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The inverted Triptych by Hieronymus Bosch

Xavier d'Hérouville ¹ & Aurore Caulier ²

In the Renaissance, to say that an Italian was cunning - "furbo" - was a compliment. At that time, cunning, like mischief and mischief, were the hallmarks of great minds, or as we would say today, gifted minds. Leonardo da Vinci may be famous for the excellence of his pictorial achievements, but the intelligence of his works seen through the prism of trickery is only just beginning to be recognised... That of Hieronymus Bosch, his contemporary and northern alter ego, the "devil-maker", is little known, if at all. The aim of this study is not to offer yet another reading of the Flemish masterpiece known today as *the Garden of Earthly Delights*, but to explore the possibility of a deliberate inversion of the order of this triptych in order to obscure its underlying message - heterodox and sacred to the initiated - under the guise of an apparently more orthodox reading to the uninitiated. This reversal lends further credence to Wilhelm Fraenger's earlier re-characterisation of the central panel of this triptych as a "Feast of Metamorphoses" ³.

The closed triptych of *the Garden of Earthly Delights* by Hieronymus Bosch

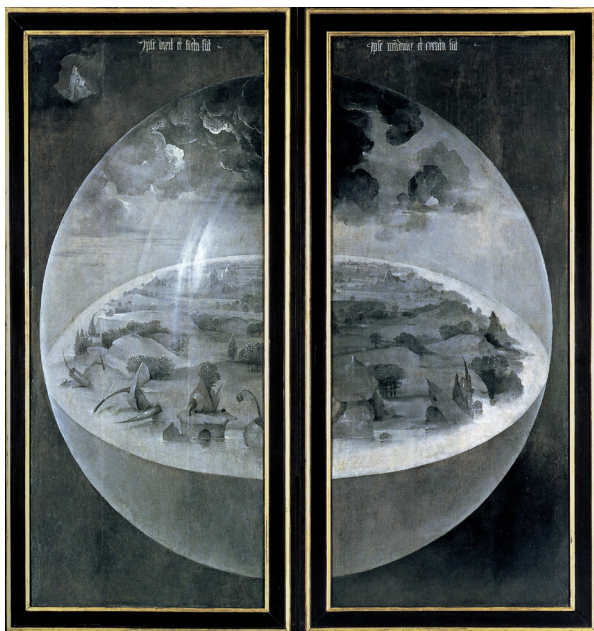


Figure 1 | *The Garden of Earthly Delights*: Closed triptych

Closed, the work by Hieronymus Bosch - reduced to a diptych format - depicts *the Birth of the World* in grisaille. A cosmogony very clearly developed in the ancient mode. We are at the precise moment when, freed from the original fog - *ed* - the earth, in the form of a primitive hill, emerges from the matrix of water. Hieronymus Bosch depicts this moment when Nature reaches its second wind, after the long bubbling of the Work in the crucible. The tranquil force of the elements completes this slow natural incubation, from which all manner of mineral, plant and animal figures gradually emerge. Some of the forms in the foreground are already reminiscent in their appearance and plasticity of the strange buildings in the background of the central panel inside the work.

This aerial perspective - in the pure *Leonardo-like* style - shows us the other side of the stage. The outline of the scene that will be played out for centuries to come is represented inside this work in triptych format. Breaking with the vision accepted and defended by the Church of a Genesis developing in successive, static stages, Hieronymus Bosch resorts to a cosmogony long abandoned: *the orbis* of the *archaic philosophy of Nature*, which floats like a disc inside the sphere. By way of prologue, he offers us the foundation of this theosophy: *the eternal morning of Creation*.

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³ *Le Royaume Millénaire de Jérôme Bosch*, translated from the German and introduced by Roger Lewinter, Paris, Denoël editions, 1966

Above this incubating sphere, on the left - at the heart of a cloudy breakthrough - appears a majestic figure in the posture of *seated philosopher*, with a pontifical tiara on his head, a pendant medal or seal, and a book held open in his left hand.



