

THE VOICE OF HONEST INDIGNATION:
A STUDY OF REFORMIST APOCALYPTICISM
IN RELATION TO PIERS PLOWMAN

TWO VOLUMES

VOLUME I

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation attempts to acquaint the reader with a brand of medieval apocalyptic thought characterized by denunciation of clerical abuse and fervent expectation of church reform and spiritual renewal. This type of apocalyptic thought, referred to here as reformist apocalypticism, seems to have exerted an ideological and stylistic influence on Langland's Piers Plowman. Although it is impossible with the current state of our knowledge of the dissemination of reformist prophecy in England to pinpoint precise sources of influence, certain patterns of thought, expression and imagery typical of such prophecy can be found in a number of passages in the poem. Furthermore, many of the less conspicuously prophetic issues which preoccupied Langland, such as clerical poverty, antimendicantism and the appropriate place of learning in clerical life, were also central concerns in apocalyptic reformist thought. The fact that Langland makes these issues the focus of explicit prophetic expectation in certain passages of the poem suggests that he was drawing upon precisely this tradition.

Medieval reformist prophecy reached England in the form of either visionary or exegetically-inspired prophecy, a division which reflects the influence of the two major figures behind Northern European apocalyptic thought, Hildegard of Bingen and Joachim of Fiore. The present study aims to make readers of Piers Plowman aware of the various

apocalyptic traditions available to a fourteenth-century writer like Langland, especially the Hildegardean visionary "school" (discussed in the first and second chapters) and the exegetically-based pseudo-Joachite tradition (discussed in the third chapter). In connection with the pseudo-Joachite tradition, Chapter III also explores the antimendicant eschatology which arose in reaction to it. Finally, many of the puzzling stylistic features of Piers Plowman which have been labelled as "non-medieval" (and worse) by exasperated critics can be seen to have parallels in both the early apocalypses and the later apocalyptic visionary writings, a problem which is explored at various points throughout the thesis.

This study suggests that we must go beyond the Middle English tradition to the Latin prophetic literature of the period in order to understand some of the stylistic and ideological features of Piers Plowman. The thesis attempts to set the poem in the context of a hitherto unnoticed reformist tradition, which I believe reflects the kind of radical but socially and religiously orthodox thought actually represented in Langland's poetry. Reformist apocalypticism could be a powerful polemical tool in the hands of a committed orthodox writer: that Langland was such a writer and that an understanding of this ideologically daring material can enhance our appreciation of Piers Plowman is the suggestion of this dissertation.

INTRODUCTION

The Prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel dined with me, and I asked them how they dared so roundly to assert. that God spake to them; and whether they did not think at the time, that they would be misunderstood, & so be the cause of imposition.

Isaiah answer'd. I saw no God, nor heard any, in a finite organical perception; but my senses discover'd the infinite in every thing, and as I was then perswaded, & remain confirm'd; that the voice of honest indignation is the voice of God, I cared not for the consequences but wrote.¹

William Blake's perceptive characterization of the prophetic impetus as the "voice of honest indignation" is perhaps the most apt definition ever arrived at for this peculiar form of religious inspiration. All the medieval prophets and visionaries considered in this study were persuaded that the voice of their own honest indignation was the voice of God and that Divine indignation would soon spill over into apocalyptic wrath if this voice continued to be ignored. A comparison between such writers and Langland is not, I believe, invalidated by the fact that Langland was less overt and perhaps a little more uncertain about his prophetic vocation than they were. That all such prophets were plagued by self-doubt at some point is obvious (it is not by chance that even William Blake, the most bold-spirited prophetic writer in the canon of English literature, placed himself as the questioner in the above exchange: "and I asked them how they dared so roundly to assert. that God spake to them . . ."). Langland portrays instances in which his right to speak out must be affirmed (XII, 23-38)² and in which the worth of his poetic activity is challenged

(B. XII, 16-29), but the fact that Piers Plowman is as it stands today suggests that such indignation usually prevails and that (what is felt to be) the truth will out in the end. Although Langland is more a poet than a self-proclaimed visionary or prophet like the other writers discussed here, there is a voice of indignation in certain passages of Piers Plowman that cannot easily be explained in other terms. What follows, therefore, is an attempt to study the influence of medieval reformist apocalypticism on this prophetic voice in Piers Plowman, in the hope that the self-proclaimed prophets and visionaries of the later Middle Ages can illuminate for us some aspects of this less self-proclaimed but equally indignant seer of visions.

We are fortunate to have to compare with Piers Plowman the explicitly prophetic visions and prophecies of a group of medieval writers who, like Langland, spoke out against injustice and abuse, and envisioned reform. Such writers most often focused their indignation upon the clergy: as the spiritual leaven of all men, a faltering clergy imperilled the entire community; thus the concentration of these prophetic writers on clerical chastisement and reform can be understood as a more central concern than at first it might seem. The present thesis aims to look at Piers Plowman, then, from the standpoint of the influence of reformist apocalypticism upon it, with particular reference to the prophecy of clerical chastisement and renewal so central to this type of writing.

Of the types of prophetic and apocalyptic literature available to Langland, the Latin religious prophecy of reform and renewal seems to

me to answer the greatest number of questions which the prophetic elements in Piers Plowman raise for us (although I would hasten to add that it does not answer them all). Langland shows little interest that I am aware of in either the political or the astronomical prophecy of his day and the popular eschatological Antichrist lore is of little assistance in understanding either his treatment of Antichrist or his apocalypticism. Langland makes use of biblical prophecy but must go beyond it in order to deal specifically with the issues that concern him most, notably, clerical reform and the renewal of the vita apostolica, first of all in the clergy but also in all men according to their spiritual capacities. The type of prophetic writing which could best meet this need is the European tradition of what one might call pre-eschatological apocalypticism, because writers in this tradition project a number of apocalyptic events (often even the coming of Antichrist) forward into a period long before the End of the World. This type of apocalypticism usually stems from either exegetical (as in the case of Joachim of Fiore) or visionary (as in Hildegard of Bingen) sources, and I believe that it is to this type of apocalypticism that Langland turned in his sense of current clerical crisis.

"Reformist" (or "renewalist") apocalypticism is my own terminology to denote that part of this "school" of pre-eschatological apocalypticism which is concerned primarily with clerical reform and spiritual renewal. From one perspective this includes virtually every writer that scholars have sought to associate with this type of apocalyptic writing. Almost all these writers are renewalist in the

sense that they believe in a coming age of spiritual growth during which a (usually recently chastened) clergy will shine forth as examples for all. In another sense the term "reformist apocalypticism" denotes an emphasis on reform which is slightly different from the progressivist views of a writer like Joachim of Fiore, who envisioned the new age not so much as a return to pristine glories (i.e. a reform), but rather as the spiritual zenith of all history (i.e. progress). Although it is important to bear this distinction in mind, I think that the term "reformist" or "renewalist" apocalypticism is as good a compromise as any, because even the apocalyptic reformists who speak most avidly of a return to first principles will also often speak as if the future reformed clergy will represent the pinnacle of spiritual achievement for all time, as we shall see. Let us turn now to a more detailed look at this type of apocalypticism before proceeding with the question of its influence on Piers Plowman.

The New Apocalyptic Theory of the Later Middle Ages

"The world is passing away, the world is losing its grip, the world is short of breath. Do not fear, thy youth shall be renewed as an eagle."³ St. Augustine's juxtaposition of decay and renewal epitomizes the conflict in the minds of Christian preachers and reformers of all ages: how can one reform a world that one must despise and hope, soon, to be freed from? Does the hope for reform clash with a divine plan for the eventual destruction of this imperfect creation? How should one interpret the dark and mysterious references to the End Time

in the Bible? Can contemporary prophets and visionaries legitimately add to one's knowledge of biblical eschatology? And finally, perhaps most importantly, is it within the power of mankind to sustain renewal once it has been achieved?

There is a cynical streak in the Judeo-Christian tradition about such things and for over a millennium the view that Christians could not hope for much in this aging and torn world held sway. During the twelfth century, however, this began to change. There developed an alternative to, though not a widely-accepted replacement for, the old eschatology, the old pessimistic view of a world worsening toward the appearance of Antichrist. The alternative eschatology was really more than an eschatology, it was a full-blown apocalyptic theory.⁴ Fueled by urgent desire for church reform and a desperate need to know the fate of the Christian Church in the divine plan, apocalyptic zealots ransacked every available source for clues that would help them fill in the part of salvation history which the old eschatology had left blank, that is, the gap between their own time and the coming of Antichrist.

The new apocalyptic theory, even in all its bewildering variety, is thus consistently characterized by an attempt to bring eschatology forward into the present day by prophesying a complex pattern of events which will occur before--often long before--the Coming of Antichrist.⁵ Perhaps the most obvious characteristic of a "new" apocalyptic thinker is his/her tendency to create these patterns or systems, which historians of apocalyptic thought tend to call "programmes." The motivating factor for each theorist will nearly always be an overwhelming concern

with church reform and the question of renewal: can there be a renewal of the Christian Church or is it already too late? Some found positive answers to this question in new readings of biblical texts or earlier writers, or in visions and revelations or in inspired interpretations of history. Some found hope in the new orders of the Church, some found Antichrist himself in them, but the state of the Church's religious orders or of one particular order is nearly always at the heart of the apocalypticist's concern.

Other characteristics that distinguish the new apocalyptic thinkers from their pre-twelfth-century counterparts are related to this obsession with the future of the Church: all feel that there has been a crisis of leadership, especially in religious affairs, and that leaders from the Pope down to the parish priest have failed the Church. Many feel that it is time to return to the basic principles of the early Church and hold Christ and the disciples as the perfect, if not only, models for clerical imitation. Apostolic poverty and simplicity of lifestyle and belief become ideological tenets as apocalyptic reformers yearn to rid the future Church of the excess baggage of worldly wealth on the one hand, and what they see as overweening intellectualism on the other. But though this anti-materialism and anti-intellectualism fuels the fires of pessimism about the present time, the prophet's zeal for reform always leads him to predict at least one period of the future when these evils will be eliminated and the Church will once more enter a Golden Age of spiritual vitality. The most powerful attraction of the new apocalyptic world view was that it gave each writer a chance to

write his own history of the future. As Beryl Smalley has said of Joachim of Fiore,

Joachim warms the heart of the student of historiography. He stimulated men to speculate on the course of history, to differentiate their own time from others. He provided a canvas on which each could paint his Weltanschauung.⁶

A final characteristic shared by apocalyptic reformers of the later Middle Ages is that in spite of sweeping visions of the future and extremes of ideology, many were both highly realistic and highly reactionary in their treatment of the present time. Whatever new-found optimism they may have held for the future, pessimism regarding the present was widespread and no doubt accounts for the ruthlessly realistic terms in which they handed down judgements on contemporaries, envisioned church reform by brute force and reacted indignantly to current political, social and religious events. This odd combination of grim pessimism and tenacious optimism, reactionary indignation and hope for large-scale renewal is found in some measure in all the reformist apocalyptists' writings and accounts for some of the tensions that we find there. These thinkers were constantly evaluating both the secular and religious institutions of their day and the mixed results they had from these evaluations brought mixed feelings--the desire to adhere to the time-honoured way was often at odds with the perception of the future of these ways given current abuses. In the last analysis, any practice which contributed toward corruption had to go.

Whereas the older Sibylline eschatology had been rather

abstract, legendary and emblematic in nature, in the twelfth century there was a new impulse toward historical realism and immediacy that for some writers altered the whole character of apocalyptic expectation. The traditional eschatology had solidified into a well-known pattern, a pattern which will be familiar to readers of Middle English texts such as the Cursor Mundi or The Pricke of Conscience.⁷ At the appointed time, Christendom will be overrun by the sons of Ishmael or Gog and Magog but will be saved by a great conquering king who will subdue the invading hordes and preside over a limited period of peace and prosperity, which is usually described in materialistic terms. This king will then lay down his crown on Mount Olivet and be taken up into heaven. The reign of Antichrist will be a period of unmitigated cruelty with the deception of many Christians and the persecution of the faithful. Elijah and Enoch will return to counter Antichrist and the Jews will be converted before the two witnesses are put to death by Antichrist. They will, however, be resurrected (usually after three days) and Antichrist will himself be struck down by St. Michael or Christ. The Day of Judgement will follow soon thereafter, usually preceded by a version of the fifteen signs before Doomsday. There were, of course, variations of detail within this basic pattern, but the pattern itself was remarkably constant. A great deal of fantastic, legendary material became attached to the figure of Antichrist, but aside from this aspect the whole effect of the scheme was rather static. There was not a great deal here for those who wished to read the "signs of the times" or work out the historical implications of events around them. There was nothing here

to participate in--no goal to work toward, above all no special role for the Church other than trying to prepare people for the worst, and no one knew how close or how far away that might be.

It is not surprising then, that at some point a desire to shift the emphasis of the old eschatology and to bring apocalyptic speculation closer to the present time should have surfaced. Historians have speculated about why this should have happened in the twelfth century, and especially in twelfth-century Germany, where the new apocalyptic thought first appears.⁸ Some have cited the development of heretical movements as an important factor. The heretical groups, frequently springing from seeds of frustrated reforming zeal themselves, were often seen by the laity to represent everything in the way of good living and spirituality which the orthodox clergy preached but did not practise. The strength and tenacity of the heretical groups proved an embarrassment to the Church and in some areas gave it strong opposition. The existence of the heretics focused attention on the need for reform and brought forth a stream of apocalyptic rhetoric as the authority of the Church was seen to be threatened.⁹ At the same time the Crusades brought Christians into contact with non-Christian peoples who similarly threatened the universality and even, in places, the existence of the Church. Non-believers had always had a role in traditional eschatology and the new threat brought forth developments of that role. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, in the twelfth century Europe was feeling the effects of the Investiture Controversy and the conflicts between church and state which it had raised. In the eyes of many,

Henry IV had blocked the progress of church reform and thus set himself up as an enemy of the Church--an Antichrist figure. From another standpoint, the higher profile of the papacy engendered by the reforms of the twelfth century brought another powerful player into the eschatological drama, heightening apocalyptic expectations, as any bid for universal authority (real or imaginary) always does.¹⁰

Troubled times have always been breeders of apocalyptic thought and many thinkers in turbulent twelfth-century Europe, under the strain of threats from many different political and religious pressures, not only turned to apocalyptic traditions but developed and expanded them. As Töpfer has suggested,¹¹ the bland, politically innocuous, wish-fulfillment dreams of earlier eschatological traditions were transformed in the course of the twelfth century in response to the political, social and religious needs of the time. Leaving behind some of the more fantastic and otherworldly elements, reformist apocalyptic theory began to be used effectively in the very real worlds of political and religious polemics--a trend which would continue in the centuries to follow in disputes ranging from the antimendicant controversies through to those of the Protestant Reformation.

In summary, then, as each apocalyptic thinker tried to read the signs of the times and work out for himself the historical implications of the events around him, each came to his own conclusions and the result is a group of writings as wildly diverse and colorful as the individuals and contexts that produced them. They do, however, show these persistently common features: (1) an urgent desire for church

reform and concern for the future of the Church, (2) an attempt to fit the present time and coming periods of time into a pre-eschatological pattern, (3) a concern with the state of the Church's religious orders and/or the role of one order in particular in the future of the Church, (4) a sense of a crisis of leadership in the present time, especially within the Church, and (5) a desire to return the clergy to the rigorous discipline of early monastic founders or of the early apostolic Church itself, with particular emphasis on poverty and simplicity of life-style.¹² Such writings are further characterized by a persistent mood of pessimism regarding the present (flanked by a marked optimism for some future period) and a sense of grim realism about what will be required in order to enforce reform in the present. Finally, all these writers exhibit a tendency toward conservatism with regard to religious and social institutions except where these are seen to be corrupting forces. Imaginatively satisfying, polemically and ideologically useful, the new apocalyptic theory was too effective an instrument for many writers and thinkers to ignore. A writer like Langland, who seems to have had a good eye for the imaginative and mind-stirring riches of many different areas of thought, could not resist the new apocalyptic vision either. In the pages that follow I hope to be able to show how a knowledge of this material can illuminate certain passages, images and themes in Piers Plowman.

Prophecy in Piers Plowman: The Case for
Reformist Apocalypticism in the Poem

Although it is difficult to trace the diffusion throughout

England of reformist apocalyptic thought in the post-twelfth-century period,¹³ when it does crop up in a particular writer its characteristic zeal and urgency is unmistakable. This brand of apocalypticism, so different from the pessimistic but popular traditional type, is distinctive because of its sense of hope for renewal after imminent cataclysmic events have passed. Reformist or renewalist apocalypticism might well be called "participatory" apocalypticism, in the sense that such writers always wish to urge that the actions (i.e. the reformation) of any individual in their audience can make a difference to the outcome of events. This feature links such apocalypticism very closely to Old Testament prophecy while distinguishing it from both early Christian apocalyptic and the popular medieval eschatology of its day. Roger Bacon, who is one of a disparate group of medieval English thinkers to have been touched by the new apocalypticism, captures this sense of urgency in a letter to the pope written about 1267:

If only the Church would examine the prophecies of the Bible, the sayings of the saints, the sentences of Sibyl and Merlin and other pagan prophets, and would add thereto astrological considerations and experimental knowledge, it would without doubt be able to provide usefully against the coming of Antichrist. For it is a great question whence he will arise and who he will be, and if the Church would do all it can, I believe that God would give a fuller revelation, especially if a special prayer for this were ordained throughout the whole Church. For not all prophecies are irrevocable and many things are said in the prophets about the coming of Antichrist which will come to pass only through the negligence of Christians. They would be changed if Christians would strenuously enquire when he will come, and seek all the knowledge which he will use when he comes.¹⁴

The sense that man can affect his own destiny, that not all prophecies--

even the long-accepted prophecies of the coming of Antichrist--were irrevocable inspired hope in writers stirred by reformist apocalypticism.

Langland, I believe, is one such writer. Piers Plowman reverberates with the tensions produced by reformist aspirations and mounting despair. Langland's use of apocalyptic elements is notably measured and restrained, tempered, one might say, by the opposing force of despair, but the ideology is unmistakable to a reader with some experience of medieval reformist apocalyptic thought. It is hoped that the present thesis will provide readers of the poem with some of this background.

To this purpose I have reproduced and translated in the discussion which follows a number of quotations from various Latin prophetic writers and this in itself makes this study somewhat different from the purely historical studies which medieval apocalypticism has engendered.¹⁵ A second feature which distinguishes this study is its concentration on only those prophetic works which can be proven to have circulated in fourteenth-century England, and related to this, the focus largely on "popular" Latin prophecy of the reformist type. The selection of material throughout has been made on the basis of availability and ideological relevance to a writer like Langland.

Much has been included in order to illustrate certain similarities in ideology, patterns of thought, expression and imagery between these writers and Langland, with the purpose of portraying the apocalyptic mentality these writers share, rather than attempting to list sources and allusions. Furthermore, although I have tried to show the

availability of all the works discussed in fourteenth-century England, this does not mean that I am arguing for the influence of any particular writer on Langland. Rather, I hope that the study will make clear the influence of certain types of prophetic and apocalyptic writing on Piers Plowman. Source-hunting is a notoriously impractical business in Piers Plowman studies, and if we were to insist upon source study as the only type of worthwhile positivist scholarship on the poem, we would never learn very much about this elusive and intriguing masterpiece, which shows traces of so many currents of contemporary thought. The present study, then, attempts to reconstruct the reformist apocalyptic mentality from the works of medieval prophetic writers and suggests that Langland was drawing upon literature of this kind. Perhaps as research in this area develops we will be in a position to name specific sources, but that time, I feel, has not yet come.

The present study aims, then, to explore later medieval religious-reformist apocalypticism as a background to Piers Plowman. There are a surprising number of problems inherent in such a study, not the least of which is the fact that there was no native tradition of this type of prophecy in fourteenth-century England, and we therefore have to assume transmission from the Continent of virtually every prophecy or prophetic writer discussed here. Fortunately, even with the current haphazard state of the cataloguing of extant medieval Latin MSS in Britain, the assumption can be supported by a certain amount of concrete evidence, but there is no obvious or systematic way of gathering such evidence and I know that what was already available and

what I have been able to add is fragmentary at best. It may well be that when the contents of more medieval Latin MSS have been carefully catalogued and other Latin sources more thoroughly studied, that different prophetic writers will prove more important for the study of Piers Plowman than some of those noted here. For the time being, however, I believe that the approach taken here is at least a thrust in the right direction.

In this I find myself echoing Morton Bloomfield, who laid the ground work for this study years ago:

Much is still unknown . . . but if I have been able to direct the investigation of Piers towards the right questions, even if I have not provided all the answers, I feel that this work has not been in vain (Bloomfield, p. 154).

Although the present study differs from Bloomfield's in attempting to relate popular or semi-popular Latin religious-reformist prophecy rather than (the apocalyptic elements of) monastic ideology to Piers Plowman, the problems in each case are similar and they are not yet entirely soluble.

There are a number of reasons why the problems inherent in the study of prophetic thought in Piers Plowman have not yet been solved. Basically, they boil down to two: difficulty in finding clues to Langland's sources within the poem and the chaos of scholarship outside it. Bernard McGinn, a scholar of long standing in the field of medieval apocalypticism, writes of the latter problem:

While several bibliographical and historiographical surveys devoted to Joachim of Fiore are in existence, there is almost nothing which attempts to deal with wider questions of apocalypticism per se in the medieval period. There are many reasons why this is so. A glance at any of the survey articles on Joachim is enough to demonstrate the extent and complexity of the studies involved; and, of course, no evaluation of these interpretations is possible without a good knowledge of the sources upon which they are based. But these sources themselves offer difficulties of unusual proportions. In terms of the availability of many texts only in manuscript form, the antiquity and inaccessibility of some printed editions, and complicated questions concerning the authenticity and ascription of various works, it is difficult for the scholar to gain the type of control over the sources which would allow him some security in evaluating the interpretations.

A guide to the "wider questions of apocalypticism" is desperately needed. At the moment, beginning work in the field is almost like being turned loose in a foreign city with no map or guidebook.¹⁶

The former problem, however, that of Langland's seeming vagueness about the sources of his ideas, is a problem with which all Piers Plowman scholars are familiar. And in one sense, it is rather unfair to expect the poem to provide us with clear statements of medieval doctrine, whether they be political, theological, philosophical or anything else. However, there are a number of definite, albeit fragmentary allusions in Piers Plowman to various prophetic and apocalyptic ideas, although Langland is maddeningly vague in his handling of many of these. About the reason for this vagueness we can only speculate. To me Piers Plowman reads like the work of a man whose exposure to knowledge of various kinds was at one time wide, enthusiastic but unsatisfied, unfinished and (at the time of writing the poem) somewhere in the past. It may perhaps be fanciful to imagine his praise

of life in the cloister as a wistful memory of a time when the freedom to browse in books was a reality and to invoke the metaphor of banishment from an Eden to which there could be no return. Fanciful perhaps, but Langland's use of academic and doctrinal ideas often betrays a distance of time between the last sight of the page and the effort of recollection.

Another possibility, of course, is that Langland gathered his ideas from discussions with others. It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of word-of-mouth for the transmission of apocalyptic ideas in the Middle Ages, even among the educated. For example, we have substantial evidence in Salimbene's chronicle of the verbal transmission of Joachite teachings among the friars,¹⁷ and Gebeno of Erbach similarly describes his first contact with Joachite thought as having occurred in deep discussions with a visitor to his monastery.¹⁸ Furthermore, Holdsworth (p. 150) in his study of medieval visions suggests the importance of the "monastic grapevine" for the transmission of both written texts and oral tales. Finally, the fact that Langland seems to have made everything he touched his own by the time he had incorporated it into Piers Plowman is an important part of our problem with his sources, although this is perhaps a small price to pay for the originality of his poetry.

Still, in the face of all the things we cannot prove or clarify, there are some things about Langland's apocalypticism which we can say with certainty. First of all, Langland deliberately chose to incorporate into his poetry a range of apocalyptic notions which comparable

English contemporary writers did not. A number of Middle English writers complained of clerical abuse, but Langland is almost alone in going so far as to prophesy clerical chastisement and reform.¹⁹ Writers like Fitzralph, Chaucer and Wyclif knew and used ideas derived from antimendicant writings in a variety of ways, but they did not, as Langland did, draw upon the apocalyptic strands of the antimendicant school. Langland's apocalypticism is so hard to contextualize because most of his famous English contemporaries show little or no evidence of having been interested in it. We still know surprisingly little about the "users"²⁰ of religious reformist apocalyptic ideas, but we know enough to suggest that they tended to be reasonably well-educated and that they almost always wrote in Latin. As we will see, there are only smatterings of evidence, outside of Piers Plowman itself and a reformist tract once attributed to Wyclif, that such material had filtered down to English vernacular writers. On the whole, vernacular works in medieval England usually make use of only the popular Antichrist lore and eschatology. Langland's sources had to be Latin, Continental, and clerical in origin and this suggests to me that Langland must have travelled, at some point at least, in reasonably sophisticated circles.²¹

A study of the actual prophetic passages in Piers Plowman shows that Langland dabbled in more than one "school" of prophetic and apocalyptic thought, but only the religious-reformist brand seems to have captured his imagination or shaped his reformist ideology. Before looking at the main traditions or schools of prophetic thought which were current in Langland's time, it will help to outline briefly which

elements in Piers Plowman might be called prophetic. There are first of all the three actual prophecies: Conscience's long millenarian prophecy, which ends in a riddling passage at the end of Passus III, the obscure warning prophecy at the end of VIII (revised substantially from B) and the prophecy of religious reform in Passus V (lines 168-79). These are the three straightforwardly prophetic passages in the poem, although there are many related passages which are just as significant for assessing the apocalyptic character of Piers Plowman. There are passages of vague foreboding (e.g. ProI. 62-65), of doomwarning (e.g. Reason's sermon in Passus V), eschatological remembrancing (e.g. IX. 334-54) and passages of mass devotion or repentance which are typical of apocalyptic prophecy (e.g. VII. 152ff.).²² There is the curious passage that links madness or imbecility to prophecy and the vita apostolica in C. IX and which itself throws up a chain of related passages and poses the question of Langland's awareness of the Spiritual Franciscan and Joachite writings. There is, of course, the Antichrist section at the end of the poem with its complex use of apocalyptic and eschatological traditions.

Leadership roles in the poem are often apocalyptically significant or suggestive, for example the various kingship roles of David (and Saul) in the prophecy at the end of Passus III, of the "reformer king" prophecy in V, the "Last Emperor" role given to Piers in XXI. 426, or even Langland's treatment of Christ himself as knight, king and conqueror in Passus XXI. The complex figure of Piers has a number of apocalyptic overtones, some quite obvious, like the plowing and harvest-

ing symbolism (which Langland nevertheless understates) and some less obvious, such as Langland's post-Resurrection vision:

Y ful eftesones aslepe and sodeynliche me mette
 That Peres þe plouhman was peynted al blody
 And cam in with a cros bifore þe comune peple
 And riht lyke in alle lymes to oure lord Iesu (XXI. 5-8).

This portrait ever so subtly calls up the apocalyptic associations of the reading for Wednesday of Holy Week from Isaiah 63:

Who is this that cometh from Edom, with dyed garments from Bosra, this beautiful one in his robe, walking in the greatness of his strength? I, that speak justice and as a defender to save. Why then is thy apparel red, and thy garments like theirs that tread in the winepress? I have trodden the winepress alone: and of the Gentiles there is not a man with me. I have trampled on them in my indignation and have trodden them down in my wrath. And their blood is sprinkled upon my garments: and I have stained all my apparel. For the day of vengeance is in my heart: the year of my redemption is come (Isaiah 63:1-4).

As we shall see, Piers can profitably be read as a type of the apocalyptic "Angelic Pope" figure, but here again the relationship is subtle and understated.

Langland's tendency to understate certain kinds of apocalyptic or eschatological elements is a point worth pausing over for a moment. There are several examples of this throughout the poem; for instance, in Langland's mere mention of Saturn in the prophecy at the end of Passus VIII:

Ac y warne 3ow werkmen, wynneth whiles 3e mowe,
 For Hunger hiderwardes hasteth hym faste.
 He shal awake thorw water, wastors to chaste,
 And ar fewe 3eres be fulfeld famyne shal aryse,

And so sayth Saturne and sente vs to warne.
 Thorw flodes and thorw foule wederes fruyttes shollen
 fayle;
 Pruyde and pestilences shal moche peple feche (VIII. 343-49).

Saturn figures in a number of such foreboding prophecies²³ and as Bloomfield pointed out (p. 212) it was thought that Saturn would be in the ascendant on the Day of Judgment. Furthermore, Saturn has another eschatological connection in that he is often represented with a hook because he "repeþ down grene thyngis"²⁴ through his pestilences and misfortunes. In the image of the falling of the fruits from the Tree of Charity there is similarly an embedded apocalyptic motif of the cutting down of "grene thynges" because in the Book of Revelation this image is used in the description of events following the opening of the sixth seal: "And the stars from heaven fell upon the earth, as the fig-tree casteth its green figs when it is shaken by a great wind (Rev. 6:13).²⁵ In fact, the vision of a tree itself is common to a number of apocalypses, and the motif of a violent wind is among the commonest of portents in apocalyptic prophecies,²⁶ a portent Langland uses in precisely this manner in Reason's sermon in Passus V. Such hints and suggestions of apocalypticism are scattered throughout certain passages, but Langland's use of this material is dignified by a definite restraint. Whether this restraint stems from uncertainty or an understandable dislike of the sensational side of popular apocalypticism is difficult to tell.

Other reasons for Langland's apparent restraint and inexplicitness could range from a politic prudence--some apocalyptic material was,

after all, extremely controversial and a number of prophetic writers landed themselves in prison for their efforts²⁷ --to his distance from written sources, mentioned above. However, there is another reason, I believe, and this is the internal tension he seems to have experienced between eschatological despair and a prophetic optimism, a problem which we will turn to now.

Like so many reformers, Langland sees the state of the clergy as a barometer of apocalyptic pressure. Wimbledon summarizes this view in his famous sermon:

Also, Seynt Johan Crisostom seiþ: "þou seest oueral derkenesses, and þou douztist þat þe day is go. First on þe valeyes is derkenessis, whan þe day drawiþ donward. Whan þerfore þou seest þe valeis is derkid, why doutist þou wheþer it be neiþ euen. But ȝif þou see þe sunne so lowe þat derkenesse is vpon þe hilles, þou wolt seye douteles þat it is nyȝt. Ryȝt so, ȝif þou see first in þe seculeres and lewde Cristene men bygynne dirkenessis of synnes to haue þe maystrie, it is tokene þat þis world endiþ. But whan þou seest prestes, þat be put on þe hize coppe of spiritual dignites, þat schulde be as hilles aboue þe comune peple in parfit lyuyng, þat dirkenesse of synnes haþ take hem, who douteþ þat þe world nis at þe ende?" (Wimbledon, pp. 112-13).

The feeling that God has forsaken the world largely because of the corruption of the clergy is expressed throughout Piers Plowman in passages like XVII. 72-122 as an explanation for continual disaster and the inefficacy of prayer to abate it:

Ac þe metal, þat is mannes soule, of many of this techares
Is alayed with leccherye and oper lustes of synne,
That god coueyteth nat þe coyne þat Crist hym sulue printede
And for þe synne of þe soule forsaketh his oune coyne. . . .
For what thorw werre and wrake and wikkede hefdes,
May no preyere pees make in no place, hit semeth.

Lewed man han no byleue and lettred men erren;
 Noþer see ne sond ne þe seed ȝeldeth
 As they ywoned were--in wham is defaute? (XVII. 78-81, 85-89).

Langland struggles between a desire to use the image of an utterly forsaken world given over to evil and the desire to urge reform by emphasizing that there is still hope. This passage describes a forsaken and inverted world, yet it ends, "Ac ȝif prestes doen here deuer wel we shal do þe bettre . . ." (XVII. 122). Langland's use of eschatological notions is thus often rather qualified or compromised by his concern for reformation, a dichotomy which I suspect is at the root of reformist apocalypticism itself. This is perhaps why such elements often remain subtly in the background in some passages, or why Langland's emphasis is so often not on the End of the World, even when he uses eschatological symbols, as in this passage from Reason's sermon:

Beches and brode okes were blowe to þe grounde
 And turned vþward here tayl in tokenyng of drede
 That dedly synne ar domes day shal fordon hem alle (V. 120-22).

The upturned trees are one of the signs that Doomsday is actually at hand,²⁸ but the emphasis is on the fear of "dedly sunne ar domes day." The eschatological concern, instead of swallowing up concern for the present, serves to heighten it.

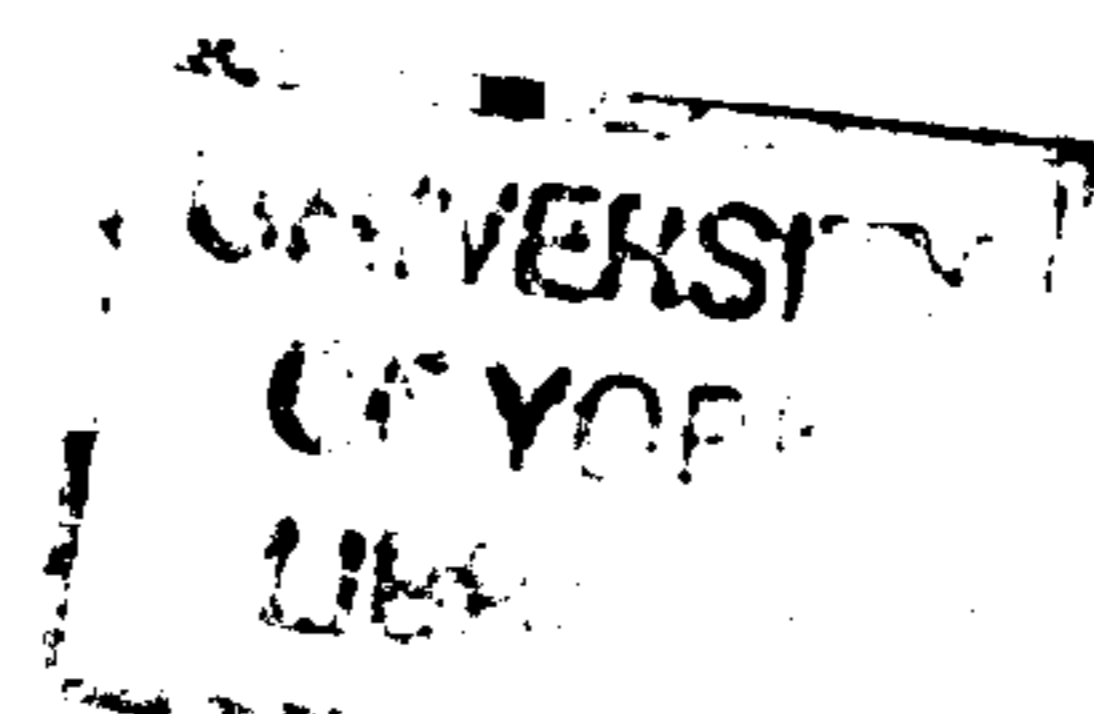
There is, then, a tension in Langland's writing between the preaching of eschatology and the preaching of a less universal and ultimate form of retribution--in biblical terms, between apocalyptic and prophetic expectations. This tension, which (as mentioned above) lies

at the very heart of reformist apocalyptic thought, is, I believe, what attracted Langland to it. Here was an apocalypticism that expressed imminent cataclysm in the same terms as traditional eschatology had forecast for the End of the World, yet placed that crisis within the framework of history and followed it up with a vision of spiritual renewal. To a man torn between love and hope for humanity on the one hand and despairing disgust for it on the other, this new prophetic world view must have looked very comforting indeed.

There are, then, a number of prophetic passages, images and subtle allusions to the apocalyptic themes throughout the poem, but they form, at best, a fragmentary lot when isolated from the poem and listed as above.²⁹ The fact is that there is no consistent apocalyptic or prophetic thread in the poem connecting all these bits together--at least not in the biblical or medieval eschatological sense of these terms. If there is any cohesive ideology which connects and supports these fragmentary apocalyptic nodes within the poem it is the ideology of reform. Furthermore, any student of reformist apocalyptic thought will immediately see in Piers Plowman all the (basically non-apocalyptic) reformist issues which came to be associated with this brand of apocalypticism throughout the Middle Ages. Briefly, they are the issues of the mendicant controversies and the broader but related issues of clerical poverty and perfection, denunciation of clerical abuse, anti-intellectualism and the fervent hope for a coming age of spiritual renewal. None of these themes except perhaps the last would be automatically associated with apocalypticism by students of Piers Plowman

not familiar with the history of Latin religious prophecy in the later Middle Ages and, indeed, all these themes and issues were widely discussed in non-apocalyptic terms as well. However, the fact remains that they were all extremely important issues in medieval apocalyptic thought: can it be simply coincidence, then, that Langland combines within his poem a perpetual concern with all these issues and a distinct, if fragmentary apocalypticism? I think not. This is not to say, of course, that Langland would not have been concerned with the issues of, for example, the mendicant controversies if he had not dabbled in reformist apocalypticism, but rather that in this brand of apocalypticism he found a way of understanding the mendicant problem within Salvation History.

Reformist apocalypticism, then, provided a framework within which both the problems of the present and hopes for the future made sense. This form of prophecy was basically religious in orientation and always written in Latin for, one assumes, a largely clerical audience. It differs sharply from the political prophecy to which Langland's prophetic passages have sometimes been compared in that it embodies a vision of the entire course of history and is not as concerned with political issues as with clerical chastisement and reform. We will look now briefly at the phenomenon of vernacular political prophecy and at a related type of vernacular prophecy which for convenience I have called "folk" prophecy because it deals mainly, in the form of charms and riddles, with social problems. This last type of prophecy is the only variety of vernacular prophecy of which I have been able to see any



evidence in Piers Plowman.

The prophecies of the later Middle Ages that are political in character are distinguished by a stereotyped use of animal symbolism to represent the kings, countries and noblemen of various factions. They are usually obscure (though often this is as much due to textual mangling as to original intention), badly written and hopelessly tedious. They were often, however, extremely popular and obviously played an important role as vehicles for the expression of hopes, frustrations and fervently-held partisan views. In England this type of prophecy is often in the vernacular and is alliterative in style, and for years it was suggested by editors of Piers Plowman that there might be affinities between this tradition and Langland's obscure prophecies. After much sifting through such prophecies I wish I could say that there were, but unfortunately nothing could be farther from Langland's prophetic interests than either the style or the content of most political prophecies. Margaret Mary O'Sullivan, who has recently written a thesis on Middle English political prophecy, describes the most common type of political prophecy, the Last Emperor type, in this way:

The story of a political crusade and an abdicatory pilgrimage proved applicable to many different situations, ranging from the hope of the Franks that they would regain from the Germans their hereditary right to the imperial crown to the prospect that some English king would successfully assert his claim to the throne unjustly occupied by the kings of France (O'Sullivan, p. 10).

These are not the type of issues which concern Langland in his

prophetic passages. Such prophecies are riddled with the names of European countries and heads of state or British nobility masquerading as lions, bats or moldwarps. It should be said that there are sometimes passages in such prophecies which are vaguely apocalyptic, for example,

So grete a battayle shall then there be
that fewe on lyve men shall see
The moste parte of the worlde deth shall tast (MS Lansdowne
762 ff. 52r-53r, Scattergood, p. 384),

or which exploit millenarian ideals, like

After this the egill and the mans son
shall reigne together withouten mone
In all the worlde then shalbe pease
with cristen and hethen dowltes
Also of frute grete plentie . . . (Scattergood, p. 384).

This is all grist for the mill, of course, and should not be ignored, but I think that it must be conceded that the prophecies in Piers Plowman are just not political in the narrow sense--by which I mean that they do not refer to the battles, intrigues and conquests of kings and noblemen thinly disguised as animals or otherwise. It seems to me that the tradition in which Langland wrote (or from which he drew) his prophecies must lie outside the political one. If we compare the use of the political prophecy tradition in Richard the Redeless or in the political poems of the Yorkists in British Library MS Cotton Rolls ii.23,³⁰ to name two contemporary Middle English examples, it soon becomes apparent that what Langland is doing in his prophetic passages is something rather different. Langland's is not a poetry of partisan

politics. I think that it is probably significant that the only part of the poem which is clearly indebted to vernacular prophecy seems in fact to be modelled on a virtually non-political vernacular type.

Non-political vernacular prophecies are really a type of moralistic, foreboding, folk-wisdom literature and they may occur either as self-contained passages within a political prophecy or as independently circulating pieces. They often predict widespread calamities and dire social problems, such as we find in the understandable portion of Langland's cryptic prophecy at the end of Passus VIII. The following lines are taken from a larger political prophecy attributed to Thomas à Becket in which the "Boar" from England subdues all the countries of Europe as a Last World Emperor figure:³¹

Then says thomas, "In fathte, ferly is it none;
 Ði land may far be females, in so Fer 3eris;
 Or þar may a pestellaunce proper fall in all landis,
 Ðat may ger sixty cosins part wythy-in vij. wekis,
 And may mak mony Sorowles lykes, & joyles brydyles;
 And mak halykyrke to-trowlede, for tenyng of maryage;
 And plewes to lygge wpon ley, þe larke lorde wax;
 And cateffis vnkyndly sall welde mekyll gudes;
 Ðai sall forgette cryste and his cleyne moder.

The motif of female rule ("Ði land may far be females") as a type of calamity is common to a number of prophetic traditions and we find it in Langland's prophecy in B. VI. 330ff. Here it is followed by a vision of disaster, chaos and tyranny which threatens the entire social order, in a manner reminiscent of Langland's "dark" prophecies. Another "folk" prophecy which for convenience I have called the "When" prophecy is

reminiscent of Reason's prophetic answer to the king's request that he pity wrongdoers in the passage at IV. 108ff. The answer might be called the "Until" prophecy:

"Rede me nat," quod Resoun, "no reuthe to haue
Til lordes and ladies louen alle treuthe . . .," etc.

The "When" prophecy can be found, among other places, in the Harley 2253 collection where it is attributed to Thomas of Erceldoune. Thomas is said to have spoken it in response to a question about when the Scottish wars would cease:

When man as mad akyng of a capped man;
When mon is leuere oþermones þyng þen is owen;
When londyonys forest, ant forest ys felde;
When hares kendles oþe herston;
When Wyt & Wille werres togedere . . . (Murray, p. xviii).

This kind of prophecy is usually considered as part of the political prophecy tradition, although there is really nothing political about it. These are often the best kind of product of the vernacular prophecies from a literary standpoint (take, for example, a line like the one cited above which warns that ploughs may "lygge wpon ley, þe larke lorde wax"). In these pieces obscurity is used to effect, and they usually make no use of the animal symbolism which turns most political prophecy into literary cardboard. Their strength comes from a well-blended mix of folklore and prophetic tradition and as such, this type of prophecy must have appealed to many writers, among whom were Langland, the author of Winner and Waster³² and Shakespeare.³³

Unfortunately, there are relatively few vernacular prophecies like the "When" prophecy still extant. Most of the vernacular prophecies committed to writing seem to have been of the political kind, judging by what we have left today. Murray found that some prophecies of this type were still in use (orally) in the nineteenth century in Scotland,³⁴ so it could be that the folkish, riddling type of prophecy was often transmitted orally while the political prophecies, which were probably of more interest to classes of literate people, were more often written down.

In any case, it seems that there was something of a prophetic folk tradition in England in Langland's time and echoes of it can be heard in a few places in Piers Plowman. It could be that this was the type of prophecy he had in mind when he wrote (or borrowed) his two riddling prophecies. On the other hand, it is also possible that he chose the images for these prophecies from the more sophisticated apocalyptic traditions of the Latin religious prophecy, a possibility which we will explore in the third chapter of this thesis.

Under the heading of reformist apocalyptic prophecy I have lumped an impossibly large conglomerate of material which seems to have these general characteristics in common: a concern with the widespread corruption and need for reform of the Church, a desire to read present tribulations as signs of a future renewal and an overall interest in the progress of sacred history, the ages of the world and the events of the Last Days. The sources of such prophecy consist (in varying degrees) of the apocalyptic material of the early Christian period and early Middle

Ages, the work of certain biblical exegetes (of whom the most influential was Joachim of Fiore) and the writings of various visionaries and prophets. Altogether, it is a very chaotic but highly compelling mixture of material.

What answers, then, to the problems of Piers Plowman can the religious prophetic traditions supply us with? To begin with, one strong indication that the study of religious prophecy might be a thrust in the right direction is that Langland's prophecy of a reforming king who will bring the regular clergy ad pristinum statum is manifestly written in this tradition. The "ad pristinum statum" theme was very popular with writers of reformist prophecy. Such prophecies, which are usually entirely in Latin, often use the phrase "ad pristinum statum" (or a close version of it) in prophesying the outcome of future clerical chastisements, usually by a king or reforming pope. There can be no doubt that this is the kind of prophecy which lies behind V. 168-79, because of the distinctively reformist-apocalyptic programme which, as we shall see, Langland lays out in this prophecy.

In this study we shall be returning again and again to the ad pristinum statum prophecy in Passus V because it embodies so succinctly a number of the very complex views of reformist apocalypticism. In this one passage Langland shows that he had grasped the essence of this type of prophecy and yet made it his own in his extraordinary vision of reform of the friars through provision for their needs. In the final chapter of this thesis we shall consider the apocalyptic function of the friars within the poem in the light of the various apocalyptic roles

they played in the antimendicant eschatology of William of St. Amour and his school on the one hand and that of the Franciscan Joachites on the other. The apocalyptic world view can be summed up in many ways as reflecting an awareness of the perpetual battle between the true prophets (or apostles) and the pseudo-prophets (or apostles). The stormy history of the friars in the later Middle Ages has given us an apocalyptic legacy in which they figure on both sides of this equation. The fraternal problem lies at the heart of Piers Plowman, as it does in the history of medieval apocalyptic thought.

Perhaps the two most commonly read apocalyptic writers in fourteenth-century England, judging by the frequency with which their names occur in MS catalogues and contemporary writings, were Hildegard of Bingen and Joachim of Fiore. Hildegard's prophecies were read largely in the form of a collection of excerpts and, although pseudepigraphic prophecy circulated under her name, her original works were widely available. Joachim's ideas, however, were popularly known in England largely through pseudo-Joachite writings and the works of prophets who had come under his influence. This study therefore deals directly (in the first chapter) with the genuine prophecies of Hildegard, and concentrates (in the third chapter) on the later and more popular Joachite material rather than on the major works of Joachim himself. Hildegard and Joachim represent the two types of apocalyptic prophecy which I believe influenced Piers Plowman: the visionary and the exegetical. As we shall see, there is evidence in Piers Plowman that Langland knew and used the conventions of visionary writing such as one

finds in the works of Hildegard and other popular visionaries (e.g. the convention of receiving a vision during mass, XXI. 4-5). Many of the themes of Hildegard's prophecies are common in Piers Plowman: the belief in a coming chastisement and reform of the clergy, the view that the present time was one of crisis that would eventually lead to spiritual renewal and the belief that the pseudo-prophets, the Church's greatest trial, were to be men in humble attire who would seem to have rejected all worldly possessions. For Hildegard, this was a real prophecy (of sorts) as she died in 1179; for Langland it was a contemporary crisis.

A word or two should be said about the relationship between the visionary writers of the Middle Ages and the visionary aspect of Piers Plowman. Many critics refer to the "visionary" qualities of the poem but few have bothered to find out what theological and historical significance the concept had in Langland's own time. It is clear that in the Middle Ages the concept of a visionary referred to the part played by someone with a specific role, a vocation in society. There were well known visionaries who, it was felt, could be relied upon to give word of God's pleasure or anger, to give leadership to the Church and society and even to answer specific problems or solve biblical cruces. A visionary such as Hildegard of Bingen carried on a large correspondence almost as a kind of "counselling service" which she offered the community. Looking at the life and writings of a visionary like Hildegard not only points up one of the apocalyptic traditions available to Langland, but also puts into context some of the other themes of Piers Plowman: the search for authoritative advice, for a

reliable counsellor or interpreter, and the thirst for spiritual knowledge.

Visionaries closer to Langland's own time, such as St. Bridget of Sweden (who was very popular in England in the later Middle Ages) were part of the same tradition. Thus we may take into account in reading Piers Plowman the fact that Langland had at his disposal well established traditions of visual religious experience and theological interpretation. We need a better knowledge of such traditions before we can completely assess the implications they will have for the study of Piers Plowman, and it is hoped that the present study will provide a start to this process, but suffice it to say at this point that I believe it is no longer good enough to understand the visionary aspect of the poem in the same way as we understand the conventions of the dream poetry of Chaucer.

Turning briefly to the works, genuine and spurious, which make up the canon of Joachite material, supplemented by the works of known disciples and those influenced by Joachim, we have a very wide range of literature. The possibility that Langland had come in contact with Joachite ideas from one of these sources is very good indeed. Critics such as Bloomfield, Kaske and Frank have tried in various ways to suggest Joachite influence, particularly in the Trinitarian structure of the poem.³⁵ While these things remain a possibility, it seems to me that stronger evidence of Langland's contact with Joachite tradition (and I am using the adjective "Joachite" very loosely to include a broad range of influence) is in the apocalyptic programme he describes in his

prophecies and in the last passus of the poem. A careful reading of III. 436-81, V. 168-79 (and B. X. 322-35) and of certain parts of Passus XXII reveals that Langland imagined an age of peace and spiritual renewal after Antichrist, a belief which by Langland's time must be associated with reformist apocalypticism, most probably Joachism.

Finally, throughout this study I have been concerned wherever possible to try to make literary as well as ideological connections between Langland and the apocalyptic writers discussed here. Apocalyptic writing has a distinctive style and follows some very distinctive literary conventions, among which are an apparent lack of surface cohesion, a particular self-deprecating autobiographical visionary stance and a fluid use of allegorical imagery. These and other features of apocalyptic writing have given trouble to critics of Piers Plowman in the past because they do not admit of exact parallels elsewhere in Middle English literature. It is hoped that some of the comparisons here will open up alternatives to critics of the poem in the Latin visionary literature of the Middle Ages.

Before turning to the previous scholarship on the subject of Langland's apocalypticism, it will be helpful to outline briefly some of the sources of Latin continental religious prophecy in fourteenth-century England. What follows is intended only as a sketch of the different types of evidence we have that this kind of prophecy did in fact circulate in Britain (occurring in MSS of Welsh, Irish and Scottish as well as English provenance), and should not be considered a listing of all the available information--a project which could itself form the

subject of a thesis.

Sources of Apocalyptic Thought in Medieval Britain

There needs desperately to be a study done of various MSS and other primary sources of apocalyptic and prophetic material in circulation in Britain in the later Middle Ages. From the work of Marjorie Reeves,³⁶ Morton Bloomfield,³⁷ Robert Lerner,³⁸ Jeanne Bignami-Odier³⁹ and with the help of indices to catalogues of MS collections in Britain, I have been able to gather enough evidence to justify the presence of all the prophets or prophecies in this thesis; however, these results are fragmentary at best. Some of this evidence is given in footnotes or introductory sections to the various writers cited throughout this study, but much of it is too miscellaneous or inconclusive to admit of presentation here. For example, information about the date and/or provenance of numerous MSS in British collections is not readily available, so it is impossible (without infinite time and travel resources) to know whether a given MS containing a prophecy or prophecies now held in a British collection was actually in Britain during the fourteenth century. Furthermore, a number of catalogues do not give incipits or any specific information which would help identify a prophecy; the prophetic section of a MS is often described in terms like "some Latin prophecies" or in another non-specific manner. Until these MSS can be studied in more detail we will not know exactly what is still extant.

A study of such MSS could tell us not only which European

prophecies were in circulation in Britain and when, but would also enlighten us about the readers and users of such prophecies: of what social and educational classes were they? What interested them in these prophecies and how did they react to the more controversial passages within them? (Prophetic MSS and early printed prophetic texts provoked a good deal of marginalia).⁴⁰

The names of the major prophetic figures like Joachim, Hildegard or John of Rupescissa crop up at least once or twice in most extant medieval catalogues of the larger libraries in Britain. For example, the medieval catalogue of St. Augustine's Abbey library in Canterbury⁴¹ lists a book containing the "prophetia sancte hildegardis," after which the medieval cataloguer refers the reader to the "prophetia Abbatis Joachim supra in Bestiar' Henr' de Burgham" (p. 292), obviously assuming that a reader interested in the one would be interested in the other. The description of the Bestiary "supra" (p. 290) is typical of the type of book in which prophecies are often found in that it is a conglomerate of theological pieces, verses, histories and miscellaneous curiosities, ranging from (the popular) verse of the Sibyl on the Day of Judgement to a piece on the mirabilia of India. Almost at the end of the list comes the Joachite item coupled with a mirabilia piece, "de Mirabilibus Anglie et/alia quedam prophetia paparum," the latter probably being a copy of the very popular "Pope Prophecies" attributed to Joachim. The association ("et alia") of these prophecies with "de Mirabilibus Anglie" is a good example of what seems (judging by medieval catalogue entries and lists of MS contents) to be a common

medieval habit of associating "wonders" with "prophecies,"⁴² which may suggest to readers of Piers Plowman that the "wonders" Will sets out to hear in the opening lines of the poem may indeed have been (or have included) prophecies. Another item in the St. Augustine's catalogue contains some unspecified "prophecia Abbatis Joachim" in the company of works by Roger Bacon, who had, as we have seen, a great interest in prophecy (p. 285).

Among extant medieval English catalogues, the library of the Augustinian Friars in York should be singled out for special mention.⁴³ Even excluding the contributions of John Erghome, which, one could argue, are something of a special case and likely not representative of the average cleric's literary tastes, the friary had a considerable collection of medieval apocalyptic works of its own, including "Joachim super apocalypsim" and "Joachim de concordancia testamentorum" (p. 36, #163) and an item called "prophecia hildegardis" coupled with a work of William of St. Amour (p. 44, #271),⁴⁴ as well as a good deal of miscellaneous unspecified prophecy. John Erghome owned copies of a number of the Joachite works discussed in this thesis, including the De Semine Scripturarum, the De Oneribus Prophetarum, the prophecies of Robert of Uzès and John of Rupescissa.⁴⁵ The availability of so much Joachite material to an English friary suggests that English friars may not have been quite as immune to the prophetic enthusiasm of their fellows on the Continent as has sometimes been suggested.

Prophetic works in circulation in medieval England which are

still extant are quite numerous: amid the perpetually popular prophecies of Merlin and the Sibyl, a number of reformist or renewalist works can be found. The most obvious place to look for prophetic works is in the type of miscellany described above, although the themes of these miscellanies can vary widely. Sometimes the focus of the miscellany will seem to be mainly on mirabilia literature, sometimes on historical writings,⁴⁶ sometimes on clerical ideology or on the literature of the mendicant controversies.⁴⁷ Some MSS carry a complement of anticlerical, satirical or Goliardic material⁴⁸ along with their prophecies; others contain sermons and theological works,⁴⁹ while still others are concerned with astronomical texts.⁵⁰ This brief summary cannot do any justice to the question of the variety of MS contexts in which prophecies occur, but it is interesting to note that they most often occur in MSS to which a writer like Langland could have been drawn for completely different reasons such as, for example, collections on clerical ideology and the mendicant controversies, or collections of anti-clerical, satirical or Goliardic material, or the numerous MSS of theological and didactic works. If his comment at the end of the reformer-king prophecy may be taken literally (V. 178), then it would seem that he had read prophecies in chronicles as well. In fact, Piers Plowman shows evidence of an interest in all the types of writing which regularly occur with prophetic texts in medieval MSS, with the possible exception of astronomy. It is not unlikely that even a casual reader of one of these types of literature would come across prophecies from time to time--and Langland shows evidence of having been

more than a casual reader in some of these areas (for example, his knowledge of the literature of the mendicant controversies is hard to overestimate).

A handful of English prophetic anthologies which carry predominantly reformist apocalyptic works are still extant, among which should be especially mentioned CCC 404, compiled by Langland's contemporary Henry of Kirkstede at Bury St. Edmunds. The MS contains nothing but prophecies of the Latin religious type, including Hildegardean, pseudo-Joachite, and other continental works. Numerous other MSS survive which are partially or even largely given over to such prophecy, but CCC 404 stands almost alone among English MSS in being entirely an anthology of current Latin European apocalyptic works of the popular type, obviously handpicked by Kirkstede himself.⁵¹ It contains almost no political prophecy and no genuine Joachite works and as such is typical of popular religious reformist interests such as I suspect Langland himself had.⁵²

An important source of prophetic material, as Langland himself tells us (V. 178), was the medieval chronicle, and a number of English chronicles do indeed mention or quote from current apocalyptic texts.⁵³ Chronicles of the Weltchronik type, such as Vincent of Beauvais' Speculum Historiale, also played a role in the dissemination of apocalyptic thought: Vincent quotes both Hildegard and (Pseudo-) Joachim on the apocalyptic forecast of the present age and the coming times, although he reverts to the traditional eschatology to end his chronicle.⁵⁴

A final source of evidence for the diffusion of prophetic works in fourteenth-century England comes from uses of or allusions to apocalyptic sources by various English exegetes, scholars, astronomers, sermon writers and poets.⁵⁵ The existing evidence is, once again, fragmentary, but there is enough to suggest that popular Latin apocalyptic prophecy was available in one form or another to a moderately wide range of English readers and writers. As I hope this study will show, there is no reason, on the basis of existing evidence, to believe that Langland could not have been one of these.

Previous Scholarship on Langland's Apocalypticism

Outside of the one important scholarly treatment of the theme in Bloomfield's Piers Plowman as a Fourteenth-Century Apocalypse, there has been shockingly little in the way of useful scholarship on the subject of Langland's apocalypticism. In fact, so little has been done that it is not really even possible to trace a chronological continuum of scholarly books and articles as it is with most subjects. Except for a few clusters of articles on specific subjects, like the question of Joachimism in the Tree of Charity passage or the "Speech of Book," there has not even been much controversial exchange in this area--a rare phenomenon in Piers Plowman scholarship. I believe it is best to approach a summary of these studies by gathering scholarly treatments together according to similarity in themes and points of view, because a strictly chronological gathering of the material serves no good purpose in a field where so little development seems to have occurred. There

are any number of critical works on Piers Plowman which mention the problem of Langland's apocalypticism in passing, but offer little or nothing in the way of fresh insight. To avoid needless tedium and repetition such notices will not be considered here.

Jusserand connected Piers Plowman with a handful of what he called "foreign mystics" in Chapter VII of his Piers Plowman.⁵⁶ Among these "foreign mystics" he mentions Joachim of Fiore briefly and rather unhelpfully (denouncing Joachim as a spiritual elitist, p. 195), but he does suggest that Langland used St. Francis as a source (ibid.).⁵⁷ More usefully, he later mentions St. Hildegard, along with Elizabeth of Schönau and Mechthild of Magdeburg, as belonging to the same "mystic family" as Langland, and he gives a description of the main characteristics of this "mystic family" which is not without insight:

The members of this mystic family have, like the others, a superhuman ideal of life; they are struck by the calamities of their time, pestilences, storms and hurricanes; . . . The vengeance of God is nigh; the mystics commune with heavenly powers and with their own souls; they break with the world; the world retaliates by calling them maniacs, and there is often some truth in this judgment. They indite prophecies in apocalyptic style; they have visions and ecstasies: for most of them these visions are their real life, and this life in dream appears to them so far superior to any earthly one, that they are irresistibly impelled to write and relate their experiences. They resist from modesty, but this resistance makes them suffer, and they at last give in; they take their pen, and under the form of poems, visions, and incoherent treatises, write a moral autobiography; and thus feel relieved. They begin again, and add new visions to the old ones, relate their journeyings through the abstract lands of ethics; and, in short, think and act very much like our English dreamer (Jusserand, p. 206).⁵⁸

The continued practice of classifying visionaries together with mystics and the almost complete ignorance of any but English mystics among later scholars has meant that Jusserand's hint at possible parallels has never really been taken up. Perhaps the next writer to attempt such a link was the German scholar Konrad Burdach, of whom more will be said later in this thesis. Donaldson (p. 14) called him "the most accomplished medievalist to turn his attention to the poem" and the tribute is well deserved. Burdach was able to bring a whole new perspective to Piers Plowman studies with his wide knowledge of European intellectual history and his felicitous disregard of the authorship controversy that swallowed so much scholarly effort to so little avail. Burdach was well aware of the apocalyptic expectations which pervaded the fourteenth century and of some of the literature which these expectations had given rise to (see Burdach ch. 4 and ch. 5, II. 5). He was the first to connect the figure of Piers with current European expectations of a coming great religious leader of personal sanctity, poverty and humility. He also recognized the influence of Franciscanism upon Piers Plowman--an influence which has still to be adequately sorted out despite some important recent contributions (see Burdach ch. 5, II. 5). Burdach was the first to align Langland with European prophetic writers, especially John of Rupecissa, although he did not pursue the question of which of these writers we could reasonably expect Langland to have had access to. His alignment of Langland with writers like Dante and Cola di Rienzo is therefore interesting as a study in comparative literature, but gives us little insight into the

apocalypticism of Langland's intellectual milieu, something which I hope this thesis will help to remedy.

Much discussion of Langland's apocalypticism has arisen from attempts to connect certain passages or structural devices in the poem with certain tenets of Joachite thought. The specific problems of a number of such attempts will be discussed further in Chapter III of this thesis, but certain studies should nevertheless be mentioned here. Frank, Wells⁵⁹ and especially Bloomfield have all noted parallels between Langland's tripartite scheme of Dowell, Dobet and Dobest and Joachim of Fiore's Trinitarian view of history. The suggestion is that in Dowell Langland is representing the status (to use Joachim's term) of the Father, in Dobet that of the Son and in Dobest that of the Holy Ghost. As Bloomfield points out, however (p. 118), it is difficult to see in Dowell the status of the Father and there are, I believe, other problems with this notion as well,⁶⁰ but Bloomfield's attempts to link Piers Plowman with Joachimism have had the effect of focusing our attention on the important influence which monastic ideology and other later medieval discussions of the apostolic life have had on the poem.

