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THE LINGUISTIC ARTISTRY OF HILDEGARD OF BINGEN AS EXEMPLIFIED IN HER LETTERS*

In the modern times, the life and activity of Hildegard of Bingen (1095–1179) have inspired academic research in many different fields. Her works are a valuable source revealing the most significant ideas which made up the medieval outlook, in particular those pertaining to the intellectual fields of theology, philosophy, medicine, and natural history. It is not without a reason that this 12th century Benedictine nun is considered among the most interesting medieval writers.

While Hildegard's fundamental theological works are the three volumes of her so-called visionary trilogy: *Scivias*,¹ *Liber divinorum operum*,² and *Liber vitae meritorum*,³ it is above all her letters⁴ that offer a precious reflection of the epoch. Perhaps even more importantly, they shed the light necessary to understand Hildegard's rich activity, of which they are also an insightful record. In her letters, Hildegard addresses significant intellectual

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¹ See *Hildegardis Bingensis Scivias*, ed. Adelgundis Fürkötter, Angela Carlevaris, Corpus Christianorum. Continuatio Mediaevalis [further: CCCM] 43–43A (Turnhout: Brepols, 1978).

² See *Hildegardis Bingensis Liber divinorum operum*, eds. Albert Delorez, Peter Dronke, CCCM 92 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1996).

³ See *Hildegardis Bingensis Liber vitae meritorum*, ed. Angela Carlevaris, CCCM 90 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1995).

⁴ See *Hildegardis Bingensis Epistolarium*, ed. Lieven van Acker, pars I, ep. I–XC, CCCM 91 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1991); pars II, ep. XCI–CCL, CCCM 91A (Turnhout: Brepols, 1993). See also *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen*, vols. 1–3, trans. Joseph L. Baird, Radd K. Ehrman (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1994–2004).

problems of her time, simultaneously discussing practical issues concerning spiritual direction. Moreover, the collection of Hildegard's letters is of outstanding value from the literary and linguistic points of view, since it comprises very interesting instances of the genre of medieval Christian epistle.

As a literary genre, letter-writing began to develop rapidly with the advent of Christianity, although epistles had been a common form of communication even before and assumed diverse forms, such as the dedication letter, the treatise, the preface, the poetic letter, the private letter, the open letter, as well as the letter to a fictitious addressee. A range of various stylistic and rhetorical means was employed in letter-writing, which in time became one of the prevailing literary genres. Probably the most important in its history, as well as in the history of Western philosophy and culture, are the epistles written by St. Paul and other apostles, which make up several of the books of the Bible. A great historical and literary value is attributed also to the existing letters of Plato, Cicero, Seneca, Pliny the Younger, Jerome,

Augustine, and Ambrose, to mention the most important names only. From Hildegard's times many collections of letters have been preserved, among them those written by Hugh of Cluny, Ivo of Chartres, Rupert of Deutz, Marbodius Redonensis, Hugh of Saint Victor, Peter Abelard, Bernard of Clairvaux, Richard of Saint Victor, Gerhoh of Reichersberg, Otho de Lagery, Achard of Saint Victor, and John of Salisbury.

THE EPISTLE AS A LITERARY GENRE

While the epistle developed into a separate literary genre already in early antiquity, a detailed theory of the style employed in letter-writing was originally put forward by Demetrius Phalereus in his work *Peri hermeneias* (*De elocutione*, Eng. *On style*). Demetrius (c. 350 BC—c. 283 BC) distinguished four types of style: plain, elevated (grand), elegant and forcible (forceful)⁵. He also distinguished the three elements that make up a style:

⁵ See Demetrius, *On style*, the Greek text of Demetrius' *De Elocutione* edited after the Paris manuscript with introduction, translation and facsimiles by W. Rhys Roberts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1902), 67–207, <http://classicpersuasion.org/pw/demetrius/>. See also Demetriusz, *O wyrażaniu się*, in *Trzy stylistyki greckie: Arystoteles – Demetriusz – Dionizjusz*, trans. and ed. Władysław Madyda, Biblioteka Narodowa, Seria II, nr 75 (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1953), 81–167. For Demetrius' remarks on the epistolary style, see *ibid.*, 151–155.

content, diction and word-arrangement.⁶ The elevated, or grand, style is characterized by sophistication and linguistic richness, and it is suited to the narrative of heroes, great and famous battles or cosmic myths. The plain style is appropriate while describing scenes from everyday, ordinary life, and the forcible (forceful) is used to express anger and Cynic invective. The elegant style is characteristic of poetry, it is the style of wedding-songs and it is suited to the description of love. Its two variants are lofty charm and more commonplace wit. Władysław Madyda extensively discusses Demetrius' recommendations on letter-writing, focusing in particular on his opinion that a letter needs to combine two styles: the elegant and the plain.⁷ The essence of the elegant style is determined by its diction (vocabulary) and expression, the latter accomplished by means conciseness, special word-arrangement and the use of rhetorical devices, the most important of which are: repetition, anaphora, hyperbole, epiphonema (*acclamatio*), metaphor, and parable.

Already in the ancient times, the cultural significance of letter-writing resulted in the proliferation of textbooks explaining its rules. According to Lidia Winniczuk, the mastery of the art of letter-writing involved, as the first step, being schooled in its theory, then practice (*exercitatio*), and finally imitation (*imitatio*) of the existing patterns.⁸ Cicero's definition of the epistle as *amicorum colloquia absentium* (*Rep.* III, 3) was considered as that of a model letter. Highly praised were also Seneca's epistolary writings. Kazimierz Leśniak, in his preface to the Polish edition of the *Moral Letters to Lucilius*, describes the existing collection of Seneca's 124 letters as "undoubtedly his most beautiful work, as well as the most useful one of all."⁹ Like Cicero, Seneca considered a letter to be a conversation with an absent one, which he expressed by saying: "I thank you for writing to me so often;

⁶ Demetrius' rhetoric, as well as the particular styles he distinguished, are discussed in detail by Alicja Szastyńska-Siemion in her article *Liryka grecka w pismach retorycznych*, in *Retoryka antyczna i jej dziedzictwo*, ed. Jerzy Axer (Warszawa: Aletheia, 1996). See also *The Cambridge History of Classical Literature*, vol. 1, *Greek Literature*, part 4, *The Hellenistic Period and the Empire*, eds. P.E. Easterling, Bernard MacGregor Walker Knox (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 88f.

⁷ Cf. *Trzy stylistyki greckie, Arystoteles – Demetriusz – Dionizjusz*, 154.

⁸ Cf. Lidia Winniczuk, *Epistolografia. Łacińskie podręczniki epistolograficzne w Polsce w XV-XVI wieku* (Warszawa: Warszawskie Drukarnia Naukowa, 1953), 68.

⁹ Kazimierz Leśniak, *Życie i twórczość filozoficzna Seneki*, in Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *Listy moralne do Lucyliusza*, trans. Wiktor Kornatowski, ed. Kazimierz Leśniak, Biblioteka Klasyków Filozofii (Warszawa: PWN, 1961), XX (translation into English is mine).

for you are revealing your real self to me in the only way you can. I never receive a letter from you without being in your company forthwith”¹⁰ or “Whenever your letters arrive, I imagine that I am with you, and I have the feeling that I am about to speak my answer, instead of writing it.”¹¹

The Middle Ages played a significant role in the process of the development of epistolography. Its rapid growth was particularly evident in medieval diplomacy and in the ecclesiastical and pastoral spheres of life. Epistolography soon began to play the role equivalent to that of rhetorical prose. The art of prose composition called *ars dictaminis* (*ars dictandi*) was growing in importance, which, according to Ernst Robert Curtius, was initially connected with the needs of administrative procedure. The purpose was to “furnish models for letters and official documents.”¹² Model letters (*formulae*) were already in existence in Merovingian and Carolingian times.¹³ However, Curtius points to an important development which took place at the end of the 11th century. It consisted in the passage from theory to practice, namely, the model letters were now preceded by introductions and rules, which in time resulted in the subordination of all rhetoric to the art of epistolary style. This was in turn followed by the abandonment of the traditional curriculum of rhetoric and there appeared a need to create a new name for the art of epistolary style in order to accentuate its novelty. The name in question was *ars dictaminis*. It stressed that epistolography was the art of composition (from the Latin *dictare*, or “to dictate,” but also “to write” and “to compose”).¹⁴ *Ars epistolandi*, due to its growing importance, in time became prevalent in the handbooks of rhetoric, which ultimately included mainly instructions on letter-writing.¹⁵

Winniczuk describes in detail the recommended method of drafting and editing a letter, which was based on the same construction principle as preparing a speech, and involved the consideration of *inventio*, *distributio*,

¹⁰ Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *Moral Epistles*, trans. Richard M. Gummere, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1917-25, vol. 1, http://www.stoics.com/seneca_epistles_book_1.html. Cf. idem, *Listy moralne do Lucylusza*, IV, 40, p. 133.

