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BOSCH'S "GARDEN OF EARTHLY DELIGHTS": A PROGRESS REPORT

By E. H. Gombrich

None of Bosch's paintings has contributed more to the aura of mystery surrounding his subject matter than the large triptych in Madrid which has become known as *The Garden of Earthly Delights*.¹ Sigença, who described it in 1605, saw in the central panel (Pl. 15) a symbolic representation of the vanity of worldly pleasures signified by the strawberries, a fruit whose fragrance 'one can hardly smell ere it passes'.² However much later interpretations may have differed, they have all taken it for granted that the key to this enigmatic representation must be found in a knowledge of Bosch's symbolism. The real or imaginary symbolic codes of alchemy, astrology, folk-lore, dream books, esoteric heresies and the unconscious have each been claimed, in isolation or combination, to provide the solution. Erwin Panofsky accepted the general premise, though he expressed the conviction that none of the keys proposed so far really fitted.³ In writing about the painting in this *Journal* in 1967 I shared Panofsky's scepticism but still adhered to the approach first documented in Sigença's text—I remained convinced that the central panel should be read as a symbolic representation of the transience of worldly pleasures.⁴

It was not altogether easy, however, to fit the outside of the triptych (Pl. 16a) fully into this reading. This large grisaille shows a picture of the earth and God the Father in the left-hand corner. It is inscribed with a quotation from Psalm xxxiii: *Ipse dixit, et facta sunt; Ipse mandavit et creata sunt*. This inscription fits in well with the accepted view, according to which the outer wings represent God creating the world, with the earth shown as a flat disc enclosed in a transparent sphere. Parallels were even recently adduced by Mrs. Spychalska-Boczkowska for this reading in representations of the orb held by Christ which is often pictured in Netherlandish painting as a shining sphere.⁵ But this very comparison shows that the interpretation is untenable. The bright curved streaks under the thunder-cloud on the left wing of the triptych cannot be all reflections on one enclosing surface. Could they not represent the rainbow instead? If this obvious question has never been asked, the reason can only lie in the fact that it seems somewhat perverse to think of a rainbow painted in grisaille. Yet it turned out that in pursuing this clue an entirely different approach to the meaning of the triptych was opened up.

The rainbow, of course, is the token of the covenant which God made with Noah after the Flood:

I do set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a token of a covenant between me and the earth. And it shall come to pass, when I bring a cloud over the earth, that the bow shall be seen in the cloud: And I will remember my covenant, which is between me and you and every living

¹ For a bibliography up to 1965, see Charles de Tolnay, *Hieronymus Bosch*, English edition, Baden Baden 1966, pp. 360–3.

² Tolnay, *op. cit.*, pp. 403–4.

³ *Early Netherlandish Painting*, Cambridge 1953, p. 357.

⁴ 'The Earliest Description of Bosch's

Garden of Delight', this *Journal*, XXX, 1967, pp. 403–6.

⁵ Anna Spychalska-Boczkowska, 'Material for the iconography of Hieronymus Bosch's Triptych *The Garden of Delights*', *Studia Muzealne*, Poznań 1966.

creature of all flesh; and the water shall no more become a flood to destroy all flesh. (Genesis ix, 13-15.)

In the picture, God is seen pointing at the pages of a book as if he were speaking of the covenant. If that is so, the painting cannot represent the creation of the earth. It must show the earth after the Flood, when the waters were receding and it is indeed clear that the disc of earth is still surrounded by water. On closer scrutiny it also becomes clear that the painting cannot possibly represent the moment of the creation of the world, because there are quite a number of castles and other buildings in the landscape.

The reader is not asked to accept this reading of the outer wings on the strength of these details alone. It can only be made convincing by showing the bearing it has on the central panel covered by these wings. For if the theme of the triptych is the Flood, then the central panel (Pl. 15) might represent the world before the Flood. The love-making and the greed would not have a vague symbolic reference to the wickedness of man but would rather illustrate the actual scenes on earth that prompted God to destroy the world.

The Biblical account of the events which led up to the Flood is tantalizingly laconic and enigmatic:

And it came to pass, when men began to multiply on the face of the earth, and daughters were born unto them, that the sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were fair; and they took them wives of all which they chose. And the Lord said, My spirit shall not always strive with man, for that he also is flesh: yet his days shall be an hundred and twenty years. There were giants in the earth in those days; and also after that, when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men, and they bare children to them, the same became mighty men which were of old, men of renown. And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And it repented the Lord that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart. And the Lord said, I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth; both man, and beast, and the creeping thing, and the fowls of the air; for it repenteth me that I have made them. But Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord. (Genesis vi, 1-8.)

The earth also was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence. And God looked upon the earth, and, behold, it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted his way upon the earth. And God said unto Noah, The end of all flesh is come before me; for the earth is filled with violence through them; and, behold, I will destroy them with the earth. (Genesis vi, 11-13.)

