon and noumenon.

The enterprise has assumed a great many forms, some literal-minded and some strictly figurative. It overlaps to differing degrees with Western speculations on hieroglyphic writing from Plotinus to Annius of Viterbo to Vico and Kircher, with the metaphysics of etymology practiced from Plato's *Cratylus* through Isidore of Seville's *Etymologies*, with the speculations of Renaissance magic, with the ongoing attempt from the Middle Ages through the Baroque to reconstruct Adamic language, with Fenollosa's theory of the Chinese ideogram and even with the Romantic valorization of metaphor over and against allegorical discourse. But its most palpable manifestations are to be found in the vast array of imaginary and artificial languages which dot the Western landscape from Montanist glossolalia to the *zaum* or transmental language formulated by the Russian Futurist Velimir Klebnikov to aUI "the language of space," a contemporary pictographic language which comes complete with its own exercise program.⁵

This essay offers a speculative account of one of the most extraordinary but little studied cases of invented languages in the medieval period: Hildegard of Bingen's *Lingua ignota*—the one thousand word vocabulary which the celebrated abbess of Rupertsberg elaborated in the mid-twelfth century. The essay begins by setting a tripartite frame whose elements are: a general typology of imaginary languages, a brief mapping of the contours of "the imaginary language project" as it stood at the end of the nineteenth century and, finally, the recontextualization of this "project" in a canonical work of fourteenth century literature—Dante's *Commedia*. In its second half, the essay moves beyond Dante into a detailed description and analysis of the *Lingua ignota*, examining the latter's structure, its morphological attributes, its

⁵ The best general survey of the subject is Marina Yaguello's *Les fous du langage: Des langues imaginaires et de leurs inventeurs* (Paris: Seuil, 1984). As for aUI, its evangelist/creator is John W. Weilgart (see his *aUI: The Language of Space*, 4th ed. [Decorah, Iowa: Cosmic Communications, 1979]).

possible models and the pivotal position it occupies between Hildegard's naturalistic and mystical writings, as well as its connections to Hildegard's music. An appendix follows the study's conclusion, furnishing an analytical outline of the *Lingua ignota*.

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Before proceeding further, then, I wish to put forth seven general propositions which describe the nature of imaginary languages as they are understood here:

I – There are two general categories of imaginary languages: the *expressive* and the *analytical*. The former, founded on a performative concept of the invented sign, is exemplified by the mediumistic languages of spiritists and practitioners of magic, speaking in tongues and “nonsensical” incantation. The latter, founded in logic or philology, is exemplified by the *a priori* combinatory philosophical metalanguages of the Enlightenment and by *a posteriori* nineteenth century creations such as Esperanto. As distinct as they might seem, these two categories necessarily intersect and overlap. Between them there exists no fundamental break; rather, they represent two *limits* between which extends a continuous spectrum of admixtures.

II – Whether analytical or expressive, *a priori* or *a posteriori*, whether its materials are numerical, pictographic or musical, every imaginary language is a *bricolage*. This is to say that imaginary languages are produced by appropriating elements from a subset of existing natural language systems and subjecting them to a series of condensations and displacements. The result is almost always an “impoverishment” of the natural languages in question: a language reduced to a limited set of open vowels, prone to syllabic reduplication and to excessive syntactical parallelisms and symmetries.

III – All “expressive” imaginary languages make some claim to be “private” but this assertion of privacy founds an all the more aggressive claim to be public or universal; “analytical” imaginary languages do the inverse: that is, advance a claim to universality which founds a counterclaim to be secret and/or private. Otherwise stated, every imaginary language, whether the creation of a

philosopher (Leibniz), a schizophrenic (Wolfson), a hermeticist (Bruno) or a mystic (Hildegard); is engaged in an elaborate game of hide and seek. It asserts itself, paradoxically, as both open and closed, as social and anti-social, as both immediately available to all and restricted to an elite. This is true on the linguistic level (where elements from the natural languages are encrypted to conceal the inventor's mother tongue), on the hermeneutic level (where the reader—or, in the case of glossolalia, the spectator—is emphatically positioned as either insider or outsider), and on the sociocultural level (where speakers constitute themselves over and against the larger community).

IV — The urge to return to an originary act of naming and to suppress the “stage-setting” of language usually overflows into a parallel impulse to reform the means by which meaning is communicated. Imaginary languages thus appear in tandem with imaginary writing systems, imaginary body languages (Bulwer's *Chirolugia*), reforms of the alphabet (Maimieux's *Pasigraphie*) and/or appeals for pictographic writing (aUI, medieval acrostics) or musical speech (Sudré's *Solrésol*). Hildegard's *Lingua ignota*, for instance, is accompanied by her *Litterae ignotae*, a secret alphabet which she employed in a number of inscriptions.

V — Imaginary languages find their symbolic “homes” in fantastic realms. Every imaginary tongue is elaborated in tandem with a fantastic temporal or spatial locus which it defines as its “natural” origin. Since this site cannot be found in the here and now, it is created via an act of projection, either spatial (the language of an exotic people is approximated), temporal (the future kingdom is prefigured or an originary order is reconstructed) or epistemological (an analytical “stage” outside of time and space is erected). Example: the uglossia written and spoken by More's Utopians.

VI — Imaginary languages are spoken in the name of an-Other. Just as the “natural” locus of an imaginary language is necessarily distant from the here and now, so the language itself occurs in a displaced relation to its originator. The latter writes and speaks as a ventriloquist, “throwing” his or her voice and declaring to be *spoken through* by an external agent: God, nature, the body, the object world, demons, science, rationality, a utopian subject or a fictive double. This internal dislocation is mirrored externally in the supplementary cast of characters which is called upon to vali-

date the thrown voice: in the case of female mystics such as Hildegard, a male retinue of figurative “dictators” and literal scribes.⁶

VII — The further one moves towards the “expressive” end of the spectrum, the more an invented language is likely to be structured by a tension between fantasies of linguistic regression and of linguistic otherness. Glossolalias and other prophetic tongues, Hildegard’s included, in the act of disfiguring the materials which they appropriate from natural languages, also move in the direction of infantile speech. They are drawn to the pulsional, repetitive and incantatory semiosis characteristic of infantile babble (what Kristeva calls the “semiotic”). Hence the predominance of simple vowel/consonant//vowel/consonant patterns and the tendency for words to be bisyllabic. Into this regressive linguistic fantasy-world, however, *alien* phonetic matter is systematically inserted as the emblem of the language’s distance from the always concealed mother tongue(s). Hence the very striking preponderance of exotic consonantal blocks in glossolalias—multiple *k*’s, *q*’s, *x*’s and *z*’s—which structure and disrupt the vocalic flow.⁷

These propositions may be briefly illustrated by examining two types of imaginary languages that prevailed at the turn of the century: first, the mediumistic languages of the spiritist “Hélène Smith,” which included a pseudo-Sanskrit, Martian, ultra-Martian and Uranian; and second, the artificial languages such as Volapük and Esperanto propounded by advocates of a new global order.

⁶ On this matter see Hildephouse Herwegen, “Les collaborateurs de Sainte Hildegarde,” *Revue bénédictine* 21 (1904): 192–203, 302–15, 381–403.

⁷ On glossolalia in the Middle Ages see Paul Alphandery, “La glossolalie dans le prophétisme médiéval latin,” *Revue de l’histoire des religions* 104 (1931): 417–36; but for a more general overview one may consult John Kildahl, *The Psychology of Speaking in Tongues* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972); Felicitas D. Goodman, *Speaking in Tongues: A Cross-Cultural Study of Glossolalia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972); William J. Samarin, *Tongues of Men and Angels: The Religious Language of Pentecostalism* (New York: MacMillan, 1972); and David Christie-Murray, *Voices from the Gods: Speaking with Tongues* (London: Routledge, 1978). A general bibliography is found in Watson E. Mills, *Speaking in Tongues: A Guide to Research on Glossolalia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986). Also worth noting is Michel de Certeau’s “Utopies vocales: Glossolalies,” 611–31 in *Oralità: Cultura, letteratura, discorso*, ed. B. Gentili and G. Paioni (Rome: Edizioni dell’Antenor, 1985).