Unfortunately, this has been the most misunderstood aspect of Bloomfield's study. One could almost fill a volume (or so it seems) with citations from puzzled and obstreperous critics on this subject. The fact is that Bloomfield's study (like a number of studies in medieval apocalypticism) requires more intellectual energy and digestion than many scholars have been willing to give it. It also assumes a knowledge of or an interest in medieval intellectual (and especially

theological) history which few modern literary scholars have. However, perhaps it should be said that Bloomfield could have made his point more clearly and effectively if he had not restricted his study of "perfection" so closely to monastic ideology alone. The search for the true vita apostolica informs and motivates much of Piers Plowman and this same theme is closely connected to apocalypticism because so many clerical controversialists on the subject saw the issue of clerical lifestyle (the apostolica vita) and clerical reform in an apocalyptic light. Not only monks, but friars, secular clergy and even some laymen debated these issues and contributed to a vast literature, a portion of which has apocalyptic characteristics. The connection between what Bloomfield calls monastic philosophy, "perfection" and apocalypticism is a valid one, but one which I believe Bloomfield could have made more directly and explicitly⁶¹ (and one which a number of scholars could have studied more attentively before leaping to unwarranted conclusions). This comment in a recent thesis sums up the problem:

the view that Piers is a quest for social perfection was first put forth in Bloomfield's seminal study, Piers Plowman as a Fourteenth-Century Apocalypse. His history of the idea of Christian perfection and his argument for the eschatological bent of the poem are most persuasive. Like Robert Kaske in a review article, however, I am puzzled by the exact relationship between "monastic theology" and "eschatology", under which term Bloomfield subsumes a range of meanings. . . .⁶²

Langland is similar to a number of visionaries, both apocalyptically-oriented (like Hildegard and Joachim) and non-apocalyptically-oriented (like Elizabeth of Schönau) in his concern to delineate the

various accepted lifestyles of "perfection."⁶³ Bloomfield sees the medieval concern with "perfection" as expressed in monastic ideology (particularly that branch of it influenced by Joachite thought) as an important factor in Langland's intellectual milieu. This is the key notion in Bloomfield's treatment of the apocalyptic impetus in Piers Plowman and it is a notion which has a number of far-reaching implications. Bloomfield's contribution to our understanding of Piers Plowman in particular and medieval apocalypticism in general is similarly so far-reaching that it is difficult to summarize concisely. Bloomfield makes many helpful suggestions throughout his study which he does not develop to their full potential and much of value remains buried in the wealth of footnotes which accompany it. My debt to Piers Plowman as a Fourteenth-Century Apocalypse will be evident throughout the thesis and, while I differ somewhat in approach and at times take issue with some of Bloomfield's conclusions,⁶⁴ it is only fair to say that this thesis is--to use a well worn medieval metaphor--something of a dwarf sitting upon the shoulders of a giant. Without the work of Bloomfield and a number of other scholars in the field of apocalypticism this study would hardly have been possible as a doctoral thesis. Stephen Medcalf and Marjorie Reeves have recently tried to summarize the various threads of Bloomfield's study, especially the central notion of the ideology of monastic perfection:

On the topmost rung of the earthly hierarchy is the life of "monks" (i.e. all religious) who are, in Bloomfield's interpretation, "the key to the establishment of a just and loving society". This is why Langland lays such emphasis on the reform

of the friars, which is crucial to the reform of the whole world, since corruption of the best brings disaster on the whole society. On the highest rung of the ladder, monks are "the foremost exponents of Christian perfection"; their dwelling is the most perfect habitation on earth and closest to heaven; "their communal life reflects that of the angels and their silence the peace of heaven"; they are "the living eschatological element in history". Accompanying this concept of a perfect state was the notion of progression through grades. Bloomfield points out that in medieval thought these often went in triads: beginner, progressor and perfect; marriage, widowhood, virginity; laymen, priests, monks. One of the most famous of these progressions was the apocalyptic scheme of history evolved by Joachim of Fiore, a twelfth-century monk of Calabria whose pattern of three successive status characterized respectively by the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit exercised a powerful influence in the centuries that followed him. He saw these three ages symbolized in the orders of married men, clergy and monks. Langland's three grades, Do-well, Do-better, Do-best, exemplify this way of thinking, but closer to the Joachimist vision is Langland's use of three grades in the Tree of Perfection. In the C text, when Liberum Arbitrium is describing the Tree to Will, he says that the fruits are married men, widows and virgins (or hermits), the last being the topmost fruits which receive heat from the Holy Ghost, as from the sun (Medcalf, pp. 95-96).

Bloomfield associates this notion of spiritual progression with medieval apocalyptic expectations of new leadership. As Medcalf and Reeves summarize it:

The pilgrimage of the poem is both that of the individual soul and of society towards perfection. Bloomfield links the ideal leader who appears in the B and C texts with the angelic pope and saviour of late medieval prophecy, who fulfil the Joachimist vision of a final blessed age of history. When Conscience goes in quest of Piers he is seeking "the ideal pope, or by extension, ideal cleric or religious, or Christ himself", for "Piers is to be the model for the reconstitution of society". Whether it is Joachim's third status (age) that Langland envisages cannot be proven, but the quest for the holy society which will transform the life of this age places Piers Plowman within the same range of prophetic expectation (ibid., p. 96).

In this Bloomfield is working in the same scholarly tradition as Burdach, although he goes beyond the German scholar in the extent of his contribution to our understanding of apocalypticism in Piers Plowman.

Bloomfield published some of his views on possible monastic and Joachite themes in Piers Plowman in his study of the "Three Grades of Chastity"⁶⁵ delineated in Will's vision of the Tree of Charity (VIII. 84ff.). As the Joachite scholar Marjorie Reeves has said, the persistent linking of the Tree of Charity and its three types of fruit (representing the states of marriage, widowhood and virginity) with the Trinity makes Bloomfield's Joachite connection possible. She continues,

All that is lacking now to make this, at least in some of its meanings, a Joachimist tree is that the three orders should be seen as progressive stages in time, so that the tree becomes a tree of the three status in history. But this is precisely what is not made clear. There is no suggestion that the growth of the Tree represents a time-sequence,⁶⁶ for the three grades of fruit are not linked successively to the three historic status. The interesting point is that Joachim himself never exactly works out this connection in any of his trees. He shows, of course, the historic sequence of the three status, but nowhere in a tree does he depict the three orders pertaining to them (Reeves, Figurae, pp. 312-13).

Adding to this complication, Reeves notes the fact that the tree soon turns into an entirely "Old Testament" tree, when the patriarchs and prophets of pre-Christian Israel begin to fall as fruit for the devil's horde. She concludes,

Here again we see a marked distinction from the trees of Joachim which grow up into the New Testament era and last to the end of time.

It is not possible, therefore, to claim this tree as a clear

expression of Joachimist thought, because of the absence of historical progression from one era to another. None the less, Langland's imagination may have been nourished on Joachim's historical trees. . . (ibid., p. 313).

Reeves gives some examples of Joachite tree diagrams which might provide analogues to Langland's Tree of Charity (pp. 313-14), but she disagrees with some of Bloomfield's suggestions of analogous figures (n. 71).⁶⁷

Interestingly, Marjorie Reeves is more convinced by Kaske's suggestion in "The Speech of 'Book' in Piers Plowman" of possible Joachite influence in Book's difficult prophecy concerning Christ's resurrection:

And ȝut y, Boek, wol be brente bote he aryse to lyue
 And comferte alle his kyn and out of care brynge
 And alle þe Iewene ioye vniouynen and vnlouken,
 And bote they reuerense this resurexioun and þe rode honoure
 And bileue on a newe lawe, be ylost lyf and soule (XX. 264-68).

Kaske had tried to tie Book's prediction to the Joachite notion of the burning of the "letter" of the Testaments in the fire of the spiritualis intellectus of the third status (see Reeves, p. 314; Kaske).⁶⁸

Unfortunately, as Hoffman has shown, Kaske's argument is based on a tenuous grammatical reading which does not stand up to close analysis nor even to historical logic.⁶⁹ Hoffman pinpoints the problem as follows:

The obvious difficulty with this equation is that it is not in equilibrium; for while, according to the Joachistic tradition, the Old Law is the first status mundi, the Resurrection commences not the third age of the Holy Ghost, but the second age, or dispensation of the Son, which Book himself, as the

littera of the New Law, represents. Kaske himself asserts that the "major events at the beginning of the second status mundi" are "the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ, and the descent of the Holy Ghost at Pentecost" (p. 142). We are faced, therefore, with the apparent enigma of having Book prophesy his own burning and the Resurrection as if they should occur simultaneously at the beginning of the last age (Hoffman, p. 59).

Hoffman's refutation of Kaske's argument is very sensible and, I believe, lays to rest the entire issue. In Kaske's defense, however, I would add that Langland's treatment of "Book" is extraordinary and that his imagination is similar to Joachim's in his ability to put even the most abstract concepts in visual form.

Kaske finds further evidence of Joachism in Will's joyful awakening on Easter morning by relating this to Joachite divisions of the liturgical year in which Easter corresponds to the third status (Kaske, p. 144). It seems unnecessary to go so far afield to explain the liturgical echoes in Piers Plowman,⁷⁰ or indeed Book's speech itself, which Hoffman renders as an "extreme conditional statement" showing how certain Book is that Jesus will rise "to lyue." The one undeniable (though not necessarily Joachite) apocalyptic theme in this passage, however, is the conversion of the Jews and Hoffman summarizes the whole matter as follows:

Book, as a symbol of the letter and spirit of the New Testament, is himself that New Law. The purpose of his speech has been, throughout, to bear witness to the divinity of Christ, and this is, after all, the basic function of the document which he represents. This second extreme conditional statement, which concludes his speech, emphasizes his conviction that even those who live under the Old Law will ultimately believe his enduring testimony and acknowledge the divine nature of Christ. Far from

prophesying his future destruction, Book is thoroughly assured of his immortality--lyf and soule (Hoffman, p. 65).⁷¹

A number of scholars have sought to relate the theme of poverty (and the many themes in the poem associated with poverty) to the question of Langland's apocalypticism.⁷² As Gordon Leff has shown, by the fourteenth-century an association between poverty and prophecy was firmly established, largely, though not entirely, because of the literature of the Franciscan Joachimites.⁷³ It was this theme which first suggested itself to Bloomfield in his study of Langland's apocalypticism:

Among the Spiritual Franciscans, who openly espoused Joachim's and Peter John Olivi's teachings, the issue frequently turned on the problem of poverty and the literal following of St. Francis' Rule. The story of the Spiritual movement is too vast to be discussed here; and besides, for Langland, it is for the most part irrelevant. I did not always think so, for when I first began the investigations that led to this book, I was convinced of its importance in understanding Langland's poem. Now I am no longer so convinced, though perhaps it is a minor factor to be taken into account in assessing the poem. Joachimism, which may well be an important factor in Langland's intellectual milieu, was primarily associated with biblical exegesis, especially on the Apocalypse, with monastic philosophy, and with the apocalyptic and prophetic view of history in general (Bloomfield, p. 95).

Furthermore, Langland's attitude toward the friars has been something of a problem in approaching the study of his apocalypticism for this very reason. Bloomfield wrote elsewhere,

The greatest difficulty in seeing the basic apocalyptic quality in Piers is the strong and violent criticism of the friars which runs through the whole poem. This satire reaches its culmination at the very end of the poem when Conscience sets out to

find Piers Plowman or Christ for two reasons--to destroy pride and to provide a minimum sustenance for the friars. The solution to the whole problem of the world for Langland turned to a great extent on the reform of the friars. How can we relate this violent attack on the friars and the conviction of the centrality of their role in the attainment of perfection with the apocalyptic frame of mind which informs the whole poem? If friars are merely one group in society among many, it is difficult to see why Langland should consider their reform the crucial problem for the solution of the problem of the world.⁷⁴

Both Guy Bourquin and Penn Szittyá have recently posed some interesting solutions to this problem. Where Bloomfield had tried to answer the question by suggesting that the quest for monastic perfection was "the eschatological element in history" (ibid., p. 166) and that Langland had seen the activities of the friars as the "most blatant violation of the monastic ideal possible" (ibid.), Szittyá has gone one step further in seeing the friars as part of what Northrop Frye would call Langland's apocalyptic grammar.⁷⁵ Szittyá has shown how medieval antimendicantism crystallized around a cluster of biblical passages concerning the coming of the pseudo-apostles in the Last Days. Concerning their role in Piers Plowman he says,

If the friars were perceived symbolically by their contemporaries, in the context of Salvation History rather than history as we know it, then they had a dimension brilliantly suited to works of the imagination, especially those like Piers Plowman already concerned with the interaction of society and Salvation History and written in a symbolic mode. It is hard to explain the puzzling importance of the friars in Piers Plowman until it is recognized that they have a symbolic rather than social function throughout the poem. They and Piers are of exactly the same imaginative dimension: both are symbolic; both are representatives of the apostolica vita, one in bono (Piers is identified with Peter), one in malo ("Antifraternal Tradition," p. 313).

In fact, when placed in the context of medieval apocalyptic writings, other elements in Piers Plowman do function as typological features of an apocalyptic grammar as well, as we shall see.

Guy Bourquin has studied the in bono side of Langland's concern with the apostolica vita in various figures throughout the poem, most notably, Piers and Patience. He sees much positive Franciscan influence in Piers Plowman, including the influence of Franciscan Joachimism in the figure of Piers especially. In response to Bloomfield's statement (quoted above) that the Franciscan Spirituals were not a factor in fourteenth-century England (and therefore not likely to be a factor in Langland's thought), Bourquin notes that while the movement was restricted, the literature it spawned was not. I would agree with Bourquin that Bloomfield poses the problem rather unhelpfully. Bourquin writes,

Le problème, selon nous, se pose différemment. Il dut exister en Angleterre, aux treizième et quatorzième siècles, plusieurs variantes originales (non nécessairement joachimistes) de ce qu'on pourrait désigner prudemment du terme de "franciscanisme apocalyptique", par quoi nous entendons toute tentative de synthèse (partielle ou totale) entre une perspective eschatologique et tel aspect de la spiritualité franciscaine. Dans quelle mesure Piers Plowman actualise-t-il de telles tendances? (Bourquin, p. 726).

As we shall see, England did not necessarily need a flourishing Franciscan Spiritual movement to bring Joachimite prophecy into circulation there in the fourteenth century. Bourquin's chapter on "Le franciscanisme apocalyptique" (pp. 723-35) is not nearly long enough or detailed enough to handle adequately the problem of Franciscan

apocalypticism and the possibility of its influence on Langland, but he does correctly recognize certain elements in the poem (notably the millenarian vision at the end of Passus III and the onslaught of Antichrist and Conscience's search for Piers at the end of the poem) as characteristic of a Joachite apocalyptic programme. Picking up on Langland's perpetual concern with monastic ideology, Bourquin writes,

Il est, d'autre part, évident que les influences franciscaines se mêlent à d'autres courants dont il est difficile de les dissocier. Piers Plowman, est en effet l'oeuvre du moyen age anglais qui reproduit avec le plus de fidélité les traits permanents de l'idéal monastique. Aussi conviendra-t-il de traiter en premier cet aspect du problème. On posera, néanmoins, comme hypothèse que le franciscanisme est le canal principal par lequel les grands principes de l'idéal monastique parvinrent au poète de Piers Plowman (ibid., p. 694).

He sees the Franciscan influence in the poem as threefold:

hagiographical, eschatological and theological, although of the three he seems least equipped to deal with the eschatological.

The role of the friars in Piers Plowman brings us to an issue in the scholarship of the poem which always gives rise to speculations about Langland's apocalypticism. Critics have been in considerable disagreement about the meaning of the coming of Antichrist and the onslaught of false clerics which Langland portrays at the conclusion of Piers Plowman. Criticism of this section falls generally into two camps. One group espouses the view that the end of the poem is essentially pessimistic and portrays the engulfing of the Church in the grip of Antichrist in preparation for the Last Judgement. In opposition to this group a number of critics espouse the view that the end of the poem

holds out hope for a renewal of the Church through Conscience's search for Piers to destroy Pride and give the friars a "fyndynge."⁷⁶

While the choice of reading may well be influenced by personal taste, it must be acknowledged that to assert that Langland is portraying the End of the World in the last passus one must disregard all the earlier apocalyptic passages in the poem and fall back upon the rather strained interpretation that Conscience is going out to seek Piers in the form of the Second Coming of Christ. Even then, one must face the question of why he should bother to give the friars a "fyndynge," which would not be of much use to them at the End of the World. Emerson, who is one of the most recent proponents of this view, puts forward an astonishingly simple-minded version of the "pessimistic" school as if it were a new reading. Before beginning his interpretation he asserts that the

conclusion has often been misunderstood because its description of Antichrist's attack has not been interpreted in its eschatological context and as reflecting the popular medieval Antichrist tradition (Emmerson, p. 193).

Emmerson writes as if the "popular medieval Antichrist tradition" has been unknown to critics or, for that matter, as if Langland makes much use of it (Emmerson is hard-pressed to point to many elements of this tradition outside of the most general). Unfortunately, critics have all too often shown ignorance of anything but the popular eschatology, which in any case does not help much to solve the problems the passage presents. Emmerson dismisses Langland's earlier explicit prophecies of renewal with the following:

It is true that the Visio also includes a series of prophecies that envision the ultimate regeneration or reform of society (3: 284-30; C. 6: 180), perhaps by a good king or Last World Emperor, but none of these utopian societies are [sic] established. Significantly, the characters who predict the renovatio mundi in the Visio are spokesmen of natural reason and lack the greater perspective provided by the traditional Christian interpretation of history (ibid., p. 194).

He finishes his discussion of the conclusion by merely asserting rather than proving that Langland is portraying the coming of Antichrist, just prior to the Last Judgement:

Actually, the poem's conclusion is typical of the Antichrist tradition, which is both pessimistic and optimistic. It is pessimistic in that there is no human solution for Antichrist's attack. It is optimistic in that those Christians who stand firmly against Antichrist will be rewarded when Christ comes in glory and destroys Antichrist. The poem's conclusion is similarly pessimistic and optimistic. It is pessimistic in that it portrays without any relief the attack of Antichrist, the final leader of evil in the last days who ruthlessly persecutes the church. He is not merely a polemical device by which Langland can condemn the friars and other evil characters in the church. . . . Furthermore, the ending is pessimistic in that it does not suggest, as Morton Bloomfield and others have argued, that a regeneration of society will follow Antichrist's reign. Piers Plowman follows the conservative exegetical interpretations of Antichrist rather than the radical Joachimist expectation of a renovatio mundi after Antichrist's defeat. . . . On the contrary, the fact that Do-Best is eschatological suggests that what follows "contemporary impiety and sin" is the Last Judgment and not the establishment of a millennial society (ibid., pp. 200-1).

Whether Langland expected Piers to usher in a millennial society such as he describes in Passus III we do not know, but at the very least we know that Conscience goes in search of Piers as an expected leader of clerical (especially fraternal) reform, something which would seem to preclude the Last Judgement following upon the coming of this particular

Antichrist. As we shall see, Langland's sense of apocalyptic expectation is far more sophisticated than the popular Antichrist tradition which is the subject of Emerson's book.

At the close of an admirably erudite treatment of the antimendicantism of Langland's "Nede" episode, Robert Adams also comes to the conclusion that Langland is portraying the End of the World in his last passus. Adams uses a more sophisticated argument than Emerson's to support this view, but, like Emerson, he fails to deal adequately with the glaring inconsistencies of his position.⁷⁷

Frank has done a helpful review of both the "optimistic" and "pessimistic" schools in his "Conclusion of Piers Plowman" and he provides a good though brief assessment of the apocalyptic import of both the friars and Piers. Although his notion that Langland uses the term Antichrist simply as a polemical label of abuse is not, I think, entirely satisfactory, he is right to recognize that the critical obstacles to the "pessimistic" reading are greater than any which the "optimistic" school has to deal with and thereby to conclude that Conscience's pilgrimage must have some meaningful purpose in the poem. He is also correct, I believe, in his assertion that Langland's expectations of reform need not necessarily be interpreted as naive utopianism or Golden Age millennialism. He writes,

Some critics, I have remarked, believe that at the end of his poem Langland despaired of mankind's salvation. The line about the friars, however, reminds us that Langland's despair grows in large part out of a specific evil, the work of the friars, and so his agony, though intense, is not complete despair. Some students find a note of hope and expectation. But the line

shows that Langland has for the specific evil a specific remedy, a "fyndyng." So his hopes too are limited and do not require an age of perfection. This is not to deny that there may be chiliastic elements in Langland's poem. Langland did hope for reforms and a better age. But Langland's hopes are embodied largely in the figure of Piers, whom Burdach explains as a symbol of the semi-divine character of human nature. In Dobest Langland employs this current belief that man was a mixture of the divine with the human to express the hope that someone--most probably a good pope--can be found to reform the Church and administer properly the Church's power of forgiveness of sins. But beyond this his expectations do not go (Frank, "Conclusion," p. 315).

Frank's comment raises the interesting problem that the word "perfection" has caused in Piers Plowman criticism. As we shall see, medieval theological and didactic writers did not mean precisely the same thing by perficiere and its various forms as we do by the concept of "perfection" today, and the indiscriminate use of this term in translation has caused no small amount of trouble. Even in the most optimistic writer like Joachim of Fiore an age of "perfection" may mean little more than a period of spiritual renewal in which each person tries to fulfill the duties and obligations of his chosen Christian lifestyle. I do not believe that such a scenario was beyond Langland's hopes or expectations, whereas an "age of perfection" in the modern sense of the term is beyond almost anybody's wildest dreams. Scholars who espouse a Joachite reading of Piers Plowman have certainly not always been explicit enough on this point and other scholars have not always been careful enough in their study of such readings. The result has been a good deal of needless misunderstanding on both sides.

A number of unpublished doctoral theses provide various attempts

at literary readings of Langland's apocalypticism in the poem as a whole. Some of these theses are neither scholarly nor particularly insightful in their interpretations and they are perhaps best mentioned in a note.⁷⁸ Among the more considered treatments of the topic is a University of Toronto Ph.D. thesis by Victor Globe.⁷⁹ Although there are a number of problems with Globe's study, he does do a reasonably detailed review of some prophetic works which could well have been known to Langland or which form part of the medieval tradition of (usually) political prophecy. He begins by looking at Lactantius and at various early medieval apocalyptic treatises of the Tiburtine Sibyl, Pseudo-Methodius and Adso of Montier-en-Der. These works had a lasting influence upon the popular eschatology and political prophecy of the later Middle Ages and, while I do not find them directly useful for the interpretation of Piers Plowman, they certainly form an important part of the "background" to later medieval apocalypticism. Globe also considers the "John of Bridlington" prophecies and a few standard apocalypse commentaries.

His analysis of apocalypticism in Piers Plowman is basically a study of Langland's use of the Apocalypse itself. He begins by noting Langland's few stray quotations from the Apocalypse (pp. 166-69) and then proceeds with a detailed but rather uneven reading of symbolism derived from it. He makes heavy use of the Middle English commentary on the Apocalypse edited by Fridner,⁸⁰ finding this particular commentary most helpful for Piers Plowman because of its author's pervasive concern with clerical corruption (see p. 169 and ch. 5 passim). Before

beginning his analysis, Globe voices a nagging concern of all scholars who have tackled the problem of Langland's apocalypticism:

To begin with, I will provide a very brief summary of the apocalyptic stratum of Piers Plowman. This summary gives the mistaken impression that apocalyptic themes in Piers Plowman are both more obvious and more continuous than they are in the texture of the actual poem. Such is the fate of the study of any theme in the poem. Langland's bent for satire leads him to countless digressions and random collections of particular details similar to the random vilifications of the Sibylline Oracles (Globe, pp. 169-70).

Globe then summarizes the main symbols which he feels that Langland has drawn from the Apocalypse:

Langland bases his characters, in part, on similar characters and images from the Apocalypse, as understood by contemporary exegetical traditions. Lady Meed plays the role of the Whore of Babylon, and Holy Church less obviously represents the Bride of the Lamb. The tower of truth recalls the Heavenly Jerusalem, while the dungeon of sorrow is reminiscent of the abode of the powers of evil in the abyss (ibid., p. 170).

None of these suggestions is new to Piers Plowman scholarship, nor are they finally of much help in understanding Langland's elusive but sophisticated apocalyptic ideology; however, Globe's analysis (for the Visio at any rate) is thorough and illuminating on certain details. Globe discusses some of the visionary (pp. 171 and 179) and admonitory (p. 172 and passim) features which Piers Plowman shares with the vision of John of Patmos, notably the warnings to the churches. His treatment of Meed as the Whore of Babylon is especially convincing in his mustering of small details (see pp. 178ff.). Globe also briefly considers some of the historical allusions in Langland's treatment of

Mede and discusses the possible references to Alice Perrers in both Piers Plowman and the John of Bridlington prophecies. Here, as in every other instance that I know of, the relationship between Piers Plowman and the Bridlington prophecies is apocalyptically unenlightening: both allude to the same historical episodes but there is no more illuminating connection that I have found, nor does Globe's study provide one. Aside from a few less specific (and less convincing) suggestions of Langland's use of the Apocalypse (as, for example, Globe's notion that the onslaught of Elde and Kynde at the end of the poem functions "in Piers Plowman as the four horsemen and the seven vials of plagues," p. 201), there is little else in his interpretation worthy of elaboration here.⁸¹ I cannot agree with his view that Langland saw the time between Piers' establishment of Unity and the first onslaught against it as the millennium of the Apocalypse, during which Satan was bound for one thousand years, nor with his notion that Langland is actually portraying the end of the world in fourteenth-century England (p. 171). He does, however, make a perceptive comment on the apocalyptic yearning for leadership so evident in Piers Plowman:

Each of the three estates is subjected to the scalpel of Langland's irony. Nevertheless, the poet also presents a remedy for the corruption of each estate by portraying an ideal leader for them. Piers is the perfect plowman; an ideal king appears to guide the second estate; and a godly pope--Piers as St Peter--builds the sound barn of Christendom (ibid., pp. 170-71).

A handful of theses and published articles have all struggled with another problem in assessing the place of apocalypticism in

Langland's thought, that is, the question of the relationship in Piers Plowman between social action and apocalyptic expectation. Put briefly the question is this: does Langland believe that man can solve (or help solve) his own problems, or must he wait upon divine intervention for a final solution? Two types of critic have particular problems with this question--the Marxist, post-christian type (as represented by David Aers) seems to be able to offer little more than critical impatience with the subject, while those critics committed to the notion that Langland is indeed portraying the End of the World in the last passus feel compelled to uphold the view that he yields to passive acceptance of man's inability to help himself. Neither view is terribly helpful, but let us begin with the latter.

Emmerson has recently published an essay in which he attempts to distinguish between prophetic and apocalyptic viewpoints in Piers Plowman on the basis of distinctions between the two in biblical literature. His point that there is an important distinction between the two in biblical writings is well taken, but I find his view that Langland was consciously applying these distinctions strained. Basically, the prophetic view in Old Testament terms usually takes the form of a conditional warning: misfortune will come upon those, warns the prophet, who do not cease from doing evil. It is thus within man's power to affect his own destiny through reform (see Emmerson [1984], pp. 44ff.). Apocalypticism, on the other hand, is a mentality in which the writer despairs of any human solution to current problems. The forces of evil are seen to be supernatural, cosmic and beyond the power of man to turn

away, either individually through repentance, or through any collective human action (ibid.). Emerson tries to argue that Langland's attitude in the Visio is prophetic, but that by the end of the poem he is engulfed in apocalyptic despair. The tide of Antichrist is not within the power of mankind to stem:

Only through a supernatural intervention can evil be overcome; only Christ or his agent can defeat Antichrist and his lieutenant, Pride. The only apocalyptic hope is placed in the intervention of the divine. The Piers whom Conscience seeks, therefore, is best understood as the apocalyptic Messiah, the savior who alone can solve the dilemma faced by the church in the last days, who alone can save the righteous individuals caught in sinful society (ibid., p. 54).

The interpretation, although attractive for its apparent tidiness, does not really stand up to analysis. In order to maintain this view Emerson must set aside any notion that Langland is hoping for clerical, especially fraternal reform at the end of the poem:

This interpretation of Piers [i.e. the view that Piers will return as a reformer] is argued sometimes to support the position that Langland primarily is concerned with the reformation of the fraternal orders. As Robert W. Frank, Jr., concludes, "Nothing more than an ideal pope is needed to reform the friars by giving them a 'fyndyng.'" Yet, there is no indication in Dobest that evil can be overcome by any human agency, no matter how ideal. In light of the apocalyptic pessimism that characterizes the poem's conclusion, such a statement seems simplistic. Neither does the poem support Bloomfield's view that "to thinkers like Langland, the very presence of Antichrist is actually evidence for the imminence of renewal and fundamentally a hopeful sign." It is not likely that Langland in his conclusion is creating a vision of a future regeneration of church and society (ibid., pp. 53-54).

Emerson's notion that the Visio is "prophetic" in its viewpoint (i.e.

that man can affect his own destiny) is also problematic. He tries to suggest that the millennial vision at the end of Passus III is prophetic in the sense that it is within man's power to affect such a moral change. The passage is indeed "prophetic" in the sense that Langland is here drawing upon Isaiah, but it is difficult to see how such a wondrous transformation is any more humanly possible than the reform of the friars and the destruction of Pride at the end of the poem. Too narrow an application of biblical terminology (which does not even fit all biblical categories neatly) to a fourteenth-century poem seems more misleading than helpful when it is done in such a rigid way.

David Aers has recently tackled the same problem from an entirely different viewpoint. Taking a Marxist approach to the problem of the relation between social reform and apocalypticism in Piers Plowman, Aers attempts to show that Langland eventually judged apocalypticism as "an unilluminating subversion of his genuine engagement with human beings in time"--for which I am afraid we must read that Aers judges apocalypticism as such because he musters no convincing evidence of this attitude in Langland. Aers' essay must surely be ranked as one of the most anachronistic and partisan readings of any aspect of Piers Plowman by a modern critic. He is unable to conceive of apocalypticism in any other form than that of a fantastically illusory and impractical programme for social action, which, he asserts persistently, Langland is forced to abandon because it does not seem to be working (Aers, pp. 67 and 73)--as if apocalypticism were some kind of newly initiated government programme, the effects of which could be immediately and quantitatively

measured.

It is needless to labour the point that Aers' understanding of the phenomenon of apocalypticism is rather idiosyncratic, but in all fairness it should be pointed out that the roots of this notion can be found in studies like Norman Cohn's famous The Pursuit of the Millennium, which seeks to wed apocalypticism to all manner of revolutionary movements and revolts.⁸² Aers tries most unconvincingly to associate Langland's millenarian prophecy at the end of Passus III with the one movement of this type which fourteenth-century England witnessed, i.e. in John Ball's revolutionary ideology. Without going into all the complexities of his argument (pp. 64ff.), we can summarize it by saying that Aers attempts to read Langland's allegorical vision of a world ordered by "Leaute," "Trewe-tonge" and similar personifications as a subversive vision of medieval England without its ruling social groups (p. 66), i.e. without lawyers, nobility and the like. The reading mistakes the purposes of both Langland's (and Isaiah's) apocalypticism and succeeds in drawing Piers Plowman into revolutionary company in which it does not belong (that is, among the likes of John Ball, Wyclif and the Lollards, and even the Hussite revolutionaries). That Piers Plowman was used by John Ball and his cohorts should not obscure the fact that Langland was himself socially conservative and shows little interest in changing the existing social order except to purge it of corruption. As we will see, Langland's radicalism on certain points should be sharply distinguished from the revolutionary ideology of some of his contemporaries. Langland's religious orthodoxy

and social conservatism are absolutely consistent with his apocalypticism and these things are characteristic of the whole group of religious prophetic writers studied in this thesis. One of the contributions which I hope that this thesis will make to Piers Plowman studies is that it should no longer be necessary to go to John Ball or John Wyclif to "explain" certain radical features in Langland's thought--the important ideological differences between Langland and his two famous contemporaries should make us wary of trying to make Langland fit a more revolutionary image than he ever intended. While such comparisons are important and can be illuminating, they can also be dangerously misleading if pushed too far, as Aers' essay unfortunately shows.

The stated purpose of Aers' article (to show that "when this tension, between an imaginatively grasped historical present and a cherished frame of ideas received from the past, becomes unbearable to the poet he often attempted to resolve it apocalyptically," p. 64) becomes a vehicle for espousing the inadequacy of apocalypticism:

So once more we find how the apocalyptic mode springs from unresolved social and ecclesiastical tensions at the heart of the poem, and how inappropriate it is for grasping the complex historical and moral issues with which Langland is preoccupied. Its blurring of historical agency is a good indicator of the ways it dissolves the terrestrial city and its history, thus only contributing to confusion and, ironically, the very frustrations which generated the mode (Aers, p. 73).

Finally, it is a means to assert that Langland rejects apocalypticism in the last passus:

We saw the attractions such a leap held for him, though we have also seen how the apocalyptic leap was one which evaded the real problems of current historical processes and went against the scrupulous exploratory methods the poem habitually deploys. We also found that the apocalyptic mode actually failed to transcend the most disturbing contradictions it was supposed to comprehend. Now, at the end of his great poem, I believe we should acknowledge how Langland absolutely refused all the temptations of apocalypticism and the hopes of millenarian renewal, even though he envisaged the present as involving a massive defeat for Christianity (ibid., p. 77).

To do so Aers must, like Emerson, reject the notion that Conscience's final pilgrimage has anything to do with clerical reform or hope for renewal: "with church and society dominated by the forces of Antichrist the pilgrimage here is emphatically extra-institutional, individualistic, participating in most significant trends in late medieval religion and psychology" (here a footnote points us rather vaguely to studies on "individualistic developments" in late medieval religion; p. 78 and p. 213, n. 37). At the end of the poem, for Aers, both social reform and apocalypticism are outcasts from Langland's thought, the poet having outgrown his use of a "wilful and impatient attempt at a premature solution, an enticing but misleading shortcut" (p. 67). But neither the prophetic nor the apocalyptic point of view (to use Emerson's biblical distinctions) offers shortcuts. A prophet merely looks around at current events and suggests that such events will have consequences at some future point ("And but holi chirche and charite choppe adoun suche shryuars/The moste meschief on molde mounteth vp fast," Pro1. 64-65). Similarly, the apocalyptic point of view asserts that the forces of good will have their day at some future time and while this time is urgently

looked for, there is no "shortcut" to its arrival possible to man, not even, it would seem, to a poet in charge of his own fictional creation. I do not think that any thoughtful reading of Langland's apocalyptic passages would construe them as misleading shortcuts, but rather promises and forebodings of what could or might or will happen as a consequence of man's actions or God's response.

Melanie Isaacson Kell has also tackled the problem of apocalypticism and social reform in a recent thesis entitled "The Unachieved Quest for Social Reformation from the Roman de Carité to Piers Plowman."

Looking at a wide range of quest, dream vision and estates literature in the period leading up to Piers Plowman, Kell concludes,

In the literature of the community there are a number of allegorical quests with the perfection of the earthly community the goal. The poets of these quests must resolve the tension between a goal of perfection and a community that is defined as corrupt in the conventions on which they rely. One resolution is to end the poem with the community in the process of restoration but not yet certain of success, even in the future. The process of perfection will take the whole of time. The only escape is the one chosen by the recluse, the repudiation of the process of time and the earthly city (Kell, p. 30).

Kell makes some insightful remarks about the "holy fool" figure which is associated with the prophetic theme in Piers Plowman. Speaking of Piers' tearing of the pardon and "conversion" from the active to the spiritual life in the B-Text she writes,

The priest's response is to taunt Piers, saying he should take "dixit insipiens" as his theme. . . . It is interesting that Piers should be called insipiens in any context when the holy fool is such an important concept for Langland. The fools are sanctified, they are also outside the community. In this

respect, they are like the prophets who ate their bread in pain and sorrow. In the pardon-tearing scene, Piers is transformed from honest citizen to penitential exile. He moves from one sort of sancta rusticitas to another, from the wisdom of a simple countryman to the wisdom of the inspired, of prophets and fools. The next news we have of Piers, after the end of the Visio, is that he has "sette alle sciences at a soppe save loue only" (13: 124). He has taken on the role of insipiens, but not at all as the priest meant it. The voice of the plowman breaks into the banquet hall and is accepted as authoritative by Clergy himself. Piers is not part of the fellowship of the banquet hall; if he were, he would probably be viewed as just one of the disputants. His words are authoritative because they come from outside. He inspires those within the hall to leave the sophistries of the learned men present and to join Patience, the professional outsider (ibid., pp. 162-63).

As we will see, this notion of wisdom and leadership from subordinate or unexpected sources is typical of the medieval prophetic mentality. Kell speaks of the recluse or outsider motif which is common to quests for social reformation, among which Piers Plowman is no exception. However, Langland's poem does prove exceptional in its renewalist emphasis when set among the poems of Kell's study. She writes, "The mainstream of surviving literature on the community seems to be highly orthodox. I do not know of any poem on the estates which believes in the founding of a messianic kingdom" (Kell, p. 14). She goes on to say, however, that although these poems are rarely chiliastic, many are eschatologically-oriented in that they often explicitly say that Antichrist and the End of the World are at hand.

In his unpublished doctoral thesis Michael Klein⁸³ approaches the problem of Langland's apocalypticism by distinguishing between what he calls "certain" and "uncertain apocalypses." In an uncertain apocalypse Klein suggests that the author has realized that a

utopian solution has been proven untenable and that apparent solutions have been reached only to fail (p. 11). Klein's approach, which considers stylistic features as well, highlights signs of fragmentation and dislocation which, he feels, are inherent in "uncertain apocalypses." Classing Piers Plowman as an uncertain apocalypse, Klein summarizes the stylistic characteristics of the poem as including a fragmented plot, paratactical syntax, sudden shifts of time, place or attitude, abrupt changes in genre and point of view, abrupt introductions of figures of authority, the use of a partly reliable or unreliable narrator or figure of authority, and the repetition, transformation and recycling of significant material within the poem. He writes, "These stylistic traits which in the latter part of my study will be seen as an expression of certain social and spiritual contradictions and tensions will in the middle chapters be viewed as rhetoric designed to put across an apocalyptic vision" (p. 12).

Klein studies various representations of the apocalypse in medieval art and categorizes them as "certain" or "uncertain" apocalypses. He notes that in the "uncertain" ones

as we have seen in the case of illustrated medieval apocalypses, the omission of the scenes of judgement or of a happy conclusion, or the darkening of such scenes, or the omission of a scene in which Antichrist is defeated, are related to an essential uncertainty on the part of the artist" (Klein, p. 389).

Noting that Langland exhibits all these tendencies toward uncertainty he contrasts Piers Plowman with the apocalypticism of John Ball:

John Ball refers to the apocalyptic in glowing and optimistic terms. His audience is addressed as if they are [sic] potentially saved. It is not a matter of self-reform, but of the conquest of evil in the world, so that the utopia of peace and equality will be established" (ibid., p. 320).

Klein notes that Langland's apocalypticism places much more emphasis on the reform of the individual and is much less certain of a concrete programme of action to right all wrongs. In spite of certain problems, I believe that Klein's study is of value in underlining the uncertainty in Langland's apocalypticism. One of the main differences between Langland and the avowed or "declared" apocalyptic writers studied in this thesis is Langland's apparent lack of self-confidence and rather fragmented apocalyptic vision. I hope that this study will be of value in putting some of these pieces together into a recognizable shape.

If Langland's apocalypticism is fragmented, the scholarship on this aspect of his poetry is every bit as scattered. As we have seen, there are a number of valuable insights, but nothing as yet which recreates the whole picture. Nor would I claim as much for the present study. There is much which this thesis does not do and many questions which it leaves unanswered. What it does do, I hope, is to illuminate one area of Langland's apocalyptic thought by showing its indebtedness to the medieval prophecy of religious reform.

CHAPTER I

THE VISIONARY PROPHECY OF HILDEGARD OF BINGEN

Introduction

The Benedictine abbess Hildegard von Bingen (1098-1179)¹ was born into the turbulent period of the Investiture Controversy and the Great Reform; her writings therefore reflect the struggles and ideologies of these times which gave birth to a whole new apocalyptic view of history. As Bernard McGinn has said:

The Great Reform had its most profound repercussions in Germany, the home of the empire. Hence we should not be surprised at the pride of place that speculation about the meaning of history found among German authors of the twelfth century. In their struggle to wrest meaning from the great revolution of their times, these writers made use of a wide variety of eschatological and apocalyptic themes (McGinn, p. 95).

For Hildegard, as for the other German apocalyptic thinkers of her time,² questions of church reform and of the course of salvation history toward its end were inextricably linked. The concerns of these German writers left their stamp on the popular religious prophecy of the later Middle Ages, but none more so than Hildegard's. Her influence as a prophetess was great. Along with Joachim of Fiore, Hildegard is the most commonly cited authority in sermons, encyclopedias, chronicles and religious tracts,³ in which authors and compilers chose to include current apocalyptic theory.⁴ Chronicles of the period testify to the reputation which she and the younger visionary Elizabeth of Schönau (on

whom Hildegard had had a great influence) had acquired.⁵ In 1158 an annalist wrote:

In these days God made manifest his power through the frail sex, in the two handmaidens . . . , whom he filled with a prophetic spirit, making many kinds of visions apparent to them through his messages, which are to be seen in writing (McDonnell, p. 282).

Hildegard carried on a prodigious correspondence with emperors, kings, popes, nobility and clergy all over Europe.⁶ Her zeal for evangelism and reform seems to have been the motivation for much of her contact with the world beyond her abbey walls, although as her reputation as a prophetess grew people began to contact her for spiritual advice, reassurance and, one might say, "news" from above. Heads of religious houses wrote to find out whether God was in any way displeased with their houses or orders,⁷ abbesses wrote to ask whether it was God's will that they continue in their positions or seek a quieter life,⁸ clerics and scholars wrote to ask whether Hildegard could pronounce on theological points under dispute or clarify mystifying passages in the Bible.⁹ At one point she was even asked to exorcise a demon from a possessed woman.¹⁰ To read her correspondence is to gain a bird's-eye view of the spectrum of the religious, spiritual and psychological problems which troubled twelfth-century society.

Although frail and prone to physical illness, she undertook preaching tours, everywhere urging reform and speaking her mind to all, respecting neither position or social rank when she encountered flagrant abuse. At a certain point in her life, Hildegard's disillusionment with

the clerical corruption she saw everywhere around her began to take its toll.¹¹ As Charles Czarski has shown in his excellent and thorough study of Hildegard's prophetic works, her apocalyptic ideology became more radical in the later years of her life and the most spectacular and virulent prophecies can all be dated to this time as a consequence. Hildegard has been described by the historian of apocalyptic thought Bernard McGinn as "one of the most strikingly original apocalyptic thinkers since the intertestamental period,"¹² so in one sense her fiery indignation came to good issue. However, it must be said that this is the only area in which she received anything like the recognition she deserved as an author. Hildegard also wrote on cosmology, medicine, ethics, science and theology, as well as producing saints lives, liturgical songs, poetry, a play and her three large, uncategorizable visionary treatises: Scivias, the Liber vitae meritorum and the Liber divinorum operum simplicis hominis (hereafter the LDO). On top of this she conducted her vast correspondence, leaving a literary legacy which runs to a full volume in Patrologia Latina. And yet her works, aside from her prophetic writings, were all but ignored until the nineteenth century. Schrader has speculated that her non-prophetic works were not better known in the later Middle Ages because she was one of the last representatives of pre-scholastic spirituality (c. 519). Schrader suggests that, unlike her famous contemporary Bernard of Clairvaux, Hildegard was not a mystic, but a prophetic writer and the domination of the scholastic and mystical movements in the later Middle Ages made her works seem difficult and strangely out of fashion to

contemporary readers.

If her works were difficult for contemporaries, they have not been made more lucid by the passing of eight centuries. Her prophecies are often hard to follow and even harder to render into modern, idiomatic English.¹³ Part of the reason for this may be the fact that she was recording the things which she believed she saw in her visions. The old cliché which asserts that a picture is worth a thousand words is pertinent here: what was visually clear to Hildegard is often less than clear in the more laborious form of prose. The problems that she had expressing her visions were no doubt augmented by the fact that she seems to have been very insecure about her competence in Latin and, despite scholarly studies of the problem, it is still unclear to what extent her secretaries contributed to the refinement of her work.¹⁴

Describing her mode of receiving visions in a letter written very late in her life, Hildegard says:

Since my infancy, however, when I was not yet strong in my bones and nerves and veins, I have always seen this vision in my soul, even till now when I am more than seventy years old. And as God wills, in this vision my spirit mounts upwards, into the height of the firmament and into changing air, and dilates itself among different nations, even though they are in far-off regions and places remote from me. And because I see these things in such a manner, for this reason I also behold them in changing forms of clouds and other created things. But I hear them not with my physical ears, nor with my heart's thoughts, nor do I perceive them by bringing any of my five senses to bear--but only in my soul, my physical eyes open, so that I never suffer their failing in loss of consciousness (extasis); no, I see these things wakefully, day and night. And I am constantly oppressed by illnesses, and so enmeshed in intense

pains that they threaten to bring on my death; but so far God has stayed me (trans. Dronke, Women Writers, p. 168).

The interesting thing about this passage is that despite Hildegard's originality, an originality which even extended to her mode of perceiving the visions (i.e. she stresses that she never loses normal consciousness), it is clear from this description that she was much influenced by earlier visionary literature. When she talks of her spirit mounting upwards into the height of the firmament, she is clearly drawing on the kind of experience recorded in texts like Scipio's Dream, on which Macrobius based his well-known commentary, and II Corinthians 12:1-4, which records St. Paul's visionary experience.

This brings us to an important point about medieval visionary writing and the study of such writing as a means of illuminating visionary aspects of Piers Plowman. It is immediately obvious to even the most casual student of Hildegard's visionary prophecies that she does not have the same literary goals as Langland. To what extent we are justified in looking for similarities between a "real" visionary and a writer of dream poetry may well be open to question. But two facts are unavoidable and these form the basis of the present study. First of all, even as a "real" visionary, Hildegard can be seen to be both influenced by and writing within the conventions of a strong literary tradition, a tradition which obviously shaped her experience, odd as that may sound. This tradition, and the literary conventions which characterize it, are part of the larger tradition which dream vision poets like Langland were drawing upon, so in a sense the two writers are

both 'literary' writers, because convention is virtually inescapable in visionary writing. The apocalypse, being by definition¹⁵ a visionary genre, contributed much to the medieval vision tradition through texts like Daniel, St. John's Apocalypse and the second century Pastor Hermas. It is, in fact, one of the most 'literary' of biblical genres,¹⁶ in the sense that apocalypses were only transmitted in written form and their authors tended to adhere very strongly to established conventions. While it is certainly possible to categorize medieval vision literature into the three broad groups of poetic, apocalyptic and didactic vision, based on the primary purpose of the work and the conventions which the author chose to emphasize, the degree to which texts feed off other texts without respecting these boundaries within vision literature as a whole is striking indeed.

The second fact which forms the basis of this chapter is that even the most empirical study of Hildegard's and Langland's prophetic writings will reveal a good many shared attitudes and ideologies which, in turn, are common to other medieval apocalyptic writers.¹⁷ Even more striking is the fact that they share many apocalyptic themes and motifs. All this does not add up to "proof" that Langland had read Hildegard (although there is no reason to assume that he could not have, given the strength of her reputation and the wide circulation of her prophetic works), but it does make her writings an important starting point for any study of the tradition of visionary writing before Langland. It will therefore be the business of this thesis to set Piers Plowman against the background of the kind of vision literature, like

Hildegard's, which denounces religious abuse and urges reform in much the same spirit as Langland did himself.

The approach that will be taken to Hildegard's prophetic works in this chapter is in itself rather different from the (very excellent) studies which have been done by a handful of scholars so far.¹⁸ Most of the work which has been done on Hildegard (and the same applies to Joachim of Fiore) has been to establish, naturally enough, the canon of genuine works, possible sources, historical context, ideology and the like. However, both Hildegard and Joachim were better known by a general audience in the form of popularizations of their works.¹⁹ Hildegard was known during the Middle Ages and the Reformation primarily through the collection of extracts from her prophetic works made by Gebeno of Erbach in 1220. The present study of Hildegard will use Gebeno's compilation as a basis for the discussion of her apocalyptic thought, largely because this is the form in which it was available to readers in the later Middle Ages. In doing so I will also be able to focus on some passages which have not as yet received much attention from other scholars. Popularizers like Gebeno were the people who created and sustained reputations and disseminated the ideas and ideologies of the major thinkers whose works were almost invariably too long, too cumbersome or too academic to have gathered a wide audience for themselves. It was Morton Bloomfield who first emphasized the importance of considering accessibility in his own study of apocalyptic ideology in Piers Plowman:

It is only out of Langland's own context, difficult as that may be to discover in detail, that the primary interpretation of the poem must come. It is not enough to leaf through Migne's Patrologia latina or Thomas Aquinas' Summa theologica in order to find parallels to Piers. They are not far to seek. They may be used to illustrate points of doctrine and spirituality, or they may, in the face of the lack of more contemporary material, be used as supporting evidence; but in a historical study such as this book attempts to be, one must also try as far as possible to find out what was easily available to Langland, and to explore the temper of his age (Bloomfield, p. 76).

For the purposes of establishing the apocalyptic tradition which may have influenced Langland's thought, it makes most sense to study prophetic thinkers in the form in which they exerted whatever influence they had.

Gebeno's compilation, the Pentachron, will form the basis of most of the discussion of Hildegard's apocalyptic thought and literary style in this study. Some non-Pentachron passages will be cited in order to contextualize a particular idea or further illuminate a certain attitude. Some of the material used to illustrate Hildegard's self-image as a prophetic writer is also not from the Pentachron because the emphasis here will be placed on illuminating certain attitudes rather than on establishing the basis for possible influence, as in the other sections of the chapter.

We will begin by looking briefly at the textual problems presented by Hildegard's works and at the character of Gebeno's compilation itself. We will then consider the three main areas of Hildegard's writings relevant to Piers Plowman: her apocalypticism and prophecy of clerical reform, her visionary self-image and finally some

literary aspects of her visionary style.

Textual Problems

The textual situation of Hildegard's works is extremely complex and frustrating. For reference to any work other than Scivias, which has recently been published in a new Corpus Christianorum edition by Führkötter and Carlevaris, scholars must rely on the nineteenth-century editions of Migne or Pitra, or have recourse to MSS. Schrader and Führkötter have done a book-length study of the problem of the genuineness of various works in the Hildegard canon, which can help the modern scholar avoid some of the pitfalls of the nineteenth-century editions but is by no means a guide to them. Die Echtheit des Schrifttums der Heiligen Hildegard von Bingen (hereafter Echtheit) deals primarily with the four main MSS of the correspondence: the Vienna Codex 881 (=W), the Zwiefalten Codex or Stuttgart Hs. 253 (=Z),²⁰ the Berlin Hs. Lat. 674 (=B)²¹ and the Riesen Codex or Hs. 2 in the Wiesbaden Landesbibliothek (=R).

The disputed sphere of Hildegard's writings, with respect to the question of their genuineness, is the correspondence, the greatest problem being the letters contained uniquely in the large Riesen Codex (Echtheit, p. 59). In this huge compilation of Hildegard's works, the redactor sought to magnify her reputation somewhat by tinkering with addressees or interpolating and recombining material from different letters.²² Although there are no large-scale, integral textual alterations (Echtheit, p. 160), the MS is certainly not overly reliable.

As Schrader and Führkötter have noted, it is no ordinary Briefkodex, but a plan for a Prälatenspiegel: the letters are ranked strictly according to the clerical hierarchy from popes down to nuns and the MS includes only three non-religious correspondents in all.

The letters printed in PL 197 are edited from R and for this reason most Hildegard scholars prefer to go back to one of the more reliable MSS, where possible, for texts of certain letters. I have used the PL edition of the correspondence in this thesis because, unlike other Hildegard scholars, I am not so much concerned with the genuine or original text of a given letter as I am with the version that was popularized and disseminated in the two hundred years following her death. As noted above, Hildegard's prophetic works were popularized in a compilation called the Pentachron, made in the year 1220 and disseminated in countless MSS all over Europe (Pitra, p. 483, n. 1). Gebeno used the infamous Riesen Codex for the base text of the Pentachron and so this is the form in which Hildegard's prophecies came to be known, replete with interpolations and questionable addressees.²³ The PL edition then, being based on R, is a positive advantage over the genuine text, which was not the text that the later Middle Ages came to know. Of course, the ideal text would be a critical edition of the Pentachron, but this we do not have.²⁴ I have made use of the variants published to some of the letters (those in MS Z) by Haug²⁵ and others listed by Pitra, but have rarely found anything in either to help solve some of the most puzzling readings in the PL edition. I have also had access to a microfilm of a fourteenth-century prophetic anthology,

Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, MS 404, which contains the Pentachron. Not enough work has yet been done on the text of the Pentachron to even establish what the best MSS are, or how many versions it circulated in.²⁶ Pitra printed part of the text (i.e. part of Gebeno's commentary with references to PL and to Pitra's own edition for excerpts from Hildegard's writings) and this is all we have to work with at the moment.

The situation, then, is far from satisfactory, but is at least enough to allow us to make basic observations. Where Hildegard has stated an idea in more than one place, the unreliability of the text does not present too much of a problem; however, where something occurs uniquely we are on shakier ground. Furthermore, even though some passages in her works would repay close literary analysis, the state of the text sometimes makes this a dubious exercise. I have limited most of my literary comments to four brief but reasonably coherent passages in the last section of this chapter for this reason. Finally, a few prophecies of Hildegard's circulated independently in MSS and these seem to have derived from the Pentachron extracts (and therefore ultimately from R). Although I will indicate, where possible, what information there is about the genuineness of a given letter in footnotes, the Riesen Codex, for better or for worse, seems to have exercised the biggest influence on the textual tradition of Hildegard's works in the later Middle Ages, and so we must, in this study, stick with its errors.

Gebeno's Pentachron

Before proceeding with Hildegard's apocalyptic thought, we should briefly consider the compilation which popularized it and made it accessible to the later Middle Ages. Gebeno of Erbach compiled the Pentachron seu Speculum Futurorum Temporum sive de Quinque Temporibus (hereafter Pent.) from various prophetic excerpts which he found in Hildegard's Scivias, LDO and correspondence. He relied most heavily on material from the end of the LDO and from the letters, these being the main sources of her later and most fully developed apocalyptic thought, as Charles Czarski has shown. Had Gebeno not made the compilation, Hildegard's prophetic writings might have been doomed to obscurity;²⁷ as Gebeno himself notes (Pitra, p. 483), few could possess or read her books, not only because of their length, but because of her obscure style:

Most disdain and abhor to read the books of St. Hildegard, for she speaks in an obscure and unusual style, not understanding that this is proof of true prophecy. . . . Moreover, that she speaks in this unusual style is also the proof of the true finger of God, that is of the Holy Spirit; the apostle Peter witnesses to this in his second epistle saying: "Understand this first: that no prophecy is made by private inspiration nor indeed by the will of man at any time, but the holy men of God spoke inspired by the Holy Ghost" (Pitra, pp. 484-85).^a

However, taking this style itself as a sign of her prophetic authenticity, Gebeno accords to Hildegard's works the highest possible authority. Addressing the compilation to Master Raymond Scholasticus and Master Reiner, canon of St. Stephen in Mainz, Gebeno opens by urging upon them a sense of Hildegard's fame:

I believe that it has not escaped your charity how much sanctity and merit the holy virgin Hildegard, foundress and mistress of the monastery of St. Rupert near Bingen, had with God and men. But if perhaps you are ignorant [of this], read the book of her life, read the diverse letters of the great ones of the earth sent to her, namely, from three popes: Eugene, Anastasius and Adrian, from King Conrad, Emperor Frederick, the patriarch of Jerusalem, archbishops, bishops, abbots, priors and then in truth you will be able to say: the Lord has glorified her in the sight of kings (Ecc1. 45:3) (Pitra, p. 483).^b

Later in the Pentachron, Gebeno goes further than this and, in a curious passage in which he compares Hildegard to the eagle of Apocalypse 8:13, he lists her among the "Who's Who" of great religious figures of the 1220s:

The blessed John, in this fourth time saw and heard the voice of an eagle flying through the middle of heaven, saying in a great voice, "Woe, woe, woe to the inhabitants of earth, [because] of the rest of the voices of the three angels, who are yet to sound the trumpet!" (Apoc. 8:15). Are there any among the saints who have flourished in the Church in the fourth age who we can possibly compare in merit to the eagle? . . . that is, who predicted three woes? . . . Though the fourth time be ever so vile and miserable, nevertheless we find some saints who flourished in that time, who may be not unfittingly compared to the eagle: as for instance, in France the holy abbot Bernard of Clairvaux, Master Hugo and Master Richard of St. Victor, in England the holy Thomas, bishop and martyr, and in the same country the venerable abbot of Rievaulx [Ailred], in Calabria, abbot Joachim, founder of the monastery of Flora, who indeed is said to have had the spirit of prophecy, and many others, which to enumerate would be long. But whether some of these predicted three woes, I am not able to know. It is necessary therefore that we understand the holy Hildegard on this point. She indeed flourished in the fourth time and she predicted three future woes in the book called Liber Divinorum Operum and she may be most fittingly compared to the flying eagle (Pitra, pp. 487-88).^c

According to Gebeno, the seven trumpets of Apoc. 8 and 9 represent the seven ages of the church since Christ, and his own time falls in the

fourth of these ages. Taking the "Vae, vae, vae . . ." of the eagle's message literally to mean that three woes would come upon the world he credited Hildegard above all the other holy ones of his time with having foreseen this. Gebeno then rather slyly compares her to St. John through the medium of the eagle, the eagle being the symbol of John in the animal representations of the four evangelists (Pitra, p. 488). As Charles Czarski has suggested, Gebeno went far beyond the editor of the Riesen Codex or the authors of Hildegard's Vita in his glorification of her prophetic powers (Czarski, p. 219).

In fact, so highly revered were her works that there seems to have been some question among the nuns of her abbey at Rupertsberg as to whether Gebeno should be allowed to make extracts from them. He defends his position in a passage of the Pentachron which is actually an open letter to the community at Rupertsberg:

Lately, when I was with you and we had that book in our hands from which I have compiled your holy mother's writings on the five future times, and we talked together about it, one among you voiced the words of St. Hildegard from the end of the Liber Divinorum Operum, namely, "no man would be so bold that he would add something to the words of this writing, or diminish it by taking anything away, lest he be deleted from the Book of Life" (c. 1038C), indirectly, as I thought, as a rebuke to me, as if I were making that transgression (Pitra, pp. 486-87).^d

He goes on to defend himself by saying that the Apocalypse ends with the same warning (22:18), but that it is not to be believed therefore that all the expositors of the Apocalypse have been stricken from the Book of Life, rather "we believe them to have received eternal reward for their labours" (Pitra, p. 487).²⁸ He finishes by quoting a line

from Scivias in which Hildegard promises that the one who "has embraced this prophecy . . . and reproduced it in a clear way" will be blessed (p. 487).²⁹

How much Gebeno added to posterity's understanding of Hildegard's apocalyptic thought is open to question, in spite of his elaborate defense. His greatest contribution was certainly his extracting and collection of the scattered prophetic texts, but he offers little in the way of exegesis. There are, however, some things of unexpected interest to be gleaned from his meagre commentary.

Most unexpected and most valuable from the standpoint of the history and transmission of apocalyptic thought is an extraordinary passage in which Gebeno gives his reasons for making the compilation:

Concerning Antichrist in our times diverse people have reported diverse frivolous things, not inspired by the Spirit of God, but by their own hearts: some affirming his birth to be imminent, others that he is already conceived, still others saying that he has already been born. I confess that I have heard very many occupied by these anxieties. Less than three years ago a certain abbot named John, a religious man and learned enough in the Scriptures, coming from Calabria, stayed in our cloister for two weeks and told me in private that Antichrist was soon to be born. And when I ventured to ask from whom he had learned this, he said, "A solitary of great name in our parts revealed this to a cardinal and proved it by certain signs. . . ." (p. 484).^e

Explaining that soon after this encounter news came to him of an anchoress who confirmed that Antichrist had already been born, Gebeno asserts, "Therefore I have compiled this book to confute and convince such pseudo-prophets" (p. 484).³⁰

Two points emerge from this passage: the first is Gebeno's

evident irritation at these rumours of Antichrist's birth. One wonders if such irritation was not common, even among those who, like Gebeno, had an apocalyptic turn of mind. The second point is that this passage in the Pentachron records the first encounter of Hildegard's apocalyptic thought with Joachim of Fiore's, because there is little doubt that the "solitary of great name in our parts" (i.e. in Calabria) is Joachim himself.³¹ Although it may be taking the matter a little too far to suggest, as Bloomfield and Reeves have said, that "although written in defense of Hildegard, the work, nevertheless, both by direct reference and in manner testifies to Joachite influence,"³² this incident is still important because it records what was probably the first encounter of Joachim's and Hildegard's theories, an encounter which pitted them against each other. The two names, ironically, would later come to travel peacefully together through the popular literature of the Middle Ages as the highest authorities of the new apocalyptic thought.

Two final points should be made regarding Gebeno's comments in the Pentachron. The first and perhaps most obvious is his overwhelming concern with what Hildegard had to say about clerical corruption and the future tribulation of the clergy. More than three-quarters of his extracts deal with this problem in some way. Even more striking is the fact that by far the largest number of extracts are worked into Book II, which deals with the "first time" of Hildegard's "five times" before the end, the "first time" being the current age, the age which Hildegard predicted would end in a massive chastisement of the clergy and consequent spiritual renewal. Gebeno seems to have taken this message

to heart. Although the initial reason he gives for doing the compilation is to "confute the pseudo-prophets" on the topic of the imminence of Antichrist, it soon becomes apparent that Antichrist is the least of his worries.³³ It is obvious that Gebeno had studied Hildegard's prophecies for every clue concerning exactly what would happen to the clergy during and after the chastisement, a task which, as we shall see, is not as easy as it sounds. Hildegard was by no means consistent or overly detailed in her discussion of these points, but as a member of a regular order writing some fifty years after Hildegard, Gebeno obviously felt that time was running out for the clergy and that God's hand would not be turned away. He has picked up the detail, mentioned in just a few of the prophecies, that the clergy will be expelled from their countries and homes (de patria et locis suis expellantur, p. 484) and he further stresses the destruction of many cloisters "because of the persuasions and machinations of the heretics."³⁴

This brings us to the final point about Gebeno's comments. Even though there is very little discussion of or allusion to the actual prophecies in his commentary, he does mention and give prominence to Hildegard's letter to the Colonienses (p. 487), which was to become by far the most popular extract, circulating in MSS independently and as commonly found in British MSS as the Pentachron itself. The extract from this letter which became so popular contains one of Hildegard's most virulent denunciations of ecclesiastical abuse and most violent prophecies of clerical chastisement. In this prophecy she also gave a

role in the chastisement to the heretical groups which were on the rise in Germany in her time. By the later thirteenth and fourteenth centuries the description of the heretics seems to have been read as anti-mendicant literature,³⁵ but at Gebeno's time the concern was still with the heretics, as can be judged by the prominence he gives to both the letter and the topic of the Cathars (p. 487).

