

H-France Review Vol. 14 (May 2014), No. 79

E. Ann Matter and Lesley Smith, eds., *From Knowledge to Beatitude: St. Victor, Twelfth-Century Scholars, and Beyond*. Essays in Honor of Grover A. Zinn, Jr. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013. xix + 471 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography and index. ISBN 0-268-03528-8.

Review by Eileen Sweeney, Boston College.

This is a wide-ranging and impressive collection of essays by a number of important scholars in the field of Victorine, twelfth century and early medieval thought. The editors divide the collection into four groups. The first set begins from reflections on the material aspects of the period—on manuscripts, the Church of St. Victor in the twelfth century, and a papal privilege for the Abbey of St. Denis. The second set is devoted to “life and learning in twelfth-century Paris,” with essays on what we can glean about the teaching at St. Victor, glossed bibles, the teaching and preaching of the canons. A third group takes up “twelfth-century spirituality and learning,” both at St. Victor and further afield, and the last set moves beyond the texts to this historical context of the time and historical afterlife of the spirituality of the period.

The collection begins with Delano-Smith’s engrossing account of the diagrams of Ezekiel’s vision of the Temple made by Richard of St. Victor. There are several diagrams corresponding to different accounts given by Ezekiel, a testimony to the Victorine emphasis on the literal level, as Richard attempts to make the many confusing things mentioned in Ezekiel make sense. Moreover, we find that Richard often included alongside his own diagram the rabbinical versions (p. 29). The illuminated manuscript detailed by Cahn only increases our sense of the visual and physical expression of Victorine spirituality. Clark’s painstaking attempt to construct an account of the first church at the Abbey of St. Victor, combing through engravings, plans and archeological excavations, gives a tantalizing glimpse of the home of the Victorines that was grander than St. Denis and St. German-des-Prés. The exploration of the papal privilege for the Abby of St. Denis furthers our sense of how the relationship between reform and the rebuilding and decoration of “the house of God” was thought about and debated. Drafted at the abbey itself, this privilege gives, Waldman shows, a sense of how the monks and their abbot thought about the spiritual mission of the abbey in relation to the physical plant. Lesley Smith gives an important glimpse into the world of books as actually used in the period, considering the collection of books of Robert Amiclas and his glosses on them. She doesn’t draw stronger conclusions than a careful look at the evidence of these rather minor comments on and emendations of the text will support, but her work does give us a more sophisticated sense of the fluidity of the texts and the sophistication of their readers. Harkins takes us to the life lived within the walls of St. Victor, presenting a reading of Hugh of St. Victor’s *Didascalicon*. For Harkins, the pursuit of wisdom described by Hugh revives in a monastic context Pierre Hadot’s notion of “philosophy as a way of life” (p. 104). This take on the text helps us to see it as outlining a real practice connected concretely to the monastic vocation, and a formalization for this Augustinian community of Augustine’s story of his “restoration by reading” in the *Confessions* 8 (pp. 123-4). All these essays demonstrate the efforts by twelfth-century clerics and scholars, as Southern put it, to “make God seem human” and also help make twelfth-century Paris seem real (p. 33).

There are a number of essays in the last two sets that contribute positively to our depth of understanding of the speculative and spiritual writings of the period. Poirel’s revelatory account of

Hugh's idea of beauty is full of exquisite passages from Hugh that give a strong sense of the particular character of Hugh's notion of beauty. The new notes struck by Hugh are of beauty as excessive and dynamic, of all creation united in a "vast symphony" (p. 258). Hugh's appreciation of the beauty of nature, Poirel explains, is "a sort of cosmic sympathy and a profound feeling of belonging to the created universe," not merely enjoyment but "a joyful and trusting acquiescence" (p. 254). Greek devaluation of becoming is contrasted with Hugh's appreciation for the beauty of change—in the changes of season, and even more for nature's production of the "novel, the unheard of, the astounding," that which "abashes our expectation, dilates our hearts and surpasses our hopes" (p. 253). Hugh's response to nature is "childlike joy in the presence of the diversity, profusion, superabundance of creation," (p. 251). Underexplored, perhaps, but still touched on, is the contrast in Hugh between the excessive overflowing of nature and the notion of beautiful human comportment, found in an ethical regime of restraint and control to bring the body back to its state of primordial beauty (pp. 268-9). In some ways, this strong contrast between excess and restraint stands in tension with Coolman's elegant and thorough account of beauty and measure in Hugh in another essay. For Coolman, Hugh's notion of created beauty and the moral life come closer to mirroring each other in the notion of moderation and measure. It need not be the case that one of these essays is wrong, but it would be interesting to explore whether or how they can be reconciled.