In the year 1900, Catherine Élise Müller, alias Hélène Smith, became a celebrity when Théodore Flournoy, a professor of psychology at the University of Geneva interested in paranormal phenomena, published a study of her activities as a medium entitled *Des Indes à la planète Mars*.⁸ Having scrutinized Mrs. Smith for a period of six years, Flournoy analyzed the three exoticist narratives which she had produced in her nightly seances: an Indian narrative in which she was reincarnated as a fifteenth century Hindu princess; a Martian narrative in which she communed with exiled human souls; and, finally, an historical narrative in which she played the role of Marie-Antoinette. Only the first two need concern us here, for to each of them corresponded an invented tongue: a pseudo-Sanskrit in the case of the first; a Martian language in the case of the second. Each has the advantage of having been studied by an eminent linguist: the former by Ferdinand de Saussure and the latter by his contemporary, Victor Henry, whose research concerned the role of subconscious processes in ordinary speech.⁹

While Saussure and Henry ended up at loggerheads over Henry's use of fanciful etymologies to explain certain attributes of Martian, both clearly situate Mrs. Smith's languages on the "expressive" side of the divide. "Expressive" because pseudo-Sanskrit and Martian can only be spoken in trance-like state, have a battery of corporeal gestures which accompany them, and are linked to the practice of automatic writing. Both are, likewise, linguistic *bricolages* generated via a system of metaphoric/metonymic transfers and phonetic re-encodings. Saus-

⁸ The work's full title is *Des Indes à la planète Mars: Étude sur un cas de somnambulisme avec glossolalie* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1900). Its success was such that a third edition was already in print within the year along with an impassioned rebuke entitled *Autour "des Indes à la planète Mars"* (Basel: Georg, 1901) by the Société d'Études Psychiques de Genève, a spiritist society. Flournoy returned to the topic in his "Nouvelles observations sur un cas de somnambulisme avec glossolalie," *Archives de psychologie de la Suisse romande* (1901): 102-255.

⁹ As reported in *Des Indes à la planète Mars* (316-29), Saussure first entered the Smith case in order to advise Flournoy on the Sanskritoid tongue which corresponded to the spiritist's Hindu cycle. Henry, professor of Sanskrit and Indo-European grammar at the University of Paris, authored *Le langage martien: Étude analytique de la genèse d'une langue dans un cas de glossolalie somnambulique* (Paris: Maisonneuve, 1901). This work approaches Smith's languages as "l'oeuvre spontanée d'un sujet absolument inconscient des procédés qu'il emploie à cet effet" (6) and hence a perfect case study of a linguistic unconscious whose operations are thought analogous to what Freud would later term the "dream work."

sure, for instance, found that pseudo-Sanskrit contained a core group of actual Sanskrit words (culled from a grammar manual) which had been spun out, via the filter of French, German and English, into a limited but coherent linguistic system.

In his study of "Martian," Henry found a similar procedure at work, but postulated that at the language's core stood Hungarian: the language of the medium's dead father, which she did not claim to know, but which Henry believed was the subject of subliminal linguistic fantasies. The unintelligibility of these languages to the participants in Mrs. Smith's seances was remedied by the invention of male "translator" spirits (named Leopold, Esenale and Alexis). These figures would "interrupt" her performances to transcribe the alien messages for a public which was constantly reminded of their secrecy. Yet, despite the hyperbolic assertions, it is worth noting that Mrs. Smith's effort to render her languages "other" by suppressing any surface ties to her mother tongue fails (as was inevitable) at a deeper level. Because Martian grammar turns out to closely parallel that of French and Martian words often follow the gender and morphology of their French cognates, it was all too easy for Henry to discover the generative devices by means of which, for example, the French phrase *nous comprenions si bien* could be turned into the Martian *nini triménêni ii adzi*. The infantile phonetic character of the utterance immediately suggested that a principle of alliterative doubling was at work, such that *si*, for instance, becomes *i-i* and the pronoun *nous* becomes *ni-ni* via the agency of the German first person plural pronoun *wir*. The same transparency characterizes much of Smith's Martian vocabulary, elaborated via the use of simple metonymies, phonetic distortions, semantic reversals and contaminations. The Martian word for child is thus *chiré*, in which it is hard not to glean the French *cher* (or dear), whereas the words for mother and father, *modé* and *mané*, are clearly modelled after the German *Mutter* and *Mann*. But the link to French remains predominant, as in the words for paper, blue and rose, respectively, *cheké*, *ziné* and *épin*, derived from the French *chèque* (check), *Chine* (China) and *épine* (spine).

Now, it may seem a bit perverse to compare these sorts of inventions with analytically constructed artificial languages such as Volapük and Esperanto, yet there are perhaps more similarities than differences. Secular heirs to the *a priori* universal writing and language schemes proposed from the mid-seventeenth century onward by figures such as Leibniz and Condorcet, Volapük and Esperanto were each the creation of a single individual who had been inspired by a prophetic

vision of an Eden of universal monolingualism.¹⁰ While Volapük is a mixed *a priori* and *a posteriori* language and Esperanto is strictly *a posteriori*, each failed in its quest to become humankind's universal language because contemporaries were quick to perceive that, in the end, each was only slightly more scientific than the Martian of Mrs. Smith. Elaborated on the basis of a palette of Indo-European languages, Volapük and Esperanto are indeed rather eccentric philological creations. Johann Schleyer, the author of Volapük, for instance, opted to privilege English and German morphology over that of the Romance languages, whereas Zamenhof (or *Doktoro Esperanto* [Doctor Hope], as he was known), did precisely the inverse. Schleyer eliminated all R's from Volapük so as to assist native Chinese speakers, but replaced them with L's, to the detriment of native speakers of Japanese. Zamenhof for his part paid no heed to either Chinese or Japanese speakers. He actually added two letters to the standard alphabet and made awkward but extensive use of consonants with the circumflex. One could continue such a listing of oddities at length, but the failure of these two enterprises was due also to factors beyond their linguistic faults. The evangelical movements which they spawned found themselves increasingly caught between the claim that Volapük and Esperanto were living linguistic organisms—the property of humankind as a whole—and the reality of an ever more possessive charismatic founder. Efforts at reform, accordingly, gave rise to schismatic movements: in the case of Volapük, linguistic progeny such as Balta, Dilpok and Veltparl; in the case of Esperanto, Ulla, Ido and Romanal.

I have dwelt on these modern products in order to suggest that, although the terms may appear different, they remain remarkably close to their medieval counterparts. The metaphysical framework characteristic of the *fin de siècle*—taking the form of utopian visions of universal monolingualism, of ideal fusions of *ratio* with *oratio*, and of communication with extraterrestrial spirits and with the dead—acquires a Christian aspect during the Middle Ages. As a result, the imaginary languages of the medieval period explicitly situate themselves, horizontally, between Adam's private act of naming and the pleromic tongue of the eschatological city and, vertically, between the babble of Babel

¹⁰ On this general topic one may consult Andrew Large, *The Artificial Language Movement* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985) and James Knowlson, *Universal Language Schemes in England and France 1600–1800* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975).

and the prophetic wind of Pentecost. Yet, despite the biblical coordinates, an identical linkage continues to obtain between imaginary languages and otherworldly or utopian discourse, between visionary modes of cognition and scientific knowledge. As for the generative mechanisms already alluded to, they remain largely unchanged. Metaphoric and metonymic displacements, phonetic substitutions, reversals and encryptions, are but some of the characteristic devices by which, from the medieval to the modern periods, natural languages were reinvented as *uglossias*.

It should be noted that such continuities draw our attention to the inaugural role played by the Middle Ages with respect to modern attitudes towards language. For, despite Horace's call for poets to "issue words stamped with the mint-mark of the day," ancient Greek and Roman doctrines of verbal and linguistic invention were deeply conservative. In antiquity neologism was considered a figure of diction consisting in the "artificial"—which is to say risky—combination of already existing verbal materials for a strictly local ornamental purpose. So Aristotle puts forth the standard view when he argues (*Rhetoric* 1404b29–32) that

strange words, compound words and invented words must be used sparingly and on few occasions . . . [because] . . . they depart from what is suitable in the direction of excess.