¹¹ Idem, *Moral Epistles*, vol. 2, http://www.stoics.com/seneca_epistles_book_2.html. Cf. idem, *Listy moralne do Lucylusza*, VII, 67, p. 246.

¹² Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 75.

¹³ Cf. *ibid.*

¹⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, 76.

¹⁵ Cf. *ibid.* Cf. idem, *Literatura europejska i łacińskie średniowiecze*, trans. Andrzej Borowski (Kraków: Universitas, 1997), 82f.

elocutio, and *dispositio*. A letter was normally composed of three parts: the *exordium* (with its purpose of *captatio benevolentiae*), the *narratio* (or *petitio*), and the *conclusio*, so it comprised the three parts rhetoric traditionally attributed to a speech, namely, the introduction, the narration relating the subject and the conclusion.¹⁶ Winniczuk notes that the form of a medieval letter was adapted to the social and cultural conditions of the epoch: it entailed the use of proper salutations depending on the addressee (*collatio personarum*), the second person plural forms (following the principles of Latin conjugation), unused in ancient letters, as well as the introduction of religious phrases.¹⁷ Winniczuk points that medieval epistolographers fulfilled one more important role, namely, that of “mediators” between antiquity and the Renaissance: they made it possible for the Renaissance authors to learn the rules of composing letters. Medieval handbooks, such as, for instance, *Artes dictandi*, *Dictamina*, *Rationes dictandi*, *Summae dictaminis*, *Libri Formularum*, *Formularia*, and *Candelabrum*, were initially models for Renaissance epistolographers. Petrarca was the first to break with the medieval tradition by turning back directly to the ancient art of letter-writing and disregarding the intermediary role of the Middle Ages, which can be seen, among others, in his return to the second person singular in his letters and in his abandonment of the bombastic style characteristic of the medieval letter.¹⁸

By Hildegard’s times, letter-writing had already evolved into an independent literary genre. Today, its numerous examples, for instance the letters of Abelard and Heloise, are considered as treasures of Western culture and have become universally recognized. Others, however, despite the fact that they have a similar value, remain familiar only to scholars doing research on the epoch. While Hildegard’s letters are perhaps not so well-known as those of Heloise, they have become an object of growing interest as a consequence of the attention given to her as a Saint. The fact that Hildegard has been included among the Doctors of the Church provides special inspiration for the research of her letters, which offer a vivid reflection of her views and outlook. The research in question may focus on selected aspects: doctrinal, prescriptive or literary. The focal point of the present considerations will be precisely the literary aspect of Hildegard’s letters. Although the literary value of her correspondence is usually considered as serving its main ob-

¹⁶ Cf. Winniczuk, *Epistolografia. Łacińskie podręczniki epistolograficzne w Polsce*, 70.

¹⁷ Cf. *ibid.*

¹⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, 5.

jective, namely prescription, it deserves separate attention. A particularly interesting theme of analysis is the stylistic means of expression Hildegard of Bingen employed in her letters. While this issue is rich in itself, it acquires an additional dimension due to the current debates on Hildegard's education. A presentation of the most important figures of speech appearing in her letters will, hopefully, shed some light also on this problem.

Using modern phraseology, one may call Hildegard's letters literary works of art, and this qualification is based above all on her abundant use of various stylistic devices, in particular of a wide range of metaphors, elaborate similes, symbols, and allegories. All these stylistic markers contribute to the sophistication and artistry of Hildegard's letters. The content of her epistolary writings determines their philosophical-theological character, while their primary objective makes them prescriptive, or didactic, the latter quality being strengthened by Hildegard's frequent recourse to the parable, a separate literary genre functioning within her letters.

HILDEGARD'S LETTERS

Hildegard's letters not only elucidate her mentality, but also give a deep reflection of the situation of the Europe of her time in aspects such as religion, philosophy, spiritual life, social structure, and political situation. As a result of the research on the authenticity of Hildegard's epistolary writings conducted since 1956 a collection of about 300 of her letters has been established. Apart from those authored by Hildegard, it also includes letters written to her, since it was a common practice in early Middle Ages (as well as it was in the ancient times) to copy the letters one was sending and to keep the replies.

While reading Hildegard's letters, one may focus on her biography and personality, on the political circumstance of the Church of the period, on its religious life or on the history of the German State. The fact that Hildegard's letters may provide interesting research material in these respects has already been noted, by Peter Dronke¹⁹ and Jerzy Strzelczyk²⁰ in their mono-

¹⁹ Cf. Peter Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages: a Critical Study of Texts from Perpetua († 203) to Marguerite Porete († 1310)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1996), 44–201.

²⁰ Cf. Jerzy Strzelczyk, *Pióro w wątych dłoniach. O twórczości kobiet w dawnych wiekach*, vol. 2 (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo DiG, 2009), 195–263.

graphs, where they make direct references to her selected letters in order to point to certain facts from her biography. However, neither Dronke's nor Strzelczyk's research of Hildegard's letters extends to the study of the philosophical and theological problems she addresses or to her views on spiritual guidance. Thus the issues of particular interest that still need to be explored are: the unity of God, the relationship between the Persons of the Holy Trinity, the origin of man, man's relation to God and the world, the models of life, ethical values, virtues, and the history of humanity. Hildegard also considers numerous issues related to religious life, such as asceticism, discipline, and the serious problem of *acedia*, or estrangement from spiritual life. Another interesting object of research is provided by those letters in which she addresses her own experience and writes extensively about her visions. A reading of these pieces of epistolary art makes it possible to examine more closely not only Hildegard's personality, but also the medieval mentality as such. The subjects she develops are sometimes deliberately chosen by her, but on numerous occasions they are "triggered" by remarks made by the recipients of her letters, who thus became their "co-authors." Leokadia Małunowiczówna says: "A general principle of letter-writing is that the addressee determines both the content and the tone of the letter."²¹ The circle of the recipients of Hildegard's letters was very wide. A majority of them were German, but occasionally they came from England, the Netherlands, France, Alsace-Lorraine, Switzerland, Italy, and Greece. They were individuals responsible for the shaping of the world of Hildegard's time, playing important roles both in the Church and in secular life. Most addressees of her letters were members of the clergy: abbots, priests, monks, abbesses, and nuns. Hildegard's letters to secular individuals include those written to monarchs as well as ordinary persons. Thus her correspondence provides rich material on the history of 12th century religious life, on the Church history of the period, and on its spiritual and intellectual life. In a way, it opens a window on the medieval outlook and the social psychology of the time.

Hildegard's letters were written in Latin. It is common knowledge that she did not learn that language systematically, so her command of it was not perfect. Her "textbooks" of rhetoric were above all the Bible, the Breviary and the writings of the Fathers of the Church, which determined her way of expression. Thus her letters include numerous phrases taken from the Holy

²¹ Leokadia Małunowiczówna, *Antologia listu chrześcijańskiego* (Lublin: Towarzystwo Naukowe KUL, 1978), 56 (translation into English is mine).

