FOREWORD

Phytophonies

Echoes of Hildegard of Bingen Today

I

“Listen for once to freshness!” How strange do these words sound today, when nature, life, and the earth itself seem to be on course to deteriorate and disappear? When humans and nonhumans, from animals to inanimate stones, seem to be facing the most lethal threat ever—a threat in comparison to which the apocalyptic tones of the past sound like mild tunes, since the violence of this destruction promises a devastation even more damaging than physical carnage? Where and how might freshness still sound in the world of today, with its planetary politics of fascism and injustice, of misery and distress, of indifference and mistrust? Is there any freshness possible when everything seems to have been already seen, said, and heard? When *the all* of things seems to have been usurped, invaded, and confiscated by the laws of destruction and the spirit of vengeance? Freshness—in which sense? Is it not merely an image, a metaphor? Or is it simply the vestige of an old fresco? Or an ancient word for a desired purity, an expected redemption? Moreover, how should one listen to freshness? How would freshness be audible?

These strange words—with which we ask that freshness be listened to—invite us not only to a series of reflections but also to an

immersive experience. Listen to listening: maybe this is the freshness that remains, as a task to accomplish in our disjointed times. To listen to listening is, however, only possible when the difference between the listener and the listened-to is somehow overcome. Thus, what emerges in the listening experience is the one within the other, the other within the one. It is the monochordic experience of a sound.

Indeed, a sound is a sound within a sound within another sound: one in the other, which is itself another, and so forth. Sound is mysterious insofar as there is no “one” sound—or, better, insofar as our limited ears listen as though it were one sound rather than a series of sounds in itself differentiating and differentiated.

The discovery of a tremendous enigma of the one being within itself, multiple and diverse, of a sound with the whisper of the one within the other: this discovery is music. We could even call it the pythagoricity of music, alluding to Pythagoras’s discovery of the monochord or sonometer. But why should it be freshness? In which sense should music, this one word that already evokes the nine Muses, be connected to freshness? If every musical experience is that of infusing the one with the multiple and the diverse, if every musician and composer performs and embodies this experience, the sense of freshness within this musical reality must be associated with a singular woman in Western cultural history: Hildegard of Bingen, the Benedictine abbess who lived in medieval Germany between the years 1098 and 1179. Hildegard, the visionary saint of the life of life, *vita vitae*, as the music of freshness.

II

Hildegard of Bingen was already a legend in her lifetime. She entered the Benedictine order as a child, inspired by the visions she would continue to have for the rest of her life. She founded monasteries for her nuns; wrote three great volumes of original and visionary theology (*Scivias* [Know the Ways], *Liber vitae meritorum* [Book of the Rewards of Life], and *Liber divinorum operum*

[Book of Divine Works]); and wrote liturgical songs, poems, and the oldest known morality play, titled *Ordo virtutum* (*Order of the Virtues*). She is considered one of the founders of natural history with her two volumes on medicine and cures, the *Physica* and the *Causae et curae*, and was one of the most creative early composers of monophonic music. Besides an extensive correspondence with popes, statesmen, emperors, and other notable figures, she also invented a constructed language, or *lingua ignota*, and would be made a doctor of the church in the twenty-first century. She was a mystical theologian, a healer, an artist, a philosopher, a scientist, and a political voice who in every aspect of her multiple areas of knowledge and intuition drew from the music of freshness—a freshness that, far from any metaphoric meaning, she conceived of as *viriditas*, as greenness, plantness, vegetality.

What is the lesson of Hildegard's vision of the life of life as greening greenness, as *viriditas*? Although used before by Augustine, Gregory the Great, and Hildegard's contemporary, the French nun Heloise, the Latin word *viriditas* gained a unique ontological and metaphysical resonance in Hildegard's writings. There it expresses another sense of *veritas*, of truth, than the common one equating reason and existence, the spirit and the body, the realm of the creator and that of the created. Rather than seeing a correspondence between two orders, realms, or faculties, Hildegard proposes to look at the mystery of plantness, of greening greenness, of growth, advancing what many centuries later another German, the poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, thought about in his inquiries on the *Metamorphosis of Plants*. In question here is not how one realm equates or corresponds to the other, but how one grows in and into the other, how one greens forth as the other, the *viriditas*—freshness or greenness—of the othering of life, of the one differentiating in itself, of the music of life. If Hildegard had known ancient Greek, she might have adopted our own invented word, *phytophonia* (from *phyto*, “plant,” and *phono*, “sound”), to say in one breath the sound of plantness.