Consequently, sustained verbal invention in ancient texts—at least before the second century A.D.—is rare and nearly always meant as comical: a matter of unnatural prefixation and suffixation associated with oratorical presumption, lack of control, and/or with barbaric speech, like that of the female barbarian chorus in the anonymous *Charition* fragment (Oxyrhynchos Papyrus 413) who intone the mostly nonsensical chant: "pan ouble ti katemanou ambre tou eni. . ."¹¹ The principal exceptions to this rule take the form of distant myths, as in the two passages in the *Iliad* where allusion is made to the secret names employed by Homer's gods.¹²

¹¹ The passage, which occurs in lines 91–94 of an anonymous actor's second century script, includes several dozen verses of similarly nonsensical or quasi-obscene cries. See *Greek Literary Papyri*, ed. D. L. Page, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1930), 3:336–49.

¹² I cite from the Lattimore translation (*Iliad* 14.289–91 and 22.74–75):

he sat . . . in the likeness of a singing bird whom in the mountains the im-

So it was the triumph of Christianity's theology of the incarnate Word and the sharpened split between the medieval vernaculars and the so-called "grammatical" languages which accompanied it, that carved out for neologism—and, by extension, for the more sustained forms of verbal invention—a new place in the poetic/philosophical edifice: a central place which, apart from such manifestations as Macaronic poetry and Renaissance dabbings in hieroglyphics, they would not regain until the Baroque era. The Middle Ages may thus be viewed as something of a golden age of neologism and verbal invention. From the wildly hermetic verbal parlor games of the so-called "Hisperic" literature of the late seventh century to the hellenizing polyglossia of Charlemagne's court to the cosmological fictions of the Chartrian writers, the medieval period not only expanded upon the legacy of late Latinity, but went on to elaborate a theory of verbal play which conferred upon everything from the most traditional and localized forms of verbal invention to full-fledged imaginary tongues, both a wider expressive range and a deeper set of ideological motives.¹³

The point is confirmed in Dante's *Commedia*, whose three-tiered structure will have to stand here for the later medieval literary system as a whole. Dante's first canticle, the *Inferno*, is a realm of linguistic ruin, where natural languages are fractured and meaning is dispersed. The pilgrim's descent begins with his encounter of a simulacrum of speech: a silent black-on-black inscription, a "scritta morta," which purports to be the voice of Hell's stony mouth. The descent continues with an accompanying shift from an elevated latinate stylistic register to an ever more particularized comic register of dialects and micro-dialects. Dense networks of warring consonants come to stand for the move from persuasion to violence and for the obtuse materiality of the fallen word. Within this declining semiotic landscape the reader encounters two signal cases of "expressive" private languages each produced by a monster: Pluto, who in *Inferno* 7.1 cries out "pape

mortal gods call *chalkis*, but men call him *kymindis* . . . the great deep-eddying river who is called *Xanthos* by the gods, but by mortals *Skamandros*.

The passages are crucial to Socrates' argument about the natural origin of names in *Cratylus*, 391d ff.

¹³ On the Hisperic craze, see Michael W. Herren's two volume *The Hisperica Famina: A New Critical Edition with English Translation and Philological Commentary*, Studies and Texts 31 (Toronto: PIMS, 1974, 1987); on its background and larger impact on subsequent authors such as Eriugena, see Michael Lapidge, "The Hermeneutic Style in Tenth Century Anglo-Latin Literature," *ASE* 4 (1975): 67–111.

Satàn, pape Satàn aleppe!"; and the giant Nimrod, who in *Inferno* 31.67, shouts "Raphèl maì amècche zabì almi." In the former it is not difficult to glean the ruins of Greek; in the latter, the ruins of Hebrew.¹⁴ But the matter worth underscoring here is neither the specific origin of Dante's invented tongues nor the obvious relation between monstrosity and disfigured speech, but, rather, it is Dante's participation in the pervasive medieval practice of associating imaginary alien tongues with transgressive forms of discourse such as magical incantation, malediction and sacred parody. Three examples will have to suffice, all from the medieval theater. In Rutebeuf's *Le miracle de Théophile*, the Jewish sorcerer Salatin summons up the devil by intoning the pseudo-Kabbalic chant "lamac lamec bachalyos / Cabahagi sabalyos."¹⁵ In Jehan Bodel's *Jeu de Saint Nicolas*, it is instead a stony Saracen idol who curses his vanquishers in Arabo-Hellenic couplets: "Palas aron ozinomas / Baske bano tudan donas. . . ."¹⁶ Finally, in the medieval *Cornommanía* or "Feast of the Ass" celebrated on the Saturday after Easter, a horned sacristan would travel from house to house chanting the parodic blessing "Iaritan, Iaritan, Iararisti, / Raphayn, Iercoyn Iararisti. . . ."¹⁷

Like Dante's infernal babble, these disfigured languages mark their speakers as marginal figures excluded from linguistic intercourse. Yet

¹⁴ Dante's earliest commentators (and among them Boccaccio) were quick to identify Pluto's *pape* as the Greek exclamation *papai*, *aleppe* with the Greek *alpha* or Hebrew *aleph*—the first—and *satan* with the name of Satan. Hence the standard translation: "Oh Satan, oh Satan [my] God." Other hypotheses for Pluto's language have included English, French and various vernacular dialects. As for Nimrod, Benvenuto and Buti were the first to insist that Nimrod's words are explicitly presented by Dante as nonsensical. But authorial denials have not discouraged a zealous crux-cracker like Henri Guiter, who proposes in "Sur deux passages obscurs de Dante et Jehan Bodel" (*Revue des langues romanes* 77 [1967]: 179–86) that Dante's Nimrod and Jean Bodel's Tervagant are speaking Basque.

¹⁵ The incantation occupies lines 160–68 of the play and is cited from *Oeuvres*, ed. E. Faral and J. Bastin (Paris: Picard, 1959–1960), 2:185. On this passage, with particular reference to Jehan Bodel, see Gilbert Dahan, "Salatin, du *Miracle de Théophile* de Rutebeuf," *Moyen âge* 83 (1977): 445–68.

¹⁶ Lines 1512–1515, ed. A. Henri (Brussels: P. U. F., 1962), 174.

¹⁷ *Le Polyptique du Chanoine Benoît*, ed. P. Fabre (Lille: Au siège des Facultés, 1889); I am in debt to Peter Dronke's *Dante and Medieval Latin Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 46–48 and 136, for this and the prior two references, as well as for first stimulating my interest in Hildegard's imaginary language. Dronke and Dahan both also allude to a section of the *Officium stellae* of Rouen, in which each of the Three Kings speaks in an unknown tongue (see K. Young, *The Drama of the Medieval Church*, [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933], 2:70).

their non-communicative character permits them to mobilize certain cthonic, pulsional and incantatory linguistic resources which are firmly lodged in the demonic order.¹⁸ It is precisely the asocial and demonic aspects of such “expressive” private languages which are remedied in the *Purgatorio*, where the rehabilitation of human nature coincides with the rehabilitation of man’s natural tongues. The process is rendered textually by poetic devices such as the integration into Dante’s poem of passages in Provençal and Latin.¹⁹ But at the *Commedia*’s discursive margins the return to Eden is also connected with a practice which insists upon the iconic power of the word: namely, acrostic writing. In canto 10, a twelve-tercet-long list of emblems of human pride is reeled off, yielding in the text’s margin the acrostic “uom” or “man.” While hardly commensurate with the systematic elaboration of a new tongue, acrostic writing, as employed from the Sibylline oracles to the *carmina quadrata* of Hrabanus Maurus to *Purgatorio* 10, represents a parallel mode of invention. By superimposing upon the horizontal axis of reading, with its *seriatim* listing of historical examples, a vertical axis which unveils in an instant the master-signifier which underwrites the text of history, acrostic writing reaches backward towards Eden and forward towards Apocalypse. It reaches “backward” in the sense that it institutes an order in which, instead of being opaque and resistant, phenomenal signs disclose their essence instantaneously and transparently (in this case, their belonging to the species “man”); it reaches “forward” inasmuch as the vertical master-signifier pretends to impose an absolute hermeneutic closure in an anticipatory enactment of the end of time.