Figure 2 | King Solomon

However discreet he may be - *above the fray* - in this cloud, this figure has a message for us. The finger pointing upwards testifies to the importance of this message and the assurance of its messenger. Historically, the finger pointing upwards signifies that one has been entrusted with a divine mission. The open book held in the left hand recalls the tablets of the law as depicted in the canonical representations of Moses descending from Mount Sinai. This figure of quiet strength could well be King Solomon incarnating Wisdom. The instrument of the Demiurge. This figure and his pontifical tiara are also to be found quite frequently in the work of Hieronymus Bosch. In *the Temptation of Saint Anthony* and *the Adoration of the Magi*, for example. The open book symbolises *the Book of Wisdom*. King Solomon represents *the Logos*.

In fact, in the extension of this celestial breakthrough, following a right oblique, a hole in the heaviest clouds in the right-hand shutter allows a ray of light to filter through. *Fiat Lux*. Light gives way to darkness. Original chaos is replaced by order. The work is born of primitive chaos. Above this crystal ball, equally

divided between the two panels, is this autograph inscription (?) taken straight from Psalm 33: *Ipse dixit et facta sunt. Ipse mandavit et creata sunt*. According to Aristotelian thought, *Ipse* is the thinking being. Hence this possible translation: *The thinking being verbalised it and the great work was accomplished*. Psalm 33 continues: *The Lord looks down from heaven and sees all the sons of Adam. He sees all the sons of Adam. From where he stands, he observes all the inhabitants of the earth. He alone can read their hearts. He discerns all their deeds.*



Figure 3 | *Ipse dixit et facta sunt. Ipse mandavit et creata sunt*

The open triptych of *the Garden of Earthly Delights* by Hieronymus Bosch



Figure 4 | *The Garden of Earthly Delights*: Open triptych

Opened up, the work of Hieronymus Bosch - developed in triptych format - offers this reading, which is permitted by a quick examination and adopted by most commentators:

Left panel, *the Garden of Eden*.

Right-hand panel, *Hell*, which threatens sinners and unbelievers.

In the centre, *the Original Paradise* where man, after his sin, must choose between Good and Evil.

However, a closer look at the work raises questions about the lack of spatial and temporal coherence in the theme treated by

Hieronymus Bosch, and by the same token about the pseudo-continuity of the left-to-right reading we are "naturally" offered...

On the one hand, it is somewhat surprising to find between *the Garden of Eden* and *Hell* such an apology for hedonism, such a polymorphous and unbridled expression of pleasure. The pleasure of the senses in all its guises. Where in fact one would expect to find a more nuanced - even Manichean - illustration of human behaviour balanced between Good and Evil. A display of human behaviour in which pious scenes and venial scenes, some of them even fatal, at best oppose each other and at worst overlap. On the other hand, it is surprising to note that while there is a pseudo-continuity in terms of space, topography, style and colour between the left-hand panel and the central panel, the right-hand panel is a bit of a mismatch. A complete stylistic and colour contrast. But also a spatial and topographical break.

Certainly, it could be a projection of the threat of Hell - promised to sinners and infidels - brandished by the *Holy Inquisition*. Like a palisade on which the image of Evil at its most perverse is plastered and castigated. But therein lies the paradox. There is no reason to believe that this triptych could have been intended for any kind of church altarpiece. Too much apparent nudity. Too much impropriety in relation to orthodoxy, too much effusiveness in relation to dogmatism. Men, women, whites, blacks - naked as worms - mixed literally and figuratively, treated as equals, without distinction of sex, class or condition. A manifest "swinger". A liberated and open libertinism... Inconceivable in these troubled times of *witch-hunting!*

So we came up with this incredible idea: shouldn't this triptych be read from left to right? Like a Japanese manga! A reversed reading, which would enable us to recover the spatial and temporal coherence of the subject treated by Hieronymus Bosch:

The right-hand panel is no longer a *scene from Hell*, but *the hell of the human condition*. An authentic manifesto of perverted and corrupt human behaviour in this lowly existence on Earth.

The central panel then becomes the site of metamorphosis. A happening. An event. A Pythagorean-inspired *feast of metamorphoses* come to life.



