

**E. H. Gombrich, Review of Charles de Tolnay on Hieronymus Bosch, The New York Review of Books, February 23rd, 1967, pp.3-4 [Trapp no.1967H.1]**

## **Bosch of Hertogenbosch**

Hieronymus Bosch

By Charles de Tolnay

Reynal, in association with William Morrow, 460 pp., \$47.50

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An age which has witnessed a vogue for the "theatre of cruelty" must be responsive to the art of Jerome Bosch. Not that this great painter was in need of rediscovery; but the presentation of oeuvre in a book weighing nine pounds and costing nearly fifty dollars clearly relies, as a publishing venture, on the topical appeal of his fantasies. But this topicality is deceptive. Cruelty, alas, may be in fashion. Hell is not. The anxieties depicted by Bosch are concerned with the eternal torment that awaits the sinner. Indulge yourself in eating, and your reward will not be an increase in cholesterol, but toads for breakfast in all eternity. Lose your temper and you will be chopped to bits by specialist devils for ever and ever and ever. For "beware, beware," – as we read on Bosch's *Table Top* in the Prado – "the Lord sees."

It is necessary to become aware of the gulf that separates us from Bosch's intellectual universe, if we are not to misread the images in this book as surrealist fantasies. But though the general import of their message is clear enough, the details of Bosch's pictorial language are still enigmatic. There is no better introduction to the problem with which his symbolism presents the modern historian than the beautiful page which Erwin Panofsky devoted to this question at the end of his book on *Early Netherlandish Painting* (1953). Having indicated briefly in what kind of popular and devotional literature he would look for the sources of Bosch's imagery, he expresses the conviction "that the real secret of his magnificent nightmares and daydreams has still to be discovered." And with a characteristic gesture of *docta ignorantia* he takes leave of his readers with an Englished version of the words of a German Renaissance scholar, who found the final section of a mystical treatise too obscure to be translated: "*This, too high for my wit/I prefer to omit.*"

Panofsky's verdict refers in particular to an interpretation of Bosch's art which created some stir in the post-war period: the hypothesis, presented by Wilhelm Fraenger in a number of dazzling erudite books, according to which several of the master's most famous paintings had been designed as cult-objects for a heretical nudist sect of millenarians who glorified the sexual act in orgiastic rituals. Despite the fact that we know Bosch to have been the member of what Panofsky calls the "furiously conventional" Confraternity of Our Lady in his native Hertogenbosch, despite the even more relevant fact that no traces of such a sect are recorded in Bosch's lifetime and in his hometown, the appeal of this Romantic interpretation does not seem to have spent its force. Professor Mario Praz, in an essay on what he calls "The Canticles of Hieronymus Bosch" contributed to the *Art News Annual* (XXXII) on "The Grand Eccentrics," admits that many of

Fraenger's readings "are only the fruit of his ingenuity"; but he still pleads that his "main assumptions" should not be dismissed. There is nothing more tempting than such a compromise with a bold and fascinating theory – but it will not do. In *Iconology* the attitude "this interpretation goes too far, but there must be something in it" presents the broad path to one of Bosch's hells. A good wine needs no bushel, and a correct interpretation on supplementary ingenuity to make recalcitrant details fit.

Professor de Tolnay has proved as resistant to Fraeger's heady fantasies as has Professor Panofsky. He does not think that any significant advance whatever has been made in this field of research since 1937, when he published his important monograph on the artist.

Hence he feels justified in reprinting, as the Introduction to this recent volume, a translation of that monograph, explaining in a brief postscript that the conclusions he had reached almost thirty years ago concerning the interpretation and the development of Bosch's *oeuvre* had been basically accepted in the subsequent books by Ludwig Baldass and Jacque Combe. His text, therefore, could be allowed to stand with only a few minor amendments. Of course there is nothing in any way objectionable to the republication of a book that was indeed a pioneering effort in its time. What is vexing is only that there is no indication of this fact in the English language edition, either in the title page or in the preliminary material. In contrast to the German edition of 1965 which opens with Professor de Tolnay's Preface to the 1937 edition, the English version has removed this Preface (together with the postscript just mentioned) to page 50.

As a piece of book-making this unwieldy volume must be described as a monster; as hybrid, bewildering, and even as fascinating, at times, as any of the ambiguous creatures which crowd its plates. The reader who decides to start with the Introduction (which is certainly worth reading despite some infelicities in the translation), and who dutifully turns to the plates indicated in the margin but arranged in a different sequence, will frequently find the words he has just been reading repeated under the picture. If he is curious to know what the author now thinks about the painting in question, and how he has reacted to subsequent interpretations offered by others, he has to turn to the bulky *catalogue raisonné* which is the new part of the book and which was published in German between separate covers.

