

KAMILA STEPIEŃ-KUTERA (Warszawa)

Love in the Writings of Saint Hildegard of Bingen

The work of Ludwik Bronarski

The stimulus which has led me to look more closely at Saint Hildegard of Bingen was the relatively little known work *Die Lieder der hl. Hildegard. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der geistlichen Musik des Mittelalters*, written by Ludwik Bronarski as his doctoral thesis in Freiburg, under the supervision of one of the greatest researchers of medieval music – Peter Wagner. It was defended in 1919 and published three years later. Apart from one more article, from 1926,¹ this work about Hildegard is the only one in Bronarski's output which does not deal with Chopin. Possibly the reason why the work has been forgotten so easily is its unusualness in the output of a famous chopinologist.

It is forgotten unjustly. This thorough analysis of Hildegard's songs is one of the first of its kind to be undertaken – possibly the very first, given that earlier works concentrate either on Hildegard's biography or her mystical writings, whereas Bronarski writes exclusively about the Saint's poetry and music (although her authorship of the music is not confirmed for certain). It is notable that, despite his use of research methods unpopular today, Bronarski's main theses remain extremely up-to-date: from establishing the number of Hildegard's works, through their classification, to his final observations.

The work is divided into six parts: an introduction (explaining how the work came about and concentrating on the sources used by the author) and five chapters. The songs are classified in two ways: with respect to the different types of plainchant (we note here the unusual character of these works, evincing a rather liberal approach to the rules of plainchant with regard to both text and melody; forms are not only re-

¹Ludwik Bronarski, 'Die Quadripartita figura in der mittelalterlichen Musiktheorie', in *Festschrift Peter Wagner zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. Karl Weinmann (Leipzig, 1926).

laxed, but also crossed) and the predominant church scale in particular songs. Bronarski supports his observation that this music represents, in a sense, a serious step towards the establishment of modern major-minor tonality by a carefully analysing each melodic theme and by showing a clear and dominating tendency towards the strong centralisation of the note chosen as the *finalis*, with its upper fifth also favoured (the author even allows himself to call this note a dominant).

Bronarski also analyses the construction of the texts and points to such characteristics as a fondness for hyperbole or the frequent use of interjections increasing the pathos and emotion of a text. In his summary, the author considers the connection between melody and text, where, in spite of the generally liberal approach, he notes the quite regular use of elaborate melismata to emphasise more important words, of higher notes to highlight stressed syllables, and even some elements of tonal painting. Bronarski's work is crowned with a brief characterisation of Hildegard's poetic and musical output (Bronarski favours such expressions as 'ornate', 'vigour', 'freedom', 'melody unsettled, to the extent of becoming unnatural or even odd', 'sharp melodic contour') and – as the author says himself – 'an attempt at an historical assessment': according to Bronarski, the analysed melodies should be attributed to the period of the decline, or 'autumn', of plainchant, representing in many respects the final phase in the development of a particular genre. That said, there are certain features (the stabilisation of modern tonality, the use of techniques similar to later motivic working and variation technique) which point forwards to the further development of music.

Love embraces everything.

Various forms of *caritas* in Hildegard's work

Bronarski's analysis is proof that the music under discussion is the consistent and coherent work of a single author, even if it is not Hildegard. The same is true for the texts, whose connection with Hildegard is more certain. All the songs are linked formally and by content, and the images, symbols and metaphors they contain have their equivalents in her prose writings.

The motive of *caritas*, that is, God's love, is a recurrent theme. Hildegard is often classified as one of the twelfth-century female mystics (although scholars do disagree on this point, e.g. in lexicographical studies), which makes the presence of God's love in her writings entirely natural. However, love in Hildegard's works does not appear in enthusiastic visions of a union in love with God. As was noted in the *Lexikon des Mit-*

telalters,² her representations of love are closer to propheticism and pictorial allegory than to an erotically metaphorical mysticism.

The short antiphon *Caritas habundant in omnia* (no. 9 in Bronarski's work) represents a poetic synthesis of how Hildegard saw *caritas*³:

Caritas
abounds in all things
from the depths to high
above the highest stars,
and is most loving
to all things;
for to the high king
it has given the kiss of peace.

Signalled in this little poetic tableau are individual meanings and traditions through which *caritas* is described by the Saint of Bingen. Thus we have a pantheistic vision where *caritas* is equated to God. Such a conception also appears elsewhere in Hildegard, most distinctly in a sequence about the Holy Spirit where *Caritas* is the third person of the Trinity, uniting the universe and making it fertile – as Barbara Newman observes in *The Sister of Wisdom*.⁴ One can also discern here ancient traditions present in the Middle Ages that have been described by Ernst Robert Curtius. However, *Caritas* would be equivalent here in a way to Physis, the goddess of Nature. Curtius writes about a third or fourth century hymn to Physis where she is described as an omnipotent creator, born before everyone else, eternal life and redemption.⁵

We find the same in Hildegard. The statement, condensed for the needs of a poem, that *caritas* embraces everything was developed more than once by Hildegard in her visions, for example in this one quoted by Newman: 'Love has been sense and substance of the whole creation because the whole creation had been formed through it [...]'.⁶ Thus the perception of *caritas* ranges from the divine mother and a means of defining the Trinitarian God to less personal *materiae creaturae*.