It is therefore possible to see even in Gebeno's brief comments the direction he gave to later apocalyptic thought, with his emphasis on Hildegard's predictions of imminent clerical chastisement, his irritation with "apocalypse now" prophets, his assurances that Antichrist and the End were still many ages and events away and his elevation of Hildegard to the highest possible prophetic status. For reasons which should now be evident, Gebeno's little book, with all its flaws, is the most important text we have for the study of the Nachleben of Hildegard's apocalyptic thought and in many ways one of the most influential apocalyptic works of the later Middle Ages.

I. Hildegard's Apocalypticism and Her Prophecy of Clerical Reform

Sub specie aeternitatis: Hildegard's View of Salvation History and Early Prophetic Writings

Before turning to Hildegard's prophecies of clerical reform, which make up most of the extracts in the Pentachron, we will look briefly at the sense of salvation history which informs all her prophetic work. We will also consider the few Pentachron extracts which come from her early works because, even though they are far less

spectacular than her later prophecies, they do show something of the development of her apocalypticism from its seeds in her anxiety about the state of the clergy and the Church.

Hildegard saw everything in terms of the course of salvation history. All aspects of that history fascinated her. She wrote with fervor about the creation of the cosmos, both the macrocosm and its microcosm, Man:³⁶

When God created man, he signified all creation in him, in the same way as the events of a whole year are described on a small space of parchment; and therefore God called man all of creation (Ep. LIII c. 271B; Pent.).^{37/f}

The glory of Adam, his closeness to God, his prophetic vision,³⁸ his perfection were all immensely important subjects in her work, set over against the Fall and God's laborious attempts to rebuild his revelation through Noah, Abraham, Moses, Christ and all the prophets and great leaders of history who had tried to regain something of what Adam had lost.

This roll-call of salvation history occurs so often in Hildegard's prophetic passages that it becomes formulaic.³⁹ The reason for her obsession with it lies in her view of the present age: each age had worked to maintain God's law as it had been received until the present one. By the end of her life, when most of her important apocalyptic work was written, she regarded her own age with so much horror and disgust that for her it was like a second Fall of Adam.⁴⁰ For Hildegard, the only way of grasping the enormity of the present age

was to place it in the context of all that had gone before--and then all that lay ahead. Liebeschütz noted that this typological framework is especially common in her correspondence.⁴¹ When a correspondent asks Hildegard about the sorrows of the present time, she places the whole situation within the context of salvation history sub specie aeternitatis in order to try to provide an answer, an assurance that God has set some limits to the power of evil in their time, as He had done and would do in others.⁴²

Before looking at Hildegard's "history of the future," we should try to establish some sense of how she viewed the ages of history as a whole. While most apocalyptists were very precise on this point, Hildegard is frustratingly vague. She does seem to adhere to a basically Augustinian view of the seven ages of the world,⁴³ which is founded on a correlation between the seven days of creation, the six ages of man and the ages of the world:

<u>Day of Creation</u>	<u>Age of History</u>	<u>Age of Man</u>
1	Adam--Noah	infancy
2	Noah--Abraham	childhood
3	Abraham--David	adolescence
4	David--Babylonian Captivity	youth
5	Babylonian Captivity--Christ	maturity (<u>gravitas</u>)
6	Christ--End of World	old age
7	New Jerusalem	

The Augustinian view of world history placed the prime of man or zenith of human history during the reign of David and saw history as already running down by the time of Christ. From this perspective we can see how revolutionary the ideas of latter-day renewal of the

twelfth-century apocalyptists were, and indeed, how revolutionary some of Langland's predictions were, for example, his notion that there would be the reign of yet another David over a utopian kingdom (III. 440ff.).⁴⁴

The sixth age was the age in which medieval Christians believed themselves to be living. It was to be followed by the end of the world and therefore drew apocalyptic speculation from all quarters. Christ had said that no man would know the day or the hour of His Coming (Matt. 24:36), but for some reason this never prevented eschatological speculation. Vincent of Beauvais gives us a clue to medieval attitudes on this subject. It seems that, as with so many other hard and fast rules, this one too had its loopholes:

In truth how much time to the end of the world and the coming of the judgement remains, it is certain that no mortal man knows; unless perhaps the Lord will reveal it to someone by special grace.⁴⁵

Hildegard herself did not attempt to predict the exact time of the End, but even in her earliest and most conservative prophetic writings (in Scivias), she took a few liberties with the Augustinian division of ages and went so far as to predict periods of spiritual renewal, both before and after the fall of Antichrist.⁴⁶

As a general rule, the radicalism of an apocalyptic writer can be seen as a function of his/her growing disillusionment with the Church. Such is certainly the case with Hildegard. As Charles Czarski has shown, many contemporary historical events and smaller incidents in

Hildegard's own sphere of influence contributed toward her growing disgust with the Church.⁴⁷ Even though Scivias was finished before the deluge of disillusionment came upon her, it does show some of the despair of the later years. Hildegard inexplicably altered the traditional Augustinian sequence of ages based on the seven days of creation and stated that now the sixth age was finished and the world was in the course of the seventh day of rest.⁴⁸ She looks back almost wistfully to the sixth age during which, she says, new miracles were manifested on earth, even as on the sixth day God created man. The sixth age, which had seen the Incarnation, the ministry of Christ and the apostles and the glory of the early Church, was now, for Hildegard, over--the end of an era. For some reason she seems unwilling or unable to associate this age with her own, so she shifts the present time into the seventh age. Her feelings about this time are definitely mixed. Being the seventh "day," it is a time of rest, perhaps even of stagnation, but also a time when the seals of Scripture will be opened (an allusion to the opening of the seventh seal in Apoc. 8) through, she suggests, a prophet figure like herself.⁴⁹ However, the implication is definitely that this opening will occur because the institutional Church has failed.

The references are often ambiguous, but it is clear that the groundwork of dissatisfaction is already there in Scivias. She attacks the doctors of the Church for not having proven themselves as teachers of the gospel and in a long passage earlier in the book she makes an impassioned plea for clergy to stick to the old ordinances and

obligations of the Church's institutions (Sci. II, 5, 27:870-31:1023; Pent.). Her concern in this passage with the fulfilling (perficiens) of clerical duties is characteristic of reform apocalyptic. The key word in discussions of this sort is often some form of perficiere, usually translated (sometimes unhelpfully) by forms of the English verb 'to perfect,' when 'to fulfill' or 'accomplish' would be clearer. When Langland uses forms of the word, as he so often does,⁵⁰ it is to this whole problem he is referring: the problem of fulfillment of the obligations and expectations in one's vocation, literally, living up to the requirements of salvation in that vocation. The relationship between medieval apocalyptic thought and discussions of perfection is not fortuitous, as Morton Bloomfield has shown.⁵¹ Langland and Hildegard, both obsessively concerned with sorting out the requirements of different paths to salvation, share this concern with a wide range of apocalyptic thinkers and visionaries.⁵²

Hildegard's apocalyptic wrath is usually directed at the clergy who are not fulfilling what they have undertaken.⁵³ Because these clerics follow their own "novel" ideas, they desert the paths of their founders and therefore, in Hildegard's view, the only right paths. By deserting these ordinances they create quarrels within their orders; they bear no fruit and, in the words of St. John, they are neither hot nor cold (Apoc. 3:15 & 16; Sci. II, 5, 27:893ff.). She continues this lengthy diatribe against half-hearted clergy who prefer the vagaries of their own will to obedience to their vows by invoking the traditional monastic condemnation of vagatio as a metaphor for their instability of

will.⁵⁴ For Hildegard, disobedience to authority is not only morally wrong; it is unnatural. It is as if, she says, the angels were to raise themselves above the archangels. Hildegard's extreme conservatism shows up here; like many medieval visionaries, including Langland, the boundaries of her vision are decidedly those of her own age in the area of social conservatism.⁵⁵ The force of God's message in this section, neatly summarized in II, 5, 30, is that "the faithful man should be content to suffer in humility, those things which have been instituted to him by his predecessors."⁵⁶

A final sign of Hildegard's early disillusionment occurs in the well known vision in Scivias of the five beasts, followed by a graphic depiction of Ecclesia giving birth to Antichrist. The five beasts who appear at the opening of the vision are, for the most part, original as apocalyptic symbols to Hildegard.⁵⁷ Her treatment of them is at this point, however, far from inspired. The five beasts, a fiery dog, a lion of tawny colour, a pale horse, a black pig and a grey wolf, are all seen as she looks toward the North⁵⁸ at the beginning of her vision (Sci. III, 11; 75ff.; Pent.).⁵⁹ Each beast has a blackish cord in its mouth which stretches to the top of one of five peaks of a hill, signifying the evil of the beast connected with the height of power at the time of its kingdom. In her exegesis of each of the five (III, 11, 2:159ff.), Hildegard makes little distinction between the evils of the different kingdoms. The future is portrayed here just as it had so often been portrayed in pre-twelfth-century eschatology: a world worsening toward the coming of Antichrist. To this extent the

periodization serves little purpose. Only the last period, that of the grey wolf, gives any hint of the detailed treatment Hildegard would give these future times in her later writings.⁶⁰

Much of the allegory of the vision is rather wooden and diagrammatic. Hildegard's exegesis of it is as arbitrary and as seemingly remote from the symbols themselves as much of her biblical exegesis,⁶¹ but the vision does have some interesting features. Perhaps the most significant thing about the vision is the horrible central image of the violent birth of Antichrist from Ecclesiã's battered body, a birth which is then blurred with an image of defecation:⁶²

In her vagina there appeared a monstrous and totally black head. . . . From that head to the knees the image was white and red, bruised as with many a beating. From the knees to the two white transverse zones which crosswise seemed to touch the bottoms of the feet from above, the image appeared to be bloody. Lo, the monstrous head removed itself from its place with so great a crash that the entire image of the woman was shaken in all its members. Something like a great mass of much dung was joined to the head . . . (III, 11:105-120; trans. McGinn, p. 101).

The blurring of images is typical of visionary style and we will return to this characteristic in the last section of this chapter; however, the interesting thing about this particular image is the powerful condemnation of the state of the Church that it entails. One would expect to find this type of image in a sectarian poem or pamphlet of the Reformation rather than in the pious, seemingly orthodox Scivias. Hildegard's anger about clerical abuse was to become more virulent as the years went by, but Scivias elsewhere shows little of the bitterness

of the later works.⁶³ If anything in Scivias is really "prophetic" it is this image which anticipates the revulsion and bitterness of the later prophetic writings, the seeds of what, for Hildegard, would be a lifelong horror of ecclesiastical abuse.

"Visionary Denunciation of Ecclesiastical Abuse":
A Chronicle of the Future

Prophecies of Clerical Chastisement and Reform

Hildegard's vision of Ecclesia giving birth to Antichrist stands as an emblem of her apocalyptic thought in all its later manifestations, but most significantly for her very real sense that the Church would generate its own downfall. One of the most surprising aspects of medieval apocalypticism is the realism that it often displays, a realism based on a profound insight into human nature, politics and institutions.⁶⁴ Thoughtful writers, like Hildegard and Langland, do not turn to apocalyptic ideology in order to place the blame for human problems on huge, supranatural, anonymous forces of Evil. Their apocalyptic writings show evil as coming from within men and their institutions. The apocalyptic crisis you will suffer, they warn their reader, is self-instigated.

In this sense, the apocalyptic option is chosen by writers, not as a form of escapism from present realities, but as a way of projecting the faults of the present onto a screen large enough for people to realize the implications involved.⁶⁵ The choice is dramatic, imaginative, presumptuous, even wild, but the motive is quite practical. Medieval apocalyptic writing acted as a reassurance to the troubled and

a warning to the wayward. In this type of writing the future becomes one large exemplum, revealing unrecognized "secrets" about the results of present behaviour.

All the symbolism and systemization are subservient to this end. Medieval writers chose the future, just as Dickens did in A Christmas Carol, as a way of confronting the present. For this reason, most apocalyptic theorists are not much interested in the actual End of the world--another feature which is at first surprising. All their calculations and schemes are directed at finding out how much time is necessary for salvaging society from the present corruption which engulfs it. This may be, of course, an oversimplification, but it is true to say that beginning in the twelfth century the new apocalypticism sprang up as the handmaiden of religious reform polemics and that the goal of reform is transformation not annihilation.

Medieval apocalyptic writers, then, bring to their subject some amazingly paradoxical features: a sense of realism about current affairs, a desire for activism in meeting the needs of the events and problems to come, and an optimism about the future and pessimism about the present that characterizes reforming zeal. With these characteristics in mind, it is easier to understand some of the complexities of Hildegard's, and ultimately Langland's, apocalyptic thought.

These characteristics are nowhere more evident in the works of both writers than they are in the prophecies of clerical chastisement, disendowment and reform that they envisioned. As we shall see, these prophecies spring out of a very realistic, not to say cynical, sense of

of what it would require to reform the clergy. In both writers there is a strong sense of the mood fostered by twelfth-century apocalyptic thought which no longer advocated waiting passively for the degradation of the End, crippled by the knowledge of Antichrist's coming (Rauh, p. 511). Rather, reformers pressed for activism in the response of the Church Militant to the coming crisis, a mood often captured in discussions of the metaphorical "arming" of the faithful, as we see in Piers Plowman XXI.

Langland's second disendowment prophecy reflects this mounting militant spirit, moving from warning by exemplum:

For couetyse of that croes clerkes of holi churche
Sholle ouerturne as þe Templers dede, þe tyme approacheth
faste . . .

to prophetic promise:

Riht so, ȝe clerkes, ȝoure coueytise, ar come auht longe,
Shal dampne dos ecclesie and depose ȝow for ȝoure pruyde,
Deposit potentes de sede,

to a conditional threat:

if knyghthoed and kynde wit and þe commune and consience
Togederes louyen lelelyche, leueth hit, bisshopes,
The lordschipe of londes lese ȝe shal for euer . . .

and finally, after citing the ominous revelation of the Constantine legend:

An angel men herde an hye at Rome crye:
"Dos ecclesie this day hath ydronke venym . . . ,

ending in the militant cry:

Taketh here londe, ze lordes, and lat hem lyue by dymes
 Yf the kynges coueyte in Cristes pees to lyuene.
 For if possession be poysen and imparfit hem make,
 It were charite to deschargen hem for holy churche sake
 And purge hem of ze olde poysen ar more perel falle
 (XVII.208-212).

In its militant spirit the prophecy raises the same issues in much the same way as we will see in Hildegard's prophecies: concern with the "imperfection" of the clergy (line 229) and with the precise state of "perfection" to which the clergy should be reformed (line 219). Added to these concerns is the larger question of who should carry out disendowment (216, 227-28) and the general feeling that the corruption of the clergy accounts for the "perels" of the present time.

In Langland's first disendowment prophecy (V.168-179) the promised coming of a king who will reform the possessioners has a messianic quality to it, but the threat of a hostile nobility was no fairytale:⁶⁶

Ac þer shal come a kyng and confesse 3ow alle
 And bete 3ow, as þe bible telleth, for brekyng of 3oure reule
 And amende 3owe monkes, bothe moniales and chanons,
 And potte 3owe to 3oure penaunce, Ad pristinum statum ire,
 And barones and here barnes blame 3ow and repreue.

This prophecy, with its allegorical and visionary features appears to be more other-worldly than the one in Passus XVII, but the tensions it registers are no less real. The promised redistribution of the wealth of the clergy (among the nobility and, even more radical, among the

friars) is a notion which captures the imagination, hanging threateningly in that uneasy limbo between fantasy and grim reality:

For þe abbot of Engelonde and the abbesse his nese
Shal haue a knok vppon here crounes and incurable þe wound
(176-7)

It is no less ominous for its allegorical coating.

Hildegard's visionary denunciation of ecclesiastical abuse is also no less violent or ruthless for its visionary style. In what follows we will look closely at her attitudes toward the following issues of clerical reform as they are voiced in the Pentachron:

(1) disendowment and the problem of justifying such an extreme act,

(2) the "pseudoprophets" or "false brethern" and their role in the

downfall of the Church and clergy, (3) the search for the vita apostolica and the question of what kind of religious life the clergy should be reformed to.

We will begin with a loosely structured series of prophetic passages which occur in the long Pentachron extract from the LDO in which Hildegard sets out her fully developed apocalyptic programme (PL cols. 1006-1038, excepting a few short passages). The focus of this programme is really on Hildegard's own age and the clerical reform she saw coming at the end of it; like most apocalyptic writers, Hildegard lavishes most detail on the immediate future. Beginning with the passage from LDO III.10 which forms the largest section of Gebeno's Book I, Hildegard sets the tone for this emphasis on the state of spirituality by highlighting the Pentecost. This was a time of ascending virtue, a tempus virile, which lasted until the present time of feminine

debility⁶⁷ (c. 1006C). Now, however, the Church is desolate, "like a widow who is without the caring comfort of her husband" (c. 1006D).

At this point Hildegard launches into a bitter condemnation of the clergy, calling them perversi mercenarii (c. 1006D), who devour the goods of the people like wolves. The charge that the clergy had become mercenaries is often echoed in prophetic contexts because of its popularity with reform writers. Langland, for example, uses this common motif in his ominous lines:

Ac sith charite hath be chapman and chief to shryue lordes
 Mony ferlyes han falle in a fewe zeres,
 And but holi chirche and charite choppe adoun suche shryuars
 The moste meschief on molde mounteth vp fast (Pro1. 62-65).

And Gower, here citing Joachim as the authority for a prophecy on simony, writes:

For Joachim thilke Abbot tolde
 How suche daies scholden falle,
 That comunliche in places alle
 The Chapmen of such mercerie
 With fraude and with supplantarie
 So manye scholden beie and selle,
 That he ne may for schame telle.⁶⁸

The wolf imagery in the LDO passage had been used profusely by recent and contemporary reformers from the time of the Investiture Controversy onwards to designate simoniacs (Rauh, p. 492), but Hildegard is also lashing out here at what we might broadly call the ruling hierarchy. She sees the avaricious clergy as being supported by secular tyrants and rulers.⁶⁹ As Rauh has shown, unjust leadership, be it

secular or religious, is the kernel notion of Hildegard's eschatology (p. 523). He points out that her concepts of 'justitia' and 'praevaricatio' have been lifted from the ethical-political sphere for use in the spiritual context. Indeed, for Hildegard there is often little distinction; every act or event ultimately had its spiritual implications.

Justitia now becomes a key allegorical figure in the vision. In this time of feminine debility, Hildegard writes, all ecclesiastical institutions, whether they be secular or spiritual, will descend into decay and stand differently than the apostles and the rest of the antique fathers constituted them, "through which all the primitive Church shone like the sun" (c. 1012D). Justitia once crowned the Church, having been constituted by God and kindled by the Holy Spirit, in the same way as a house through its inhabitants is made sublime (c. 1013A), but no longer. In a typically apocalyptic image, Hildegard now sees Justitia herself crying out over the mountains and her voice resounding⁷⁰ to heaven (c. 1013B). In a passage reminiscent of the laments of Boethius' Lady Philosophy, Justitia laments that her crown is clouded by the schemes of erring minds and that each man now follows his own will, not allowing himself to be ruled by a master (1013C). Her robe is covered with the filth of the sins of the clergy, who were joined to Christ "per imitationem circumcisionis" and the legal constitutions of the priesthood, but who now rise up as fornicators (1013D). The clergy are blind, deaf and mute, and neither teach nor judge according to justice.⁷¹ These sinners, she says, are like the

Samaritans, who wish to live under two laws, serving God when they wish to, serving their own will when it pleases them (c. 1014D). They want the name without the labour involved in earning it (c. 1014A). She cries out for judges who will vindicate her (c. 1014), but before the passage ends Hildegard pauses to insert an assurance to the faithful clergy, for whom she always had a great deal of concern: God sees the man who fights valiantly against the devil during these wicked times and will not give him over into darkness (c. 1014D-15A).

The message of assurance is not simply a conventional flourish. Justitia's call for vindication is shortly answered in what must be one of the most spectacular clerical reform prophecies ever written. The disendowment and chastisement of the clergy which Hildegard envisions is forcible, immediate, ruthless and total. Just as the Old Testament prophets did, Hildegard promises that "a remnant will be saved" after the Day of Reckoning, but this hardly lessens the terror of the day itself. As this vision proceeds, those who suffer at the hands of the perverters of righteousness (praevaricatores rectitudinis) are allowed to take up the complaint of Justitia and to carry out her vindication:

Indeed, after Justice has directed her complaint, as said above, to the Supernal Judge, He, receiving the words of her complaint, by His just judgement He will permit her vengeance over the betrayers of righteousness [by allowing] them to be robbed and [allowing] the tyranny of their enemies to rage upon them as they say to each other, "How long will we suffer and tolerate these rapacious wolves, who ought to be physicians and are not? But because they have the power of speaking, binding and unbinding, therefore they capture us as the most ferocious beasts. . . . They are indeed ravishers of the Church and they

devour through avarice whatsoever they are able, and by their offices we are made poor and destitute, and they contaminate themselves and us. On account of this let us judge and distinguish those who rise up as greater seducers than physicians. Let us do this that we may not be destroyed, because if they persevere thus, subjecting the whole region to themselves, they will destroy it. Now moreover let us say to them that they should fulfill their office according to the proper religious usage, in the way that the antique fathers constituted these things, or retire from us and leave that which they have." These and things similar to these will be aroused in them by divine judgement; sharply they will propound [such things] and attacking them [i.e. the clergy] they will say, "We do not wish these to reign over us, with estates, lands and other secular things, over which we were constituted as princes. And in what way is it fitting that the tonsured, with their robes and houses, should have more soldiers and arms than we? And how is it fitting that a clerk be a soldier and a soldier a clerk? Whence let us take away from them that which they have not rightly but unjustly" (c. 1017D-c. 1018C).⁹

The enemies of the perverters of righteousness (i.e. the clergy) are the nobility (those who suffer at their hands)--or more broadly speaking, the laity. In what is for the conservative abbess of a Benedictine monastery clearly a "world-upside-down" topos, the laity will become the judges and punishers of the clergy. That she would go to such lengths in her prophecy is a measure of the desperation she must have felt regarding the need for clerical reform. Töpfer has pointed out that Hildegard did not have the "self-conscious optimism" of a member of the newer twelfth-century orders and, as such, had to foresee reform as happening through political brute force.⁷² Töpfer also noted that this expectation is realistic in terms of the contemporary tensions between ecclesiastical and secular powers, brought on by the papal schism of 1159, which set Church against State (p. 35). What we are dealing with here, as in Langland's disendowment-reform prophecies,

is perhaps better described by the term 'expectation' (Töpfer: 'Erwartungen') than prophecy. This type of apocalyptic expectation is not the product of the wish-fulfillment dreams of cloud-cuckoo land: it reflects very real tensions, expectations and political positions.⁷³

The apocalyptic framework, however, does function to arouse fears and establish a sense of urgency which purely political discussions cannot: this is the difference in prophetic terms between saying "This could happen" and "This will happen (unless you repent)." Provided that the prophet could gain the confidence of his/her audience (and even in the Middle Ages this was not always the case by any means), the apocalyptic polemic certainly had the potential to be more effective than the political version. This perhaps accounts for the longstanding relationship between reform polemics and apocalyptic thought.

Two further points should be made with regard to this passage. Hildegard has the laity complain that the clergy use their "power of speaking, binding and unbinding" as a hold over them. She obviously feels that the laity must resent the special privileges of the clergy (i.e. their education and spiritual powers). We know from other passages that Hildegard had a great distrust of the doctores of the church, preferring knowledge acquired by divine inspiration to that acquired by books, and frequently castigating them for their restrictive attitude toward spreading knowledge and their failure to preach the gospel effectively.⁷⁴ The power of binding and unbinding, more specifically, was obviously being used, in Hildegard's view, simply as a

means of oppression or coercion (e.g. the use of excommunication to make someone comply with demands). In any case, Hildegard seems to have felt no hesitation about speaking out even on such a sensitive point as this.

One difficulty with this passage--and this is the type of difficulty we frequently meet in Piers Plowman--is the problem of determining to what extent the views placed in the mouths of certain characters are also the views of Hildegard. Although, as we shall see, Hildegard did not feel that the plunder of clerical wealth by secular powers was necessarily just, she did feel that it was justified to a certain extent and she saw it as a divinely permitted purgation of the Church through tribulation (c. 1017D). In the justifications given by the secular powers for their action and the reaction of the clergy as portrayed by Hildegard much depends on tone and in the perception of this we are hampered by a number of things, not the least of which is the state of the text itself. However, some very clear lines do emerge and on the basis of these it would seem that Hildegard's sympathy lies more with the secular powers at this point. She places the following justifications in their mouths:

"Diligently, we might consider what with great discretion for the souls of the discharged has been offered and that we may relinquish to them, because this is not robbery. The Omnipotent Father indeed rightly divides all things . . . and by this measure there may be just division among the sons of men, namely, that the spiritual men have the things which are appropriate for them, and seculars have that which is fitting to them, so that neither part of them may oppress the other through robbery. God did not teach that the tunic and the cloak be given to one son, and the other remain nude, but ordained that

to the one the cloak and to the other the tunic be bestowed. The cloak should be conceded to the seculars because of the breadth of their concerns and ever increasing number of their children, the tunic to the spiritual people, lest they be deficient in food or clothing and lest they possess more than is necessary. Therefore we judge and elect that all things which were said before rightly be divided and whosoever among the spiritual people is discovered to have the cloak with the tunic, the cloak shall be taken away and given to the needy, in order that they be not consumed through dearth." And so at last through this judicial sentence all these things according to their will they will try to fulfill (c. 1018D-1019A).^h

These arguments could certainly be read as simply hypocritical rationalizations for greed, but there is too much here which falls in line with orthodox reform thinking and, more specifically, with Hildegard's own teachings (unequivocally stated elsewhere) to place much emphasis on the hypocritical reading. There is nothing that Hildegard wished more fervently in all her writings than that, as the secular powers say, the clergy should fulfill their duties "in the same way as the antique fathers constituted them" (1018B). As Rauh has pointed out, Hildegard always measures the Church in relation to "the timeless ideal of the apostolic Urkirche" (p. 495). Hildegard stresses in all her visions of the reformed Church that the clergy should, as the secular powers say here, have enough food and clothing that they are not deficient, but that they should possess no more than is necessary. Hildegard maintains this view even in letters where she is relating the words of the "Living Light," who is, obviously, her highest authority.

Further proof that her sympathy lies with the secular powers can be found in her treatment of the clergy's reaction:

But when at last they will have realized that neither by the strength of binding nor unbinding, nor by assertion of their oblation, nor by noise of arms nor flattery, nor threats are they able to resist these, terrified by divine judgement they will put aside the inane pride and faith which they always had in themselves and . . . they will be humiliated in the presence of those⁷⁵ and howling [ululando] they will cry and say, "Because we have cast out Omnipotent God from the performance of our duties, therefore this confusion has been brought upon us, namely, that we should be oppressed and humiliated by those which we ought to oppress and humiliate" (c. 1018D-1019A).¹

This passage is rather remarkable for its political pragmatism.

Hildegard was obviously under no illusions about the different ploys that the clergy would use, if threatened, to maintain their position. The power of binding and unbinding comes up first on the list, which is arranged in order of ever-decreasing clerical decorum. The characterization is by no means flattering: Hildegard refers to the "inane pride and faith which they had always had in themselves" and from there on the image of the clergy degenerates into the almost comic characterization which Hildegard usually reserves for her dramatization of demons.⁷⁶ The use of words like howling (ululando) and the absurdly proud assertion that they are now oppressed and humiliated by those whom "to oppress and humiliate we ought" are markers of this type of treatment. It is clear that whatever guilt she might attach to the attack of the nobility, Hildegard had little sympathy for their victims.

Hildegard finishes this prophecy with the general moral, drawn from the Old Testament experience, that those who disobey God will have a foreign people led against them and can expect to be reigned over by their enemies (c. 1019B). The effect of this purgation will be that

both the secular and the spiritual people will have a just measure of this world's goods according to their needs (c. 1019C). The clergy especially will be regulated so that they have those things which are necessary "in order that they do not sustain scandal by means of secular things" (c. 1019C). Hildegard's conservatism, never content for very long with an upheaval of the social hierarchy, comes out at the end of the prophecy, where she promises that

they will be disposed so that each order may stand in its rectitude and indeed be freed to the honour of their liberty and servants to the duty of their subjected servitude may return (c. 1019C-D).^{77j}

Although the disendowment prophecy we have just discussed from the LDO gained enough popularity to be circulated in MSS independently of its context in the LDO or Pentachron, by far the most popular single Hildegard prophecy in circulation in the later Middle Ages was an extract from her letter to the clergy of Cologne (PL 197. Ep. XLVIII, cols. 243-253). The extract, beginning in most MSS "O filia Sion, corona honoris capitio filiorum tuorum inclinabitur . . . (or "De vivente luce iterum audivi vocem dicentem: O filia Sion, etc.) coincides with Gebeno's extract from this letter for the Pentachron. It is interesting to note that when the extract was originally taken up for independent circulation, it must have been taken from the Pentachron itself or at least from a MS in the R tradition (perhaps R itself) because it includes one of the R interpolations into this letter.⁷⁸

The letter is one of two letters on the Cathar heretics known to

have been written by Hildegard.⁷⁹ Extracts from both letters appear in the Pentachron because for Hildegard the heretics had an apocalyptic significance and her discussions on the subject therefore turn into prophetic visions. Hildegard had visited Cologne and preached vigorously against the Cathars and the laxness of the clergy there (Briefwechsel, p. 168). For Hildegard, as for many reformers, the two issues were not unrelated: as the clergy became more corrupt, a confused and frustrated laity turned elsewhere for spiritual leadership. The heretical groups, whose clergy were often models of the ascetic life, gathered a large number of lay adherents and in some areas like Cologne were growing stronger as the orthodox church grew weaker.

Hildegard prophesies in this letter that the heretics will play a part in encouraging the princes to rise up against the corrupt clergy and take away their property, persecuting and chastizing them, until, as a result of their many tribulations, the clergy will arise renewed and purified. The prophecy is of interest to us not only because of its disendowment-reform theme, but because Hildegard's description of the heretics formed the basis of her later reputation as an anti-mendicant prophetess. As the pseudo-apostles of Hildegard's "apocalyptic grammar," the heretics can also be seen to play a role in her writings similar to the role that the friars play in Piers Plowman. For both writers these wayward spiritual guides are types of the pseudo-prophets of II Timothy 3, but as such signal not the end of the world, but the end of an era for the corrupt clergy. Symptoms of a disease that originated with the negligence of the clergy themselves, these

pseudo-prophets will play an important role, for both writers, in the eventual downfall of the Church. The treatment of the pseudo-prophets by Langland and Hildegard is, obviously, not the same in every detail, but their symbolic function is exactly similar. Both writers chose to fill this symbolic slot in apocalyptic typology with the bête noire of their particular age.⁸⁰

In the long section from the beginning of the letter to the Pentachron extract, Hildegard sustains a bitter attack on the corruption of the clergy of Cologne. At the start of the Pentachron section (c. 249B) Hildegard castigates the clergy further for neglecting their duties and promises their chastisement:

And from the living light again I heard a voice saying: O daughter of Sion, the crown of honour of the head of your sons will decay, and the cloak of the pride of their riches will be diminished . . . they also have a voice, and do not cry out, indeed work has been given to them and they do not work. They wish to have glory without merit and merit without work. Who wishes to have glory with God should cut off his own will. . . . But because you do not do this you will be reckoned as the servants of servants and they will be your judges and your liberty will decline from you, just as blessing from Canaan. This scourging [flagella] will come before; another, however, and afterwards another and a worse one will come (c. 249A-C).^k

Hildegard then pictures the devil gluttoned with the sins of the clergy, announcing that he is ready to toy with this unfaithful lot. The devil then addresses the heretics:

"But, O you my disciples and servants, are much more disciplined than those in the presence of the people and because you are so, rise up over them and take all their riches and honour from them and, despoiling them utterly, suffocate them." These things the devil says in himself, which indeed in many by the judgement of

God will be fulfilled. But I Who Am say to those who hear me: "In that time when this will be done through a certain erring people worse than the erring people who exist now, destruction will fall upon you by the accusations of sham accusers, who will persecute you everywhere and who will not hide your works. Rather, they will uncover them and concerning you say, 'They are scorpions in their behaviour and serpents in their works.' They will condemn you as if in the zeal of God: 'The way of the wicked shall perish' (Psalm 1:6). Indeed your ways in your iniquity they will deride and scorn to extermination" (c. 249C-D).^l

Hildegard then breaks into a description of the errans populus of the future, which later readers took as a prophecy of the coming of the friars.⁸¹ The characteristics will be immediately familiar to students of medieval antimendicant literature:

But those people who will do this, sent and seduced by the devil, will come with pale faces and compose themselves as if in all holiness and will join themselves with the greater secular princes, to whom they will say concerning you, "Why do you hold with these and why do you suffer with them; they pollute the whole earth with their stained iniquity. They are indeed intoxicated and wanton, and unless you cast them out from you, the whole Church will be destroyed." The people who will say this concerning you will put on vile robes which are of strange (aliena) colours and will go along tonsured in the correct way, and in all their behaviours they will also not love avarice, not have money and in their secrecy will imitate so much abstinence, that scarcely any will be reprehensible. The devil indeed is with those men. . . and he says, "People say in joking that I may show myself to them [in the form of] unclean animals or flies. But now, in the wings of the wind shining with thunder I wish to fly, in all ways so to pervade them, that they may complete all my will" (c. 250A-B).^m

There is often a comic element in Hildegard's treatment of the devil; here he speaks allegorically of upgrading his popular image in this his latest attempt to deceive by imitating ascetic behaviour. Hildegard plays on the idea long associated with Antichrist that he

desires to fly.⁸² She goes on to explain how the devil will give the heretics the power to be chaste and resorts once again to the comic mode she reserves for "low life" figures with the heretics' boast that "other men who wished to be chaste before us roasted themselves like dry fish. No pollution of the flesh or desire dares to touch us, because we are holy and filled with the Holy Spirit" (c. 250C). Hildegard then admits that the secular people, in their longing for spiritual leadership, will rejoice in the heretics "because they will be seen by them as just" (c. 250D). There is contemporary evidence to support this notion.⁸³ The visionary Elizabeth of Schönau, with whom Hildegard corresponded on the subject of the heretics, records her questioning of the angel who appeared to her in her visions concerning these puzzling people. Elizabeth first asks, "Lord, what and of what kind is their faith?" and is told that "their faith is contemptible, their works are worse." Elizabeth then replies "Yet they have the appearance of just men and are praised as men of good works," to which the angel says, "Truly they put on an appearance of just and innocent living, through which they attract and convert many, and yet inwardly they are full of the worst madness."⁸⁴ While Elizabeth does not appear to have been as well educated or as well travelled as Hildegard, and we may perhaps make a few allowances here for her naïveté, her questions probably reflect the confusion of many people at the time.

Hildegard proceeds in her letter to the clergy of Cologne by describing the persecution of the wise ones who will remain faithful to God: the princes of the rich will take council and decide that these

people should be punished "with clubs and sticks, whence all the earth shall tremble" (250D-251A). Citing the prophecies of Elijah (3 Kings 19:18), however, Hildegard promises that a remnant will be saved. She then prophesies the seduction of women by the heretics, another motif made famous in later anti-mendicant literature:

Those seducers however, in the beginning of the seduction of their errors will say to women, "It is not allowed for you to be with us, but because you have no just teachers, obey us. And whatsoever we say to you or teach you, do, and you will be saved." And in this way women will be gathered to them and led into their error, whence, in the pride of their swelled souls they will say, "We have overcome all." Afterwards, nevertheless, with the same women in secret wantonness they will mingle. And so the iniquity of their sect will be revealed. But I Who Am say, "Therefore the iniquity which will purge iniquity will be brought upon you" (c. 251A-B).^{85/n}

Hildegard ends the prophecy by explaining, as she always tried to do, why such tribulations are necessary and how they fit into the divine plan for Church history:

Indeed it is necessary that the depraved works of men be purged through tribulation and contrition. But nevertheless many calamities will be accumulated to those who have inflicted misery on others in their impiety. But those unfaithful men, seduced by the devil, will be the rod [*scopa*] of your castigation . . . But those deceivers are not the ones who will come before the last day, when the devil will fly on high . . . rather, they are a forerunning branch of them. But nevertheless, as soon as they will have been found out in the perversities of Baal⁸⁶ and in other depraved works, princes and other great ones will attack these and just as rabid wolves they will be killed, wheresoever they are found. Then the dawn of justice [will arise] and your last [time] will be better than your previous [time] and from all the past [events] you will be frightened and will shine as pure gold and so for a long time you will remain. Indeed the first dawn of justice in the spiritual people will then arise, although at first they will begin with small numbers, nor will they wish to have much wealth

or many riches, which kill souls . . . and so afterwards they will live in humility, nor will they desire to rebel against God with depraved works . . . but in the greatest strength of righteousness they will persist (c. 25C-252A).⁰

Hildegard's prophecies were no doubt so popular because of her constant assertions that these coming times of trouble would not be the End times. This, coupled with her exuberant optimism for a "new dawn of justice," probably contributed to the popularity of her works.⁸⁷

There are three more letters in the Pentachron in which Hildegard prophesies the chastisement of the Church in fairly specific terms. Although the basic message is the same in all three, she often chooses to emphasize one factor or implication more in a certain letter than in others. This may be partly in response to what she thought appropriate to the particular correspondent,⁸⁸ or it may simply reflect the turn that her meditations on the subject (i.e. her "vision") took. Of the three letters (to Werner of Kircheim, to the clergy of Trier and to Conrad III), the one to Werner of Kircheim offers the most "concrete" detail on Hildegard's vision of the uprising of the nobility against the clergy. The other two are much more vague, but the letter to Conrad is of interest to us for another reason; being Hildegard's first prophetic letter (Briefwechsel, p. 81) something of the development of her apocalyptic thought can be illustrated by laying it alongside a later prophetic letter, like the one to Werner. The letter to Conrad (Ep. XXVI c. 185-6)⁸⁹ must have been written before 1152⁹⁰ and Hildegard herself tells us that the vision recorded in the letter to Werner occurred in 1170 (c. 269B). The Pentachron section

of the letter to Conrad runs as follows:

In a certain way you turn yourself from God; and the times in which you live are inconstant, like an effeminate person and indeed they incline themselves in perverse injustice, which strives to destroy the justice of the Lord's vineyard. Afterwards, in truth, worse times will come in which the true Israelites will be scourged, and in which the catholic throne will be shaken by error: and therefore the last times will be blasphemous, like a cadaver in death. Whence the vineyard of the Lord smokes with pain. And after this stronger times than before will arise, in which the justice of God will be somewhat aroused and in which the injustices of the spiritual people will be censored in order to be cast out. Nevertheless people will not as yet be provoked to hear the sharp call of contrition. But afterwards other times will press forward in which the riches of the Church will be dispersed, so that indeed the spiritual people will be lacerated as if by wolves and from their homes and countries expelled. Whence, the foremost⁹¹ of these will pass over into solitude, leading a poor life in much contrition of heart and so serving God humbly. The first time will be truly foul in God's justice, the following one will be disgusting. The next time will arouse itself somewhat toward justice, but will afterwards arise like a bear tearing apart all riches gained wrongfully. Following this, signs of masculine virility will show, so that all the ointment-handlers⁹² will run back to the first dawn of justice, with fear, modesty and wisdom. Princes will be unanimously in concord with one another, just like a warrior (*vir praeliator*) raising a banner against the time of error, which God will destroy according as he renews and to that which pleases him. And he who renews all things says to you O King, "Restrain yourself from your will and correct yourself, so that you may come to that time purified rather than embarrassed by your deeds (c. 185C-186A).⁵

What is so striking about the letter to Conrad is Hildegard's heavy reliance on the "dark" prophetic style: the constant use of vague and foreboding allusion to ill-defined times to come, accompanied by an awkward shifting of tenses which tends to blur time distinctions. There is also a heavy reliance on imagery which is used once in a disconnected way and dropped. These characteristics of prophetic writing, which

occur to some extent in Langland's prophetic passages, will be looked at in more detail in the final section of this chapter. What we should notice about Hildegard's style here is above all the sense that she is relying more on a passionate indignation than on a clear vision of the message she would like to convey. This perhaps gives us some insight into how even the most elaborate apocalyptic theory (and Hildegard's later theory is very elaborate, as we shall see) arises.

By contrast, her letter to Werner of Kircheim is pointed and definitive in its attack. While still making use of the rhetoric of apocalyptic writing and a visionary (Boethian) format, there is a directness in this letter which is missing from the one to Conrad. This may be explained in part by the audience she is writing for--here a group of priests gets the frontal attack in the second-person-plural, which is less suitable for the letter to Conrad. It is interesting to note that even when writing to a king Hildegard is more concerned with the problems of the clergy than with the state of things generally.⁹³

The letter to Werner of Kircheim is the only other source in the Pentachron selection in which Hildegard treats the character and motivation of the uprising nobility in any detail.⁹⁴ The letter was written in response to a letter from Werner and the society of priests of which he was Deacon (Briefwechsel, 174). Hildegard had spoken to this group on her last preaching tour (1170-71) and obviously made an impression upon them. The letter, the whole of which is included in the Pentachron, once again opens with a Boethian vision of a beautiful woman

whose clothing and face are stained with dirt. This time the woman is Ecclesia rather than Justitia and her lament focuses on the secular clergy, specifically the sacerdotes who have thus tarnished her appearance with their sins.⁹⁵ Hildegard is careful to give the date and circumstance of the vision (something she does not always do by any means), opening with the words, "Lying a long while ill in bed, in the year of the Lord's Incarnation 1170, watching, I saw in body and in spirit a most beautiful image having a womanly form. . . ."96 This may reflect her sense of the controversiality of the letter, which is politically more sensitive than most of her treatments of this theme. In this vision she sees the kings of the earth participating with princes in the takeover of clerical wealth, but with a difference: the kings will do so out of greed (inhiabunt) while the princes will "wish to show themselves obedient to God" (et in hoc facto obsequium Deo se exhibuisse volunt). Note that even the wording of the latter leaves the possibility of hypocrisy open. Once again, Hildegard does not uphold the takeover as just, but as justified, or at least provoked:

Princes and foolish (temarius) people [will rise up] over you, O priests, who thus far neglect me, they will attack and cast you out and put you to flight, and your riches they will take from you, because you have not attended to your priestly duties. And concerning you they will say, "These adulterers and ravishers and evildoers, let us cast them out of the Church." And in this deed they will wish to show themselves obedient to God, because they will say that the Church is polluted through you. Whence Scripture says: "Why have the nations raged and the people devised vain things? The kings of the earth stood up, and the princes met together (Psalm 2:1,2)." Indeed, many peoples will begin to rage over you by permission of God in His judgement and many people concerning you will meditate vain things, because your sacerdotal office and your consecration they will reckon as

nothing. The kings of the earth will assist these in your destruction and they will covet earthly things and the princes who dominate you will convene in one counsel and will expell you from their borders, because you put to flight the Innocent Lamb through the worst works (c. 270D-271A).^P

The participation of the kings, which was not a factor in the LDO version of the uprising, seems to have been suggested by the verse from Psalm 2.⁹⁷ Her view of kings and emperors is generally negative and this is probably what is being reflected here.⁹⁸

At this point in the vision the voice from heaven gives Hildegard a mission to tell forth what she has seen:

And I heard a voice from heaven saying, "By this image the state of the Church is demonstrated. Therefore you who see and hear these plangent words, proffer them to the priests who were constituted and ordained to the ruling and teaching of the people of God, to whom, with the apostles, it was said, 'Go into the whole world and preach the gospel to all creatures (Marc. 16:15)'" And I, poor womanly form, saw an extended sword hanging in the air, of which one edge was turned toward heaven, the other toward earth. And that sword was extended over the spiritual people . . . and I saw that sword cut off certain places of the spiritual people in the same way as Jerusalem was cut off after the passion of Christ. But nevertheless I saw that God will watch over for Himself many God-fearing, pure and simple priests in that adversity, just as He responded to Elijah when He said that He would leave to Himself seven thousand men in Israel whose knees have not been bowed before Baal (III Reg.19:18). Now may the inextinguishable fire of the Holy Spirit fill you, so that you may be converted to the better part (c. 271A-D).⁹

Both the sword motif and the assurance that "a remnant will be saved" stem from the passage in III Kings which she so often uses as a prefiguration of clerical chastisement.

The letter to the clergy of Trier (Ep. XLIX c. 253-258; Pent.

c. 256C-257C)⁹⁹ does not shed new light on Hildegard's vision of the chastisement and reform, except that it gives a slightly clearer view of the actual destruction:

O daughter of Sion, the crown of your head will decay and the cloak of the pride of your riches will be diminished and, constrained to small numbers, you will be expelled from region to region. Through powerful men many cities and cloisters must be dispersed. And princes will say, "Let us take away from them the iniquity which through them subverts the whole world" (c. 256C).^r

This vision of the destruction of cloisters raises the question of what kind of lifestyle Hildegard imagined for the clergy after the reform, a key question in reform literature and consequently in reform apocalyptic. The question is important here because of Hildegard's influence on the prophecy and ideology of religious reform. The life of apostolic poverty or the question of how clergy should live up to their vow of poverty was to become strongly associated with prophecy in the decades to follow, partly because of the Joachite tendencies of the radical wing of the Franciscan order--partly, but not entirely. Scholars have all too often neglected other sources of this ideology in apocalyptic writings, sources like Hildegard, whose popular reputation matches that of Joachim's in many respects.

The problem is an important one for Langland scholars as well. The question certainly exercised Langland, both in his prophetic passages and elsewhere.¹⁰⁰ These links between poverty, prophecy and clerical reform first led Morton Bloomfield to connect Langland's apocalypticism with Franciscan Joachism, as we have seen.¹⁰¹ As

he tells us, Bloomfield realized in the course of his research that the question of apostolic poverty in the Middle Ages was much bigger than the one group who sensationalized it (i.e. the Franciscans). In the later Middle Ages almost every order struggled with it in the form of the apologist or polemical literature which it produced (thus Bloomfield's emphasis on "monastic philosophy"). By some sleight of hand cunning apologists could prove that any order's rule did in fact espouse and uphold the ideals of apostolic poverty. This whole question of the fulfillment of these ideals is, once again, what English writers refer to as "perfection" (translating the Latin perfectio); in terms of clerical reform, the question of how the clergy should live up to the ideals of their vows, especially the vow of poverty.

There can be no doubt that some of Langland's obsessive interest in apostolic poverty and apostolic lifestyle derives from apocalyptic sources, but the question is how much? More work needs to be done on both the apocalyptic and the non-apocalyptic literature of clerical reform before this question can be finally settled, but for this reason apocalyptic writers like Hildegard who dealt with this problem should be seen as part of the tradition from which Langland was drawing.

Hildegard comes closer in the letter to Conrad than in any we have examined so far to envisioning a life of apostolic poverty for the post-reform clergy. She speaks of a pauperam vitam (c. 185D) here which gives a slightly different emphasis to the question. To the clergy of Cologne she wrote: "nor will they wish to have much wealth, which kills the soul" (c. 251) and in the LDO she says "and those things which are

necessary to them will be disposed in this way, that they may not be deficient in either food or clothing, that they may not sustain scandal by means of secular things" (c. 1019C). Hildegard, as we have seen, was well aware that the apostolic poverty adopted by the heretic clergy was one of the factors which made them so spiritually attractive and there is some evidence in her writings that she envisioned just such a change for the clergy after the reform. However, the extent of her vision of apostolic poverty is difficult to be clear about: would she have wished it to go to the extremity of encompassing the kind of wandering, homeless and possessionless poverty which St. Francis later adopted for his order? Or would the traditions of Benedictine monasticism and her own social class have militated against this?

Before going any further we should look briefly at what the different twelfth-century concepts of the apostolica vita involved. These concepts were essentially derived from two not entirely compatible biblical texts, Acts 4:32 and Luke 10:1-12 (Chenu, p. 214). Monastic apologists of Hildegard's time saw themselves as living a true vita apostolica, but, as Chenu has shown, in order to do this they had to emphasize certain apostolic tenets, like holding all possessions in common (Acts 4:32), while virtually ignoring others, like itinerant preaching, poverty and active ministry (Luke 10:1-12; see Chenu, pp. 204-13). Traditional monasticism was currently under stress from the newer and more "evangelical" orders of the twelfth-century. As the canonical movement established itself, laying more stress on the Luke model of the apostolic life (Chenu, p. 213ff.), and as the Cistercians

took monasticism itself back to a very austere interpretation of the Benedictine rule, stressing poverty, anti-intellectualism and self-denial (Southern, p. 252), the older orders became self-conscious about their apparent wealth and worldliness. Also, eremiticism, yet another form of clerical lifestyle which stressed different "apostolic" qualities, was experiencing a revival which penetrated new orders like the Carthusians and the Vallombrosians (Chenu, p. 216). In spite of their many differences, what each group had in common was a desire to go back to "antiquity," back to the simplicity and austerity of the early Church (Southern, p. 251).

In the midst of all this ferment, it is no wonder that reform-minded individuals like Hildegard from the long-established, comfortable Benedictine orders, began to anticipate sweeping changes which would return the complacent clergy to a state of apostolic rigour. Although not all reformers chose to express this sense--or fear--of change in prophecy, it is easy to see how such notions functioned to heighten apocalyptic expectations. The idea that the great monastic orders would at some point give way to newer institutions is perhaps the most spectacular result of this ferment. Rupert of Deutz, Hildegard's contemporary and himself a reformer, apocalyptic writer and monastic apologist wrote to an acquaintance:

I recall certain remarks you made and I don't think I like their implications. You told me that the Babylonian kingdom was established, then reached its height, and then collapsed. And that it was supplanted by the Persian kingdom which in its turn collapsed. Then came the Macedonian kingdom. And so it goes, by a similar pattern, you added, with the grandeur of the

monastic orders, especially Cluny (about which I have never heard a friendly word fall from your lips). They will collapse in their turn, since new, still modest institutions will rise up to take over. What an altogether wrong and insulting comparison between the monasteries of the kingdom of God and those monstrous kingdoms destined to the fires of Hell (cited in Chenu, p. 215).

As we shall see, Hildegard herself allows for a complete change in the established clerical institutions in what, despite Rupert, could well be compared to the fall and rise of dynasties.

Charles Czarski has pointed out quite rightly that the radical nature of Hildegard's post-reform vision has not been fully appreciated by scholars (Czarski, p. 199), but exactly what that radical vision is can be difficult to pin down from her writings. Unlike Joachim of Fiore, Hildegard did not focus her vision of the new age of spirituality quite clearly enough to get down to administrative details.¹⁰²

How, exactly, were the post-reform clergy to live the pauperam vitam? The one motif which gives us some clue to Hildegard's post-reform ideology is her constant reference in these prophetic passages to the eremitical life. In the letter to Conrad she writes that after the chastisement "the foremost of these [the clergy] will pass over into solitude" (c. 185D). In her letter to the clergy of Trier she says of the post-reform period:

Then the justice and judgement of God will arise and there will be discipline and fear of God in the people and the spiritual people will become just and good men, who nevertheless will remain in small numbers on account of humility and in the first dawn they will return as (sicut) hermits and this they will do out of fear of past times (c. 256D).^t

The same motif recurs in a letter to the monks of her former convent of St. Disibodi¹⁰³ and in a letter to the Cistercians of Eberbach, which we shall look at shortly. In these passages the eremitical life is often somehow associated with a return to the "first dawn." At first sight the connection seems an odd one, but when the place of the eremitical tradition in monastic history and ideology is taken into account, it is no longer so.

The earliest Christian hermits were considered to be the founders of the monastic life.¹⁰⁴ The place of figures such as St. Anthony and St. Paul in monastic history was literally that of "the first dawn." Writers of apocalyptic reform literature were constantly struggling with the question of the precise state to which the clergy should be reformed. Aware that some of the ecclesiastical traditions had allowed for abuse, they were faced with the question of whether it would be better to change some aspects of the traditional institutions or whether the best possible reform would not simply be a return to the beginning. Given the conservatism of the Middle Ages with respect to tradition and authority, the balance usually seems to lean in the latter direction, although there were exceptions.¹⁰⁵ The theme of so much reform prophecy in the later Middle Ages can be summed up in the scrap of Latin "ad pristinum statum ire," which Langland uses in his own prophecy of clerical reform in Passus V. As we have seen, Hildegard uses this concept in many places; the ideal of the early Church is always before her eyes. But on the subject of the reform of the regular clergy, she seems to look more specifically to the dawn of monasticism.

The eremetical life, with all its privations, is arguably, I believe, the form of "apostolic poverty" she foresaw, at least for the regular clergy after the reform. The idea may not be original, but in real terms it was certainly radical. To contemplate the destruction of the massive holdings of the monasteries and a return to the life of the Desert Fathers would certainly have taken some vitality of imagination, but this is a quality that Hildegard never seems to lack.

There has been some controversy among scholars on this subject of what Hildegard imagined would happen after the reform. Charles Czarski has maintained that Hildegard had in mind a lifestyle of wandering, begging, apostolic poverty.¹⁰⁶ There is some support for this notion that the clergy will be forced to wander in Hildegard's letter to the clergy of Trier where she prophesies that they will be constrained to small numbers¹⁰⁷ and "expelled from region to region" (c. 256C). She adds that many cities and cloisters will be destroyed, which also indicates a vision of homelessness for the clergy. She does not say whether this would be a permanent condition, but given that hermits (as opposed to anchorites) were often wanderers in the Middle Ages,¹⁰⁸ the notion of transience would not necessarily contradict a return to monastic eremiticism in her view of the post-reform lifestyle. Other scholars, like Töpfer, have suggested that she intended a return to early Benedictine monasticism.¹⁰⁹ Especially in Scivias, Hildegard makes a plea for clergy to return to the ordinances instituted by the "antique fathers" and later, in the LDO, she laments the falling away of clergy from these. But the later

prophetic passages (in the LDO and the letters) do not all support the notion of a return to traditional Benedictine monasticism, although some passages do seem to suggest a return to a purified monasticism (e.g. LDO 1019C), consisting of a chastened clergy, severely reduced in numbers and often living an eremetical life.

What this eremetical lifestyle had in common with the life of "apostolic poverty" popularized by both orthodox and heretical evangelical groups was that in both lifestyles, one is dependent on Providence for the necessities of life. Langland makes this point in several places, for example in Passus XVII:

'There is no such,' y sayde, 'þat som tyme ne borweth
 Or beggeth and biddeth, be he ryche or pore,
 And zut oþer-while wroeth withouten eny synne.'
 'Ho is wroeth and wolde be awreke, holy writ preueth,' quod he,
 'A passeth cheef charite, yf holy churche be trewe.
Caritas omnia suffert.
 Holy writ witnesseth þer were suche eremytes,
 Solitarie by hemsulue in here selles lyuede
 Withoute borwyngge or beggyngge bote of god one,
 Excepte þat Egide a hynde oþer-while
 To his selle selde cam and soffred by mylked.
 Elles foules fedde hem in frythes þer they wonede,
 Bothe Antony and Arseny and oþer fol monye.
 Paul primus heremita hadde yparrokede humsulue
 That no man myhte se hym for moes and for leues;
 Foules hym fedde, yf frere Austynes be trewe,
 For he ordeyned þat ordre or elles þey gabben (lines 1-16).

In this passage Langland clearly associates apostolic poverty with the monastic traditions of the early desert fathers, in one of his many struggles with the question of what constitutes a "perfect" lifestyle. Like Hildegard, Langland obviously considered the eremitical life to be an important, though not the only, manifestation of the apostolica

vita.

This is the type of "monastic philosophy" which Bloomfield saw at the heart of Langland's apocalyptic thought. This type of literature had in many cases become associated with apocalyptic thought through the common bond of an interest in church renewal, as we see in writers like Joachim of Fiore, for example. By Langland's time there was a substantial literature encompassing all three of these themes and this same grouping of ideologies is certainly reflected in Piers Plowman.¹¹⁰

These themes converge in a very interesting way in the final prophecy of clerical reform which we will look at from the Pentachron, in Hildegard's letter to the Cistercians of Eberbach (PL LI c. 259-268; Pent. c. 263D-264A, 264C-266A).¹¹¹ The letter is really a treatise on the ideals of the clerical life, a summary of Hildegard's "monastic philosophy."¹¹² In the section extracted for the Pentachron, Hildegard condemns those of the regular and secular clergy "who are called converted but are not"¹¹³ because they love contrariness more than rectitude (c. 263D). Because they do so, they are similar to the pseudo-prophets (c. 264A). Hildegard's description of these pseudo-prophets, this time within the Church instead of outside it, is once again strongly reminiscent of the antimendicant literature of later years: these men are mild in speech but imprudent and perverse in example (265A); that which they have begun in humility and poverty they do not see through to the end (265B); they are proud like the Pharisees and they take on riches, multiplying their worldly cares (265C); they wish to have heaven and earth at the same time (265D); like

asses, these men will eventually fall under the burden of a double load (266A).

The interesting thing about this passage is that it lacks the scathing bitterness of some of her other attacks.¹¹⁴ Her concern in this letter is really largely with "perfection" of the clerical life (to this end she writes several columns of rather idealistic theory of the clerical life before she gets to this stage [c. 260-263]) and with those who are "lukewarm" but not necessarily cold. She addresses the order:

Now you masters, the aforementioned men, namely the conversos in your order, rebuke and correct, because many of them work neither in the day nor in the night, since they serve neither God nor the world to perfection [ad perfectum]. Arouse them from their ignorance, just as a good herbalist [pigmentarius] purges his garden of useless herbs (c. 264C).^u

In the context of this idealistic discussion of clerical life Hildegard also gives for the first time a sense of the significance of the institutional reform which will occur after the tribulations of the clergy:

You therefore who fear God, hear the Spirit of the Lord saying to you: "Take away from you this aforesaid evil and purge yourselves before the days of those tribulations when the enemies of God and of us will put you to flight and you will turn around¹¹⁵ to the right place of humility and poverty, that you may not henceforth persist in so much latitude as thus far you have. In the same way indeed God has changed the Old Law from its usage in the spiritual life, when he purged each single prior institution toward greater utility (c. 264A).^v
[emphasis mine]

What Hildegard suggests here, all too briefly, is that seen from the

perspective of church history this reform is nothing less than the coming of a new age, which she daringly compares to the change that occurred between the Old and New Testaments. This reform is obviously no hiccough in church history, but a full-scale altering of institutions to meet the needs of a new age. In apocalyptic literature, the concept is closest to that of Joachim of Fiore's vision of the Third Status or "age," equal in significance to the two previous ones of the Old and New Testaments. The radicality of this notion, when set beside the old Augustinian view of Salvation History as declining after the Incarnation never to rise again, hardly needs to be laboured. Indeed, Hildegard comes close here to predicting the very thing which so incensed her contemporary Rupert of Deutz in the remarks of an acquaintance: the implication that the monastic orders would rise and fall like ancient dynasties. Whether or not we are justified in reading her remarks this way, there can be little doubt that Hildegard was willing to cast out anything in order that "each single institution be purged toward greater utility." Langland, writing two hundred years later, exhibits much the same spirit in his prophecy of wholesale and "incurable" institutional changes in the organization of the monastic and fraternal orders.

Let us pause now to reflect on Langland's disendowment prophecies in the light of Hildegard's visions on the same theme. Langland's prophecies (V. 168-179 and XVII. 204-232) also suggest that the king and the nobility will carry out the takeover. The argument given in the Passus XVII prophecy is very close to the argument that Hildegard puts in the mouths of the nobility in the LDO.¹¹⁶

Langland reinforces his argument by preceding it with the stories of the fall of the Templars and the legend of Constantine, but he obviously does not feel ambivalent about the essential rightness of committing such an act.¹¹⁷ Hildegard, on the other hand, while believing that the purgation would be good for the clergy, feels she must disapprove to some extent of the act itself, as we saw in her letter to Werner of Kircheim. This difference probably reflects Langland's and Hildegard's personal positions. Hildegard herself was one of the possessioners, while Langland, as far as we know, was likely a member of the unbeneficed secular clergy. Another difference between the two lies in their attitude toward kingship. While Langland, in the prophecy in Passus V looks for a reformer-king, Hildegard distrusts kingship as an institution and places her faith in the nobility. This difference no doubt stems from the writers' experiences and the fact that they lived in very different historical situations.

However, despite their differences in historical and personal situation, Langland's and Hildegard's attitudes toward reform of the clergy are remarkably similar; both believed that the reform had to be forcible, that it had to be carried out by secular powers, and that the clergy had no business in the management of properties, armies¹¹⁸ or other secular affairs. Both felt that the children of the nobility were being robbed of their inheritance.¹¹⁹ Both stress that poverty is the only temporal state conducive to spiritual life and that clerical "perfection" requires that clerics follow a certain, narrowly-defined path of physical lifestyle. Both insist that a redistribution

of the wealth amassed by the clergy is the only way to social justice. Both focus on a populus errans (for Hildegard, the heretics and for Langland, the friars) as the pseudo-prophets who signal that the rot has set into the shaky clerical structure, but both recognize that these pseudo-prophets are only the symptoms and not the causes of the Church's problems: the Church itself has begotten the antichrist which plagues it. Both are prepared for sweeping institutional changes in the present clerical orders to bring them closer to the ideals of the true apostolic life and wholly reform the Church.

Langland struggles with these themes and concerns throughout Piers Plowman and not just in the two disendowment prophecies, while Hildegard is similarly obsessed with the question of clerical goals, standards and ideals. For Hildegard it is clear that the state of the clergy and the vitality of spiritual commitment remain nothing less than the measuring stick of the quality of life in all ages, past and still to come, and one suspects that these concerns are at the centre of Langland's poem for the same reason.

The Apocalyptic Point of View: A Few Attitudes

Before we go on to consider Hildegard's apocalyptic programme, we should pause to look at some of the attitudes which characterize the world view of writers of this type of literature. These attitudes are often shared by Langland, but they are made more explicit in the overtly prophetic writings of the German visionary than in the subtle poetry of Piers Plowman.