It is in the commentaries to this last passage that the clue to the most enigmatic feature of the painting can be found—the explanation of the strawberries and other gigantic fruit which play such a conspicuous part in the composition. For not unnaturally God's words to Noah that he would 'destroy the earth' raised a problem of exegesis. The earth was not destroyed in the Flood. One explanation became standard in the glosses and

paraphrases, from the *Glossa Ordinaria* of the ninth century⁶ to Petrus Comestor's *Historia Scholastica* of the twelfth, that book which enjoyed such a popularity in the late Middle Ages that it almost eclipsed the Bible itself: what God had meant was that He would destroy the *fertility* of the earth. 'The vigour and fecundity of the soil is said to be much inferior after the Flood than it was before, and it is for this reason that man was given permission to eat meat, while before he lived on the fruits of the earth.'⁷

This is the aspect of antediluvian life on earth on which the imagination of the painter fastened when he filled his picture with people eagerly feeding on gigantic fruits. There are too many of them to enumerate, but I may draw attention to the group in the central foreground where a man whose head is covered by a huge blossom buries his teeth in a gigantic strawberry (Pl. 17c); to the circle of people in the water all feasting on a super-grape (Pl. 17b) and the crowd in the background on the left surrounding an even larger strawberry (Pl. 17a). A closer scrutiny also shows the many apples and berries enjoyed by the men and women who carry them on their heads or feast on them while they are making love.

That the principal sin that brought about the destruction of mankind was unchastity had always been taken for granted. The Biblical account of the beginning of this corruption through 'the sons of God who saw that the daughters of man were fair' has presented a famous crux to commentators. The possibility was always mooted that these were the fallen angels or demons and that the giants who are mentioned in this passage were the offspring of this sinful union.⁸ There may be an echo of this interpretation in the two large winged figures shown by Bosch in the right-hand corner of the panel carrying a berry and a fish through the air (Pl. 17d). But the presence of many black people, most of whom are women, suggests that Bosch mainly relied on another interpretation of the passage, which is stressed by St. Augustine in the *City of God* and found its way into the commentaries from there. According to this reading the 'sons of God' are to be understood as the offspring of Seth, the son of Adam, Noah's ancestor and a good man, while 'the daughters of man' represent the tribe of Cain.⁹ The belief that this tribe could be identified with

⁶ Migne, *P.L.*, cxiii, col. 105. So also Rabanus Maurus, *P.L.*, cvii, col. 513.

⁷ *P.L.*, cxcviii, col. 1082: '*Disperdam eos cum terra, id est cum fertilitate terrae. Tradunt quoque vigorem terrae, et fecunditatem longe inferiorem esse post diluuium, quam ante, unde esus carniuum homini concessus est, cum antea fructibus terrae victitaret.*' The motif of vegetarianism of man before the Flood was not, in all likelihood, prompted by the Biblical passage which is here explained, but by Genesis ix, 3, where God says to Noah after the Flood that 'every moving thing that liveth shall be meat for you'. In discussing the iconography of Bosch's Madrid *Epiphany* in C. S. Singleton (editor), *Interpretation: Theory and Practice*, Baltimore 1969, I have

had occasion to comment on the relevance of the *Historia Scholastica* for Bosch and to point out that the copy of the 1485 edition of that much printed work in the Paris Bibliothèque Nationale comes from the charterhouse of Bois le Duc, Bosch's hometown.

⁸ St. Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, *loc. cit.*, xv, 23, cautiously presents the pros and cons of this interpretation. The *Historia Scholastica* (*loc. cit.*, 1081), equally cautiously concedes another possibility: 'potuit etiam esse, ut incubi daemones genuissent gigantes'.

⁹ *loc. cit.*, xv, 22. In this interpretation the progeny of Seth represents and foreshadows the City of God while Cain's progeny stands for the terrestrial city. The *Historia Scholastica*

negroes¹⁰ and that their blackness was in fact the mark of Cain mentioned in the Bible was to play an unfortunate part in the arguments for the retention of slavery in subsequent centuries.¹¹

There was little else Bosch could learn about antediluvian man, but he let his imagination play around these few indications. Clearly in those days of vegetarianism animals had no fear of man. To us this proximity of man and beast may look more like a remnant of a paradisaical stage than a sign of particular depravity, but it may be well to remind ourselves that even in our language it is not a compliment to say that man has sunk to the level of beasts. The way in which these naked men and women give free rein to their animal instincts is in accord with their evident feeling of companionship with beasts both clean and unclean. They accept food from the gigantic birds which must have grown to this size because of the abundance of the earth.¹² One accepts the visit of a rat, and the majority disport themselves on all kinds of animals in the mad circular procession that fills the centre of the picture.

Lust had indeed driven man to madness in the period before the Flood. So, at least, we read again in the *Historia Scholastica*, which here refers to the visions of Methodius for a chronological account of the deterioration of mankind leading from abomination to perdition:

In the year five hundred from the year one thousand, that is after the first millennium, the sons of Cain abused the wives of their brothers with excessive fornication; but in the six hundredth year the women turned even more mad and abused the men. When Adam died, Seth separated his relatives from the family of Cain which returned to its native country. For while the father was alive he had prohibited them from intermingling, and Seth lived on some mountain close to Paradise. Cain lived in the plain where he had killed his brother. In the five hundredth year of the second millennium men caught fire having intercourse with each other. In the seven hundredth year of the second millennium the sons of Seth lusted after the daughters of Cain and hence the giants were born. And when the third millennium began the Flood set in.¹³

is again more straightforward: '*fili Dei*, id est Seth, religiosi, *fili hominum* id est de stirpe Cain'.

