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Judgment, self-scrutiny and punishment: How Hieronymus Bosch's pessimistic worldview enabled a radical shift in pictorial tradition

Anna Keenan

At its core, this essay examines how Hieronymus Bosch's (circa 1450-1516) pessimistic Christian worldview enabled him to break into a new artistic paradigm through his unrelenting and unprecedented focus on human sin and Divine Judgment. Working in Northern Europe during the time of the Renaissance, Bosch made paintings so radical and complex that nothing of the likes has been seen before nor since. With an oeuvre characterized by a deeply rooted fascination with sin and evil, in the three works that I examine, I trace Bosch's understanding of humanity's predisposition toward sin, the consequent punishment and, finally, the origins of such evil.

Often employing imagery as ghastly as it is delightful, the meaning of Hieronymus Bosch's work is permeated with ambiguity, yet his fixation on human sinfulness clarifies one thing: the world he sees brims with pessimism. By elucidating how Bosch perceived and expressed humanity's sinful nature, its origins and its consequent punishment, I seek to explore the ways in which Bosch's pessimism was an innovative force in his painting. To do so I will draw on three of his works – *The Seven Deadly Sins and Four Last Things* (Fig. 1) (from here on referred to as *the Tabletop*), the Vienna *Last Judgment* triptych (Fig. 2) and *The Garden of Earthly Delights* triptych (Fig. 3). Many scholars have already pointed to Bosch's pessimism, most notably for my purposes, Larry Silver who posits that 'Bosch's originality stems first from his own consciousness of evil in the world and of human sinfulness – his artistry thus begins with pessimism.' This is very insightful as it suggests that Bosch's fixation of evil and sin provided him with the space to move into a new pictorial paradigm. This dark fixation, alongside his departure from the tradition of depicting positive biblical themes and his pivot away from iconography by virtue of obscuring the link between his images and religious

1: Larry Silver, "Jheronimus Bosch and the Issue of Origins," JHNA 1:1 (Summer 2009): 12.

text, enabled him to generate innovative ways of seeing and painting the world. In essence, Bosch's primary concern was the retribution humanity faces as a result of their inherent sinfulness, which carved him out as a radical image-maker.

The *Tabletop* is a useful entry point into medieval Christian dogma and, by extension, the theological underpinnings of Bosch's pessimistic worldview. Split into quadrants, each corner features a decorative circle depicting either Death, Judgement, Hell, or Heaven. In the centre is a large circle comprised of concentric rings. The two central rings are generally regarded as representative of the Eye of God; the pupil contains a half-length figure of Christ and the inscribed words *Cave, cave, dominus videt* (Beware, beware, God sees). Radiating golden striations mark the start and end of the iris (Fig. 4), before giving way to the outer wheel in which the Seven Deadly Sins are rendered in quotidian, contemporary scenes – a feature which mark it out as distinct from earlier medieval tradition. Each section is fascinating, but the eye is particularly drawn to the bottom zone which represents *ira* as it is the most upright (Fig. 5). Men fight raucously in a drunken brawl outside a brothel, a sin

Figure One: *The Seven Deadly Sins and the Four Last Things*

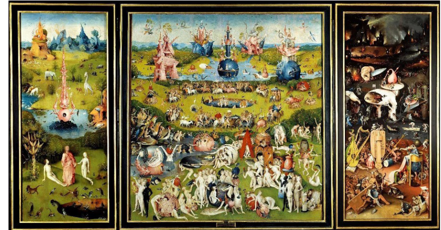

Figure Two: *The Garden of Earthly Delights*

Figure Three: *The Last Judgment*

2: Debra Strickland, Lecture 2: Bosch's Sins, 27.09.2022.
3: Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, II-II, q. 158, a. 1.
4: Walter S. Gibson, "Hieronymus Bosch and the Mirror of Man: The Authorship and Iconography of the "Tabletop of Seven Deadly Sins"," OUD Holland, Vol. 87, No. 4 (1973): 213-214.
5: Gibson, "The Mirror of Man," 218.
6: Fra José de Sigüenza, "History of the Order of St Jerome," in Bosch in Perspective ed. James Snyder, 1973, (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1973), 35.

Figure Four (Left): *Eye of God, The Seven Deadly Sins and Four Last Things (detail).* **Figure Five (Above):** *Ira (Wrath), The Seven Deadly Sins and Four Last Things (detail)*

which was traditionally criticised for its abandonment of reason. Sombre in tone, the panel reminds its viewer that sin is often wrapped up in the mundanity of life, in the here and now – a notion which is elevated by the composition's similarity to a turning wheel: the temptation to sin is an inescapable cycle.