In LDO III.X.7, Hildegard gives a clue to a problem which has vexed modern scholars for years: why do some writers use the "signs of the End" to describe their own age when they are not predicting that the End is near? Describing the decline which began in her own time in terms of its effect on nature Hildegard remarks that everything will become so strange that:

. . . with certain other forerunning signs, which the Son of God before the coming Day of Judgement foretold to his enquiring disciples and which will have been [seen] many times on earth, many would say that the Day of Judgement was imminent (c. 1005D; not in Pent.).^w

Many would say that it was imminent, but by implication, Hildegard would not. The signs are, for her, a warning, a warning of the kind of cycle which has occurred many times on earth, but is not occurring now for the last time. There is no doubt, however, that in Hildegard's view, the downfall of her own time was apocalyptically significant. In the Prooemium Vitae St. Disibodi (Pitra, p.p. 352-57; Pent., pp. 355-57, hereafter PVSD)¹²⁰ which is a kind of dedicatory letter to the monks of her former monastery at Disibodenberg, she reassures them that the time of the End is not yet come but describes her own time as the worst of all, by implication, worse than the time of Antichrist:

The time of pressure and destruction, namely of that weight by which the grapes will be pressed in the wine press, is not as yet come. But nevertheless now is the worst time, therefore look to former times and consider how honourable they were, defend yourselves from your enemies and may God assist you in order that he does not reject you (Pitra, pp. 356-57).^x

Earlier in this letter Hildegard has characterized the present age as the tempus muliebre, a time of debilitatingly feminine weakness in which spiritual strength is at its lowest point since the Fall. This time, in fact, is similar to the first fall:

The aforementioned stars [i.e. the patriarchs of the Old Testament] in their significations, ran their course with great honour and reverence of their conversation, until the time of a certain tyrant,¹²¹ who began to embrace the counsel of the old serpent. And then came the effeminate time, very much like the first fall, so that all justice is according to the infirmity of feminine debility (p. 355).^Y

This sense of the writer's own time being worse than any other and therefore especially historically significant, is very common among apocalyptic thinkers.

Like most apocalyptic writers, including Langland, Hildegard could speak in glowing terms of past glories, uninhibited by any sense of historical realism.¹²² In a section of the PVSD which is not in the Pentachron, but which gives some insight into this phenomenon so common to apocalyptic thinkers, Hildegard contrasts present spirituality with past times, saying:

Then the people were just as the most precious stones . . . because they prepared themselves for the better part, and they ascended from virtue to virtue and they enlarged themselves in charity, and because through the active life in hospitality and almsgiving to all they would look toward Mt. Sion, whence they were called the daughters of Sion in all things (p. 355).^Z

Another notion common to apocalyptic writers is that God punishes human wickedness by tribulation and that tribulation purges

evil. Hildegard gives an interesting slant to this idea in her letter to Pope Anastasius.¹²³ After castigating him severely for his laxity, she ends the letter with a kind of disclaimer clause:

But where the will does not know of the crimes . . . there the man does not fall wholly under profound judgement. But the guilt of this ignorance will be cleansed through tribulation (Ep. II c. 153A; not in Pent.).^{aa}

Ignorance in itself, presumably on the part of those who bear a position of responsibility, is a kind of lesser fault and will be purged by tribulation. This notion that human wickedness brings on disaster informs Langland's view of tribulation as well. Speaking of fraudulent vendors, for example, he writes:

Many sondey sorwes in citees falleth ofte,
Bothe thorw fuyr and thorw flood, al thorw fals peple
That bygyleth good men and greueth hem wrongly . . .
(III. 90ff.)

Closely linked to this is the idea that God uses the natural elements to punish men (see for example Piers Plowman V. 114-23). In a vision from the LDO God warns the corrupt clergy that they will suffer just as the rebellious ones of the Old Testament did:

But through creation, which I made for the use of men, many times they are judged, so that through fire and water they may be suffocated and through wind and air the fruit of the earth may be taken from them. [The same is true of] the sun and the moon, which may appear wrongly and not finish their courses as divinely constituted, but exceed them. Whence indeed sometimes the earth is moved, just as a vehicle which is unloosed by some shock (c. 1007B; Pent.).^{bb}

Not only does God use the elements to chastize evildoers, but the state of the elements themselves, for Hildegard, reflects the moral state of the world.¹²⁴ She describes, for example, the peace and harmony of the winds at the time of the Pentecost "because the passion of Christ made all things temperate" (Ep. XLIX c. 256B; not in Pent.). Conversely, the vile behaviour of the clergy at the present time affects the winds and weather for the worse (c. 254C; not in Pent.). Hildegard is even able to give a "scientific" explanation to support this observation.¹²⁵

In a recent article, Dronke quotes a passage from one of Hildegard's scientific works, Causa et Curae, which sums up this attitude very well:

The elements are subject to man and according as they are touched by the actions of men, they at times exercise their functions. For when men clash in battles, terrorism, hate and envy and sins of discord, the elements overturn themselves, moving into a discordant mode of heat or cold, or of great effusions and inundations ("Problemata," p. 110).

Langland introduces this notion in the midst of a discussion of clerical corruption in the present day. Nothing, he says, functions as well as it used to:

For what thorw werre and wrake and wikkede hefdes,
 May no preyere pees make in no place, hit semeth.
 Lewed men han no byleue and lettred men erren;
 Noþer see ne sond ne þe seed zeldeth
 As they ywoned were--in wham is defaute? (XVII.85-89).

Such attitudes are not peculiar to apocalyptic writers by any

means but they do form part of the apocalyptic world view. Generally speaking this is basically a deterministic view.¹²⁶ The concern of this type of writer is to fit every event into the larger plan of history. So keen is this perception of the whole of history that no apocalyptic writer works without one--whether it be sketched out explicitly, as with Hildegard, or alluded to implicitly, as with Langland, the plan becomes the key to analysis of present ills and to hope for the future. We will now turn to Hildegard's detailed and very explicitly laid out apocalyptic programme as she describes it in the final visions of the LDO and then try to sketch in, as far as is possible, the programme implicit in Langland's prophetic passages.

Chronicling the Future: The Apocalyptic Programme

Hildegard went back to her vision of the five beasts in Scivias, which signified five vaguely bad times before the End, and refurbished it for the LDO, replete with extensive "historical" detail and a characterization of each age. Her own time, the time of the fiery dog, she characterized as the days of "torpid injustice" (1017A). This is why, she explains, the dog was described in Scivias as being "fiery, but not burning." Hildegard explains that justice gradually grew among men from the time of the Flood, strengthened by the prophets and later by the apostles and doctors of the Church, until the present time of feminine debility (1017B). The decay of the present time, she writes, began with the coming of a "secular judge,"

a greater fornicator than cultivator of the fear of God before whose beginning [things] began to deteriorate gradually, just as from the flood until the prophets they began to ascend. From the days of this same judge the root of evil and obliviousness of justice and honesty had their birth, which spread and propagated themselves as if in feminine debility until [the time of] another leader, bearer of a spiritual name, who had the prudence and malice of the serpent, and who died by the judgement of God (c. 1017B-C).^{CC}

In other places Hildegard refers to this secular judge as a tyrant. It is almost certain that she is referring to the Emperor Henry IV, who opposed Gregory VII's attempts to make certain ecclesiastical reforms¹²⁷ and who was regarded as an Antichrist figure by contemporary reformers.¹²⁸ Hildegard had little reason to be favourably disposed toward the Imperial throne of her own time; the papal schism created by the Emperor Frederick in 1159 further soured her view of this institution. The spiritual leader she speaks of is somewhat less easy to pin down historically, but Charles Czarski has made a convincing argument that the culprit is Pope Anastasius.¹²⁹ Anastasius was notorious for his corruption and, as the surviving letter from Hildegard to Anastasius is genuine, there can be little doubt about her feelings on this subject. In this letter (Ep. II c. 151-3; Pent. c. 152B-D) she castigates him severely for the laxness of the curia and of all clergy, for whom he is ultimately responsible. In the LDO, Hildegard says that during the days of these leaders the superfluity of iniquity began to grow hot and foul and eject spume (Pent. 1017C), "but the days of sorrow are not as yet come."

For Hildegard, the leaders of the two great institutions of her

day, the Empire and the Papacy, offered no hope for solutions to the Church's problems. Scholars have suggested that this is why the conquering hero/Last Emperor figure, so much a part of apocalyptic thought in other medieval writers, is absent from her prophecies.¹³⁰ On the whole, this is true of her writings, but she does briefly and enigmatically mention one leader figure who seems to be Hildegard's own answer to the question of ideal leadership.

In her letter to the clergy of Trier, after her description of the spiritual renewal of the post-reform period, she writes:

And then strong men will arise and prophesy and will collect together all their understanding of the Scriptures and all discourses inspired by the Holy Spirit, like a necklace of precious stones. Through these and through other wise ones many seculars will become good and will live in holiness. Indeed this holy zeal will not soon dry up, but will last a long time, because all this will happen on account of the erring time, when there will have been many martyrs to the faith. Indeed, a warrior [vir praeliator] will do this, who will consider in the beginning and end of his works how far he may resist the erring people. He will constitute prophets at first as the head, wisemen as the eyes, learned ones as the mouth . . . that is, by the understanding of these he will explain prophecy. Then the princes will hang up their lutes and tambourines in hardship and sadness, in the same way as the sons of Israel did when they were captive (Psal. 136: 1ff). After this, all spiritual things will be strengthened without defect . . . because the warrior will replenish the wholesomeness of the air and will bring forth the viridity of virtue (c. 257A-B)^{hh}

This passage is by no means clear, but Hildegard seems to be imagining a warrior (vir praeliator)¹³¹ who will lead the battle against the erring people and who will make prophets and wisemen his counsellors. The growth of understanding of prophecy and the renewed goodness of the faithful will cause the princes to hang up their harps in sadness,

presumably because they will no longer be able to oppress or make war in the present situation of renewed spirituality.

The passage is an odd one, but there is a hint here that even Hildegard could not do without a "conquering hero" figure to complete her apocalyptic programme. The conquering hero is definitely conceived in terms original to Hildegard, in whose view a wise leader would give prophecy and wisdom first place.¹³²

Hildegard's larger vision of the course of later ages reflects these notions of leadership. Her apocalyptic programme is original, but by no means atypical. In Piers Plowman Langland gives us fragments of an apocalyptic programme too, but his use of the material is frustratingly vague. The best we can do at this point is to acquire a general sense of how this type of pattern functioned in writers like Hildegard and note the places in which Langland too seems to be making use of such apocalyptic patterns.

The approaching age, to be ushered in by the reform of the Church, Hildegard called the tempus virile, which she associated in the LDO with the lion from the Scivias vision of the five beasts. During this time, Hildegard says, not only will the Church be reformed by violence, but there will be a parallel reform of society through the tribulation of war:

Just as man by his strength vanquishes his feminine weakness and as the lion overcomes the rest of the beasts, so the cruelty of certain men will consume the quiet of the others in these days by divine judgement, because God will concede the cruelty of pain for the purgation of iniquity by his enemies, and so He has

always done from the beginning of the world
(c. 1019D1020A).^{ss}

The time of peace which follows this will be characterized by
spiritual strength and religious conversion:

. . . and because peace before the Day of Judgement to these
Christians may be given, just as indeed peace came before the
first advent of the Son of God, nevertheless, for fear of the
judgement to come, they will not be able to rejoice fully, but
will seek all justice in the catholic faith from the Omnipotent
God, rejoicing with the Jews who formerly denied Christ. That
peace which preceded the advent of Christ, in these days will be
fully perfected because strong men will arise then in great
prophecy so that all the buds of justice in the sons and
daughters of men will flourish (c. 1020D).^{dd}

Once again, the paralleling of a time so close to the End with the
time of Christ's advent was radical in itself. Hildegard gives a lavish
account of the millenarian state of things to come: in line with man's
changed behaviour, the air will become sweeter, the earth more abundant
and all the elements will work together in harmony (c. 1022A). Drawing
on Isaiah's millenarian prophecy, as Langland does in a similar passage,
Hildegard says that arms will be forbidden and only iron tools for
cultivation will be retained; any man transgressing this law will be
killed with his own weapon (c. 1022B). The Holy Spirit will pour out
the dew of His grace in prophecy, wisdom and holiness. Hildegard here
anticipates the Joachite status of the Holy Spirit, especially in her
emphasis (a constantly recurring feature of her prophecies) on a new
prophetic spirituality. All religious orders will stand in
righteousness at this time, having cast off pride and superfluity of

riches (c. 1022C). So great will be the sanctity of men that angels will keep company with them, seeing the possibility of "new and holy conversations" in their presence (c. 1022D). However, a latent Augustinian world view is reflected in Hildegard's comment that there will be much rejoicing, but not full rejoicing, because of awareness of the future judgement; men will be similar to pilgrims, she says, who strive toward their country, lacking full joy while still travelling (c. 1022D).

Hildegard's attitude toward the Jews, pagans and heretics--all important actors in medieval apocalyptic dramas--is rather cynical to say the least. At this point, she says, the Jews and heretics will be saying to themselves, "Our time is next . . ." and her description of the pagans is hardly more flattering: they will join the Christians because they see how much wealth and honour they have (c. 1023A)! The transition into the next age comes with a wavering of justice and religion. Hildegard seems to be describing the kind of fluctuation which Langland portrays in the last passus of Piers Plowman as pestilence, famine and other disasters make for temporary periods of adherence to spiritual values, which then decline again as the memory of adversity fades.¹³³ The time of the pale horse will be a time of fluctuation between good and evil. But, Hildegard warns, a time of extreme sorrow will fall upon men when they forget to attribute their good fortune to God's grace:

Indeed in other days of pain and calamity some comfort and amendment sometimes they would have, but these days will be

filled with increasing pain and iniquity, sorrow upon sorrow, iniquity upon iniquity will be accumulated to them and all the [preceding] hours of homicide and injustice will be counted as nothing (c. 1023D-1024A).^{ee}

The pagans will choose this time to invade the Christians because they are without arms or strength (c. 1024A). Many cities and regions will be destroyed and the Church discipline will be polluted once again. When the pagans (incredulae et horribiles gentes) attempt to invade, however, the Christian people, in penitence for their sins, will be protected by a miraculous dust cloud (c. 1025D). Hildegard here imagines one of those mass scenes of penitence and praise which characterize apocalyptic writing and which Langland portrays so movingly at certain points in Piers Plowman. The miracle brings about the conversion of the pagans and a renewal of faith among Christians.

With these last events, the pendulum begins to swing in a different direction and Hildegard describes a return to spirituality once again. In complete contradiction to older apocalyptic thought, the deterioration of the Roman Empire is seen by Hildegard as a positive event. Older eschatology had established the notion that the Roman Empire was the unnamed agent who was described as holding back the tide of Antichrist in II Thessalonians 2:7.¹³⁴ For Hildegard and the German reformers of her period, the Roman Empire was anything but a positive force. She writes that the deterioration of the Empire will be due in part to immorality and in part to the fact that the imperium wished to be honoured by the people, but did not seek the prosperity of the people. She prophesies that kings and princes, who before were

subject to the Empire, will detach themselves from it and that the people will constitute their own regional leaders, saying that the latitude of the Empire was more of a burden than an honour (c. 1026C). Once the Empire has been dispersed, it will never be able to be rebuilt.

After the division of the Empire, the Papacy will also fall.¹³⁵ This will happen

because neither the princes nor the rest of the people as much in the spiritual as in the secular orders will discover any religion in the apostolic name, [and] the dignity of that name will then diminish. They will prefer [to appoint] other teachers and archbishops under other titles in diverse regions, so that the Apostolic See will at that time be weakened from the honour of its pristine dignity with the result that only Rome and a few regions adjacent to it would be left under its authority. This will happen partly from the incursions of war and partly through a common counsel and consensus of the spiritual and secular people (c. 1026D-1027A).^{ff}

In passages like this it is possible to see why Hildegard was so eagerly taken up by Protestant polemicists of the Reformation. In Hildegard's view, at least by this point in her life, the authority of the Church lay with the Church body, as represented here by a council, and not with the Papacy.¹³⁶

With the disappearance of these two great medieval institutions, spiritual strength will reach unprecedented heights: the abundance of the earth, harmony of the elements and prophetic revelations once again mark this kind of change (c. 1027C). Princes and ecclesiastics will reprove each other and cooperate in maintaining good government and morality (c. 1027B). Most interesting is the comment that men will return to the "antique" disciplines:

But justice meanwhile will stand in its righteousness, so that men of those days may turn themselves to the antique customs and disciplines in honesty and hold to these and observe them just as the antique [fathers] did (c. 1027B).⁹⁹

Hildegard clearly sees the Church returning to its pristine discipline here, in all its austerity. We know from her predictions for the earlier clerical reform just how "antique" she hoped it would become: she probably imagined nothing less than the "dawn" of monasticism and the "dawn" of the Church itself.

At the same time, however, many heresies and much iniquity will develop as Antichrist approaches, this being the time of the pig in the Scivias vision (c. 1027D). As if to justify these extreme changes in her apocalyptic programme, Hildegard explains here that "the world at no time remains in one state."

From here until the end of the LDO she returns to a nearly standard eschatology of Antichrist's life, reign and defeat. This is the time of the wolf for Hildegard, because the sheep of Christ will be devoured in the persecutions of Antichrist and the great number of martyrs of this time will "bring to perfection" the number of the Church's martyrs since the primitive Church (c. 1034A-B). After the defeat of Antichrist Hildegard ends the prophecy, and the LDO itself, with the mass conversion and renewal of the Church, giving her version of salvation history a truly comedic form. The song of praise she uses comes from Apocalypse 12:

Now is come salvation and strength and the kingdom of our God and the power of his Christ; because the accuser of our brethren

is cast forth, who accused them before our God day and night. And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of the testimony; and they loved not their lives unto death (Apoc. 12:10-11).¹³⁷

Summarizing Hildegard's complete programme into the form of a schedule we get a detailed system of good and bad times to come--and much to come--before Antichrist:

<u>Symbol</u>	<u>Description of Time Period</u>
fiery hound	1. Time of spiritual weakness or "feminine debility" (<u>tempus muliebre</u>) --clergy are " <u>perversi mercenarii</u> ," simoniacs and heretics are forerunners of Antichrist --both secular and spiritual leaders are corrupt (emperor and pope) --Church has fallen away from pristine apostolic discipline
lion	2. Time of chastisement and disendowment of Church and purgation through tribulation for all --" <u>tempus utile</u> " or " <u>tempus virile</u> " --renewal of spiritual strength revealed through prophecy, abundance and peace--utopian vision --conversion of pagans
pale horse	3. Time of sorrows --Church polluted --persecution of Christians by heathens --Christians saved by miracle and conversion of heathens --Papacy and Empire dispersed --Church returns to pristine discipline --renewal of spiritual strength again revealed through prophecy, abundance and peace
black pig	4. Reign of heretics and forerunners of Antichrist --many Christians desert orthodoxy --moral decay and spiritual decline --signs of the End
grey wolf	5. Antichrist's "ministry" --persecution of faithful and traditional eschatological events

Death of Antichrist

Renewal of Church and spirituality

Last Judgement

The pendulum effect of such an apocalyptic programme is immediately evident: the swings between periods of good and evil show that the optimism of millenarian dreams soon gives way to pessimism, and vice versa. What Rauh (p. 510) has referred to as the cycle of Build-up, Decay and Restitution (paralleled by the biblical cycle of Creation, the Fall and Salvation) is at work here all the time. It is informed by the apocalyptic writer's sense of the weakness of human nature and human institutions, and the strongly ingrained medieval notion that no perfection is possible on earth where man is only a pilgrim on the one hand and, simultaneously, by an indomitable sense of hope, on the other.

However, perhaps the most important thing to note about such a programme is the important place which it gives to Church renewal. Hildegard's scheme differs from both the "old" eschatology and the Augustinian scheme of the Seven Ages in that she sees spiritual renewal occurring before the End of the World, both before and after Antichrist. Although, like Marjorie Reeves, I do not see in Hildegard's scheme the full-blown historical optimism of Joachim of Fiore (Reeves, "Originality," p. 286), it must be conceded that Hildegard's vision of the future is a radical departure from the old view of the close of history. Her post-Antichrist chiliasm¹³⁸ (to use Lerner's

terminology once again) differs from Joachim's, as Reeves says, in that "this last period is seen not so much as a new epoch in history as the rounding off of the work of the Son" (p. 286). I would locate Hildegard's more important (i.e. more radical) departures from the Augustinian scheme in her powerful ad pristinum statum visions of Church renewal before Antichrist, but this is perhaps an academic point.¹³⁹ Later medieval readers coupled her apocalyptic programme together with Joachim's and saw no discrepancy between the two. As Henry of Hassia writes:

. . . Hildegard and the Abbot Joachim speak as if the end of the world and the coming of Antichrist are to be preceded by one or many reformations of the Church or reductions to the state of primitive sanctity.¹⁴⁰

The point for medieval readers seems to have been that these reformist apocalyptic writers saw hope for the Church in the future and placed this hope in chastisement and reform of the clergy in particular; whether this would happen before or after Antichrist was perhaps of less importance to them than it has been to modern scholars. To a medieval reader, prophecy of the Church's apocalyptic renewal was sufficiently startling in itself it seems and this is a point which should interest Langland scholars.

Let us now try to patch together from some of Langland's prophecies the scheme that he was working with--however unconsciously. The first passage which reveals something of this fragmentary schedule is in the prophecy at the end of Passus III (436-81). Conscience has

been trying to show how dangerous a desire for "mede" can be and he uses the exemplum of Saul's disobedience to God in not killing Agag, king of the Amalekites, after Samuel had told him to do so. The prophecy which Conscience breaks into at this point indicates that at some future time an unrighteous king will once again be overcome and a true Christian king will reign over a unified world (III. 436-41, quoted below). The prophecy ends, as a number of apocalyptic prophecies of this type do,¹⁴¹ with a "dark," foreboding reference to future times which seems to be based on an obscure sense of an apocalyptic programme: "Ac ar this fortune falle fynde me shal the worste . . ." (lines 477-81, quoted below). I have made an attempt to reconstruct this fragmentary schedule below in a form in which it can be compared with reconstructed fragments from other passages:

I, Consience, knowe this, for Kynde Wit me tauhte
 That resoun shal regne and reumes gouerne
 And riht as Agag hadde happe shal somme;
 Samuel shal sle hym and SaueI shal be yblamed
 And Dauid shal be ydyademed and adaunte alle oure enemyes
 And o cristene kyng kepe vs echone. . . .
 [Here follows a lengthy utopian vision.]
 Ac ar this fortune falle fynde me shal the worste
 Be sixe sonnes and a ship and half a shef of arwes;
 And the myddell of þe mone shal make þe Iewes turne
 And Saresines for þat syhte shal syng Credo in spiritum sanctum,
 For Machameth and Mede shullen mishap þat tyme,
Quia melius est bonum nomen quam diuicie multe
 (III. 436-41, 477-81).

Reconstructed schedule

1. Time of evil ("the worste")
2. Conversion of Jews and Saracens
3. Death of Saul and reign of David

Langland repeats this same formula ("Ac ar") at the end of his prophecy of church reform by a coming king (B, X. 323-34 and C, V. 168-79, quoted below). Once again the prophecy ends with a "dark" reference to an assumed time schedule: "Ac ar þat kyng come Caym shal awake,/[Ac] dowel shal dyngen hym adoun and destruye his myzte" (B, X. 333-34). In the C-Text version of this prophecy, these lines have been altered. The reference to Cain has been removed and now there is a direct mention of church renewal, "clerkes and holy churche shal be clothed newe" (l. 179), in place of the more general reference to Dowel. The reconstructed schedules of both versions must assume a lapse of spiritual or moral fortitude to account for both the times of renewal which these fragments indicate:

B. X. 323-34

Ac þer shal come a kyng and confesse yow Religiouses,
 And bete yow, as þe bible telle, for brekyng of youre rule,
 And amende Monyals, Monkes and Chanons,
 And puten [hem] to hir penaunce, Ad pristinum statum ire;
 And Barons wiþ Erles beten hem þoruþ Beatus virres techyng;
 [Bynymen] that hir barnes claymen, and blame yow foule:
 Hij in curribus & hij in equis ipsi obligati sunt &c.
 And þanne Freres in hir fraytour shul fynden a keye
 Of Costantyns cofres [þer þe cātel is Inne]
 That Gregories godchildren [vngodly] despended.
 And þanne shal þe Abbot of Abyngdoun and al his issue for euere
 Have a knok of a kyng, and incurable þe wounde.
 That þis worþ soop, seke ye þat ofte ouerse þe bible:
Quomodo cessauit exactor, quieuit tributum? contriuit dominus
baculum impiorum, et virgam dominancium cedencium plaga
insanabili.
 Ac er þat kyng come Caym shal awake,
 [Ac] dowel shal dyngen hum adoun and destruye his myzte.

Reconstructed schedule

1. Time of evil (Cain awakes)

2. Time of good (Cain conquered by Dowe11)
3. [Lapse?]
4. King comes to reform clergy.

C. V. 168-79

--first section much the same as B

Ac ar þat kyng come, as cronicles me tolde,
Clerkes and holy churche shal be clothed newe (178-79).

Reconstructed schedule

1. Renewal of Church
2. [Lapse of Church?]
3. King comes to reform Church.

I realize, of course, how artificial these constructions are-- they are based on minute, unclear details at the ends of two prophecies --at one time I regarded them as simply fillers or tags and I still think that it is obvious that Langland had not thought these comments through very carefully, perhaps not even carefully enough to warrant this much attention. But I believe that it must be conceded that these are allusions to an apocalyptic schedule of sorts. Here we have fragments of the usual cycles of decay and renewal that one comes to expect in such prophecies.

Finally, there is further proof of Langland's understanding of the fluctuations of religious reform prophecies and this occurs in the last two passus of the poem, where he uses a good deal of eschatological allusion to portray "a coming of Antichrist." I wish to stress "a coming of Antichrist" as opposed to "the coming"--like Hildegard and most other later apocalyptic writers, Langland probably believed in

waves of evil or waves of "Antichrist" (although not all writers chose to use the term) that would rise, be combatted and rise again until the end of time. What Langland portrays in the last passus of Piers Plowman is not the end of the world, but it is very likely one of the great battles for church reform further up the schedule.

Since this is not the place to treat all the complexities of the last two passus of the poem and since our main concern is to try to sift out an overall pattern, I have tried--how successfully I do not know--to summarize the main events of this section:

Summary of Passus XXI-XXII

- XXI. 1ff. Piers appears as risen Christ at mass
 - . 199 The Pentecost
 - . 207 Scene of mass devotion of people
 - . 215 Grace gives out weapons to fight against Antichrist and warns of false prophets (alluding to friars); also warns of an anti-pope figure
 - . 262 Piers and Grace establish "Unity" and "sew" Christianity
 - . 336 Attack of Pride's army on Unity
 - . 356 Strengthening of Church against attack and brief vision of renewal:

"Clannesse of þe comune and clerkes clene lyuyng
Made Vnite holi church in holinesse stande" (379-80).

 - . 396 Beginning of breakdown (brewar, vicar, king)
- XXII. 51 Coming of Antichrist, welcomed by all except a few "fools"
 - . 74 Conscience collects "fools" into Unity
 - . 80 Pestilences come and sins are temporarily subdued
 - . 109 Sin on the rise again
 - . 215 Sins now described as corrupt clerics attacking Unity
 - . 228 Friars answer Conscience's call for help
 - . 242 Conscience attempts to reform friars
 - . 273 Attempt fails because friars are sent "to scole"
 - . 297 Conscience bars gates of Unity and tries to hold out with traditional methods of confession and penance (i.e. without friars)

- . 332 Friars gain entry (Langland uses traditional antimendicant eschatology) and the last stronghold (i.e. sincere penance) is down
- . 380 Conscience is forced to leave in search of Piers Plowman and a solution to the friars' corruption.

A number of the elements in this summary of events are reminiscent of an apocalyptic programme. Passus XXI opens with the dreamer's vision during mass of Piers as the risen Christ coming before the people. Mass was probably the most popular setting for prophetic visions during the Middle Ages and Langland must have been aware of this tradition.¹⁴² Then comes a Pentecostal scene, which doubles allegorically as both a portrayal of the historical Pentecost and a vision of church renewal for Langland's own time. After a typically apocalyptic scene of mass devotion, Grace gives out weapons to strengthen the Church against Antichrist. He also warns that "Pryde shall be pope and prince of holy church," a clear reference to the apocalyptic anti-pope tradition which we have seen something of in Hildegard and which we will see again in later writers.

After Grace's warning about Antichrist's infiltration of the Church and the establishment of Unity,¹⁴³ there is the first attack on the Church by Pride's army at lines 336ff. The Church withstands the attack and there is a brief vision of the Church Militant: strong, secure and holy:

Clannesse of þe comune and clerkes clene lyuyng
Made Vnite holi churche in holinesse stande (379-80).

However, cracks begin to show soon enough and the beginning of Passus

XXII brings the coming of Antichrist himself. From this point until the end of the poem, the Church becomes weaker and weaker and its defenses fall back further and further. This antichrist is clearly a religious antichrist--an "anticleric," the personification of all corrupt ecclesiastics. Friars and other religious join him as soon as he appears and Langland tells us that only a few fools are left to be taken into Unity as the crowd welcomes Antichrist. These are, of course, the "fools for Christ" that St. Paul talks about and such fools have a long history in the religious prophecy tradition.¹⁴⁴ At line 215, the sins who have been attacking Unity are described as corrupt clerics. Conscience has no alternative but to retreat into Unity and bar the gates, where he tries to "hold the fort" with the traditional methods of penance and contrition. At this point Langland's antifraternality is loosed upon the scene and he portrays the disastrous entrance of the friars into Unity and their insidious attack on penance, which leaves the future of Unity in doubt. With Conscience's last weapon destroyed, he has no choice but to become a wanderer in search of Piers Plowman, "who will destroy Pride" and find a solution to the fraternal problem. Piers here is some kind of reforming church leader--possibly a pope, possibly even a papa angelicus--whoever he is, Langland definitely sees him as the last hope for the healing and restoration of the Church.¹⁴⁵

As we have seen, critics have always been baffled by Langland's use of eschatological elements in this section.¹⁴⁶ Most commentators on the poem only know what I have called the old

eschatology, where there is one Antichrist and he directly precedes the end of the world. Yet Langland is clearly not thinking of the end of the world here, because when the poem ends Conscience is looking to Piers to reform the Church. In order to solve this apparent discrepancy, other critics have suggested that 'antichrist' is merely a term of abuse and they point to Wycliffite writings in which the term is clearly used in this way. It seems to me that neither explanation is entirely satisfactory. However inexplicit and vague Langland's apocalyptic system may be, it is clear that he is referring to the kind of schedule which the "new" apocalyptic theory of the later Middle Ages popularized. There are enough bits and pieces of this tradition scattered throughout the last two passus to indicate that Langland's Antichrist has a real, apocalyptic significance but that he is not the Antichrist of the old tradition. Either, like some apocalyptic writers (Gerhoh of Reichersberg, for example),¹⁴⁷ Langland believed in a renewal after this Antichrist that would last until the Second Coming, or (like Hildegard) he saw a series of forerunners of Antichrist or, like the Joachite writers, he foresaw multiple antichrists and this particular "Antichrist" could be any one of them. Whatever he believed, it is clear that Langland, like Hildegard, saw his own time as apocalyptically significant. Although not the End of the World itself, obviously for him it merited a place on the schedule.

Before leaving the question of Langland's schedule, I would like to indulge in what may be a fool's errand and try to correlate the fragments we have. The patterns hinted at at the ends of the prophecies

in C. III, B. X and C. V all have in common an imminent time of evil ("the worste" or a time of the awakening of Cain) followed eventually by a just king (David or a reforming king who will give the friars a "fyndynge"). The last passus of the poem ends with the search for Piers, who is expected similarly to solve the problem of the friars. Whether Piers is to be the reforming king or whether Langland had by the end of the poem shifted this image to a papal figure or other religious leader, or whether he just did not notice the discrepancy, is hard to say, but there is something of a consistent pattern among these fragments in the motif of the expected reforming leader. Some of the short fragments also suggest that there will be more than one renewal--something we have seen in Hildegard's apocalyptic schedule, certainly, but it is hard to know whether Langland's multiple renewals arise from a considered sense of the apocalyptic future or from pure sloppiness. Whatever the meaning of these fragments, it seems clear that what Langland is describing in the last two passus is a process which he believes to be already underway and which will reach its climax in the immediate future. This lavishing of detail on the implications of present troubles for the immediate future is what we have already come to expect from Hildegard's prophecies. Whatever the imperfections of Langland's apocalyptic architecture, the implications for the near future are clear enough.

We have only to look at Langland's and Hildegard's schemes for the future in comparison with the Augustinian scheme of salvation history and the traditional eschatology¹⁴⁸ to see how radical

their visions of the last times were. We can also see how much more detailed they are, how high a profile the Church and the ecclesiastical orders have in the programme of events, and how much more time is given over before the final end to cycles of decay and restitution. Unlike some apocalyptic writers, Hildegard does not confuse the reader by referring to evil figures or groups of figures as Antichrist until she gets to the Antichrist; rather she refers to the forerunners of Antichrist (the heretics and simoniacs or pseudo-prophets). Langland's "Antichrist" may well be such a forerunner too, or he may be a Joachite antichrist but in that he precedes renewal he can be best read as part of the reformist apocalyptic tradition. By the end of the poem the clerical reform of Langland's schedule is still wanting. The great reforming leaders, Langland's Piers or his king of the prophecy of Passus V, are still being sought. The traditional events of the conversion of the Jews or Saracens, or the less traditional coming of an age of renewed spirituality, are also still to come. In both Langland's and Hildegard's apocalyptic programmes, the end is a long way off--but the implications of mankind's sins and the wrath they provoke sub specie aeternitatis are not. Herein, for these writers, lies the sententia for their own age.

II. Prophetic Stance: The Self-Image of the Visionary

There are many ways in which Hildegard and Langland are just simply not comparable as prophetic writers: Hildegard was a self-professed prophet of God and Langland was a poet. Hildegard had no

ulterior motives for writing (or so she would have us believe); in fact, she was often reluctant:

Indeed I do not put forth mystical words of my own but according to those (words) which my mind does not desire and indeed which my will does not seek, which are shown to me, but many times I see them by compulsion (Ep. CXCVII. c. 157C-D; Pent.).ⁱⁱ

She insisted time and time again that she wrote only what was related to her "in true vision":

And the things I write are those I see and hear through the vision, nor do I set down words other than those that I hear; I utter them in unpolished Latin, just as I hear them through the vision, for in it I am not taught to write as philosophers write (trans. Dronke, Women Writers, p. 168).

Of artistic merit or motivation, she would have us believe that she had none, leaving it to others to correct or refine her works but approving of this only to a limited extent. Writing to Guibert of Gembloux, one of her secretaries in the latter part of her life, she says:

In the correction of these and other things you have been diligent and generous with my defects, but you [are] to take care not to add or subtract or change anything unless it departs from the rules and course of correct Latin; or if you prefer, because I have offered in this letter more than customarily--a whole series of visions--you shall not neglect to couch them in more seemly language. . . . likewise in the editing of whatever of my writings, I do not wish to urge you to remold step by step, but at least not to depart from my footsteps. My beloved Volmar who assisted me assiduously before you in making these corrections asked for no such freedom. He was content with the simplicity with which I was able to present what was inspired or

revealed to me, not with polished words, but according to the rules of grammar (trans. McDonnell, p. 291).

Her writings often end with a warning against any man who would alter her words in the slightest, a convention found in apocalyptic texts like St. John's Revelation.¹⁴⁹ In every sense Hildegard presents herself as unquestionably a mouthpiece of God.¹⁵⁰

The self-image revealed in Langland's works shows neither the confidence nor self-professed prophetic stance portrayed in Hildegard's writings. The visionary ground that Langland staked out for himself is poetic ground, and, although it must be admitted that he is impatient with some of the literary conventions of his choice,¹⁵¹ he obviously feels more comfortable with narrative, allegory and satire as vehicles for his message than he does with the setting down of direct divine revelation.¹⁵² Hildegard's works are related to her by the "Living Light" or "the voice of I Who Am" but one senses that Langland's humility would never have allowed him to adopt such a position. The supranatural beings who speak to Will are facets or faculties of the mind of man or personifications of spiritual but earthly authorities or virtues. Even Peter and Christ himself are presented to Will in the more earthly, figural form of Piers. Through Piers, Christ and the apostle become accessible to the dreamer without the necessity of the dramatic divine apparitions or locutions of the mystic-visionary tradition.

For this reason Will's encounters with the different authority figures of his vision are very different from the type of encounters

typically recorded by monastic writers and lay mystics in which angels, saints, apostles and even Christ himself appear to the visionary in order to teach or admonish.¹⁵³ In terms of literary originality, narrative complexity and visionary humility, Langland's visions are worlds apart from such contemporary writings. Even when comparing Piers Plowman to other literary visions Langland's humble, earthbound character emerges: Will is neither granted a vision of heaven, as the Pearl narrator is, nor does he mingle with the dignitaries of heaven and hell the way Dante does. Langland chose the dream vision form, but does not commune with the highest nor assume an unquestionably authoritative stance for his vision--at least not overtly. Will muses over the value of visions (IX. 298ff.); he does not confidently proclaim them as divine revelation. Langland hopes for the reader's assent whereas Hildegard commands it.

For all that, however, both writers expect to be taken seriously in their critique of abuse and this is where their prophetic stances converge. Furthermore, it is surprising to find, in spite of what has just been said, that Hildegard has her insecurities and Langland his authoritatively prophetic moments. What seems to emerge from a study of the stances of these two rather different writers is that both used a visionary-prophetic persona to deal with, among other things, their insecurities about speaking out from the social and personal positions they found themselves in and, furthermore, that both used the device to advantage. In investigating these stances we will look at the theme of knowledge, which is an obsessive problem with both writers and also at a

few of the possible sources or traditions behind the enigmatic visionary persona which both visionaries set up for themselves, encompassing the paradox of prophetic self-assurance and self-deprecation. It seems logical to assume that if Hildegardian apocalypticism could have either directly or indirectly influenced Langland (something which both the wide dissemination of Pentachron MSS and their many similarities in ideology make likely, as we have seen) then the visionary stance which a writer like Hildegard adopts could also have impressed itself upon his mind. Whatever the case may be, it is evident that Langland takes for granted some visionary-reformist tradition which Piers Plowman scholars have so far not been able to pinpoint. This problem will be explored more fully in Chapter Two of this thesis, but I believe that Hildegard's visionary stance can provide us with a good starting point in reconstructing the visionary tradition behind the poem.

One of the persistent themes of Piers Plowman is the question of the right place of learning and knowledge on the road to salvation. The question takes many forms. Langland attacks what he sees as the destructive learning of the friars (see, for example, XI. 54ff. or XXII. 273ff.) and he also condemns as presumptuous the fashion of mealtime theological disputations:

Nowe is þe manere at þe mete, when munstrals ben stille,
 The lewed aȝen þe lered þe holy lore to dispute,
 And tellen of þe trinite how two slowe þe thridde
 And brynge forth ballede resones, taken Bernard to witnesse,
 And putten forth presumpcioun to preue þe sothe.
 Thus they dreuele at the deyes, the deite to knowe,
 And gnawen god with gorge when here gottes fullen (XI. 35-41).

At the centre of much of Langland's treatment of this theme is Will, whose curiosity--from his desire to "hear wonders" (Pro1. 4) to his over-zealous desire to learn everything--are consistently frowned upon. On the other hand, however, Will's humbly proffered requests for knowledge of salvation (for example, I. 80 and XI.88ff.) are welcomed and encouraged. As Hildegard does in Scivias (the title itself means "Know the Ways"), Langland seems to make distinctions between the kind of thirst for knowledge which may be approved as worthy and the kind which can not.¹⁵⁴

Less straightforward than simply the desire for knowledge is Langland's view of the role of academic learning in salvation. In the "Recklessness" interlude, Will plays the devil's advocate and takes a profoundly anti-intellectual position, a position which, although it is eventually overturned by Imaginatif's voice of sanity, rings true in some places, in spite of the exaggeration and bravado with which it is pronounced.¹⁵⁵ He argues at one point that "Austyn þe oelde"

Saide thus in his sarmon for ensaunple of grete clerkes:
Ecce ipsi idiote rapiunt celum ubi nos sapientes in inferno
mergimur.

And is to mene no more to men þat beth lewed,
 "Aren noen rather yraueschid fro þe rihte bileue
 Comuneliche then clerkes most knowyng in konnyng,
 Ne none sonnere ysaued ne none saddere in bileue
 Then ploughmen an pastours and pore comune peple (XI. 290-95).

Even though Imaginatif is able to bring a sense of moderation to the discussion:

Forthy y conseile vch a creature clergie to honoure

 And as a blynde man in bataile bereth wepene to fyhte
 And hath non hap with his ax his enemye to hutte,
 No more can a kynde-witted man but clerkes hym teche
 Come for al his kynde wit thorw cristendoem to be saued,
 (XIV. 43, 50-53),

Rechelesnesse's assertions are not entirely forgotten and form part of the rich, dialectical complexity of the poem, which always struggles toward truth by examining every facet of a problem.

For all that Rechelesnesse's arguments are presented as reckless, they reflect a certain pragmatic skepticism of some aspects of contemporary theological studies which pervades the poem. Conscience's advice to the friars to "leue logyk" illustrates this anti-academic (here anti-scholastic) attitude:

Y wol be zoure borwh; ze shal haue breed and clothes
 And opere necessaries ynowe; þow shal no thyng lakke
 With þat ze leue logyk and lerneth for to louye.
 For loue lefte they lordschipe, bothe lond and scole,
 Frere Franunceys and Domynek, for loue to be holy
 (XXII. 248-52).

Dame Study, after listing her many fields of intellectual endeavor, says of theology:

Ac Teologie hath tened me ten score tymes;
 þe more y muse þeron the mystiloker hit semeth
 And þe deppore y deuine the derkore me thynketh hit.
 Hit is no science sothly bote a sothfaste bileue,
 Ac for hit lereth men to louie y beleue þeron þe bettere,
 For loue is a lykyng thyng and loth for to greue.
 Lerne for to louie yf þe lik Dowel,
 For of Dobet and Dobest here doctour is dere loue (XI. 129-36).

And even Langland's Christ shows a somewhat anti-academic attitude in the Harrowing of Hell scene when he says:

For y þat am lord of lyf, loue is my drynke,
 And for þat drynke today y deyede, as hit semede.
 Ac y wol drynke of no dische ne of deep clergyse,
 But of comune coppes. . . (XX. 403-6).

The advice is similar to that of Piers as it is related by Clergie at the Feast of Patience:¹⁵⁶

For Peres loue þe palmare zent, þat inpugnede ones
 Alle kyne connynges and alle kyne craftes,
 Saue loue and leute and lowenesse of hert (XV. 131-33).

Langland's point in these passages seems to be not so much perhaps a problem with "clergie" itself as with the assumption that one can come to faith (solely) through academic knowledge. This type of external knowledge in itself will not suffice unless it can be internalized and personally experienced or lived.

Langland was obviously a man who was both fascinated by knowledge and wary of its abuse. Therefore, to stress the anti-academic streak in the poem is obviously not to tell the full story, but there is a definite sense in which, as the Vita progresses, Langland places increasing emphasis on inner, spiritual knowledge and on self-knowledge. As Scripture says to Will, "Multi multa sciunt et seipsos nesciunt" (XI. 166). Will gradually learns to leave off his clerkish disputations and listen with patience in order to learn. The emphasis shifts from the acquisition of knowledge to the development of understanding. This

intensely spiritual approach to knowledge displaces the perceived source of knowledge itself in the poem from the schools and the educated to the Holy Spirit: by the end of the poem the purveyor of all skills and knowledge is no longer Dame Study (XI. 119ff.), but Grace (XXI. 213ff.). This orientation toward inner illumination, complemented by skepticism of the "clergie" of the schools, is precisely what one would expect of a prophetic writer and does, in fact, stand out as one of the most persistent characteristics of the apocalyptic reform writers from Hildegard and her contemporaries onwards.¹⁵⁷ It is also reflected in the evangelical impetus that characterized so many religious movements both inside and outside the Church.¹⁵⁸ Anti-academic thought had, by Langland's time, become firmly entrenched as a trademark of prophetic reform ideology, which in turn emphasized prophecy and revelation over scholarly knowledge (Töpfer, p. 39). At least some of Langland's struggles with the proper place of knowledge in attaining salvation must be seen in this context.

With this in mind, let us have a look at the place of knowledge in Hildegard's writings. Once again, this is a very complex subject, full of contradictions and entanglements. Hildegard, like Langland, must have been master of no small amount of bookish learning, yet she never, or rarely ever, mentions a source or cites an authority outside of the Bible.¹⁵⁹ In everything she wrote upon the subject, she was at pains to credit her vision with all the knowledge she had acquired, always minimizing anything learned from earthly teachers:

In that same [experience of] vision I understood the writings of the prophets, the Gospels, the works of other holy men, and those of certain philosophers, without any human instruction, and I expounded certain things based on these, though I scarcely had literary understanding, inasmuch as a woman who was not learned had been my teacher. But I also brought forth songs with their melody, in praise of God and the saints, without being taught by anyone, and I sang them too, even though I had never learnt either musical notation or any kind of singing (trans. Dronke, Women Writers, 145).¹⁶⁰

She constantly refers to herself as a "poor little feminine form" (paupercula feminea forma), often adding the adjective indocta and insistently giving over all credit (and thus all responsibility) for her writings to divine revelation. The reasons for such a strategy are fairly obvious, but one suspects that insecurities about the inflammatory nature of some of her material would not be least among them. As a woman without formal training in theology or philosophy, her qualifications as a religious writer would certainly be open to question; therefore Hildegard, like so many other women (and men) who found themselves outside of the "charmed circle" of the educated elite, pleaded divine inspiration as reason for her literary involvement. Langland may have chosen the dream vision form for similar reasons, among other more literary ones.¹⁶¹

We therefore have a social reason, both for the choice of the visionary form and for a certain amount of anti-academic feeling. Time and again, as we have seen, Hildegard denounces the doctores of the male-dominated hierarchy for their failure to teach the people:

He who sat above the mountain called out in a very strong and most penetrating voice, saying "O Man! fragile dust of the dust

of the earth and ashes of ashes, cry aloud and say concerning the entrance into incorruptable salvation: For as much as those who are learned and see the inner meaning of the Scriptures, but wish neither to tell it nor to preach it because they are blind and tepid in preserving the righteousness of God, open to them the lock of these mysteries, which they, timid ones, conceal in a hidden field without fruit. Therefore, write at large from a fountain of abundance, and so overflow in mystical erudition, that they may tremble at the profusion of your irrigation, who wished you to be considered contemptable on account of Eve's transgression (trans. Steele, 131-32, from I, I, 30-40, Sci.).

Not only does Hildegard castigate the learned clergy for their lack of productivity in the vineyards of the Lord, but she almost seems to imply in places that they have deliberately concealed these things, having explained them, she says in Scivias, with a "disfiguring tediousness" (in turpi taedio), which makes the food of the Scriptures tepid,

whence now I speak through one who is not eloquent concerning the Scriptures nor taught by an earthly master, but I Who Am speak through him new secrets and many mystical things which until now have been hidden in books (Scivias, III, 11, 18, 385ff.).^{162/JJ}

We have seen elsewhere that Hildegard feels that the clergy misuse their special powers over others and more of the same distrust is implicit here. Now (i.e. in the seventh age, Hildegard's own age), the spokesperson of God will not be a member of the elitist circle of academics. As Töpfer (p. 38) has suggested, Hildegard sees her own prophetic preaching as an example of the "new, deeper-pressing form of instruction in the faith, for which no learning is necessary." In the seventh age, she says, the meaning of the Scriptures will be opened up, offered "in gentle words just as the words of this book" (Scivias, III,

11, 23, 453-55); that is, they will become accessible to the less learned.

The same sense of dissatisfaction with and rebelliousness against those who hold the power of teaching and spiritual guidance in the Church is evident in Langland's writings, but there is not the same outward display of confidence about taking up the pen and taking over from those who have failed. In a passage in the B-Text, Imaginatif rebukes Will:

And þow medlest þe wiþ makynge and myztest go seye þi sauter,
 And bidde for hem þat zyue þee breed, for þer are bokes
 y[n]owe
 To telle men what dowel is dobet and dobest boþe,
 And prechours to preuen what it is of many a peire freres.
 I seiþe wel he seide me soþ, and somewhat me to excuse
 Seide, "Caton confortid his sone þat, clerk þouþ he were,
 To solacen hym som tyme; [so] I do whan I make:
 Interpone tuis interdum gaudia curis.
 And of holy men I her[e]," quod I, "how þei ouþerwhile
 [In manye places pleyden þe parfiter to ben].
 Ac if þer were any wight þat wolde me tell
 What were dowel and dobet and dobest at þe laste,
 Wolde I neuere do werk, but wende to holi chirche
 And þere bidde my bedes but whan ich ete or slepe
 (B. XII. 16-28).

Langland's compulsion to write as here described seems to come from a yearning for understanding of Dowel or of the different ways of salvation. This yearning is clearly not being fulfilled, despite what Imaginatif says, by the books already written or the preaching of the friars. For Langland, the available contemporary spiritual aids to understanding, human or literary, were obviously bankrupt. And so he takes up his pen, for himself--and for others (his many direct second-

person addresses to various social groups, most notably, the rich and the clergy, betray a sense of audience which goes far beyond the self-help therapy which his reply to *Imaginatif* suggests). Interestingly, when this passage was reworked in the C-Text (i.e. in the autobiographical section of *Passus V*), the question of the validity of his writing does not come up again. Whether this means that Langland acquired a stronger sense of purpose and self-confidence, even mission, is hard to tell. We do have one instance of audience reaction at the beginning of this passage in the C-Text, however, which may supply a clue:

Thus y awakede, woet god, whan y wonede in Cornehull,
 Kytte and y in a cote, yclothed as a lollare,
 And lytel ylet by, leueth me for sothe,
 Amonges lollares of Londone and lewede ermytes,
 For y made of tho men as resoun me tauhte (V. 1-5).

If this can be relied upon to be literally true, then Langland had attained something of the reputation of a moralist or reformer already on the basis of the A- and B-Texts, albeit a grudging one. It may not be simply empty speculation to suggest that by the time Langland wrote C, he had enough confidence in his work that he no longer needed the passage of apology for writing in B XII.

In another passage Langland actually portrays this sense of hesitance with respect to another aspect of his writing: his open criticism of certain moral failings in others, most notably, the friars:

And thenne louhe Leaute for y loued on þe frere:
 "Why louest þou?" quod Leaute. "Leue sire," y saide,
 "For this frere flaterede me þe while he fond me ryche
 And now y am pore and penyles at litel pris he sette me.

Y wolde it were no synne," y saide, "to seien þat were treuthe;
 The sauter sayth hit is no synne for suche men þat ben trewe
 To segge as they sen and saue only prestis:

Existimasti inique quod ero tibi similis; arguam te et statuam
 contra faciem tuam.

Thei wolte allegge also and by þe gospel preuen hit,
 Nolite iudicare quemquam."

"And wherof serueth lawe," quod Leaute, "and no lyf vndertoke
 Falsnesse ne faytrye? for sumwhat þe apostel saide:

Non oderis fratrem tuum secrete in corde.

Thyng þat al þe world woet wherfore sholdest thou spare
 To rehercen hit al by retoryk to arate dedly synne?

Ac be neuere more þe furste the defaute to blame;

Thouh thowe se, say nat sum tyme, þat is treuthe.

Thyng þat wolde be pryue publische thou hit neuere,

Nother for loue labbe it out ne lacke hit nat for enuye

(XII. 23-38).

What he is establishing here through Leaute is both the legitimacy of the moral reformer's stance as "sothsegger" and the groundrules for such activity. Although Leaute's answer seems to settle the question quite nicely, there can be little doubt that the existence of the passage at all suggests that Langland struggled with doubts or fears about what he was doing.

In any case, for all that Langland does not afford us an outward show of confidence in his self-image as writer, the poem does not lack for authoritatively-assumed stances and denunciations of many subjects, present and future. If Langland cannot match Hildegard in self-assertion, he can certainly match her prophetic and declamatory vigour. But to some extent, both writers slip behind a visionary persona in order to make these pronouncements. Within the literary framework of the vision, they are both free to speak out as controversially and vigorously as they do.¹⁶³

In analysing Hildegard's prophetic stance, Liebeschütz (pp. 163-66) has made the very helpful comparison of certain of Hildegard's attitudes with those characteristic of what he calls the "monkish autobiography." The relevance of this literary genre is perhaps even more apparent in relation to Langland. The greatest model for this type of writing was, of course, Augustine's Confessions and certainly the confessional approach remains the most pervasive influence in this genre. This type of spiritual autobiography, which narrates, often amid prayers, tears and thanksgiving, the story of how the writer learned first this truth, then the next; how he was proven a fool in this situation and was inspired to change for the better in that one, has two main features which we can see in both Langland and Hildegard. The first Liebeschütz describes as a negation or deprecation of self; the second is an intense interest in the role of studies and intellectual development in the life of the autobiographer.

The first notion involves a tendency to belittle the self at every point in favour of stressing the role that God has ordained for the self. Only the gradually unfolding divine teachings are realistic for the writer, who thus writes a lifestory told from a peculiarly interior and spiritualized point of view. The second notion involves the process by which the autobiographer came to grips with the proper place of knowledge and study in life and the effect of these studies upon him. Liebeschütz notes that one of two scenarios occurs in monastic autobiographies: either the individual is stricken at one blow with an understanding of profound spiritual knowledge or he is dragged

back gradually to more "useful" spiritual thinking from a dangerous indulgence in idle questioning, speculation and superfluous knowledge. To some extent, the latter theme is reflected in Will's struggles with learning in Piers Plowman; the former experience is definitively recorded by Hildegard.¹⁶⁴

It might be helpful to pause for a moment to illustrate a few of these points from the famous monastic autobiography of Guibert of Nogent.¹⁶⁵ Guibert deals at great length with the problems that his desire for learning involved him in: spiritual pride (p. 79), persecution by fellow monks (p. 83), and perhaps most interestingly, his abbot's annoyance with Guibert's agreement to write a treatise on sermon preparation at the request of another prior. This latter episode deserves to be quoted in full because it illustrates the kind of anti-academic attitude which a monk might expect to encounter from his superiors:

Since I knew that my abbot . . . would be annoyed by my writings, I approached the man with caution and, acting as if I came on behalf of his friend and did not care much about it myself, I begged him to grant what I was asking for the sake of the prior, whom he professed to love. Supposing that I would write very briefly, he consented. When I had snatched his consent from his mouth, I began to work at what I had in mind.

I proposed to undertake a moral commentary on the beginning of Genesis, that is, the Six Days of Creation. To the commentary, I prefixed a treatise of moderate length showing how a sermon ought to be composed. I followed up this preface with a tropological exposition at length of the Six Days, with poor eloquence but such as I was capable of. When my abbot saw that I was commenting on the first chapter of that sacred history, he no longer took a favorable view of the matter and warned me with great reproof to put an end to these writings. I saw that such works only put thorns in his eyes, and by avoiding both his presence and that of anyone who might report it to him, I

pursued my task in secret. For the composition and writing of this or my other works, I did not prepare a draft on the wax tablets, but committed them to the written page in their final form as I thought them out. In that abbot's time my studies were carried on in complete secrecy. But when he was gone, finding my opportunity when the pastoral office was vacant, at last I attacked quickly and finished my work. It consisted of ten books which followed the four activities of the inner man mentioned before, and I so carried out the moral treatment in all of them that they went from beginning to end with absolutely no change in the order of the passages. Whether in this little work I helped anyone, I do not know, although I have no doubt that most learned men were greatly pleased with it. This much is certain, that I gained no little profit from it myself, seeing that it saved me from idleness, that servant of vice (pp. 90-92).

The passage in which Will is attacked by Imagination for "meddlyng with makings" bears some of the marks of this monkish attitude toward writing. What is perhaps most interesting, however, about Guibert's account is that he uses the excuse of the task of writing a treatise on sermon preparation to write on a much larger subject in order to settle his mind about matters which (as we learn from passages just previous to this one) were of special concern to him at the time: notably, questions about the psychology of man (particularly the relation between appetite, will, reason and intellect)¹⁶⁷ and problems of morality. All this he works into a treatise on the Six Days of Creation. While this plays havoc with our modern sense of unity of theme and appropriateness of genre, it does give a contemporary example of the type of "writing as process" which we see in Piers Plowman. Other passages in Guibert's autobiography, as well as his description of the writing of his little treatise show the "monkish" mind struggling with and through and against knowledge toward some kind of inner awareness.

The influence of the "monkish autobiography" on both Langland and Hildegard is apparent in an examination of their prophetic stances. The weakness, ignorance, even the feeble-mindedness of the visionary's persona is stressed in order that the teaching can be seen to pass directly from its "divine" or authoritative source to its audience, with no interference from or by the messenger, the implication being that the messenger is just too limited to meddle with anything so far above his or her capacity. The presentations of this stance in the two writers are, of course, different--Langland dramatizes Will's ineptness through the narrative of the poem while Hildegard simply avows her ineptness before or after her report of the prophetic teaching--but the impetus is the same. The whole thing is, of course, a literary convention--not to say hoax--but it does serve some useful functions. First of all, and most obviously, it shelters the visionary from responsibility. Secondly, and less obviously, it subtly connects the visionary with a long line of "simple fools" traditionally hailed as prophetic figures. The association of the fool with the prophet or wiseman or holy man probably finds its origin in Christian thought in the words of Paul:

For the word of the cross, to them indeed that perish, is foolishness; but to them that are saved, that is to us, it is the power of God. For it is written: I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; and the prudence of the prudent I will reject. Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this world? For seeing that in the wisdom of God, the world, by wisdom, knew not God, it pleased God, by the foolishness of our preaching, to save them that believe (I Cor. 1:18-21).

Here, the fool figure is largely metaphorically drawn, but the later

tradition branches out in many directions to include the simple rustic and even the literally mad or imbecillic. Langland makes a good deal of use of the fool figure, much of it ironic, of course, in his portrayals of Will, but perhaps his most extreme use of this motif occurs in his passage about the "lunatic lollars":

And ȝut ar ther oþere beggares, in hele, as hit semeth,
 Ac hem wanteth wyt, men and women bothe,
 The whiche aren lunatyk lollares and lepares aboute,
 And madden as þe mone sit, more other lasse.
 Careth they for no colde ne counteth of non hete
 And are meuyngē aftur þe mone; moneyeles þey walke,
 With a good will, witteles, mony wyde contreyes,
 Riht as Peter dede and Poul, saue þat þey preche nat
 Ne none miracles maken--ac many tymes hem happeth
 To profecye of þe peple, pleyngē, as hit were (IX. 105-14).

What Langland admires most about these men is their capacity to live a lifestyle of perfect apostolic poverty (i.e. total dependence on God), but it is interesting that he should also focus on their ability to prophesy. What they say sounds like nonsense ("pleyngē, as hit were"), but Langland seems to imply that because of the perfection of their lives (he later calls them God's "privy disciples" and apostles), they reflect, and have the capacity to utter, divine truths. The literal incoherence of the imbecile is analogous to, or becomes a metaphor for, the "darkness" or difficulty of all prophetic utterance, which always sounds like nonsense, literally or logically, to the casual observer.

Langland's use of Will's apparent simplicity is far more sophisticated than anything Hildegard does with her prophetic persona. For example, Will's literal-mindedness can be used to point up ironies

in what has just been asserted or to dramatize the difficulty that certain divine truths present to the common man, but Hildegard's persona, too, is an elaborate construct with many subtle psychological functions.