Hildegard's lessons on *viriditas* as music, on phytophonia, in the sense of the one growing into otherness—that is, in the sense of creation—is the subject of this unique book, authored by Michael Marder and musicalized by Peter Schuback. It is a work that meditates in words and sounds on the meaning of *viriditas* as phytophonia, opening ways of knowing today how one is in itself becoming other and of following the paths of creation in a world pierced by *ariditas*, a growing desertification. Even without quoting explicitly the words of Friedrich Nietzsche, another visionary, that “*Die Wüste wächst: weh dem, der Wüsten birgt*” (“The desert grows: woe to him in whom deserts hide”), *Green Mass* listens carefully to the deserts. It listens to the *growth* of the desert beyond boundaries within the capitalist desert, paying attention to how a vagabond little flower grows within and despite the reinforced concrete that today arms the world against the life within itself.

Michael Marder's philosophical work over the last years has been dedicated to thinking about and on the most neglected experience in philosophy, that of plant life and plant-thinking; his is an approach to vegetal being and the mystery of elemental growing. The place of a book on Hildegard's visions of the greening greenness in his philosophy is, of course, more than clear. What is remarkable about Marder's readings of Hildegard's visions of freshness, however, is the attention he pays to how *viriditas* is also the way thoughts grow. Indeed, thoughts are thought not about or on questions, subjects, realities, or experiences, but as plants of life. With Hildegard, Marder learns both how thoughts are the growing branches of life and how this growth is music—hence, that which should be listened to.

III

Green Mass, both the text in your hands and the musical composition that accompanies it, opens with a Prelude and is divided into Verges, Analogies, Resonances, Missives, Ardencies, Anarchies, Kisses, and a Postlude. As a sound is in itself a series of

simultaneous sounds, these different chapters or movements should be read and listened to as moments of attention to the different instances of the simultaneous, the mysterious way of the one that grows into its own othering, sounds in words, words in music. Any attempt to find an equation or correspondence between the writing and the music would be fruitless: both grow from a listening *to viriditas*, to greenening greenness, and not really to each other. Therefore, one can grow into the other.

The book and the music can be read and heard as phytophonies within phytophonies, as the sounding of greenness within the sounding of greenness, as listening within a listening, wherein the life of life, *vita vitae*, is sensed as the way “the fire of the Spirit gives life to forms and is saint,” as Hildegard wrote in one of her poems. My insistence on these repetitive expressions is not a rhetorical procedure. It is instead the way the freshness of listening can be listened to—as echoing, as the growing of each one into the open air of another. If Hildegard wrote poems of poems, songs of songs, and thoughts of thoughts, it was not at all for the sake of turning the soul away from the body of the world, alienating action from theory, imprisoning life in the tower of lifelessness. Much to the contrary, the question was how *viriditas* greens, echoing the one in the other and the other in another. It is, for us today, the demand for thought that keeps an ear close to the earthy ground and lets thinking words be spoken from this listening—decisive words that flourish in the mouth from the abyss of the earth, as flowers grow and plants green on the skin of life.

At a moment when the world seems to be succumbing to despair, when all forms of life are threatened, when not only the annihilation of living beings is legitimated but also the attempt to eradicate being itself, an invitation to “listen for once to freshness” appears as a way out. It pays attention to the incomprehensible dynamics that can take place in not moving, in remaining where one is, spreading multiple branches in the air and deepening multiformed rhizomes under the earth. If it seems difficult to find an

answer to the question of where and how we should move today, maybe the answer is one of not trying to give an answer. Perhaps we should stay within the mystery of greening greenness, of *viriditas*, learning to listen to its *lingua ignota*, the unknown score of its sounding, its *phytophonies*.

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