In relation to The *Tabletop* panel, Walter S. Gibson argues that by using the tradition of the Wheel of Vice and Virtue, reminiscent of works such as an early fifteenth-century fresco originally from a church in Inglestone, Bosch unites medieval ideas of God being both a witness of sinful mankind and a mirror reflecting the variety of his creation. This innovation, which he believes confirms Bosch's involvement in the design of the panel, even though it may have been painted by his workshop, enabled him to introduce an omniscient, scrutinising and inescapable God to monitor the sinfulness of humanity – a God that prompts the viewer to see and reflect on his own sinful soul. Reading the panel according to this twofold interpretation of what the individual is – sinful – and what they ought to be – pious – imbues it with didacticism that acts as a potent reminder of the viewer's need to resist sin and live devoutly. Further, this introduction of self-examination opens up the possibility of a psychological reading of Bosch; commenting in 1605, Fra José de Sigüenza suggests that that

7: Peter Glum, "Divine Judgment in Bosch's Garden of Earthly Delights," in The Art Bulletin Vol. 58, No. 1 (March 1976): 45.
8: Ilsink, Matthijs; Koldewij A. M; Spronk, Ron et al, Hieronymus Bosch: painter and draughtsman: catalogue raisonné, ('s-Hertogenbosch: Bosch Research and Conservation Project, Brussels: Mercatorfonds, 2016): 290. 9 Hannah Kagan-Moore, "The Journey through the Judgment: Affective Viewing and the Monstrous in Bosch's Vienna Last Judgment Triptych," in Critical and Historical Studies on the Prenatural, Vol. 5, No.2 (2016): 134. 10 Larry Silver, "Crimes and Punishments. Bosch's Hells," in Bosch. The 5th Centenary Exhibition ed. Pilar Silva Maroto, 2016, (Madrid: Museo Nacional del Prado), 119. 11 Silver, "Issue of Origins," 1.

which distinguishes Bosch from other artists is his attempt to paint man 'as he is on the inside'. Although positive in the sense that Bosch promotes self-scrutiny, he expressed pessimism by virtue of what he assumes the viewer will find: that they are sinful by nature and destined for Hell if they turn away from God.

This reading heightens the pertinence of the four surrounding scenes. In the top left corner, we see a deathbed scene; the top right divine judgment; the bottom right, Heaven; and the bottom left, unsurprisingly due to his preoccupation with sin and the torturous punishments his later panels depict, Hell. Bosch shows the possible trajectory of the soul in the afterlife and enforces that there is a direct correlation between the life one lives and the soul's fate. Notably however, Heaven features infrequently in Bosch's painting and plays a subordinate role the few times it does. Although Heaven is seen in the bottom right corner of the *Tabletop*, which is the last thing the eye comes to when reading the panel from left to right, bottom to top, and therefore could suggest a certainty or finality in Heaven, I would say this is an insufficient visual reference to outweigh the sin and judgement that dominates the rest of the panel. On the contrary, as Peter Glum has emphasised, Bosch attempts to represent the immanency of judgement using the deathbed and last judgment scenes as well as the resurrected Christ in the centre. It is not just the human proclivity to sin, but also God's watchful scrutiny of it and consequent chances of immanent judgment and eternal punishment that set the scene of Bosch's worldview, which is at best unforgiving and at worst terror-inducing.

This overwhelming presence of evil at the expense of the illuminating force of Heaven is similarly observable in the Vienna *Last Judgment* triptych. In the top third of the middle panel, Christ sits atop a throne surrounded by the Virgin Mary, John the Baptist and the twelve Apostles (Fig. 6). The rich blue orb delineates the celestial space from the world of creation engulfed entirely in the Hell of Judgement Day, and demons and monsters spread chaos and evil over the rest of the earth. The rest of the panel is given over to the evil that rises from humanity's sin, while the holy figures are remote and largely inaccessible by comparison, resulting in what Hannah Kagan-Moore describes as 'lopsided focus on the inevitability of Hell'.9 This chimes with Larry Silver's

9: Ludwig von Baldass in Glum, "Divine Judgment," 49.
10: Silver, "Crimes and Punishments," 119.
11: Felipe de Guevara, "Commentaries on Painting," in Bosch in Perspective ed. James Snyder, (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1973), 28.
12: Toos de Peyer, "Grillen and Grylli: The Diableries of Jheronimus Bosch," in Jheronimus Bosch, his Patrons and his Public ed. Prof. Frances Kemp et al, 2003, ('s-Hertogenbosch: Jheronimus Bosch Art Centre), 215.
13: Debra Strickland, Lecture: Bosch's Hells (2), 18.10.2022