Hildegard constantly downplays her own intellectual capacities. Describing the period of her life before she began to write down her visions she says (speaking of herself in the third-person as she often does), "from her infancy until the time of her fortieth year [she was] simple-minded."¹⁶⁸ In one of her visions God tells her that literary competence in the use of language is not among her capacities:

This, which in language from above is shown to you, you will put forth not according to the form of human usage, because that usage is not given to you, [but] he who has a file should not neglect to refine it, in order that it may sound suitable to men (Ep. II c.152D-153A).^{kk}

The self-portrait she paints in prefaces and epilogues to her works is that of a child-like, frail, idiosyncratic and unstable person. Again speaking of herself in the third-person, she writes in the final passage of the LDO:

But Omnipotent God has put forth this writing through a poor little feminine form, [that] she may be made worthy to be anointed with the oil of His mercy, because she lives without any security nor knowledge of the edification of the Scriptures. . . . From the day of her birth [she has experienced] painful infirmities, as if she were entangled in a net, so that in all her veins, marrow and flesh, she is continuously vexed. Meanwhile, nevertheless it pleased God that she should not be broken, since through a cavern of the rational soul she sees certain mystical things of God spiritually. This vision so transfused this person's veins that on account of it

she is always much affected by fatigue. Sometimes nevertheless she is lighter, at other times more oppressed, labouring in the fatigue of infirmity. Therefore she has different behaviours from those of diverse [other] people, in the same way as an infant, whose veins are not as yet full, can discern to a certain extent the behaviours of men. She rose up with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and has a complexion of air, therefore from that air, and from rain, wind and all tempests, infirmities are implanted in her, so that in no way may she have security of the flesh and the Holy Spirit is not able to dwell in her in other respects. But the Spirit of God with great strength of His love would resuscitate her from this infirmity as if with a dew of His refreshment, in order that it might be possible to live as an instrument of his inspiration. . . . May Omnipotent God, who knows truly all the fatigue of the passion of this same person, deem it worthy so to fulfill His grace in her . . . that her soul may, when it departs from this world, go on to eternal glory (c. 1037C-1038B).¹¹

Yet in many ways, the opposite of this frail, encumbered image must have been evident. In her prophetic denunciations, business affairs, travels, defences of her abbey, correspondence, and scientific writings, she seems to have been energetic, self-preserving and forthright.¹⁶⁹ In fact, the old spirit revives somewhat even in these pathetic self-portraits when she reaches the point of pronouncing a curse on any who would alter her writings:

It pleased [God] to put forth this writing through no doctrine of human knowledge, but through a simple and untaught feminine form. Whence no man would be so bold that he would add something to the words of this writing, or diminish it by taking anything away, lest he be deleted from the Book of Life and all beatitude which is under the sun (c. 1038B-C).^{mm}

The main complaint, if indeed it is a complaint, in this self-portrait, is of insecurity. She gives a "scientific" explanation of her physical instability and frailty, based on her theory of

complexions and humours,¹⁷⁰ but the instability goes beyond the purely physical. She compares her behaviour and perception to those of a child and describes herself as living without any security or knowledge--this, presumably, being a different insecurity from the physical frailty. Liebeschütz has suggested that this belittling or negation of any strength or independence of the self is necessary to the prophetic stance which Hildegard takes up.¹⁷¹ The influence of the monastic spiritual autobiography can be seen in the reduction of the self-image to the history of its spiritual encounters. The distinction between natural knowledge and revelation is sharpened and only the unfolding of spiritual teachings becomes real to the writer. We see something of this posturing in Piers Plowman, in the "autobiographical" passages in the C-Text, for example, or in descriptions of Will between dreams or encounters, particularly as his search becomes more obsessive.¹⁷²

To Hildegard, the service which she rendered--or was forced to render--to God was so demanding and so all-consuming, that there was little left ("Omnipotent God, who knows truly all the fatigue of the passion of this same person . . .").¹⁷³ In her letter to Pope Eugene, she describes herself as a "feather which flies miraculously and is held up by a strong wind."¹⁷⁴ "A prophet must count himself as nothing" she writes to Guibert of Gembloux. This total dependence on God is part of the imaginatively powerful evangelical tendency which informs so much of the thinking of religious movements in the later Middle Ages. Some took this notion of total self-abdication to the

extremities of the lifestyle of apostolic poverty, throwing all responsibility for sustaining life into the hands of Providence. Hildegard herself was willing to follow the commands of her vision just as implicitly as we find out in one of the autobiographical passages from her Vita:

At one time, because of a dimming of my eyes, I could see no light; I was weighed down in body by such a weight that I could not get up, but lay there assailed by the most intense pains. I suffered in this way because I had not divulged the vision I had been shown, that with my girls (*cum puellis meis*) I should move from the Disibodenberg, where I had been vowed to God, to another place. I was afflicted till I named the place where I am now. . . . But my abbot, and the monks and the populace in that province, when they realized what the move implied--that we wanted to go from fertile fields and vineyards and the loveliness of that spot to parched places where there were no amenities--were all amazed. And they intrigued so that this should not come about. . . . [after finally obtaining approval], with a vast escort of our kinsfolk and of other men, in reverence of God we came to the Rupertsberg. The ancient deceiver put me to the ordeal of great mockery, in that many people said: "What's all this--so many hidden truths revealed to this foolish, unlearned woman, even though there are many brave and wise men around? Surely this will come to nothing!". . . . So I stayed in that place with twenty girls of noble and wealthy parentage, and we found no habitation or inhabitant there, save for one old man and his wife and children. Such great misfortunes and such pressure of toil befell me, it was as if a stormcloud covered the sun. . . . So God let me be oppressed in some measure by the common people, by relatives, and by some of the women who had remained with me, when they lacked essential things (except inasmuch as through God's grace, they were given to us as alms). For just as the children of Israel plagued Moses, so these people, shaking their heads over me, said: "What good is it for well-born and wealthy girls to pass from a place where they lacked nothing into such penury?" But we were waiting for the grace of God, who had shown us this spot, to come to our aid.

After the pressure of such grief, he rained that bounty upon us. For many, who had previously despised us and called us a parched useless thing, came from every side to help us, filling us with blessings (trans. Dronke, Women Writers, 150-51).

She finishes this story and introduces the next one with the comment, "Nonetheless, God did not want me to remain steadily in complete security: this he had shown me since infancy in all my concerns, sending me no carefree joy as regards this life, through which my mind could become overbearing" (p. 151). Hildegard had obviously come to believe that insecurity was the way of life most suited to a servant of God; only insecurity provided the conditions for total dependence on God necessary to the prophetic stance.

The self-image of the visionary in apocalyptic literature, then, is made up of an odd mixture of anonymity, self-deprecation and bold self-assertion. On the one hand, there is a tendency for the visionary to view his or her own experience as being less important than the revelation received. On the other hand, the visionary's experience is everything, the visionary's doubts, views and limitations determining the unfolding of the vision itself, as it is written down for the reader. Different authors emphasize different literary conventions in telling a vision. A writer like Hildegard never intrudes herself into the vision as a unit. She does not carry on a dialogue with the heavenly voice that speaks to her--she is an observer, a secretary, a scribe only. Paul Franche,¹⁷⁶ remarking on Hildegard's correspondence complains that, unlike most surviving correspondence, Hildegard's tells us virtually nothing about her personality--the anonymity is almost chilling. The reason is that Hildegard's letters are "business letters." The business is the revelation of the divine will to her correspondent through the medium of her vision. Any reference to her-

self will occur at the beginning or end of the letter (or even at the beginning or end of treatises as long as Scivias or the LDO); during her vision she does not record any personal reaction at all. This represents one extreme in the treatment of the visionary persona. Even the passive John of Patmos becomes involved in his vision to the extent that he weeps (Apoc. 5:4) or "eats" the book he is given (Apoc. 10: 9, 10). Hildegard's visionary persona is dormant during the vision itself.

In contrast to this Langland's Will is argumentative, presumptuous, questioning, always reacting throughout Piers Plowman. This type of narrator occurs in apocalyptic visions like II Esdras, as we shall see in the next chapter. The Boethian tradition of vision literature also fostered the figure of the wrong-headed visionary who requires patient tutelage from the figure of authority who appears to him. Writing of these conflicting elements in the narrator figure of later medieval visions, Barbara Nolan says:

For the character of their first-person narrator, . . . [these] writers depended either explicitly or implicitly, on the authoritative model of the prophet St. John, to whom the angel had said, "Write what you see on a scroll." These literary pilgrims shared with the evangelist the purpose of prophecy as defined by St. Thomas, "to instruct the human race in whatever is necessary for salvation." But they usually lack the privileged certainty of the scriptural prophets. Rutebeuf's visionary insists he is a "rude worker." Dante protests that he is neither Aeneas nor Paul. Langland's Will is "unholy of works." The desolate Pearl narrator's "wreched wylle" wars with reason. Echoing Boethius' forlorn philosopher, all these fictive pilgrims are portrayed as lethargic and self-ignorant, not chosen for vision because they are holy and elect but because they are Everyman in need of consolation and spiritual guidance. Alone they would not find heaven or the spiritual acuity proper to souls near the end of the Last Age.¹⁷⁷

In Piers Plowman, Will's wandering provides an ambiguous image of the kind of "positive" insecurity or uncertainty expected of one who, like the prophets, is open to the divine will and, in the C-Text, Langland makes sure that the reader sees this "positive" side of Will's wandering by connecting it explicitly with that of the "lunatic lollars."¹⁷⁸ This portrait is deliberately undercut, however, by ironic self-deprecation and by the implication that Will's wandering is a symbol of his indecision or waywardness.¹⁷⁹ The result is that we are left with a rich ambivalence. Langland never assigned to himself the grandiose, uncompromising role of God's prophet, but he certainly played with the idea and he expects his reader to play with it, too. His prophetic proclamations are no less earnest for that, however, and in the end Langland's self-portrait may be the most effective one. Hildegard's prophetic stance leaves little room for the kind of scepticism with which even in the Middle Ages the educated were taught to view visions.¹⁸⁰ Langland's prophetic self-image anticipates that and deals with it by ambiguously assenting to it, after which the sceptic, now disarmed, must allow for the possibility of prophetic wisdom from the mouth of a wayward fool.

III. Why Vision? Some Literary Aspects of Hildegard's Prophecy

The twelfth-century mystic, Richard of St. Victor, distinguished four types of vision: ordinary physical vision, physical vision of a supernatural significance (e.g. Moses' seeing of the burning bush), symbolic vision which gives the seer insight into spiritual

things through objects of the senses, and finally, anagogic or contemplative vision which is non-imagistic. As Dronke has pointed out, Hildegard's vision is clearly of the third or symbolic type.¹⁸¹ Retaining all her normal faculties of perception, she describes her vision as a seeing "in the soul":

The brightness that I see is not spatial, yet it is far, far more lucent than a cloud that envelops the sun. I cannot contemplate height or length or breadth in it; and I call it "the shadow of the living brightness." And as sun, moon and stars appear [mirrored] in water, so Scriptures, discourses, virtues, and some works of men take form for me and are reflected radiant in this brightness (trans. Dronke, p. 168).¹⁸²

Her mode of vision might be described as meditative rather than contemplative, symbolic rather than mystical.¹⁸³ As Rauh has said, Hildegard never sinks into timelessness. Her visions are totally involved in the concerns of the present day. She teaches through symbols and narrative, not through philosophical utterance. In a brief passage in Scivias Hildegard explains why God speaks to her as He does:

As long as mortal men are weighed down by the weight of their mortality, I [God] show myself to them in a darkening (obumbratione), just as a painter declares to men those things which are invisible through the images of his picture (III, 11, 28, 595ff.; Pent.).ⁿⁿ

Very early Hildegard realized that her vision was a special gift, but to medieval theorists of religious experience visions were not as exalted a gift as the contemplative non-imagistic variety of mystical experience.¹⁸⁴ This distinction should be of utmost importance to

modern scholars as well, although it is too often ignored. The visionary is too closely tied to this world by concerns for its problems to be helpfully identified with the contemplative. Lina Eckenstein finishes her chapter on Hildegard and Elizabeth of Schönau in Women Under Monasticism by stressing this distinction:

A later age witnessed other notable nuns who were divinely inspired and who were acknowledged to be so by their contemporaries, but, as we shall see later, their communings with God and the saints were chiefly directed to intensifying mystic and devotional feelings in themselves. They have neither the hold on outside events nor the wide outlook which give such a deep interest to the writings of Hildegard of Bingen and Elizabeth of Schönau (pp. 284-85).

What characterizes visionary writing is, as Northrop Frye has suggested, the visionary's special view of the objects of this world:

A visionary creates, or dwells in, a higher spiritual world in which the objects of perception in this one have become transfigured and charged with a new intensity of symbolism. This is quite consistent with art, because it never relinquishes the visualization which no artist can do without. It is a perceptive rather than a contemplative attitude of mind.¹⁸⁵

This notion is echoed by the Jewish theologian of prophecy, Abraham Heschel:

What makes the difference between the prophet and the ordinary person is the possession of a heightened and unified awareness of certain aspects of life.¹⁸⁶

For writers like Hildegard prophetic vision could be simply described as a special insight, visually perceived, into the meaning and course of

things and events, a capacity which is present to a greater or lesser extent in all human beings. This is suggested in her comment to the clergy of Cologne that anyone "who wishes to flee [the coming] calamities should guard against the dimming of his vision" (Ep. XLVIII c. 252B; not in Pent.). The perceptions of visionaries like Hildegard and Langland with respect to clerical corruption and church reform are in many ways simply thoughtful and impassioned extrapolations of the consequences of what they see around them. Visionaries, then, may be seen as comprising the "lowest" rank of those who have transcendental experiences. Theirs might be described as the "active" life of the supranaturally inclined. This position makes for certain kinds of literary characteristics in visionary writing, influencing form, content, style and, as we have seen, the visionary narrator's own stance, all of which are evident in both Hildegard's and Langland's works. It is to these literary features that we will turn now, but first some of the problems of this type of comparative study of two visionaries should be noted.

Vision literature, especially apocalyptic vision literature, represents an extremely "literary" type of writing in which texts feed off other texts and one suspects that "real" visionary experience, where it existed, is made subservient to literary convention at each turn. Early apocalyptic literature, which was by convention written in vision form, was unlike other types of biblical literature in that it immediately established itself as a written form.¹⁸⁷ "Write down what you see and hear" is the command given in all such works and their

visionary conventions have been propagated with all the tenacity of a literary tradition ever since. The problem that this presents in comparing two writers like Langland and Hildegard is that it is difficult to establish criteria for distinguishing the relating or even imitating of "real" vision from the exploitation of literary conventions. On the one hand, a self-acknowledged prophet like Hildegard can be seen to have made use of all the appropriate literary conventions and to exercise a great deal of control over the presentation of her vision in many of her prophetic passages. On the other hand, a more obviously literary writer like Langland can be seen in certain passages to manifest some of the features of an altered state of consciousness, of the kind we might associate with accounts of "real" visionary or dream experience (for example, in his use of abrupt and disjointed movement, sudden appearances and disappearances, and the like). Langland's use of such techniques even seems to go beyond the requirements of "dream realism,"¹⁸⁸ which sophisticated medieval writers so successfully mimicked. It is extremely difficult to know how to account for this, other than by concluding that even the self-acknowledged prophet could be greatly influenced by literary sources and that the poet could be influenced by spiritual or meditative experience. But perhaps it is better to approach the problem from a different point of view altogether (since we are never likely to know what experiences really formed the basis of such writing) and ask what, if anything, a close look at avowedly visionary literature, like Hildegard's, can teach us about dream vision allegory.

Both Langland and Hildegard used allegory extensively in creating the visual effects of their visions. Peter Dronke in his study of the rise of the religious lyric comments that "poetically, the finest allegory is closest to pure vision" (Medieval Lyric, p. 79). Speaking of one of Hildegard's own lyrics he comments on the "cascade of images" (p. 77) she uses to enrich the central theme of the poem in several directions at once, giving the work the kind of multi-valency which we see so often in Langland's use of images. This multi-valency is achieved in Hildegard's poetry, as in Langland's, through both a fluidity of syntax and of imagery (p. 77). This fluidity can be seen, for example, in these few stanzas from one of Hildegard's lyrics dedicated to St. Maximinus:

He, the swift hart
 ran up to the fountain
 of purest water bubbling from the mightiest stone
 whose moisture made the sweet perfumes flow.

You perfumers
 who live in the gentlest greenness
 of the king's garden,
 you who mount into the height
 when you have consummated
 the holy sacrifice among the rams,

Lucent among you
 is this architect, wall of the temple
 he who longed
 for an eagle's wings as he kissed
 his foster-mother, Wisdom,
 in Ekklesia's glorious fecundity!
 (trans. Dronke, Medieval Lyric, p. 76)

This fusion (and profusion) of imagery in Hildegard's lyrics "taken to an unparalleled visionary extreme" (p. 75), Dronke has elsewhere noted

as the main feature of Langland's most explicitly visionary vision, Will's dream of the Tree of Charity:

We can see, then, that what is new in Langland's vision lies not so much in the components as in the movement and structure: within his conjointure, certain combinations of motifs and images are original, or have dramatic force they had never had before. The scope of Langland's transgressions of known, systematic allegory, fusing traditional elements unpredictably, is startling. . . . Whether we view the transgressions as so many sins against an allegorical norm, or as imaginatively valid ways of stepping beyond that norm, is something each reader, in each context, must decide ("Arbor," p. 220).

Following Benjamin, a German critic who has written on baroque allegory, Dronke refers to this type of allegorical writing as "disordered scenery":

Benjamin--here thinking primarily of baroque rather than late medieval allegory--stresses an element of fluidity and unpredictability: "Around the figural centre . . . the whole mass of emblems groups itself. They seem capricious in their ordering: 'The disordered court'--the title of a Spanish tragedy--could be taken as indicating the scheme of allegory. The laws of this court are 'scattering' and 'gathering.' Things are gathered according to their signification; the lack of concern for their reality scatters them again" (Dronke, citing Benjamin, "Arbor," p. 208).

In order to illustrate the existence of this "disordered scenery" in medieval dream vision allegory, Dronke calls to witness a number of apocalyptic and visionary writers who make use of a similar fluidity of allegory in their visions.¹⁸⁹ It is interesting to note that the most successful of these comparisons with Langland are, I think, his studies of Ramon Lull (233ff.) and Joachim of Fiore

(216ff.),¹⁹⁰ as well as the second-century apocalypse Pastor Hermas (221ff.), all of which is perhaps a further indication that Langland's style has affinities with the apocalyptic vision tradition. Dronke's limitation of his discussion to passages dealing with tree imagery means that some more helpful comparisons, of necessity, may have been excluded, as in the case with his discussion of Hildegard.¹⁹¹

Hildegard's vision, which draws on literary conventions but also in places bears the marks of "vision realism" or of an altered state of consciousness, reflects this fluidity to a greater extent than Dronke's brief treatment of a single passage would suggest. Liebeschütz noted many years ago "her technique of joining loosely connected symbols together into a long chain or series which is organized around a central theme"¹⁹² was not uncommon in contemporary theology. Liebeschütz also noted the degree of originality and freedom with which Hildegard reworked traditional symbolism,¹⁹³ a point which Dronke also stresses in his discussion of Langland.

All this does not tell us exactly what the relationship is between allegory and vision, but it does suggest some common characteristics:¹⁹⁴ visionary writing is (or is expected to be) vividly visual, thus we have an abundance of images, which may or may not be worked into coherent allegory. We also have a fusion of these images in surprising ways and a tendency toward abrupt, disjointed movement between these fusions. Dream vision allegory also indulges in sudden appearances of unexplained or unintroduced characters or objects.

Add to this characteristics of apocalyptic writing like a strong dependence on typology¹⁹⁵ for explanations of past, present and future events--a dependence which allows for a blurring of distinctions between times, historical ages and places (this in itself contributing to a sense of "vision realism") and one has indeed a recipe for "disordered scenery." Finally, we have the contribution of biblical prophetic literature to visionary style which gives it its terse, aphoristic, unreasoning quality. The message of the vision is presented with the conviction of assertion, not suggestion. What seems to tie all these aspects together is the sense that they emanate from the intuitive rather than the logical perceptions of the writer,¹⁹⁶ as we shall see.

Many of these characteristics apply equally to "literary" (or more consciously-artificed) visions and to apocalyptic visions, but with the difference that the latter type of vision makes fewer concessions to the reader--or, to put it more bluntly--the author is less considerate of the difficulties which the reader might have in following the sense of the vision. (Some readers respond better than others to this type of treatment--Piers Plowman has certainly had its fair share of indignant reader-reaction). In fact, medieval visionary literature could be ranked in terms of difficulty from the least difficult type, the didactic vision, through the carefully-crafted literary type, to the most unpredictable, the apocalyptic variety. The didactic vision,¹⁹⁷ which is so popular in chronicles, sermons, and religious writings usually has a purely edificatory intent, while the

apocalyptic vision is highly polemical. In the latter, writers are free to be (and usually are) opinionated, partizan and "political" in what they say and this, too, will affect the literary character of the vision. Impassioned, "dark" and perhaps even written for an audience who will appreciate more of the covert allusions and inferences than we now can, this type of vision once again shows up as less comprehensible and coherent as further reasons for the disordering of the scenery are brought to bear upon it.

With these characteristics of apocalyptic vision in mind, let us now look at a few visionary passages from Hildegard's prophecies.¹⁹⁸ We have already had occasion to note Hildegard's use of disconnected imagery, abrupt shifts and blurring of time distinctions¹⁹⁹ and of images,²⁰⁰ as well as her tendency to play with key words as a way of emphasizing a theme.²⁰¹ We will now consider some of these characteristics associated with visionary writing in greater detail in a few short excerpts from Pentachron prophecies.

The first passage we will consider is taken from Hildegard's fiery letter to Pope Anastasius. Having rebuked him for the state of the clergy and the Church which he directs, she then breaks into an apocalyptic sequence:

The whole world is thrown into turbulence through great vicissitudes of errors, because man loves what God has destroyed. And you, O Rome, lying as if at the point of death (in extremis), will be so perturbed, that the strength of your feet on which you have thus far stood, will weaken, because you love the daughter of the King, that is, Justice, not with ardent love but as if in the torpor of sleep, so that you expell her from you, whence she wishes to flee from you, if you will not

call her back. But nevertheless the great mountains will reach out still to your aid, lifting you upwards, and the great trunks of great trees will support you, so that you will not be wholly destroyed and scattered in your honour as the Bride of Christ. But you will have some wings of your distinction until the snow may come, flinging forth many mockeries and insanities. Beware therefore that you do not wish to mix with pagan rites, lest you fall. Hear him who lives and will never cease: the world is now in wantonness, after it will be in sadness, later in terror, so that men may not care if they are killed. Now is sometimes the time of impudence, sometimes of contrition and sometimes of the lightning and thunder of diverse iniquities (Ep. II c. 152B-D; Pent.).⁰⁰

In this brief passage we see some of the fluidity of allegory of which Dronke spoke: Rome, the seat of the Church, is pictured as lying at the point of death, because it neglects Justice, the King's daughter, though there can be little reason for making this connection. A few lines later the Church is the Bride of Christ, but this image soon gives way to a vaguely angelic or bird-like image with the promise that it will retain some of the "wings of [its] distinction." In an abrupt and unexplained shift within the same sentence, Hildegard refers ominously to the coming snow which will fling out mockeries against these wings, ending the whole section with a warning against mixing with pagan rites, for which the reader is equally unprepared. All the elements of Hildegard's vision of the coming chastisement of the Church are here but they are couched in very obscure terms: the diseased state of the contemporary Church, the storm of the coming chastisement, the promise that a remnant will be saved--here symbolized as a remnant of the wings of its former distinction. Finally, the pagan rites must refer, as they do in her other prophecies, to the practice of simony. This is easy

enough to see after reading and studying several of Hildegard's prophecies, but one wonders what Pope Anastasius made of it. If we remember that correspondents received these letters singly and would not likely have had access to her other works, the problem of understanding Hildegard which Gebeno referred to takes on another dimension. This is a good example of the kind of visionary apocalyptic writing which is not particularly concerned to take the reader with it.

In the very apocalyptic and very striking image of the mountains and trees offering support to the faltering Church, if Rome will only try, Hildegard holds out hope in the midst of recrimination and despair. This rapid fluctuation between the poles of despair and hope is typical of prophetic literature;²⁰² authors of this kind of prophecy always seem to have some reserve of optimism to draw upon. Also typical is the envisioning of the sympathy or participation of the great forces of nature, a motif common to much biblical writing but especially to prophetic and apocalyptic literature, in which it serves to create a sense of the universal and contributes to the heightened, dramatic intensity which the writer so fervently wishes to convey.

Hildegard achieves this heightened, dramatic effect partly through her choice of diction, as well as through imagery. The lexis of the first section could only be described as apocalyptic: 'turbulence,' 'great vicissitude,' 'destroyed,' 'at the point of death,' 'perturbed,' and so on. The prophecy ends with two storm images (the coming of the snow flinging mockeries and insanities and, at the end of the passage, the time of lightning and thunder), as if to prove that the world has

indeed been thrown into turbulence.

The second section of the prophecy, which Hildegard separates from the first with one of her usual formulas "Now hear Him who lives . . .,"²⁰³ is again a shift in focus to futuristic prophecy: "the world is in wantonness, later it will be in sadness, afterwards in terror. . . ." The portrait of the future is appropriately vague and forboding, spoken with the terse, aphoristic quality that "doomsong" prophecy often has.²⁰⁴ This kind of prophecy with its dark and summary assessment of present and future time often caps off a larger prophetic section in medieval apocalyptic writings. This is one of the patterns which Langland picked up in his own prophetic passages, as, for example, he does at the end of the prophecy which itself forms the end of Passus III, "Ac ar this fortune falle fynde me shal the worste . . ." (line 477 and ff.).²⁰⁵ Although Langland himself did not write a great many prophecies, he certainly was familiar with the conventions of the genre, even some of the more subtle ones.

Abrupt shifts from the unexplained to the unexplained and a preoccupation with typology are recognizable features of an apocalyptic passage contained in one of Hildegard's most difficult letters. Properly speaking, the brief excerpt we will look at is not a prophecy at all, but an apocalyptic interpretation of the past, an attempt to 'organize' the past within the framework of Salvation History--a task which is just as important to the apocalyptic thinker as predicting the future. The letter is thought to have been written in response to the request of the monks of St. Martin's in Mainz for more information

concerning the Cathars, although Czarski does not think that the letter is genuine at all because of its total lack of internal explanation, which is odd for Hildegard.²⁰⁶ The subject of the heretics always brought forth her ire and, if the letter is genuine, this may account for the uninhibited and darkly obscure presentation of the prophecy.

The first part of the prophecy (Pitra, pp. 348-49; Pent.) draws on the Apocalypse for much of its imagery and content. It is very difficult to interpret, but if I am reading it correctly it seems that the first speakers, the twenty-four elders of Apoc. 4:4, articulate the impatience of heaven with the injustices of the world and in a number of scattered and imprecise allusions to St. John's vision they register their desire to get on with the process of doing what must be done in order to end the iniquities of the present. The elders know that they must wait until the "fulness of time," but their impatience, echoed by the cries later in the prophecy from the saints under the altar (Apoc. 6:9-11) that the sins of the people are violating their ashes, creates a strong sense of impending doom. Hildegard then moves to a discussion of her own times:

Indeed twenty and three years and four months there are since the four winds were moved through the four corners of corners in great destruction by the perverse works of men which were blown out from the mouth of the black beast when the same works ascended upon them: so that the East was blown by vicissitudes of bad behaviour and the West by blasphemy and obliviousness of God among His holy ones, through the fame of a calf and through the cult of idols, crucifying the holy sacrifice, and the South by wicked vices, and also Northern regions by phylacteries of vestments, enlarged according to the crooked serpent, which with the coming of all the aforesaid evils afterwards were contaminated.

But nevertheless sixty years and twenty-four months there are since the old serpent with phylacteries of vestments began to delude the people (p. 349).PP

The prophecy is obscure even for Hildegard, but the basic outline of it is clear enough. She begins by saying precisely how much time has elapsed since the winds of the world were moved by the perverse works of men to blow evil and destruction to all four corners of the earth.²⁰⁷ When the ill wind blew, the West incurred clerical negligence ("blasphemy and obliviousness of God among His holy ones") and idolatry ("through the fame of a calf . . ."), for Hildegard a typological symbol of simony. The North is blown by "phylacteries of vestments, enlarged according to the crooked serpent." This is the kind of detail which would have allowed Hildegard's anti-heretical prophecies to have been read later in the Middle Ages as antimendicant literature. The reference seems to be to Matt. 23:5, in which Christ describes the behaviour of the Pharisees:

And all their works they do to be seen of men, for they make their phylacteries broad and enlarge their fringes.

The Pharisees are the second branch of forerunners of Antichrist in Hildegard's typology, coming after the worshippers of Baal and before the heretics themselves, the subject of the present letter. However, Hildegard's wording of this line is very odd and suggests either some confusion²⁰⁸ on her part or a deliberate attempt to "darken" what, for any clerical audience, must have been a fairly recognizable allusion. Phylacteries were small scrolls of the Commandments which

were worn by the Jews on the forehead, as if to indicate that the wearer was always meditating on the law. Christ charges in Matt. 23:5 that the Pharisees make their phylacteries bigger to draw attention to their supposed piety. They also enlarge the fringes of their capes. Therefore Hildegard's "phylacteries of vestments, enlarged according to the crooked serpent" would seem to be a conflation of the phylacteries and fringes. However, the allusion is enough to point cryptically to the Pharisees (or Sadducees) and heretics.

The typology, however, is used here as allegory.²⁰⁹ Hildegard implies that since 1139 all three of these groups of forerunners of Antichrist have been loosed on the world through the perverse works of men. In so doing she uses the typological figures in such a way that time distinctions are blurred and all the historical figures of evil are seen to be present at once in the age she elsewhere described as "the worst"--her own.

Perhaps the point of most significance about this passage is that it illustrates the apocalypticist's particular use of typology. Typological figures in this kind of prophecy are spilled forth with little or no attempt to explain their significance and with no concessions to history, circumstance or place. They are allegorical images and it is expected that the reader will understand their significance. The darkness with which they are shrouded imparts a sense of foreboding and otherworldliness which is just what the prophet wants. The fact that Hildegard does not give an explicit interpretation for this prophecy, rather than being a sign that the prophecy is not

genuine, as Czarski suggested, may indicate that she knew the recipient(s) of the letter would need no such explanation. The main lines of the prophecy would have been clear enough to a clerical audience with some knowledge of current reform literature or of Hildegard in other writings.²¹⁰ The fine points would have seemed obscure and enigmatic, no doubt, but as Gebeno says in his commentary to the Pentachron, this style is the reader's assurance that the prophecy is the product of the true finger of God!

Denunciation of evil was as much a part of the prophet's job as the elaboration of the scheme of salvation history or the prediction of future events. A passage which gives us "visionary denunciation of ecclesiastical abuse" in its purest form is a brief excerpt from one of Hildegard's many diatribes against the avarice of the clergy. She employs the traditional allegory of the wolf and sheep, used so widely among clerical reformers, in this very visual description of ecclesiastical abuse of power:

But perverse mercenaries, on account of avarice of money, prostrate my little ones in the valleys and prevent them from ascending to the hills and mountains. They separate from them their wealth, inheritance, property and nobility, just as rapacious wolves do, who lie in ambush for the footsteps of the sheep. The sheep which they attack, they tear, and those which they are not able to tear, they put to flight and by crafty deception my poor ones through greater judges and through iniquitous tyrants they devour (LD0, c. 1006D-1007A; Pent.)⁹⁹

The most memorable image of the passage is not the commonplace wolf image (although it must be said that Hildegard's use of it is particularly violent),²¹¹ but the claim that the avarice of the

clergy "prostrates" the little ones "in the valleys and prevents them from ascending to the hills and mountains," giving a strikingly visual form to an abstract concept. This brief allegorical image--not even complete as allegory--is typical of the seemingly unpremeditated visionary imagery one comes to expect from writers like Langland and Hildegard. These "momentary flowerings of allegorical visualization," as Derek Pearsall has called them,²¹² can be picked up and abandoned with amazing agility and often involve a mixing of the literal or the non-imagistic and the allegorical. There is, for example, no allegorical connection between the mercenarii and the casting down of the little ones into the valleys, but, one senses, this is not important. It is the ever-fluctuating wave of imagery and visual ideas which creates the special effect of this type of visionary writing, which often seems to be as much an outlet for passion as a form of literary art for the indignant writer.

Having seen much of the dark, angry, embittered side of Hildegard's prophetic writing, it is only fair to finish this brief look at some of the literary aspects of her work with one of her most lyric prophecies of assurance. The basic reason for the assurance and hope offered in this prophecy is no doubt that it occurs in the PVSD, written, as we have seen, for and at the request of the monks of her former monastery of St. Disibodi. In her prophetic writing both to the monks of Disibodenberg and to her own nuns at Rupertsberg, Hildegard always exercises a care and tenderness which we see little of in her letters to other clerical groups. For example, in the Epilogus Ad Vitam

S. Ruperti, written to her own congregation of nuns, she assures them that in the coming clerical tribulation they will be preserved, "But your home, O my daughters, God will not destroy" (Pitra, p. 363; Pent.).

The main passage from the PVSD is assuring in another sense. Piehler, in his study of medieval visionary narrative poetry, found that such literature "offers the reader a chance to participate in a process of psychic redemption,"²¹³ the dream vision usually taking the form of a description of a journey, cycle or learning process of some kind. Piers Plowman is obviously a classic example of this type of vision, but in Hildegard's short prophetic passages we are offered nothing comparable to this type of narrative process. There is a sense in which, however, Hildegard's chronicling of present and future spiritual "history" performs something of the same function. We have noted before that the new apocalyptic schemes which concentrated on highlighting the pattern of events and their spiritual significance before the End arose out of a sense that contemporary man needed to know of his participation in his destiny. The very knowledge of what lies ahead, narrated in graphic detail and coupled with denunciation of the sins of the present, could provide a kind of crisis of experience or encounter with conscience for the credulous and stimulate a change of heart, in much the same way (to use the same analogy again) as Dickens employed an encounter with the future in A Christmas Carol. In the following passage from the PVSD Hildegard says as much herself: she is aware that her prophecies, in delimiting the times of evil and good, not only provide reassurance, but also provide a kind of speculum in which

the spiritually aware will see the coming wrath and prepare to flee it:

The time of pressure and destruction, namely of that weight, by which the grapes will be pressed in the winepress, is not as yet come. But nevertheless now is the worst time, therefore look to former times and consider how honourable they were, defend yourselves from your enemies and may God assist you in order that He does not reject you.

The time of good intentions and conversations will come and they will look toward the first dawn and they will relinquish the world then for love, and pant after God and persevere in goodness.

And then concerning these it will be said by a clear voice of the people in the Holy Spirit, "The voice of the turtle is heard in our land" (Cant. 2:12). That is the voice of the hermits and pilgrims of this world, so strongly looking to heaven, and wishing to go the narrow way which leads there. And all these things past and finished, which were both prosperous and adverse, they watch, in order that they may be aware how the violent hawk may snatch them away, in the same way as the dove flees from him, when he has seen him in the mirror of the water (Pitra, 356-57; Pent.).^{rr}

There is little here in the way of denunciation of abuse (Hildegard clearly thought it was not necessary), but there is gentle advice and warning mixed with the assurance that she offers. The prophecy maintains a perfect balance between authoritative pronouncement and a sense of intuitive fluidity. Allegorical images "flower" and fall away swiftly, like the image of the winepress or the first dawn, while some suggest only the seeds of allegory in one word, for example, "they will . . . pant after God," an allusion to Psalm 41:

As the hart panteth after the fountains of water: so my soul panteth after thee, O God. My soul hath thirsted after the strong living God: when shall I come and appear before the face of God? (verses 2-3).

Symbols of hope abound in this passage: Hildegard speaks not only of the first dawn, but of love and of springtime in her allusion to Cant. 2:

My beloved is like a roe or a young hart . . . Arise, make haste, my love, my dove, my beautiful one, and come: For winter is now past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers have appeared in our land: the time of pruning is come: the voice of the turtle is heard in our land (verses 9-12).

The context of this quotation, which Hildegard would have expected the monks to recognize immediately, probably prompted some of the other symbols in the prophecy, like that of the dove, while the hart of Psalm 41 may have in turn prompted the Canticles verse itself.

Like Langland, Hildegard "speaks Bible,"²¹⁴ and the Scriptures supply a rich fund of material for the movement by association from image to image which is an identifiable characteristic of the "vision realism" of this type of writer. Hildegard's technique of joining loosely connected symbols together around a central theme was thought by Liebeschütz to stem from her reading of contemporary theology, but there is no doubt that it serves to add a visionary quality to her work. The central theme in this passage is surely the often repeated motif of watching or looking for something: the imperative aspicite comes near the beginning of the passage and the same verb is repeated twice more, along with forms of considerare, inspicere and videre. To Hildegard, for whom everything spiritual was visually perceived ("as sun, moon and stars appear [mirrored] in water, so Scriptures, discourses, virtues, and some works of men take form and are

reflected radiant in this brightness"),²¹⁵ her prophecies also provided a speculum for others who were willing to look, like the dove hovering over the water. The emphasis on looking for or watching for something creates and articulates the sense of expectation which characterizes prophecy itself, but in this passage it has a still richer meaning. The pilgrims and hermits of this world are not just watching in the negative sense of 'watching out,' they are also 'looking for' in the positive sense of yearning or seeking: "they will look toward the first dawn . . . and pant after God . . . so strongly looking to heaven and wishing to go the narrow way. . . ." Hildegard captures in the duality of this central image, the duality of the visionary experience which encompasses both a horrifying awareness of future doom as well as an equally strong awareness of the possibility of spiritual renewal.

In this prophecy Hildegard once again anticipates Joachim of Fiore²¹⁶ in the fervor of this hope for an "age of the Spirit" and also in the special place she reserves for hermits, those who are "clothed with the secrets of God" (Ep. LI c. 261) and pilgrims, those who realize that this world is not their true home. The lines of the prophecy are basically the same as all the other Hildegardean visions we have looked at, but the tone and style and emphasis differ remarkably. Hildegard obviously tailored her writings to her audience, but she also shows an amazing flexibility of vision. No matter how many times she laid out her apocalyptic scheme, there were new images and new emphases to renew each telling. Some of the discrepancies of detail we find in the prophecies of visionaries like Langland and Hildegard are no doubt

attributable both to the fertility of imagery and to the passion with which their meditations on the feared and the desired things of the future carried them between the poles of hope and despair.

The question we asked before looking at these few passages of Hildegard's from a literary point of view was what, if anything, the writings of a "professional" or "real" visionary like Hildegard teach us about dream vision allegory, as it is manifested in a poem like Piers Plowman? That these are two distinct types of writing is immediately evident and no one would wish to push any comparison too far, but I think that it is obvious that they have many characteristics in common--stylistic and literary characteristics as well as attitudinal and ideological ones. Perhaps the main literary characteristic could be described as a certain looseness or freedom with imagery, a freedom which seems to spring from passion of soul and fertility of imagination, sometimes even from an exhilarating or impatient bursting of the bonds of reason. Peter Dronke characterized this freedom or looseness with imagery as a fluidity of allegory, which it definitely is, although the word "fluidity" may disguise the fact that the images shift abruptly and disjointedly as often as they move "fluidly" or gracefully. The point is that they often do move quickly and there are a great many of them and that we do not often get this type of vividly visual, imagistically indulgent allegorical writing in many other authors.

We do not and can not know whether Langland had "visionary" (i.e. spiritual) experiences, as Hildegard claimed to have. What we can and perhaps must assume is that he learned to write the way he does in

certain passages from reading apocalyptic vision literature. This type of literature would not, of course, be the only source for his visionary style--scholars have firmly established the place of the thirteenth-century French dream vision literature, for example, among sources for the tradition in which Langland writes--but I will suggest that apocalyptic vision literature accounts for some of the darker, looser, more "fluid" aspects of his writing, aspects which we do not see in the artistically controlled visionary style of the Pearl poet or the delightful dream mimicry of Chaucer. There is a sense of movement by intuitive perception in Langland's visionary writings which we must turn elsewhere to find a model for.

* * * * *

One of the main purposes of this thesis is to place Piers Plowman against a background of vision literature which denounces religious abuse and urges reform in much the same spirit as Langland does. As we have seen, apocalyptic vision literature such as Hildegard writes can provide this background. Aside from the literary characteristics we have just noted, we also looked at similarities between Hildegard's and Langland's writing in the areas of attitude and ideology. Summarizing these briefly we have found similar concerns with the corruption of the clergy, the possibility of disendowment, the role of the Church in future history, questions of clerical lifestyle (especially the ideal of clerical poverty), and a similar idealizing of a return to the ways of the early Church. There are also similarities in what could only be described as distinctly apocalyptic attitudes

toward life: a sense of determinism, the belief in divine retribution through natural and humanly-caused disasters, pessimism about the present and optimism for some future period of spiritual renewal, the projecting of apocalyptic programmes far into the future, a sense of world history as swinging between corruption and reform, and perhaps most important of all, a rejection by both writers of the traditional Augustinian view of a world which only worsens towards its end--a characteristic which in itself is sufficiently rare among medieval thinkers to alert us to Langland's reformist apocalyptic contacts.

Although we cannot make a point by point comparison of these two very different writers, and although we cannot prove that Langland ever read any of Hildegard's works, the similarities between Hildegard and the apocalyptic tradition she represents, on the one hand, and certain ideas and kinds of writing in Piers Plowman on the other, make a convincing case for the welcome of apocalyptic reformist writing into the small, but ever increasing number of distinct types of literature which can illuminate our understanding of Langland's powerful and enigmatic poetry.

CHAPTER II

PIERS PLOWMAN AND THE NORTHERN EUROPEAN VISIONARY TRADITIONIntroduction

In 1513 the philosopher and theologian Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples published the Liber trium virorum & trium spiritualium virginum as part of his campaign to make medieval spiritual works available to a larger public (Rice, p. 91). The three women whose works he had chosen to represent were Hildegard, Elizabeth of Schönau and Mechthild of Hackenborn (1242-99); the three works he chose by men were the second century The Shepherd of Hermas, the ninth century Visio Wettini by Hatto, abbot of Reichenau,¹ and the visions of the Dominican Robert of Uzès, who died in 1296. All six works were visions or revelations and it is clear that Lefèvre had a strong sense that they formed a literary and spiritual tradition. It is also clear that he felt that the publication of visions required some justification, or even defense, especially the publication of visions by women:

He reminded his readers that angels and the Holy Spirit, not men, had given all three women their visions, and attacked the "proud audacity and audacious pride" of their detractors. "Will they deny such revelations," he asked "because they themselves have never experienced them? Will the owl dispute with the eagle about the radiance of the sun and moles deny the beauty of the day?" (Rice, p. 92).

In what follows I would like to explore a virtually uncharted area of medieval literary history, that controversial and idiosyncratic

medieval genre, the religious vision. The only thing which prevents this from becoming the subject of a thesis in itself is the severe restrictions I have placed on the topic as it is treated here. I hope that it is not so restricted as to be misleading, for in trying to select a part of the prophetic visionary tradition which could have been relevant to Langland, far more had to be left out than could be included. Among later medieval prophetic visionaries who share Langland's reform ideology, (what may be called) the Southern European tradition had to be virtually eliminated as being unlikely to have been known in fourteenth-century England. Gordon Leff delineated this group of visionaries in a chance remark about St. Catherine of Siena in his Prologue to Heresy in the Later Middle Ages:

St. Catherine was in the spiritual tradition of intense fervour and visionary denunciation of ecclesiastical abuses associated with Conrad of Offida (1237-1306), John of Parma (1209-88), Jacopone da Todi (1228-1306) Angelo of Clareno (1247-1337) and Angelo of Foligno (1248-1309) (Leff, Heresy, p. 32)² [emphasis mine].

Almost nothing has been written on these Southern European visionary writers as visionaries, but the Northern European visionary tradition is even worse off because it has never even been postulated, so far as I know. The influence of Hildegard, who must be viewed as the mentor of almost all Northern European visionaries, has never been traced³ and what is offered here is really at best an attempt to sift out a meaningful sense of the development of a Northern European visionary prophetic tradition which might have been known in fourteenth-century England.

The best candidates for this tradition are, I believe, Robert of Uzès, John of Rupescissa and Bridget of Sweden. John of Rupescissa will be considered in the next chapter because his explicitly visionary writings do not seem to have been known in Britain in the same way as his Vade Mecum was--and this is best read as a Joachite work. Even the Vade Mecum, however, which is really an abbreviated outline of John's prophetic ideology, shows signs of his visionary orientation in its use of imagery.⁴ Robert of Uzès and Bridget of Sweden will be considered here, then, as the followers of Hildegard in urging prophetic reform through an explicitly visionary medium.

The second section of this chapter involves a study of some literary and visionary features of "classic" apocalypses, once again those which were known to medieval England: the Apocalypse of Esdras (or Ezra), the Revelation of John and The Shepherd of Hermas. Although it is difficult to say for certain that Langland was influenced by the apocalyptic form, some of the formal and stylistic parallels between the apocalypses and Piers Plowman are striking, especially in the area of the role of the visionary within the vision.

The third section of the chapter deals with some of the theories, literary conventions and attitudes prevalent in the Middle Ages with regard to visions, with a view to what evidence we have in Piers Plowman that Langland was aware of these. While scholars have concentrated on the parallels between Piers Plowman and other medieval literary dream visions, virtually no work has been done on trying to relate the poem to the medieval religious vision tradition. This final

section makes a start in this direction.

There is much medieval writing which could be called "visionary" which is not considered or even represented in this chapter. It seems only fair to outline briefly the types of visions which have been excluded. The most obvious type not included here is the literary dream vision of Middle English writers like Chaucer and the Pearl poet, or the earlier French dream allegories. Critics have given us many studies in this area and there seems little need to tackle the problem afresh here. In the final section we will look at some of the distinctions between literary and "real" religious visions, but the emphasis throughout this chapter is on the apocalyptic and religious vision tradition as background to Piers Plowman.

Another group of writers who could well have been included in a study of the medieval vision are the visionary mystics of the period. These are not at first easy to distinguish from visionary prophets, but there are profound differences in point of view between the two groups. The operative distinction is between vision and contemplation: visionary experience may sometimes be meditative but it is never contemplative. The visionary experience often explodes with visual imagery, the mystical experience seeks always to surpass images and do without them.⁵ However, there are a few mystics who tend toward the visionary side of religious experience, for example, Mechthild of Magdeburg, Ramon Lull, Jacopone da Todi and Ubertino da Casale. Certain stylistic features of their works make it tempting to associate such writers with Langland,⁶ but it is difficult to prove that Langland could have come in contact

with most of them. The mystical tradition native to England positively discouraged visionary experience⁷ and so it is not surprising that there is no real British visionary tradition to speak of in this study.

Among medieval prophetic writers there was a tendency to refer to any kind of cryptic prediction as a revelation or a "vision." Many of these writings are patently not visions in any meaningful sense of the word and so this is another group of "visions" which will be excluded from this chapter. It might be helpful here to give an example of this type of "revelation." The "Cedar of Lebanon Vision," a very popular religious prophecy which survives in countless MSS, provides a good instance of a pseudo-vision.⁸ Supposedly revealed to a Cistercian monk during mass, the vision is nothing more than a prophecy written in the usual prophetic idiom:

The high Cedar of Lebanon will be felled. Mars will prevail over Saturn and Jupiter. Saturn will waylay Jupiter in all things. Within eleven years there will be one God and one monarchy. The second god has gone. The sons of Israel will be liberated from captivity. A certain people called "without a head," or reputed to be wanderers, will come. Woe to the clergy! A new order thrives: if it should fall, woe to the Church! There will be many battles in the world. There will be mutations of faith, of laws, and of kingdoms. The land of the Saracens will be destroyed (Lerner, Powers, p. 16).

Visionary status could be claimed for almost any type of prophecy if the circumstances of revelation were appropriate. Speaking of Theodorus, another "pseudo-visionary" prophet of the late Middle Ages, Lerner writes:

The visionary route was the one taken by Theodorus, probably in imitation of the visions of Hildegard of Bingen. Ultimately, visionary prophecy had its origins in the Bible. Just as God granted knowledge of future events by means of visions and transports vouchsafed to Daniel and John of Patmos, so it was thought that he continued to do so for saints such as Hildegard and Bridget and for specially chosen monks, hermits, and even laymen. Thus medieval prophecies often begin with a prologue explaining that the course of the future was made clear in a vision granted to the prophet while he or she was lying in bed (sometimes a sickbed), participating in mass, or reading psalms. If the setting seemed right and the prophet worthy, the vision might be widely accepted. . . (Lerner, "Dissent," p. 9).

As we shall see, the appropriateness of the setting and of the prophet was of utmost importance in claiming visionary status. In assessing visionary credibility, the medieval mind seemed far more concerned with these external aspects than with internal criteria of the message itself.

Finally, a distinction should be made between the prophetic and the non-prophetic religious vision. Visions which treat topics like the welfare of a certain soul in purgatory or conversion experiences of individuals were extremely common in the Middle Ages, especially among regular clergy and devout layment.⁹ The final section of this chapter deals with religious visions in general, but for the most part our concern here is with apocalyptic vision, that is, visions which are directed to a wider audience than the individuals who receive them and which, generally, have some kind of polemical purpose or motivation--visions like those of Robert of Uzès, Bridget of Sweden, the authors of the "classic" apocalypses and, finally, in many ways, like those of Langland.

My working definition of a visionary writer, which should perhaps be offered here in the absence of anything better, falls into two parts or criteria. First, such a writer records the ideas presented to him by his religious experience in a vividly visual fashion. The images may arise from the process of creative problem-solving, in meditation or in real (or feigned) religious experience and may be susceptible to quick shifts and changes or even to total obliteration because of the way the mind works.¹⁰ But however the images are arrived at--and this is the second criterion--they must be intrinsic to the writer's mode of thinking, not simply a form of ornamentation. A visionary writer usually dramatizes in imagistic terms what he or she is trying to say--allegory is thus, par excellence, the visionary mode--and Langland is thus a profoundly visionary writer. Most of the writers we will look at in this chapter do not share Langland's poetic skills, but to a great extent they all share his visual way of thinking and his spiritually-charged perspective on the world. It is hoped that their presence in this thesis chapter will prove that vision literature is not simply the preserve of poets and that the religious visionary tradition is also part of the literary legacy which produced Piers Plowman.

I. Visionary Denunciation of Ecclesiastical Abuse: The Northern European Tradition

In this section I want to look at two visionary apocalyptic writers who seem to be direct descendents of Hildegard's visual prophetic line. Similarities in ideology are the most obvious points of comparison between this "school" of writers and Langland's own prophetic

brand of vision, but from a literary point of view there is also a similarity in the use that each of these writers makes of what Northrop Frye calls an apocalyptic grammar of images. While the choice of images often differs from visionary to visionary, the effect created when such a writer is working from an archetypal gathering of imagery does not. It is hoped that this study will give some sense of the tradition of the non-literary allegorical vision (aesthetically undistinguished as it often is) which was available to Langland.

The similarities between this Northern European visionary prophetic "school" and Piers Plowman make it obvious that Langland must have known something of this type of literature, but it is not the purpose of this thesis to argue for the influence of any particular work or author on Piers Plowman. So far as I know, this is the only study even to have postulated a Northern European apocalyptic visionary tradition --time may well reveal other visionary writers in this "school" more deserving of comparison with Langland, but I hope that this brief look at Robert of Uzès and Bridget of Sweden will provide some sense of an alternative tradition of visionary writing, one which urges reform in an apocalyptic manner just as Langland does.

Robert of Uzès

Any attempt to trace the course of the apocalyptic visionary mantle which Hildegard bequeathed to the Middle Ages should take in the brief writings of the Dominican, Robert of Uzès. Robert is usually described as "little-known" (when he is described at all) by modern

scholars,¹¹ but it would seem that he was not as obscure a figure in his own time. In fact, his visions seem to have enjoyed a certain vogue from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century.¹² Jeanne Bignami-Odier, who edited Robert's slender works in 1955, first drew attention to him as one of two visionaries (Hildegard being the other) who had greatly influenced John of Rupescissa.¹³ Since Joachim of Fiore is virtually the only prophetic figure whose influence has thus far been traced by modern scholars, Mme Bignami-Odier's short study of Robert appears as an oasis in a scholarly desert. As she has shown, Robert must have been considered a man of some importance during his own lifetime. Having become a priest as a young man, Robert did not join a religious order until 1292, after he had received many of the visions which he records in the Liber Visionum.¹⁴ But even by the time of his profession he seems to have attained a degree of recognition within his order.¹⁵ No less an authority than Bernard Gui devoutly recorded Robert's death in 1296:

He was a man in the bloom of youth, full of the Spirit of God; the Lord revealed many things to him and he predicted future events which came to pass. The day and hour of his death in the infirmity by which he died he predicted to his companion, as I have heard from that same friar.^{16/a}

This note by Bernard Gui certainly sets a seal of orthodoxy upon Robert's radical reforming zeal, providing us with another example of how surprisingly well controversial prophecy could be tolerated within the Church.

In the second half of the fourteenth century the English

chronicler Henry of Herford recounted a miracle which occurred at Robert's funeral, noting first that Robert had predicted the general pestilence thirty years¹⁷ before its occurrence:

Whence among other things he has said: The Spirit of the Lord has spoken in me, saying: Go to him who guides my dove and go to the cardinals [literally 'poles'] of the earth and say to them that unless they renounce avarice and simony so many deaths will follow that a stream of blood will flow from sepulchres. And that did happen in Avignon at the time of the general pestilence.^{18/b}

Henry goes on to explain that when many thousands (multa millia) of bodies were placed in one sepulchre, a great rain so compressed them that a stream of blood flowed into the fields. Any prophet who could be seen to have genuinely predicted the great plague of 1348 was, in the latter half of the fourteenth century, destined for some degree of popularity even outside apocalyptic circles, and this is certainly true of Robert.

His prophecies seem to have influenced some fourteenth and fifteenth-century reformers,¹⁹ among whom was Venturino de Bergamo, who in turn influenced Saint Vincent Ferrer, one of the most important apocalyptic figures of the fifteenth century. John of Rupescissa was obviously very impressed with some of Robert's apocalyptic motifs, particularly his angelic pope figure, as well as his many attacks on ecclesiastical corruption.²⁰ John even tries to imitate Robert's style, just as Robert tried to imitate Hildegard's, as we shall see. From a literary point of view the sense of visionary tradition and convention in these prophets is just as obvious as their doctrinal and

ideological similarities.

The question of the dissemination and influence of Robert's works is a vexed one. During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, when the popularity of apocalyptic collections and compilations reached its zenith, Robert persistently appears with his better-known fellows of the prophetic company: Hildegard, Joachim, John of Rupescissa, St. Vincent and others.²¹ In spite of the comparative lack of MS evidence for the circulation of Robert's works in the fourteenth century, it seems unlikely to me that Robert was "rediscovered" during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, but rather that Robert's works are similar to those of virtually every other prophetic figure in that we have suffered more losses among earlier MSS than later ones. The Augustian friar John Erghome (d. 1385), author of the John of Bridlington commentary and avid collector of prophetic material at York, owned a MS which contained prophetia Roberti de Usecio, which has not survived to the present day.²² Since some MSS of Robert's works circulated anonymously (Bignami-Odier, p. 271) and since his writings are short and thus more likely to be embedded in a collection than to stand on their own, it is no wonder that we know of so few today. So many medieval Latin MSS are still so poorly catalogued that evidence of the survival of shorter prophetic works like Robert's comes largely by chance.²³ It will be some time yet before we will be able to say exactly how well Robert was known in fourteenth-century England (or anywhere else, for that matter), but he provides an important link in the apocalyptic visionary tradition, and more specifically, the tradition of visionary

denunciation of ecclesiastical abuse, which should be unfolded as background to Piers Plowman.

Robert's Visionary Prophecy of Reform

Robert's prophecies show all the classic hallmarks of reform apocalyptic.²⁴ His concern is primarily for the decay of the Church and for its coming humiliation, which he predicts over and over again. Central to this concern is the figure of a pope whom he portrays as a papa angelicus, a humble, poorly dressed "man of sorrows," a stranger to the glitter, pomp and intrigue of the papal curia. Robert was clearly much affected by the events of 1294-1296, which saw the eventual abdication of the holy hermit pope Celestine V and the enthronement of "one of the least spiritual men to hold the papal office," Boniface VIII.²⁵ The episode gave rise to quite a prophetic legacy because Celestine and Boniface provided apocalyptic reformers with the most dramatically opposed images of pope and anti-pope that history could possibly have produced. Many of Robert's visions are peopled with these two powerful figures, while also reflecting the characteristic anti-intellectualism, anti-materialism and sense of the presence of Antichrist in the contemporary Church. Also characteristic of this type of apocalyptic thought is his persistent focussing on the crisis of leadership and the marking out of a special group or order as forerunners or embodiments of Antichrist, in Robert's case, the heretical Saccante.

Let us begin by looking at one of Robert's visions of the "angelic pope" figure. The reader will be struck immediately by how

much the vision reads like an account of a real dream and yet, at the same time, the evidence it shows of attention to allegorical structure:

In the same place I saw in a dream that I was with my oldest brother and sister. While we were walking we came to a door and heard the words: "The pope is inside, if you wish to see him." We entered and kissed his feet as he stood on the ground. I was amazed that he would sit upon the ground and looked upon his short narrow bed with its very poor covering. I said: "Why is it, Father, that you have such a poor bed? The poorest of the poor bishops of the world would not have a meaner one." The pope said to me, "We must be humbled." Suddenly we were on our way down a mountain and I saw him in the habit of the Friars Minor. I fell upon my face and kissed his naked foot; then I held him up on the right side. As we began to ascend the mountain, I held the pope up on the left side and a secular priest supported him on the right. While we ascended, the pope began to limp badly so that he would not have been able to go up had we not carried him. While we carried him, we entered a hospice at the top of the mountain; there were kettles and pots there, but the fire was out. We glanced all around and saw no one, but when we entered we looked in a small place as through a window and saw some women looking at the pope. He lifted up his hand and blessed them.²⁶

The many elements of dreamlikeness, as for example, the mention of being with a brother and sister²⁷ or simply hearing the words, "The pope is inside, if you wish to see him" without seeing or being introduced to the speaker, are striking enough that one suspects that the vision, as it is written, does have its roots in a real dream. The sudden and unexplained shift of location and sense of arbitrariness or lack of direction (where were they going? and why?) contribute to the dream world effect, an effect which we see in certain passages in Piers Plowman.

And yet, the imagery in places suggests allegory, and not

entirely artless allegory either: "As we began to ascend the mountain, I held the pope up on the left side and a secular priest supported him on the right." This vision must have been written after Robert had joined the Dominican order, because he distinguishes himself from the secular priest and they are both, obviously, symbols of the two groups of clergy, secular and regular, who should be helping the crippled Church (or the Head of the Church) in the uphill struggle towards reform. The meanness of the pope's personal appearance and living conditions suggest Robert's idealization of the figure as a kind of vicarious sufferer, a Christ-like man of sorrows who has taken upon himself the sins of the clergy. But in accordance with Robert's view of the current spiritual crisis, we note that the pope is crippled and that one of the last images is of a fire that has died out,²⁸ although all the utensils are ready and waiting. The dream ends as abruptly as it began with the seemingly arbitrary image of some women gazing at the pope from a window and his hand raised in blessing. The whole vision conveys a sense of poverty, emptiness and struggle which is more than the sum of its confused parts.

How much we are justified in reading into this kind of vision is open to question--it is not, after all, a literary work, but allegory and dream vision convention are certainly built into the written version of the vision, which is, of course, all we have, whatever the original source of the experience may have been.

We will look briefly at two more of Robert's visions which deal with images of the unfortunate hermit pope. In Vision 18 (Bignami-

Odier, pp. 281-82) Robert dreams that he is before the papal chamber and is met by three cardinals in humble habit, and ushered in to see the pope, who greets him warmly and emotionally. Robert notes that "he was dressed in grey and sat under a small oven (?fornello) on a broken seat next to his tiny straw bed, which was poorly covered."^C The Spirit of God interprets the dream for Robert, upon his waking up, and explains that these things signify the future humiliation of the Church. The dream is a mixture of contemporary history and prophetic fantasy: the three cardinals in humble habits are clearly the three to whom Celestine V had entrusted the affairs of papal government,²⁹ but they also represent Robert's idealization of a reformed papal court. The humiliation of the Church seems to refer to both the Celestine/Boniface scandal and the coming chastisement which Robert predicts in other visions.

Vision 34 (Bignami-Odier, p. 286) deals with the same images, but is even more chaotic and dreamlike. Robert dreams, while softly sleeping between the two bells for Prime, that he is taken in the spirit to Rome and enters an old palace of which the southern part is decayed. There he sees men dressed in gold and silks carrying rich garments and ornaments for the pope to wear. After a series of disordered events and details, the pope praises Robert for having entered "that order." The vision ends with the following:

Taking me by the hand he lead me towards the east. Those who were with me began to say, "we will wait for you". And he said, "He does not need you, he is with the pontiff." And I went into a room of wood and suddenly the vestments of his glory

were stripped away and he remained beardless in a black garment, vile and ancient, with only an old cap on his head, both of which were soaked in sweat. He ordered me to sit to the left of him on a basket or chest. And I would not, but sat before his eyes on a low seat, lacerated by the teeth of dogs, and made of linen and animal skin.^d

The dramatic stripping away of papal vestments and the return to the vile clothing and furnishings, which are so common a motif in Robert's papa angelicus visions, seem here to be a reversal of the other visions in which the pope is found initially and willingly in humble attire. Mme Bignami-Odier despairs of this vision as a hopeless mixture of memories of the Celestine/Boniface scandal (n. 54, pp. 286-87),³⁰ but it seems more likely to me that the whole vision refers to the coming humiliation of the proud papacy (no doubt embodied realistically enough for Robert by Boniface at the time of writing). Several details would seem to refer expressly to Boniface,³¹ and the expensive garments are not voluntarily put off, as one would expect of a Celestine figure, but are suddenly stripped off (subitoque exutus est vestimentis glorie illius) by an unnamed agent. The vile clothing and furnishings may well be reminiscent of the hermit pope,³² but there is an entirely different tone to this vision which suggests that this is what the papacy will be reduced to, unwillingly, in the coming humiliation. This interpretation is entirely consistent with the views expressed in the radical Joachite-Franciscan prophecies with which Robert's own prophecies are usually associated,³³ and it suggests, once again, a certain artfulness in Robert's apparent artlessness. The vision is more consistent than it initially appears to be and its record of events and

images has been constructed with some care.³⁴

Robert's concern with the state of the papacy and the crisis of leadership which the Church is presently undergoing easily shades into concern for the orders of the clergy, their present condition and future role or fate within the Church. A whole group of visions can be subsumed under this heading. Vision 5 (p. 275) expresses the view, usually associated only with Joachimism,³⁵ that the new mendicant orders represent a superior and transcendent spirituality which will be ignored by the Church at its peril. Robert dreams that he is with certain others of his acquaintance

in a great ship which was not well made, without a rudder or helm in heavy waters. And behold two white birds were swimming on the waters and I said to one of my servants that he should take them up. When he did not, I began to rebuke him. He said, "Master, they do not allow it." While I considered these things, behold the boat came of its own accord to a small earthly island, on which we few recovered ourselves.^e

The ship of Peter is, for Robert, adrift without a guide at the helm.

Vision 31 (p. 285) "on the state of the Roman Church" reiterates this idea in a very Hildegardean way.³⁶ Robert sees a pope standing with his hands elevated as if saying mass, but at first he sees no head. When he does make out a head it is "withered and blemished and as if made of wood" (vidi capud eius aridum, macilentum, ac si esset ligneum), using one of Hildegard's favourite images of spiritual weakness. A voice tells him that "this signifies the state of the Roman Church." In another vision Robert sees

holy Peter the apostle dressed in red papal vestments with a tiara on his head. And behold, he appeared rough, rude and angry, holding great iron keys in his left hand. And when I looked to his right hand, I saw that his right arm was black, dry and as if withered, and in amazement I said, "What are these things, Lord God?" and the Spirit who showed this to me said, standing on the right, "the right part is the Church, made black and dry and as if withered, but it has not lost the strength of the keys" (p. 277).^f

Repeating the same image of spiritually-diseased aridity, Robert nevertheless asserts the orthodoxy of his reforming stance. As Mme Bignami-Odier indicates (n. 21, pp. 277-78), Robert, like so many apocalyptic reformers of the period, vehemently criticizes the ecclesiastical hierarchy but always remains a true son of the Church. Citing Olivi and Rupescissa as examples, she opposes this type of reformer to those revolutionaries who challenged the rule of the powerful and the entire fabric of the social and religious order. This is the same opposition as we have, in religious terms, between Langland and Wyclif, and in secular terms, between Langland and John Ball. It seems to me to be evident that ultimately Langland cannot be as successfully associated with religious heretics or social revolutionaries as he can with the radical but orthodox apocalyptic reform writers. Even the latter group, however, often incurred the wrath of the establishment, who, when feeling threatened, were only too willing to disregard the differences between the reformers and their heretical counterparts in order to silence these critics.

