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Primordial Symbolism: A Case Study

Lauren Caryer

_A symbol participates in the reality it symbolizes._

~Paul Tillich

Throughout time human life has been shaped by the continuous play between creation and destruction. During more placid periods of history these themes often fade to the background only to reappear in conditions of strife. In such precarious times, religion often is forced to recreate itself in order to supply the explanatory support to the given set of circumstances. Our metaphors for God shift in response to our basic doubts about the society within which we are functioning. However it may shift, religion always tends to hover around the human experience of creation-destruction, finding either new words or new meanings for old words, all in attempt to explain the same ontological queries.

One goal of religion is to utilize and expound upon paradigmatic symbols in a way that addresses the problems posed by a particular set of historical conditions. This process can easily be studied in examining the exact message of an iconographic image within a historical context, in the instance of this essay, the Northern Renaissance. The artist Hieronymus Bosch employed the iconography found within Genesis tale of The Fall of Man to create a backdrop for his commentary on both the current situation of his world and his signature views of eschatology. This is particularly evident in two seminal triptychs: The Haywain and The Millennium (commonly known as The Garden of Earthly Delights). Although the exact themes and meanings found in each of the examined paintings vary greatly, both fit within a rubric of three components: the context of the painting (metaphorically, the language of the painting), the artist’s intent (the message), and his manipulation of the Genesis iconography to achieve his intent within the given context (the words).

Part One: A Common Context

In his influential work Nature and Grace in Art, art historian John Dixon defines art as “the embodiment of man’s response to reality and his attempt to order his experience of that reality” (53). In order to understand a work of art’s
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dialogue with reality, we must understand the reality the artist is acting within. It would be anachronistic to apply, for example, existentialist philosophy to Grunewald’s Crucifixion. As tempting as it is to superimpose modern and post-modern interpretations onto Renaissance paintings, it would ultimately detract from the aim of examining the function of iconography in terms of the artist’s reality, in favor of examining them in our own reality. Dixon goes on to say, “furthermore, an art work is not a theory about reality… it is in essence a grappling with reality” (54). In order to understand Bosch we must first understand the nature of the reality within which he functioned.

The theme of the Fall of Man is a motif Bosch returns to time and again in his painting, in part because of its immediate relationship to themes of the Last Judgment, a subject of prime interest to late medieval and early Renaissance Christendom. From the twelfth century up through the time of Bosch’s work, the medieval faithful were absolutely fascinated with the apocalypse. Northern Renaissance art historian, Walter S. Gibson comments, “The terrors of the Final Reckoning were intensified by a general sense of its imminence. There had always been prophets who insisted that the world was nearing its end, but the feeling of impending doom grew particularly acute in the late fifteenth century” (52). Many prophets and other religious zealots would search for signs of the end times (as delineated by the biblical Revelation of John and other non-canonical texts) in current natural disasters, bouts of pestilence, and political events. Bosch, true to his era, would repeatedly enumerate the gory details of the Last Days in his paintings.

These depictions of the torments of Hell and Judgment, although stylistically unique to Bosch, reflected many of the common beliefs held about damnation during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. While many of Bosch’s demons were distinctive of the artist, he drew some of the ideas for his more prosaic devils from the works of popular (yet nameless) biblical illuminators. His work was also influenced by other contemporary Flemish and Germanic artists including Van Eyck, Diest, and various members of the Utrecht school as well as traditional Flemish folk lore and proverbs (Bax 324-353).

His depictions of Hell were also influenced heavily by popular conceptions and contemporary literary interpretations. It was popular during the early Renaissance to equate specific types of sins namely, the Seven Deadly Sins with circumstantially appropriate retribution. While Bosch did not strictly adhere to this formula, many of the damned did receive apt punishment. For example, on the far right panel of the triptych, Last Judgment, an obviously
corpulent man is condemned to forever drink from a barrel of what Gibson refers to as “dubious refreshment”. These apocalyptic scenes were often arranged hierarchically with levels of punishment and lakes of fire, suggesting the influence of Dante’s Inferno and the anonymous work The Vision of Tundale, both of which were among popular eschatological literature at the time (Gibson 57-61).