¹⁰ G. K. Hunter, 'Othello and Colour Prejudice', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, liii, 1967, p. 147.

¹¹ The belief had little theological sanction, since Cain's descendants must all have perished in the flood. Hence Isaac de la Peyrère argued in 1656 that the Negroes belong to a pre-Adamite race related to Cain (cf. T. F. Gossett, *Race, The History of an Idea in America*, Dallas 1963, p. 15). But it could also be argued that the curse on Ham for mocking Noah was a renewal or continuation of the curse on Cain (cf. Hunter, *loc. cit.*).

¹² The belief in 'antediluvian' monsters of gigantic size is again foreshadowed by St. Augustine, *op. cit.*, xv, 9, who refers to a find

he had witnessed of an enormous human molar which must have belonged to a giant before the Flood. But speculations about gigantic antediluvian animals clashed with the Biblical dimensions of Noah's ark, which made it hard enough to accommodate even all the animals of normal size. For these discussions see Don Cameron Allen, *The Legend of Noah*, Urbana 1949. The development of palaeontology had largely to evade or avoid this problem. Cf. Othenio Abel, *Vorzeltliche Tierreste im deutschen Mythos, Brauchtum und Volksglauben*, Jena 1939, and W. N. Edwards, *The Early History of Palaeontology*, London 1967.

¹³ *Hist. Schol.*, Lib. Genesis xxxi; Migne, *P.L.*, cxcviii, col. 1081: 'Methodius causam diluvii, hominum scilicet peccata, diffusius exsequitur dicens, quia quingentesimo anno

Given this description, Bosch's picture looks indeed remarkably restrained. It is not so much the wickedness of man's actions that is stressed as the complete self-abandon with which they are performed. There is another Biblical text which fully explains this aspect and which permits us to clinch the interpretation here proposed by means of an important document which has been known for some time to students of Bosch,¹⁴ but which has not been brought into connexion with the Madrid Triptych.

The inventory of the purchases of Archduke Ernest at Brussels shows that a triptych by Bosch was bought for him by Grameye in 1595 which was described as 'a history with naked people, *sicut erat in diebus Noe*'. It was suggested more than sixty years ago that this item was the same as the painting described in the inventory of the Prague *Kunst und Schatzkammer* of 1621 under the title 'the unchaste life before the Flood'. In this inventory, by the way, the item is followed by 'two altar wings how the world was created'.¹⁵ There can be no doubt that this was a copy or a replica of the Madrid Triptych.

But more is gained from this identification than the knowledge that the meaning of the central panel (though not of the wings) was still understood more than a hundred years after Bosch's death. The title itself not only confirms the interpretation, it also helps to make it more precise.

Sicut erat in diebus Noe is a quotation from the Gospel of St. Matthew, where Christ speaks of the coming Day of Judgement:

But of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only. But as the days of Noe were, so shall also the coming of the Son of man be. For as in the days that were before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noe entered into the ark, And knew not until the flood came, and took them all away; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be. (Matthew xxiv, 36-39.)

Here, as in the painting, what is stressed is not so much the wickedness of man before the Flood, as his unconcern. Thus the document about the

primæ chiliadis, id est post primam chiliadem, filii Cain abutebantur uxoris fratrum suorum nimis fornicationibus. Sexcentesimo vero anno mulieres in vesania versæ supergressæ viris abutebantur. Mortuo Adam, Seth separavit cognationem suam a cognatione Cain, quæ redierat ad natale solum. Nam et pater vivens prohibuerat ne commiserentur, et habitavit Seth in quodam monte proximo paradiso. Cain habitavit in campo, ubi fratrem occiderat. Quingentesimo anno secundæ chiliadis exarserunt homines in alterutrum coeuntes. Septingentesimo anno secundæ chiliadis filii Seth concupierunt filias Cain, et inde orti sunt gigantes. Et incepta tertia chiliade inundavit diluvium'. One might speculate on the date here assigned to the beginning of mankind's deterioration—the year 1500 after the creation—and the

probable date of the painting around A.D. 1500, but unless this parallelism could be documented from contemporary prognostications it is better regarded as a coincidence.

¹⁴ Tolnay, *op. cit.*, p. 397 (Lost Works by Hieronymus Bosch, No. 8); W. Fraenger, *Die Hochzeit zu Kana: ein Dokument semitischer Gnosis bei Hieronymus Bosch*, Berlin 1950, p. 97.