He will find it arranged in categories which come straight out of *Alice in Wonderland*. Thus a puzzling distinction is made between "Compositions with Large Figures" and "Biblical Compositions with Large Figures," the latter including *The Temptation of St. Anthony*, an event not recorded in my Bible. Moreover it appears that almost life-sized, half-length figures such as those of the Biblical *Crowning with Thorns* belong to neither category; not that "large" should therefore be interpreted as "full length" either, for there is separate section devoted to "The Great Triptychs" which overlaps both earlier categories. All this would matter less if there were references in the Introduction or at least under the plates to this most important section of the text. As there are no such indications, all the conscientious reader can do who wants to be enlightened about a particular item is to look for its place in the sequence of the plates in order to take his bearings for the search in the Catalogue. Let him take heart. This method will usually work. Not always, through. He will look in vain for the Bruges *Last Judgement* (illustrated on 12 plates) in the body of the Catalogue. It is discussed in section headed "Disputed Works" where, when we have run it to earth, we shall find that the author now considers it genuine, having changed his mind since 1937. The headings of other sections are even less likely to reveal the information to any but the most persistent reader. Under "Sources of the Work of Hieronymus Bosch," for instance, he will find early descriptions of Bosch's paintings, mainly from seventeenth-century Spain, known

to the author in 1937. There is no indication in this section (through there is in the Catalogue) of the existence of an earlier and infinitely more important description which was discovered since, an interpretation of the *Haywain* by Ambrosio de Morales, published in a paper by A M Salazar in the Archivo Español de Arte, 1955. The neglect of the opportunity to make this crucial document available for English readers is quite inexplicable. Nor is it clear why there should be two sections on documents, the original one of 1937 and the supplementary one headed "documents in archives." Surely it would not have been hard to combine the two.

By way of contrast, however, we find that the separate list of "additions to the catalogue" has also been incorporated in the main body of that section. The new supplement also contains two brief sections on page 414 headed "Study of Motifs and Interpretation." We read in the latter that after the appearance of Professor de Tolnay's original edition,

Exegesis... concentrated almost exclusively on the "iconology" of the works ... the meager findings show, however, that without artistic empathy the iconological method cannot lead to positive results ... nevertheless, recent studies of popular expressions and proverbs... have in some cases shed light on the master's thinking.

It would be hard for the uninitiated reader to infer from this grudging acknowledgement the extent to which the studies of Dutch and Flemish folklorists such as J Grauls and D Bax have transformed the situation, and that those who cannot read their papers have dropped out of the game. Nor will the reader find in these sections any reference to Fraenger's sensational theories. These, it turns out, are mentioned in the subsequent section under "General Works" where we read that "In Fraenger's beautifully written analyses the methods of Jung's depth psychology and modern sociology (sic) are applied in a way that is often interesting but usually arbitrary." For further criticism of these interpretations we are referred back to the Catalogue, where only those who already know on which paintings Fraenger based his interpretations will find further hints. Continuing our exploration of this labyrinthine tome we now encounter on pages 419-22 "Notes to the Introduction," which turn out to be stragglers, other notes having been accommodated on earlier pages. There is a bibliography (which does not mention Panofsky), and an appendix of 23 plates with no fewer than 116 uncaptioned illustrations of works related to Bosch's *oeuvre* as sources or reflections of his inventions. The preceding list offers no clue as to where in the body of the book these interesting items are discussed. The concluding page headed "List of Paintings" takes no cognisance of their existence. There is no index. One is entitled to ask whether the publishers ever gave a moment's thought to the needs of the user. They obviously thought of this second edition exclusively as a picture book.

As a picture book the volume is certainly striking. The new photographs by Max Seidel include many details, both in colour and in black-and-white, which show motifs one might easily have overlooked. It would seem ungenerous to carp at these riches, but one misses at least an indication for the reader that a substantial proportion of the details are considerably larger than the originals. Since the dimensions of the whole panels are given, it is possible to calculate approximately how much they are enlarged. (Only approximately, for the damnable practice of "bleeding" the margins frequently excludes more accurate measurements.) Some of the details, it turns out, are two-and-a-half to three times their real size. Of course such enlargements are most interesting to the student of technique who can often follow the lines of the painter's brush and discern with ease his methods of indicating light and texture. But as far as their artistic effect is concerned these enlargements obviously falsify the character of Bosch's painting. It is made to

look much more “modern,” much more “impressionistic” than his subtle technique justifies.