Figure Six: *God's Judgment, The Vienna Last Judgment (detail)*

reading, who suggests that Bosch favoured an emphasis on the presence of evil in the world over the accessibility of holy figures and image.10 He also contends that this takes Bosch beyond an earlier established paradigm.11 Unlike earlier religious works which generally focused on positive Biblical stories such as the Nativity and Adoration of the Magi, Bosch's images are ruled by evil and humanity's alienation from God. The consequence of the sins Bosch so meticulously paints become evident and arguably only mean anything of significance for the viewer, when seen in tandem with Bosch's imagined punishments. The right panel of *The Garden of Earthly Delights* is most famed for its depiction of punishment, teeming with menacing monsters and torturous activities no less harsh than can be imagined. Stacked in front of a dark, fiery and army filled background, the tortures of Hell and its recipients are crammed into the pictorial space. Writhing anguished souls (medieval tradition used bodies to depict souls despite them being incorporeal to make their eternal torment more comprehensible), gather around a bizarre collection of objects including a giant skull, oversized instruments, huge ears with a protruding knife and the elusive Tree-Man (Fig. 7). Perhaps the epitome of punishment is the untraditional bird-like Satan (Fig. 8) who, wearing a chamber pot 'crown' and sat atop a wooden commode, eats and excretes human souls. The bizarre, undignified

9: Ludwig von Baldass in Glum, "Divine Judgment," 49.
10: Silver, "Crimes and Punishments," 119.
11: Felipe de Guevara, "Commentaries on Painting," in Bosch in Perspective ed. James Snyder, (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1973), 28.
12: Toos de Peyer, "Grillen and Grylli: The Diableries of Jheronimus Bosch," in Jheronimus Bosch, his Patrons and his Public ed. Prof. Frances Kemp et al, 2003, ('s-Hertogenbosch: Jheronimus Bosch Art Centre), 215.
13: Debra Strickland, Lecture: Bosch's Hells (2), 18.10.2022

anal theme dominates this detail; we see the soul being devoured also defecating birds, the souls below defecating coins and the green creature's mirrored buttocks. To further heighten this disturbing motif, much of this imagery can be linked to worldly sins. As Ludwig Von Baldass pointed out, plenty of the symbolism in the panel is related to the Seven Deadly Sins, an idea that Larry Silver has elaborated by arguing that Bosch's punishments fit their sinful crime. Silver demonstrates that what we see in the foreground of this panel is former worldly pleasures converted in Hell into mental and physical torment. For example, Silver suggests that the soul defecating coins represents the sin of *avaritia*, the vomiting soul represents *gula* and the female soul compliantly looking into the buttocks mirror under the control of a demon represents *vanitas*. Further, the monsters that populate Hell, which secured Bosch's status as 'inventor of devils and chimeras', add to the extent of this torturous punishment. Bosch drew on traditional grotesques or grylli that usually populated the marginalia of illuminated manuscripts, such as the Luttrell Psalter, incorporating his inventions into the core fabric of his work. The hybrid creature on the right side of this folio of the Luttrell Psalter (Fig. 9) for example, has an anthropomorphised dog-like face, a reptilian scaled back,

Figure Seven: *Skeleton, Ears and the Treeman, The Garden of Earthly Delights right panel (detail)*

Figure Eight: *Satan, The Garden of Earthly Delights right panel (detail)*

14: Joseph Koerner, "Impossible Objects: Bosch Realism," RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics, No. 46, Polemical Objects (Autumn 2004), 95.
15: Rev 12:7-12
16: Silver, "Issue of Origins," 10. 20 Silver, "Issue of Origins," 12.

tum nostrum
Recordatus est quoniam puluis
sumus: homo sicut fenum dies eius
tanquam flos agri sic efflorebit:
Quoniam spiritus pertransibit in
illo et non subsistet: et non cognoscet
amplius locum suum
Misericordia autem domini ab eter
no: et usque in eternum super timen
tes eum
Et iusticia illius in filios filiorū:
his qui seruant testamentum eius:
Et memores sunt mandatorum
ipsius: ipsius: ad faciendum ea:

Dominus in celo parauit sedem su
am: et regnum ipsius omnibus do
minabitur
Benedicite domino omnes angeli
eius potentes uirtute facientes uer
bum illius: ad audiendam uocem
sermonum eius
Benedicite domino omnes uirtu
tes eius: ministri eius qui facitis
uoluntatem eius
Benedicite domino omnia opera
eius: in omni loco dominationis
eius benedic anima mea domino:
Benedic anima mea domi

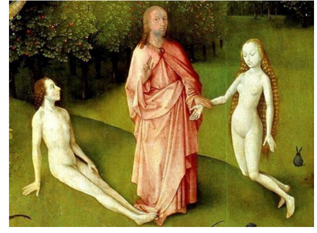

Figure Nine (Left): *Luttrell Psalter.* **Figure Ten (Center):** *Fall of the Rebel Angels, Vienna Last Judgment (detail).* **Figure Eleven (Right):** *God, Adam and Eve, The Garden of Earthly Delights left panel (detail)*

avian legs and feet and a vine-like tail. While Bosch's monsters emulate earlier examples, he enhances them by individualising them and rendering them in an unprecedented level of realism. Further, unlike traditional archetypal monsters, they are identifiable according to what they do rather than what they look like. In this regard, in addition to knowing the sin that was committed, they also assist with their counterpart's torture and blur the boundary between the sinner and the sinner's torturer. In attempting to find a resolution to the dichotomy between Bosch's monsters being impossible products of fantasy and truly convincing constructions, Joseph Koerner argues that their eccentric forms functioned so as to allow Bosch to depict Hell as he perceived it. This reinforces that they were tools with which Bosch could express two facets of his pessimistic outlook: both that the world is rife with sin and that their punishments are merciless. Therefore, punishment is personalised, almost intimate and operates in tandem with life on earth – a reminder that God sees every individual's sin in their lifetime, which would have been particularly unsettling for pious contemporary viewers.

I would now like to move away from Bosch's depictions of punishment and instead examine his treatment of the origins of the evil that leads to such punishment. Arguing that he was motivated by the problem of evil, Larry Silver locates the origin of evil for Bosch was in the event of The Fall of the Rebel Angels. According to the Book of Revelation, having betrayed God, Lucifer and his angels are banished from Heaven following a war with Michael. Silver references the Vienna *Last Judgment* triptych as a key example of this – dark beasts, the embodiment of evil, cascade to earth at the top of the left panel (Fig. 10). A swarm of insect and toad-like creatures, many individually armed with swords, they engage in a battle of light versus dark below a hazy yet serene globe-holding God, as many

17: Hans Belting, Hieronymus Bosch, Garden of Earthly Delights (Munich: Prestel, 2002), 7.
18: Ibid., 47-57.

convert into the monstrous rebel angels. Given that the Fall of the Rebel Angels precedes the events of Genesis and the Transgression, it is evident that Bosch regarded humanity as wholly alienated from the origins of their sin. Silver also contends that Bosch recognises this event as marking the beginning of history, which will end with the Last Judgment.20 The worlds that Bosch paints operate within a pre-determined mechanism dictated by evil forces, which creates little room for human redemption. Here then, Hell begins in Paradise, is experienced on the Earth and ends in Hell; the promise of retribution is constant. Through joining the horizons across the panels of the Vienna Last Judgment and shifting from a lush landscape and blue skies in the left panel to a barren, fiery wasteland in the right panel, Bosch reinforces the darkness of the human condition and the inevitability of punishment.

In displacing the root of evil and locating it in the Fall of the Rebel Angels, theologically speaking, Eve is unshackled from the sole burden of the Original Sin of eating the apple from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Thus, Bosch afforded himself the ability to present ambiguous versions of Biblical stories in other works, as seen in *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, in which the Transgression need not be depicted in order to represent evil in the world. This triptych is recognised for having not been wholly reliant on religious texts for the first time and therefore departed from conventional iconography. Consequently, his images became inherently ambiguous, with a plurality of interpretations becoming possible. In the centre of the left panel, a Christ-like figure presents a demure-looking Eve, the embodiment of medieval beauty considering her golden flowing hair and pale, high breasts, to a resting Adam (Fig. 11), which signals the standard Creation story. However, unlike in the *Last Judgment*, in which the episodes of Genesis (the Creation, the Transgression and the Expulsion) unfold upwards, the Transgression and Expulsion are absent, as if they have not yet happened, thus destabilising the exact meaning of this panel and the rest of the triptych. Yet, although the Fall of the Rebel Angels itself is not depicted, we see its consequences in death, desire and evil, which lurk in this panel: a cat has killed its prey (Fig. 12), toads are seen beside the pond at the bottom of the panel (Fig. 13) and an owl perches in the pink fountain (Fig. 14) (the latter two being particularly indicative of wickedness as they traditionally symbolised evil.) Thus, the central panel can be read in multiple ways in response to these ambiguities. For instance, one of these readings is that of Hans Belting, who suggests that, given the absence of the Transgression, the