Robert is equally aware of decadence within certain orders of the clergy, even the Dominican order. In Vision 36 (p. 287), headed

"concerning the Order of the Preachers," he writes:

It happened one day through a sign that, while [I was] eating bread with my brothers, the Spirit of the Lord came upon me (irruit) and I saw, in the Spirit, a man in the habit of the evangelical men, having great blemishes as much on the head as on the limbs. And the Spirit of the Lord said, "This order is blemished; however, you, my servant, say to it that it should be made clean".⁹

The image of the blemished head and limbs is once again very Hildegardean, and Robert is given a suitably Hildegardean mandate as prophet or spokesman of God to his order. We note that this is the first vision in which he is specifically told to preach a message to others.³⁷ Vision 23 (p. 283) is similarly prophetic but this time more pessimistic with regard to the fate of another group of clergy. The rubric reads "on the destruction of the prelates" and the entire vision is contained within one stark sentence: "Waking, I saw something like a heap of mitres and pastoral staves on the ground, without bishops or prelates, an innumerable multitude."^h

Many of Robert's visions press the apocalyptic notion that time is short and that forces of evil are already at work in the world. In a revelation (p. 280) which is not really a vision but an audition, Robert writes that he and many others were awakened one night by the noise of great thunder. Robert asks God what this signifies and hears a voice saying, "Let brides and bridegrooms be joined, because there is too little time!"ⁱ Robert thinks that this must be an illusion (illusio) because it seems to speak of carnal marriage, but the spirit tells him that the voice of God has spoken of spiritual things. The vision seems

to imply that the Church, the bride of Christ, has very little time to waste in accomplishing its spiritual reform.

In another revelation (p. 281) Robert is shown some enigmatic symbols which, he is told, represent the end of the world. He then records two events which, for him, are foreboding signs. The whole set of events occurs shortly after he had relinquished all the possessions which were his by inheritance to pursue his religious vocation (see Bignami-Odier, p. 262). Having preached to the people,

after the elevation of the body of our Lord Jesus Christ I prostrated myself in prayer and I saw ..∇..∞. And I said, "What is this my Lord God?" And the Spirit of the Lord in me said "The end of the world". It happened, moreover, when I had begun to preach the word of the Lord more ardently, always inserting [the need for] preparation for the future tribulations, going about to the castles and manors, I came to the city of Avignon, preaching the same things there. And an indiscreet and very dangerous commotion of men and women was made by the group known commonly as the Saccantes. And the death of Pope Nicholas IV happened in that time.^J

Robert seems to have picked out the Saccantes³⁸ as the most dangerous group threatening the Church at the time. The apocalyptic mentality seems to work this way: some group is always identified and charged with "Anti-Christian" activity. For many writers the orthodox friars themselves fill this position; for other writers heretical groups or corrupt forces within the Church supply the targets. The Saccantes were similarly attacked by the Franciscan chronicler Salimbene, and Marjorie Reeves notes that they are the target of a pseudo-Joachite prophecy.³⁹

Antichrist himself is the subject of many of Robert's visions,

but most of these read not so much as prophetic visions as personal nightmares. For example, Robert's first vision:⁴⁰

It happened, while I slept in bed, I saw myself to be above the wall of my paternal home and behold an untamed horse was led through the street which goes straight to the gate of the city and while it stood at the gate of a certain God-fearing widow, a man of the greatest stature took shape, with torn clothing and something like a voice in me said, "This is Antichrist." Trembling I descended quickly and went up into the house of God which was in the same place, and having got hold of a wooden crucifix, I prevented him from entering as he stood before the door. Nor did he enter, but I did not feel myself to be safe, unless I had the cross in my hands.^k

Robert also shows the same anti-intellectualism which most of the prophetic writers do. The last vision in the Liber Visionum, number 37, concerns "the investigators of inane philosophies." Robert reports that one day while he was "seeing in the Spirit" he saw a man in fraternal habit

carrying delectable bread on his shoulders with the best wine, which hung by his side; truly he held in his hands the hardest stone, long in shape, gnawing it with his teeth, as one does, when hungering, around a loaf of bread. But he accomplished nothing and there came two heads of serpents out of the stone. And the Spirit of the Lord instructed me saying, "This stone represents the useless questions which they labour over hungering too curiously, forsaking the matters of the soul." And I said "What therefore do the heads mean?" "The name of the one is vainglory, the name of the other, in truth, is the destruction of the religious."^l

Robert once again constructs his vision around allegory, this time of the emblematic type. However awkward the device may seem to us today, the message is clear enough: his condemnation of intellectual curiosity and warning of the coming destruction of the religious are themes which

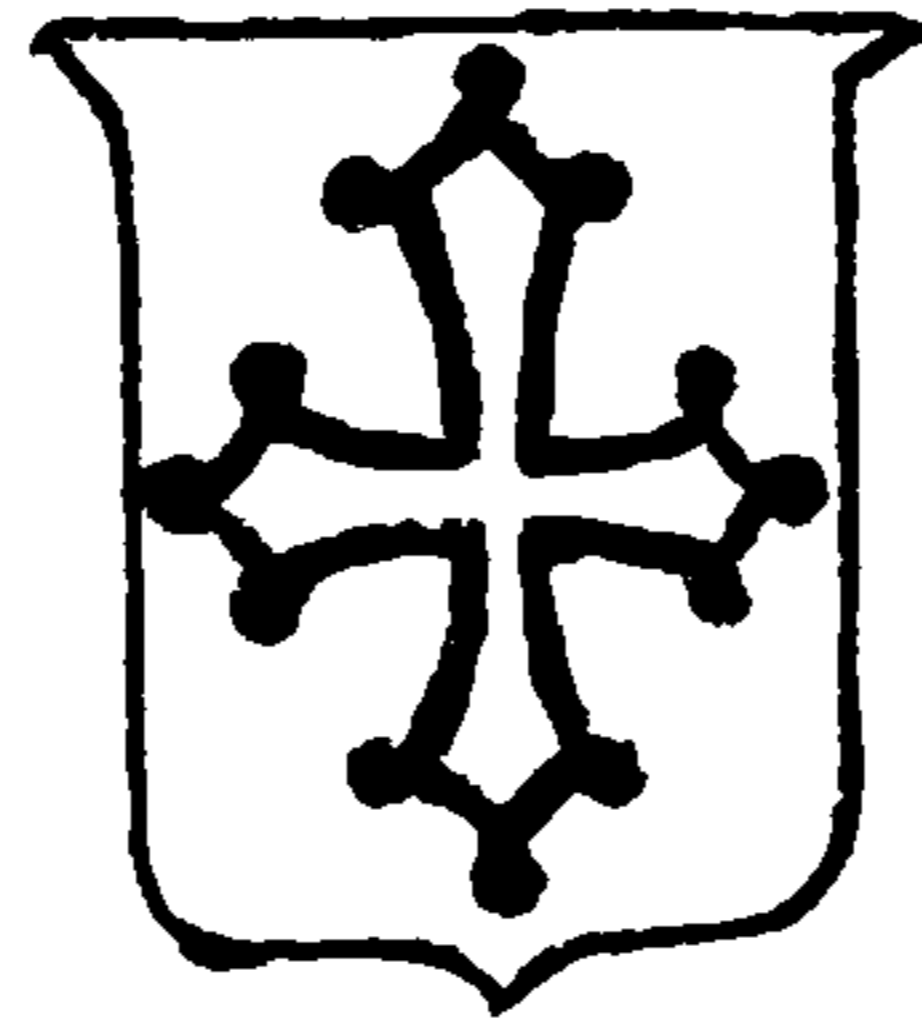
all these prophets urge, including Langland.

The emblematic allegory forms the structural basis of the last two visions of Robert's which we will consider. Like much of Robert's writing, both are heavily influenced by biblical imagery and language and the tradition of visionary allegory he inherited. The first is a very enigmatic vision. While in the home of a Breton lord, Robert sees

a cross of silver [constructed] in the manner of the cross of the Count of Toulouse, but those twelve fruits which are in the branches of the cross were just like very vile fruits, which the sea casts out,⁴¹ and I said, "What are these things, Lord Jesus?" And he said to me in the Spirit, "This cross which you see is the Church, which is about to be [made] bright through cleanness of life and sonorous through the clear voice of preaching the truth." Troubled, I asked, "What therefore do those very vile fruits signify?" and he said, "The humiliation of the Church which is about to come."^{42/m}

The cross of his vision is based on the cross of the arms of the Count of Toulouse, as he himself tells us. From medieval descriptions of this cross it is not difficult to imagine why he associates it with a fruit-bearing tree: "Le countee de Tholosa, gules un crois patee percee d'argent un border d'or."⁴³ The cross itself was red (gules), pierced (percee) and provided with round, presumably red, knobs (patee). A definition of the "Toulouse cross" from a modern dictionary of heraldry completes the picture: "a cross cleché, voided and pommetty."⁴⁴ The cross has the features noted in the medieval description, but is also described as "cleché," that is, the arms widen out gradually from the centre, like the branches of a tree. Another modern dictionary provides a picture of the kind of cross now known to heraldic

experts as the Toulouse cross,⁴⁵ complete with its twelve "fruits":



However, there can be little doubt that Robert's image of the cross bearing fruits was as much inspired by the Tree of Life in Apoc. 22.2 as by the arms of the Count of Toulouse. Apoc. 22.2 runs: "In the midst of the street thereof, and on both sides of the river, was the tree of life, bearing twelve fruits, yielding its fruits every month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations." In the Glossa Ordinaria these fruits are interpreted as the prophets and apostles who spread the faith throughout the world, an interpretation which bears a close resemblance to Langland's use of the fruit image in his allegory of the Tree of Charity.⁴⁶ Robert's use of the image is not dissimilar. The commentary also explains that the leaves of the tree, "for the healing of the nations," come from Christ and are disseminated by the apostles and those after them who preach the gospel. The tree of Robert's vision, however, bears not good fruits but vile ones. The apostles and prophets of the present Church, the clergy, have faltered and, as Christ said in his parable, "by their fruits ye shall know them." The image of the rotten fruit is very similar to his use of other Hildegardean images of blemished and withered life to portray a

dual sense of present and future disgrace.

The last vision which we shall look at is heavily steeped in the visionary allegorical tradition of the apocalyptic writers. While saying Compline Robert records that he was

seeing in the Spirit of God and behold a Church took shape before me, constructed of white stones, over which stood very high, erect columns with capitals on which there seemed to be golden fruit. It had been built on a mountain of stone, having a gate from the West which was high and wide, dark and black and, similarly, having windows. That darkness came out of the church from the door just like a river toward the North and not very clear water was mixed with the darkness and overflowed together over the church, so much that they very nearly wholly covered it, but the waters could not attain such a height as to prevent part of the columns, albeit a small one, from being visible. (p. 284)ⁿ

This image of the Church, constructed of white stones, on a mountain of stone and having a high, wide gate comes originally from the apocalyptic Pastor Hermas⁴⁷ and is used extensively in Hildegard's Scivias. It is not by coincidence that Lefèvre published these works with Robert's in his 1513 edition of the writings of three men and three women visionaries; he had certainly identified the tradition to which they belong. The whole vision is highly reminiscent of Hildegard, as is much of Robert's visionary writing, right down to his use of directions (North, South, etc.) to reconstruct the placement of objects in the mental picture, but the vision also recalls certain biblical visions, like those in Ezekiel.⁴⁸ The golden fruit of this vision would seem to be the antitype to the vile fruits of Robert's vision of the cross.⁴⁹ The Church, this time bearing good fruit, is, however,

engulfed in darkness which threatens it but cannot entirely swallow it. Like Langland's *Unity*, the Church is seen as besieged and threatened on all sides, but not wholly defeated.⁵⁰

Robert was a radical critic of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, yet he remained a true son of the Church until the end. We know that when he died he was widely revered within his order and that he seems to have acquired something of a saint's reputation, judging by the reports of his death in the chronicles. The Dominican Order, at Robert's time and throughout the later Middle Ages a stronghold of scholastic learning and a watchdog of orthodoxy, was not much given to flights of prophetic fancy or apocalyptic criticism of the Church establishment--one finds much more of this sort of thing among the Franciscans. Robert, then, is something of an enigma, but the fact that his case clashes with our stereotypical notions of medieval religious history may mean that our ideas need redrawing. Robert's case would suggest that there was room within the Church for radical reformers, outspoken critics, and, most surprisingly, dreamers of prophetic dreams.

In the third section of this chapter we will return to Robert in our consideration of medieval visionary conventions and the problem of distinguishing fictional or literary visions from the "real" variety. But it should be stressed here that Robert's visions show the hallmarks of both kinds of vision. His attention to allegorical detail (some of it politically as well as religiously motivated, if Mme Bignami-Odier is correct) betrays the polemical purpose behind these seemingly guileless, homespun visions and nightmares. If we knew more of the political and

historical situation within which Robert worked and lived, perhaps much of the "arbitrariness" of his visions would disappear. Robert usually provides the reader with an interpretation, given by the "Spirit of God," who always stands (adhering to the conventions of religious vision) on his right during the vision,⁵¹ but much is left unexplained. Perhaps, like Langland, there are times when he dares not interpret. Writers like Robert seem to have had a keen sense of how to maintain the balance between reforming zeal and fanaticism--prophets like John of Rupescissa write from prison because they lack this.

There are few similarities between the actual images and details in Robert's writings and in Langland's, but after one has read several such prophetic writers, the archetypes and ideological similarities begin to emerge from the visionary clutter. This is above all a literature of archetypes and patterns, from which each writer creates his own set of scenarios: the humbly attired, God-fearing and frustrated spiritual leader figure, the group or order who are seen as precursors of Antichrist, the expected chastisement of the corrupt clergy, the belief that the renovatio must and will come, the use of "dark" symbols or emblems to convey the sense of outrage, fear or fervour. Robert seems to be working with what Northrop Frye would call a "grammar of apocalyptic imagery,"⁵² some of it traditional, much of it culled from the historical situation he found himself in. One would have to do much more work on his visions in order to do justice to this: what is offered here is simply an attempt to highlight certain characteristics and patterns in order to place Robert in the mainstream of prophetic

visionary thought.

Bridget of Sweden

The revelations of St. Bridget (or Birgitta) of Sweden (1303-1373) are easily comparable in size, scope and popularity to the works of Hildegard. These two women visionaries dominated the non-Joachite prophetic tradition of Northern Europe and Great Britain for the better part of the later Middle Ages, but, surprisingly, they have less in common than one would expect. Bridget has little of Hildegard's literary ability and she is altogether less likeable than the serene, earnest twelfth-century abbess. While Hildegard's experience of the divine is often dignified by her detachment of herself from the action of the vision, Bridget is more apt to engage in dialogue with a Christ who denounces the unhappy works of men, presaging ghoulish torment in the depths of Hell. The literary abilities required for the successful rendering of a divine figure, which even Milton could not effectively master at times, are nowhere evident in Bridget's visions. Her treatments of torment are similarly sensational, crude and vindictive. However, if Bridget was neither Dante, nor Milton, she was nevertheless highly popular in Britain in the decades after her death and she left a mark on the papal history of her day which few women of any age could match.

One of the main goals of Bridget's life was to persuade the Avignon popes back to the "true seat" in Rome. She regarded this as the "prerequisite for the reformation of Christendom" (Colledge, p. 21)

which she so earnestly desired. Born into a family of the highest nobility of Sweden, Bridget was a member of the royal court and the mother of eight children. The death of her husband in 1344 marked the beginning of her visionary role as "spouse" and prophetess of Christ (Cumming, p. XXIV). Her initial contact with the papacy came in 1347-48 when she sent a delegation to Clement VI in Avignon to make known certain of her revelations to him. The revelations were unsparing in their attack on the papacy. Instead of being a help, the pope is described as a hindrance to the cure of souls. Instead of being a shepherd and a servant, he is a scatterer and destroyer of the sheep, worse than Lucifer, less just than Pilate. Judas sold only Christ, but the pope sells the souls of the elect for filthy lucre (I, 41, p. 362).⁵³ The delegation also carried with them the projected Rule for the order which Bridget hoped to establish to leaven the bread of decadent monasticism. It is perhaps no wonder, however, given the tone of these early revelations to Clement VI, that they returned without approval for the order (Colledge, p. 22).

In 1349 Bridget herself went to Rome, accompanied by a secular priest, Master Peter Olafsson and by another Peter, prior of a Cistercian house in Alvastra. These men were to be her translators and secretaries for most of her life. They were later joined by Alphonse of Jaen, who is responsible for much of the editing and propagation of her later works, as well as for the active promotion of her canonization proceedings and a spirited defense of her visions, the Epistola Solitaria.⁵⁴

Once in Rome Bridget poured forth her Revelations to her secretaries and sent numerous messages to successive popes, urging them to return to Rome, to reform the Church and to approve her rule for the Brigittine order.⁵⁵ In Rev. IV, 5 St. Peter appears to Bridget and tells her that she will see the Pope return to Rome with her own eyes and hear the Romans cry "Vivat vicarius Petri!" (Colledge, p. 37). In 1367 Urban V did finally return the papal court to Rome, but only to leave the decayed and dangerous city again in 1370, dying a month later in Avignon. Bridget continued her threats and entreaties to Gregory XI until her own death in 1373. It is difficult to assess what influence, if any, the seemingly simplistic warnings and commands of an unlearned and uncompromising woman had upon decision-making processes in the powerful political world of the curia.⁵⁶ There is certainly evidence that they were received with scepticism in many quarters (Colledge, p. 38), but as Colledge suggests,

Today it is easy for us to dismiss such figures as St. Bridget and St. Catherine from the scene, and to discover as the prime causes of the political events of their age economic factors which the Christian faith and its leaders neither controlled nor affected. But in doing so we forget that the politicians of the Middle Ages, avaricious, greedy for power, venal and corrupt, still believed in the Four Last Things. In all the documents in the case of St. Bridget we have the clearest proof that popes and kings could not always deny audience to those who came to speak to them of death and judgement, hell and heaven, that "even as constrained to hear they heard them" (Colledge, p. 49).

If the powerful had, in many cases, to be "constrained to hear," the vast majority of the reading public in the Middle Ages did

not. The popularity of Bridget's Revelations after her death is easily attested to by the dozens of manuscripts which survive. In Britain she was especially popular in the fifteenth century, but evidence for the dissemination of her work there before her death is a little harder to come by. F. R. Johnston has shown that Bridget made a lasting impression on at least two Englishmen who encountered her in Europe.⁵⁷ William de Guellesis heard Bridget prophesy in Cyprus while he was serving as a squire with the Crusaders there. He was so moved when her predictions of disaster were fulfilled that he went to Rome to testify before the canonization commission.⁵⁸ A second Englishman to have been impressed with Bridget was the prominent English cardinal Adam Easton (1330-97),⁵⁹ who was arrested and imprisoned with five other cardinals in 1365 on suspicion of plotting against Urban V. All the other cardinals were eventually executed, but Easton was spared and he attributed this to the heavenly intercession of Bridget (see Johnston, p. 4; Colledge, p. 36ff.). Easton wrote a learned defense of Bridget's writings and especially her Rule when they came under attack in 1390. Although the treatise is clearly an act of gratitude on Easton's part, the view he puts forward of feminine spirituality is hardly flattering.⁶⁰ He seemed to feel that Bridget could best be defended by stressing that she was special, if not "unique" among women. However, the path to acceptance for almost all medieval visionaries, male or female, was at best a precarious one and this was nowhere more true than in England, where, by Langland's and Bridget's time, the local mystical tradition discouraged visions and the

like.⁶¹ We shall return to this problem a little later, but perhaps it was no accident that these early British supporters of Bridget were men who had travelled extensively on the continent.

Cumming, who edited a fifteenth-century Middle English translation of a selection of Bridget's Revelations for the Early English Text Society in 1929, notes in his introduction that before her death in 1373 Latin texts of the Revelations had found their way to England and were being studied with great interest in Oxford and London. Johnston notes that theologians were studying full texts of the Revelations in England before the end of the fourteenth century and mentions the Cistercian abbot, Geoffrey of Byland, who wrote yet another defense of their orthodoxy, which was used by English delegates to the Council of Basle (Johnston, p. 5). Bale writes that the Revelations were being explicated "in scholis Oxoniensibus & in cathedris publicis" by the great masters of the time, notably, the Dominican Thomas Stubbes, the Carmelite Richard Lavenham and "many others of that type besides" around the year 1370 (Cumming, p. xxix).

Richard Lavenham, who was a confessor of Richard II, owned a copy of the Revelations which is extant and contains the Prologue and the first four books. John Pits attributed "notable public lectures in seven books" on the Revelations to Lavenham, but Cumming (p. xxix) suggests that he is confusing this with the seven books of the Revelations themselves because he gives as the incipit to the supposed work "Stupor et mirabilia audita sunt," which is simply the incipit of the Prologue to the Revelations. Lavenham died in 1381 and Stubbes in

1373, the same year as Bridget herself died. Ellis makes it apparent in his illuminating study of the textual tradition of Bridget's works in fifteenth-century England that the first seven books of the Revelations were virtually all that were available to most English readers even during the fifteenth century (p. 166). Pits' assertion, confused as it is, is thus entirely consistent with the English textual tradition and suggests that texts of Bridget's Revelations came to Britain before Book VIII was added, perhaps long before, and remained in circulation in this form for decades to come.⁶²

It is virtually impossible to say exactly how early Bridget's works began to circulate in Britain and exactly how many books first arrived. The first collection of Revelations was brought from Sweden to Rome in 1347, although it is likely that this consisted only of what is now the first book of the full work (Jorgenson, p. 301). Sometime between this date and Bridget's death in 1373 at least some of her works began to be read in England, but Bridget herself was definitely known there by 1347 because of a revelation which she had regarding the Hundred Years War, in which both the kings of France and England were allegorized as wild beasts. The revelation, as it is recorded in Book IV, chapters 103-05, begins with St. Dionysius' plea to the Virgin for the kingdom of France and particularly for the danger of the many souls which, at the present mortality rate, "fall like snow into the Inferno" (IV, 103, p. 314). The Virgin appeals to Christ for his judgement on the matter, using the similitude of the beasts (c. 104) and Christ's reply follows (c. 105) in which he shows favour to the English

side. Colledge summarizes Christ's judgement:

If the warring kings wished for peace, He who is true peace would give it to them perpetually, and it is His will that the one king should make peace per matrimonium, so that his kingdom may have a legitimate heir. Both kings should do all in their power to promote the Christian faith, they should cease from their intolerable exactions, and should seek the salvation of their subjects' souls. But since ille rex qui nunc tenet regnum will not wish to submit to such counsels, his life shall end in misery, his kingdom be given over to tribulations, and his line be held in such detestation that all shall be amazed. If the other king, who has justice on his side, be willing to submit to Him, Christ shall aid him and fight for him; but if he be disobedient, he shall not attain to his desire, but shall lose all that he has so far won. When the men of France acquire true humility, their kingdom shall have a lawful heir and a good peace (Colledge, p. 31).

Colledge adds pointedly that we need not wonder why Bridget became so popular in England and remained unknown in France. These chapters from the Revelations did themselves become well known in Britain. Hoccleve wrote a verse paraphrase of Christ's judgement in De Regimine Principum and many other fifteenth-century English writers used it for various political purposes.⁶³

Even though much of the evidence we have for Bridget's popularity in England comes from the fifteenth century, nevertheless, I believe that Bridget deserves to be considered in a study of the visionary background to Piers Plowman. Many of the themes and concerns of the two writers are similar, in some cases they even use the same imagery and some of the same phrases to express their desires and fears about the state of the Church and the urgent need for reform. Bridget was more concerned with Rome and the papacy than any English writer ever

could have been, but her orientation to church reform is otherwise very similar to Langland's and she is very much a part of the visionary apocalyptic tradition which Hildegard, Robert of Uzès and John of Rupescissa represent. While it is almost impossible to know how many books of the Revelations were available in England before Bridget's death in 1373, we do know that the upper limit is definitely the first seven books and in what follows we will restrict ourselves to excerpts from these.

I have also made use of the compilation done by the Leipzig theologian John Tortsch in 1433 of prophetic passages from the voluminous Revelations. Although the Onus Mundi itself is too late to be of precise relevance to the study of Piers Plowman, it is important in its own right as a near-contemporary commentary on prophetic doctrine of Church reform and as a specimen of that "much neglected medieval genre, the prophetic compilation."⁶⁴ Tortsch had read Hildegard, Joachim and a number of other medieval prophets and he is well able to set Bridget's prophecies within the context of the tradition to which they belong. In fact he is so proficient at his task that he is positively dangerous--unlike Gebeno of Erbach, Tortsch weaves a great deal of his own commentary into Bridget's prophecies and one must always go back to a full edition of Bridget's Revelations in order to verify precisely what is hers and what is Tortsch's elaboration.⁶⁵ Ellis says of the Onus Mundi:

In his prologue (f. 2^r), the author shows a great concern that the book should come in its present form of a single

libellus to as wide a public as possible. His desire that his own text would be handed on unchanged contrasts strikingly with his treatment of the Revelations material he is using. . . . He abbreviates his texts "causa breuitatis" (f. 23^v) and all but sinks the Revelations in a welter of commentary (pp. 169-70).

Tortsch was certainly fanatically enthusiastic about the prophetic reform material in the Revelations, but as Ellis has shown, he was not alone in regarding these passages as the most significant of Bridget's literary offerings. In fifteenth-century England compilers went to the Revelations for three main purposes: (1) their prophetic and eschatological material, (2) material on the requirements of the spiritual life, and (3) information about the life of Christ and the Virgin (Ellis, p. 166ff.). Prophetic and eschatological elements were a factor for some compilers in the selection of revelations translated into Middle English (Ellis, p. 171), while others used this material to emphasize the evils of the corrupt clergy (p. 172). Certain passages of the Revelations, probably directed against the Fraticelli, emphasized that the evil actions of any particular priest could in no way change the power of the priesthood and of the Church. These passages were taken up by certain English scribes as weapons against their own local heretical group, the Lollards (Ellis, p. 172). The prophetic passages, then, were certainly among the more popular excerpts from the Revelations and in this Bridget's works are similar to Hildegard's, which also survived largely because of their prophetic content.⁶⁶ The medieval appetite for the curiosities of apocalyptic reform prophecies should not be underestimated.

Bridget's Visionary Prophecy of Reform

Let us now look at some passages from the Revelations themselves which highlight Bridget's apocalyptic view of the need for Church reform. Like most apocalyptic writers, Bridget focusses time and again on the crises of leadership within the Church and, like most apocalyptic writers, this concern originated for her with a sense of indignation about clerical corruption. We have already noted Bridget's vehement denunciation of the papacy in the early revelations sent to Avignon in 1347. These are contained in Book I, ch. 41 of the Revelations, which deserves to be looked at more closely as one of the starting points of Bridget's apocalypticism. In this chapter Christ appears, as he so often does in Bridget's revelations, as a judge who brings down a harsh verdict on various groups in society. While our concern here is primarily with Bridget's view of the clergy, it should be noted that Christ also speaks out against the laity, the Jews and the heathen, and before beginning his condemnations he expressly exempts those Jews and pagans who live justly (I, 41, p. 361). The righteous heathen seems to have been a concern of Bridget's as well as Langland's and, while this same concern can be found in many non-apocalyptic writers, the special role that non-Christian peoples are usually given in apocalyptic prophecy may well be a contributing factor to this kind of thinking.

At the beginning of his complaint against the Pope, Christ makes it clear that the Pope stands as a symbol for all clergy in what follows, but this choice is obviously motivated by the perception that the Pope as Vicar of Christ is ultimately responsible for all vicars of

Christ--a point which Hildegard drove home in her letter to Pope Anastasius. Unlike Hildegard, however, Bridget does not give the pope the benefit of any doubt. Christ's judgement is viciously pronounced with the threat that

The sword of my severity will pierce your body, which will enter by the higher part of the head, and so deeply and violently will it be fixed, that it will never be taken out. Your seat will plunge like a heavy stone, which will not halt before it comes to the lowest depth . . . (I, 41, p. 366).⁰

Continuing in this vein, he promises hellfire and eternal torment and threatens the clerics with removal of their ecclesiastical dignities and possessions by an explication of verses 9 and 11 of Psalm 108: "May his children be fatherless: and his wife a widow . . . May the usurer search all his substance: and let strangers plunder his labours." In exchange for their dignities, he threatens, they will inherit eternal confusion. Tortsch refers to this passage in his discussion of Bridget's prophecies against the corruption of the various clerical orders (Montag, p. 300) and it is no doubt partly on the basis of this revelation that he later associates Bridget's predictions of clerical chastisement with those of Hildegard (pp. 324-26) and (Pseudo-) Joachim (p. 328).⁶⁷

Like Langland, Bridget looked for a reforming king who would take the clergy back to their pristine state of unworldliness. In fact, she uses various images to describe this expected reforming leader. In at least one revelation he is a king (VI, 26), in other revelations the pope is to fulfill this function himself, in still others the great

leader is more vaguely cast in symbolic terms as a plowman (arator), a hunter (venator) or as simply a conqueror.

In Revelations VI, 26, Christ explains to Bridget exactly how this king should go about reforming the Church. The revelation opens with Christ's lament that the vessels and instruments of his Church have been carried off to Babylon, these things representing allegorically the (formerly) good conversation and disposition of the clergy and religious (p. 435). In a passage which echoes the imagery of the Pastor Hermas, in which individual Christians are seen as the stones that form the walls of the Church, the king's instructions are laid out:

Therefore that king for whom you pray ought to gather together the spiritual men, wise with my wisdom, and ask those who have my spirit, inquiring diligently according to their counsel how the wall of my Church may be rebuilt with Christians, honour shown to God, right faith restored, divine charity made ardent and my passion impressed upon the hearts of men. Let him search out how the vessels of my house may be restored to their pristine state (restituantur in pristinum statum), namely, that the clergy and religious, having forsaken pride, should recover humility, the innocent should esteem chastity and the worldly and greedy abstain from excessive appetite for worldly things. . . . Truly, my Church has receded too far from me, so much that unless the prayers of my mother intervene, there may not be hope of mercy (VI, 26, p. 436).P

The phrase restituantur in pristinum statum is very close to Langland's ad pristinum statum ire, which he uses in his own prophecy of the reforming king (V, 171). This passage from Bridget is not as clearly a disendowment prophecy as Langland's is, but the basic pattern is the same. This phrase crops up again in a revelation in which Christ threatens to give up on Christians altogether and make the heathen his

chosen people (VI, 44, pp. 464-65; Montag, p. 270), lamenting that Christians are now degenerating from their former state (a priori statu degenerantes). This sense of the decline of spirituality in recent history is, of course, endemic in apocalyptic thought, and this concept of going back to a first, more pristine state, is often the cornerstone of reform ideology.

Tortsch himself uses the phrase (ad pristinum statum bonum reducere) to summarize the contents of another revelation in which Bridget sees and hears a discussion in heaven on the state of the Church in Rome. The vision takes place after Urban V had returned to Rome in 1367, a triumph for Bridget which was obviously marred by her view that the ecclesiastical hierarchy was still in as bad a state as ever. In this revelation she uses the decaying Lateran church, which had been burnt out in 1361, as an emblem of the corrupt hierarchy. The question Bridget hears asked in heaven is, "But how can the pope come into the church?" The doors are hanging crookedly, the hinges rusted and deformed, the floor is full of holes so deep that they have no bottom, the roof is smeared with pitch and burns with a sulphurous flame, and so on. This image of the Lateran church is interpreted in profuse allegorical detail in the revelation, beginning with the doorposts, which represent the pope himself. Urban is to begin by reforming his own life, stripping away the wealth and retinue that accompany him, and leaving himself with necessities only. Then he must turn his attention to the hinges, id est, the cardinals, by force of a play on the Latin word cardines which Langland too indulges in (Prol., 132). The pope

must take up hammer and forceps and bend the hinges to his will, not allowing them to have many worldly things (clothing, servants, etc.) but, once again, only the necessities they require. He should seek to bend them with kind words and divine counsel, but if they do not wish to obey, he must use the hammer and by showing them his severity and doing whatsoever he is able ("as long as it is not against justice," Bridget qualifies) bring them to bend to his will. The floor of the Church is represented by the bishops and secular clergy, whose cupidity, like the holes in the Lateran floor, has no bottom. The revelation ends with a reiteration of the basic principle that each group should be permitted to have necessities only and no superfluities, and that anyone who does not wish to amend his life will be utterly deprived of his ecclesiastical office (IV, 49, p. 251).

This notion that the lifestyle of the clergy should be reduced to a provision for necessities only is most often associated with such radical groups as the Franciscan Spirituals; however, as we have seen in Hildegard's and now Bridget's works, the notion is very much a part of visionary prophecy outside of the Joachite/Franciscan circle.⁶⁸ Langland too is concerned with the limitation of the clerical lifestyle to necessities⁶⁹ and, although he may have been influenced by Franciscan Joachite ideology, the use of this notion by writers like Hildegard and Bridget shows that he could have acquired the idea of a coming clerical chastisement and reform from any number of prophetic sources.

After Urban's death in 1370, the undaunted Bridget began working

to persuade Gregory XI to return the papal seat to Rome and reform the decaying Church. In Book IV, chapter 142 of the Revelations another pristinum statum prophecy occurs, this time addressed to Gregory. It begins with a strongly worded condemnation of the pope's pride and cupidity (p. 359) and of the state of the curia ("indeed it is as if all who come to your curia, you send into the fires of Hell"),^q oscillating between bitter denunciation and a desire to encourage reform. The pope is both threatened and entreated to come to Rome: ". . . rise up strongly & . . . begin to renovate my Church which I acquired with my own blood & let it be renovated & spiritually reduced to its pristine state (reducantur ad pristinum statum suum) of holiness, because now a brothel is more venerated than holy Mother Church" (IV, 142, p. 359).^r If he does not obey, Gregory will be condemned in the curia of Heaven (p. 360). Brandishing threats of eternal torment, Bridget nevertheless ends with the assertion that Gregory is God's chosen pope and there is still time for reconciliation.

Bridget resorts to a more frightening image of the clerical reformer she expects in a vision directed against the decline of the Dominican order. In Revelation III, 18 Mary tells Bridget that there are few Dominicans now who live within their rule and fewer still who follow in the footsteps of St. Dominic in imitation of his sanctity (III, 18, p. 175). In an ensuing discussion of the friars' cupidity with regard to taking up episcopal appointments, Mary says that a powerful hunter (venator) will come to those Dominicans who have contempt for their rule and he will bring with him ferocious dogs, an image no doubt

derived from the well-known medieval pun on the Dominican name, "domini canes," the dogs of God. This venator will say to God, as if he (the venator) were a servant,

"Many sheep have entered into your garden, whose desires are carnal, whose fleece is vile with filth, whose milk is useless and whose lechery is excessively insolent. Order these to be cut off, that pasture for the useful sheep be not wanting and that they be not disturbed by the evil ones." To whom the Lord may say, "Close the gates, that some may not enter, unless they are suitable to me...." So I say that some gates will be shut, but not all. Afterwards the hunter will come with his dogs, who will not spare their hides from arrows, nor their bodies from wounds, to the end that their life may be finished. Afterwards guardians will come, who diligently will consider what kind the sheep are and which are admitted to the Lord's pasture (III, 18, p. 175).⁵

The most interesting of Bridget's reforming figures for students of Piers Plowman, however, is the plowman, whom she uses as agent of the coming chastisement and reform. Both the plowman and his plow recur in a number of her visions and are perhaps among her favourite images. Bridget's plowman is clearly a reformer and a chastiser, a man who will set the world right. The clearest statement about this figure that I have found comes in Book IV, chapter 22, in which Christ breaks off a typical Brigittine complaint about the sad state of human morality and spirituality to make the following prophecy:

Therefore a plowman will come from the most powerful, sharpened by the most wise, who will not seek lands and beauty of the body, he will not fear the strength of the strong, nor the threats of princes, nor will he respect the persons of men.... Therefore, let my friends, to whom I would send you, labour diligently and quickly, because that will not be in the

last days, but in the days of many now living. And this they will see with their eyes, that it will be fulfilled as it is written, "[And my rage shall be enkindled, and I will strike you with the sword;] and your wives shall be widows and your children fatherless" (Exodus 22:24) (IV, 22, p. 232).^t

Both Tortsch (Montag, pp. 274ff.) and Durantes (Notae, p. 233) react most strongly to the sense of impending chastisement in this passage; Tortsch embroiders the scenario with all kinds of doom and gloom about famine, pestilence, wars, earthquakes and the like which will weaken Christians (p. 276) against this great invader.⁷⁰ He admits that the revelations do not say whether the invader will be a Christian, heretic or pagan, but Tortsch implicitly made him a non-Christian (not to say anti-Christian) conqueror by saying that the calamities to precede him will weaken Christians against his attack. This whole section is a good example of Tortsch's bent for dubious elaboration of Bridget's text.⁷¹ In fact, the description of the plowman as we have it in the passage from Revelations IV, 22 above gives a rather different sense. This plowman will have divine wisdom as well as power, and will not be swayed by worldly attributes of any kind, be they beauty, riches or power. The fact that he will not be a respecter of persons not only establishes his credentials as a true Christian (James 2, passim), but makes him an anti-type to the pseudo-prophets as well.⁷² It also leaves an opening, for any who might wish to make use of it, for a possible attack on the social system--a point to which we shall return.

A note to this passage in the Durantes edition of 1611 directs

us to chapter 28 of the Book of Isaiah and to Jerome's commentary on it. This is no doubt the source of Bridget's plowman figure and, coming closer to home, it may well be the source of one of John Ball's prophetic images. The biblical passage concerns God's chastisement of the Israelites:

Shall the ploughman plough all the day to sow, shall he open and harrow his ground? Will he not, when he hath made plain the surface thereof, sow gith, and scatter cummin, and put wheat in order, and barley and millet and vetches in their bounds? For he will instruct him in judgment: his God will teach him. For gith shall not be threshed with saws, neither shall the cart-wheel turn about upon cummin: but gith shall be beaten out with a rod, and cummin with a staff. But bread-corn shall be broken small; but the thresher shall not thresh it for ever: neither shall the cart-wheel hurt it, nor break it with its teeth (Isaiah 28:24-28).

The plowman is indeed the man who will put everything right, "sharpened by the most wise," instructed by God himself. The threshing and grinding images are clearly images of chastisement and purification, but, the prophet asserts, this will not be done with instruments which are too heavy or too sharp (the cartwheel or the saw), but with the appropriate tools, the rod and the staff. Even though the corn will be ground small, it will not be ground forever, "neither shall the cart-wheel hurt it, nor break it with its teeth." To paraphrase, the business of purification, of separating kernel from chaff, is not intended as a process which will destroy the kernel, nor will it go on forever. Coming as it does at the end of a prophecy of retribution (Isaiah 28:1, "Woe to the crown of pride, to the drunkards of Ephraim, ..." gives a sense of the tone throughout), the allegory of the

plowman's work is intended as a reassurance: the Lord does not seek to destroy, only to purify.

The passage also speaks of the proper treatment of different types of grains, something which the plowman is instructed in by God himself. Jerome's commentary on this passage (PL 24, cols. 337-38) picks up this notion by stressing that gith and cummin are weaker seeds than the others; the wheat may be ground but the gith and cummin must only be beaten (c. 337C). Jerome suggests that these weaker seeds represent the Gentiles who have not received the Law, while the grains represent the Jews, who will suffer greater torment (c. 338A). Others interpret the passage as referring to the common people and the clergy, Jerome continues. On the Day of Judgement, the common people will be corrected with the rod and staff, like the gith and cummin. The clergy, however, will suffer greater torture for their sins because they were in full possession of the knowledge they needed to avoid sin. This interpretation would certainly have appealed to clerical reformers like Bridget or Langland. Jerome's whole interpretation has eschatological overtones,⁷³ but also stresses the notion of consolation and refreshment after sorrow and chastisement (post tormenta, refrigeria c. 338C),⁷⁴ which is also a key apocalyptic theme of reform-oriented prophets.

The apocalyptic overtones of the passage also make it a plausible source for John Ball's use of the image of grinding "smal" in the obscure prophetic letter which is attributed to him by Walsingham: "Iohan the Mullere hath ygrounde smal, smal, smal;/The kynges sone of

heuene schal paye for al."⁷⁵ The harsh treatment of the bread-corn as a symbol of divine chastisement in the Isaiah passage may well have been suggested to the rebel priest by his use of the figure of Piers the Plowman⁷⁶ just prior to this couplet:

Iohon Schep, som tyme Seynte Marie prest of York, and now of Colchestre, greteth wel Iohan Nameles, and Iohan the Mullere, and Iohon Cartere, and biddeth hem that thei bee war of gyle in borugh, and stondeth togidre in Godes name, and biddeth Peres Ploughman go to his werk, and chastise wel Hobbe the Robbere, and taketh with yow Iohan Trewman, and alle hiis felawes, and no mo, and loke schappe you to on heued, and no mo (Dobson, p. 381).

Although Piers himself is not obviously a chastizing figure in Piers Plowman, he does most definitely try to set the world straight in the Visio, based on his knowledge of Truth's teachings. It is Piers who tries to get everyone in society working productively in a capacity which suits his social role; it is Piers who tries to curb the Wasters and put the idle back to work. When they are chastised it is not by Piers personally but through his strategy of calling in Hunger (VIII, 167ff.), and we note that Piers also calls off Hunger when he feels they have been punished enough. Like the biblical plowman, Piers controls the "threshing." In the Vita, after Christ's death and resurrection, it is again Piers who is called to set the new Church in motion. In a return to the agricultural imagery of the Visio, Piers once again ploughs and harrows and sows, not seeds this time, but truth (XXI, 260ff.).

The biblical passage does not specifically name the plowman as

agent of the threshing process--the passive voice is used in vs. 27 and 28--but it is at least implied that the plowman, suitably instructed by God, will carry out the various threshing or purifying processes wisely. At the end of Piers Plowman the purification of the clergy is yet to come and it is Piers whom Conscience seeks to carry this out. As Rosemary Woolf has suggested, the power of the figure of Piers in the poem lies in the fact that his allegorical significance is not as explicitly defined as is usual in medieval literature⁷⁷ and this looseness of definition is certainly true of the many apocalyptic associations with agricultural imagery in the poem. Here we have noted just the tip of the iceberg. Agricultural imagery is one of the commonest types of imagery used in biblical apocalyptic writing and the figure of Piers is powerfully but evasively suggestive of all its richness.⁷⁸

Unlike Langland, Bridget was certainly not a subtle, nor even a terribly literary writer. However, her use of the figure of the plowman and the plough is also somewhat enigmatic and allusive. It is almost certain that she was drawing on the Isaiah passage as the main source of her image, because later in IV, 22 we have the assertion that "it is just that the house should be purged into which the king enters . . . [as it is that] the grain be strongly ground, that it may be separated from the ear" (p. 233).^u The entire chapter is filled with images, ambiguities and abrupt shifts, which is unusual in Bridget's writing. Although Bridget could not be described as an original apocalyptic writer, some of her prophetic passages have a richness which the non-

prophetic passages do not. This may be accounted for in part by the fact that her first confessor and theological instructor, Master Matthias of Linköping, one of the most eminent Swedish theologians of his day, was much interested in apocalyptic theology and author of a commentary on the Apocalypse.⁷⁹ It is perhaps to Master Matthias that we owe what symbolic richness there is in Bridget's apocalyptic thought.

In another chapter of the Revelations Bridget records a message from Mary in which Rome is likened to a field overgrown with weeds: "The fire must pass over it, next the plough, next to that a yoke of oxen drawing the harrow, before corn can grow there again" (Jorgenson, p. 82, summarizing Rev. IV, 57). In another use of the plough image, the Lord says to Bridget:

Therefore it is just that I come with my plough over the world, over the heathen and the Christians, not sparing the old or the young, neither the poor nor the rich, but each will be judged according to his merits and each will die in his sin, and houses will be left behind without inhabitants. Nevertheless, I will not make this the end (IV, 37, p. 242).^v

In response to this Bridget asks the Lord to send some of his "friends" to warn the people of their danger, whereupon he reminds her of the gospel story of Dives (Luke 16:19), who upon asking the same thing was told that the world had had many messengers and teachings from God. Now, the Lord tells Bridget, men have even more: the gospels, the sayings of the prophets, exempla, the words of the doctors, and also reason and intelligence. If they make use of these, Christ says, they

will be saved. However, he agrees to send his friends to prepare the way (IV, 37, p. 242).

The theme of warning and preparation for the coming chastisement dominates Bridget's prophetic thought as it does that of other apocalyptic writers. Bridget is a good example of the kind of non-theoretical prophet whose sole historical preoccupation is with the present, which is perceived as spiritually decadent in contrast to the past, and the immediate future, which holds a violent chastisement but not the end itself. Unlike Hildegard and Joachim, Bridget has little interest in the kind of exegesis which produces historical and futuristic patterns, although in one chapter of the Revelations she does a periodization of the past and future. This revelation shows the influence of apocalyptic sources; in fact, at one point Bridget mentions a source. The revelation begins with Christ's statement that the world is like a ship having three parts, the prow, the middle and the stern. So too it has three ages:⁸⁰

The first was from Adam to my Incarnation, signified by the prow, which is high and wonderful and strong. High in the piety of the patriarchs, wonderful in the knowledge of the prophets, strong in observance of the law, but this part began to decline a little when the Jewish people, having contempt for my teachings, embroiled themselves in wickedness and impiety, on account of which they were cast out from honour and inheritance^w (VI, 67, p. 499).

The middle part of the ship began with the Incarnation, "just as the middle part of a ship is lower and more humble than the rest, so in my Advent humility and honesty began to be preached and for a very long

time these were followed" (6, 67, p. 500).^x Now, however, because of the present pride and impiety, "the third part begins to ascend, which will endure until the Judgement, and in this age I have sent the words of my mouth into the world through you" (ibid.).^y

Like so many apocalyptic thinkers, to whom the present seemed so abhorrent in comparison to their notion of what the past must have been like, Bridget cannot bear to associate past and present in the same age. The feeling is that the world must surely be entering a new decadence, the nadir of all history. And like so many apocalyptic thinkers, this perception of present evil is the foundation upon which they see themselves called as prophets at this special moment in time. At this point in the revelation Christ explains to Bridget that Antichrist will be born at the end of the present age and indulges in some of the usual Antichrist-lore which was proliferated in popular literature of the Middle Ages. Then he makes the comment, "but the time of this Antichrist will not be just as that friar, whose books you have seen, has described it, but in a time known to me" (p. 500).^z

"That friar" could be almost any of the Joachite-influenced Franciscans (or any of the handful of similarly influenced Dominicans); Bridget was living in Italy, which was a hotbed of prophetic activity at this time. However, it seems likely to me that the friar in question is John of Rupescissa. John was a near contemporary of Bridget's and wrote many books which were extremely popular. He also attempted the business of prophesying exact dates (he changes his mind) for the coming of Antichrist, something not all prophets did, and it would seem to be this

that Christ is objecting to in his statement to Bridget ("not . . . as that friar . . . described it, but in a time known to me").

The revelation ends with a list of the signs that will herald the coming of Antichrist: 1) iniquity and impiety will abound; 2) before Antichrist comes the door of faith will be opened to some heathen; 3) there will be heresy among some Christians; and 4) there will be persecution of the clergy and of the just. This periodization of apocalyptic events has many of the elements of current apocalyptic theory and the statement that Bridget had been reading the books of a certain friar only confirms what one would naturally guess after reading the revelation: Bridget was a dabbler in contemporary prophecy.

Jorgenson made a few suggestions about possible sources and analogues to Bridget's apocalyptic thought and while not all of these suggestions are convincing, a few of them are worth mentioning here. Jorgenson seems to feel that Bridget was influenced by Joachimism, but, as Marjorie Reeves has said, this is difficult to prove from her works.⁸¹ Her revelations do not seem to reflect any serious study of Joachim's exegesis,⁸² but they do show evidence of the more popular forms of Joachite prophecy and especially of sympathy for the radical Franciscan Spirituals' point of view (see Jorgenson, pp. 22ff.).

Bridget's love of sensational fire and brimstone predictions, which she made concerning the fate of individuals and the fate of the world in the coming chastisement, betrays a reading of popular portent-oriented prophecies. To the evident delight of John Tortsch,

who seemed to be even more fascinated by these spectacular predictions, Bridget forecast wars, pestilences, famine, earthquakes, great storms, fires and extremes of temperature⁸³ as some of the ways in which God would express his anger--now worse than ever before in one thousand years of history, Tortsch solemnly reports,⁸⁴ even though, he adds, chronicles show by the calamities they record that God has certainly been angry before! Jorgenson gives a translation of a pseudo-Sibylline prophecy which typifies this type of portent-oriented prediction very well:

To all faithful servants of Christ, wheresoever they might live. For the sake of the salvation of mankind we counsel you, that ye all straightway confess in the year of our Lord 1357, because of those things which shall come to pass in that year. First the sun shall go into the sign of the moon, which sign is exceeding hot, and the moon shall then be darkened. And the planets shall war against each other. Great afflictions shall at that time visit the earth, the slaying of men and many other disasters, and the sea shall pass up over the firm land and fill up four times more room than in the days of the deluge. . . . Strange signs will be seen on land and sea, manifold terrors and earthquakes shall come, and many towns shall be laid waste. . . . And at last on the seventh day in the month of August at the third hour the sun shall rise, red as blood. By its exceeding great fire and heat many houses, built of wood or having roofs of wood, will catch fire. In that third hour there will be great shedding of blood, most of all in the land of France, and later town will be set against town and country against country, but great numbers of Saracens will be converted by the preaching of the Gospel. And later lightning and thunder will come over the earth and terrors of other kinds, the like of which few men have ever seen. . . . We therefore counsel each and all to prepare themselves to die and to be good Christians. . . . All this is the prophecy of the Sybil, she who has said that after the year 1357 there shall be strange things to behold (Jorgenson II, p. 58).

This is the type of prophecy which no doubt prompted

Langland's use of obscure and foreboding portents in some of his own predictions. In many portent prophecies the same motifs recur and can be traced backwards; for example, the references to unnatural changes in the sun are often found in prophecies attributed to the Sibyl because of the original Sibylline interpretation of the vision of the nine suns.⁸⁵ Langland uses some common apocalyptic motifs as portentous warnings of God's anger with man's sin: the motif of houses burning down is (as in this prophecy) a common one which he uses (III.90ff.) and the motif of the uprooting of trees is another (V.118ff. and see also XXII.54ff.).⁸⁶ Bridget uses the latter motif herself in a prophetic admonition to the king of Sweden:

Thus saith the Son of God: "I will visit this kingdom with the sword and lance and with wrath. In vain do they say: 'Let us do as it pleaseth us, life is short, God is merciful, He will do us no evil!' Hearken to what I now say to thee. I will rise up in all my power and will not spare either young or old, rich or poor, just or unjust. I will come with my plough and pull up the trees by the roots, so that where there before were a thousand people only a hundred will be left, and their houses shall stand empty" (trans. Jorgenson II, p. 5; Rev. Extrav., Ch. 74).

She uses the image again in a different, rather poignant portrayal of Christ as a lone pilgrim and pathfinder in Rev. II, 15:

I came to the wild forest as a pilgrim. But before I came forth there was a voice that cried: "Now is the axe ready! He is come who shall clear the way and pull up by the roots all that withstand him." I laboured from the rising of the sun until its setting [i.e. until Christ's death on the cross]. . . . And thus I went forth in the wild forest of this world, in misery and in labour and prepared the way in my blood and the seat of my toil. This world must truly be called a wild forest, for all virtue was choked, and there was only one path that all men

walked in, the damned to hell and the good to desolate darkness. I came therefore like a pilgrim and laboured to prepare the way that leads to the kingdom of heaven. . . (trans. Jorgenson I, p. 149).

This is the type of passage, unfortunately all too rare in Bridget's writings, which is truly deserving of the adjective "visionary," in the sense of being vividly visual. All the best visionary writers give us from time to time these symbolically rich pictures, the elements of which radiate meaning in more than one direction.

The image of Christ as a "trailblazer" clearing a new path, the old one leading only to desolation for all who walk it, is superimposed over a more frightening image of Christ as conqueror, wielding an axe which no one can withstand. To this is added a rewriting of John the Baptist's message, "the voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight . . . and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways shall be made smooth. And all flesh shall see the salvation of God'" (Luke 3:4-5). But in another sense the path was not prepared and Bridget's passage emphasizes the loneliness and toil of the one whose task it was to clear it alone: "And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees: every tree therefore which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire" (Luke 3:9). The voice which precedes the pilgrim in Bridget's prophecy is John's and the message is as much an eschatological one as it is a message of hope.

In a few passages like this one Bridget's allegorical vision, which usually plods, soars to something like the level which is almost a

norm for Langland. The similarities lie in the effective use of a few key allegorical images (the wilderness, the pilgrim, the axe) in ways which are not entirely predictable. The layering of images and meanings which are themselves drawn from a powerful archetypal tradition (usually biblical) provides a kind of resonance which is heard even after the reader has stopped reading--heard and seen, as meanings crowd in around an evocative image. It is surely this effect which marks the kind of writing we deservedly call visionary.⁸⁷

Bridget was neither a highly innovative nor a theoretical apocalyptic writer, but some of her apocalyptic inspiration could be accounted for by the fact that she was no doubt genuinely moved by contemporary problems. Jorgenson cites a quotation from the fanatical Cola di Rienzo, whose apocalypticism carried him to revolutionary struggles. Referring to the pseudo-Joachite Oraculum Cyrilli, he said, "I would not have believed so easily that Cyril's prophecies had come down from heaven, and that God himself had been their author, if I had not in Avignon seen with my own eyes the Pope and his whole court and been witness to their corruption" (Jorgenson II, p. 32). The quotation speaks volumes: the shock of encountering certain realities obviously drove even the skeptical at times to embrace prophetic visions and this no doubt accounts for why a "realist" like Langland was moved to write and espouse prophecy.

Like Cola di Rienzo, Bridget was probably shocked into her apocalyptic stance as well. Her main concern is always the state of the clergy. She inveighs against almost every group or order within the

Church, usually using the original founder as a measuring stick of the decline.⁸⁸ In Rev. III, 20 Mary praises St. Benedict for his personal sanctity and the role he has played in bringing so many others to a "life of perfection." But, using a striking allegorical image, Mary laments:

Now, however, many firebrands cast out from the funeral pile of St. Benedict lie dispersed, having for heat frigidity, for light shadow, which, if they were cast together into the fire, they would give forth flames and heat from themselves (III, 20, p. 180).^{aa}

Like many apocalyptic writers, Bridget is especially concerned with the state of the mendicant orders. For her there were two types of Franciscans, those who followed Francis' Rule and those who followed the rule of "Brother Adversarius." Roger Ellis' edition of the Middle English translation in British Library MS Claudius B I of sections of the Revelations contains a passage which illustrates well Bridget's view of what had happened to the Franciscan order. Christ tells Bridget:

Fraunces freres, þat are called menours, longe time kepid þis reule right wele gosteli and deuoteli eftir mi will; and þat hade þe fende grete inuie at . . . [At the devil's instigation one clerk began to think:] "I wold gladli be in swilke a state whare I might haue worshipe of the worlde . . . I will entir þe ordir of Fraunces, and I sall feine me full meke and lawli and obedient. . . ." And þan þoght þe fende þus: "Right als bei Fraunces were mani drawn to leue þe worlde & com to blis, so sall þis frere adversari, and þat sall be his name, drawe mani fra mekenes to pride, fro wilfull pouert to coueitise, fro obediens to do þaire awen will and bodeli likinge."⁸⁹

Among other hypocrises Friar Adversarius says, "Also I will go to þe scole and lere, þat I mai haue wirshipe in þe worlde and in mine

order. . . ."90 Like Langland, Bridget saw the downfall of the friars as being in large part due to their zeal for university studies. Anti-intellectualism is as much a part of Bridget's prophetic point of view as it is of the other visionaries we have looked at. In a revelation concerning a foreign ecclesiastic Bridget is asked,

Will he stake his esteem as a scholar, and exchange his seat among the other supporters of culture for the humble place of a poor Franciscan among the simple-minded and the foolish? For only then can he stand fearlessly . . . and speak the truth . . . (Rev. III, 18; trans. Jorgenson II, p. 10).

In spite of the decadence of the Franciscan order, Bridget maintained a certain idealization of these friars which we rarely see in Middle English literature. One can only assume that the struggle of the Franciscan Spirituals on the continent left its mark on the imaginations of many religious thinkers there. What is particularly interesting about Langland is that he shows all the signs of this idealization of poverty and simplicity at the same time as he heaps scorn upon the fraternal orders and it is the apocalyptic aspect of this problem which will be taken up in the next chapter. For the time being we should consider these characteristics as part of the visionary apocalyptic tradition to which they also belong--and to which they belonged even before the formation of the fraternal orders in the thirteenth century. In Revelations IV, 22 Christ says,

Come you unlearned and simple ones and I will give you speech and wisdom with which the loquacious will not be able to fight. So now I have filled the simple with my wisdom in these days and they oppose the learned. I have rooted out the

magniloquent, and the powerful and suddenly they have departed (IV, 22, p. 233).bb

As we saw with Hildegard, unlearned women visionaries had a vested interest in this type of attack on the clerical establishment;⁹¹ however, that said, the strong current of anti-intellectualism which engulfs so many prophetic writers takes in a wider group. Eric Colledge speaks of the controversies which Bridget's writings spawned after her death as "dividing the antiqui from the moderni" (p. 48) and mentions the self-portrait which her disciple, Alphonse of Jaen, draws in the opening chapter of his defense of Bridget's Revelations, the Epistola Solitarii:

This opening chapter is aimed not so much at kings as at their counsellors, learned men, doctors in both laws, no doubt, of the type that will dismiss the Revelations as the vapourings of a mere woman, a type which is the very antithesis of Alphonse, who draws for us here an excellent miniature portrait of himself, a man learned in scriptural and patristic lore rather than in worldly science (his disparaging remarks on canon law will be recalled), and a practised spiritual counsellor, above all to holy women (Colledge, p. 41).

This chasm of understanding between the antiqui and the moderni, which is one of the main issues in Langland's poetry, is highlighted in medieval discussions of the validity of prophecy and visions, as we shall see. One of the most famous images from Bridget's Revelations, immortalized in an excellent woodcut of Gothan's 1492 Lübeck edition, is of a monk on a ladder. The whole fifth book of the Revelations records the questions of an arrogant university professor who, from a heightened position on a ladder, challenges God on the imperfections of the world

and of Christian doctrine.⁹² Will's "aresoning" of Reason (XIII.243) would seem to be part of a long and lively prophetic tradition which scorns the intellectual pride and presumption of mankind.

Bridget and the Visionary Self-Image

We do not know a great deal about Bridget's actual mode of receiving visions, because unlike Robert of Uzès she does not herself give us details of the circumstances of their occurrence.⁹³ But so much controversy surrounded Bridget both during her lifetime and after her death that we have been left a legacy of material reflecting a variety of medieval attitudes towards the visionary experience. Some of the most eminent theologians of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries became involved in commentary on Bridget's claims in particular and the problem of visionary validity in general.⁹⁴ The proliferation of prophecy of all types at this time no doubt made religious thinkers from a variety of backgrounds aware of both the dangers and possibilities inherent in this question.

Bridget's visions were received when she was awake, not asleep, "rapt and caught away from the senses of the body in ecstasy and spiritual contemplation."⁹⁵ In Revelations IV, 77 she writes,

O dearest God, strange it is what thou dost to me. For when it pleases thee, thou dost lull me to sleep, not bodily, but in a deep spiritual sleep. Then thou dost awaken my spirit to see and hear and feel with the powers of the Spirit . . .
(Jorgenson, II, p. 231).

In this same chapter she makes much use of the "sweetness" metaphor, so common in the medieval mystical tradition, both in England and on the Continent,⁹⁶ but gives little else by way of explanation of her actual experience.

Bridget, like Robert and John of Rupescissa, must have been much impressed with Hildegard, because she too tries to imitate the Hildegardian visionary style: Hildegard's "lucent cloud" figures in Bridget's earliest visionary experiences: "raptaque in spiritu vidit nubem lucidem, et de nube audivit vocem dicentem sibi, 'Ego sum Deus tuus, . . .'"⁹⁷ Unlike Hildegard, however, Bridget claimed that she went into a state of ecstasy while receiving her visions. In Alphonse of Jaen's defense of Bridget's status, the Epistola solitarii, he writes that many have asked him for an account of Bridget's manner of receiving her visions and he refers readers to this passage in Revelations IV, 77. He then testifies that he himself has often seen her in ecstasy, absorbed in prayer, and blind and deaf to everything about her--the exact opposite of Hildegard's experience. On recovering she would relate her visions to her confessors, often "fearing to be deluded by the devil" (Colledge, p. 42).

All medieval visionaries lived with this ever-present fear of being duped by diabolical frauds. In Revelations IV, 38 Christ warns Bridget against too easy a trust in dreams and reminds her that the devil is the father of lies (Colledge, p. 40). Dreams were generally considered much less trustworthy and, at best, a lower form of revelation than waking visions, and this is no doubt what is being

reflected here. As Colledge notes, Bridget was on various occasions required to undergo probatio, that is, to be "tested" as to the validity of her revelations (pp. 39-40). By Bridget's time a considerable literature had grown up concerning this problem of telling a true visionary from a fraudulent one and it is this literature which Alphonse summarized and called to witness in his defense of Bridget. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to do anything more than mention some of the key concepts involved, but since this specialized area of medieval religious thought does throw some light on certain problems in Piers Plowman, we should give it some space here. There are two aspects of the probatio problem which we will look at, the first spiritual and the second polemical: how does one go about distinguishing a true visionary from a fraudulent one, and why does God choose to reveal himself in this way to the simple and not to the learned?