Is it fair to criticise enlargement if we accept the reduction of scale in other books? There is a difference here. Granted that reduction, too, falsifies, its effect at least approximates the view from a distance with which an artist must reckon. The effect of enlargement is rather like a slow motion picture of an actor’s gestures. It is instructive but inartistic. Scale, visibility and the resolution of the eye are attuned to each other, and minute inflections should not be blown up into flourishes. Even the selection of these enlargements is open to some criticism. Though every square inch of Bosch’s paintings is worth looking at, there are some details which offer clues to his symbolism. The Madrid *Table Top* mentioned before shows in one of its corners a picture of hell in which the sins to be punished by each of the tortures are carefully labelled. The roundel is badly visible on the colour plate, the inscriptions are illegible, and there are no details. Not that the book otherwise affords us too few glimpses of this side of Bosch’s art. On the contrary. The seven details of the centrepiece of the *Haywain* triptych rather emphasise the demonic and grotesque at the expense of marvellous panoramic landscape and the humour of the foreground group, which anticipate Bruegel. An opportunity was missed, moreover, of allowing us to compare good illustrations of the Prado version (here reproduced) and of that in the Escorial, though the Catalogue informs us that the question as to their relative merits “has still not been decided.” The photographer’s selections were altogether made without much regard for the author’s opinions on authenticity; the Vienna triptych, for instance, which is given such prominence in the plates, is considered by Professor de Tolnay to be a copy of a lost work.

Even so the student of Bosch will find plenty of food for thought in turning these pages. He will have an unusual opportunity, for instance, of studying Bosch’s types and of comparing the physiognomies of his figures and pondering their facial expressions. He will soon find that there is little point in singling out one or the other of these heads as presumed self-portraits by the master. Too many of them resemble one another. He will also notice the contrast between the quizzical expressiveness of their gesture language. For Bosch’s style is particularly adapted to the rendering of expressive movements and actions. Particularly his smaller figures in narrative scenes are frequently seen in half profile with the position of their legs and arms clearly silhouetted, as if they were actors taking account of a distant audience. It is this skill which enables Bosch to retain the expressiveness of figures even in the rapidly sketched grisailles and in those tiny distant episodes which the enlargements in this book bring to our attention.

Together with this language of movement Bosch uses a language of physiognomics. The misshapen profiles of the enemies of Christ, which so tantalisingly remind us of Leonardo’s caricatures, bespeak their evil intention with unmistakable force. But this very skill in characterisation tends to make us forget that as far as facial expression is concerned, Bosch’s figures frequently wear impenetrable masks. Isolate the faces of his tortured victims or of his saints, of his (few) blessed in Paradise and of his sinners, and you will often find it hard to guess at the context. Not that Bosch stands alone in this difficulty of mastering facial expression. On the contrary; compared with the impassive features of a Memling, some of his figures, such as that of the thief on the Road to Calvary, are landmarks in the history of this conquest. And yet his ambiguities help to explain the diversity of interpretations of individual figures. That strange bystander watching the adoration of the Magi in the Prado *Epiphany* has been interpreted as the Antichrist by Mrs Brand Philip, and as a prefiguration of Christ by Professor de Tolnay (p. 372). The so-called *Prodigal Son* in Rotterdam is equally a figure of evil for the former, and on the way to redemption for the latter. The centrepiece of the so-called *Garden of Delight*, which the seventeenth century Spaniard saw as a sermon against the lusts of the flesh, became the

cornerstone of Fraenger's theory, according to which Bosch celebrated the innocence of sexual desire. Even Professor de Tolnay writes that "nothing seems more chaste than the love-play of these couples," a description hardly verified by the illustrations. But the truth is that, "artistic empathy" is in any case a poor guide unless it is coupled with an awareness of the artist's means.

The historian will in any case prefer to proceed from the known to the unknown. He will be grateful that, apart from the *Table Top*, we now have incontrovertible proof of the meaning of another Bosch's principal works, the *Haywain*. The history of this discovery is interesting. In the seventeenth century the Spanish ecclesiastic Siguenza was reminded by its theme of the passage in Isaiah, "All flesh is grass," with its message of the transience of all worldly pleasure. Noting the many figures in the painting grabbing bundles of hay, Professor de Tolnay in 1937 suggested that it illustrated the proverb, "The world is a haystack; and each man plucks from it what he can." In 1938, however, there appeared in the *Gentsche Bijdragen tot de Kunstgeschiedenis* a paper discussing a print from the middle of the sixteenth century (now reproduced in Tolnay's Appendix) showing a haywain surrounded by groups of people, each motif being explained in a satirical verse. Jan Grauls could show by means of extensive pictorial and literary parallels that hay here stood for all vanities, the grabbing for hay was the chase after emptiness, which led to perdition. The next number of the same periodical brought further confirmation of this interpretation. It turned out that a real haywain was actually dragged through the streets of Antwerp in 1563 during a procession, accompanied by a song emphasising the vanity of all earthly gains. Professor de Tolnay refers to these articles, but still prefers his 1937 interpretation (which is repeated under the plate), even though the detective work of these scholars has meanwhile been brilliantly confirmed through the discovery of the description by Ambrosio de Morales, mentioned earlier, who, only a few years after Bosch's death, explained that hay in Flemish meant "nothing," and that the picture was an allegory of the hunt for vanities, "*al hoo*" (all hay).