...it is evident that Bosch regarded humanity as wholly alienated from the origins of their sin

central panel represents a counterfactual story of Genesis. For Belting, the triptych shows an imagined version of what the world would have looked like had Adam and Eve not disobeyed God, populated with their descendants who, in their frolicking and joyous copulation, embody innocent obedience rather than sin. He evidences this by referencing the figures in the foreground of the lower left of the central panel (Fig. 15), who gesture back toward Paradise as if acknowledging their ancestors. He claims that this is a world without death and while he postulates that motifs such as fruit could represent forbidden sexual desire, they instead represent natural fecundity. This reading distances the role of sin, perhaps even offering a glimpse of optimism in this image and, by extension, Bosch's view of the world. Yet, in my eyes, at its core this reading is in itself pessimistic: we witness a human race we cannot and will not know, a world that never existed. And, regardless of how one interprets the central panel, Bosch makes it clear through the right panel and the other works I have discussed, where the majority of humanity ends up regardless. I would suggest that no supposedly positive reading of his work can outweigh this or discount the force of his Hells. Ultimately, Bosch's gruesome Hell scenes eclipse other interpretations such that the only thing we are sure of in approaching his unsolvable puzzles is his pessimism.

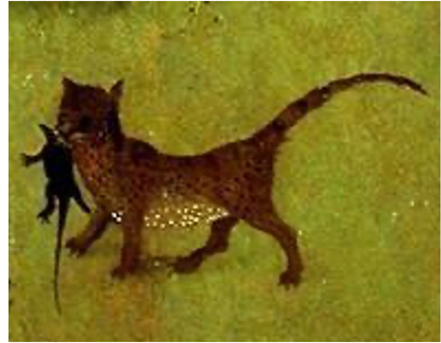

Figure Twelve: *Cat with prey, The Garden of Earthly Delights (detail)*

In this essay, I have shown that Bosch expressed pessimism through his depictions of the world and humanity dominated by sin, the result of which is a dark eschatological vision overflowing with an inevitable, torturous punishment. In examining the Prado Tabletop, I clarified Bosch's orthodox approach to humanity's sin and God's watch over it and drew on Gibson's ideas to ruminate on the self-scrutiny that Bosch innovatively advocated for. In his vision of Hell in the right panel of The Garden, his innovative monsters make it clear that man damns himself for his bad deeds by succumbing to irrational, worldly temptations. And, with the tortuous punishments fitting their worldly crimes, the extremity of this self-imposed punishment is unmissable for the viewer. Further, I have attempted to provide nuance by showing that this pessimistic worldview often bolstered his innovation. Out of his pessimism arose novel pictorial devices such as his monsters and, significantly, the ambiguity that characterise many of his images. Ultimately, many of Bosch's innovative pictorial motifs stemmed from his pessimism, which was itself a radical starting point for images of the time.

Figure Thirteen: *Frogs at pond, The Garden of Earthly Delights (detail)*

However, despite radically departing from tradition and inventing new modes of representation that was not reliant on text, he was evidently aware of and influenced by earlier image traditions. Moreover, by locating the root of evil in the Fall of the Rebel Angels, a dark and pessimistic story, Bosch invented new modes of exploring Biblical stories.

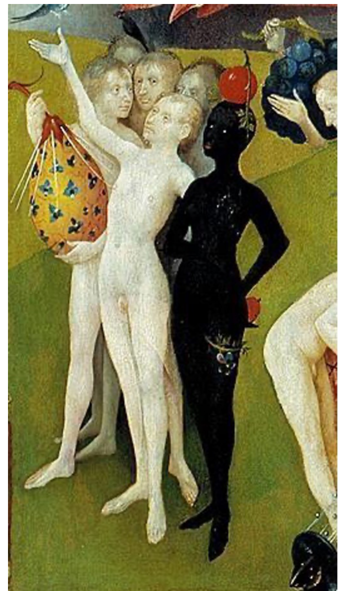

Figure Fourteen (Above): *Owl, The Garden of Earthly Delights (detail).* **Figure Fifteen (Right):** *Figures gesturing, The Garden of Earthly Delights (detail)*

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