Figure 5 | Pythagorean "Y" in the central panel of *the Garden of Earthly Delights* by Hieronymus Bosch

The Fountain of Youth in the background is clearly the central element of this celebration. Around it, in a ritual ballet - a perpetual round movement - the human, animal and hybrid nebula is articulated in all its states.



Figure 6 | The Round of the human, animal and hybrid nebula in the central panel of *the Garden of Earthly Delights* by Hieronymus Bosch

The left-hand panel is no longer a representation of *the Garden of Eden, the Original Paradise*, but of *the Return to the Sources*. To the sources of ancient civilisations. A return to the sources of the Nile, illustrated on the left by this *tree of Life* that looks like a dragon tree, an explicit reference to Martin Schongauer's *Flight into Egypt*.

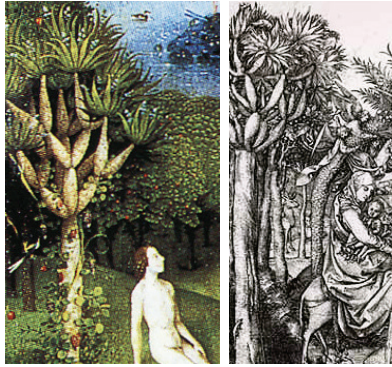


Figure 6 | The Dragon tree (dracaena) in the right-hand section of *the Garden of Earthly Delights* by Hieronymus Bosch and the Dragon tree (dracaena) in *the Flight into Egypt* by Martin Schongauer

Autre référence, un peu plus haut sur la droite : Cet élément de paysage anthropomorphe matérialisant la source du Nil, profil grotesque “ arcimbolde ”, aux allures de *Vieux (Sage) de la Montagne*. Au sommet de son crâne, en guise de couvre-chef, s’élève un autre arbre mythique : *l’arbre de la Connaissance du Bien et du Mal*. Mais cet arbre autour duquel s’enroule un serpent, évoque aussi la forme symbolique du caducée. Attribut d’Hermès. Hermès trismégiste. Le messager des dieux. Le passeur d’âme. Le guide de l’initiation sacrée. *Le maître des métamorphoses...*



Figure 7 | Anthropomorphic landscape element from the right-hand panel of *the Garden of Earthly Delights* by Hieronymus Bosch

And then, in our still-bubbling minds, this idea of "reverse reading" is transformed into pure and simple material inversion. A physical, structural inversion of the two side panels. An inversion that would appear to have been deliberately created to blur the lines of this manifesto that was originally impious, sacrilegious and blasphemous. The manifesto of *the Men of Intelligence*, disciples of *the Free Spirit* and *Modern Devotion*, or of that Spanish variant, *the Alumbados*. A late resurgence of the ancient Gnostic cults. From the Gnosis of the worshippers of the Mother Goddess, alias *Alma Mater*; alias Isis, *the Egyptian*. This simple structural inversion would have succeeded - or almost succeeded - in keeping this triptych in a straitjacket of theological and moral asceticism in perfect accord with Vatican orthodoxy for nearly five centuries (half a millennium). In short, to impose, by a simple sleight of hand, a politically correct inverted reading!

The inverted open triptych of *the Garden of Earthly Delights* by Hieronymus Bosch



Figure 8 | Open inverted triptych of *the Garden of Earthly Delights*, aka *the Feast of Metamorphoses* by Hieronymus Bosch