Clearly, the work of Hieronymous Bosch, although very fantastic and unusual, was grounded in the context of contemporary (1470-1520) culture. The metaphorical language he was speaking was one of an intensely dogmatic and hell-bent strain of orthodox Christianity, one that was beginning to grow uneasy at the initial grumblings of a discontented faith community. His message within this context, however, is somewhat blurred by his uncertain personal history.

One major Bosch historian, Wilhelm Franger links Bosch to an unusual sect known as the Brothers and Sisters of the Free Spirit, specifically a smaller group within this sect known as the Adamites. This esoteric cult focused primarily on a return to the state of paradise before the Fall of Man. This coed group would celebrate mass underground and naked in an attempt to regain the innocence of Eden and achieve a state of “homo perfectus”. Franger’s primary impetus for such an interpretation of Bosch’s life rests in the meaning behind the central panel of “The Garden of Earthly Delights”. Franger interprets this piece not as a condemnation of the depicted behavior but as a celebration of the type of unashamed eroticism found in Adamite communities (1-22).

However, the majority of Bosch scholars, while respectful of Franger’s unique analysis of Bosch’s work, are skeptical at best of this interpretation of the artist’s religious background. Gibson discredits Franger’s theory based on his lack of historical evidence supporting Bosch’s involvement in a non-orthodox cult tradition. Gibson instead contends that Bosch was a practicing member of the orthodox lay community and a member of the Brotherhood of Our Lady. Gibson goes on to further negate Franger’s interpretation of The Garden of Earthly Delights by stating that it was eventually “acquired by the most conservative Catholic of them all, Philip II of Spain,” who appreciated it in light of his involvement in the Spanish Inquisition (10-12). Clearly, a concise analysis of Bosch’s message must take into account the somewhat murky nature of his personal history. Of the two pieces of focus within the topic of The Fall, The Haywain proves to be a relatively straightforward work, while, given Bosch’s dubious background, the message of The Millennium is somewhat more cryp-
tic. While both are rooted within a shared cultural background, the messages (and thus the manipulation of the underlying symbolism) presented by the two are perhaps very different.

**The Haywain: Epic of the Everyman**

_The world is a haystack and each man plucks from it what he can._

Flemish Proverb

_All flesh is like grass and all its beauty like the flower in the field._

Isaiah 40:6

The Haywain is the earliest painted of Bosch’s great triptychs, completed circa 1490, and although it is obvious that Bosch has not yet mastered his signature style of the fantastically symbolic, within it we see the same struggles of a restless mind with a reality of creation, sin, and ultimately destruction. (Delevoy 31). When folded up, its outer wings depict a tattered and weary pilgrim who has been called among art historians the Prodigal Son, the Way­farer, the personification of melancholy, the Everyman, and as Virginia Tuttle suggests, the “personification of poverty” (88). He holds back a snarling dog with his walking stick as he makes his way through a disturbing landscape of bones, thieves, lewd dancers, and gallows.

When opened, the trio of panels tells the tale of the regression and damnation of humanity. The left panel shows the complete story of the Fall of Man under the watch God and His host of angels. In the background we see the Fountain of Life and the introduction of Adam and Eve. The midground reveals an anthropomorphic snake leaning from the Tree of Knowledge and proffering the couple a piece of fruit. The foreground depicts the result of man’s folly, namely the banishment from Eden. A larger than life archangel brandishes a sword while Adam implores him for mercy with one hand and hides his nudity with the other. Eve looks away, covering her face in distress and shame.

The larger central panel is dominated by an immense hay wagon, which throngs of people gather around. Frenzied, they seize the hay from the cart and from one another. Only slightly troubled by the mob around them, a bishop and a king follow in the rear of the cart, which is pulled by several of Bosch’s characteristic hybrid demons. Atop the massive mound of hay a musician woos
a lady with his talent while a pipe playing devil dances besides her. Just behind this couple another pair sneaks into a hedge for some private merrymaking. Atop the hedge, above all but God, an owl perches, closely observing the entire scenario. An angel kneels opposite the flute-playing devil looking beseechingly up to heaven while a shirtless and lone Christ looks down from the clouds, arms outstretched and apparently helpless.