Newman's essay on the metaphor of lovers exchanging hearts is equally illuminating. Showing the transfer of the *topos* of exchanging hearts from secular to religious contexts, Newman traces it to the (controversially attributed) "lost love letters" of Abelard and Heloise and then to the literature of the Abbey of Helfta. There are great treasures in this literature, among them, arresting images, such as that of Christ's heart as a kitchen, accessible to all, slave and free, whose "dishes" are constantly replenished through the divine pleasure of God and by the gratitude of those who feast there. Another image Newman finds is of reeds coming out from the Sacred Heart, through which the nuns drink grace as if through a straw. Most interesting of all, as Newman shows, is that there seems to be no sense in this literature that intimate human friendships are in any way in competition with the "exchange of hearts" with God, as they are in some male writers in monastic communities, where such "particular friendships" were discouraged. Newman concludes, "the Helfta women embedded the exchange in a broad context of inter-personal and communal intimacy" (p. 295).

Another fine contribution is Brown's reading of Hildegard of Bingen's *Scivias* as a work of theology, rather than as disparate though inspired visions, its structure and rigor as important as its images. Brown looks at Hildegard's work as connected to that of Abelard, Gilbert and others of the twelfth century bent on revealing, so far as possible, the nature of the Trinity (p. 313). Hildegard's images are not from logic or politics, but from the organic and artisanal world because, Brown explains, "in her theology, the creation of the world was the originary theophany" (p. 314). Brown does a masterful reading of the second book of the *Scivias*, showing the persistently Trinitarian structures Hildegard finds in the sacraments. Brown also brings that Trinitarian structure out admirably in the third, most famous book figuring salvation and justice in the construction of the heavenly Jerusalem.

There are a number of essays which help complicate our vision of this period. Colish's short but information-packed essay points to the ways in which Stoic notions of conscience and *synderesis* are transformed in medieval thinkers through the mediation of Jerome and Ambrose and added on to Aristotelian scholastic faculty psychology. Her conclusions upend the standard assumptions that medieval thinkers mangled and misunderstood Stoic contributions and theologized the notions in unfortunate ways.

Adams' account of the responses of three different prelates to crusaders who seemed to return from war bent on sadistic cruelty and mayhem is a sobering reminder of the violence of the period and also of the contradictory and ambivalent responses of clerics who had been left behind to these returning war heroes. Adams explores and juxtaposes the views of Ivo of Chartres, Guibert of Nogent and Abbot

Suger of St. Denis with those of chroniclers of the Crusades such as Albert of Aachen and the *Chanson de Jerusalem*. Also complicating our sense of the period is van Liere's account of Jewish exegesis of the prophets as predicting a Jewish Messiah who would bring about Christendom, the Diaspora, and end of the Holy Roman Empire, while rebuilding the Temple. Van Liere reads Andrew of St. Victor's biblical commentary carefully, noting that while Andrew often accepts Jewish interpretations and eschews anti-Jewish readings identifying the Antichrist with the Jewish Messiah, he nonetheless minimizes Jewish messianic readings of the prophets, accepting their readings in a historical sense that places the message of the prophets in pre-Christian events. Andrew even at times makes the association of the Jewish Messiah with the Antichrist he otherwise resists. As van Liere puts it aptly, Andrew "combines appreciation for [Jewish] exegetical tradition with skepticism toward their theology" (p. 354). We are reminded that though Andrew and his teacher Hugh "were more aware of Judaism as a living religion...it did not make them necessarily more tolerant" (p. 355).

