UNEQUAL TWINS: VISIONARY ATTITUDE AND MONASTIC CULTURE IN ELISABETH OF SCHÖNAU AND HILDEGARD OF BINGEN*

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In the Taunus Mountains north of Frankfurt, the days preceding Palm Sunday in the year 1153 must have been accompanied by diluvial rain, as we learn from the so-called Liber Visionum of the 12th-century Benedictine nun Elisabeth of Schönau.¹ We would rather expect to find such information in a chronicle or similar annalistic source, rather than in a book identified as a collection of visions—definitely not in a work of the temper of Hildegard’s Liber Scivias. Yet this surprising detail, which could even arouse suspicion about a possible confusion of literary genres, should be perceived as a warning, keeping us from an overly homogeneous notion of the medieval concept of visionary experience. “Vision,” obviously, can refer to different modes of “seeing” things beyond the borders of natural perception and to a wide range of different textual genres.²

Visualizing Monastic Liturgy

The Liber Visionum of Elisabeth of Schönau opens with a cycle of visionary records that are closely embedded in the life of the monastic community at Schönau, thus assuming a diary-like character, as the above-mentioned case of Palm Sunday witnesses, where Elisabeth presents herself as the narrator:

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¹ I am indebted to the participants of the October 2006 Medieval Studies Seminar at Harvard University for their critical comments on an initial presentation of this article’s considerations, which in turn draw on two preliminary studies of mine: an article on Elisabeth of Schönau titled “Imaginierte Passion. Vision im Spannungsfeld zwischen liturgischer Matrix und religiöser Erfahrung bei Elisabeth von Schönau” in Nova de Veteribus. Mittel- und neulateinische Studien für Paul Gerhard Schmidt, ed. Andreas Bihrer (Munich, 2005), pp. 463–76; and “Hildegard und ihr liturgisches Umfeld,” an unpublished contribution to a symposium, organized in 1998 in Bingen under the leadership of Wulf Arlt (Basel), on the musical aspects of Hildegard’s oeuvre.


¹ Elisabeth of Schönau, Liber Visionum 1, 44, in Die Visionen der hl. Elisabeth und die Schriften der Äbte Ekbert und Emecho von Schönau, ed. Friedrich W. Roth (Brünn, 1884), p. 23 (Latin text, see n. 4).
I had earnestly asked our brothers to celebrate the office of Palm Sunday that day in the meadow where we could see them. They were not able to do this because the brooks had flooded; instead, they conducted the service behind the church where we were not able to see it. And the Lord respected the desire of His handmaid, and with the eyes of my mind I saw everything that they did there.\(^3\)

This short text offers paradigmatic insight into important features and conditions of this type of vision. The episode is narrated with remarkably scant sobriety and without any features of prophetic rhetoric. Arguing from the perspective of a more sophisticated and more spectacular concept of vision and visionary—and again, Hildegard is a good example of such an opposition—one might even hesitate at first glance to consider this kind of imaginary process as a “real” vision. What is related here is actually located in the horizon of a more general culture of visuality, since it appears to be an outflow of a strongly developed desire of seeing, in this case a kind of spiritual substitution for physical view. The ceremony, which Elisabeth is not able to observe because of bad meteorological circumstances, is shown to her inner eyes (\textit{vidi oculis mentis omnia quae illic gesta sunt}).

Yet there is another, even more important aspect of this description that is absolutely symptomatic of the entire range of this early part of Elisabeth’s visions: the immediate dependence on the celebration of liturgy, which lends this first cycle of visions, as Kurt Köster describes it, a character of being a “witness of ecstatic participation in the ecclesiastical year, intimately linked to monastic liturgy.”\(^4\)

A closer reading of the text shows an interesting switch of registers at the beginning of its last phrase. The formula \textit{respexit dominus desiderium ancillae suae}, inserted rather abruptly at this point, is an obvious allusion to a biblical text, Mary’s praise of the Lord’s unexpected favor in the \textit{Mag-}

\(^3\) \textit{Liber Visionum} 1, 44, p. 23; “rogaveram fratres nostros diligenter ut illo die officium Palmarum celebrarent in prato quod est ante conspectum nostrum, et non potuerunt propter inundationem rivulorum, sed retro ecclesiam ubi videri a nobis non poterat id peregerunt. Et respexit dominus desiderium ancillae suae (cf. Lk 1:48) et vidi oculis mentis omnia quae illic gesta sunt ab eis.” For the English version of this and the following quotes from Elisabeth’s writings, I gratefully make use of the translation by Anne L. Clark, \textit{Elisabeth of Schönau: The Complete Works}, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York, 2000), p. 71.