The cart is being pulled inevitably to its doom, which Bosch depicts in full in the third panel. Although this hell seems like a fairyland in comparison to Bosch’s later scenes of retribution, the process of man’s damnation is nevertheless completed. Unlike future scenes of hell, Bosch maintains a color scheme and balance integral to the rest of the triptych. Several blue demons, the prototypes for some of Bosch’s later and more unusual hellish hosts balance the reddened sky.

The message of The Haywain, in contrast to some of Bosch’s later works, is relatively straightforward. Art historian, Robert Delevoy comments, “Bosch sought to define the human predicament, to expose the dangers and pitfalls on man’s path and to lead him back to the fold of religion” (34). Bosch presents the folly of the world via the symbolic microcosm of the hay wagon. In Flemish tradition, “to pluck hay” is in essence an idiom, meaning to become of a fool for worldly goods. The sin man commits in this triptych is avarice, the rulers’ avarice for power, the couples’ avarice for passion, and the mob’s avarice for material happiness (Gibson 70-71).

The theme of greed is offset by the enigmatic subject of the outer panels, the pilgrim who winds his lonely way through a realm beset with evils. Tuttle discusses the origin of the shabby man harassed by a dog as part of the artistic “vocabulary of popular, secular art in Italy” having stemmed from the Franciscan ideal of poverty. This symbol spread to the Netherlands via the Devotio Moderna, a popular religious movement very similar to southern Franciscanism (92). The pilgrim on the closed triptych is a lone, Christ-like sufferer in a world of folly and greed. In placing him on the outside of the structure, Bosch invites us to see the entire microsaga through the Christian eyes of the wandering esthetic. Ultimately, Bosch presents the viewer with the message that avarice is a transgression that stems from the original sin and leads those guilty of it to an inevitable damnation. The only ones who can be saved are those who give up worldly wants and embrace a life of poverty and simplicity.

In establishing the message of the work, we can now evaluate Bosch’s application of Genesis symbolism as a means of enhancing the message. At
first glance, not much seems to be unique about Bosch’s pictorial rendition of The Fall. However, one particularly unusual feature of this work is that all three scenes are existent within the same panel, with the focus being not on the taking of the fruit, but on the expulsion from the Garden. The God who looks down on the scene from the heaven at the top of the panel watches all three events unfold simultaneously. It is almost as though Adam and Eve are, from the moment of their inception, set up to fail. The active role of the serpent in handing them the fruit and Adam’s confused look as he is expelled also support this idea. From the moment Adam and Eve came into existence, they were fated to be expelled from the Garden, hence the focal point of the panel is their forced exile.

This bears direct relevance to the positive side of The Haywain message, that of poverty and pilgrimage. The pilgrim is, in fact, emulating the expelled Adam and Eve. Like his progenitors he wanders estranged from his home. Although the Wayfarer is not naked like Adam and Eve, he wears ragged garb and carries himself with the humility of an admitted sinner. In accepting his place outside of paradise, he ultimately assures his re-admittance in the next life. It is those who chase the hay of earthly pleasure who eventually deny themselves of the greatest pleasure of all, reunion with God and eternal life. Thus, through his exacting and subtle rendition of the The Fall, Bosch uses traditional biblical symbolism to make a distinct statement in response to the issues of his own historical reality.

The Millennium: a Menagerie of Mysteries

_Happiness and glass, bow soon they pass._

Dutch Proverb

_And God blessed them, and said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply”_

Genesis 1:28

Bosch’s largest and most celebrated triptych, The Millennium (circa 1505) is arranged in a manner very similar to The Haywain, but unlike The Haywain this work does not lend itself to a single easy interpretation. As Delevoy comments, “Everything in this famous triptych is at once a delight to the eye and a puzzle to the mind” (90). The visionary mystery begins with the outer wings in an airy depiction of the creation of the world. The earth is depicted as a trans-
lucent orb, home to strange mineral-like plants which seem to spring out from the seas and shimmering vapors that collect near the top of the orb. Historian, Peter Beagle remarks, “it is a vision of great and wearisome effort—the very transparency of the globe makes it seem as though God were struggling to hold it all together in his imagination—but chillingly, uniquely beautiful” (38-39).