Now it's time for us too to catch our second wind after this incredible 'retroversion'. Let's look at the recomposed triptych. Hieronymus Bosch's work has regained all its original spatio-temporal coherence. A perfect continuity of reading from left to right is now "artificially" offered to us. We won't dwell on deciphering each scene in this triptych in detail, one after the other. Others have done so before us. And even if none of them held the keys to this inverted triptych, their remarkable work of "cryptanalysis" has nonetheless helped to re-establish a *Boschian grammar* that is very close to the historical truth: Wilhelm Fraenger, Jacques van Lennep, Charles Prost, Frédéric Elsig and more recently Annick Drevet-Tvermoès, as far as the most perceptive are concerned. To put it succinctly, the triptych by Hieronymus Bosch can be read on two levels. These two levels of reading are very subtly intertwined. On the one hand, there is a first level of reading based on the so-called alchemical register, more

broadly described as Hermetic (including *the language of the Birds*). On the other, a second level based on the shamanic *modus operandi* (including the ingestion of mushrooms and other hallucinogenic substances). These two levels, alchemical and shamanic, both symbolic and gestural, served as the ritual basis for the Adamite ceremonial. A synthesis of the old Platonic, Augustinian, Neo-Pythagorean and Gnostic heritage had been achieved. It gave rise to a spirituality imbued with philosophy (known as theosophy) which saw in *the Original Man* the symbol of an inner renewal and of man's accession to a pure and free humanity. This new vision of *the Original Man* found its most magnificent expression in the Mediterranean contemporaries of Hieronymus Bosch, in the neo-Platonic Academy of Florence, whose members included Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola. Adam - situated between animality and divinity - is the Proteus of universal metamorphosis. Grouped into esoteric communities organised rather like lodges, *the Men of Intelligence*, disciples of *the Free Spirit* and *Modern Devotion*, or even of that Spanish variant, *the Alumbrados*, were thus followers of a singular gnosis, a cross between Platonic Eros and Johannine agape. They all considered themselves to be *sons of Adam*, united by effective bonds of kinship. Women entered these circles as equal partners, freed at last from the condition of inferiority and the label of *Satan's doors* to which they had been condemned by the Church. According to the Platonic myth, *the original Man* unites within himself, in a pure androgynous unity, the masculine solar (celestial) principle and the feminine chthonian (earthly) principle. The divine spiritual part of man has retained the ability to return to the light thanks to the reincorporation of the lost chthonian principle: woman. The right (now left) panel of the triptych by Hieronymus Bosch, known as *the Return to the Sources*, is an exact representation of this.



Figure 9 | The Union of the Male and Female Principle in the left panel of *the Garden of Earthly Delights*, aka *the Feast of Metamorphoses* by Hieronymus Bosch

Love between the sexes thus becomes a Gnostic mystery, a *modus specialis* - called *angelic love* or *the ascending path* (acclivity), or even *the joy of Paradise* - that is clearly distinct from the ordinary animal act of copulation and in no way "offends" Nature. *The Children of Adam* in the central panel of Hieronymus Bosch's triptych should be understood in this sense, as a return to the original purity of Man.

At the heart of this *Feast of Metamorphoses*, a veritable symbiosis seems to have taken place between these Adamites and the various plants, to the point where we can speak of a vegetable humanity that tends to rediscover the sexual innocence of plants. Men and women seem to have grown there like flowers or mushrooms in a vast, lush green meadow. The emblem of this naturist, Orphic universe - free and uninhibited - is probably this butterfly (*Panthea cænobita*, aka Small Tortoiseshell) in the centre, gathering a Milk Thistle that looks like a stallion flying the Adamite flag on this strange beached totemic vessel.

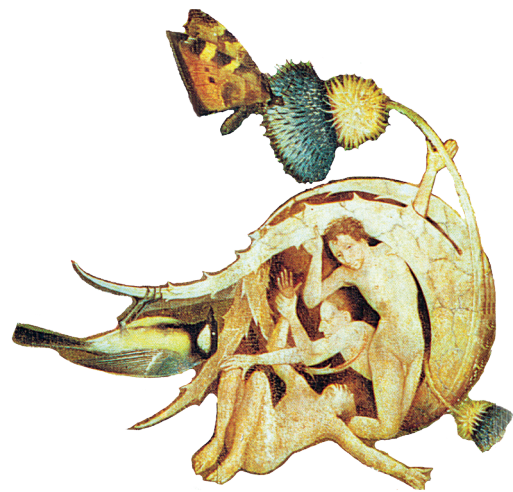


Figure 10 | The Milk Thistle & the Small Tortoiseshell (*Panthea cænobita*) from the central panel of *the Garden of Earthly Delights*, also known as *the Feast of the Metamorphoses* by Hieronymus Bosch.