If in Purgatory the powers of the natural *logos* are restored, Dante’s *Paradiso* attempts to reach out beyond nature towards a universal linguistic community founded in a purely supernatural *logos*. Three forms of liminal discourse come into play in this context: intralinguistic hybrids, poetic neologisms and apocalyptic skywriting. The first

¹⁸ The enumeration of demons’ names is a not infrequent motive for verbal invention in medieval texts, on which subject one may consult Robert Garapon, *La fantaisie verbale et le comique dans le théâtre français* (Paris: A. Colin, 1957), 16 ff. and Dahan’s “Salatin,” esp. 461–65.

¹⁹ To this practice one might link the various polyglossic or macaronic poetics found in such textual traditions as Eriugena’s hybrid Greco-Latin poetry and the extravagantly hellenizing poetics of neologism found in the “Hisperic” and “Hermeneutic” styles. On this subject see Lapidge, “The Hermeneutic Style,” esp. 67–76.

must be categorized as “expressive” and is affiliated with one of the commonplaces of medieval mysticism: the phenomenon of “xenoglossia” or speaking in (and understanding) unknown tongues. In *Paradiso* 7, the Emperor Justinian, above whom hovers the cleft flame of Pentecost, intones the hymn:

Osanna, sanctus Deus sabaòth,
superillustrans claritate tua
felices ignes horum malacòth.

Para. 7.1–3

This hymn of praise to the god of hosts is xenoglossic inasmuch as it fuses Latin with “Hebrew”—a language which the historical Justinian could not have known. Dante’s attribution of Hebrew to Justinian is, functionally speaking, not unlike the xenoglossia of Hildegard’s protégée, Elisabeth of Schönau, who was reputed to speak in a distorted Latin during her frequent trances. In each instance, the miraculous alien tongue is not a symptom of alienation (as it would have been in the *Inferno*), but rather serves to anoint the speaker as well as the spoken. Justinian’s Hebræo-Latin marks him as the legitimate heir of the Hebrew kings and attests to the divinely sanctioned character of his vision of salvation history.²⁰ Elisabeth’s Latin grants her access to an otherwise forbidden world of masculine authorities, while cloaking her sometimes heterodox visions in the mantle of orthodox prophecy.

If the first of the *Paradiso*’s imaginary languages involves the pentecostal fusion of natural tongues, the second attempts both to implement the same procedure within Dante’s own Tuscan vernacular and to take us one step beyond. Dante’s primary strategy in this regard consists in vernacularizing words from Hebrew (such as “alleluiando” [2.30.15]) and from Latin (such as “miro gurge” [3.30.68], “laboro” [3.31.9] and “conflati” [3.33.89]). Part and parcel of the *Commedia*’s larger effort to construct an illustrious vernacular out of building-blocks from the “grammatical” languages, the procedure is supplemented by the coining of verbal neologisms which probe the outer grammatical and phonetic limits of human languages as a whole. Boldly inventing such verbs as *immiare* (to “inme”), *intuare* (to “inyou”), *s’inluare* (to “inhim” oneself) and *inleiare* (to “inher”), Dante fuses

²⁰ The point is reinforced by the fact that Pentecost is the Christian reenactment of the Hebrew Midrash on Psalm 68:11 which describes the law being dictated by God on Mount Sinai in xenolalic fashion.

the grammatical categories of subject and object and threatens to collapse every verbal sign into an undifferentiated sea of vowels. That these neologisms effect a reversal of the linguistic consequences of the Fall may be inferred from Adam's statement in *Paradiso* 26 that God's original name was the single vowel *I*, but that his name later became *El*.²¹ Because *I* coincides with the first-person pronoun *io*, and *El* with the third-person *egli* or "he," the fall into linguistic difference entails more than a simple fall out of vowels into vowel-consonant clusters. Implicit is a simultaneous transition from a pre-gendered act of naming in which subject and object are one ($I(o) = I + \text{God}$) to an alienated and gendered relation between the namer and the named ($I(o) = I, El = \text{God, him}$). Collapsing the subject/object barrier and reducing consonants to mere traces, Dante's verbal neologisms thus set out to recover (or, more precisely, *to invent*) an Adamic tongue that would be "imaginary" in the Lacanian sense. A purely vocalic prelapsarian tongue without difference or deferral, such a "full" glossolalia would be permeated by a divine *logos* which is at once *Alpha* and *Omega*, *I* and *AUIEO*—a term which the *Convivio* associates with the word's power to bind.²²

For reasons of brevity I now skip over the last of Dante's paradisiac languages—the hyperacrostic skywriting of cantos 10–27—in order to turn to Hildegard of Bingen's secret language, the *Lingua ignota*. Whereas in Dante's *Commedia* a spectrum of imaginary languages—from infernal babble to paradisiac baby-talk—is developed along the

²¹ Dante is here correcting his own emphatic affirmation in the *De vulgari eloquentiae* 1.4.4 ("non titubo") that man's first word, and hence the first name of God, was *El*. In the Bible the divine name *Elohim* does indeed have chronological precedence over the later *I* (or *Iaweh*). In *Paradiso* 26, consequently, Dante seems to knowingly go against both biblical chronology and Patristic tradition in order to exploit the greater poetic suggestiveness of the revisionist version of the story. On this subject I have learned much from Herbert Marks's "From Adam to Master Adam: Neologism in the *Commedia*," a lecture presented to the Stanford Dante Institute in July of 1988.

²² See *Convivio* 4.6.3–4; cited from vol. 1.2 of *Opere Minori*, ed. C. Vasoli and D. de Robertis (Milan: Riccardo Ricciardi, 1988):

Questo vocabolo, cioè *autore*, senza quella terza lettera C, può discendere da due principi: l'uno si è d'uno verbo molto lasciato da l'uso in gramatica, che significa tanto quanto *legare* parole, cioè *auieo*. E chi ben guarda lui, ne la sua prima voce apertamente vedrà che elli stesso lo dimostra, che solo di legame di parole è fatto, cioè di sole cinque vocali, che sono anima e legame d'ogni parole, e composto d'esse per modo volubile, a figurare l'immagine di legame.

edges of a highly elaborate theological frame, Hildegard's creation remains much more elusive: it is an artifact which stands alone and about whose purpose little is known. Indeed, consisting in a simple word-list of some one thousand or so nouns, the *Lingua ignota* may seem a singularly unpromising "text" to try to interpret. Yet it is the only systematically constructed imaginary language that has come down to us from the Middle Ages. Moreover, authored by one of the most remarkable figures of twelfth century letters (and, by any measure, one of the century's most prolific neologists), the *Lingua ignota* inhabits a complex triangular zone bounded by science, mystical vision and liturgical ritual.²³ As such it offers a unique, if somewhat eccentric, vantage point both on the taxonomy of the arts and sciences within the Hildegardian corpus and on medieval taxonomical practices as a whole.

The *Lingua ignota* and the *Litterae ignotae* exist in two manuscripts from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, one located in Wiesbaden and one in Berlin.²⁴ Found in the company of Hildegard's other

²³ For a comprehensive estimation of Hildegard as author and historical figure one should consult Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom: Saint Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); Peter Dronke's fine chapters in *Women Writers of the Middle Ages: A Critical Study of Texts from Perpetua to Marguerite Porete* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 144–201; and *Poetic Individuality in the Middle Ages: New Departures in Poetry 1000–1150*, 2nd ed. (London: Westfield Publications in Medieval Studies, 1986), 150–79; as well as A. Führkötter and M. Schrader's *Die Echtheit des Schrifttums der heiligen Hildegard von Bingen: Quellenkritische Untersuchungen* (Cologne and Graz: Bohlau, 1956). All references to the text of the *Lingua ignota* here are to M. L. Portmann and A. Odermatt's *Wörterbuch der unbekanntten Sprache (Lingua ignota)* (Basel: Basler Hildegard-Gesellschaft, 1986). Because there are a number of problems with this edition, it is also worth consulting F. W. E. Roth's "Glossae Hildegardis," 390–404 in *Die Althochdeutschen Glossen – Band III*, ed. E. Steinmeyer and E. Sievers (Berlin: Wiedmann, 1895), which reprints "Die Geschichtsquellen des Niederrheingaus," *Geschichtsquellen aus Nassau* 1 (1880): 457–65; and the "Wiesbadener Glossen," ed. Wilhelm Grimm, *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum* 6 (1848): 321–40.