The triptych opens up to another left-panel creation scene. In this version Jesus stands in the center of the foreground staring wide-eyed directly ahead, almost as if he was looking at the world outside of the painting. Holding Eve’s hand, he presents her to the reclining Adam. Directly behind Christ the Fountain of Life springs out of a wildlife infused stream. The owl that appeared at the top of the hay wagon peaks out from a hollow in the center of the fountain. The serpent, this time just a traditional snake, coils around a fruit-heavy tree to the right of the panel. In the background, animals frolic and fight across a fantastically organic land where plant and mineral fuse into an exceptional morning landscape.

The central panel, joyfully colored in green and blue and bright pink is a far cry from the pastel daybreak of creation. In this scene hordes of naked men and women engage in a hedonistic free for all. Some men ride around on horned beasts while women bathe in the pond. Others eat and even recline in giant pieces of fruit. A man carries a gigantic mussel shell which closes over two pairs of entwined human legs. Still other couples and small groups exchange caresses inside of glass domes and bubbles. In the background other nudes climb on top of giant beaker-shaped structures which just out of the water. The nudes frolic and play underneath a godless blue sky.

The central panel of communal love gives way to a ghastly version of the retribution yet to come. In the right panel Bosch takes his depiction of the underworld to a whole new level. Painted mostly in deep greens and blacks, with the occasional streak of lurid yellow, the color sets the tone for the dark fate awaiting the frolicking fruit-eaters. Some humans are forced to play or be tortured on giant musical instruments, while others are chased and harassed by Bosch’s strange hybrid demons. Giant knives, ears and horses skulls drift through the background bringing the viewer’s attention to the central image. A strange being is standing in the murky water. His legs are two giant pale trees which give way to a broken egg-shaped torso that appears to house some sort of tavern inside. The face of the tree man looks out over the rest of the carnage contemplatively, while demons dance around the brim of his hat and play a giant pink bagpipe.
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It seems as though the only things that outnumber the nude bodies in this masterpiece are iconographic symbols. Many of these symbols rely heavily on traditional Dutch folklore and proverbs and the meanings of more than a few are lost permanently to the modern historian. The unprecedented abundance of symbolism has in fact made it incredibly difficult for viewers and historians to come up with a single interpretation of Bosch’s intended message. In this essay, I will address three construals of the meaning of this work and how the Genesis symbolism of both the left and outer panels functions within each of these analyses.

The first of these analyses, as supported by Delevoy, originates from the same paradigm as The Haywain, namely Paradise, Folly, Hell. The folly in this microcosm is obviously lust as all “are participating in an orgy, or a daydream, of gratified desires: a sort of cosmic carnival” (98). Gibson agrees, adding that “the sexual act the twentieth century has learned to accept as a normal part of the human condition, was most often seen by the Middle Ages as proof of man’s fall from the state of angels, at best a necessary evil, at worst a deadly sin”. In this interpretation the giant fruits so prominent in the central panel function within the same metaphorical vein as the hay in The Haywain. Like human gratification of carnal pleasures, the fruit lasts only for a short while before spoiling (80-81).

When seen within the message of aversion to the sin of lust, the reason for the utilization of The Creation story is relatively obvious. Bosch uses the relationship between Christ, Adam, and Eve as a contrast to the hedonistic exploits of the central panel. While Adam and Eve both neglect to cover their nudity because of innocence, the people of the Garden of Delight roam naked fully aware of their sexuality. Christ joins the first man and first women in a divinely sanctioned marriage. The pristine couple has not even glanced towards the Tree of Wisdom, and the world is still harmonious and new. The central panel, in contrast is a midday chaos. None of the partnerships forged in this garden are sanctified; in fact, God is not present in this panel at all. The Fountain of Life in this panel is a synthetic monolith (quite unlike the original in Eden) unable to protect the nudists from the doom that awaits them. In the case of this message, Bosch may have used the Creation story as a paradigm for correct gender relationships in contrast to wanton lust which ultimately leads to damnation.