Scripture and, not infrequently, paraphrases of Biblical texts. The adoption of Biblical phraseology gives a characteristic tone to her style and determines the solemnity of the contents of her letters. According to Małunowiczówna, solemnity was typical of medieval Christian letters in general, the quality in question being evident already in early Christianity.²² Another characteristic of the language of Hildegard's letters (and undoubtedly also of her Latin) is its figurativeness and emotional tone. Adelgundis Fürkötter, who translated Hildegard's letters into German, is of the opinion that the scope of the words she used was in a way limited, which has a bearing on the interpretation and translation of her texts today. Depending on the context, particular words are used by Hildegard in their various meanings, so the translator needs to pay extreme attention to their exact designations in the language of the translation. For instance, the word *virtus*, recurring in Hildegard's texts, may mean, respectively, a grace from God or the power of God, and occasionally man's cooperation with God or simply virtue.²³ While it is undoubtedly a fact that Hildegard's language is to a large extent homonymous, it does not manifest her linguistic poverty. As a lexical means, homonymy is not always a drawback. In order to prove this claim, it will suffice to consider the semantic unity characteristic of Greek and Latin, the quality that may be figuratively described as "semantic density" or "opalescence" of meaning. A good example is offered by the word *viriditas*, frequently used by Hildegard, which may be translated as: "life force, " "freshness, " "greenness, " "power, " "force" or "virtuality." However, the underlying denotation of the word in question in a way links all these semantic aspects. Probably it would be the best to refrain from translating this word and, instead, define it based on the most frequent contexts in which it appears. Thus the homonymy that marks Hildegard's language proves neither its poverty or richness; rather, it shows that this language is absolutely different from the one we use today, since its function is to describe absolutely different personal and cultural experiences. Yet Fürkötter is right in stressing that certain language games which are possible in Latin cannot be rendered in a German translation.²⁴ It is also the case with translating certain phrases used by Hildegard into Polish. For instance, it is impossible to render the words *humilitas*, *humanitas*, and *homo*, which she introduces while speaking about the Incarnated Son of God, preserving the alliteration.

²² Cf. *ibid.*, 56.

²³ Cf. Adelgundis Fürkötter, *Briefwechsel von Hildegard von Bingen* (Salzburg, 1965), 4.

²⁴ Cf. *ibid.*

A reading of Hildegard's letters shows that they include the most important stylistic devices used in European literature. While Hildegard makes frequent use of all of them, metaphors and detailed similes are undoubtedly her favorite. She frequently and deliberately introduces alliteration and does not avoid tautology. Occasionally, passages of her letters are organized by means of rhythm or rhyme.

All these stylistic markers characteristic of Hildegard's epistolary writings will be discussed in the present section. Due to the abundance of the material, however, only a selection of them will be analyzed. The focus will be the devices used by Hildegard on the phonetic, semantic and syntactic levels of her letters. Then some instances will be analyzed in which she introduces the parable, making the passages in question significantly different in the rhetorical sense. Her mastery of the parable proves that, as a writer, Hildegard made conscious and deliberate choices to use particular figures of speech in order to modify her style.

THE PHONETIC LEVEL

The marker of style appearing most frequently in Hildegard's epistolary writings is alliteration. As this stylistic device is used predominantly in poetry, the abundance of alliteration in her letters gives the impression that they are organized so as to resemble poems. This impression is even strengthened by the rhythmical quality of her narrative and by the rhymes she occasionally introduces. All these tropes contribute to the overall effect of the text being melodious and thus poetic, as opposed to common prose. The following examples exhibit precisely this trait: "que in sinum tuum posite sunt, nec permitte eas in lacum perditionis demergi per potestatem convivantium prelatorum" (Ep. 3)²⁵; "invenit in vanitate errantium viarum, " „venatores venientes" (Ep. 6)²⁶; "vitam viventibus ... diram duritiam" (Ep. 9)²⁷; "autem auditus aurium" (Ep. 15)²⁸; "circumcircuitionis" (Ep. 15)²⁹; "vos veloces venti" (Ep. 15)³⁰; "in veritate tibi dico quod omnia verba hec in vera visione vidi et audiavi" (Ep. 17)³¹; "suavis sensus sufficientiam" (Ep.

²⁵ *Hildegardis Bingensis Epistolarium*, pars I, ep. I–XC, CCCM 91, p. 9, 18–19.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 14, 4.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 22, 1.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 34, 14.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 36, 55.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 37, 93.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 52, 42–43.

81)³²; “velut flamma semper *coruscant* et in eadem *coruscatione miracula* ipsius vident, ac illa *mirando*” (Ep. 84)³³; “*miracula mirantur*” (Ep. 84)³⁴; “que de tanto *fulgore splendidie faciei fulget*” (Ep. 85)³⁵; “qui *dat dona dantibus* et *cursum currentibus*” (Ep. 143)³⁶; “velut *sponsus sponsam suam* in mente *sua sibi suaviter copulat*” (Ep. 179)³⁷; “*terra terram* non abicit nec *spernit sibi similem, sed illi* (Ep. 219)³⁸; “*debita debitorum domini sui*” (Ep. 177)³⁹; “cum *fiduciali fine finiariis*” (Ep. 156)⁴⁰. The frequency of alliteration in Hildegard’s letters is proportional to that in her *Canticles*,⁴¹ so it is evident that her application of this stylistic device was intentional.

Apart from alliteration, the phonetic level of Hildegard’s letters is constituted by inner rhymes, the only kind of rhymes possible in the case of prose. In certain passages, Hildegard, conscious of the melodious quality of her style, approaches poetry: “Qui gloriam cum Deo habere vult, proprietatem suam abscidat, et qui meritum apud Deum habere desiderat, opus ad hoc exerceat” (Ep. 15).⁴² “Sed ceco nomine nominaretur, quia quamvis lucida diceretur, lumen eius tamen non videretur” (Ep. 16).⁴³ “Tu autem surge, quia dies tui breves sunt, et reminiscere quod Nabuchodonosor cecidit et quod corona ipsius periit. Et alii multi ceciderunt, qui se temere in celum exaltaverunt” (Ep. 19).⁴⁴ “Cum autem deceptor eius, diabolus, audisset, quod homo ex inspiratione Dei cantare cepisset” (Ep. 23).⁴⁵ “Lux vivens, omnis boni operatrix, cui omnis anima vitalis et ad decimum numeratur preelecta cooperatrix, etsi in sua puritate inveniatur, tamen iuxta sensum accipiendum a beatis differenter participiatur. Nam sicut superna regis aule organa eo ardentius inflammantur quo vicinius et quasi immediate fontem claritatis contemplantur” (Ep. 51).⁴⁶ “Sic tu etiam, carissima filia, fecisti quando pop-

³² Ibid., p. 183, 9.

³³ Ibid., p. 191, 40.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 191, 44.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 204, 21.

³⁶ Ibid., pars II, 318, 1.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 386, 61.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 479, 1–2.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 403, 5.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 351, 34.

⁴¹ Cf. Małgorzata Kowalewska, *Bóg – kosmos – człowiek w twórczości Hildegardy z Bingen* (Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS, 2007), 46–47.

⁴² *Hildegardis Bingensis Epistolarium*, pars I, ep. I–XC, CCCM 91, p. 46, 85–86.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 49, 8–9.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 55, 3–6.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 6, 104–105.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 123, 5–124, 10.

pam huius mundi relinquisti” (Ep. 63).⁴⁷ “Ignis vero flammam habet quam ventus movet, ita quod eadem flamma flagrando apparet” (Ep.77).⁴⁸ “Unde Paulus apostolus, qui in summa volavit et in terra tacuit, ita quod non revelavit quod absconditum fuit” (Ep. 52).⁴⁹ “Homo contra diabolum pugnaret et eum superaret, et sic in divina laude semper persisteret” (Ep. 84).⁵⁰ “Prima radix in die apparuit et in omnibus ramis floruit, atque duas vias constituit. Altera via plena edificiorum erat, in quibus aquile et alia volatilia habitabant” (Ep. 85)⁵¹ (the latter sentence includes a rhyme and it has a conspicuous rhythm, the number of the syllables in the particular verses being similar, and the recurring accented and unaccented syllables clearly audible). “In cuius scientia fuisti et a quo principium sumpsisti” (Ep. 153).⁵²

THE SEMANTIC LEVEL

The rhetorical devices used by Hildegard on the semantic level of her letters further contribute to their poetic character. The tropes she uses most frequently include metaphors, similes, and epithets, all of them characteristic of the language of poetry. Homeric similes and metaphors seem to prevail and a number of them comprise references to the Bible, which proves Hildegard’s erudition. In numerous letters, rich metaphors and Homeric similes develop into poetic images.