Drawing on Augustine, Jerome, Gregory, Thomas Aquinas, Nicholas of Lyra, Hugh of St. Victor and St. Anthony, Alphonse deals in the Epistola Solitarii with the first problem under the heading of discretio.⁹⁸ In discerning the validity of any vision, much weight was placed on the moral and spiritual character of the visionary or visionaries in question:

Are they spiritually-minded or of the world? . . . Do their lives bear fruits of obedience, humility, charity, prayer, or are they marked by pride, vanity, ambition? . . . Have they continued for long in spiritual life and in visions, or are they only beginners? Are they of sound intelligence and judgment, or

are they giddy, easily moved, fantastic? (summarized by Colledge, p. 41)

The visions themselves should then be examined:

Were they received in waking, in sleeping or in dreaming? Are they corporeal, imaginary and spiritual, intellectual and supernatural?⁹⁹ Were they received in ecstasy? Have mysteries and doctrines of the faith been revealed in them? Has divine truth been illuminated or illustrated? Do the visions accord with Scripture? Do they promote virtue and the health of souls, or do they lead to error, teaching that which is monstrous and irrational? Are they always true, or do they sometimes deceive? Do they foretell worldly honours and riches, or humility? Do they encourage pride or meekness, disobedience or obedience? (Ibid.)

Even these indications, however, are full of ambiguous implications for the Church, and medieval theologians who distrusted visionaries and prophets were quick to point these out. Revelations had, on the one hand, to accord with Scripture and the Church's received tradition of faith; on the other hand, they could not be considered as true revelations if they revealed what we might bluntly refer to as "nothing new."¹⁰⁰ The illuminating or illustrating of divine truth was a tricky business: what accorded with present faith and knowledge could hardly be regarded as "revelation" in many cases and what did not could easily be seen as heresy. As Gerson shows in his attack on Bridget's revelations, too many supposed visionaries had turned out to be heretics in the last analysis (Colledge, p. 46). Furthermore, as Alphonse himself said, one had to be learned and experienced in the spiritual life in order to be able to judge visionaries in the first place. Gerson takes the problem even further:

not all men are capable of such proofs; rather, it is a gift of the Holy Spirit in itself to be able to make such judgements (Colledge, p. 45). At this point we may rightly ask how one can assess the validity of the judge and/or his judgements. The solution seems only to spawn fresh problems.

The whole question was magnified in Bridget's time by the presence of a plethora of prophets and visionaries often giving contradictory advice. In Revelations IV, 141 Bridget excuses Pope Gregory to Christ by explaining what hinders him from coming to Rome, "and I have heard that many oppose him, saying that they have the Spirit of God, and that they have received divine revelations and visions; and that they use these as a pretext to dissuade him from coming" (trans. Colledge, p. 38). For Bridget this was obviously an embarrassing situation and one can see why visionaries in her position were often tortured with insecurity. As Colledge suggests, however, even detractors of such visionaries often espoused prophecy when it suited their purposes,¹⁰¹ a fact which suggests that, even with the sceptical, prophecy still carried some weight, whether for its spiritual or polemical potential.

It is clear from what has been said even in this brief summary of the problem that prophets found themselves under constant scrutiny both regarding their own lifestyle and demeanor and regarding the orthodoxy and credibility of what they prophesied. What we have here is the absolutely earnest side of what writers like Langland and Chaucer exploit when they portray their dreamers as musing on the validity of

dreams. One wonders to what extent Langland, as a serious religious writer, felt that his own lifestyle and writings required the justification which Alphonse seeks for Bridget? I think that we may have the reason here for some of Langland's autobiographical additions to the C-Text and it is this problem which we will turn to in the last section of this chapter.

The second aspect of the probatio problem, which Bridget's works bring us face to face with, is the polemical problem of anti-intellectualism. We have already noted this problem in Bridget's own writings; the issue raised its head in the polemics exchanged after her death as well. Why God should have revealed his mysteries to an unlearned woman and in a vernacular tongue as well is a question which runs through all the anti-Brigittine treatises. Alphonse sought to counter it by stressing that in both the Old and New testaments God had consistently chosen simple people as his prophets and had often favoured women in this respect (Colledge, pp. 41ff.). In speaking of this problem with regard to women mystics, Valerie Lagorio has pointed to the Schwester Katrei exemplum, "which, in all its variants, concerns how a simple woman triumphed over her confessor, a learned theologian" (Lagorio, p. 74).

This notion of the triumph of the simple over the learned is evident in several places in Piers Plowman. Even excluding the questionable anti-intellectualism of the Rechlessnesse section of the poem, this theme occurs in a number of other places, notably in various appearances of Piers. His argument with the priest over the troublesome

pardon (IX) and his teachings, as espoused by Clergie at the Feast of Patience (XV, 128-137) both show evidence of this type of thought. In the B-text pardon scene the priest needles Piers about his "intellectual pretentions":

"What!" quod þe preest to Perkyng, "Peter! as me þynkep
Thow art lettred a litel; who lerned þee on boke?"
"Abstynence þe Abbesse myn a b c me tauzte,
And Conscience cam afte[r] and kenned me [bette]."
"Were þow a preest, [Piers]", quod he, "þow myztest preche
[whan þee liked]
As diuinour in diuinite, wiþ Dixit insipiens to þi teme"
(B VII, 136-41).

Just because the priest (and the spiritual neophyte, Will) cannot see more in Truth's message does not mean that there is not more there. No matter how one interprets the pardon scene, Langland's skillful juxtaposition of learned literalism with spiritual simplicity will remain at the heart of the message.

In fact, on one level the pardon episode can be read as the medieval evangelical response to what the clergy and their learning have come to represent. We have seen in our discussion of Hildegard how closely associated the prophetic tradition was with the evangelical tenets of poverty, simplicity and anti-intellectualism. Upon tearing the pardon in the B-Text, Piers vows to take up what is clearly an evangelical lifestyle based on apostolic poverty and prayer:

"I shal cessen of my sowyng", quod Piers, "& swynke not so
harde,
Ne aboute my [bilyue] so bisy be na moore; . . .
And but if luc lye he lereþ vs [anoper]
By foweles [þat are] not bisy aboute þe [bely ioye];

Ne solliciti sitis he seip in þe gospel,
 And shewep vs by ensampl[e] vs selue to wisse.
 The foweles in þe [firmament], who fynt hem at wynter?
 [Whan þe frost fresep fode hem bihouep];
 Haue pei no gerner to go to but god fynt hem alle" (B VII,
 121-22, 129-35).

Piers is in every respect an excellent vehicle for this type of anti-clerical reproach which is so much a part of the prophetic reform tradition. This polemical dimension to the figure of Piers shows up more clearly when the poem is placed against a background of prophetic material where both the ideology and the self-justification of visionary writers is reflected in this type of stance.¹⁰²

Another point which is highlighted in this context is the importance of the autobiographical element in such works. What holds these books of visions, like Robert's Liber Visionum or Bridget's Revelations, together is the recurring and developing experience of the visionary, however sketchily that may be portrayed--without this they would simply be a series of separate visionary incidents. Mary-Jo Arn has recently made this point with regard to the dreamer in Piers

Plowman:

Episodes do not relate to each other; they relate, each in turn, to Will. This allows Langland a more radical departure from discursive exposition than is evidenced by any other Middle English poet. It also raises the narrator to an altogether new plane of importance. It is overstating the case only a little to say that without Will the action of the poem as a whole has little meaning. Will is the locus and embodiment of its meaning (Arn, pp. 60-61).

One genre of medieval literature in which the narrator had

already been raised to this "altogether new plane of importance" is the religious visionary literature. Here the visionary is "the medium through which the authoritative story [i.e. the revelation] had become available to the reader," at the same time as he or she provides "a role with which the reader could identify in his reading."¹⁰³ This is what the literary critic Paul Piehler is referring to when he writes of explicitly literary visions that "medieval visionary allegory offers its readers participation in a process of psychic redemption."¹⁰⁴ In visionary prophecy the autobiographical element may not be as effectively presented or developed as it is in the narrative of a literary vision, but the same elements are there. As Lagorio has suggested, these autobiographical elements often go hand in hand with other concerns which we are familiar with in Piers Plowman: concern for social and clerical reform, spiritual counsel and demarcation of the steps on the road to perfection of Christian life. It is in these, and in the more specific similarities in apocalyptic ideology that prophetic vision literature can illuminate Piers Plowman for us, but before considering the implications of these things for the poem itself, we will stop to consider some of the literary features of this age-old genre.

II. Allegory or Apocalypse? Apocalyptic Form in Piers Plowman and Some of the "Classic" Apocalypses

The apocalypse can be most simply defined as "a genre of revelatory literature within a narrative framework" (Hayes, 366), because all apocalypses are or include visions of one sort or another. In looking

at the apocalyptic writings of medieval visionaries we have been able to get a sense of the doctrinal or ideological concerns of the apocalypticist: the sense of crisis, concern for present morality and spirituality, the conviction of impending chastisement, the attempts to interpret the course of history, and so on. In this section we will be concerned with the apocalypse as a literary form or recognized genre. Certain commentators on Piers Plowman, from Robert Crowley to Morton Bloomfield, have viewed the poem as "an apocalypse,"¹⁰⁵ and it should be stressed that this is a different proposition from saying that the poem has apocalyptic passages. Many medieval writers wrote apocalyptic prophecies or saw visions on apocalyptic themes, but few attempted to write an apocalypse--a full-fledged revelatory literary work within a narrative framework. In order to find out whether this is what Langland himself was trying to achieve, the literary form and style of the apocalypses available to him have to be analyzed and this is what we will attempt to do now.

It should be admitted that what follows is only a beginning. It is just about as easy to define the apocalypse as a literary genre as it is to define the novel or the epic--it is also just about as feasible. However, I hope that by selecting a few characteristics of genuine apocalypses, we will be able to throw some light on certain literary features of Piers Plowman--without rushing in where angels fear to tread by attempting to solve the mystery of the apocalypse as a genre.

We shall begin by looking at three early apocalypses which were certainly known to or knowable to Langland: The Apocalypse of Esdras,

the Revelation of St. John and The Shepherd of Hermas. All three were well known to the Latin Middle Ages, yet only the second is ever considered in any study of the vision literature which influenced the Middle English tradition.¹⁰⁶ Although there are any number of similarities between them, we shall look at the following characteristics which, I think are of especial interest to readers of Piers Plowman:

- 1) a striking mixture within the same work of visionary (usually allegorical) passages with non-visionary (usually didactic and dialectical) sections, resulting in a total absence of visualization in some parts;¹⁰⁷
- 2) a mixture, again within the same work, of characteristics which may be associated with both "real," "experienced" visions or with literary, conventionalized visions;
- 3) a striking degree of variation in the extent to which the dreamer or visionary participates in particular passages or sections of the work;
- 4) a somewhat troubled or argumentative or unpredictable relationship between the visionary and certain supernatural figures of authority;
- 5) a tolerance of a certain amount of confusion or structural looseness on the surface level of the narrative or allegory, and in the treatment of topics or ideas throughout.

Biblical critics, who are virtually the only people who work much with these "classic" apocalypses, have commented on some of these features, but remain silent on others. R. H. Charles commented that something which "the reader of the Apocalyptic Literature must be prepared for is the frequent inconsistency of thought to be found there, together with variableness of teaching often involving contradiction."¹⁰⁸ Charles explains this phenomenon with reference to the fact that the apocalypses involved an undigested mix of both traditional

and newer conceptions--this is certainly a problem that Langland's readers can identify with. Apocalypses were often written in times which were both politically and spiritually turbulent: fourteenth-century England meets this criterion as well.

With regard to the visionary aspects of apocalypses, Morton S. Enslin notes that "vision" and "seeing" are as conventionalized for the apocalypticist as

"Thus saith Yahweh" for the prophet. What he wishes to express he reports as having "seen". Thus the author of Rev. can see a scroll that is rolled up and sealed with seven seals, yet can see that it is "written within and on the back" (5:1). He can turn around to see the voice which is talking to him (1:12) and see the Son of man holding 7 stars in his right hand yet placing that same right hand on the author's head (1:16-17). He can see the new Jerusalem in the form of a perfect 1,500-mile cube (21:16). Failure to understand this convention of apocalyptic imagery has led to most unwarranted conclusions. . . .¹⁰⁹

On the other hand, certain features in the apocalypses, such as many of the apocalypticists' descriptions of their physical state during or after their visions, sound convincing enough to "suggest that the reported dream or vision may well have had genuine inspirational experience behind it" (Russell, p. 165). The vivid descriptions of Esdras' emotional state, for example, coupled with his long bouts of prayer and fasting, might have given rise to psychic experiences in anyone:

And so I fasted seven days, mourning and weeping, like as Uriel the angel commanded me. And after seven days so it was, that the thoughts of my heart were very grievous unto me again,

And my soul recovered the spirit of understanding, and I began to talk with the most High again (II Esdras 520-22).

As Holdsworth says speaking of the medieval Purgatory of St. Patrick:

It is significant too that no one could enter the cave called the Purgatory of St. Patrick until they had spent fifteen days fasting and praying in the nearby church, and that they finally entered fortified by communion and elaborate ritual. Prepared in such a way it would take an unimaginative person not to believe that he saw visions once he had crossed the threshold of the cave (Holdsworth, p. 144).

But there are also literary indications of real psychological experience, or convincing imitations of such experience, as for example the chaotic use of imagery and disrupted narrative line.

All the biblical critics speak of the profusion of symbolism, allegory and imagery in apocalypses, but there is next to no comment on the chaotic use of such things within the framework of what are usually very untidy narratives. Austin Farrer comments, in his study of what must surely be, at the literal and narrative level at any rate, one of the most chaotic books ever written,

The Apocalypse has a great deal of framework; no one can miss that. It bears the promise of formal consistency, of a continuous grand architecture spanning the whole book, into which all the visionary detail is to be fitted. Yet, as we advance, it does not appear to us that the promise is fulfilled. The lines of the schematic architecture elude us, and the work seems in danger of disintegrating into a mere pile of visions and oracles. Then architectural elements reappear, yet not in such order as plainly to make up the unity of a single edifice. We are left unable to reconcile ourselves either to the hypothesis of formal order or to the hypothesis of its absence. Must we conclude that St. John attempted form and broke down in the execution of it? Or must we accept the supposition of a

demon-editor who has broken up St. John's noble building by his senseless omissions, rearrangements and additions? (Farrer, p. 36)

Piers Plowman critics have been haunted by similar problems for years.

Biblical scholars make little reference to the role of the visionary, his self-characterization or his relationship to the supranatural figures he encounters, although D. S. Russell comments that the apocalyptist remains "completely concealed behind his message" (p. 118), no doubt because so many apocalypses were written in difficult times and were foisted pseudonymously on revered figures of the past. The apocalypse is a completely literary form, a message disseminated through a book: "What thou seest, write in a book" (Revelation 1:11) is the byword. The effect is to shift responsibility for the content of the work on to supranatural authorities and this may well account for the apparent stupidity or short-sightedness or even "amazement" with which the visionary characterizes himself within the work: it is safer and more effective for the visionary to be taught certain things than it would be for him to espouse them personally.

If "myth is the language of concern," as Northrop Frye says,¹¹⁰ then perhaps apocalyptic is the language of conflict. The two predominant sub-forms within apocalypses, the allegory or similitude on the one hand and the disputation or dialogue on the other are both used as vehicles for resolving the conflicts within the visionary's mind (see Hayes, p. 366). This is nowhere more evident than in the first apocalypse we shall look at, the apocryphal Apocalypse of

Esdras:

it makes less use of fantastic imagery than [other apocalypses] and is sharply distinguished from them by its dominant concern with the problem of human suffering. No other book outside of Job exhibits so profound and intensely personal an interest in this subject . . . [the author's] immediate problem is the fact that God's chosen people have been subjugated by the impious Romans (4:23), but his mind can never completely separate this from the broader problem presented by the existence of human misery in any form. . . . His pessimistic view of human nature, corrupted by an evil heart (3:26), has striking affinities with the teaching of Paul, as does his lament that even possession of the divine law does not suffice to save Israel (3:22, 9:36). The continual return to these themes in the first 3 visions shows the extent of the author's emotional involvement in them (Dentan, p. 522).

Called by Charles "one of the most remarkable of Apocalypses," the core of the work (chapters 3-14) consists of seven visions,¹¹¹ of which three are "visions in the strict sense" (Dentan, p. 521), that is, they are allegorical dramas which must be interpreted to Esdras afterwards. Three further visions are "extended philosophical colloquies" (ibid.) between Esdras and a divine authority. The final vision consists of Esdras' commission to rewrite the sacred books which were destroyed in the burning of the temple, including seventy apocalyptic books. Even from this brief summary the mixed nature of the apocalypse can be seen: it divides itself almost evenly between allegorical and dialectical vision.

Esdras was not considered canonical by the Church, but it became attached to the Vulgate as the apocryphal IV Esdras and Latin manuscripts are numerous.¹¹² In the Middle Ages the text would have circulated as it stands in the King James version today (chapters

1-16 inclusive). It was not until 1875 that R. L. Bensly published a missing section of chapter 7 (verses 36-196), which was probably excised early on for doctrinal reasons.¹¹³ In what follows I have used the King James translation, which was made from the version the Middle Ages knew.

Let us look first at Esdras' role as visionary within the work. Chapter three (the beginning of the original apocalypse proper) starts with an explanation of Esdras'¹¹⁴ mood at the time of the visions:

In the thirtieth year after the ruin of the city I was in Babylon, and lay troubled upon my bed, and my thoughts came up over my heart: For I saw the desolation of Sion, and the wealth of them that dwelt at Babylon. And my spirit was sore moved, so that I began to speak words full of fear to the most High (II Esdras 3:1-3).

His words of fear become words of indignation as he challenges God to justify what he views as His unreasonable treatment of Israel:

Are they then of Babylon better than they of Sion? . . . Weigh thou therefore our wickedness now in the balance, and theirs also that dwell in the world; and so shall thy name no where be found but in Israel. Or when was it that they which dwell upon the earth have not sinned in thy sight? or what people have so kept thy commandments? Thou shalt find that Israel by name hath kept thy precepts; but not the heathen (II Esdras 3:31.34-36).

At this point the angel Uriel appears and the bold, indignant Esdras takes on the role which we have become so familiar with in medieval dream visions:

And the angel that was sent unto me, whose name was Uriel, gave me an answer, And said, Thy heart hath gone too far in this world, and thinkest thou to comprehend the way of the most High? Then said I, Yea, my lord. And he answered me, and said, I am sent to shew thee three ways, and to set forth three similitudes before thee: Whereof if thou canst declare me one, I will show thee also the way that thou desirest to see, and I shall shew thee from whence the wicked heart cometh. And I said, Tell on, my lord. Then said he unto me, Go thy way, weigh me the weight of the fire, or measure me the blast of the wind, or call me again the day that is past (II Esdras 4:1-5).

Esdras' response is predictable, and although he has clearly lost the first round of the fight, he perseveres in his questioning of God's purpose in allowing the present state of affairs. Esdras reminds us here of Will "aresoning" Reason or pestering Liberum Arbitrium for endless answers. For example, when Will jokes about the number of names he has, Liberum Arbitrium responds with a sudden anger which surprises most modern readers:

"Now y se thy wille:
Thow woldest knowe and conne þe cause of all here names
And of myn yf thow myhteste, me thynketh by thy speche."
"ȝe, sire!" y sayde, "by so no man were ygreued,
Alle þe sciences vnder sonne and alle þe sotil craftes
Y wolde y knewe and couthe kyndeliche in myn herte."
"Thenne artow inparfit," quod he, "and oen of Pruydes
knyhtes;
For such a lust and lykyng Lucifer ful fram heuene (XVI.205-12).

In an age which applauds intellectual curiosity it is hard to understand this reaction, although the hyperbolic way in which Will describes his thirst for knowledge in his reply to it is a good clue. Like Esdras, Will "would comprehend the way of the most High" in his pursuit of knowledge and in his present state even all this knowledge

would not likely bring him understanding, a distinction which he is unable to see. This type of encounter between visionary and guide is a common motif in apocalypses, as we shall see with the Shepherd of Hermas especially. Critics of Middle English dream vision literature have not usually realized that the convention of the blundering, inquisitive dreamer goes back so far in literary history.¹¹⁵

Esdras then tries to change the tenor of the discussion by asking, "O Lord, let me have understanding: For it was not in my mind to be curious of the high things, but of such as pass by us daily, namely, wherefore Israel is given up as a reproach to the heathen . . ." (4:22-3). A discussion of sin ensues in which Uriel promises worse to come for Israel. Esdras asks, "How and when shall these things come to pass? wherefore are our years few and evil?" and he is rebuked again, "Do not thou hasten above the most Highest: for thy haste is in vain to be above him, for thou hast much exceeded" (4:33-4). As the apocalypse continues the reader is consistently struck by the portrait of Esdras as sincerely and desperately seeking understanding, on the one hand, and being consistently made to play the fool, on the other hand, with his indignant and essentially unreflective reactions to his own thoughts and emotions. As always in religious writings, similitudes serve as surrogate answers to the unanswerable questions of faith, and the effect is often one of disjointedness as this oblique way of proceeding masquerades as logical discussion. But logical progression is quite simply not to be had. Esdras, like Will, does not see that faith is not settled by disputation:

And I said, Behold, O Lord, yet art thou nigh unto them that be reserved till the end: and what shall they do that have been before me, or we [that be now], or they that shall come after us? And he said unto me, I will liken my judgment unto a ring: like as there is no slackness of the last, even so there is no swiftness of the first. So I answered and said, Couldst thou not make those that have been made, and be now, and that are for to come, at once; that thou mightest shew thy judgment the sooner? Then answered he me, and said, The creature may not hast above the maker. . . (II Esdras 5:41-4).

In this passage Esdras even tries to make suggestions to God about how he should organize the world, but for all his boldness, his desperation to understand is touching:

. . . then said he unto me, Thou art sore troubled in mind for Israel's sake: lovest thou that people better than he that made them? And I said, No, Lord: but of very grief have I spoken: for my reins pain me every hour, while I labour to comprehend the way of the most High, and to seek out part of his judgment. And he said unto me, Thou canst not (II Esdras 5:33-5).

It is difficult not to sympathize with Esdras; from a human point of view his questions are just, but Uriel is only one in a long line of supranatural authorities in the visionary tradition who view the searchings of a human visionary with disapproval. The relationship between these two figures in apocalyptic tradition is unpredictable and uneasy. While at one point the visionary's questions will be welcomed and the answers delivered with grace, shortly afterwards the visionary will meet with a rebuke and the relationship seems about to dissolve in bad temper. The technique--if it is intentional--may be an attempt to instill fear and meekness in the reader. There can be little doubt that it adds to the sense of instability which these visions create in so

many different ways.

We will look briefly now at one of the allegorical visions which illustrates a number of the characteristics of apocalypses at once. Esdras receives this vision, as he has the others, after seven days of fasting and praying out in a field. While praying he sees a woman who mourns and weeps aloud in rent clothing and ashes. Esdras asks her why she mourns and she responds, after some coaxing, with a tale that is absolutely coherent on the literal level: after thirty years of praying for a child, she and her husband were graced with a son who grew up and took a wife, but this son died at the wedding feast. The woman has fled to the field to mourn and fast until death releases her from her pain. Esdras reacts to this story by rebuking her:

Then left I the meditations wherein I was, and spake to her in anger, saying, Thou foolish woman above all other, seest thou not our mourning, and what happeneth unto us? How that Sion our mother is full of all heaviness, and much humbled, mourning very sore? And now, seeing we all mourn and are sad, for we are all in heaviness, art thou grieved for one son? (II Esdras 10:5-8)

After a lengthy attempt to bring her around to his point of view, she suddenly begins to change:

And it came to pass, while I was talking with her, behold, her face upon a sudden shined exceedingly, and her countenance glistered, so that I was afraid of her, and mused what it might be. And, behold, suddenly she made a great cry very fearful: so that the earth shook at the noise of the woman. And I looked, and, behold, the woman appeared unto me no more, but there was a city builded, and a large place shewed itself from the foundations. . . (II Esdras 10:25-7).

It is as if the woman brings forth the city in labour, but Esdras is incapable of understanding the significance of what is now, obviously, a vision and not a chance encounter. Panicking and desperately calling for Uriel, he faints:

And, lo, I lay as one that had been dead, and mine understanding was taken from me: and he took me by the right hand, and comforted me, and set me upon my feet, and said unto me, What aileth thee? and why art thou so disquieted? and why is thine understanding troubled, and the thoughts of thine heart? And I said, Because thou hast forsaken me, and yet I did according to thy words, and I went into the field, and lo, I have seen, and yet see, that I am not able to express. And he said unto me, Stand up manfully, and I will advise thee. Then said I, Speak on, my lord, in me; only forsake me not, lest I die frustate of my hope. For I have seen that I knew not, and hear that I do not know. Or is my sense deceived, or my soul in a dream? Now therefore I beseech thee that thou wilt shew thy servant of this vision (II Esdras 10:30-7).

Langland also uses this device of swooning to move to another level of vision and panicked searching for the figure of authority (in Will's case Piers) who can explain what has now become quite literally an obsession. This obsessive, even physical reaction to intense desire for spiritual understanding is characteristic of apocalyptic visions; we will see the same thing in John's Apocalypse and the Shepherd of Hermas. The woman whom Esdras rebuked was indeed Sion herself. The city was barren until Solomon built it up and began to present offerings; the death of the son was the destruction of Jerusalem which Esdras himself so laments:

For now the most High seeth that thou art grieved unfeignedly, and sufferest from thy whole heart for her, so hath he shewed

thee the brightness of her glory, and the comeliness of her beauty (II Esdras 10:50).

We can see within this allegorical vision episode many features of the apocalypse: the dreamlike mid-vision shift of symbol (the woman becomes the city), the troubled state of the visionary in being unable to comprehend anything beyond the literal level of what he perceives. Finally, comparing this to other allegorical visions in the apocalypse in which Esdras is just an observer, we note the degree to which he participates in this one. The elements of the allegory are simple and very conventional: the woman, who later changes in appearance so that "her countenance glistened," the apocalyptic cry of travail, the great city, and so on. But there is also the suggestion--deliberate or otherwise--of real visionary experience, especially in the confusion of Esdras (Russell, p. 165).

There is much in Esdras which is typical of apocalyptic prophecy such as we find in later medieval productions. The book abounds with doom and gloom predictions, unnatural signs and portents and common motifs such as the persecution of the faithful, the stubbornness of the unrepentant even after repeated divine chastisement, and a pessimistic sense of world history winding down to a close:

For the world hath lost his youth, and the times begin to wax old. For the world is divided into twelve parts, and the ten parts of it are gone already, and half of a tenth part: and there remaineth that which is after the half of the tenth part. Now therefore set thine house in order, and reprove thy people, comfort such of them as be in trouble, and now renounce

corruption, Let go from thee mortal thoughts, cast away the burdens of man, put off now the weak nature (II Esdras 14:10-14)

This attempt at a periodization of world history is another feature of apocalyptic thought and Esdras is given many similitudes, some of them in the riddling, obscure style also characteristic of prophecy, which suggest the point of the present time on the whole schedule of history, as for example:

Then answered I and said, What shall be the parting asunder of the times? or when shall be the end of the first, and the beginning of it that followeth? And he said unto me, From Abraham unto Isaac, when Jacob and Esau were born of him, Jacob's hand held first the heel of Esau. For Esau is the end of the world, and Jacob is the beginning of it that followeth. The hand of man is betwixt the heel and the hand: other question, Esdras, ask thou not (II Esdras 6:7-10).

These characteristics of the apocalypse are not surprising, but some of the literary elements we have just discussed are perhaps unexpected: they signal that we should beware of too narrow a definition of what might constitute apocalyptic influence in a poem like Piers Plowman.

The Apocalypse of John and the Apocalypsis Goliae

We will turn now to the Apocalypse of John, surely one of the most enigmatic works ever written. Of all the apocalypses in the Judeo-Christian tradition it bears perhaps the least resemblance to Piers Plowman. The grotesque beasts and cryptic symbolism are, for the most part, quite different from anything we find in Langland's poetry and, as the only canonical Christian apocalypse, this fact may have served to steer critics away from any consideration of apocalyptic form

in the poem. It does, however, exhibit many of the literary characteristics of the apocalypse which we have spoken of and there can be little question of Langland not knowing it. Furthermore, one of the few works of literature cited in Piers Plowman is a parody of John's Apocalypse, the Apocalypsis Goliae, which we will also look at briefly. Interestingly, some of the apocalyptic features in the Revelation of John which are relevant to Piers Plowman are most easily seen from the standpoint of the goliardic parody. Any apocalypse, but especially John's, could be easily parodied. The genre depends almost entirely on the reader's readiness to entertain seriously an unending and unrelieved series of doom warnings, hyperbolically described calamities and pessimistic reviews of human nature. This high seriousness, bolstered by even higher claims to divine inspiration, is easily punctured by the satirist's pen and the result makes for entertaining reading. In fact, if the goliardic satirist had not yielded to the temptation to include rather too much standard medieval anti-clerical diatribe and had stuck a little more closely to his parodic purpose, the work would be a masterpiece of satiric art. Langland seems to have summoned up his allusion to the work in the Feast of Patience passage (XV.99) because of Goliath's long and vicious attack on clerical gluttony. This particular passage gives some sense of the kind of literary "double standard" which obtained in the Middle Ages in the division between vernacular and Latin texts--it is hard to imagine anything so pungent being written in the vernacular. Take for example the parody of clerical gluttony based on the rite of communion (quoting the sixteenth-century English

translation):

And when the Abbat dothe amonge his bretheren suppe,
 Then tossed are the cuppes with quaffinge to and froe,
 And then with bothe his handes the wine he holdeth uppe,
 And with a thundringe voice these wordes he doth out blowe:
 "O how muche glorious is the lordes lamp so bright,
 The cuppe in stronge man's hande, that makes men druncke I
 meane.
 O Baccus, god of wyne! our covent guyde aright,
 Withe fruict of Daviddes stocke to wash us thoroughlie cleane."

And aftir this the cuppe he takethe from the breade,
 And cryes alowde, "Ho! sires, can yow as well as I
 Drincke this cuppe in his kind that I lift to my heade?"
 (Golias, 11.341-51)

F. J. E. Raby remarks of the satire that the first two visions (one of Pythagoras and the other of famous scholars and poets read in the schools) are irrelevant both to the rest of the poem and to each other.¹¹⁷ This is surely an intentional poke on the part of the poet at the seeming irrelevance and bewildering unrelatedness of many of the visions in John's Apocalypse, which are heaped together in one book with few cohesive elements to guide the reader through the maze. We have already noted the completely non-visual quality of some passages of apocalyptic vision; the Goliard poet picks up on this characteristic as well in his description of Pythagoras "i-painted well about":

Upon his foreheade faire Astrologie did shine,
 And Gramer stode alonge upon his teethe arowe,
 And Retheroick did springe within his hollowe eyen,
 And in his tremblinge lippes did art of Logick flowe.

And in his fingers eke did Arithmetick lie,
 Within his hollowe pulse did Musick finelie plaie,
 And then in bothe his eien stode pale Geometrie;

Thus eche one of these artes in his owne place did staie.
 (Golias, 13-20)

One of the most susceptible targets of his satire is the visionary's description of the state of ecstasy. St. Paul's well-known allusion to his own ecstatic experience is pressed into service for the dreamers' vision of Pythagoras:¹¹⁸

And as I laye me downe undir an oken tree,
 About the midtyme just, even of the somers daie,
 Pithagoras his shape me thought that I did see,
 But that it was his corpes, God wott, I cannot saie.

Pithagoras his shape in deede I did behold,
 Withe divers kindes of art i-painted well about;
 But yet this sight, God wotte, by me canot be told
 Whether it were in deede, in bodie, or without.
 (Golias, 5-12)

This theme of visionary ecstasy is closely connected with the motif of the hidden knowledge which is revealed to the visionary, but which may or may not be able to be divulged below. In the parody the dreamer is "caught uppe even to the third skie," where he "a secrete saw, a wonderous misterie,/The which may not be told to any living wight" (Golias, 391-2). The poem ends with an ingenious overturning of the revelation motif, when the poet, after eating a heavenly poppy leaf and drinking of "Lethe's floude" loses memory of all his divine secrets, except such as have been inscribed on his brain by his guide, i.e. the revelations of the seven seal-openings concerning clerical vice. The irony here, of course, is that this is no subtle, divine secret, but common knowledge.

The poem highlights in a viciously humorous fashion some key features of apocalyptic form and style: the inconsistency and unrelatedness of visions, inattention to narrative structure, the claims of the visionary to divine revelation. It may even be that the Goliard poet wishes to poke fun at the claims of contemporary prophets and visionaries, many of whom have an annoying tendency to put forward "revelations" which are either uninspiringly commonplace or so cryptic as to be useless to others. The comic revelation of a hidden message written on the hand of the guide figure (see below, lines 27-8) may be intended as a send-up of the elaborate devices which some medieval prophets use to "disclose" commonplace messages.

Let us go back now to John's Apocalypse itself and look at a few more features of apocalyptic style and form. John's degree of involvement in his visions varies remarkably from vision to vision. In some his role is only that of a spectator ("I saw . . . then I saw . . ."), in others he is not even involved as a spectator and the prophetic message is simply recorded. At odd points his involvement crops up suddenly and ends just as suddenly, as for example when he weeps because no one is worthy to open the sealed book:

And I saw, in the right hand of him that sat on the throne, a book, written within and without, sealed with seven seals. And I saw a strong angel, proclaiming with a loud voice: Who is worthy to open the book and to loose the seals thereof? And no man was able, neither in heaven nor on earth nor under the earth, to open the book, nor to look on it. And I wept much, because no man was found worthy to open the book, nor to see it. And one of the ancients said to me: Weep not; behold, the lion of the tribe of Juda, the root of David, hath prevailed to open the book and to loose the seven seals thereof (Revelation 5: 1-5).

Langland similarly involves Will in his visions in sudden and unpredictable ways, as when Will weeps during Repentance's sermon (VI.1-2) or when he reads Truth's pardon over the shoulder of the priest (IX.284ff.). Other apocalyptic visionaries are similarly able to read books or messages from above which are shown to them in their visions; in fact, this is parodied in the Apocalypsis Goliae:

At lengthe much like a booke unfolded his bodie,
 And did disclose his hand, and badd me looke in it. . . .
 Whiche I beheld right well, and after ganne to reade;
 Withe letters blacke as incke, thus found I written there,
 "I will the leade the waye, to followe me make speede"
 (Golias, 23-4, 26-8).

The Apocalypse of John is heavily dependent on visionary convention and biblical scholarship has shown it to be an intricately structured work based on numerology, cryptic allusions and apocalyptic symbolism derived from earlier works like the Book of Daniel.¹¹⁹ However, there is a certain dreamlikeness about some passages and some indication that John moved from idea to idea by association of images, much as real dreams do. For example, Chapter Three ends with the well-known image of Christ knocking at the door: "Behold, I stand at the gate and knock. If any man shall hear my voice and open to me the door, I will come in to him and will sup with him; and he with me" (Rev. 3:20), and Chapter Four begins with "After these things, I looked; and, behold a door was opened in heaven . . .," whereupon John is quite literally given entrance to heaven through a state of ecstasy. Furthermore, the narrative is often interrupted by an unnamed voice of

warning or counsel:

And I saw from the mouth of the dragon, and from the mouth of the beast, and from the mouth of the false prophet, three unclean spirits like frogs. For they are the spirits of devils, working signs; and they go forth unto the kings of the whole earth, to gather them to battle against the great day of the Almighty God. Behold, I come as a thief. Blessed is he that watcheth and keepeth his garments, lest he walk naked, and they see his shame. And he shall gather them together into a place which in Hebrew is called Armagedon (Revelation, 16:13-16).

The underlined section interrupts almost irrationally the prophecy of Armagedon, illustrating not only the characteristic lack of cohesion, but also the typically abrupt movement between narrative and warning--something else we see in Piers Plowman.

Langland drew on some of the imagery and typology of John's Apocalypse, but his use of the material was very subtle--where other prophetic writers have made use of the spectacular and grotesque in the Apocalypse, Langland's interest in the work was sparing and restrained. Nevertheless, our brief look at some of the literary characteristics of the Apocalypse and its Goliardic parody should serve to highlight a few of the formal problems of the apocalyptic genre such as inconsistency and lack of cohesion. The biting Goliardic parody which is especially aimed at the credibility of certain visionary claims should also prepare us for our consideration of Langland's choice of visionary mode and apparent anxiety about his own role within the poem.

The Shepherd of Hermas

When the Pastor Hermas was published by Lefèvre d'Étaples in

1513 along with Hildegard's Scivias, the visions of Robert of Uzès and a number of other medieval visionary works, the edition was prefaced with a letter of dedication which shows, as Peter Dronke has written, "that he [Lefèvre] was well aware of the features that linked these texts across the centuries" (Dronke, "Arbor," p. 221). The apocalypse was perhaps written by Hermas, brother of Pius, who was Bishop of Rome in the mid-second century or may have been written by an otherwise unknown writer as early as 90-100 A.D.¹²⁰ The name Hermas may be an assumed name. A number of early Christian writers, like Origen, identified the name with the Hermas to which St. Paul sends greetings in Romans 16:14,¹²¹ and this may be what the anonymous writer intended: most apocalypses are pseudonymous and there may be no reason to assume that this one is any different. Many biblical scholars in the twentieth century have tended to view the work as allegorical fiction (Taylor compares it with The Pilgrim's Progress), although it may well be founded at least in part on fact. The problem presented by the autobiographical elements in the work which relate to the visionary narrator Hermas is similar to the problem of assessing the historical reality of Langland's Will. For example, Hermas is rebuked in his visions for the misconduct of his children and his wife (Vision I), and is told that when he was a rich man he was unprofitable to God (Vision III), whereas now in poverty and old age, he is a more worthy servant. As Taylor suggests, "a didactic purpose being here so evident, Hermas may be illustrating ideas rather than recording mere facts" (pp. 11-12).

Whether the Pastor Hermas should be regarded as an allegory or as an apocalypse is an intriguing problem and scholars have sought to solve it by looking at what evidence there is concerning the reception of the text during the early years of its existence, especially the question of its canonicity during this period.¹²² It is beyond the scope of this thesis to relate the discussion here, but it should be noted that the work was thought by many contemporaries to be an apocalypse and thus a record of real revelation. The Muratorian Fragment, which comes from the end of the second century and reflects the opinion of the Roman Church, contains an incomplete list of the canonical books of the New Testament and has this to say about the Shepherd of Hermas:

Of apocalypses also we receive only those of John and Peter which (latter) some among us will not have read in the church. But the Shepherd was written by Hermas, very recently, in our own times, when his brother Pius the bishop was sitting in the episcopal chair of the church of the city of Rome, and therefore it ought indeed to be read, but it cannot be publicly read to the people in church, either among the Prophets whose number is complete, or among the Apostles to the end of time (Quoted by Macmillan, p. 87).

Pastor Hermas was canonically disallowed at this point, but it is clear that it was associated with other apocalypses, at least in literary if not in canonical terms, and it continued to be read down through the Middle Ages as such. Medieval MSS are numerous and emanate especially from Northern Europe: Switzerland, South Germany, Northern France and England,¹²³ a fact which is especially interesting to the student of medieval apocalyptic writings. It is becoming

increasingly evident that while Joachite works were extremely popular in Southern Europe, a Northern European tradition--as yet almost entirely neglected by scholars--was flourishing with the impetus of a very different set of works. It would seem that England was more a part of this Northern European tradition because, almost without fail, the pattern of dissemination in Britain resembles that of Northern Europe more closely than its Southern counterpart (although there is obviously no hard and fast rule). This is precisely what the pattern of extant Hermas MSS shows and it therefore provides external evidence for the conclusion one often reaches on the basis of internal evidence: that is, that northern prophets like Hildegard, Robert and Bridget knew and were influenced by Hermas' archaic apocalypse.

We have spoken of the varying degree of participation of the visionary (or visionary persona) within different parts of an apocalypse, as well as of the somewhat volatile relationship he carries on with his guide from above. No apocalypse illustrates these characteristics so well as the Shepherd of Hermas. Critics have occasionally mentioned this work in connection with Piers Plowman,¹²⁴ but only Peter Dronke has given it any prolonged attention. This critical neglect is odd because the work reads as a convincing antecedent to the spiritual quest visions of the later Middle Ages. The very central role which Hermas himself plays in the vision exemplifies beautifully the autobiographical soul-searching of the visionary tradition which we have come to know through medieval poems like Piers Plowman and Pearl.

Although Hermas lacks much in the way of literary genius or sophistication, it is nevertheless remarkably insightful with regard to the psychological aspects of spiritual growth and it is this dimension of the work, as it relates to the role of the visionary, which we will concentrate on. Piehler's notion of the dream vision offering the reader a chance to participate in a process of psychic redemption is extremely apt with regard to Hermas. The opening of the work sets out, within the compass of a few lines, both autobiographical elements of Hermas' life and the background to a visionary incident which precipitated his revelatory experiences and spiritual growth:

He that bred me up sold me to a lady Rhoda at Rome. Many years after I knew her again, and began to love her as a sister. After a while I saw her bathing in the river Tiber, and I reached out my hand to her, and led her up out of the river. Then, seeing her beauty, I communed in my heart, saying, Happy were I had I such an one for beauty and disposition to wife. That only I thought to myself, and nothing more. After a certain time, as I was on the way to Cumae, and was lauding the creations of God that are so great and notable and mighty, as I walked I fell asleep. And a Spirit took me and carried me away across a pathless region, through which no man could journey; for it was rugged, and broken up by watercourses. But when I had crossed the river there I came to the plain ground, and I knelt down and began to pray unto the Lord, and to make confession of my sins (Taylor I, 57-8; Vision I, ch. i).

At the opening of the dream vision the visionary finds himself, like Will, in the midst of "a wilderness, wiste I nevere where"

(B. Pro1. 12). In Christian religious literature from the Bible to Dante the wilderness is both a symbol of spiritual lostness and spiritual potential for those who find themselves there, and Hermas is no exception. What is most effective about this opening, however, is

its succinct telling of an incident which gives Hermas cause to worry about the insidious and unconscious nature of personal sin and guilt. While he is praying "the heaven was opened, and I beheld the lady whom I had desired greeting me from heaven." Rhoda tells him that God

is wroth with thee because thou hast sinned against me. I answered and said to her, I sinned against thee? How? Spake I ever an unseemly word to thee? Did I not always esteem thee as a goddess? Did I not always reverence thee as a sister? Why, lady, dost thou falsely lay these evil and unclean things to my charge? Then she, smiling upon me, said, The desire of naughtiness arose in thine heart. Seemeth it not to thee to be an evil deed to a righteous man that the desire of wickedness should enter his heart? . . . But do thou pray unto God, and He shall heal thy sins, and the sins of all thy house and of all the saints. After she had spoken these words the heavens were shut up, and I was all quaking and sorrowing. And I said within myself, If even this sin is laid to my charge, how is it possible I should be saved? How shall I make atonement to God for my sins that are full grown? or with what words shall I pray the Lord to be forgiving unto me? (Taylor I, pp. 58-60; Vision I, ch. i-ii).

This is an insightful opening to a work on the theme of repentance, and this motif of self-confrontation does indeed recur throughout the work at crucial points in a way which makes the apocalypse the record of one individual's spiritual growth. It is a role which the reader finds himself participating in and one wonders whether Hermas provided a model not only for the representation of psychological and spiritual growth in later visionary narrators, but also to the tradition of monastic autobiography which, as we have seen, is so closely related to medieval vision literature.

The reader may feel that Rhoda's accusation is rather unfair and may even wonder if the incident is as much a divine revelation as the

result of over-wrought soul-searching. Taken to its logical conclusion the "revelation" gives more cause for despair than hope and this is indeed the state which Hermas is in when a second revelation comes to him:

While I was considering these things and debating in my heart, I saw over against me a great white chair of snowy wool; and there came an ancient dame in brightly shining raiment, holding a book in her hands; and she sat down alone and saluted me saying, Hermas, hail! And I, sorrowing and weeping, said, Lady, hail! And she said to me, Why art thou gloomy, Hermas, that art so patient and calm and wont to be always laughing? why thus downcast in look and cheerless? And I said to her, Because of a most gracious lady, which sayeth that I sinned against her. Quoth she, Far be this thing from the servant of God. But of a surety something about her came into thy heart. . . . Howbeit it is not for this that God is angry with thee, but to the end that thou shouldest convert thine house, which have rebelled against the Lord and you and their parents. Being fond of thy children thou didst not admonish thine house, but sufferedst it to be terribly corrupted. Therefore is the Lord angry with thee. But He will heal all the former ills of thine house (Taylor I, 60-61; Vision I, ch. ii).

The old woman, who is later identified as Ecclesia, seems almost to make light of the Rhoda vision and one wonders if it is to be viewed in the same way as Hermas' later visions in which he is instructed by divine authorities. What we have here is an instance in which a visionary is confronted with a personal issue by someone recognizable to him from his own life, unlike the figures of divine authority who are never known to or recognized by human visionary narrators.

From this point on the Shepherd of Hermas concerns itself with somewhat less subtle problems in Hermas' spiritual growth, but this initial episode has set the tone for a work which demands that a high

standard of self-knowledge be required of the Christian for salvation. While Hermas receives much encouragement he also receives many rebukes and one senses the process of spiritual renewal is a painful one, and, as in Piers Plowman, one which moves toward its goal partially subconsciously.

The first vision of the Church ends with the woman asking Hermas if he would hear her read. Assenting to this, Hermas hears "in great and wondrous wise that which I had not ability to remember; for all the words were fearsome, such as no man could bear. So I remembered the last words, for they were profitable to us and gentle . . ." (I, p. 62). This apocalyptic motif of hearing words which no man can bear and which the visionary cannot remember we saw parodied in the Apocalypsis Goliae. The Shepherd of Hermas, which is clearly an apocalypse written for edification and encouragement of the faithful, does not dwell on the unknowable mysteries or horrors of chastisement in the way that Esdras and John's Apocalypse do. As an apocalypse, Hermas' work is far less prophetic than the others. One senses that its teachings would not have been "revelations" to any but the relatively unlearned in Christian doctrine. It is often in this sense that Will's visions are "revelations" as well; outside of certain prophetic passages much of the poem could fall under the heading of Holy Church's command to the dreamer, "Lere hit thus lewed men, for lettred hit knoweth" (I. 134). The point is that traditional apocalypses do allow for a wide diversity in both the centrality of the visionary to the narrative and the amount of real prophecy they espouse. Hermas reads like a calm, didactic

treatise next to John's Apocalypse, patently lacking in thunder and calamity, yet both works have traditionally been called apocalypses or revelations. A writer in the later Middle Ages following the models of the early Christian apocalypses available to him in Latin would still have a wide diversity of approaches to choose from.

Hermas has two further visions of the woman during which her appearance changes and she gradually becomes younger. The second vision comes upon Hermas while he is walking to Cumae, a fact which probably explains why he takes the woman to be the Sibyl (see p. 65). Like Langland's Will, Hermas does not recognize the Church and has to be told who she is (pp, I. 68-75; Hermas, p. 70). Both Will and Hermas begin to receive their revelations at crucial points during their lives when they are stirred by a sense of spiritual need but have little notion of how to go about finding the right path. The similarities are striking: both are earnest and inquisitive, eager to learn but slow to think for themselves, both are visionaries hampered by literal vision.

In the second vision Hermas sees the same woman walking about and reading a little book, which contains a message for all Christians: "And she said to me, canst thou repeat these things to the elect of God?" (I, 65-6). Hermas dutifully copies the text of the message, which he cannot read, and after days of fasting and prayer is finally granted an interpretation. The message is directed in the first instance, however, to Hermas, and his family. After revealing their misdeeds and urging them to repent, the missive is broadened to all the Christian community: the Lord has limited to the very day the time left for

repentance and that day is at hand (I, 68). At this point the message becomes truly apocalyptic with the motif of preparation for coming tribulation: "Happy are all ye that endure the great affliction which is to come, and that shall not deny their life" (I, 68). The seeming inconsistency in the duality of the message which is both a personal and a general revelation goes to the heart of the apocalyptic as a genre: the apocalypse is very much a scribal or messengerial text in that the visionary is only a mouthpiece of higher forces but the visions themselves are traumatically personal experiences and record not just a divine message but a process of personal growth as well.¹²⁵ Even the inobtrusive John, who for the most part hides himself behind the Apocalypse, cannot wholly keep himself back emotionally from the action of the revelation itself, as we have noted. A good example of this occurs at the end of the vision when John can no longer contain his awe:

And I, John, am he who have heard and seen these things. And after I had heard and seen, I fell down to adore before the feet of the angel who shewed me these things. And he said to me: See thou do it not; for I am thy fellow-servant, and of thy brethren the prophets and of them that keep the words of the prophecy of this book. Adore God (Rev. 22:8-9).

And for all the dramatic action of John's visions there is the sense that his reactions are being monitored. Upon seeing the woman drunk with the blood of the saints, John is awed and the angel asks, "Why dost thou wonder? I will tell thee the mystery of the woman . . ." (Rev. 17:6-7). Even John, the least demonstrative of all apocalyptic narrators can be seen to be undergoing a personally traumatic experience

which the reader will naturally identify with. It is in this sense that apocalypses are both autobiographical and universal documents and they so often appear chaotic because these two interests are not well delineated. The reader can often justifiably ask whether the writer wished to write a spiritual autobiography or document a universal prophetic message when, at times, he seems to be doing both incoherently or haphazardly. The only answer (and this is not so much an answer as an observation) is that the apocalypses that have come down to us do try to do both and do not seem either concerned to or able to control both forms. Difficulty seems almost to be a requirement of the genre.¹²⁶ Apocalypses always read as works of passion, urgency and compulsion. At the same time they are works of process: as the visionary tries to grapple with the message he feels compelled to convey, he records his experience and the growth of his understanding. But works of process are not always "reader-friendly,"¹²⁷ and perhaps this is something which readers of apocalypses must simply accept.

In the third vision Ecclesia shows Hermas a tower being built of square stones. Stones which are of the proper shape fit together so that no trace of a joint can be seen, but many types of stones are rejected by the builders. Having shown these things to Hermas, the woman prepares to leave, but Hermas asks her,

Lady, what doth it profit me to have seen these things and not know what they mean? She answered me saying, Thou art a knavish fellow, desiring to know all about the tower, Yea, quoth I, lady, so that I may tell my brethren, and they may be

the more glad, and when they have heard these things may know the Lord in much glory. Then quoth she, Many shall hear; but when they have heard, some of them shall rejoice and some shall weep. Howbeit these also, if they hear and repent, shall likewise rejoice. Hear then the parables of the tower, for I will reveal all things unto thee; and then trouble me no more about revelation, for these revelations have an end, seeing they are fulfilled. Yet thou wilt not cease to ask for revelations, for thou art shameless (Taylor I, 78-9; Vision III, ch. iii).

She continues by explaining to Hermas that the tower is herself, the Church, and answers a number of Hermas' questions about what various features of the tower represent. This scene and others in the book are very much like the beginning of Will's vision of the Tree of Charity or his discussion with Holy Church in that Hermas' questions are sometimes encouraged and answered with patience and sometimes met with impatient disapproval because of their inquisitive nature. In the B-text version of the Tree of Charity vision, the dreamer tells Piers that he has "þouʒtes a þreve" concerning the three props which support the tree, but soon realizes that Piers is becoming intolerant of his boundless questioning. Piers tells him,

And I haue told þee what hiʒte þe tree; þe Trinite it meneþ."
 And egreliche he loked on me and þerfore I spared
 To asken hym any moore þerof . . . (B. XVI. 63-5).

From the standpoint of the visionary, the unpredictability of response to his questions serves to heighten the awesome superiority of the otherworldly guide. From the standpoint of the guide, the questions do, at times, reveal the dreamer's inability to think for himself. It is possible to sympathize with both views, but as the reader often

identifies unconsciously with the dreamer or visionary figure in any given vision and as our own age views intellectual curiosity in a more positive way, it is perhaps easier to understand the dreamer's sense of intimidation than his guide's exasperation. There are many parallels in Piers Plowman to Hermas' relationship with his various guides. At one point when Hermas complains that he is foolish and cannot understand, his guide (the Shepherd this time) tries to suggest why he finds himself so hampered:

Put away sorrow from thee, quoth he; for she is a sister of doublemindedness and quick temper. How, sir, quoth I, can she be sister to these? for quick temper seemeth to me to be one thing, and doublemindedness another, and sorrow another. Thou art a foolish fellow, quoth he. Perceivest thou not that sorrow is worse than all the spirits and most dreadful to the servants of God, and corrupteth a man more than all the spirits, and weareth out the Holy Spirit, and again saveth? Sir, quoth I, I am foolish and understand not these parables; for how it can wear out, and again save, I perceive not. Hear, quoth he; they who never searched about the truth nor enquired diligently concerning the things of God, but believed only, and were mixed up with business and wealth and heathen friendships and many other affairs of this world; such, I say, as are intent upon these things understand not the parables of divinity, for they are darkened by these employments, and they decay and grow barren (Taylor I, 144-5; Mandate 10, ch. i).¹²⁸

The message is clear: parables are not understood by those who put no effort into searching out the truth or living a Christian life. Readers of Langland cannot help but recall Will's refrain, "I have no kynde knowyng," which always crops up when he seems unwilling to exert his mind to grasp some new teaching. His exchange with Holy Church furnishes a typical example:

"I haue no kynde knowyng," quod y, "zut mot ze kenne me
 bettere
 By what wey it wexeth and wheder out of my menynges."
 "Thow dotede daffe," quod she, "dulle aren thy wittes.
 To lyte lernedest zow, y leue, Latyn in thy zowthe:
 Heu michi, quod sterilem duxi vitam iuuenilem!
 Hit is a kynde knowyng that kenet in thyn herte
 For to louye thy lord leuest of alle,
 Dey rather þen do eny dedly synne.
Melius est mori quam male viuere (I. 136-43).

Like Hermas' Shepherd, Holy Church seems to understand what she perceives as willful ignorance by putting it down to lack of application--a lack of application which betrays a lifelong habit. Instances of this rebuke in Hermas are legion:

And the white round stones, which do not fit into the building, what are they, lady? She answered and said to me, How long wilt thou be foolish and without understanding, asking about everything and discerning nothing? These are they that have faith, but have also the riches of this world (Taylor I, pp. 84-85; Vision III, ch. vi).

Or, again:

I asked her about the four colours on the head of the beast; and she answering me said, Art thou curious about such matters? Yea, lady, quoth I, acquaint me what these things be (Taylor, p. 103; Vision IV, ch. iii).

Or, again:

Then I asked her concerning the times, whether the full end was yet. And she cried with a loud voice, saying, O foolish man! Seest thou not the tower yet a building? When this shall have done being built, then cometh the end. Howbeit it shall quickly be built up. Henceforth ask me nothing. Sufficient for thee and for the saints is this notification, and the renewal of your spirits. Not however for thyself alone have things been revealed, but to the intent that thou mayest shew them to all.

After three days, for thou must first understand them, I charge thee, Hermas, to speak all these things which I am about to say to thee in the ears of the saints; that they may hear and do them, and may be cleansed from their iniquities, and thou with them (Taylor, pp. 89-90; Vision III, ch. viii).

This last interchange reveals some interesting details. Ecclesia shifts our focus from Hermas' edification to that of the whole Church, but in the process charges him to meditate upon these things for three days "for thou must first understand them." The paradox of apocalyptic vision is neatly juxtaposed in these lines: the revelation is given not solely nor even primarily for the benefit of the visionary alone, but it is through his mind that it all must be filtered.

Hermas is eventually made to recognize the power of his own mind over what he sees and learns. Upon fasting and praying in order to gain understanding of the series of visions of the Church he has seen, a young man appears to Hermas and says,

Seeing that thou prayest earnestly without ceasing for revelations, beware lest by thy much asking thou hurt thy flesh. These revelations are sufficient for thee. Art thou able to see mightier revelations than those thou hast seen? I answered and said to him, Sir, this only I ask, to have full revelation concerning the three forms of the aged woman. He answered and said to me, For how long are ye without understanding? Your double minds make you of no understanding, and your not having your heart set on the Lord. I answered him again saying, But from thee, sir, we shall learn those things more perfectly (Taylor I, 94; Vision III, ch. x).

The young man goes on to explain the three visions in such a way that they now appear as mirrors of the state of Hermas' soul at the time of seeing:

Hear, quoth he, concerning the three forms about which thou enquirest. In the first vision wherefore did she appear to thee aged and sitting on a chair? Because your spirit was aged and already faded and powerless from your ailings and doubts. For as the aged, having no hope any more to renew their youth expect nothing but their last sleep; so ye, being weakened by worldly affairs, yielded yourselves up to weariness, and cast not your cares upon the Lord, but your spirit was broken, and ye were worn out with your griefs. Then I would fain know, sir, why she sat on a chair. Because, said he, every sick person sitteth on a chair by reason of his infirmity, that the weakness of his body may be comforted. There thou hast now the figure of the first vision (Taylor I, 94-5; Vision III, ch. ii).

The increasingly youthful appearance of the woman in the second and third visions is likewise interpreted as reflecting Hermas' increasing ability to comprehend spiritual truth and utilize his own spiritual strength: they are a mirror of his own rejuvenation.

At this point the visions of the apocalypse themselves are almost wholly a reflection of the visionary's spiritual state and the broader apocalyptic message seems in danger of being swallowed by a purely subjective vision. There is something of this mirror effect in the early sections of the Vita of Piers Plowman. At this stage many of Will's guides are reflections of certain facets of his own mind and his ability to provide answers for himself is thus consistently restricted to his own mental capacities for vision. Langland illustrates this rather more subtly and at greater length than Hermas does, but the point is the same: Will encounters a number of personifications in this section, many of whom, like Thought (X. 68ff.), Wit (X. 114ff.), Recklessness (XI. 196ff.) and Imaginatif (XIII. 217ff.) are more or less projected fragments of his own limited world view. He is only freed to

move onwards by being cast out of the visionary world in a confrontation with his own impudence: both literally and metaphorically Reason gets the better of him (XIII. 193ff.).

The self-confrontation which so unlocks his mind is thus brought on by shame and humiliation. When Imaginatif, as yet unidentified, rebukes him for his impatience and "entermetynge," Will admits,

"ze seggeth soth, be my soule," quod y, "I haue sey hit ofte:
Ther smyt no thyng so smerte, ne smelleth so foule
As Shame; ther he sheweth hym, vch man shoneth his companye.
Why ze worden to me thus was for y aresonede Resoun"
(XIII. 240-3).

The dreamer has come far enough by this point in the poem to be able to offer his own definition of Dowell: "To se moche and soffre al, certes, is Dowel" (XIII. 219). The definition is hopelessly inadequate, but it is nevertheless a benchmark in Will's spiritual growth, which has been much hindered up to this point by his inability to listen patiently and work independently toward an understanding of what he is told. A similar turning point comes in Hermas when he feels the sting of shame:

Again he said unto me, Love truth, and let all be truth which proceedeth out of thy mouth, . . . Now when I heard these things I wept bitterly. And seeing me weep he said, Why weepest thou? Because, sir, quoth I, I know not whether I can be saved. Wherefore? quoth he. Because, sir, quoth I, never yet in my life spake I a true word, but I lived always knavishly with all men, and displayed my falsehood as truth to all; nor did any one ever gainsay me, but my word was believed. How then, sir, quoth I, can I live when I have done these things? Thou thinkest well and truly, quoth he; for it were fit that thou as a servant of God shouldest walk in truth, and that an evil conscience should not dwell with the spirit of truth, nor bring grief upon the

reverend and true Spirit. Never before, sir, quoth I, did I hear such words aright. Now therefore that thou hearest, quoth he, keep them (Taylor I, 115, 116-7; Mandate III).

Shortly after this episode Hermas' Shepherd underlines the point for Hermas that repentance is understanding:

I asked him again saying, Since the Lord counted me worthy that thou shouldest always dwell with me, bear with yet a few words from me, for I understand nothing, and my heart is grown dull from my former doings. Give me understanding, for I am very foolish and apprehend nothing at all. He answered and said to me, I am set over repentance, and to all who repent I give understanding. Seemeth it not to thee that this very repenting is understanding? To repent, quoth he, is great understanding (Taylor I, 121-2; Mandate IV, ch. ii).

Perhaps Will's foolishness in his visionary role should be understood as Hermas' is: as a marker of the moral and spiritual weakness which clouds his vision.¹²⁹

The Shepherd of Hermas makes much use of the kind of vision which we see most clearly in Will's interchange with Holy Church or at the beginning of the Tree of Charity episode. In this type of vision the guide points out a visionary scene to the dreamer and explains its significance, as for example in Holy Church's first appearance: ". . . 'Wille, slepestou? seestow þis peple,/Hou bisy þei ben aboute þe mase?'" (I. 5-6). When Will asks Holy Church to "Kenne me by sum craft to knowe þe false" (II. 4)¹³⁰ she responds by showing him the Mede vision: "Loke vppon thy left half and loo where he standeth" (II. 5). After this early stage in the poem, Langland more or less abandons this directly didactic type of vision, preferring to have his

dreamer observe without the benefit of an interpreter (as, for example, in Will's vision of the pardon episode) or to have Will participating directly in the action of the vision (as in the Feast of Patience). The observed type of vision in which the visionary stands outside the action of the vision and listens to his guide's interpretation of what he sees (we might call it the "show and tell" variety) is perhaps one of the least helpful modes of visionary writing for Langland and he seems to have realized this early on in the development of the poem. Many non-apocalyptic visions of the Middle Ages, especially those which German scholars call Jenseitsvisionen, other-world visions, rely almost entirely on this type of convention.¹³¹ Indeed, the masterpiece of Jenseitsvisionen, Dante's Divine Comedy, makes much use of this visionary convention in its basic structure. However, Langland was obviously dissatisfied with this mode of proceeding and did not sustain it. He reverts to it again at the start of the Tree of Charity vision and this perhaps contributes to our sense of this episode as distinctively visionary: it makes use once again of the more traditional visionary guide convention of "show and tell" at its opening, but swiftly moves to an abrupt and highly associative chain of allegorical events which better suit Langland's purposes in conveying the dreamlikeness of the episode. Still, the formal, static beginning, with its diagrammatic allegory, sets this vision apart from previous "participatory" visions and Langland may have intended this. The Tree of Life vision is an important and often climactic convention of formal apocalypses and Langland may have been consciously drawing on this

tradition.