At the risk of repeating ourselves, it has to be said that the work of Hieronymus Bosch "retroverted" in this way regains all its original spatio-temporal coherence, and that we are now "artificially" offered a perfect continuity of reading from left to right. There is now a real spatial, topographical, stylistic and colour continuity not only between the central panel and the right-hand pane, but also between the latter and the left-hand pane. Even more subtly, the left-hand panel, the central panel and the right-hand panel are interpenetrated by successive pictorial layers, so that the action extends beyond the margins of the two side panels into the central panel, and vice versa. The two side panels and the central panel behave like communicating vessels in which we can

observe the *Brownian motion* of the "elementary particles": a perpetual random movement with its multiple turbulences, nevertheless channelled by a circular levorotatory current (with the appearance of a galaxy-like spiral perspective) articulated around *the Fountain of Youth*.

The inverted closed triptych of *the Garden of Earthly Delights* by Hieronymus Bosch



Figure 11 | "*Garden of delights, spins like a helix...*"
(G rard Mansset)

So the theosophical message could not be clearer: even if our world is a world of depravity - perverted and corrupt - no one is banished or even condemned from it. This doctrine of *Apokatastasis* (or Universal Redemption), first enunciated by Origen in the 3rd century and taken up again by John Scotus Erigena in the 9th century, is very explicitly illustrated and expressed here: "*All Christians, Jews, pagans and even the Devil will be saved and brought back to God*". The same goes for the knights errant, the bawdy monks, the street musicians, the acrobats, the hucksters, the swindlers, the gamblers and other *minions of Satan* detailed in the left-hand (now right-hand) panel: *All will be saved and brought back to God!* But the Church formally condemned this doctrine. Hence the subterfuge of inverting the side panels to cut off the main thread of this heterodoxy... And to further muddy the waters of a reading now reserved for only a handful of great initiates.

Now duly recomposed and renamed *the Feast of the Metamorphoses*, this work by Hieronymus Bosch expresses the Orphic-Pythagorean heritage of the ancient *archaic philosophy of Nature* with a force that we have never encountered in any work of art from the Renaissance.

All that remains now is to gently close this inverted triptych...

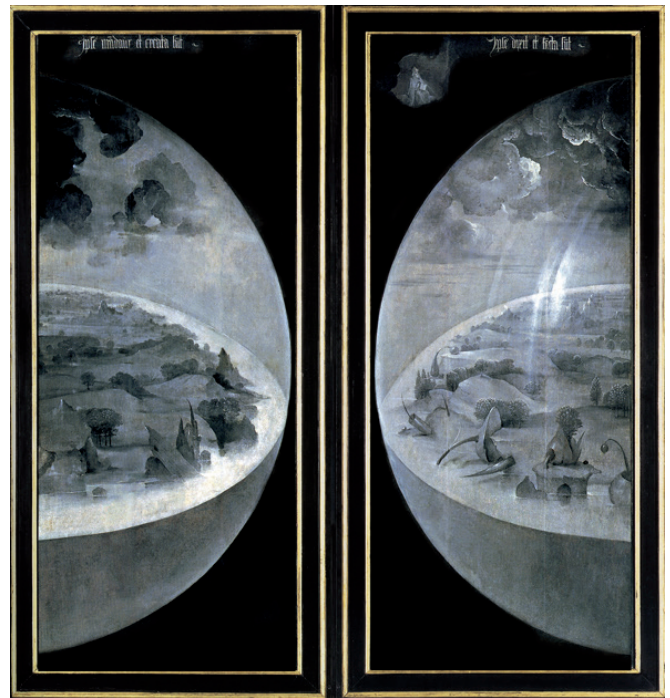


Figure 12 | *The Garden of Earthly Delights*: closed inverted triptych



Figure 13 | *The metamorphosis of the Small Tortoiseshell (Panthea c nobia)*, from the absolute eye of Catherine Bricaud