

Notes on The Garden of Earthly Delights: a Triptych by the Renaissance artist -
HIERONYMUS BOSCH

These notes may be applied to (work such as the struggle between the temptation of evil and the resistance to good seen in)

- a. Milton's Paradise Lost
- b. Marlowe's Dr. Faustus
- c. Webster's The Duchess of Malfi

Hieronymus Bosch worked on his paintings in Hertogenbosch, southern Holland, during the years 1480-1515 or thereabouts. His work is not only unique, but offers puzzles of such complexity that they are harder to solve than works of art common to this period in time.

In shape, Bosch's Garden of Earthly Delights is also rather complex. Most paintings are simple oblongs. This is a triptych, three paintings fastened together horizontally by hinges. And here begins our first problem because the three paintings seem to have little or nothing to do with one another. They are different in theme, emotional tone and composition. However, Bosch himself indicates clearly that the three form a unit. The two side pictures fold together like shutters to cover the central panel; and on their backs Bosch has painted a fourth scene, a unitary composition spreading over both and joining them inseparably. (Renaissance altar pieces were often arranged like this, often being kept shut during the weekdays to increase their impact on the congregation when they were thrown open on Saturdays, Sundays and holy festival holidays.)

Looking at Bosch's complex arrangement of pictures and having studied the scene painted on the backs of the side panels, we cannot help concluding that Bosch intended us to see not three paintings, but four. He also, it must be supposed, intended us to look at them in sequence: first, the scene on the outside as an introductory statement; and then, after the triptych is opened, the three inside, which come as a revelation.

On the back, that is the outer covering, Bosch has depicted a majestic scene glorifying the power of God the Creator. It shows the world on the third day of Creation, before mankind and the animals were called into existence (Genesis 1: 9-13). The earth is there and the sea surrounding it, and the clouds (stormy clouds) in the firmament above, and grass, and trees - some of them fantastic and to our eyes unnatural in shape. God sits far apart from the world, gazing at it and holding an open book. There is deep meaning in this. One of the great philosophical problems with which men grappled, both before and after the establishment of Christianity is, why the world exists with all its imperfections and mutabilities; why God created it, since God is from all eternity self-sufficient and does not need to produce a world of temporal change such as ours. Before the world was brought into being, God was perfect and infinite. What good did it do him to create the world? He did not require worshippers; he did not need to demonstrate his power. He gained nothing by calling the world into existence, and would not suffer loss if he chose to blot it out into primal nothingness. Something of this mystery can be seen in the outer earth appearing like a newborn planet; and God, although contemplating it and willing its existence, far removed from it and above it. In order to unite the two parts of this picture, Bosch has written in tall stiff Gothic script a sentence from the Book of Psalms:

For he spoke, and it was done;
he commanded, and it stood fast.

Now, opening the triptych, three strange scenes appear. Only one is at first sight intelligible, and even this is full of quirks and oddities. The panel on the left shows a dream-like garden. In the foreground is a divine figure whose face, beard, robes, etc. do not resemble those of God the Father, but rather those of Jesus, (as Bosch has depicted him in other works. Jesus stands between two naked figures: Adam, just awakened from sleep during which Eve was made out of his rib, and Eve half-kneeling as though rising to her human stature for the first time. (Genesis 2: 21-25) With his left hand God the Son holds the right wrist of Eve; he is at once giving her life and raising her from the ground, and presenting her to Adam, who gazes at her with admiration. God the Son does not look at either of his creatures, but fixes his gaze directly upon us, the onlookers, raising his right hand in a gesture that certainly blesses the union of the couple and may also be extended to us.

So far the picture is clear, if slightly unorthodox. There is one important Christian concept identifying Jesus with the Logos, the Word of God, which actually accomplished the creation. It appears in Milton's Paradise Lost:

So spake the Almighty: and to what he spake
His Word, the Filial Godhead, gave effect.

Hieronymus Bosch might portray God the Father creating the world but God the Son, (who was to be incarnated) was portrayed as having created at least one of the first human beings.

The scene is Paradise, the garden called Eden. Behind Adam is a peculiar tree, which must be the tree of knowledge of good and evil. It does not look like an ordinary fruit tree, its shape and appearance is however, unique among all the other shrubs and trees in the picture, some of which are dream-like fantasies and some which are recognizable normal-looking trees and bushes. Bosch in his religious paintings always interrupts the reality with fantasies, reminding us that his subjects are distant, exotic, or other-worldly. The bizarre rock formations in his Paradise, and the grotesque fountain central in the midst of the panel, are created by this belief.