¹⁵ H. Zimmermann, 'Das Inventar der Prager Kunst und Schatzkammer vom 6. Dezember 1621', *Jahrbuch der kunsthistorischen Sammlungen in Wien*, xxv, 1905, p. xlvii, No. 1287, 'Das unzüchtige Leben vor der Sündfluth (Cop.), vielleicht A.A.18, Historia mit nacketen leuten, sicut erat in diebus Noe. 1288 Zween altarflügel, wie die Welt erschaffen'. I am indebted for this reference to Professor Otto Kurz.

original title of the Madrid Triptych also provides an invaluable key to the true mood of the work. It becomes indeed intelligible that Fraenger could make so many converts to his fantastic reading of the panel as a glorification rather than as a condemnation of sexual pleasures.¹⁶ For however wild his hypothesis about the presence of a nudist sect among the members of the Confraternity of Our Lady of S'Hertogenbosch may have been, he did discern something essential when he commented on the sense of joy rather than revulsion that pervaded the painting. True, the joy is not that of the painter or the ideal beholder but rather that of the *dramatis personae*. But the passage from the gospel which was probably inscribed on the painting makes it clear that what constituted the real sin of man before the flood was the absence of a sense of sin. People indulged in 'eating, drinking, marrying and giving in marriage' without a thought of the judgement that awaited the indulgent in that Hell where the very instruments of pleasure are turned into tools of torture (Pl. 16c). As Nicholas de Lyra comments on the passage: 'Erant enim tunc comedentes et bibentes in securitate: diluvium non timentes',¹⁷ while Rabanus Maurus is particularly anxious to combat the heretical interpretation that the Lord was here condemning eating and marriage as such. 'They perished in water and fire not because they did these things, but because they wholly gave themselves up to them and despised the judgement of God.'¹⁸ Returning to the picture from this text one can only admire the imagination with which Bosch evoked and envisaged this total absorption in eating, love-making and revelling.

Bosch's version, of course, is unique, but the subject he represented is not without parallel in Netherlandish Renaissance art. There exists an engraving by Sadeler after Barendzoon inscribed *Sicut autem erat in Diebus Noe* and showing naked people feasting in a landscape (Pl. 17e),¹⁹ but the artist appears not to have known about vegetarianism before the Flood and furnished them with a well-cooked fowl.

The parallel certainly takes Bosch's composition out of its complete isolation. With all its strangeness the triptych does conform to the tradition of Biblical illustration rather than to a genre of symbolic fantasies. It can be more easily imagined in a chapel or church even than the triptych with the *Hay-Wain*.

As in the case of the Madrid *Epiphany*, which I have discussed elsewhere,²⁰ it seems to me that we are much more likely to make further progress in the 'decoding of Bosch' by reading the Bible and its commentaries than by studying the kind of esoteric lore that has attracted so many of Bosch's interpreters.

¹⁶ W. Fraenger, *Das Tausendjährige Reich*, Coburg 1947, English as *The Millennium of H. Bosch*, London 1952. His most redoubtable opponent is D. Bax, *Beschrijving en poging tot verklaring van het Tuin der Onkuisheid-drieluik van J. Bosch*, Amsterdam 1956.

¹⁷ This important commentary has never been reprinted; it is to be found in many large editions of the Bible around 1500.

¹⁸ *P.L.*, cvii, col. 1078: 'Neque enim quia haec agebant, sed quia his se totos dedendo

Dei iudicia contemnebant, aqua vel igne perierunt'.

¹⁹ The verses under the print read:

Ut quondam tellus rapidis cum mersa procellis
Aequoris insanis convulsaque fluctibus atque
Per medias undas delata est Arca Profundi
Mortales turpi frangebant saecula luxu
Laxantes scelerum passim et constante habenas
Laetaque ad instructos carpentes gaudia mensas.

For the drawing cf. *Prisma der Bijbelse Kunst* (Exhib., Prinsenhof, Delft 1952), p. 43.

²⁰ See note 7 above.

This does not mean that the picture should necessarily be regarded as a pure illustration without any recourse to symbolism. The possibility certainly exists that the metaphors and allusions to sexual activities which Bax traced in what he called the *Tuin der Onkuisheid*²¹ were in fact intended to convey this message by the artist. Nor need we exclude the possibility that those hints at the instability of good fortune I believed to be discernible in the picture are purely imaginary. The Biblical theme itself does not exclude the presence of such symbols and several of the most obtrusive ones still await explanation. Maybe a tentative solution can still be proposed for some of these puzzling features. One concerns the curious motif of glass implements, many of which look like test-tubes. Was chemistry practised by the antediluvians? Actually it was, though the records take a rather confused and puzzling form. According to Josephus²² the 'children of Seth' knew that Adam had foretold the destruction of the world. They therefore made two pillars, one of stone, one of brick, to withstand both the forces of water and of fire, and inscribed on them all knowledge they wished to preserve for mankind after the flood.²³ The story of these pillars and of the care taken with their material spreads from the *Historia Scholastica* to other accounts of the history of the world.

Sometimes the craftsman is said to have been Tubal Cain, sometimes it is Jubal.²⁴ But at least in one medieval world chronicle, that of Rudolf von Ems, the authorship of the columns is attributed in more general terms to the sinful people before the Flood whose skill and cunning in contriving a resistant material 'harder than glass' is stressed:

Now there began, more and more, the increase of people; there were so many, all the time and ever, late and early, their number grew mightily. Sin and a sinful mind also began to increase; and with the power of their cunning skill there also increased their mastery of many skills and arts. Now Adam had foretold them that the world would have to perish through water, and come to an end in fire. Against this peril their skill artfully wrought two columns; one was of brick, the other of marble, harder than glass. Whatever art had been discovered by them they inscribed onto these columns. . . .²⁵

²¹ See note 16 above.