²⁴ In addition to a number of references in her writing and correspondence, Hildegard's authorship of the *Lingua ignota* and *Litterae ignotae* is confirmed by her biographers Gottfried and Theodoric of Echternach and by the acts of the Inquisition. The former pose the rhetorical question

quis vero non miretur, quod cantum dulcissimae melodiae mirabili protulit symphonia, et litteras non prius visas, cum lingua edidit antea inaudita?

and proceed then to discuss her xenoglossic command of Latin (see *Vita* 2.1, reprinted in Migne, PL 197:101b). The latter list her works (*Acta Inquisitionis*, Migne, PL 197:137b) as the

writings, neither is accompanied by an introduction, *accessus* or narrative frame. In each case, the text consists of little more than a list of up to one thousand and ten invented terms, the vast majority of which are flanked first by a Latin and then a Middle German translation. Individual entries are neither alphabetized nor presented in random succession, but instead are divided into categories: six in the Wiesbaden codex and fifteen in the Berlin manuscript. The categories covered are the following (in sequential order and according to my own nomenclature): first, the supernatural sphere; second, the human order; third, the church; fourth, the secular order; fifth, time measurements; sixth, the socio-economic sphere; and seventh, the natural world.²⁵

By its very structure, Hildegard's work discloses its close affinities with encyclopedic works such as Isidore of Seville's *Etymologies* and, most of all, with medieval dictionaries and word lists. While certain lexical categories are notably absent—cosmology and rhetoric, to name only two—the work's organization is hierarchical and its scope universal, spanning everything from the highest to the lowest, from God and the angels to the humble grasshopper and hornet. The universal impulse which inspires the *Lingua ignota* is all the more striking when one examines individual subsections, such as those covering the names of plants and herbs (over one hundred and thirty entries), trees (forty-eight entries) and birds (over sixty entries). The fact that over one quarter of the total invented terms refer to the natural world and that another one hundred and forty describe the human body, closely affiliates the *Lingua ignota* with Hildegard's principal scientific works: the *Physica* (concerned with the natural world) and the *Causae et curae* (a medical tract).²⁶ While these two treatises survey many of the same materials, there remain, nonetheless, some notable gaps with respect to organization: the *Lingua ignota*'s subsections are ordered differently and the sequence and distribution of its lexical entries is usually closer

... librum simplicis medicinae, librum Expositiones Evangeliorum, Coelestis harmoniae cantum, linguam ignotam cum suis litteris, quae omnia octo anni perficit: quod plenius in accessu libri Vitae meritorum colligitur.

²⁵ For a detailed schema of Hildegard's *Lingua ignota* see the appendix which follows this essay.

²⁶ The connection between the *Lingua ignota* and the *Physica* is noted in Robert Wolff, "Herrschaft und Dienst in Sprache und Natur: Geistverwandtes bei Hildegard von Bingen und Stefan George," 245 in *Hildegard von Bingen 1179-1979: Festschrift zum 800. Todestag der heiligen*, ed. Anton Ph. Brück (Mainz: Gesellschaft für Mittelrheinische Kirchengeschichte, 1979); but see also 239-62.

to works like the medieval pseudo-Dosithean *hermeneumata* and Isidore's *Etymologies* than to Hildegard's own works.²⁷

An ulterior indication of the encyclopedic ambitions which shape the *Lingua ignota* is its tendency to adopt the macrocosm/microcosm structure which typifies much of the Hildegard's writing, whether visionary or scientific. This is to say, individual subcategories generally recapitulate the larger pattern of moving step by step from top to middle to bottom, from God to man to hornet. Just as the listing of supernatural terms (of which there are only nineteen) begins with God and passes down through the angels and saints to humankind, so the list of kinship terms (of which there are twenty-seven) extends downward from father to mother to family to, finally, the clan. Likewise, the one hundred and twenty-one words referring to the human body are presented in descending fashion from the top of the head to the upper torso to the midriff to the sole of the foot. Although the latter procedure is ordinary enough, the very copiousness of Hildegard's corporeal vocabulary deserves some comment inasmuch as, in the course of the Middle Ages, the human body gradually came to be a privileged site for verbal invention and a veritable treasure house of exotic vocabulary. It would be tempting to attribute this to a congenital human urge to assign private names to one's own body—and, especially, to one's *private* parts. But whether or not one endorses Freud's claim that

where one finds incomprehensible neologisms one may suspect combinations of components having a sexual significance,²⁸

the fact remains that this feature is common to the *Lingua ignota*, to the *hermeneumata*, to certain tenth century medical poems written in the so-called "hermeneutic style," and to the Hisperic *Lorica* (which contains elaborate lists of body terms which have been encoded via recourse to reinvented Greek and Hebrew words so as to figuratively "shield" the bearer's body).²⁹ It is also operative in the world of

²⁷ On the *hermeneumata* see volume three of the *Corpus Glossariorum Latinorum*, ed. Georg Goetz (Leipzig: Teubner, 1892); but also such bilingual *glossae* as that reprinted in PL 112:1575–1578, and attributed by Migne to Hrabanus Maurus and Walafrid Strabo.

²⁸ *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. A. A. Brill (New York: Modern Library, 1938), 373.

²⁹ On the Hisperic *Lorica*, see the second volume of Herren's edition of *The*

Romance when swords and other regalia connected with the hero's bodily *virtus*, are assigned secret names. In a broader sense, it is also integral to Hildegard's medical practice, where incantations and verbal charms are employed in order to ensure the health or protection of human bodies and their reproductive functions. While there is little evidence that Hildegard's "unheard-of words" are meant to function as verbal charms, the preponderance of herbal and corporeal terms in the *Lingua ignota* could imply a tie to the arts of healing.

The above-noted predominance of genealogical and hierarchical patterns in the organization of Hildegard's text is sometimes troubled by a certain "turbulence" on the local level. Competing taxonomical schemes intrude here and there, as in the subsection on trees where some fifty entries are suddenly presented according to the alphabetical sequence of their Latin cognates (a further indication that the *Lingua ignota* was probably generated via a set of word lists). Also noteworthy are some minor variations within the expected genealogical progression. As in the *hermeneumata*, the kinship ladder is, for instance, sundered at two junctures: the words for mother (*maiz*) and son (*scirizin*) are disjoined by the insertion of terms for step-father and step-mother (*hiltzpeueriz* and *hiltzmaiz*); and the word for mistress (*pleniza*) insinuates itself in between the words for uncle (*peuors*) and aunt (*maizfia*).³⁰ Yet it should be observed that such interruptions may be more apparent than real, since medieval conceptions of family were far more inclusive than those which characterize the present era.

No less striking is Hildegard's positioning of her extensive vocabulary for the human body between a list of permanent bodily afflictions and a brief vocabulary for skin diseases. While one would not wish to overstate the importance of such an anomaly, particularly since disease was regarded as an integral part of the "natural" order, it suggests that the *Lingua ignota* is structured by a subliminal tension between an upbeat descriptive naturalism and a sense that the human order is inexorably

Hisperica Famina; and on the "Hermeneutic style" poetry of the English tenth century, see the two glossarial poems reproduced in Lapidge, 103-4.