Although apocalypses like the Shepherd of Hermas make more use of this "show and tell" convention than Piers Plowman does, they too exhibit a wide variety of approaches to the visionary's participation in his vision. Discussion of doctrinal problems, especially those which the visionary narrator finds hard to fathom, take up as much space in these apocalypses as the visualized visions and the result is long stretches of text in which any would-be illustrator would not find a scrap of visual material to fasten on. Rosemary Woolf puzzled over this problem in her seminal article on some of the "non-medieval" qualities of Piers Plowman. She writes,

The extraordinary point about Langland's dreams, however, is that they show the bewildering indifference to time and place which is characteristic of real dreams. The effect of this unique modification of the convention may be seen in two ways. Firstly it may be seen in the absence of visualization of a scene. . . . The second characteristic which derives from Langland's peculiar use of the dream convention is the abrupt shifting of time and place, which is so familiar from actual dreams, and so extremely unlike any other Medieval use of the dream convention (pp. 116-17).

It is hard to find models or analogues in vernacular literature for both the lack of visualization and the instability of narrative framework in Piers Plowman, and we are left to wonder, as Rosemary Woolf does, what literary paradigms Langland was influenced by:

Langland's avoidance of the common need to lay a foundation in reasonable plot for the appearance or conduct of any character is clearly related to his indifference to the literal level of his allegory, and his suggestion of the disorganized nature of real dreams gives at least a technical plausibility to the

inconsistencies of the literal level of the poem (p. 118).

Every individual has experienced dreams and it is therefore not necessary perhaps to seek for an explanation in literary history for Langland's use of real dream-likeness. However, one genre of literature which he could have turned to as a model for his dream realism is the apocalypse. We have already noted the mixture of visualized and non-visualized (usually dialectical or hortatory) passages in the other apocalypses, as well as the uncertainties involved in the visionary-guide relationship. Let us look now at some of the features in Hermas which produce this dream-likeness, notably the work's structural looseness, shifting symbolism and the changing states of some of the characters.

The Shepherd of Hermas is divided into three discernible sections of five visions, twelve mandates (or commandments) and ten Similitudes (or parallels). Certain allegorical symbols serve to provide the work with some cohesion, such as the allegory of the Church as a tower under construction. Hermas sees the tower for the first time fairly early on in the poem (in the third vision) and the allegory recurs in several places, is explained ad nauseam in its various forms and finally comes to rest with the end of the work itself, at which point the reader is exhorted:

Do good works therefore, ye who have received from the Lord,
lest while ye delay to do them the building of the tower be
finished; for your sakes the work of the building of it hath

been delayed. Except then ye make haste to do ought, the tower shall be finished and ye shall be shut out (II, 131).

The tower, then, provides a measure of cohesion within the work, but even this is limited. The main themes of Hermas, exhortation to repentance and concern with the requirements of the spiritual life, are introduced and represented and discussed in a myriad of ways and any number of images and similitudes are pressed into service in the process. As in the Apocalypse of Esdras, similitude after similitude is produced and images are heaped one on top of another in order to solve the unsolvable or express the inexpressible. There is little or no attempt to reconcile symbolic incongruities or relate similitudes to one another.

Critics have frequently complained about this "problem" in Piers Plowman; many regard it as a lack of authorial control or even of literary ability. David Mills, for example, complains of the "inadequacy of imagery" in both Holy Church's explanation of love and in the Tree of Charity vision:

When Holy Church attempts to explain love to the Dreamer, she is compelled to use images, but shifts reference so frequently that the image breaks down. . . . On a larger scale, the same inadequacy of imagery can be seen in the description of the Tree of Charity which, even in its poetically superior form in the C-text, utilizes an inadequate image (Mills, pp. 200-01).

Mills takes the trouble to show in each passage how the chosen allegorical image with which the passage begins "breaks down" (p. 204) and he seems to imply that these passages are therefore poetic failures.

Interestingly, he despairs of the Tree of Charity vision just at the point when it becomes truly fascinating, when the falling fruits become the Old Testament patriarchs. As Peter Dronke has suggested, this may well be a matter of personal taste ("Whether we view the transgressions as so many sins against an allegorical norm, or as imaginatively valid ways of stepping beyond that norm, is something each reader, in each context, must decide."),¹³² but critics like Mills would do well to remember that there is plenty of absolutely consistent and well-sustained allegory which is no longer read. Allegoric consistency and artistic genius are not always necessarily found together. This technique of heaping images is, however, a common feature of apocalypses and it may be this eccentric form of literature which gave Langland a paradigm for his allegorical transgressions.

This looseness of structure is marked in other ways in Hermas. The key guide figures do not maintain their presence throughout the work, but appear and disappear almost arbitrarily, often in changing forms. The woman who represents the Church, as we have seen, consistently appears to Hermas during the first visions in different forms and Hermas is later told that this shifting of forms reflects his changing capacity for vision. The Shepherd himself, who is most comparable to Piers, and for whom the work is named, does not enter the drama until the fifth vision (much as Piers does not enter the poem until it is well under way). Hermas is told that the Shepherd, who is also the Angel of Repentance, has been given to him as a guide "for the rest of the days of his life" (I, 107) and yet he appears in different forms and Hermas

does not at first recognize him:

When I had prayed at home and sat down upon the couch, there came in a man of stately look, in the attire of a shepherd, cloked in a white skin, and having a scrip on his shoulders and a staff in his hand. And he saluted me, and I saluted him back. And immediately he sat down beside me and said to me, I was sent by the most reverend Angel to dwell with thee the rest of the days of thy life. Thinking that he was come to try me I said to him, But who art thou? for I know, quoth I, to whom I was delivered. He said unto me, Knowest thou me not? Nay, quoth I. I, quoth he, am the Shepherd to whom thou wast delivered. While he yet spake his visage was changed, and I took knowledge of him that it was he to whom I had been delivered; and immediately I was confounded, and fear took hold upon me, and I was quite overcome with grief at having so answered him wickedly and foolishly. Then he answered and said to me, Be not confounded, but strengthen thyself in my commandments which I am about to command thee (I, 107-08).

It is perhaps going a little too far to say, as Peter Dronke has, that the two protagonists, Ecclesia and the Shepherd, "are in their ways as richly elusive as Piers Plowman in Langland's poem" (p. 221); however, it is certainly true that they exemplify the dream-like shifting of shape which we are familiar with from Langland's poetry.

Placing these apocalypses, then, in the background to Piers Plowman provides us with a different perspective on some of what Rosemary Woolf called the "unique" aspects of Langland's poetry, especially those which we associate with "dream-likeness," with "lack of artistic control" and with the "non-medieval" way in which Langland treats his visionary narrator. In the next section we will look further at this problem of the "non-medieval" qualities, but enough has been said for the moment to help us make an assessment of what is involved in the suggestion that Piers Plowman might, in literary terms, be called an

apocalypse.

At the beginning of this section "apocalypse" was defined as "a genre of revelatory literature within a narrative framework" and we set ourselves the problem of trying to determine whether this literary model was in the back of Langland's mind as he wrote. As we have seen, biblical scholars have wrestled with the problem of whether Herimas should be regarded as an allegory or an apocalypse and the question is in many ways equally applicable to Piers Plowman. Biblical scholars have different reasons than literary scholars might have for asking such a question, but from a literary viewpoint it seems to me that the question can partly be resolved on the basis of audience reaction--how was the work read by a contemporary audience, simply as an allegory or as an apocalypse? In the case of Herimas, it is clear from the Muratorii Fragment that, whatever the canonists decided, Herimas was thought of and mentioned in the context of other apocalypses. In other words, similarities in form and message placed it in the same category as John's and Peter's apocalypses in the minds of contemporaries. For the literary historian this is important testimony, but we have little such evidence for Piers Plowman,¹³³ although we do now know that placing the poem alongside the earlier apocalypses does illuminate certain features of the poem which comparison with other kinds of texts has not illuminated in the same way. Perhaps whether or not we call Piers Plowman an apocalypse is not as important as whether we recognize the apocalyptic elements within the poem, and especially the visionary conventions which fall under this heading, as part of a distinct

tradition in literary history.

Before leaving the question of whether Piers Plowman is an apocalypse, we should look at what Morton Bloomfield had to say about the problem which, after all, gave him the title of his book on Piers Plowman. Bloomfield first of all suggests that:

A simple answer to the question of the genre of Piers Plowman would be to say that it is an apocalypse. The classic Judeo-Christian apocalypse is cast in dream form, or consists of several dreams, is a revelation from some superior authority, is eschatologically oriented, and constitutes a criticism of, and warning for, contemporary society (Bloomfield, p. 9).

However, he dwells more upon the differences than the similarities between Piers Plowman and the apocalypse genre as he sees it:

In many ways Piers Plowman seems to fit the category of apocalypse, yet there are certain fundamental differences. The emphasis on the quest is foreign to the apocalypse as we know it. There is no single guide in Piers, but rather a search for guides, although Holy Church and Conscience have a certain authority. The use of personifications is not a characteristic of the apocalypse, and there is a strong vein of irony in the figure of Will that is not consonant with the apocalypse. Although Piers does criticize contemporary society, is in dream form, and is eschatologically oriented, these characteristics of the apocalypse can be accounted for otherwise (Bloomfield, pp. 9-10).

I hope it is now clear that this assessment is inadequate: whether we wish, in the last analysis, to consider Piers Plowman as an apocalypse or not, the only way to assess the problem is to look closely at what an apocalypse, in literary terms, really is. What has been done here in this regard is at best a beginning, but it has been enough to make Bloomfield's objections seem highly questionable. As we have seen, the

quest, as a spiritual quest or journey in soul-searching is not foreign to the apocalypse. None of the apocalypses we looked at, including John's, have a single guide. There is much use of personification: Sion in Esdras, Ecclesia in Hermas and Babylon in John's Apocalypse to mention only the most obvious examples. Even the "vein of irony in the figure of Will" has important antecedents in the figures of visionary narrators like Esdras and Hermas.

Bloomfield ends his short discussion of the problem with the suggestion that the notion of the apocalypse as genre is unhelpful:

The chief objection to taking the form of Piers to be an apocalypse is that it is doubtful whether such a literary form existed. I agree with Father H. Musurillo when he writes, "The form known as 'apocalypse' creates a problem, and perhaps no useful purpose is served in making the term a technical one applicable both to the Revelation of St. John and the so-called Shepherd of Hermas." He says that the Shepherd is rather "allegorical fiction disguised as a primitive Christian prophecy" (Bloomfield, p. 10).

I do not believe that the author of Hermas was trying to disguise allegory as prophecy and this seems a rather perverse way of posing the problem: the author of Hermas would have no doubt thought our scholarly opposition of allegory to apocalypse somewhat ludicrous. He was writing within a literary genre (the apocalypse) which was by definition visionary and the way that visionary experience had always been related in the Judeo-Christian tradition was by the use of allegory--as works like the apocalypses of Daniel, Esdras and John all show. Allegory is, par excellence, the visionary mode of writing and this literary tradition has been preserved even in post-medieval visionary works like

those by Bunyan and Blake.

The form known as "apocalypse," as Father Musurillo says, does create a problem, but so has every other literary form worth mentioning. Have genres like the lyric, the novel or the epic not "created problems" for literary critics? We may well "doubt" whether it is helpful to try to precisely define the novel or the epic, but as long as works are created which remind readers of other works in a literary tradition, we will have to grapple with these problems of categorization as best we can.

The apocalypse, as the mode of fully developed visionary narrative within the religious tradition, is perhaps the best term we have for describing these qualities and tendencies in Piers Plowman. Until more scholarly work is done on the literary characteristics of the religious visionary tradition, it is unlikely that our primitive system of literary labelling will reveal a better term than "apocalypse" for Langland's revelatory allegory.

III. Piers Plowman and some Psychological, Literary and Spiritual Aspects of Medieval Visionary Tradition

In this final section we will look briefly at the theories, conventions and attitudes toward visions and visionaries in the Middle Ages with a view to how these might illuminate our study of Piers Plowman. This takes in many different subject areas including medieval psychology, theology, and literary and social history--here we can only scratch the surface and try to provide the reader with a few key ideas, hoping at the same time not to be too misleading in the process of

having to generalize about some very complex issues.

We will look first at the more technical side of vision theory as it was understood in medieval psychology. Although there were a variety of theories in the later Medieval Ages about the sources, workings and characteristics of visions, all writers seem to have agreed that the imagination was the workshop for such productions, no matter what spiritual or psychic forces caused the visions themselves. Medieval theory distinguished between the imaginatio and the vis imaginativa. The former was simply a storehouse of sense data which had no power to form judgements about what it received but did have the capability for long-term retention (Harvey, p. 44). The vis imaginativa, on the other hand, had the power to combine and divide images at will. Theorists postulated that it was because of this power that man could imagine things which he had never seen, like an emerald mountain or a flying man (Harvey, p. 45; Minnis, pp. 72ff.; Bloomfield, pp. 170ff.). The vis imaginativa works by looking into both the imaginatio and the memorialis for forms and images, and in sleep when the external senses are cut off and the control of reason is lifted it "meddles" with these stored images to produce visions (Harvey, p. 49).

As Bloomfield pointed out in his excellent short study of "The Problem of Imaginatif" in Piers Plowman, "it is clear from the adjectival form of the word that Langland is using 'Imaginatif' as a translation of (vis) imaginativa"¹³⁴ and this means that it is the creative one of the two imaginative faculties which is being referred to. As Bloomfield and others have pointed out, however, even the vis

imaginativa was considered something of an inferior faculty by medieval theoreticians and yet it is given a key role in Piers Plowman. At the end of the lengthy and confusing Recklessness section of the poem, Imaginatif is able to shake Will from a number of unhelpful attitudes as he summarizes and answers the vexing questions of previous passus. Bloomfield suggested that the "manner whereby the imagination could be elevated [to a more prestigious role] is through the medieval theory of prophecy"¹³⁵ and that this was Langland's purpose in portraying Imaginatif as he does in the poem. As we shall see shortly, Langland's use of Imaginatif here is closely related to his use in the same passage of various conventions of the visionary tradition, all of which shows that Langland was very conscious of current thought on visionary experience.

Alastair Minnis has taken up the problem in a study of medieval theories of the imagination which brings to light a number of reasons why this particular faculty would be so important for Langland's purposes. The Imaginatif episode marks the end of the disputative phase of Will's journey (Minnis, p. 71), and though the imagination is normally the servant of reason, Imaginatif dominates the poem at this point because Will must learn that not all questions can be settled by reason (Minnis, p. 75). Minnis shows that the imagination was thought to be able to enable one to form hypotheses about the consequences of wrongdoing, by working from knowledge of past sins, a suggestion which fits Langland's Imaginatif very well (Minnis, p. 77). Minnis further suggests, citing a passage from Froissart, that "imaginatif implies a

prudence based on far-sighted grasp of a situation" (Minnis, p. 78). All three qualities, it should be noted, are relevant to the role that the imagination was thought to play in prophecy, where it becomes a vehicle for sophisticated insight into spiritual and moral problems of the mind. As the workshop of dreams, the imagination is, as Minnis points out, the medium through which everything in the poem passes (Minnis, p. 94), a fact which alone would serve to underline the importance of Imaginatif in the poem and Langland's concern with vision theory.

The importance of the imagination in medieval prophetic theory becomes evident when one looks at the different types of prophetic revelations which mankind was thought to be susceptible to. Various medieval writers suggest various categorizations of such revelations, but virtually all agree that vision, for one reason or another, is a necessary part of prophecy. Almost all attempts at categorization tried to distinguish visual from non-visual types of revelation: Augustine suggested a threefold distinction between corporeal, spiritual and intellectual revelation (Minnis, pp. 92-3); Richard of St. Victor distinguished between two types of bodily and of spiritual vision;¹³⁶ Thomas Aquinas between infused representations, supernatural light and the kind of revelation which includes both (Synave and Benoit, p. 33), or between sensible, imaginative and intellectual revelation (Synave and Benoit, p. 177).¹³⁷ While there is often a prejudice, stated or implied, which places the intellectual vision above the imagistically conveyed vision, there is

also a recognition on the part of theorists that the imagistically conveyed vision is most accessible to the human mind. Aquinas felt that the notion of prophecy is more properly realized in imaginative vision (Synave and Benoit, p. 177). Hugh of St. Cher recognized that prophecy usually occurred "per impressionem ymaginis in spiritu" (Torrell, p. 209). Furthermore, he distinguished two different types of prophecy by images: in the first, the prophet does not have need of the images for understanding God's message himself, but God wishes him to announce it with the help of the images in order that it can be made accessible to the common man (Torrell, p. 211). In the second case, the prophet does not himself completely understand what he is told and the images are purposely given to veil the divine mystery (Torrell, p. 212). Prophecy through images and similitudes, then, was the most common kind recognized in medieval thought, making prophecy virtually synonymous with imagistic vision.

Hugh of St. Cher's second distinction brings us to another problem in prophetic theory: to what extent can a prophet be said to be prophesying if he does not understand the full import of what he says? "Ad esse prophetie duo requiruntur: apparitio imaginum que fit in spiritu et intelligentia significans" (Torrell, p. 153) writes the anonymous author of a quaestio on prophecy in MS Douai 434. In a review of Torrell's edition of the quaestio, Osmund Lewry summarizes succinctly the author's theory of prophetic vision as it relates to this problem of degrees of the prophet's own understanding of his message. For the anonymous author prophetic vision

is a transient activity comprising three elements: the appearance of images in the imagination, the revelation of what is hidden there by an illumination of the mind so that it knows the truth latent in the imagery, and the proclamation of what has been revealed in this way. By distinguishing these three stages of imagination, understanding and interpretive utterance, he is able to meet the case of Pharaoh, who is only materially a prophet, having images without truth, Joseph, who is formally a prophet in grasping their latent truth, Caiaphas, who is materially and finally a prophet, uttering without understanding, David, who is formally and finally, uttering with knowledge, and prophets in the fullest sense, such as Isaiah and Daniel, who are all three (Lewry, p. 130).

The narrators of later apocalyptic texts, as we have seen, do not claim to be prophets in the fullest biblical sense: they are portrayed, rather, as groping or fumbling desperately and at times blindly for an understanding of their revelations. Both Esdras and Hermas, for example, are portrayed as part of the learning process of their revelations, not as confidently telling forth a finished product. The relevance of this prophetic model to Piers Plowman is obvious: Will is not a prophet in the traditional Old Testament sense of a man with a direct message. Like the apocalyptic visionaries he gropes toward understanding, "musyng on this meteles" (IX. 298), acknowledging that "mony tyme this meteles hath maked me to studie" (299). Medieval theory, then, accommodated a wide variety of prophets. Aquinas felt that the prophet who did not fully grasp the meaning of his prophecy was an instrument of the Holy Spirit, but not a proper prophet.¹³⁹ He has another category, however, for the prophet with impartial knowledge and that is the man with "a certain instinct" (quidam instinctus) for God's message, "a certain impulse, a certain prophetic instinct, a

certain divine influence."¹⁴⁰ Such a prophet will lack the certitude of divine command, but may nevertheless have an important message.

Now Aquinas, Hugh of St. Cher and the anonymous author of the quaestio on prophecy cited above are all dealing almost exclusively with biblical prophecy; however, even here there are allowances made for impartial understanding of the prophecy, for "instinctive" prophesying, for prophecy by images in which the meaning is latent, for the ignorant prophet to be an instrument of the Holy Spirit. The point for readers of Piers Plowman is surely that there was plenty of room, even in theological conceptions of prophecy, for a prophet to be in some way or another speaking on behalf of God without claiming too much for himself, i.e. without claiming the same status as a fully fledged biblical prophet. To summarize briefly, then, the relevance of all this theory for a consideration of the visionary aspects of Piers Plowman:

(1) prophecy in the Middle Ages was conceived of as being usually and most properly visionary, i.e. making use of "similitudes," images and the like; (2) Langland gives a special authoritative role to the imagination and this is probably because he saw himself as writing visionary prophecy of some sort; (3) the imagery of prophetic vision was seen as a useful tool for teaching the common people; (4) a prophet could prophesy in many ways without claiming full prophetic status (i.e. status equivalent to the biblical prophet's). Minnis has put this last point from a different angle in his considerations of medieval literary theory:

There is considerable evidence that, in the later Middle Ages, clerics came to appreciate more and more the literary qualities of scriptural texts. For example, certain exegetes were so impressed with the literary qualities which many prophetic writings seemed to have that they came to regard the modus prophetialis as a possible genre or style of writing. In such an intellectual climate, a writer could imitate biblical "modes of treatment" without in any way offending against the great authority of the Bible, or appearing to claim divine inspiration of the kind possessed by the authors of holy Scripture. Therefore, there seems to be no a priori reason against regarding Piers Plowman in the light of the triplex genus visionum. The poem can be described as a "spiritual vision or imaginatif" in so far as the Dreamer sees images and figures of various things; it can be said to have an element of visio intellectualis in so far as Langland's personifications explain their significance (Minnis, p. 94).¹⁴¹

These, then, are some of the parameters within which Piers Plowman may be considered as a prophetic work. Further evidence that it is not inappropriate to speak of Piers Plowman as a prophetic poem lies in the fairly broad definition which many medieval writers gave prophecy. Aquinas, for example, defines prophecy as "all those things, the knowledge of which can be useful for salvation, . . . whether they are past, future, or external, or necessary, or contingent."¹⁴² Synave and Benoit have summarized Thomas' view of prophecy further, stressing the social and pedagogical vocation of the prophet:

By "prophecy" St. Thomas understands essentially knowledge, supernaturally given to man, of truths exceeding the present reach of his mind, which God teaches him for the benefit of the community. It is, first of all, a social charism which imparts divine revelation to the world through the mediation of certain privileged persons upon whose vision the faith, and consequently the rule of life, of others depends. The function of prophecy is to instruct the human race in "whatever is necessary for salvation" (Synave and Benoit, p. 61).

This second definition stresses the difficult nature of prophecy which deals in "truths exceeding the present reach of the prophet's mind"--a statement which suggests that a certain amount of confusion on the part of the prophet was thought inevitable. The definition also suggests that visionary texts could really only be regarded as prophecy if they somehow reached beyond the didactic to the genuinely revelatory. Piers Plowman does, at times, do this as well, both in revelation of the future and, what is in many ways a more profound form of vision, revelation of divine truths through only partially understood figures like Piers.¹⁴³

The poem can also be spoken of as prophetic in more specific ways, however, and it is to these aspects that we should turn now. Langland not only includes overtly prophetic passages in his poetry, but he also uses many of the literary conventions which in his time signalled the recording of serious visionary experience. This brings us to an aspect of the literary history of the poem which has been left virtually unexplored by critics of Piers Plowman: the relationship between the medieval religious visionary tradition and the visionary character of Piers Plowman.

For many years now critics have treated the visions of Langland in much the same way as the dream visions of Chaucer, that is, as literary inventions which provide the writer with a vehicle for otherworldliness, satirical comment and, as one critic put it, freedom from the tyranny of narrative. Comparisons with Chaucerian dream visions and other visions of the Middle English literary tradition can

certainly be enlightening, but they do not and cannot provide a full context for the consideration of certain visionary aspects of Langland's poem. Some of these visionary aspects are so different from anything we find in other Middle English works that many critics have come to accept Rosemary Woolf's description of them as the "non-Medieval" qualities of Piers Plowman. But, as I have suggested earlier with regard to the apocalypse genre, these visionary aspects are not so much non-medieval as non-Middle English: if we go outside of Middle English literature to the Latin religious prophecy of the Middle Ages we will find much that explains these so-called "non-Medieval" qualities in the poem.

We have already noted some of these "non-medieval qualities" which can be explained with reference to the Continental tradition, for example, Langland's enigmatic and evocative handling of allegorical figures, the looseness of his allegorical structure and his chaotic mixture of vision of external events with internalized, psychological vision. Another of Woolf's "non-medieval" qualities is Langland's peculiar treatment of his visionary narrator in what seems to be his mixing of autobiographical elements with a highly conventionalized literary persona. It is the autobiographical phases of Langland's Will which surprise Woolf, while other critics are surprised by the suggestion that Will could be anything but an autobiographical creation. Woolf writes:

Up to the end of the fourteenth century one would not expect a poem set in the first person to contain any personal truth: the poet is not concerned with the individual, whether it be himself or another, but with what is common to everybody. In

the religious lyric, for instance, the "I" speaker expresses feelings which anybody could make their own, whilst in narrative poetry the "I" character, as in Chaucer's Prologue, may be quite unlike the poet, indeed ironically his opposite. Modern critics seem sometimes to think that the use of a dramatic "I" is sophisticated, and that the simple and natural thing for a poet to do is to express truthfully his own feelings. The course of English literature, however, suggests the exact opposite, for the development is from the impersonal or dramatic "I" of Anglo-Saxon and Medieval poetry, through the semi-personal "I" of Renaissance literature, to the completely personal "I" of the Romantics. If Langland therefore is typical of his period, one would expect the dreamer to be remote from the individual personality of the poet (Woolf, pp. 119-20).

Woolf finds, however, that Langland is not typical: such is the confusion and profusion of ideas and teachings within the poem that it seems easier to explain the chaos by suggesting that Langland was recording the struggles of his own mind, not simply creating a wholly fictionalized persona, a kind of surrogate Everyman figure who would, as in other Middle English dream visions, allow for the participation of the audience in a learning experience. However, George Kane has provided us with a via media between these two critical extremes. Asserting on the one hand,

where the authorship of a dream-vision poem and the circumstances of the author are known it very often proves the case that the dreamer of the poem possesses not merely the name, but also other historical attributes of that actual author. It is thus a convention of this literary kind for the dreamer to share identity with the poet, whether simply by being represented as a writer, or nominally, or more than nominally. To some greater or lesser extent the author of a dream-vision poem fashions his dreamer-narrator in his own image (Kane, p. 12).

but cautioning on the other,

the fact of the literary occasion, the artificial circumstance of the narrative being in verse, the degree to which the reported dream must surpass any actual dream in organization, coherence, and circumstantial character, the known use of the dream setting for fictional representation, all would presumably signal to even the least intelligent hearer the necessary existence of at least some kind of distinction between the entities of poet and dreamer (Kane, p. 13).

Kane summarizes the problem in this way:

The poets invite us to identify the narrators with themselves, and then, by the character of what is narrated, caution us not to carry out the identification (Kane, p. 15).¹⁴⁴

A study of the religious visionary conventions behind Piers Plowman does indeed support this mix of the historical and the fictional in the narrator, as we shall see, but it seems to me that Rosemary Woolf was still correct in her assessment that Langland's "autobiographicalization" of his narrator was unparalleled in Middle English literature. Especially in parts of the C-Text, Langland's treatment of Will is much more specific than anything Chaucer does with Geoffrey. The autobiographical passage in C. V in which the dreamer asserts that he has learned, "witterly what holy writ menede/And what is . . . sykerost for þe soule" (37-39) stands in sharp contrast to the "dotede daffe" who has no grasp of the fundamentals of Christianity which Holy Church teaches. And the itinerant cleric who reproves the lollars of Cornhill in his verses similarly jars with the hermit "vnholly of werkes" (Prol. 3) who wanders the Malvern Hills. The autobiographical and the fictional are related to each other by a series of ironically cast similarities in appearance--but they are not the same figure and the Middle English

literary tradition does not furnish us with a precedent for such specific autobiographical portrayal.¹⁴⁵ I believe, however, that the Latin religious visionary tradition does. Against this background, in which the narrator figure is usually based on truly autobiographical detail that has been shaped by its own structure of visionary conventions, Langland's narrator looks surprisingly at home.

Almost no one has ever entertained the notion that Langland might have been influenced by or intended his poetry to be read as serious religious vision.¹⁴⁶ Like Chaucer, Langland exploits the visionary mode for literary purposes, and both authors portray their dreamers as musing on the question of the validity of dreams, but for Langland there was an added dimension to this musing: satirist though he was, he also breaks into earnest prophecy, urgent admonition, and authoritative doctrinal teaching at various points in the poem. As there can be little doubt that he intended his poetry to provoke serious religious thought, we must ask ourselves to what extent Langland sought to establish visionary credibility for himself and his poem. I would like to approach this problem in two ways. First I will look at what guidelines we have for distinguishing between real and religious vision--as it was recorded by those who believed themselves to have had religious experiences, on the one hand, and purely literary or fictionalized visions on the other. Then I will look at the extent to which the lifestyle and demeanour of the visionary was judged in the Middle Ages to reflect the credibility and validity of his visions. The question in both cases is one of authorial intention--what type of poem

was Langland trying to write, and how did he hope that it would be received by his audience?

Before going further, I would stress that "real" or "experienced" visions and their fictionalized counterparts exhibit a powerful tendency toward conventionalization in the Middle Ages. Religious visionaries seem to have laboured under as many constraints with regard to the recording of their visions as any "literary" writer working in the most conventionalized of traditions. To make this point I would like to look briefly at one of the most famous passages from the annals of medieval religious writing, St. Augustine's description of the moment of his conversion:

I threw myself down under some fig tree--I don't know how--and let loose the reins of my tears, and a flood broke forth from my eyes, a sacrifice acceptable to you, and not in these words, but with this sense, I spoke many things to you: "And you, O Lord, how long? How long, O Lord; wilt thou be angry forever? Remember not our former iniquities," For I still felt myself held back by them. I kept crying in misery, "How long, how long, tomorrow and tomorrow? Why not let this moment be the end of my foulness?" I was saying this and was weeping with the most bitter sorrow in my heart. And behold, I hear a voice from the next house, whether a boy's voice or a girl's, I don't know, singing and often repeating, "Take it and read, take it and read." And at once, with a changed expression, I began to think most intently, whether children were accustomed to chant words such as these in any kind of game, nor did I recall I had heard them anywhere at all, and having quelled the onset of tears, I stood up thinking this could be nothing else but a divine command that I open the book and read the first passage I found (Book VIII, 12; trans. Ginnsberg, p. 86).

The account reads in many ways like a real experience: Augustine first wonders, upon hearing the voice, whether he is overhearing a child at play--details such as this give the passage an air of autobiographical

realism. However, certain stylistic features and phrases are lifted directly from biblical sources:¹⁴⁷ the "how long, how long . . . tomorrow and tomorrow" cry is taken from Psalms 6 and 78; the rhetorical repetition of "I do not know" is taken from St. Paul's description (in I Corinthians) of how he was caught up to heaven in a state of ecstasy ("Whether in the body, I know not, or out of the body, I know not, God knoweth"). Furthermore the whole scene has been typologically arranged: throughout the Confessions Augustine refers back with shame to a boyhood incident when he had stolen pears from a pear tree. The conversion takes place under another tree, a fig-tree--one of the most typologically resonant of biblical plant symbols. Augustine arranges his autobiography in such a way that it echoes man's first fall, at the tree of knowledge, and his redemption at the tree of the Cross.

To point out Augustine's use of biblical phrases and typological parallels is not to deny that he really underwent some kind of religious experience--or even that he really stole pears as a boy--it is to show how little concerned such writers were with the experience of the individual and how much concerned they were that anything which was recorded--even autobiographical experience--be made a vehicle of religious truth through the imposition of typological patterns.¹⁴⁸ If we were honest we would acknowledge that even modern autobiographies betray the same mythmaking tendencies, although the motivation behind this creative activity may no longer be religious edification; so it is perhaps wrong for us to pity or condemn the medieval tendency to adapt historical truths or sacrifice personal experience to the purposes of

edification. Nonetheless we should be aware that when we speak of recorded religious experience we are dealing with a species of conventionalized work.¹⁴⁹ The question for us is not so much whether a religious poet like Langland could be recording "real" religious experience, as whether there is any evidence in his poem that he opted for the conventions which in his time signalled the recording of experienced religious vision as opposed to secular vision.

The only scholar who has tried in any systematic way to set out some guidelines for distinguishing between literary and "experienced" visions is the German historian Peter Dinzelbacher. Although we should be grateful to Dinzelbacher for tackling a problem which other scholars have been content to skirt around, his guidelines present us with some problems when we attempt to apply them to apocalyptic visions. This in itself, however, is instructive and gives us yet another justification for looking at apocalyptic vision as a type of literature unto itself. In order to illustrate some of the differences between experienced and fictionalized visions and the difficulties of categorizing apocalyptic visions as either, we will look first at Robert of Uzès' visions in light of Dinzelbacher's guidelines and then at Piers Plowman itself. The following chart is abstracted from Dinzelbacher's discussion of the literary vision and its "real" religious counterpart:¹⁵⁰

"Real" Religious Vision

-occurs within an autobiography or contains autobiographical elements, autobiographical narration

Fictional Vision

-non-biographical, "Everyman" narrator

-prose	-poetry
-waking vision or state of ecstasy, visionary disturbed by the experience	-dream vision, visionary shows no signs of disturbance
-realistic, biographical setting for visions (e.g. church, home, etc.)	-idyllic natural setting
-rarely uses allegory, symbolism, etc.	-usually uses allegory
-religious content	-secular content, often uses pagan myth
-asserts validity of visions	-narrator muses on validity of visions, expresses doubt
-experience results in change in the visionary's life or conversion of some kind	-vision does not result in change in the visionary's life

Let us look first at how a writer like Robert of Uzès, who at first glance appears as a writer of "real" rather than fictionalized visions, measures up to these categorizations. There are certainly autobiographical elements in the visions, but they do not occur within an autobiography and, with a few exceptions, the autobiographical details are not of much importance to the main message of any particular vision.¹⁵¹ The settings of Robert's visions are, however, the most biographically-oriented details about them and in this Dinzlacher's analysis is apt. They are indeed written in prose, but show a concerted use of allegory and symbolism, something which, as Dinzlacher says, is rare in medieval religious visions. Robert does talk about "seeing in the spirit," but he never describes a traumatic or difficult transition into a different state. He does not give us any

information about how his visions affected him while awake, but many of his visions come to him while he is doing very "normal" activities: eating (e.g. Vision 36, p. 287), speaking with someone (e.g. Vision 10, p. 287), resting in bed but awake (e.g. Vision 3, p. 274). In fact many of Robert's visions seem to come to him the way a modern person would describe an idea "coming to him." As Jean Leclercq said about Hildegard, she envisions what others would express in another way.¹⁵² Although many of Robert's visions show marks of real visionary experience, especially some which he describes as dreams, they also show the effect of conscious imitation of a literary tradition, conscious development of religious and political allegory and conscious reforming or didactic intent. Robert's visions, then, transgress the boundaries between "real" and literary visions in several areas.

Dinzelbacher's guidelines for "experienced" and literary visions work very well when applied to most medieval vision literature, from Tundal to St. Jerome's famous dream to Chaucer's literary masterpieces. He does not consider much apocalyptic vision literature, however, and admits difficulty with writers like Robert.¹⁵³ Medieval apocalyptic vision literature seems to be best described as a mixture of "experienced" and literary constructions, perhaps because writers of such visions found themselves trying to relate what they hoped would be a convincing autobiographical experience to an audience they hoped to persuade, on the one hand, and working within the confines of a strong literary tradition on the other--as biblical scholars so often stress, there is nothing more "literary" than an apocalypse.¹⁵⁴ Perhaps

the single most important feature which distinguishes apocalyptic visions from their fictional and "real" counterparts is the polemical motivation of the apocalypse. This is what separates Robert's and Hildegard's and Langland's visions from Tundal's on the one hand and Chaucer's on the other. The polemical element does not explain all the differences, but does provide us with an important focus.

Checking Piers Plowman against the list of some of Dinzelbacher's guidelines we find, similarly, that the poem comes down with one foot in each camp. As in the fictional visions of the Middle Ages, the narrator of Piers Plowman dreams his visions and never goes into a state of ecstasy, although he does receive a few of his visions in a waking state, which may suggest that Langland was reaching beyond secular literary conventions to religious ones.¹⁵⁵ Like many literary visions Piers Plowman is written in metre rather than prose, although this is perhaps the least reliable of the criteria, as Dinzelbacher says. As in other literary visions some of Will's dreams are set in idyllic natural surroundings, although it is evident that Langland was not much interested in this stylized literary convention and with the C-Text revision of the poem he excised more of the natural description of flowers, trees and bird songs, finally leaving his dreamer to fall asleep in some of the barest natural settings in dream vision literature. Another relevant aspect of Langland's use of setting is that for later visions in the poem he totally abandons the idyllic natural world and begins to set Will's dreams in contexts which are usually only associated with the recording of real religious visions,

notably his vision weeping before the cross in Passus V, and the vision from which he awakes at home among his family on Easter morning (Passus XX). A third vision (XXI, 4ff.) is received during mass, a visionary setting usually reserved for prophetic visions in the Middle Ages. It would seem then that we do have certain indications that Langland was playing with the idea that some of his visions were to be read as the real, religious variety. This is hardly surprising given the strong sense of spiritual urgency the poem leaves with the reader. Piers Plowman differs from almost all the literary dream visions of the Middle English period (except, perhaps for Pearl) in that it is much more religious in character than it is secular; we should note that Langland never uses pagan mythology in his visions, as Chaucer does: it is only the Christian world view which interests him. This is especially true of the C-Text, which condenses and clarifies and spiritualizes many of the confusions and mental wanderings of the B-Text. While Langland no doubt began writing the poem with the more secular dream vision model in mind, his work soon became a quest for moral and spiritual reform.

As Dinzelbacher suggests, the literary religious vision is a rare phenomenon; he cites the Divine Comedy as the type of work which is both uncommon in medieval literature and difficult to produce, being a literary masterpiece of sustained religious vision.¹⁵⁶ When he mentions Piers Plowman it is always in the context of the secular, literary vision tradition, but this may be partly because of the unequivocal way modern criticism has received Piers Plowman as a purely

literary vision and also partly because Dinzelbacher uses the B-Text rather than the C-Text. Another feature of Piers Plowman which suggests that Langland had the "real" religious vision model in mind is the emphasis throughout the poem on Will's spiritual growth. Literary visions such as the ones Dinzelbacher discusses (in Latin and also in various vernaculars) do not result in any change in the visionary's life or any conversion experience, whereas the religious vision on the contrary seems often to be motivated by this factor.¹⁵⁷ This emphasis on the spiritual growth of the visionary brings us to two key features of the religious vision which we will now look at in more depth with regard to Piers Plowman: the autobiographical elements of such visions and the visionary's state (awake or asleep) when the vision occurs.

Robert of Uzès' visions provide interesting information about this question of the mode of receiving visions. We have seen that some of his visions come to him almost casually; others are the result of intense prayer (he usually describes himself as prostrate when receiving a vision during prayer, as in Vision 17, p. 281 or Vision 22, p. 283). Many of his waking visions occur during mass or during a service such as matins (Vision 2, p. 273) or compline (Vision 35, p. 287). This scenario was a favourite with visionaries, especially in prophetic circles. Some prophets mention the exact point during the mass when the vision occurred; we notice that Robert mentions a vision occurring at the elevation of the body of Christ in Visions 17 and 22; other times he simply states that it happened during mass.

Unlike a number of other medieval visionaries, Robert has both waking and dream visions. A rough count shows that the waking ones predominate, which may indicate that Robert was aware that these were more prophetically prestigious than the ones which occur during sleep:

Sleep is an affection of the body: damp humours rise to the brain and cut off the external senses, but they do not silence all the internal powers. This is an opportunity for virtus imaginativa to meddle with the images stored up in the imaginatio. Normally, in waking, the rational powers command both of these wits; but when the control of reason is lifted, imaginativa can make new shapes and forms by combining and separating the images. . . . Some men who have a particularly strong imaginativa can see waking what others see only when sleeping. This kind of prophetic experience is to be distinguished . . . from a higher prophecy . . . which is a direct insight by the strong and pure soul. . . . Prophetic dreams belong to the lower kind of imaginative prophecy (Harvey, pp. 49-50).

The fact that Robert has both waking and dream visions shows that the dream vision could be a respectable form for certain religious visionaries and that it was not just limited to literary usages.

In the early Middle Ages there was a great distrust of the dream and this negative attitude was to some extent perpetuated to the later period through the writings of Augustine, Gregory and Jerome (Le Goff, p. 203). However, as Le Goff writes, "the twelfth century may be considered the age of the reconquest of the dream" (p. 203). With twelfth-century writers like Hildegard of Bingen, the dream came to be seen as a more healthy phenomenon (p. 204) and was no longer regarded with as much suspicion. There is no clear distinction between a dream and a vision throughout the Middle Ages, but an essential distinction

between receiving of visions when asleep or awake.¹⁵⁸ For example, the anonymous author of the Vita of Christina of Markyate is often at pains to assert that the religious experiences he recounts are of the most respected sort:

Abbot Geoffrey has at one stage a waking vision of Christina which he "saw clearly (for it was no dream)", whereas he writes of the recluse's own experiences that they were not fantastic visions or dreams, but were seen by her "with the true gaze which is enjoyed by those who have spiritual eyes". In using the words neque enim phantastice erant visiones, he was echoing the terminology of the Somnium Scipionis by Macrobius, where the fantasma, the dream seen between sleeping and waking, is dismissed as valueless (Holdsworth, "Christina," p. 200).

As Holdsworth points out in his study of Christina's visions, it is clear that her biographer did not have "a well-judged standard by which he judged the quality of the experiences he recounted" (p. 200) and this is the whole visionary problem in a nutshell. By Langland's time there was a sophisticated literature on and about visions and a well-established visionary tradition, but religious visionaries were still haunted by the ambiguities inherent in their mode of revelation.

There are waking visions and "semi-waking" visions in Piers Plowman and in one of the most important of these, Will's encounter with Imaginatif, I believe that Langland actually plays on the medieval conviction of the superiority of waking over dreamed visions.¹⁵⁹ There is much in this section to suggest that Langland knew and was concerned with visionary conventions. And given the fact that the Imaginatif encounter constitutes one of the major turning points in Will's spiritual growth, it seems pertinent to look for features of the

religious vision tradition at this point. The passage does indeed record what is at least a minor "conversion" experience for Will.

The passage begins as Will has been literally cast out of the visionary world because he has rebuked Reason for what Will sees as his unreasonable treatment of mankind:

Tho cauhte y colour anoen and comesede to ben aschamed,
And awakede þerwith; wo was me thenne
That y ne hadde met more, so murye as y slepte,
And saide anoen to mysulue, "Slepynge hadde y grace
To wyte what Dowe1 is, ac wakyng neure!" (C. XIII, 212-16)

Wakened and sobered by shame and remorse for his presumptuous behaviour, the dreamer cries, "Slepynge hadde y grace/To wyte what Dowe1 is, ac wakyng neure!" Ironically, it is the waking vision of Imaginatif that follows which gives Will the spiritual grace he needs to transcend his own narrow perceptions of the spiritual life and move on to greater understanding. This is, both literally and metaphorically, the passage in which Will wakes up. By shifting this important revelation from a sleeping to a waking vision, Langland is playing off two different vision conventions against each other, and not without some irony. The one convention, popular in the secular literary tradition, is the receiving of revelations during sleep. This is set over against the theologically orthodox view of the religious visionary school that dreams received during sleep are the least reliable form of revelation--the waking vision being the more respected of the two. Add to this the widespread use in religious literature of sleep as a symbol of spiritual torpor from which a man must be awakened to save his soul,

and we have a powerful set of ironical implications clustered around Will's cry. Langland would certainly have expected his audience to be aware of the spiritual implications of the sleeping and waking states and would also have expected them to pick up the important shift he makes at this point in the poem through this juxtaposition of secular and religious vision conventions--the signal may tell us that Will is moving into the sphere of religious vision and that the audience should similarly shift its poetic expectations.

A further clue that Langland is concerned here with the question of visionary convention is that he gives such an exalted role in the poem to the personification Imaginatif. As we have seen, the only place in medieval theory in which the imagination was thought to be involved in spiritual affairs was in discussions of its role in visionary prophecy. As the workshop of dreams and prophetic visions, the vis imaginativa had a widely divergent reputation, which ranged from the observation that it made a nuisance of itself by producing unreliable and nonsensical images during sleep and contemplation to the belief that it was the faculty which enabled the holiest souls to receive prophetic visions. This is the background against which literary writers like Chaucer and Langland portray their dreamers as musing about the validity of visions. The implications for visionary credibility created by these ambiguities are obvious--they are the ironist's delight but the bane of the religious visionary's existence--and the ground Langland occupies is somewhere between these two positions. His delight in irony and his skill in creating irony are every bit as evident as Chaucer's, but

Langland's poetry is far too didactic to exist for art's sake alone. Langland clearly highlights the visionary conventions in this waking encounter between Will and Imaginatif to some purpose. I believe that he was drawing attention to the whole visionary question in this passage: the issue of the status of his poetry as revelation and of his own credibility as a visionary. The veins of irony which riddle the passage do not alter this suggestion in the slightest, they only complicate it.

A study of other waking visions in the poem further supports the notion that Langland is concerned with visionary conventions and self-credibility. All Will's waking visions are somehow self-revelations: in the C-Text the most important of these are the dreamer's confrontation with Conscience and Reason in the autobiographical passage in passus V and his encounter with Need at the beginning of passus XXII. In both cases Will is reproved for his lifestyle and accused of being a false beggar:

And hit neyhed neyh þe noen and with Nede y mette
 That afrounted me foul and faytour me calde:
 "Couthest thou nat excuse the, as dede the kyng and opere,
 That thou toke to lyue by, to clothes and to sustinaunce,
 Was bi techyng and by tellyng of Spiritus temperancie
 And þat thou nome no more then nede the tauhte? (XXII, 4-9)

There have been many critical attempts to interpret Need's dubious advice to the dreamer, but not much notice of the fact that Need begins by accusing Will of being a "faytour," a point which hardly seems relevant to Need's argument. Conscience and Reason make the same

accusation in passus V, but argue that the dreamer should remedy the situation by performing some socially useful labour. Clearly the dreamer's lifestyle and role in society was a recurring concern for Langland throughout the poem. He seems to have a vague sense of uneasiness about his association with the various "faytours" of medieval society and, whatever the rewards of this association in terms of the riches of irony and literary ambiguity, he seems to need consistently to try to clarify his own position. Three of the waking (or semi-waking) visions, the autobiographical passage in V, the Imaginatif passage in XIII-XIV and the Need passage in V, are somehow self-confrontational and one wonders if there is not a reason for this. The conventions of the religious visionary tradition, with its emphasis on the importance of waking visions and the expected autobiographical impact of such experiences may well lie behind Langland's departure from the dream framework in these passages.

There is much in Langland's treatment of his dreamer-narrator which shows that he was concerned with his self-image as a writer of visions and it is this problem which we will turn to now. Langland must have known from his wide acquaintance with serious religious visionary literature that, because of the ambivalence with which visions were viewed, judgements as to the credibility of any revelation usually fall back upon an attempt to discern whether the lifestyle of the visionary himself (or herself) was credible. This process, as we have seen in our study of Bridget, was part of what medieval theologians referred to as probatio, a series of tests whereby one could tell a true visionary from

a fraudulent one. In testing the validity of any vision, much weight was placed on the moral and spiritual character of the visionary. Furthermore, a stereotypical image of the true visionary or prophet had been evolving in medieval minds since the evangelical movements of the twelfth century had sprung into being. As we have seen, these groups put much emphasis on apostolic poverty, rigorous asceticism and evangelical teachings, and roamed the countries of medieval Europe preaching the gospel, urging poverty and repentance, and (often) prophesying doom, especially against the wealthy and corrupt clergy of the established orders.¹⁶⁰ There is much evidence within Piers Plowman that Langland was strongly attracted to both the ideology and the lifestyle of such prophet figures. There is also much to support the argument that he wanted his dreamer-narrator to be associated with this apostolic image. For example, Langland goes out of his way to stress that many of his dreamer's visions are received when he is hungry--wandering "meteles and moneyles on Maluerne hulles," as he puts it in one place (IX, 297). Fasting was considered highly efficacious for the receiving of visions--medieval vision theory held, for example, that the only true dreams were those which occurred in the morning, when the body was free from the physiological effects of food.¹⁶¹ Arbesmann writes that to the early theorists on visions,

the striking changes produced in the human body by certain dishes, especially those causing flatulence, were more than merely physiological processes: demoniac influences stood behind them. This in turn led to the belief that the soul could reach its greatest power when it was independent of the digestive activity of the body and, therefore, most free from bodily influence (Arbesmann, p. 31).

This evangelical ideology makes the enigmatic section in which Need appears to the dreamer and tempts him to steal food to satisfy his hunger look even more dubious. Need's argument is convincing, but we must note that the dreamer does not give in. Although Langland portrays Will's "metelessness" as the accident of his wandering lifestyle, sometimes even implying that it is somehow Will's own fault because of his idleness (e.g. V, 5-10), it is probably no more "accidental" that Will wanders hungry throughout the poem than it is that the lunatic lollars do (IX, 105-127). The point here is that one may not always plan to be a prophet, but certain conditions of life and point of view can predispose one to the role. Langland's emphasis on Will's hunger and the fact that all of his visions (so far as we can tell) are daytime visions are just part of a subtly drawn visionary self-portrait.

Langland drops other hints in this direction. Through the course of the Vita, Will's search for Truth drives him to a state of alienation from society, he stops noticing physical discomforts and this obsession with the search becomes almost a form of madness:

Ac after wakyng it was wonder longe
 Er I koude kyndely knowe what was dowel,
 And so my wit weex and wanyed til I a fool weere.
 And some lakkeðe my lif allowed it fewe --
 And lete me for a lorel and looþ to reuerencen
 Lordes or ladies or any lif ellis,
 As persons in pilure wiþ pendauntz of siluer;
 To sergeauntz ne to swiche seide nozt ones,
 "God loke yow, lordes", ne loutede faire,
 That folk helden me a fool; and in þat folie I raued
 Til reson hadde ruþe on me and rokkeð me aslepe (B. XV, 1-12)

Will becomes a type of the "holy fool," a figure born, as we have

seen, of St. Paul's notion that Christians are fools in the eyes of the world but wise in the eyes of Heaven. As Will says, people took him for a fool, a village idiot, but his concerns lay outside of society.

On the other hand, Langland constantly undercuts this image of his dreamer: the line mentioned earlier in which Will wanders "meteles and moneyles" on the Malvern Hills can be translated either as "meatless and moneyless" or "visionless" and moneyless (M.E. "meteles"--dream). This instance of wordplay sums up the problem succinctly. Is Langland's dreamer a true prophet or a visionless, wayward wanderer?

In the B-Text in particular, Langland toys with both ideas. In the C-Text, however, I believe he took steps to eliminate some of the ambiguities and the result is that he comes down even more heavily on the serious religious visionary side. He added two new passages to the C-Text which may have been written expressly for this purpose. The first is the autobiographical passage in C. V. Here Langland the poet once again merges with his fictionalized narrator figure to expose certain details of his lifestyle--the poem's Everyman becomes a specific man, the poet himself. The passage is expanded and reworked from a shorter apologia pro vita sua which occurs in the dreamer's confrontation with Imaginatif in the B-Text. In the original passage, Imaginatif accuses the dreamer-poet of "meddling with makyngs" (B. XII, 16) when he should be praying for those who give him bread. Many critics have taken this to mean that Langland was a beggar--and they have read all kinds of ironies and inconsistencies into these lines because this would place the poet among those in society whom he spends

most of the poem inveighing against, the idlers and wasters and fraudulent clerics who preyed upon medieval society. Some of that irony is certainly there, but a close examination of these passages shows that this is partly a misconception. This misconception about Langland's lifestyle which has misled modern critics may have mystified some of Langland's contemporary audience and it may be because of this that he rewrote and clarified the passage in the C-Text. In the new passage he makes it quite clear that, although he is bothered by Conscience for having wasted time in his life, he is not in fact a beggar. He makes his living, as did so many other unbeneficed lower clergy, by making the rounds of various homes of benefactors who pay him to say prayers for their souls and the souls of dead relatives.¹⁶² When Conscience and Reason ask him why he cannot make himself useful by doing manual labour, he replies with a defense of his life and means of livelihood:

"When y zong was, many zer hennes,
 My fader and my frendes foende me to scole,
 Tyl y wyste witterly what holy writ menede
 And what is beste for the body, as the boek telleth,
 And sykerost for þe soule, by so y wol contene.
 And foend y nere, in fayth, seth my frendes deyede,
 Lyf þat me lykede but in this longe clothes.
 And yf y be labour sholde lyuen and lyflode deseruen,
 That laboure þat y lerned beste þerwith lyuen y sholde
In eadem vocacione in qua vocati estis.
 And so y leue yn London and opelond bothe;
 The lomes þat y labore with and lyflode deserue
 Is pater-noster and my prymer, placebo and dirige,
 And my sauter som tyme and my seuene psalmes.
 This y segge for here soules of suche as me helpeth,
 And tho þat fynden me my fode fouchen-saf, y trowe,
 To be welcome when y come, oþer-while in a monthe,
 Now with hym, now with here; on this wyse y begge
 Withoute bagge or botel but my wombe one (C. V, 35-52).

To understand this passage fully we must lay it alongside Langland's description of the lunatic lollars, who in his view are God's own disciples because they live in a state of total dependence on God for their livelihood. Like Christ's apostles, they do not beg with bags either, but take from their benefactors only what suffices for today, leaving the problem of sustenance for tomorrow up to God.

Distinguishing them from idle beggars Langland writes

And ȝut ar ther opere beggares, in hele, as hit semeth,
 Ac hem wanteth wyt, men and women bothe,
 The whiche aren lunatyk lollares and le pares aboute,
 And madden as þe mone sit, more other lasse.
 Careth they for no colde ne counteth of non hete
 And aren meuyngge aftur þe mone; moneyeles þey walke,
 With a good will, witteles, mony wyde contreyes,
 Riht as Peter dede and Poul, saue þat þey preche nat
 Ne none miracles maken -- ac many tymes hem happeth
 To profecye of þe peple, pleyngge, as hit were.
 And to oure syhte, as hit semeth, seth god hath þe myhte
 To ȝeue vch a wyht wyt, welthe, and his hele,
 And suffreth suche go so, it semeth, to myn inwyt,
 Hit aren as his postles, suche peple, or as his priue disciples.
 For a sent hem forth seluerles in a somur garnement
 Withoute bagge and bred, as þe book telleth:

Quando misi vos sine pane et pera.

Barfoot and bredles, beggeth they of no man.
 And thauh a mete with the mayre ameddes þe strete,
 A reuerenseth hym ryht nauht, no rather then another.

Neminem salutaueritis per viam.

Suche manere men, Matheu vs techeth,
 We sholde haue hem to house and helpe hem when they come.

Et egenos vagosque induc in domum tuam.

For hit aren merye-mouthed men, munstrals of heuene,
 And godes boys, bourdyors, as the book telleth.

Si quis videtur sapiens, fiet stultus vt sit sapiens.

(C. IX, 105-28)

Like the dreamer-poet, they wander meteless and moneyless. Like him they are perceived as lunatics. Like him they beg without a bag and

have no cares for tomorrow. Like him they do not salute the great ones of society when they meet them on the street--they are social outcasts, whose wits wax and wane, as the poet's do, with the moon. Like the poet they sometimes prophesy: "Ac many times hem happeth/To profecye of the peple." They are God's minstrels, poets of heaven, as (I suspect) Langland himself wanted to be. But the holy fools are also "merye-mouthed men," bourdyors"--jesters--when they prophesy it is as if they are playing, Langland tells us. Perhaps like Langland they too delight in the profound ironies which a spiritual point of view on life is forever revealing to the thoughtful man. "If anyone among you is seen to be wise, let him become a fool that he may be wise." I believe Langland would have glossed this text by saying, "Let him become a dreamer and a visionary."

I have referred at many points throughout this chapter to Rosemary Woolf's analysis of the many characteristics of Piers Plowman which she calls "non-medieval" and which I have contended are not so much non-medieval as simply non-Middle English. With reference to Latin religious literature of Langland's day many of these supposed anachronisms can be seen to have parallels in other medieval works. To summarize some of these "non-medieval" qualities which we have touched on: Langland's "inconsistent" handling of allegorical figures and themes (Woolf, pp. 111ff.), the absence of visualization in Langland's visionary writing (Woolf, pp. 116ff.), his dreamlike shifting of time and place (pp. 117ff.), the autobiographical features of the dreamer (119ff.), the extent to which the dreamer's participation in the visions

varies (118ff.), and Langland's entangled compression of allegorical ideas (p. 124).

Woolf particularly fastens on Langland's handling of the figure of Piers, the many forms he takes throughout the poem and his sudden appearances and disappearances: "The combination in Piers of uncertain significance with deep emotional power is exactly the reverse of what is normally found in Medieval allegory" (p. 114). We have seen that this type of elusive handling of supranatural authority figures is a characteristic of apocalypses, but it is also similar to the treatment of Christ-figures in the visions of certain medieval mystics. Mechthild of Magdeburg (1210-1279), whose writings, as Dronke has suggested, are similar to Langland in their "loose" treatment of allegory,¹⁶³ represents Christ as appearing to her in different guises, notably as a "working man" or as a pilgrim. Her vision of Christ as a working man deserves to be quoted in full, not only because it exemplifies the recurrent vision motif of the visionary struggling to comprehend Christ in this new guise, but also because the exchange between Christ and the visionary illustrates this structural looseness:

Our Lord showed me in a parable what He has fulfilled and still fulfils in me. I saw a poor man raise himself from the ground. He was dressed as a working man in poor linen clothes. He had a crowbar in his hand on which there lay a burden as big as the earth. I said, "Good man! What art thou lifting?" He said, "I am lifting thy sufferings. Turn thy will towards suffering! Lift it up and carry it!" Then I said, "Lord, I am so poor that I have nothing." Then He said, "Thus did I teach My disciples when I said Blessed are the poor in spirit, for when a person would fain do something and has not the power, that is spiritual poverty."

THE SOUL.--"Lord! Is it Thou? turn Thy face to me that I may

know Thee!" Then He said: "Learn to know Me inwardly!" THE SOUL.--"Lord! if I saw Thee among a thousand, yet would I know Thee!" Then my heart tempted me inwardly to a small dissimulation, but I did not trust myself to say to Him, "Thou art the Lord!" I said: "Lord! this burden is too heavy for me!" And He said, "I will clasp it so close to Myself that thou canst easily bear it. Follow Me and see how I hung before My heavenly Father on the Cross and endured!" Then I said, "Lord, give me Thy blessing." He answered, "I bless thee without ceasing. Thy sufferings shall give thee good counsel." And I replied, "May this help all those who gladly bear suffering for Thee!" (Mechthild, pp. 217-18)

One wonders whether Rosemary Woolf would say of this passage that it "lacks the typical Medieval virtue of clarity" (p. 124). It would appear that some religious writers were simply trying to express the partially inexpressible when they recorded certain spiritual experiences and Langland may well have been as familiar with this type of writing as he was with lucidly consistent allegories. It is interesting that a modern theologian uses much the same language to describe the characteristics of Hildegard's mystical writings as Rosemary Woolf uses to describe Langland's allegory. David Baumgardt talks about the "density and compactness" of Hildegard's recording of her experience (Woolf speaks of associated ideas being "interwoven and compressed together," p. 124), and he explains that Hildegard records "a diversity of insights in one instant . . . what modern psychology would describe as the peculiar contraction and stratification of intuitive and highly emotional thinking, and what Jakob Boehme once called being caught in an intellectual downpour" (p. 283). Memories, observations and conscious interpretation of the observed and remembered, Baumgardt writes, "are squeezed together in one moment." There are many instances in Piers

Plowman in which one feels that one has been caught in an intellectual downpour. Perhaps one of the best known of these is Christ's speech in the Harrowing of Hell:¹⁶⁴

For y þat am lord of lyf, loue is my drynke,
 And for þat drynke today y deyede, as hit semede.
 Ac y wol drynke of no dische ne of deep clergyse,
 Bote of comune coppes, alle cristene soules;
 Ac thy drynke worth deth and depe helle thy bolle.
 Y fauht so, me fursteth ʒut, for mannes soule sake.

Sicio.

May no pyement ne pomade ne precieuse drynkes
 Moiste me to þe fulle ne my furst slokke
 Til þe ventage valle in þe vale of Iosophat,
 And I drynke riht rype must, resurreccio mortuorum.
 And thenne shal y come as kynge, with croune and with angeles,
 And haue out of helle alle mennes soules (C. XX, 403-14).

Mechthild also sees Christ as a poor pilgrim, and except for the direct nature of the exchanges between the soul and Christ, these incidents are reminiscent of the multiple appearances of Piers. The English recluse Christina of Markyate similarly sees a Christ-like wanderer. Holdsworth summarizes the account in her Vita of three appearances of a "certain pilgrim" to Christina as follows:

The first time he comes he is received hospitably but goes on his way. "After a while" he returns again, talks with her, and sits down whilst she and her sister prepare refreshment for him. This he scarcely tastes, but after blessing them he goes on his way. The two sisters are left longing to see more of him; finally he turns up the day after Christmas day, attends services with the nuns and then disappears, although the church door had been locked so that no one could get in or out. At this point the author who has already drawn parallels between the behaviour of the pilgrim and the two sisters to that of Jesus with Mary and Martha, adds "Who else could we say he was, except the Lord Jesus or one of his angels?", and appeals in justification to the vision which Christina had had on Christmas night of a crowned figure approving the way the monks at St

Albans were singing Mattins. His account breaks off with the tantalising phrase In die vero sub perigrini sed maturioris viri specie videri voluit quia qualiter (Holdsworth, p. 192).

Holdsworth refers to the visions as Christina's "Emmaus experience" and one wonders whether the evocative biblical tale of Christ appearing to his disciples as an unrecognized traveller is not at the root of many of these enigmatic pilgrim appearances in medieval literature. As Holdsworth remarks, the stranger who joins the disciples in the Vulgate account is a peregrinus (p. 191), a linguistic point which supports this notion. Langland's handling of the figure of Piers, then, does not appear to be entirely as "non-medieval" as one might initially think.

Clearly, where one should go to find parallels to the vision-like qualities in Piers Plowman is to those writers who believed themselves to have had real visions, who were steeped in the literature of the earlier visionaries and who formulated their religious ideas in terms of visual experience. As David Baumgardt says (p. 281), "The mystical vision, like the esthetic one, seeks something quite different from the observation of the bare given facts of existence . . . [it] seeks, rather, to grasp the inner import, the living impact and meaning of these facts." If there was ever an intersection of spiritual and esthetic vision, it is in Piers Plowman--literary critics always pride themselves on their sensitivity to the latter, but it seems to me that we ignore the former at our peril. The tradition of visionary writing behind Piers Plowman is much broader than the one literary scholarship has illuminated for us in studies of the secular literary dream vision

of the Middle Ages. The emphasis in this thesis on the religious visionary tradition is by no means an attempt to displace that, only to broaden our view to further possibilities for influence among those writers who not only wrote but thought in images, who spoke a visual language. None of the writers discussed here speaks that language as eloquently as Langland, but all of them, in one way or another, strove, as C. S. Lewis said, to render "imaginable what before was only intelligible" to visionless humanity.