It would be tempting to speculate how such an image might have been interpreted, if we did not know its meaning. Could the procession around the haywain perhaps represent some harvest festival, survival of a pagan ritual, perhaps also alluding to "tumbling in the hay" and thus connected with fertility cults? Did people grab at these bundles of the precious stuff "for luck?" Are the demons here represented perhaps to be explained by parallels with the devil's masks worn in certain folk customs in connection with seasonal pageants? The more erudite the commentator, the more easily would he fall victim to what Panofsky has called a *boa constructor*. If he accepts Professor Praz's premises that "ancient coins, Assyrian cylinders and ... influences from the Far East" are among Bosch's sources, no holds need be barred. Parallels could be quoted from any region and tradition, and in the end the reader might watch the performance open-mouthed as some of Bosch's most amusing figures watch the juggler, who pretends to bring forth a frog from the mouth of his dupe.

We are still in the state of such bemused wonderment when we read the various interpretations of Bosch's companion piece to the *Haywain*, the so-called *Garden of Delight*. But maybe one day a lucky find will put us in possession of its key, and all the strange configurations will fall into place. Provided, of course, that there is such a key. For, after all, it remains possible that Bosch was not quite sane and that there is no rational explanation for all his symbols. Several psychiatrists have hinted at insanity, for instance, Dr Hemphill in the *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Medicine* (February 1965) and Professor Carstairs in the Colour Supplement of the London *Observer* (June 12, 1966); but perhaps neither of the authorities is enough of a historian to sift the evidence. For this much is sure: if Bosch's weird imaginings are the result of inner pressures, these were soon, matched by external pressures asking him to repeat and develop them. Even in his lifetime he

became a specialist in *diableries*, and his inventions were much in demand among the rich and the mighty. He was the head of a large workshop and the originator of a whole genre which was revived and developed by Bruegel and others. In this respect, at any rate, he was very unlike most of the "Grand Eccentrics" discussed in the *Art News Annual*.

Interested as he is in Freudian psychology, on which he draws for the interpretations of some of Bosch's symbols, Professor de Tolnay nowhere poses the question of the artist's sanity. He may be right in eschewing this insoluble problem, but maybe he is also prevented by his methodological commitment from asking this kind of question. For his allegiance is to that type of *Geistesgeschichte* which regards the work of art as a symptom of the evolution of the human spirit; the artist expresses the age, a collective situation rather than a personal one.

Applying the method, so persuasively championed by Max Dvorak, of interpreting style as a metaphor for a philosophy of life, a *Weltanschauung*, Professor de Tolnay sets about to explain Bosch's pictorial technique as a direct manifestation of the "world view" of that period. It is not a world view for which he quotes texts, but one that is postulated by that philosophy of history which derives directly or indirectly from Hegel. The history of the spirit, in this reading, is the progress of self-awareness. Thus de Tolnay finds predictably that Bosch's artistic discovery of the seductive beauty of this world "leads to a new sovereignty of consciousness which is no longer bound exclusively to religious doctrines but strives for that independence of the mind which future generations were achieve" (p. 49). Straddling, as he does, the transition between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, Bosch must embody this outlook in his style. For it is apparently a law of history that "in the late phases of all cultures, the truth of the inner world prevails over the lies of the outer" (p. 49).

Van Eyck's style had represented the world as "a cosmic gem" to express "the late medieval pantheism" (p. 45). In Pieter Bruegel and Rubens the world "is seen for the first time independently of religious postulates" (p. 49). Bosch must be found to stand between these Hegelian points to reference, to which little in Europe's intellectual history corresponds.

Faced with a world that denies its metaphysical origin and does not yet seek any immanent meaning, Hieronymus Bosch invented another image: the world that had once been the home of the soul became alien to him. The gem changed into a deceptive veil, its divine lustre into vanity. Enveloping in mist that which had once been clear, rendering inconstant that which had once been lasting, and immaterial that which had once been palpable, the artist finally found the new face of the earth: a world that is merely an optical illusion (p. 45).

All this may make poetic reading, but is it true? Much as we owe to the pioneers of *Geistesgeschichte*, among whom Professor de Tolnay will always occupy an honoured place, it must be said that the last thirty years have made many of us impatient with its frequently circular argument and with its portentous tone. It seems only too easy to imagine what the master of the *Haywain* would have said to all this.