² Peter Dinzelbacher, Hans Biedermann and Hamid Algar, 'Mystik', in *Lexikon des Mittelalters*, vol. 6 (Munich, 1991).

³ English versions of Hildegard's poems after Peter Dronke's translations in CD-books *900 Years Hildegard von Bingen 1098-1998. The Most Comprehensive Anthology of Her Musical Works Performed by Sequentia* (BMG Entertainment, 1998).

⁴ See Barbara Newman, *The Sister of Wisdom. St. Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine* (University of California Press, 1987), 67.

⁵ See Ernst Robert Curtius, *Europäische Literatur und Lateinisches Mittelalter* (Bern, 1948); trans. Willard R. Trask as *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, (Princeton, 1953).

⁶ Cit. after Newman, *The Sister of Wisdom*, 63.

The range of possible interpretations of *caritas* in Hildegard's work is expanded in further verses connected with another group of visions. *Caritas* raised from the depths brings to mind descriptions in which it belongs to the set of virtues subordinate to God – not in unity with Him, but rather in His service. As the virtue by means of which the world was created (the world was obviously created thanks to God's love for it), it stands highest in the hierarchy of virtues. In Hildegard's drama *Ordo virtutum*, it is *caritas* which is to lead the other virtues to God, the living light.⁷

The last group of associations with *caritas* which can be derived from this antiphon are exceptionally beautiful. Among those presented thus far, they are the closest to mystical traditions. *Caritas* giving God the kiss of love is *Caritas* kissing her betrothed, and at the same time *Ecclesia* in Bernard of Clairvaux's mystical reading of the Song of Songs. In *Liber vitae meritorum*, *Caritas* speaks of her relationship with God, relating that it is she who takes care of the divine nuptial bed and that everything belonging to God belongs also to her.⁸

The word *caritas* is used in yet another meaning in an antiphon to Saint Rupert:

Blissful sight,
when in Rupert, God's friend,
the flame of life sparkled,
so that *caritas*
flew in his heart
embracing fear of the Lord;
so too his fame
among the citizens on high
flowered.

Passing over the fact that the presence here of Rupert provides temptation for an interpreter to point to Hildegard's mystical roots, it is important for my description of the diverse manifestations of the word *caritas* in her work that in this antiphon it appears in the sense of grace; it is a sign of being chosen by God and a special distinction (even among the inhabitants of heaven!). *Caritas* represents here both God's love for the chosen one and also the chosen one's love for God. In a sense, we can hear once again the opening phrase from the antiphon about *caritas*: it embraces everything, flowing from God through every creature, like a life-giving stream.

⁷ Presenting herself, *Caritas* says: 'Ego Caritas, flos amabilis – venite ad me, Virtutes, et perducam vos in candidam lucem floris virge' (*Ordo virtutum*, Scene 2).

⁸ See Newman, *The Sister of Wisdom*, 49–50.

Hildegard in modernity – Anette Kreuziger-Herr

Hildegard's representations of *caritas* often escaped the canons of scholastic theology, yet they always remained within the religious-ecclesiastic environment. This is important, as in recent interpretations her person and work appear in surprisingly different contexts.

Anette Kreuziger-Herr, a German researcher of Hildegard's life and work, wrote a very interesting article about the modern perception of Hildegard. In 'Postmoderne Hildegard',⁹ our attention is drawn to the use of the figure of Hildegard of Bingen by feminist movements (strongly feminist thinking in general seems to be constantly linked to this mystic; the above-mentioned book by Newman is also not free from such a perception – it is enough to observe that she writes about *caritas* mainly in the context of its personification as a woman – which is, *nota bene*, nothing unusual given the fact that *caritas*, a feminine word in Latin, has always appeared in a female form, similarly to the other virtues). Kreuziger-Herr also gives numerous examples of Hildegard's music being transformed into so-called 'sacropop' or 'chill-out' music.

As Kreuziger-Herr writes elsewhere,¹⁰ Hildegard is in some sense susceptible – as is the mediaeval era in general – to 'postmodernist' transformations. The less we know about a given epoch, and the longer the period that divides us from it, the greater is the scope for 'filling in' the emotional gaps with contemporary logic. Hence our sense of proximity in relation to the Middle Ages and the apparent ease with which we interpret and adapt it to our own needs. In truth, however, every product of the medieval imagination, infinitely distant from today's way of thinking, remains shrouded in mystery.

Perhaps the only way to escape the trap of false readings of medieval thought is a thorough analysis of the material (following Bronarski's example), which, now further enriched by contemporary knowledge and innovative methods of interpretation, might bring us at least a little closer to the impressive oeuvre of Saint Hildegard of Bingen.

Translated by Joanna Stępień

⁹ Anette Kreuziger-Herr, 'Postmoderne Hildegard, oder Wie man im 20. Jahrhundert der "Harfe Gottes" zuhört', in *Übersetzte Zeit*, ed. Wolfgang Gratzer and Hartmut Möller (Hofheim, 1999).

¹⁰ See Anette Kreuziger-Herr, 'Zur Musik der Hildegard von Bingen', in *Europäische Mystik vom Hochmittelalter zum Barock. Eine Schlüsselepoche in der europäischen Mentalitäts-, Spiritualitäts- und Individuationsentwicklung*, ed. Wolfgang Beutin and Thomas Bütow (Frankfurt am Main, 1998), 90.