Among the most impressive metaphors are: “oculus mentis” (Ep. 103)⁵³; “domus cordis” (Ep. 74)⁵⁴; “fons sapientiae” (Ep. 25)⁵⁵; “lignum viriditatis mentis” (Ep. 132)⁵⁶; “penne felicitatis ac beatitudinis” (Ep.73)⁵⁷; “cornus

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 145, 13–14.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p.168, 6–7.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 128, 9–11.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 191, 49–50.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 209, 1–4.

⁵² *Hildegardis Bingensis Epistolarium*, pars II, ep. XCI–CCL, CCCM 91A, p. 432, 14–15.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 264, 156. Curtius discusses the history of corporal metaphors, in particular the relation between the “eye of the mind” and the “eye of the soul.” “Plato says that the dialectical method gently raises ‘the eye of the soul, buried in barbaric mud.’ (*Republic*, 533d). Thenceforth the ‘eye of the soul’ became a favorite metaphor, which we find both in pagan (cf. Cicero, *Orator*, 29, 101) and Christian authors. In this usage the visual power of the physical eye is transferred to the perceptive faculty of the intellect. Inner senses are co-ordinated with the outer (systematically in Origen).” Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, 136. Curtius quotes Paulinus of Nola: „Ergo oculos mentis Christo reseremus et aures” (ibid.).

⁵⁴ *Hildegardis Bingensis Epistolarium*, pars I, ep. I–XC, CCCM 91, p. 161, 7.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 71, 20.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 132, 2.

salutis” (Ep. 73)⁵⁸; “aqua salientis”(Ep. 39)⁵⁹; “lignum vitae” (Ep. 40)⁶⁰; “scala in celum” (Ep. 136)⁶¹; “penna rationalitatis” (Ep. 153)⁶²; “pecunia iustitiae” (Ep. 160)⁶³; “ianua mentis” (Ep. 125)⁶⁴; “speculum salvationis” (Ep. 20)⁶⁵; “os abyssi aperuit” (Ep. 113).

Hildegard uses not only simple metaphors, but also compound ones: “mons iustitiae in ortu veritatis ascendit” (Ep. 4)⁶⁶; “os tuum celeste es et mens tua cum nube floret, unde radix tua ascendat”(Ep. 79)⁶⁷; “tu etiam eburneus mons esto, de quo fenestralia iacula in recto iudicio iustitiae contra adversarios tuos volitant” (Ep. 28)⁶⁸; “dies esse deberetis sed nox estis” (Ep. 15)⁶⁹; “o tu arbor es a Deo constitutus” (Ep. 27)⁷⁰; “esto quoque speculum vite in oculis columbe” (Ep. 127)⁷¹; “tu hortus in quo oculos meos pascerem esse debuisti” (Ep. 167).⁷²

Hildegard’s letters include a vast number of similes. Even those which appear incomplex are nevertheless very interesting. The following are only a narrow selection of them: “Tunc eos populos multi velut nobilissimos lapides, scilicet topazium, smaragdum, saphirum et hyacinthum cum laude narrabant” (Ep. 77).⁷³ “Vos enim ignea columna esse deberetis” (Ep. 15).⁷⁴ “Spes vero est quasi caritatis oculus, amor autem celestis velut cor illius, et abstinentia compago ipsius. Sed fides est velut oculus humilitatis, obedientia vero quasi cor eius, et contemptus mali compago illius” (Ep. 95).⁷⁵ It seems that the latter sentence, which comprises a number of incomplex similes, is analogous to the following one referring to the Holy Trinity: “In Patre aeter-

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 159, 2.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 159, 20–21.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 101, 15.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 105, 44.

⁶¹ Ibid., pars II, p. 309, 20.

⁶² Ibid., p. 342, 11.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 359, 46.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 300, 25.

⁶⁵ Ibid., pars I, p. 57, 9.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 15, 42–43.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 179, 1–2.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 79, 43–44.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 39, 154.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 77, 1.

⁷¹ Ibid., pars II, p. 302, 8.

⁷² Ibid., p. 357, 23–24.

⁷³ Ibid., pars I, p.174, 149–150.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 37, 112.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 205, 54–58.

nitas, in Filo aequalitas, in Spiritu Sancto aeternitas aequalitatis connexio.” In one of her letters, Hildegard offers an interpretation of this formula (Ep.31).⁷⁶

Yet Hildegard introduces also numerous Homeric similes. Among them, the following call particular attention: “Avaritia ... velut parvum habitaculum rustici est, quod locum non habet ubi honestos mores conservet” (Ep. 17).⁷⁷ “O homo, tu similis es aque que moveatur in tempestate, et que iterum deinde manet in tranquillitate” (Ep. 53).⁷⁸ “Tu autem, o homo, similis es nubi que progreditur et regreditur, et que in hac utraque parte aliquantulum lucida est, et per quam tamen sol sepius obnubilatur, ita quod divitius expectatur quando luceat” (Ep. 39).⁷⁹ “Iacula que in incredulitate et in contumelia malitiosorum verborum veniunt, similia priculoso vento sunt, qui repente ad cor hominis venit” (Ep. 55).⁸⁰ “Lucifer fugit velut coluber qui in cavernam suam se abscondit” (Ep. 139).⁸¹ “Claustrum tuum velut turrim video, duas fenestras habentem, quarum altera est ut rutilans fulgor aurore mixtus cum nube, altera ut lux die. Sed eadem turris ab imo usque ad medietatem suam valde nigra est; que nigredo predicas fenestras obscurare vult, sed eas movere non poterit” (Ep. 130).⁸² “Sed manus meas ad Deum porrigo, quatenus velut penna, que omni gravedine virium caret et per ventum volat, ab ipso sustinear” (Ep. 103)⁸³ (this particular simile, which rests on a comparison to a feather carried by the wind, is among Hildegard’s favorites; it recurs a number of times in her letters, and she uses it in reference to herself). “Arbori te assimilo, que in estate grossos suos producit, et cuius fructus a turbinibus et nebulis aliquantulum leditur et iterum ex rore celi et puro ethere renovatur. Isto enim modo mens tua est, quia, cum fiduciam in aliique prosperitate habes velut grossos producens, ex vicissitudine morum tuorum quasi ex turbine fatigaris, et etiam ab illis qui sub onere tuo sunt sicut ex nebulis lederis” (Ep. 153).⁸⁴ “O homo, video te quasi ligneum edificium de manibus artificum factum, ad cuius ianuam due imagines pulsant”

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 83–88.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 52, 35–37.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 131, 2.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 101, 3–5.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 134, 1.

⁸¹ Ibid., pars II, p. 439, 44.

⁸² Ibid., p. 304, 1–3.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 260, 54–58.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 342, 2–8.

(Ep. 141).⁸⁵ “Tu fabro illi similis es, qui multa vasa fundit et ea fungentia per ignem non fecit” (Ep. 155).⁸⁶

In some instances Hildegard arranges her metaphors so as to create metaphorical images: “Animum autem tuum video quasi diem, ubi in mane sol lucet, sed tamen ipsa dies tempestates sepe portat, que tamen non multum periculose sunt et in quibus sol interdum apparet” (Ep. 130).⁸⁷ “Rex vidit scalam que obtenebrata est in vicissitudine pestilentie. Et sol effusit, et tenebrationem illam scidit. Et hoc regi placuit, et dixit: Hec fugitiva scala in fatigatione est, quia interdum ad ardua ascendit et interdum obtenebratur. Talis est mens tua, o homo. In die ... ascendis in leto gaudio ad me, et iterum in nociva pestilentia colis cadentem morbum” (Ep. 47).⁸⁸

Epithets are the stylistic devices that actually underlie the construction of multiple clauses. Hildegard shows mastery in creating very interesting collocations in which she juxtaposes apparently very distant words, such as “ignea admonitio” (Ep. 56)⁸⁹ or „aurea ligatura obedientie,”⁹⁰ thus adding to the poetic character of her prose.

THE SYNTACTIC DEVICES

Among the most characteristic syntactic devices used by Hildegard are apostrophes, exclamations, tautologies, rhetorical questions, syntactic parallelisms, as well as word games. All of them contribute to the magniloquent qualities of her style and they also give it its dynamics.