If we look again at the picture this landscape is not at all how we envision the Garden of Eden. Although the world is newborn and ought to be harmonious and peaceful, it already contains ugliness and cruelty, and something even of a kind of madness. Beside the central fountain there is a rock formation that resembles a huge sleeping head: the mouth is made of a nasty, squirming snake, and there is a little swarm of disgusting reptiles at the neck. If you recall it is orthodox belief that before Adam's fall, the animals lived at peace with one another: (again, Milton's Paradise Lost)

. . . .Sporting the lion romped, and in his paw
Dandled the kid

Not so here. Right in the foreground where we cannot miss them, a cat has caught a mouse, and a fantastic bird is swallowing a live frog. In the upper right of this picture a boar is threatening a lizard-like creature which is snarling defiance. Even in Paradise something is wrong.

The panel on the right balancing Paradise, is hell. It is not the conventional medieval hell, where ape-like creatures (devils) torment sinners with instruments used by human torturers - pincers, hot irons, boiling oil. Nor is it an organized hell like that of Dante, which is the work of Divine Reason, constructed according

to the three Aristotelian categories of wrong-doing: Incontinence, Violence, and Malice. It is all like a dream drug, or a drug dream, a nightmare: or the interior of a maniac's mind. This is one of the ruling ideas of Hieronymus Bosch: that health, virtue and heaven are calm, orderly, and reasonable, while illness, sin, and hell are wild, random, and senseless. Many have been the depictions of hell in both art and literature, but in all such depictions, hell is basically described as logical and systematic. It is a kingdom. Its citizens are the devils who oppress the damned souls as the bad noblemen and their soldiers oppressed the peasants in earthly life. (See some of the satirical works of Bruegel, particularly his Massacre of the Innocents.) Hell's monarch, Satan, supernaturally huge and infernally hideous reigns at its centre, eternally tormented by God's decree, and himself tormenting the worst of human sinners consuming them and mangling them. In such a hell the fiends all do what bad humans would do if they had almost infinite power and ingenuity. They appear to be using their minds to inflict pain; they are jailers, interrogators, torturers working under a system of law and giving evil for evil. But for Bosch hell is the abrogation of the intellect. In his hell very little happens for any intelligible reason - except that sometimes a sinner is apparently punished by the worldly device that led him into sin, as when a soul who loved profane music too well is crucified on a harp, or when gamblers are pinned to the gaming table. But the monarch of Bosch's hell is not an angel in reverse, turned black and equipped with bat wings, nor like Dante's Satan, a three-headed antithesis to the Holy Trinity. It is a monster in which nothing is human but the face and that is not evil, but almost vacuous. (Some scholars believe that the features are those of Bosch himself without, of course, being a self-portrait.) The creature's legs are dead trees, hollow and stripped of bark; its feet are ships in water, one nearly capsizing. Its body is a thin empty shell - an eggshell inhabited by a few unconcerned figures and one beast. Its head is not a skull with a crown, but a flat disk surrounded by a bagpipe around which little monsters (not very scary) lead sinners.

A subaltern demon is punishing gluttons which we can tell because he wears a cooking pot for a crown and beer jugs for shoes. He eats his victims alive and then excretes them into an open latrine. This is painful and disgusting: but is also ridiculous - even in a gruesome way, funny. Bosch makes it funnier by adding a silly-looking man to vomit into the mess and by making an avaricious sinner discharge gold pieces from his anus. Some interpreters of this work suggest that this frightening demon is intended to be Satan, ruler of hell - apparently because he sits on a perverted throne, (a latrine seat) and that this scene occupies the foreground of the picture. But although frighteningly disgusting, he is not large enough to depict the titanic power of Satan nor is the creature formidable enough to fit the destructive evil of hell's monarch, he is avenging only in one particular sin - gluttony. The monarch is certainly that central monster with the seemingly simple vacuous face whose body is the dark cavernous pit of our worst nightmares. By this expressionless creature, Bosch is reminding us that Satan, after his fall, lost all his godlike semblance and all his power; only the subordinate demons remain active and they are easily recognizable to us as the seven deadly sins - tempting sinners and finally conducting the torture to which their sin has led them.

Bosch's creatures of hell tell us that creation is being uncreated by the forces of unreason and therefore that God is powerless or non-existent. The exact reverse of what Milton proves in Paradise Lost when he justifies God by his loving mercy and forgiveness which extends to all sinners who would repent.