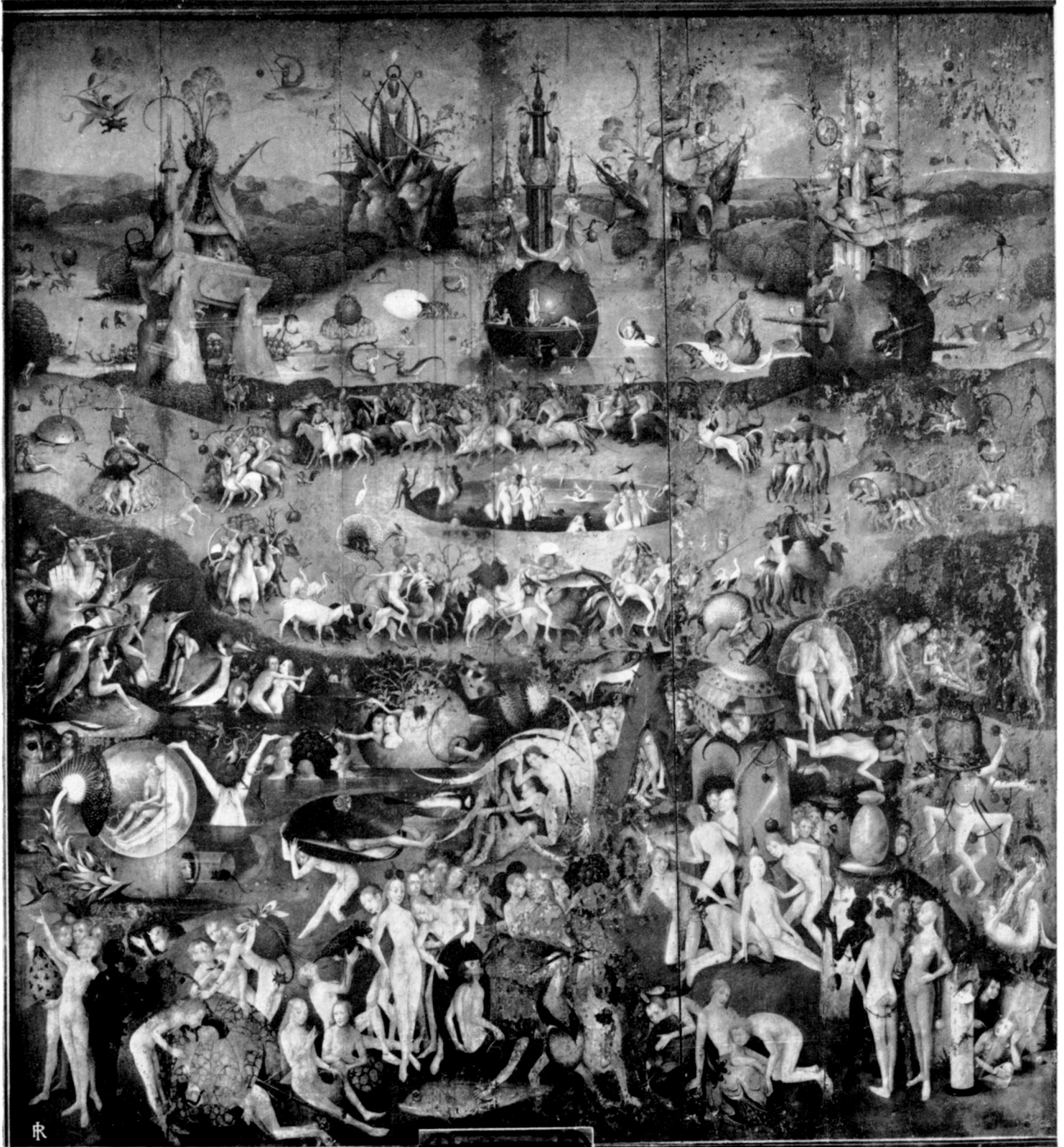
²² *Jewish Antiquities*, i, 70–71.

²³ *P.L.*, cxcviii, col. 1079: 'et quia (Tubal) audierat Adam prophetasse de duobus judiciis, ne periret ars inventa, scripsit eam in duabus columnis, in qualibet totam, ut dicit Josephus, una marmorea, altera latericia, quarum altera non diluetur diluvio, altera non solveretur incendio'.

²⁴ See Paul E. Beichner, 'The Medieval Representative of Music, Jubal or Tubal-cain?', *Texts and Studies in the History of Medieval Education*, ii, Notre-Dame, Indiana 1954.