Apostrophe, which was a rhetorical device frequently used in all the literary genres throughout the Middle Ages, recurs also in Hildegard’s letters, contributing, together with the equally numerous exclamations, to the solemnity and grandiloquence of her style. Again, only a narrow selection of its instances can be quoted here: “o tu persona prelationis” (Ep. 22)⁹¹; “tu ergo pater peregrinorum, audi” (Ep. 2)⁹²; “nunc, o tu, qui es in vice Christi sedens” (Ep. 3)⁹³; “unde, o pastor magne et post Christum nominate ... unde,

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 316, 1–2.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 345, 1–2.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 304, 1–8.

⁸⁸ Ibid., pars I, p. 116, 1–8.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 135, 1.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 140, 50.

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 59, 1.

⁹² Ibid., p. 8, 16.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 9, 23.

o pastor ovium, audi” (Ep. 5)⁹⁴; “o persona, que es precellens armatura et mons magistrationis ... unde tu, o homo, qui sedes in principali cathedra” (Ep. 8)⁹⁵; “Et tu, o Roma, velut in extremis iacens ... ergo, o tu homo, sta in recto itinere, et Deus salvabit.” (Ep. 8)⁹⁶; “o tu, qui in persona illa es que a Deo et non hominibus est ... o pater, in veritate tibi dico” (Ep. 17)⁹⁷; “o iustitia, tu peregrina et advena es” (Ep. 78); „o filia Ade” (Ep. 186).⁹⁸

Another device Hildegard frequently applies is pleonasm (or tautology). Pleonasms give the text a characteristic melodious quality and they must not be considered as stylistic errors; rather, they are devices deliberately used by the authoress, as can be seen in the following examples: “intelligibilem intellectum” (Ep. 9)⁹⁹; “testimonium testimoniarum” (Ep. 15)¹⁰⁰; “prevaricantes prevaricationes” (Ep. 15)¹⁰¹; “servili servitio” (Ep. 15)¹⁰²; “optione opto” (Ep. 146)¹⁰³; “scrutinium scrutitionis” (Ep. 52)¹⁰⁴; “morte morieris” (Ep. 58)¹⁰⁵; “admiranda miracula” (Ep. 84)¹⁰⁶; “vulnere vulnerata” (Ep. 113)¹⁰⁷; “debita debitorum” (Ep. 177)¹⁰⁸; “iudicio iudicat” (Ep. 179)¹⁰⁹; “congregatio congregata” (Ep. 220)¹¹⁰; “diligenter diligit” (Ep. 226)¹¹¹; “fine finiaris” (Ep. 156).¹¹²

Not infrequently do Hildegard’s letters include rhetorical questions, which results in the vividness of intonation once they are being read aloud. Their purpose is usually to focus the attention of the reader on some important issues that demand intellectual scrutiny. The following rhetorical questions, again a narrow selection only, seem most interesting: “Ah, tu

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 12, 20; p. 13, 34.

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 20, 1; p. 20, 52.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 21, 57; p. 22, 92.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 176, 2–3.

⁹⁸ Ibid., pars II, p. 420, 1.

⁹⁹ Ibid., pars I, p. 22, 5.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 34, 5.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 40, 173.

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 41, 213.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 146, 24.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 192, 40.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 138, 29.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 191, 46.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., pars II, p. 282, 58.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 405, 5.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 407, 8.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 482, 44.

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 512, 2.

¹¹² Ibid., p. 351, 43.

cinis, quare non erubescis” (Ep. 19).¹¹³ “O homo, qualis est estimatio tua, qui non erubescis ambulare in tenebris per gustum operis tuis?” (Ep. 35).¹¹⁴ “Quo ambulo et quo ibo? Quales dies mihi sunt et qualia opera me tangunt” (Ep. 98).¹¹⁵ “O homo, cur abicis quod factura Dei es?” (Ep. 164).¹¹⁶ “O homo ... cur petulantiam lascivie non abnegas per scrutinium domus cordis tui?” (Ep. 74).¹¹⁷

Hildegard also uses syntactic parallelisms, such as: “Quis creavit celum? Deus. Quis aperit fidelibus celum? Deus. Quis eius similis? Nullus” (Ep. 23)¹¹⁸ (in this example they are combined with rhetorical questions). “Et ignis flammam habet et Deo laus est, et ventus flammam movet et Deo laus est, atque in voce verbum est et Deo laus est, atque verbum auditur et Deo laus est. Quapropter et omnis creatura laus Dei est”(Ep.77)¹¹⁹ The latter sentence provides an instance of rhythmic speech resulting from an obvious syntactic parallelism as well as from the melodious quality introduced by alliteration.

The exclamations present in Hildegard’s letters include: “He, he, tempus hoc nec frigidum nec calidum ... he, he, qui in vice Christi es, iterum audi” (Ep. 26).¹²⁰ “O ve irrisioni, et o ve errori” (Ep. 73).¹²¹ “He, he o aquile, que in me transistis” (Ep. 78).¹²² “Wach, wach, hoc tam possibile est velut hoc ut locusta durum lapidem transfoderet” (Ep. 85).¹²³ “Heu me, mater, heu me, filia, *quare me derelinquisti* sicut orphanam?” (Ep. 64)¹²⁴ (here the exclamation is combined with a rhetorical question). “Ach, ach o homo, in magno studio te formavit Deus” (Ep. 144).¹²⁵ “In antiquo tempore Spiritus Sanctus inspiravit quosdam homines inter quosdam populos qui nondum erant fraudulentum. O, o, o! Postea posuit Deus sapientiam in aurora. Ach, ach, ach! Et fecit instrumentum in semetipso, scilicet magnum mons iustitie. He, he, he! Nunc iustitia montis facta est” (Ep. 192).¹²⁶

¹¹³ Ibid., pars I, p. 55, 6.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 94, 4.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., pars II, p. 254, 9

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 321, 45.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., pars I, p.161, 5–7.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p. 65, 154–155.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p. 168, 8–11.

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 75, 15–16.

¹²¹ Ibid., p. 159, 11.

¹²² Ibid., p. 177, 21.

¹²³ Ibid., p. 207, 16–17.

¹²⁴ Ibid., p. 147, 14–16.

¹²⁵ Ibid., pars II, p. 321, 45–46.

¹²⁶ Ibid., p. 434, 1–6.

— The *sententiae* and the parables

In the current paper, only a very narrow selection of the stylistic devices that appear in the letters authored by Hildegard of Bingen has been presented. Without doubt, one might point out to others that have been disregarded here. In this context, however, it is worthwhile to mention that apart from various figures of speech, she introduces into the body of her letters passages which represent distinct literary genres which add to the prescriptive tone of her correspondence. The two genres in question are the *sententia* (sentence) and the parable.

Short, clearly sapiential sentences are actually among the main characteristics of Hildegard's letters. They encapsulate the visionary nun's psychological experiences, the rules of her life, as well as her basic philosophical conceptions. Due to their linguistic form, the sentences in question have acquired a universal appeal and for this reason they will be included in the present discussion of the expressive means employed by Hildegard.

The sapiential sentences are accompanied by numerous parables which develop Hildegard's recommendations as to the stances the recipients of her letters needed to adopt in their lives. Since in the case of any prescriptive literature the aesthetic and literary qualities are subordinated to its didactic objectives, it is not surprising that Hildegard followed this principle in her letters. It is worth noting, however, that this tendency did not by any means negatively affect their overall linguistic value. On the contrary, Hildegard skillfully introduces various rhetorical means despite the fact that they all serve her primary, didactic objective. The parables she tells are intended to develop her idea of an exemplary life. In each case, this idea is supposed to remain in concordance with the ethos of the social group of which the addressee of a given letter is a representative. Since a majority of the recipients of Hildegard's letters were members of the clergy, it will be interesting to point to the parables with which she addressed them. The examples that will follow, however, will not be discussed from the doctrinal point of view, as the main focus of the present considerations is their linguistic form. Both the *sententiae* and the parables are proofs that their authoress skillfully and deliberately chooses among the available stylistic means.

a) The *sententiae*

The attention of a reader of Hildegard's letters is immediately drawn to her perspicuous sentences which have a positively sapiential nature and are remindful of Pascal's *Pensées (Thoughts)*, however anachronistic such a comparison might seem. Their form is that of a maxim (a *sententia*, or an aphorism) and they express general insights, in which they go beyond their prescriptive goals and assume the shape of philosophical statements. Some of them might be considered as proverbs due to the universal appeal of their message. Others in a way encapsulate the basic philosophical ideas professed by Hildegard and express, in a concise form, her otherwise elaborate conceptions. The intention of the present paper, however, is not to delve into the essence of these *sententiae*, but merely to present their selection, pointing to their linguistic artistry. In a few cases only a brief explanation of their intellectual context will be added. From among numerous *sententiae*, the following seem the most striking:

(1) „Qui non timet non amat, et qui non laudat, non operatur” (Ep. 77).¹²⁷ (“The one who does not fear, does not love, and the one who does not praise, does not act.”) *Amare*, *timere*, *laudare*, and *operare*, as well as *timor*, *amor*, *laus*, and *operatio*, function as the key verbs and nouns in the vast philosophical conception Hildegard develops in her visionary works. Thus the quoted sentence encapsulates her fundamental idea on man's relationship with God (or with another human being, such as the relationship between man and woman), the ultimate destiny of man, and man's role in the created world. An interpersonal relationship consists in love, which is rooted in mutual deep respect and reverence. The love of God should assume the shape of the *laus Dei*, which is the ultimate goal of a human life and of all the created world. In the case of a human being, the *laus Dei* is manifested through actions he or she performs in the world as *homo operans*.