³⁰ *Maiz* seems derived from the Middle German *matere* (mother) and/or *meiz* (cleavage, incision, opening). *Scirizin* is of metaphoric origin, combining the Middle German *schîr* (pure, clear, lustrous) with the diminutive *-chen*, but following the pattern of the Middle German *kindelin* (small child). The connection between *schîr* and the word for son (*sun* or *Sohn*) seems motivated by the fact that the latter is a virtual homonym of the word for "sun" or *sonne*; (associations with the glorified Christ second the link). *Peueriz* and *peuors* are calques on the Latin *pater*.

linked to corruption, disease and decay. If the book of nature is brimming with signs that bear the indelible signature of the creator, the human body and body politic seem strangely covered with the ulcerations of the Fall. The split extends through much of the Hildegardian corpus, founded as it is on the attempt to reconcile “a life-affirming vision, nuanced by the thousand subtle harmonies of the macrocosm and microcosm” with a call to “renunciation of the world, ascetic transcendence, and a stark moral dualism.”³¹

Such apparent zones of “turbulence” aside, it would seem fair to conclude that the defining traits of Hildegard’s *Lingua ignota* are its naturalism and even “creatural” realism. Its inclusion of terms for sweat (*suinz*) and feces (*meginz*), for the penis (*creueniz*) and vulva (*fragizlanz*), have provoked one nineteenth century philologist to speak of it as “absolut obszön.”³² Yet this supposed “obscenity,” more the symptom of a newfound Victorian delicacy than of a judicious examination of the facts, may well provide a key to understanding what motivates Hildegard’s impulse to rename the world, and above all the sexual/scatological world: does it not suggest that, more than a simple naturalist enterprise, the *Lingua ignota* represents an effort to begin language anew, to do away with all the tarnished stage-setting and re-discover the aesthetic core of human language (language as virgin beauty, ornamentation, music, objectless play); an effort to recover the purity and innocence of Adam’s act of naming in the present?

If the marginal presence of physical ailments and moral infirmities in Hildegard’s lexicon might cause one to lean instead in the direction of the Last Judgement, the case for an affirmative answer is made forcefully by the loving detail with which the Edenic worlds of farm, garden and convent are documented at the expense of any allusion to the urban world. Farm, garden and convent are for Hildegard realms associated with the ontological and aesthetic plenitude of God’s crea-

³¹ Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*, 251, but see also 42–45.

³² The remark is F. W. E. Roth’s and is cited (and summarized) in the Portmann/Odermatt edition of the *Lingua ignota* (viii). The word *suinz* seems to fuse the Middle German *sweiz* and the Latin *sudor*. The genesis of *meginz* is far less evident, although the Greek root *mega* and Middle German verb *megenen* (to make powerful, plentiful, strong) may be related. *Creueniz* is probably derived from Latin terms referring to tumescence and creation such as *crevi* (the perfect form of the verb *crescere*, meaning to be born, to grow, to thrive, to increase); while *fragizlanz* seems related to the Latin *fragilitas* (or frailness) and/or the vulgar Latin *fragium* (or hearth).

tion. Embodied by the Virgin, on whose body precious jewels and garments are not dangerous supplements, but instead tokens of God's presence, this plenitude knows no disjunction between nature and artifice, essence and ornament, cosmos and cosmetics. In precisely this spirit the virgin words of the *Lingua ignota* may assume a dual identity: they are at once secret names and glossy surfaces, at once semantically "full" divine emanations and semantically "empty" rhetorical embellishments. As regards their apparent "realism," it is worth recalling that not only were medieval sensibilities towards bodily states and functions far less prudish than our own, but, more importantly, one of the key attributes of Hildegard's thought is the audacity and freedom with which she transforms the creatural into the transcendent. Such is the case with her use of sweat metaphors; in the words of Peter Dronke:

[S]udat is a favourite word of Hildegard's, and is often used in conjunction with her favourite imagery of greenness, flowering and perfumes: for her *sudare* has the associations not of the sweat of effort but of the distillation of a perfume, a heavenly quality, out of anything that is fertile or beautiful on earth.³³

Further testimony concerning Hildegard's dynamic conception of the humble and creatural may be found in the Wiesbaden codex, which touches upon the themes of divulgation and simplicity in its very title, *Ignota lingua per simplicem hominem Hildegardem prolata*: a phrase which may be translated as "the unknown language brought forth by agency of the simple person [or literally, *man*] Hildegard." Hildegard's characteristic self-presentation here as a simpleton must surely be read as more than a humility topos. The phrase "simple man," as elsewhere her frequent self-designation as a "poor little female," signals that the author's exclusion from the "complex" world of masculine letters is actually the mark of her inclusion in an even more privileged linguistic community: the community of prophets. Barbara Newman has demonstrated the importance of this rhetorical strategy in her study of Hildegard's "theology of the feminine."³⁴ In order to firm up her claims to legitimacy, Hildegard defines the present era as an effeminate time—a *muliebre tempus*—to be remedied

³³ *Poetic Individuality*, 157.

³⁴ On gender reversals and the problem of female authority see Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*, xix, 3 and 34–41.

by the (provisional) virilization of actual women. Because men have declined into femininity in these topsy-turvy times, God finds himself obliged to summon the "frail and simple sex" to take on the roles once assigned to the prophets of Hebrew antiquity. Contemporary women are therefore called upon to write and prophesy, to become the chosen vessels for earthly and celestial tongues.

Beyond this oblique avowal of prophetic intent, the most intriguing evidence that naturalist description and mystical vision are thoroughly intertwined in the *Lingua ignota* is internal. On the grammatical level, Hildegard's language consists entirely of substantives in the nominative case. So not unlike Dante's pre-pronominal Adamic tongue, it seems to envisage a state of absolute linguistic plenitude in which names and nouns simply radiate their meanings and interconnections, without ever having to decline into the carnivalesque world of pronouns, verbs, predicates, modifiers or adjectives.³⁵

On the level of word-formation, moreover, Hildegard's language is both systematic and asystematic, straddling the seam between the extraterrestrial glossolalias of the *fin de siècle* and the uglossian creations of the Schleyers and the Zamenhoffs. As may already have been evident in the case of kinship terms, it makes extensive use of prefixes and suffixes as building-blocks. Employed just like their Middle German cognates, these are often generated by fusing two phonetically similar words such as *halbe* (half, side, party) and *hülfe* (help, aid, support), so as to yield *hilz* or "step" and hence: *hilzmaiz* (stepmother), *hilzpeueriz* (stepfather) and *hilzsciriz* (stepson).³⁶ In other cases prefixes are produced by metaphorical association, as in *luz*, which recurs in the words *luzeia* (M. Ger. *ouga*; Eng. *eye*), *luzerealz* (M. Ger. *ougrinch*; Eng. *eye socket*), *luziliet* (M. Ger. *ouglith*; Eng. *eyelash*), *luziminispier* (M. Ger. *ougbrawa*; Eng. *eyelid*), *luzpomphia* (M. Ger. *ougappel*; Eng. *eyeball*) and perhaps also in *luxzia* (butterfly). Modeled after the Latin *lux* (or

³⁵ As such, Hildegard's work inserts itself in that metaphysical tradition of probing language's origins which, beginning with Plato, founds the edifice of language on nouns and proper names, while positing a remote "private" act of naming, whose adequacy or inadequacy the philosopher is called upon to investigate. Socrates' task in the *Cratylus* is thus to locate, via the "science" of etymology, certain names and nouns which are correct, which is to say, illumined by the divine logos. As for the other parts of speech, they are deemed inferior. Relegated to the sphere not of being but of becoming, their task is to unfold the various refracted names of the logos in time and space.

³⁶ But cf. *hilzial* (= wrist) and *hilziol* (= folding door) both of which involve the notion of hinging.

light)—a connection strengthened by contemporary optical theories which held that the eye was either the recipient or the source of light—the prefix *luz* permits Hildegard to spin out a series of further metaphors (which, again, tend to shadow the syllabic structure of their Middle German equivalents). As a case in point one may take the word *luzpomphia*, in which the term *appel* has been replaced by a variant on the Latin *pomum* (or fruit), yielding a marvelously surrealistic redefinition of the eyeball as a sort of “light apple.” Similarly, the word *luziminispier* suggests that the eyelid is a “light manager or attendant,” inasmuch as *minispier* appears a distortion of the Latin word *minister*.