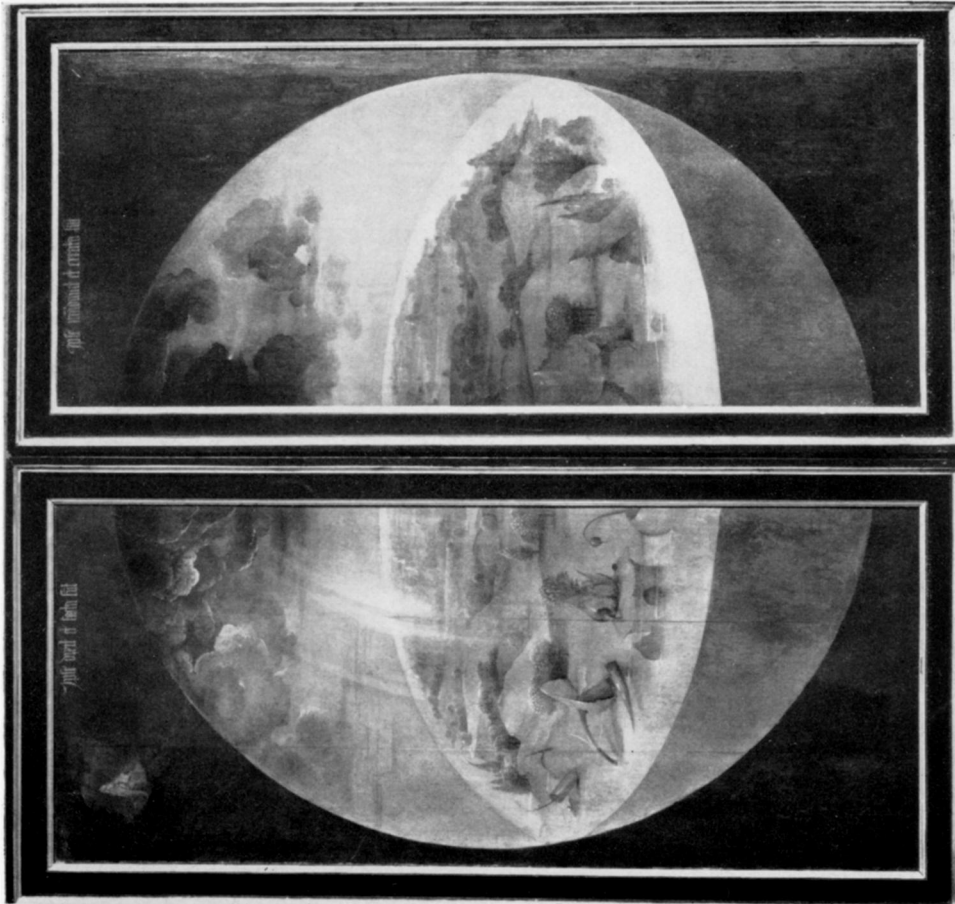
²⁵ Rudolf von Ems, *Weltchronik*, ed. Gustav Ehrismann, Berlin 1915: Nu begunde sere / ie mere und ie mere / wahsin das lút, sin wart vil, / alle zit und alle zil / leite spate unde

frû / ir zal mit kraft wahsende zu. // sünde und süntlichir sin / begunde wahsen ouh an in, / mit kunstlichir liste kraft / wchs ouh ir liste meisterschaft / an manegir kunst mit wisheit. // nu hat Adam in vor geseit / das al dú welt müste zergan / mit wazzir und ouh ende han / mit fûre: für die forhte / ir kunst mit vlize worhte / zŵ süle, der einú zigelin / was und dú ander steinin / von marmil, hertir danne ein glas. // swas kunst von in do fundin was / und irdaht, die scribin sie / an dise selbin süle . . . (verses 671–92). Needless to say I do not suggest that this German text was Bosch's immediate source, but it represents a tradition of rhymed world histories which could only be studied in detail by comparing many unpublished manuscript sources.

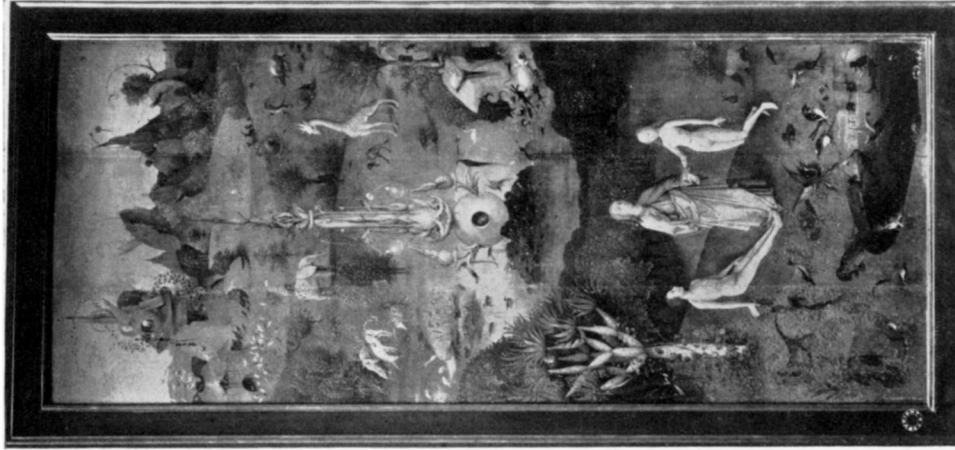


Bosch, "Garden of Earthly Delights," centre panel. Madrid, Prado (*pp.* 162f.)