(2) „Surge ergo ad Deum, quia tempus cito veniet” (Ep. 20).¹²⁸

(3) „Melius est mihi incidere in manus hominum, quam derelinquere preceptum Dei mei” (Ep. 24).¹²⁹ („It is better for me to fall into the hands of men, than to sin against the law of my God.”) The message expressed in this verse, which is included in the *Officium Divinum*, is evidently sapiential. It is marked by universality, although it refers to a particular situation in the life of Hil-

¹²⁷ Ibid., pars I, p. 168, 12–13.

¹²⁸ Ibid., p. 57, 16.

¹²⁹ Ibid., p. 68, 61–62.

degard. In 1179, her convent was placed under interdict, because she consented to a burial of an excommunicant in its cemetery and opposed the pressures exerted by the clergy to change her decision. It was in that context that Peter Dronke compared Hildegard to Antigone.¹³⁰ The sentence in question expresses an ethical norm that can be derived from the Ten Commandments.

(4) „Sed tamen vir plures vires habet quam mulier perficere possit. Mulier autem est fons sapientie et fons pleni gaudii, quas parte vir ad perfectum ducit” (Ep. 26).¹³¹ This sentence summarizes an important motif present in Hildegard’s anthropology, namely, the one regarding the relationship between man and woman. They have been created so that they can attain the fullness of human nature only in a reciprocal union.

(5) „Lex dat vitam, et tenebre schizmata, et nocturnale tempus tristitiam” (Ep. 42).¹³² The above sentence comprises three simple metaphors the combination of which culminates in a metaphorical aphorism. Hildegard thus expresses a warning: one must not fall into error and heresy, which she describes as “darkness, ” tantamount to nothingness. *Nocturnale tempus* designates the state of sin, always accompanied by an absence of true joy.

(6) “Nam omnes creature habent quod videtur et quod non videtur. Quod videtur debile est, et quod non videtur forte ac vitale est” (Ep. 31).¹³³ This sentence in turn encapsulates Hildegard’s views on metaphysics: in the case of each being, she distinguished the matter and the form (the soul), and held that a being always has its essential “core,” which is constituted by the special life force, *viriditas*, deriving from the Holy Spirit.

(7) “Humilitas semper ascendit, quoniam se minimam esse computat, vana autem gloria semper descendit, quia a se ipsa esse vult” (Ep. 94).¹³⁴ In the case of this aphorism Hildegard uses metaphors which are simultaneously personifications. The message she thus transmits encapsulates one of the fundamental Christian ideas which have informed European culture, namely, that humility is the foundation of spiritual growth, while vanity is the essential vice. Undoubtedly, Hildegard was also acquainted with the Rule of St. Benedict, which distinguished various degrees of humility and vanity. In her times, the teaching on humility and vanity was also being developed by Bernard z Clairvaux.

¹³⁰ Cf. Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages*, 196.

¹³¹ *Hildegardis Bingensis Epistolarium*, pars I, ep. I–XC, CCCM 91, p. 75, 11–14.

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 108, 1–2.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, p. 87, 137–138.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, pars II, p. 252, 19–20.

(8) “Diabolus namque hominem deum nominavit, quemadmodum etiam se ipsum deum esse voluit” (Ep. 113).¹³⁵ This aphorism in turn succinctly expresses the broad concept of the fall of the first man, as well as points to its causes and consequences. Here, Hildegard refers to the Book of Genesis (cf. Gen. 3).

(9) “Nullus homo securam pacem habet in hac vita, sed in eterna” (Ep. 125).¹³⁶

(10) “Talis esto ut amicum Dei fias” (Ep. 137).¹³⁷ This clause comprises an instance of the *sententia*.

(11) “Omnem veritatem Deus per hominem probat, quem de limo terre formavit” (Ep. 146).¹³⁸

(12) “Qui enim in corde suo Deum non esse dicit (cf. Ps. 52, 1), celum et terram ac omnia viventia que in Deo et cum Deo sunt, et seipsum esse negat” (Ep. 155).¹³⁹ This idea, based on Psalm 52, has in turn a clearly “Pascalian” character.

(13) “Magna autem insipientia est quod homo, qui se videt et se scit, in dubietate dicit: ‘non sum’” (Ep. 155).¹⁴⁰

(14) “Dies lucem clarificat et nox tenebras obnubilat. Si autem nox contra diem pugnare vult, eum extinguere non potest; si vero dies noctem superare vult, possibilitatem eam vincere habet” (Ep. 163).¹⁴¹ This aphorism (which is based on a personification) expresses in a terse form Hildegard’s view of the nature of the good (*dies*) and the evil (*nox*).

(15) “Mens enim quasi vir est, et optio quasi femina” (Ep. 164).¹⁴²

(16) “Homo namque cum originali peccato naturaliter peccat” (Ep. 186).¹⁴³

(17) “Nam arbor que floribus plena est, pulchra ad videndum est; sed cum fructus eius ad vescendum maturescit, multo utilior est” (Ep. 186).¹⁴⁴ This metaphorical sentence has a sapiential character. It addresses the relation between intention and action, as well as the one between beauty and the good.

¹³⁵ Ibid., p. 281, 23–25.

¹³⁶ Ibid., p. 300, 24–25.

¹³⁷ Ibid., p. 310, 13.

¹³⁸ Ibid., p. 325, 11–12.

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. 347, 59–60.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 347, 61–62.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., p. 366, 1–3.

¹⁴² Ibid., p. 368, 8.

¹⁴³ Ibid., p. 420, 20–21.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 421, 31–32.

(18) “Terra terram non abicit nec spernit sibi similem, sed illa illam edificat quantum possibilitas ipsius est” (Ep. 219).¹⁴⁵ This aphorism is built upon an allegory and communicates an important wisdom as well as offers good advice: human beings (symbolized by the land) must support rather than despise one another, since they are all alike.

b) The parables

The parables used by Hildegard serve the purpose of parenthesis. Since the parable is essentially a didactic and prescriptive genre, Hildegard resorted to it in order to formulate the moral prescription or exhortation which was the ultimate goal of her letters. Another reason why she drew on the parable is probably that her literary education was based on the study of the Bible (in particular the Gospels).

Apart from the parable, Hildegard occasionally uses *exempla*, the *exemplum* being another genre which frequently recurs in the prescriptive literature of the Middle Ages. Both in her parables and in her *exempla*, the visionary authoress presents fictitious events by means of allegories. She then provides their interpretation, usually concluding it with moral exhortation.

Interestingly though, the passages in Hildegard’s letters which are made up of parables might not give the impression of rhetorical richness: she refrains from alliteration, the text does not have a rhythm, and there are no rhymes or complex similes in it. However, the passages in question comprise numerous allegories which are the structural elements of the parables. This in turn proves Hildegard’s control over her style and her deliberate, well thought over choice of the particular literary means that help her accomplish the prescriptive goals she has set for herself. Since she did not want to divert the attention of her reader away from the message of the text, she refrained from using stylistic markers and, in consequence, there are no tropes in the passages including parables. Instead, they comprise simple sentences without any kind of stylistic ornamentation. The parables are composed of rhetorically ascetic, dry statements. The epithets used in them are simple, unsophisticated, one might even say colloquial. Hildegard’s modest recourse to rhetoric in the case of parables proves her good insight into genre theory and the literary means suitable for a particular genre. It also demonstrates both her good taste and her literary intuition.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 479, 1–2.