Although Bosch's view of hell is sinister there is something reassuring about it. It is insanity, but it is not rational, deliberate, ingenious cruelty. There are some scenes of physical suffering. Naked souls are pierced or sliced, transfixed, and held in loathsome positions terrified by monsters. But the cruelest of all tortures, the torture by fire, promised in the Bible, is seldom shown. It is sad that history, in fact, has recorded instruments of torture devised by human societies that make all

Bosch's devils look like amateurs. (e.g. tortures devised by the Chinese - medieval Europeans - the Nazi Holocaust - the atom bomb.)

With all this in mind, let us examine the big central panel in the triptych, standing between Paradise and Hell. It is a vision: an unnatural landscape crowded with naked figures, animals both real and surrealistic, grotesque, conglomerations of bodies and vegetable shapes, and dreamlike fantasies. This all appears to be a picture of madness, of insensate folly. Virtually nobody is doing things that men and women do in normal life: most of the huge crowd is very busy doing things that are absurd. The little group that best typifies the whole thing is composed of two people stark naked, dancing merrily, interlocked by branches of a fruit tree, and wearing as a headdress a huge solemn owl (whose eyes are the only "seeing" eyes for this pair of revellers.) Others are standing in swimming pools, one of them head down in water: some are playing with gigantic birds and fishes; many are riding animals, real and imaginary; many are just chatting or playing little tricks on one another; one is cuddling, not a girl, but a giant strawberry. The remarkable thing is no one is doing anything really evil and no one of this group looks as if he or she were conceived and presented as positively wicked or dangerously sinful. The faces are mostly calm and composed. Everyone is about twenty years old - there are no old sinners or young perverts. No one is leering or slobbering with greed; no one is angry or over-excited. (See the lower extreme right hand corner for this particular section - on the complete picture.) Although there are scores of men and women in this picture, all naked, few of them show any signs of sexual desire. One fellow standing in the river has grabbed a woman, who looks a bit shocked, as though such a thing were against the rules, and yet she is returning his caress. (See below centre - extreme left of this central panel.) Another couple sitting inside a transparent bubble fondle each other gently whilst a third exchange a kiss through an aperture in a monstrous fruit. (For both - see the lower extreme left of the central panel.) It all looks somewhat like a well-conducted nudist camp. Though the people are naked, they do not appear to be flaunting sexuality. Also there is no real violence worth mentioning. No one is robbing his neighbour or torturing or trying to kill, but there are some actions which might approach the description of lewdness. So what does it all mean?

In this "Garden of Earthly Delights" the occupations of its inhabitants are not the normal pleasures of humanity. It may be delightful to carry a six-foot long fish while riding a lion, but most of us can do without the experience. (see the absolute centre of this panel.) Hugging a huge strawberry; (see lower centre of the panel), toting a large mussel shell with people inside it; (see lower left quarter of the panel), crowding into a big empty egg are occupations that give little enjoyment, (see lower centre of the panel) and must soon grow boring.

There might then be two ways to understand the complexity of this painting. One is to assume that it is filled with ethical meanings that are hidden behind symbolic acts and objects. In religious paintings both of this time period and earlier, it is common to recognize the details which are religiously symbolic. For example, when the baby Jesus holds a gold finch it reminds us that these birds love thornbushes and it was, of course, for the thornbush that the crown of thorns (which Christ was made to wear) was made. The European blackbird sings beautifully, but looks somewhat sinister in his overall blackness, so he is a symbol of devilish temptation. In this painting then, the big central group of men and women riding animals and birds may be a presentation of sinners carried away by the seven deadly sins. The camel, that great "ship of the desert," because it can go so long without water is regarded as a symbol of Temperance, but the riders of Bosch's camel do not typify self-control since they are tickling its neck. Again, in Christian iconography the strawberry symbolizes perfect virtue because it is so sweet and has no stone. The Virgin Mary is frequently associated with this symbol - her clothes are often embroidered with strawberries. Amongst the many appearances of the strawberry in Bosch's work, (I have counted eight in the centre panel) there does

not seem to be a single sign of Christian faith. The strawberries are caressed or cuddled with expressions of appetite. Raspberries also appear and other fruits and they, again, appear to be tempting only the appetite. Apparently, then it is impossible to bring all of Bosch's dreamlike objects into a single pattern governed by any acknowledged type of symbolism or to form a coherent description of some aspect of human life.