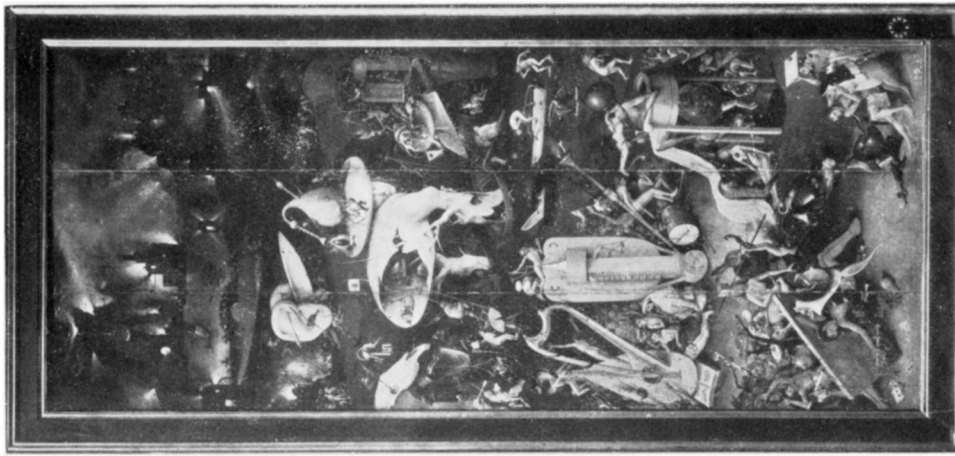
Photo: Anderson



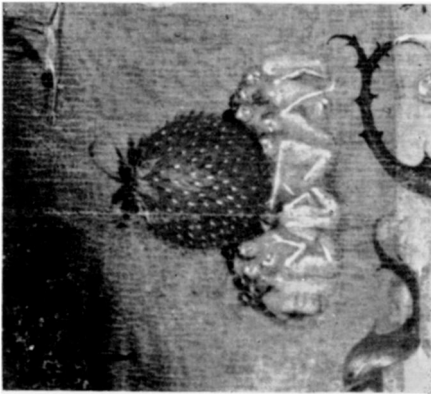
a—Bosch, “*Garden of Earthly Delights*”, closed triptych. Madrid, Prado (*pp.* 162f., 169f.)



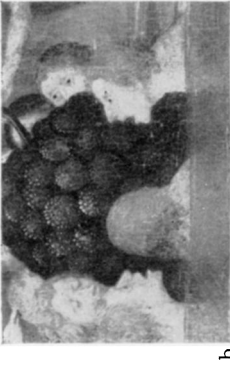
b—Bosch, “*Garden of Earthly Delights*”, Paradise wing. Madrid, Prado (*p.* 169)



c—Bosch, “*Garden of Earthly Delights*”, Hell wing. Madrid, Prado (*p.* 167)



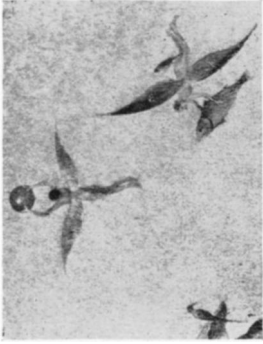
a—Detail of Pl. 15 (p. 164)
Photo: Mas



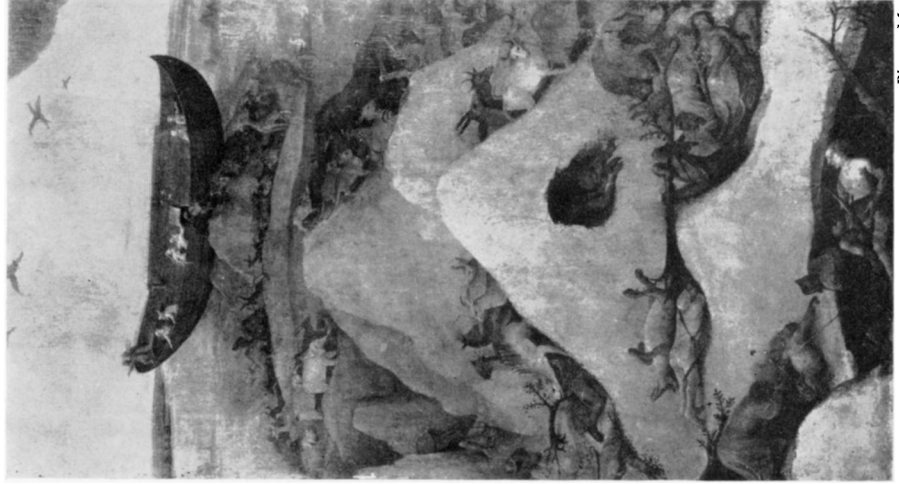
b
Photo: Mas



c



d—Detail of Pl. 15 (p. 164)



g—Bosch, *The Deluge*.
Museum Boymans (p. 170)
Photo: Mas
Rotterdam,



e—'Sicut erat in diebus Noe', engraving by J. Sadeler
(p. 167)



h—Detail of Pl. 15 (p. 169)
Photo: Mas



f—Detail of Pl. 16b (p. 169)

There is something very much like a pillar in the right-hand corner of the central panel, and behind it a pointing man who may be the only one who is dressed. Could he be Noah? (Pl. 17h.)