It is worthwhile, in this context, to quote the parable she included in her letter written in 1173 and addressed to a monk from Disibodenberg. This story seems particularly interesting, since Hildegard speaks in it about the relation between philosophy and faith: “Care fili, parabolam hanc audi quam in vera visione vidi: Quedam nobilis et pulchra domina cubiculum ex auro ornatum habuit, que frequenter duas puellas elegantes vultus habentes secum habitare elegit. Multe autem turbe dominam hanc videntes, faciem eius laudaverunt ac cum illa habitare voluerunt. Quibus ipsa dixit: Munera que vobis placent, vobis dabo, quia nec mihi nec vobis prodesset ut simul essemus. Notabilitatem enim et pulchritudinem meam vulpibus et canibus et in irrisiones dare nolo. – Sed quedam rugosa mulier, rubea et nigra facie, huic nobili domine assimilari voluit ac nobilitatem et pulchritudinem ipsius indigne tulit. Hec eadem rugosa mulier super montibus ambulat, et in regionibus ac in omnibus locis currit, laudem et honorem querens. Et nemo illi dat, sed omnes dicunt: Ista inquieta et indisciplinata a diabolo est, et ab omnibus abigenda est. Quaedam etiam mulier mercatrix de omni arte ad se collegit que oculis pulchra ad videndum sunt, et studebat ut ea ignota et mirabilia hominibus in visu et in auditu faceret. Post ea vero crystallum pulchram et nimis puram ad ignem solis posuit, que de sole sic accendebatur quod lumen omnibus dedit, unde etiam ipsa omnes artes suas in moderatione habuit. Nunc, fili mi, primam mulierem et puellas eius attende, sed mulierem rugosam omni studio fuge; mulierem autem mercatricem ad te collige. Prima enim mulier caritas est, cum puellis suis, videlicet benevolentia et largitate; sed rugosa mulier, rubeam et nigram faciem habens, amor secularis est, quo turpi studio lascivi homines ad invicem se complicant. Mulier vero mercatrix philosophia existit, que omnem artem instituit et que crystallum, id est fidem, invenit, cum qua ad Deum pervenitur. Ego in Deum confido quod cum his patrem habeas, quoniam in ignea crystallo munera passionis et resurrectionis Domini Deo obtulisti” (Ep. 80).¹⁴⁶

Among the stylistic means included in the above text are a number of simple epithets (“beautiful lady,” “noble features,” “unclean woman,” “dark face”) and uncompounded metaphors (“leave beauty and nobility to be devoured by dogs,” “hover above the mountains” (or “succumb to vanity”). Hildegard introduces allegories of Love, Good Will, Generosity, Philosophy and Uncleanliness, and “crystal” as a (simple) symbol of Faith. All these means are indeed very modest. Clear and easy to understand is also the

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., pars I, p. 181, 1–182, 30.

teaching included in the parable: One needs to avoid anything “earthly love” might denote and choose “heavenly love” instead. Philosophy, says Hildegard, attains faith in the process of knowing the world. Thus faith has advantage over philosophy. It might be worthwhile to add that the “arts” Hildegard mentions may denote the seven liberal arts, which were the introduction to philosophy, and were thus related to it.

In this context, one might also mention the fact that Hildegard was the first among female mystics to personify Caritas (Love)¹⁴⁷ and describe it as a woman of great beauty. However, Peter Dronke, from whom this observation comes,¹⁴⁸ notes that Hildegard, unlike later female mystics (e.g. Mechthild of Magdeburg and Marguerite Porete)¹⁴⁹ was not inspired by the principles of earthly love, but based the personification of Caritas on her reading of the sapiential Books of the Old Testament, as well as the works of Boethius.

Another parable worth quoting here comes from Hildegard’s letter written between 1169 and 1170, whose addressee is the abbot of Michaelsberg Abbey in Bamberg. Hildegard says: “Nunc, o homo, intellige. In quadam domo viri duo sedebant, quorum alter miles fuit, alter vernaculus. Et ad eandem domum due pulchre et sapientes puelle venerunt et ad ianuam pulsaverunt, et hominibus illis dixerunt: In longinquis regionibus famam que bona non fuit de vobis adiuvimus, scilicet quod in multis scrutationibus contra regem dixeritis. Et rex de vobis dixit: Qui sunt squalidi isti? Et quis sum ego? – Ideo nunc audite consilium nostrum ad victoriam vestram. Ego humilitas vitam in incarnatione Filii Dei vidi et mortem conculcavi. Opera autem obedientie mons sunt, et benevolentia vallis cum floribus, cui tribuli et spine in multis tempestatibus vitiorum spe accurrunt. Et in domo cordis tui, o homo, sedet miles, scilicet obedientia, et vernaculus, scilicet superbia, et ad ianuam mentis tue caritas et obedientia pulsant, ita quod non totum facias quod in possibilitate tua malum habes. Nunc autem discerne quod miles vernaculum superet, ne pulchritudo obedientie sub pedibus vernaculi iaceat, quia superbia dicit: Impossibile est vincula illa dirumpi quibus homines ligo. – Cui tu responde, caritatem audiens tibi dicentem: In celo integra sedi et terram osculata sum, et superbia contra me iuravit atque super sidera volare voluit, sed eam in abyssum proieci. Nunc autem vernaculum

¹⁴⁷ This observation refers not only to Hildegard’s letters, but also to her visionary trilogy, where the personification of Caritas is also present.

¹⁴⁸ Cf. Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages*, 171.

¹⁴⁹ Cf. *ibid.*

mecum conculca, et in me caritate, o fili, sta et humilitatem velut dominam in amplexione habe, et numquam confunderis nec morte morieris” (Ep. 58).¹⁵⁰

The introductory sentences in this passage form an *exemplum*. They are simple sentences, lacking any stylistic ornamentation. The authoress does not want to distract the reader from the message of the text, which includes allegories of Humility, Love, Vanity and Obedience, as well as a number of personifications. Hildegard uses simple metaphors, such as “the house of the heart” or “the gates of the mind, ” although she occasionally introduces a metaphor within a metaphor, for instance, when she says: “The house of the heart in which the soldier lives, or obedience.” There also appears an explicit simile, in which the actions that follow from obedience are compared to a mountain, as well as a Homeric one, when Hildegard compares “good will” to a “valley.” There are also two rhetorical questions. The whole passage ends with an exhortation and prescription regarding the attitude to be adopted in one’s life. This concluding sentence includes a tautology (or a pleonasm). Throughout the parable, Hildegard consistently uses the stylistic markers characteristic of prescriptive literature, since the text draws on numerous allegories.

The third and the last instance of parable that might be insightful in the context of the present considerations brings the image of a vineyard, which is one of the most frequent themes in the Gospels. Hildegard writes: “Homo qui vineam aut saxosum habet agrum et intra se dicit: Laboriosum est hic laborare – ac sic eos relinquit, tediosus laborator est. Sed cum tempus fructuum advenerit, dominus eius ad ipsum dicit: Vade ad campos et quere fructum in floribus, qui interdum florent et interdum arescunt. – Sed ibi nihil invenit. Audi: vinea sacerdotale officium est. Qui autem virgam correptionis in populo gravi habet, hic saxosum agrum possidet. Quem ista fatigant, intra se dicit: Illa vita est aliena vita, ac ista vita mihi melior est. – Et sic quod hoc tempore excogitat, hoc tempore derelinquit, sicut flos qui arescit. Sed si tu ista faceres, tibi dicendum esset sicut uillico qui de villicatione sua coram domino suo diffamatus est et qui de abiectioe sua intra se cogitabat, ac unicuique minus scribebat quam deberet, unde dominus suus ipsi dixit *Filii huius mundi sapientiores filiis lucis in generatione sua sunt*. Primus angelus cadens in penitentia suspirare noluit, nec ut alii suspirent permittit. Sacerdos autem erigat se et alios festinet adiuvere, Nunc hec provide et in sapientiori

¹⁵⁰ *Hildegardis Bingensis Epistolarium*, pars I, ep. I–XC, CCCM 91, p. 138, 6–29.

parte deficeris et in penitentia recordarieris quid derelinquisses. Tu autem cum populo isto mane et eum non relinque, ut in eternum vivas” (Ep.111).¹⁵¹

Again, this is a simple story, told without recourse to rhetorical means. It is structured around the simple symbols of the vineyard and the stony field which denote a religious community. It includes a number of similes: the work of the spiritual director in such a community is compared to working in a stony field, and life itself is compared to a withering flower. There are minor metaphors: “ideas that come across one’s mind” and the “birch of correction,” which denotes the duties of a superior. Hildegard also makes a direct reference to the Gospels, which are the source of authority to the recipient of her letter. There is also present, one may presume, an echo of the passage in St. Augustine’s *Confessions*, where he calls himself “wasteland.”¹⁵² The entire attention and effort of the authoress are focused on her primary goal, which is to persuade the superior not to reject the community he leads despite the toil of his work.