In a much different vein Wilhelm Franger, the previously mentioned art historian who placed Bosch within the background of the Brotherhood of the
Free Spirit, has constructed an interpretation of The Millennium that fits into the cultic practices of this group. In his view, the Garden of Earthly Delights doesn’t represent the sin of lust, but instead represents the cultic practices of the religious group. He writes, “The Brothers and Sisters of the Free Spirit called their devotional community-life ‘Paradise’ and interpreted the word as signifying the quintessence of love. It is in this sense that the Paradise of the central panel must be understood”. The left panel (Eden) shows ultimate unity with God, while the right panel (Hell) shows utter separation from God. Thus the central panel is an earthly utopia in which all humans work to reconcile ourselves to God thus saving ourselves from hell (104).

When viewed with this message in mind, the left panel serves an entirely different purpose. Here the focus is on the human connection with the divine. Franger calls this the “rapport” and stresses that it is this type of closeness to God that the Adamites wish to achieve (44). The purpose of the front panel is likewise transformed. It has become what Franger calls “the fertilized germ cell” for the “primal act of generation”. According to Franger, this is the moment of the first rain, where bushes and trees come out of the ground and life is awakened on planet earth (32). If the message of The Millennium is to encourage viewers to re instituted connection with God through a return to the innocence of Eden, then the function of Genesis symbolism is to depict a paradigmatic universe to which we should be attempting to return.

Art historian, Laurinda S. Dixon, supports the last of the three interpretations of the message behind The Millennium. She claims the work was an attempt to glorify alchemy within the framework of cosmic creation and destruction. The concept of alchemy, while now looked upon as a strange pagan precursor to modern medicine, was actually an integral part of medieval society and was closely connected to utopian ideals of the age. In fact, at its most ambitious, alchemy functioned as an esoteric quest for an “Elixir of Life” for alchemists believed the key to the salvation of the macrocosm (earth) lied within the salvation of the microcosm (the human body). It was thought that the pre-fall Adam and Eve possessed the perfect balance of the four humors, and it was through alchemy that humanity could one day reach that state again (96-98).

Dixon goes on to state that The Millennium is arranged on the concepts of alchemy and that the three panels represent the three steps to the alchemical distillation process. The first of these steps, the “conjunction” in which opposite elements are combined is symbolized through the union of Adam and Eve in the left panel. The second step in which the alchemists attempts to unite all
of the elements is known as “coagulation” or “child’s play” and is symbolized by the frolic in the central panel. The final step of the distillation process, known as “putrefication” involved rotting and burning processes akin to those of the hell in the right panel. Dixon also hypothesizes that the strange beaker-shaped structure and the glass apparatus in the garden of delight are actually depictions of alchemical tools, and that Hell’s giant tree man is in fact the “alchemical man” due to the significance of both the egg and the tree in alchemical symbolism (97-107). Within the context of alchemy, the message of The Millennium is actually utopian, rather than pessimistic, as it unites all of creation (including Hell) within the human search for perfection.

Under the influence of alchemical symbolism, the Genesis iconography of the left and outer panels takes on a whole new set of connotations. Alchemists would often refer the source of their knowledge as the “Philosopher’s Tree” or the “Fountain of Science”. The strange plant-like fountain in Bosch’s Garden of Eden seems to fit both of these metaphors—with the owl, the bird of wisdom making a nice contribution to the overall effect (Dixon 101). Yet perhaps even more important is the symbol of the egg, or the glass orb in which alchemists would combine all of the necessary ingredients. Within this context, the world on the outside panel exists as a giant “alchemical egg” which contains all of the essential ingredients for perfection (106). The world itself is therefore a divinely instituted alchemical process paradigmatic of our own quest for perfection.

Conclusion

If art is indeed, as John W. Dixon suggests, the embodiment of man’s response to reality and his attempt to order his experience of that reality, then the art historian must first ask, “What is the artist’s reality?” For Bosch it was the eschatological fervor of the late 15th century. While it remains unclear exactly what Bosch had to say about his reality, what is clear is his reliance on religious iconography to support his varying messages. His deft use of symbolism is a powerful example of man’s ability to respond to and (as Dixon would say) re-present that reality. It is only through such activity, the response and re-presentation of our reality, that we can begin to approximate what it means to be human.
Works Cited