Another explanation that might be applied to understanding this work is that the painting is a message in cypher: that it is a sermon for a few chosen people concealed by a set of esoteric symbols. These symbols may have been familiar to a group that practiced a secret religion not espoused by Christianity and thus subject, upon discovery, to severe - even drastic - punishment, on the grounds of heresy. This was a sect, however, which considered itself more noble and pure as well as more enlightened than Christianity with its laxities and abuses. (Something, in fact similar to Manicheism.) Some such sects certainly were active during Bosch's lifetime and some were known to be Adamite - i.e. believers in collective nudity. Some scholars have suggested that this centre painting shows a meeting of such a group. The meeting is idealized as a heaven of physical and spiritual harmony. To this suggestion I personally must say Bosh! (and plead forgiveness for the pun.)

The things that the people are doing are so silly, so obviously meant to be contemptible and foolishly childish that they cannot be intended to be respected as enlightened. There is no sign of God or godliness; no religious feeling; these people live only for themselves and one another in a brittle, dreamlike present, without effort, aspiration, or ideal.

In Bosch's time the painting was probably regarded as an obscenity or it was mania. Today, we may, regrettably, admit to it not being too far removed from our experience. Crowds of naked people sit together (the topless beaches of California), others ride aimlessly in circles with no real destination in sight (the surfers, the pleasure gliders, motorcyclists, etc.). Others swim, dive, perform gymnastics (according to whatever is IN (hula hoop, frisby, or rollerskates). There are birds, flowers, fruits (the flower children). Girls' hair falls long and straight down their backs with only the hint of a wave and they all look alike (Farrah and Cheryl and whoever else might replace them in the "teeth and cheesecake" syndrome). A few black men and women mingle with the white groups and are accepted peacefully. The landscape is phantasmagoria (as it is most probably seen by drug addicts who cease to be able to contend with any form of reality.) And then there are the innocent, unlined vacuous faces, the bland joy in unanimous nudity, the silly games with the fruit, and above all, the lack of purpose and direction and will power, the absolute denial of any goal in life except the simplest pleasures of immediate existence. This is certainly a familiar picture of the untrammelled gregariousness of modern youth. But what of the animals?

Charles de Tolnay, a student of Bosch's work thinks that many of the animals and fruits are sexual symbols. Apples according to Freud, are symbolic of the female breasts. The bagpipe, used so frequently by Bosch, is an illusion to the female sex organ (which ends, of course, with the womb.) But in folklore, the bagpipe is also a symbol of vanity and wasted effort; a bag of wind requiring great effort to produce poor, cheap, simple-minded music. There are other such symbols, representing much the same ideas; the glass bubble, the broken eggshell, the bundle of hay.

If we remember that Bosch painted this work at a time when Christianity dominated society; when churches would be around almost every corner and the sound of church bells filled the air regulating human life with the precision of a clock; then we must find it odd that there is in this centre panel neither priest nor parishioner; neither saint nor sinner. Why then is it placed in the centre of this trio of paintings with Paradise on one side and Hell on the other?

The solution to this question would have to be, at best, an educated guess.

- 1) Humanity is going to hell. We are all doomed, all damned.
- 2) We are not vicious, wicked, repulsive criminals. We are fools. Sin is folly.
- 3) The mission of Jesus Christ was perfectly useless. At the very moment when the human and animal world was created cruelty and sin were already a part of Paradise. The naked society has never heard of the Incarnation and the Crucifixion; it does not know of the fall of Adam; it does not believe that Jesus came to the earth to redeem mankind. It would rather stand in swimming pools, ride giraffes and play, than think about repentance and virtue and heaven and hell. It is a world without Christ and without religion. (It is the world of Faustus, permissive, self-centered, an unrestrained attainment of desires.)

This is a message, then, of desperate pessimism. Even the darkest of the Christian books in the Bible (Revelations) draws to its end with a battle waged by the Incarnate Word of God against the monstrous beast, the false prophet and their followers (Satan). Then comes the Last Judgement and after that the radiant vision of the Heavenly City, the New Jerusalem, gleaming forever with the splendour of the Lord God shed upon his servants. Hell is for the damned, but some souls are saved and for them there is a promise of eternal life. Not so in the vision of Bosch, which moves through universal folly to endless damnation, without hope of heaven. Bosch in his dark pessimism shows the history of mankind as a long fool's errand leading inexorably to disaster. His greatest paintings are inspired by a spirit of bitter laughter and contemptuous despair. What I wonder would he have done with the advent of the atomic bomb and hydrogen bombs, and the sophisticated weaponry of destruction - so much a part of our daily threat? Perhaps somewhere his vision includes even this. It is timely for us all to read the "sermon" of Hieronymus Bosch.