A comparison of the parts of Hildegard’s correspondence comprising parables with other sections of her letters shows numerous linguistic differences. In the parables, the authoress avoids the stylistic devices she abundantly uses elsewhere. However, both her avoidance of the figures of speech in parables and her intentional use of them in other parts of her letters is undoubtedly the visionary author’s deliberate choice. After a tentative analysis of the phonetic and semantic levels of Hildegard’s letters, one may justifiably claim that, on the linguistic grounds, they represent a borderline genre, in between poetry and prose. One might even hold that they resemble poetry rather than prose, which is due both to the frequency of alliteration, rhythm and rhymes and to the abundance of stylistic tropes characteristic of the language of poetry. The present considerations are by no means exhaustive in this aspect and they merely outline an interesting research perspective.

Hildegard’s letters certainly accomplished the goal to which they were written. Apparently, their content appeals also to modern readers, in particular to those who seek spiritual direction.

Translated by Dorota Chabrajska

¹⁵¹ Ibid., pars II, p. 275, 1–23.

¹⁵² St. Augustine, *Confessions*, Book 2, Chapter 10, 18, in idem, “*Confessions*” and “*Enchiridion*,” trans. Albert Cook Outler (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1955), 37.

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ARTYZM JĘZYKOWY HILDEGARDY Z BINGEN
NA PRZYKŁADZIE JEJ LISTÓW

Streszczenie

Hildegardę z Bingen (1095-1179) uwzględniają współczesne badania naukowe prowadzone w wielu różnych dziedzinach. Ta dwunastowieczna benedyktynka jest jednym z najbardziej interesujących nas dziś autorów średniowiecza. Jej twórczość pozwala na poznanie ówczesnych poglądów odnoszących się do głównych obszarów wiedzy, takich jak teologia, filozofia, medycyna, przyrodznawstwo.

Najważniejsze jej pisma to tzw. trylogia wizyjna, na którą składają się: *Scivias*, *Liber divinorum operum*, *Liber vitae meritorum*. Uzupełnieniem, a zarazem echem tej twórczości są listy, których zbiór jest cennym świadectwem epoki. Poruszone w nich zostały najbardziej ważne problemy teoretyczne ówczesnych czasów. Listy stanowią zbiór dokumentów cennych także z literaturoznawczego punktu widzenia, jako interesujące przykłady średniowiecznego listu chrześcijańskiego. Pozwalają one przy tym przedstawić nie tylko umysłowość autorki, ale także sytuację panującą w ówczesnym świecie zewnętrznym. Tę ostatnią w kilku aspektach – religijnym, filozoficznym, duchowym, politycznym, społecznym. Językiem, w którym zostały napisane jest łacina, której – jak wiadomo – wizjonerka nie uczyła się w sposób systematyczny, a mimo to lektura dowodzi, że można listy te potraktować jako przegląd najważniejszych środków stylistycznych, jakimi dysponuje literatura europejska. Hildegarda wykorzystuje je wszystkie, choć najchętniej korzysta z metafor i rozbudowanych porównań. Chętnie i celowo stosuje aliteracje, nie unika tautologii. W jej listach natrafiamy na ustępy o zdecydowanie rytmizowanym i rymizowanym charakterze. W artykule środki te zostały zaprezentowane, choć ze względu na obfitość materiału z konieczności jedynie w pewnym wyborze. Są to środki odnoszące się do warstwy brzmieniowej i znaczeniowej tekstów oraz środki składniowe. Niniejszy artykuł nie wyczerpuje tematu, jedynie wyznacza perspektywę badawczą.

Streściła Małgorzata Kowalewska

Słowa kluczowe: Średniowiecze, Hildegarda z Bingen, listy, artyzm języka.

THE LINGUISTIC ARTISTRY OF HILDEGARD OF BINGEN
AS EXEMPLIFIED IN HER LETTERS

Summary

In the modern times, the life and activity of Hildegard of Bingen (1095–1179) have inspired academic research in many different fields. While Hildegard's fundamental theological works are the three volumes of her so-called visionary trilogy: *Scivias*, *Liber divinorum operum*, and *Liber vitae meritorum*, it is above all her letters that offer a precious reflection of the epoch. Moreover, the collection of Hildegard's letters is of outstanding value from the literary and linguistic points of view, since it comprises very interesting instances of the genre of medieval Christian epistle. The fact that Hildegard has been included among the Doctors of the Church provides special inspiration for the research of her letters, which offer a vivid reflection of her views and outlook. The research in question may focus on selected aspects: doctrinal, prescriptive or literary. The focal point of the present considerations is precisely the literary aspect of Hildegard's letters. Although the literary value of her correspondence is usually considered as serving its main objective, namely prescription, it deserves separate attention. A particularly interesting theme of analysis is the stylistic means of expression Hildegard of Bingen employed in her letters.

Hildegard's letters were written in Latin. It is common knowledge that she did not learn that language systematically, so her command of it was not perfect. Her "textbooks" of rhetoric were above all the Bible, the Breviary and the writings of the Fathers of the Church, which determined her way of expression. The adoption of Biblical phraseology gives a characteristic tone to her style and determines the solemnity of the contents of her letters. Another characteristic of the language of Hildegard's letters (and undoubtedly also of her Latin) is its figurativeness and emotional tone. A reading of Hildegard's letters shows that they include the most important stylistic devices used in European literature. While Hildegard makes frequent use of all of them, metaphors and detailed similes are undoubtedly her favorite. She frequently and deliberately introduces alliteration and does not avoid tautology. Occasionally, passages of her letters are organized by means of rhythm or rhyme.

In the current paper, only a very narrow selection of the stylistic devices that appear in the letters authored by Hildegard of Bingen has been presented. Without doubt, one might point out to others that have been disregarded here. In this context, however, it is worthwhile to mention that apart from various figures of speech, she introduces into the body of her letters passages which represent distinct literary genres which add to the prescriptive tone of her correspondence. The two genres in question are the *sententia* (sentence) and the parable. The attention of a reader of Hildegard's letters is immediately drawn to her perspicuous sentences which have a positively sapiential nature and are remindful of Pascal's *Pensées* (*Thoughts*), however anachronistic such a comparison might seem. Their form is that of a maxim (a *sententia*, or an aphorism) and they express general insights, in which they go beyond their prescriptive goals and assume the shape of philosophical statements. The parables used by Hildegard serve the purpose of parenesis. Since the parable is essentially a didactic and prescriptive genre, Hildegard resorted to it in order to formulate the moral prescription or exhortation which was the ultimate goal of her letters. Apart from the parable, Hildegard occasionally uses *exempla*. Interestingly though, the passages in Hildegard's letters which are made up of parables might not give the impression of rhetorical richness: she refrains from alliteration, the text does not have a rhythm, and there are no rhymes or complex similes in it. However, the passages in question comprise numerous allegories which are the structural elements of the parables. Instead, they comprise simple sentences without any kind of stylistic ornamentation. The parables are composed of rhetorically ascetic, dry statements. The epithets used in them are simple, unsophisticated, one might even say colloquial. Hildegard's modest recourse to rhetoric in the case of parables proves her good insight into genre theory and the literary means suitable for a particular genre. It also demonstrates both her good taste and her literary intuition.

Translated by Dorota Chabrajska

Key words: Middle Ages, Hildegard of Bingen, letters, linguistic artistry.