The test-tubes are also seen in Paradise, sticking out of the slag-heap in the central pool that supports the fountain with its four jets reminiscent of the four rivers of Paradise (Pl. 16b). The flesh colour of the fountain prompts the speculation whether Bosch may have known one of the most basic texts on the Flood, the *Liber de Noe et Arca* by St. Ambrosius where the passage 'all flesh had corrupted his way upon the earth' is commented upon at some length. 'It is out of the flesh that the rivers of concupiscence and other evils burst forth as from a fountain'.²⁶ However that may be, the creeping creatures which crawl out of that pond (Pl. 17f), no less than some of the other apparitions which disturb the beauty of Paradise, make it visually more intelligible than it could ever be intellectually that the Lord repented of the Creation. In Bosch's Paradise, corruption has already set in.

The giant trees with their fantastic shapes, which are the result of the fertility of the antediluvian soil, line the horizon here and on the central panel, but the swarm of black birds which spiral through and around them augurs nothing good.

It is these trees, of course, which are shown withered and dying in the waters of the Flood on the outer wing (Pl. 16a) to which we can return in conclusion. The verse from Psalm xxxiii we read across this scene of divine wrath and consoling promise is not in contradiction to its subject:²⁷

By the word of the Lord were the heavens made; and all the host of them by the breath of his mouth. He gathereth the waters of the sea together as an heap: he layeth up the depth in storehouses. Let all the earth fear the Lord: let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him. *For he spake, and it was done; he commanded, and it stood fast.* The Lord bringeth the counsel of the heathen to nought: he maketh the devices of the people of none effect. . . . The Lord looketh from heaven; he beholdeth all the sons of men. From the place of his habitation he looketh upon all the inhabitants of the earth. He fashioneth their hearts alike; he considereth all their works. There is no king saved by the multitude of an host: a mighty man is not delivered by much strength. An horse is a vain thing for safety: neither shall he deliver any by his great strength. Behold, the eye of the Lord is upon them that fear him, upon them that hope in his mercy: To deliver their soul from death, and to keep them alive in famine. . . . (Psalm xxxiii, 6-19.)

Thus the message of the triptych is not one of unredeemed gloom. The rainbow in the storm-cloud contains the promise that no second deluge will destroy the whole of mankind and the salvation of Noah the reminder that the good will not perish with the wicked.

²⁶ *P.L.*, xiv, col. 387: 'Itaque caro causa fuit corrupendae etiam animae quae velut origo et locus est quidam voluptatis, ex qua velut a fonte prorumpunt concupiscentiarum malarumque passionum flumina . . .'

²⁷ Nicholas de Lyra comments on 'Quoniam ipse dixit' . . . 'sicut enim simplici voluntate omnia creavit de nihilo: ita potest in nihilum redigere'.

This last mentioned motif is, of course, of such crucial importance in the interpretation of the Flood, that one must ask whether Bosch can really have omitted a representation of the ark when he painted the world emerging from the destructive waters. The question is all the more legitimate, as there exists a wing of an altar in Rotterdam (Pl. 17g) by Bosch or by his workshop which shows the unusual scene of the ark having come to rest and the animals emerging into a desolate landscape littered with the corpses of men and beasts drowned in the Flood.²⁸ The scale of the earth on the Madrid wings almost excludes the possibility of a similar representation, but whether or not the ark itself may have been visible in the centre is another matter. It is certain that all the pictures have been trimmed. This can be demonstrated through a comparison with the sixteenth-century tapestry based on them.²⁹ Moreover, we can safely assume that in this, as in countless other cases, Bosch enclosed the painted field of the outer wing in a complete circle. In the present mounting (Pl. 16a) the circle is maintained,³⁰ but bisected by the double frame which may not be original.³¹ A central strip about one-sixth of the total widths would thus be available for our imagination to play with. It corresponds to some 32 cms. out of a total width of some 194. The width of the Rotterdam wing is no more than 38 cms. Could it possibly represent an echo or an elaboration of the centre of the closed Triptych? But whatever fresh evidence about these and other aspects of Bosch's masterpiece the future may reveal, we can safely discard the awkward title of *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. Its Christian name is *Sicut erat in Diebus Noe*, or, perhaps more briefly, 'The Lesson of the Flood'.

²⁸ It was with this fragment that W. Fraenger connected the inventory entry mentioned above, in *Die Hochzeit zu Kana*, Berlin 1950.

²⁹ Otto Kurz, 'Four Tapestries after Hieronymus Bosch', this *Journal*, XXX, 1967. Some evidence for this cutting can even be discerned on the small illustration of his Pl. 15a, but in making the comparison for our purpose of reconstructing the amount of painting now missing in the centre of the outer wings not only the reversal of the image in the tapestry must be considered, but also

the reversal of the wings when they are closed. It is the motifs on the outer wings adjoining the columns on the tapestry that have to be scrutinized and these show indeed evidence of considerable trimming.

³⁰ The plate in Tolnay, *loc. cit.*, is misleading.

³¹ In two of Bosch's triptychs, the *Hay Wain* and the Madrid *Epiphany*, the inner wings are framed, but the outsides join up to form a continuous painting.