This somewhat erratic, but nonetheless, analytical usage of prefixes and suffixes coexists with hermetic features such as a seeming allegorization of the letters of the alphabet. To cite the most salient case, the words for God (*aigonz*) and Angel (*aieganz*) both extend from “A” to “Z,” whereas the word for Christ the Saviour (*liuionz*) begins with “L”—that is, at the mid-point of the alphabet—and ends in the omnipresent apocalyptic “Z”; each word appearing to mime its own position within salvation history. But Hildegard’s primary strategy for generating words consists in adapting and recombining root-words from Latin, Hebrew, Greek and Middle German with a melodic and alliterative effect in mind. The term for “devil” is, for instance, *diuueliz*, which bears the imprint of the Middle German *duivel* (*Teufel* in modern German). The term for “woman,” *vanix*, seems instead of Latin derivation, descending from *femina*, *fano* (to dedicate or consecrate) and/or *vanus* (empty, vain). The term for “Bishop’s chair,” on the other hand, is *tronischia*, ultimately derived from the Greek *thrónos*. As is apparent from the above examples, all natural root-words have been subjected to a procedure which is characteristic of all “expressive” imaginary languages. They have been encrypted and then rendered exotic through the redoubling of multi-vowel sequences and the addition of a plethora of *sch*’s, *x*’s and, especially, *z*’s.³⁷ The *Lingua ignota*, in fact, repeats a pattern typical of glossolalias: its somewhat limited phonetic “palette”—which does not, among other things, appear to include any diphthongs—undergoes a series of cyclical mutations, such that once a given syllable occurs in one or two successive invented words, the same syllable is likely to recur constantly, as if an obsessive leitmotif, in the succeeding words. This “clustering”

³⁷ 95% of Hildegard’s invented words contain an *sch*, *x* or *z*. Only 237 or so entries out of an approximate total of 1017 do not contain a *z*.

phenomenon ceases only when a new leitmotif takes its place, at which time it either vanishes or becomes dormant. For example, the consonant/vowel sequence *buz*, entirely absent in the first 750 items in Hildegard's vocabulary, suddenly figures in over *half* of the next fifty entries, never to resurface after item 800. Similarly, the syllable *zia* occurs only three times in the first one hundred items on Hildegard's list, then jumps to eight occurrences between items 100 and 150, then redescends to three occurrences between 150 and 200, and so on and so forth.³⁸ The net effect of these generative mechanisms is that they render the *Lingua ignota* a highly alliterative, rhythmically vigorous tongue which, though related to glossolalias, resembles most of all a sort of Germanic illustrious vernacular in which Latin, Hellenic and Semitic elements appear fully integrated within a strongly Teutonic phonetic and orthographic grid. The point may be of some significance because in the so-called "Berlin Fragment," Hildegard seemingly goes against the Patristic tradition by advancing the hypothesis that in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve spoke a lost Teutonic tongue and not Hebrew.³⁹

Whether Adamic or Apocalyptic (or, indeed, both), it is essential to note that, in the last instance, the *Lingua ignota*'s claims as an inspired language are founded on its connections to music. Hildegard's letter to Pope Anastasius provides important testimony in this respect, ascribing a miraculous origin to her imaginary language and writing system, while identifying them not with her mystical or scientific works, but with her liturgical *Symphonia*.⁴⁰ The preface to the *Liber*

³⁸ Such cyclical phonetic/syllabic patterns appear so frequently in the *Lingua ignota* that it is hard not to conclude that Hildegard composed her language in linear fashion, or, in other words, according to the sequence of the existing manuscripts.

³⁹ The passage in question figures among a series of *sententiae* attributed to Hildegard; see H. Schipperges, "Ein unveröffentlichtes Hildegard-Fragment," *Sudhoffs Archiv für Geschichte der Medizin* 40 (1956): 41-77. Although the authenticity of the Berlin fragment has never been challenged, Peter Dronke has recently pointed to a number of improbabilities which it contains, and among these, the thesis that Adam's language was Teutonic. See "Problemata Hildegardiana," *Mittelalterliches Jahrbuch* 16 (1981): 97-131, but esp. 108-9.

⁴⁰ The epistle to Anastasius, dating from 1153 or 1154, provides the earliest certain reference in the Hildegardian corpus to the *Lingua ignota*. In it Hildegard describes her inspiration as follows (Migne, PL 197:152d):

sed ille qui sine defectione magnus est, modo parvum habitaculum tetigit, ut illud miraculum videret, et ignotas litteras formaret, ac ignotam linguam pro-

divinorum operum is equally unambiguous, speaking of how she received “the harmonies of music and of the *Lingua ignota* and *litterae*” in a single “celestial revelation.”⁴¹ It should thus come as no surprise that the only stage-setting in which her numinous nouns were ever permitted to descend into the ordinary world of predicates and predication was liturgical. In the context of the elaborate rituals which Hildegard staged in the privacy of her convent at Rupertsberg, her nuns were wont to sing one of the abbess’s own compositions. The song in question celebrated the dedication of the church and is the earliest surviving record of Hildegard’s *Geheimsprache*. It reads:

O orchis Ecclesia,
armis divinis præcinta,
et hyazintho ornata,
tu es *caldemia*
stigmatum *loifolum*
et urbs scientiarum.

meret, atque ut multimodam sed sibi consonantem melodiam sonaret.

A possible prior allusion may be found in a letter from Hildegard’s scribe Volmar, dated approximately 1147 (reproduced in the *Analecta Sanctae Hildegardis Opera*, ed. Johannes Pitra, [Montecassino, 1882], 346 in vol. 8 of his *Analecta Sacra*), which asks

ubi tunc responsa de universis casibus suis quaerentium? Ubi tunc nova interpretatio Scripturarum? Ubi tunc vox inauditae melodiae? et vox inauditae linguae?

On Hildegard’s music one may consult Immaculata Ritscher’s “Zur Musik der heiligen Hildegard von Bingen,” 189–209, in *Hildegard von Bingen 1179–1979: Festschrift zum 800. Todestag der heiligen*.

⁴¹ See the Proemium (ed. Pitra, *Analecta Sacra*, 8:7–8):

Et factum est in nono anno postquam vera visio veras visiones, in quibus per decennium insudaveram, mihi simplici homini manifestaverat, qui primus annus fuit postquam eadem visio subtilitates diversarum naturarum creaturarum ac responsa et admonitiones tam minorum quam maiorum plurimarum personarum, et symphoniam armonie celestium revelationum ignotamque linguam et litteras cum quibusdam aliis expositionibus, in quibus post predictas visiones multa infirmitate multoque labore corporis gravata per octo annos duraveram, mihi ad explanandum ostenderat, cum sexaginta annorum essem, fortem et mirabilem visionem vidi, in qua etiam per quinquennium laboravi.

The “litteras cum quibusdam aliis expositionibus” are presumably Hildegard’s exegetical works.

O, o, tu es etiam *crizanta*
in alto sono et es *chorzta* gemma.

(Oh immense Ecclesia,
girded with divine arms,
and bedecked in hyacinth,
you are the fragrance
of the wounds of peoples
and the city of knowledge.
Oh, oh, you are truly anointed
amidst lofty sounds and are a sparkling gem.)⁴²

Of the five invented terms employed in this Latin antiphon (which, as is characteristic of Hildegard, neither scans nor rhymes nor follows a regular stanzaic pattern), only *loifolum* or “people” figures in extant manuscripts of the *Lingua ignota*.⁴³ Yet the adjectives *orzchis* and *chorzta*, as well as the participial adjective *crizanta* and noun *caldemia* are clearly cast in the same linguistic mold.⁴⁴ Intruding like rough ornaments into the angelic song, they help to build a ritual bridge between the mass at Rupertsberg and its heavenly prototype. Similar to the elaborate jewelry, the allegorical headgear and the bridal gowns worn by Hildegard’s nuns as they draw near to the altar to partake in the mystery of the eucharist, these virginal words participate in a delicate blurring of boundaries between *nomen* and *numen*, natural and supernatural, convent and celestial church. The fusion is effected

⁴² Liturgical song #67 (“In dedicatione ecclesiae”), cited from Hildegard von Bingen, *Lieder*, ed. P. Barth, I. Ritscher and J. Schmidt-Gürg (Salzburg: O. Müller, 1969). English translation mine.

⁴³ *Loifolum* seems to have been produced by grafting a deformed Middle High German *liut* (Modern *Leute*) onto *volc* (Modern *Volk*) and then adding *um* to indicate a Latin neuter plural genitive.