Clemens' contribution on Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples' Renaissance edition of Hildegard's *Scivias* offers an interesting look at the way Lefèvre's own theological program informed his edition of Hildegard, placing her work alongside but on an equal footing with some male mystical writers. His program was to reform and present an alternative spirituality to that of the scholastics. Clemens notes that Lefèvre was an editor of Aristotle and thus no stranger to philosophy when he rejected scholastic readings of Aristotle. While Lefèvre corrected Hildegard's Latin and made use of the *topos* of the unlettered woman whose visions must be articulated by a male cleric, Clemens notes he found some justification for this *topos* in Hildegard's vita and, more importantly, had genuine regard for her writings and the spirituality they embodied.

The lovely coda to the book is written by E. Ann Matter, on what it means that medieval mystical exegesis made its way into Bach's cantata, *Wachet auf!* This was the question Grover Zinn had posed to her as an undergraduate, so her answer is a fitting conclusion to the book. Richard turns to the Song of Songs in the midst of his exegesis of the mystical ark in Exodus 25, and Bach in connection with the story of the wise and foolish virgins in Matthew 25, but both, without direct influence of Richard on Bach, use the Song of Songs in the same way with these different texts. Their common use of "the aching loss of the story of the ardent lover and the hesitant beloved in the Song of Songs" is a sign of their "participation in a more ample literary and theological culture" in which it "signif[ies] the dilemma of human response to God's offered love" (p. 392).

Though it will likely not be read by many readers continuously or as a whole, there is a strong value to the volume as a unit. The parts come together to form a whole which prevents a number of partial and oversimplified narratives of the early Middle Ages, but which also deepens our understanding of things we thought we already knew. The whole of the volume is a little like creation for Hugh of St. Victor, "a table heaped high with gifts" (p. 251). This collection, like Zinn's own work of scholarship informed by joy and appreciation for the period, is set out as a table of delights. And it is indeed often delightful.

#### LIST OF ESSAYS

Catherine Delano-Smith, "Maps and Plans in Medieval Exegesis: Richard of St. Victor's *In visionem Ezechielis*"

Walter Cahn, "An Illuminated Manuscript of Writings by Hugh of St. Victor (Paris, Bibl. Mazarine, MS 729)"

William W. Clark, "The Twelfth-Century Church of St. Victor in Paris: A New Proposal"

---

Thomas Waldman, “*Decor Domus Domini*: Innocent II’s Privilege for the Abbey of St. Denis, May 9, 1131”

Franklin T. Harkins, “*Lectio exhortatio debet esse*: Reading as a Way of Life at the Twelfth-Century Abbey of St. Victor”

Lesly Smith, “Robert Amiclas and the Glossed Bible”

Hugh Feiss, OSB, “Preaching by Word and Example”

Boyd Taylor Coolman, “‘Trangressing [its] measure . . . trespassing the mode and law of its beauty’: Sin and the Beauty of the Soul in Hugh of St. Victor”

Dale M. Coulter, “Contemplation as ‘Speculation’: A Comparison of Boethius, Hugh of St. Victor, and Richard of St. Victor”

Marcia L. Colish, “*Synderesis* and Conscience: Stoicism and Its Medieval Transformation”

Dominiqu Poirel, “The Spirituality and Theology of Beauty in Hugh of St. Victor”

Barbara Newman, “*Iam cor meum non sit suum*: Exchanging Hearts, from Heloise to Helfta”

Rachel Fulton Brown, “Hildegard of Bingen’s Theology of Revelation”

Jeremy Adams, “Returning Crusaders: Living Saints or Psychopaths?”

Frans van Liere, “Christ or Antichrist? The Jewish Messiah in Twelfth-Century Christian Eschatology”

Raymond Clemens, “Medieval Women Visionaries in the Renaissance: Jacques Lefèvre d’Étaples’ *Liber trium virorum et trium spiritualium virginum* (1513)”

E. Ann Matter, “Heart Calls to Heart: The Importance of the Love between the Lover and Beloved in *The Mystical Ark* and *Wachet auf*”

Eileen Sweeney  
Boston College  
[eileen.sweeney@bc.edu](mailto:eileen.sweeney@bc.edu)

Copyright © 2013 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172