⁴⁴ *Orzchis* and *chorzta* are rather difficult to decode, although the former may be related to the Middle High German prefix *ort* (meaning apex, peak or summit) and the latter to the Latin *corusca* (glittering or shimmering). *Caldemia*, on the other hand, seems less a calque than a metaphor founded on the Latin *calida* (warm liquid), *caldarius* (with hot water) and related terms such as the vulgar Latin *caldaria* (an Ordeal kettle or cauldron), all of which suggest warm vaporious emanations. As for *crizanta*, it is evidently derived by grafting the vulgar Latin *crisma* (or anointing) onto either *sancta* (holy, consecrated) and/or *uncta* (oiled, sumptuous). It ought to be noted in passing that Hildegard’s coinage for the word “church” is *crizia*, which not only echoes *crizanta*, but also appears to meld the Greek *eklesia* with Christ’s name.

linguistically via the relay of Latin, the language of the institutional Church, which here provides the frame into which the *Lingua ignota* inserts itself, respecting the conventions of Latin gender and case structure. Yet all the while the meaning of Hildegard's words remains withdrawn, their very secrecy at once affirming the impermeability of the convent's walls and the private nature of its treasures. Seen from within, the fragrances, immensities and peoples which they denote may be embraced as palpable presences; seen from without, they present themselves as little more than empty lyric shells.

* * *

In concluding, I should like to probe the convent walls of Rupertsberg for one last moment. In their ability to create a sense of mystery, intimacy and immanence, their ability to enclose a small community over and against the outside world, are they really so different from the cover of a book? The forging of u glossias, in other words, often seems like little more than a radicalization of the procedures common to all writing but, most especially, to fictional writing. In some fundamental sense every text is a public attempt at a privatization of language, every metaphor a game of hide and seek, every readership a community joined together by certain forms of ritual communion. While perhaps obvious, these matters are not insignificant because, despite the centrality in the contemporary canon of works such as Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, cultural historians still tend to place the inventors of languages at several removes from the mainstream of literary and philosophical inquiry. My own approach has been to assume the contrary position: to try to show how the margin leads back to center; how imaginary languages, literary fictions, communities of belief and public institutions are confused and intertwined. Outside of the usual isolating spotlight, the inventors of Volapüks and Martians, of tongues edenic and eschatological, may thus be seen in a somewhat more familiar light: that is, not as dreamers or nostalgics, but instead as furious decoders and encoders: the philologists of imaginary worlds . . . *nos semblables, nos frères, nos soeurs*.

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Appendix

AN ANALYTICAL OUTLINE OF

HILDEGARD OF BINGEN'S "LINGUA IGNOTA"

Note: all numbers refer to M. L. Portmann and A. Odermatt's *Wörterbuch der unbekanntten Sprache (Lingua Ignota)*. The nomenclature and section divisions are my own, and are sometimes approximative, because of the incompleteness of the manuscript tradition. Percentages listed along the right-hand margin refer to the proportion between the total number of lexemes and the items within each general category.

- | | |
|---|---------------------------------|
| <p>I – The Supernatural Order (#1–#18)</p> <p>A. God (#1, #4)</p> <p>B. Angels (#2, #5)</p> <p> 1. in heaven (#2)</p> <p> 2. in hell (#5)</p> <p>C. Saints (#3, #10–#14)</p> <p>D. Man as spiritual being (#6–#9, #15–#18)</p> <p> 1. as God's creation (#6–#9)</p> <p> 2. as believer, practitioner (#15–#18)</p> | <p>[18 items]
[1.78%]</p> |
| <p>II – The Human Order (#19–#189)</p> <p>A. Kinship relations (#19–#45)</p> <p> 1. Fathers (#19–#21)</p> <p> 2. Mothers (#22)</p> <p> 3. Step-parents (#23–#24)</p> <p> 4. Children (#25–#26)</p> <p> 5. The five stages of human development (#27–#31)</p> <p> 6. Siblings (#32–#33)</p> <p> 7. Relations outside the nuclear family (#34–#42)</p> <p> 8. The marital unit (#43–#44)</p> <p> 9. The clan (#45)</p> <p>B. Permanent bodily afflictions (#46–#58)</p> <p> 1. Impaired senses (#46–#51, #58)</p> <p> 2. General conditions (#52–#57)</p> | <p>[172 items]
[16.96%]</p> |

C. Body Parts (#59–#179)

1. Head (#59–#112)

a. Upper section (#60–#71)

b. Hair (#72–#76)

c. Ears (#85–#87)

d. Nose (#88, #91)

e. Facial bones (#92–#94)

f. Mouth (#59, #95–#106)

g. Lower section (#107–#112)

2. Upper Body (#113–#134)

a. Bones (#113–#116)

b. Extremities (#117–#129)

c. Larger torso structures (#130–#134)

3. Middle Section of Body (#135–#166)

a. Lower torso (#135–#136, #138–#143)

b. Organs, Innards (#137, #144–#148, #150–#154)

c. Organic fluids (#149, #155–#157)

d. Organs of excretion, excrement (#158–#161)

e. Sexual organs (#162–#166)

4. Lower Body (#167–#179)

D. Skin diseases (#180–#189)**III – The Church (#190–#341)**

[153 items]

[15.08%]

A. Hierarchy of church offices (#190–#219)

1. The priesthood (#190–#219)

2. Teaching, education (#209–#213)

3. Monastic life (#214–#219)

B. The temple of worship (#220–#341)

1. Types of ecclesiastical structures (#220–#224)

2. Architectural features (#225–#282)

3. Church equipment (#283–#341)

a. Liturgical and sacramental objects (#283–#304)

b. Literary/musical texts for the liturgy (#305–#323)

c. Liturgical robes (#324–#341)

IV – The Secular Hierarchy (#342–#447)

[106 items]

[10.45%]

A. Positions of authority (#342–#352, #354–#357)

B. Middle to lower stations in life (#353, #358–#365)

C. Estate managers (#366–#368)

- D. Craftsmen, Workers (#369-#409)
- E. Entertainers (#410-#416)
- F. Morally deficient individuals (#417-#426)
- G. Physically deformed individuals (#427-#428)
- H. Members of hunting/exploring parties (#429-#438)
- I. Positions within the household (#439-#447)

V – Time (#448-#482) [35 items]
[3.45%]

- A. The diurnal cycle (#448-#449)
- B. The week (#450-#456)
- C. Time and light (#457-#459)
- D. Larger temporal units (#460-#462)
- E. Relational terms (#463-#465)
- F. Months (#466-#477)
- G. Hours (#478-#482)

VI – The Socio-Economic Domain (#483-#751) [269 items]
[26.53%]

- A. Clothing (#483-#503)
- B. Currency (#504-#506)
- C. Household equipment (#507-#532)
 - 1. Skinning knives (#507-#508)
 - 2. Building hardware (#509-#532)
- D. Farming (#533-#569)
 - 1. Farming implements (#533-#560)
 - 2. Farmland (#561-#561)
- E. Writing and Illuminating (#570-#593)
- F. Weaving and Sewing (#594-#628)
- G. Military Equipment (#629-#655)
- H. Craftsman's tools (#656-#664)
- I. Wine making and beer making (#665-#703)
 - 1. Equipment for wine and beer production (#665-#687)
 - 2. Products (#688-#691, #701)
 - 3. Ingredients (#692-#695)
 - 4. The vines (#695-#700, #702-#704)
- J. The home (#705-#751)
 - 1. The house (#705-#714)
 - 2. Outbuildings and agricultural supplies (#715-#726)
 - 3. The hearth (#727-#731)

4. Kitchen implements (#732-#739)

5. Food supplies (#740-#751)

VII – The Natural World (#752-#1011)

[261 items]

[25.74%]

A. Trees (#752-#800)

B. Plants (#801-#935)

1. Herbs, Flowers, Spices (#801-#881, #905-#915, #917-#921)

2. Vegetables (#882-#904, #916)

a. The onion family (#882-#890, #894)

b. The turnip family (#892-#893, #896)

c. Miscellaneous vegetables (#891, #895, #903-#904)

d. Salad vegetables and herbs (#897-#901)

3. Grains (#922-#929)

4. Legumes (#930-#935)

C. Birds (#936-#999)

D. Insects (#1000-#1011)