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The *Garden of Earthly Delights* by Hieronymus Bosch as a dream to be deciphered

By Meinhard Michael

The 'reality' character of *The Garden of Earthly Delights* has often been contemplated. Does the painting represent a vision of earthly paradise? Maybe neither the earthly nor the heavenly paradise is depicted, but instead a vision of both to warn of the sensual corruption of nature (Paul Vandenbroeck)? Or a utopia; how the world would have looked without the fall of man (Hans Belting and others)? Or are the viewers being examined, to test whether they are able to recognize the truth of the deadly danger behind the insidious face of earthly pleasure? (Reindert L. Falkenburg) Perhaps the whole story is a dream of the Antichrist who has fatally directed the world from the very beginning (Margaret A. Sullivan)?¹



Fig. 1: The Garden of Earthly Delights, inside view, 220 x 390 cm, Madrid, Museo del Prado, Inv. P02823.

The following suggests that *The Garden of Earthly Delights* of Hieronymus (Jheronimus) Bosch is the extensive dream of a concrete figure which is shown in the picture itself. This approach leads to a more detailed understanding of the picture than before. Almost everything

¹ Paul Vandenbroeck, *Jheronimus Bosch zogenaamde 'Tuin de Lusten'*, in: *Jaarboek van het Koninklijk Museum voor schone Kunsten Antwerpen 1989*, S. 2-210., Teil II. *De Graal of het Valse Liefdesparadis*, JbKMA 1990, S. 9-192. Hans Belting, *Hieronymus Bosch, Garten der Lüste*, München 2002. Reindert L. Falkenburg, *The Land of Unlikeness. Hieronymus Bosch – The Garden of Earthly Delights*, Zwolle 2011, Joseph Leo Koerner, *Bosch & Bruegel. From enemy painting to everyday life*, Princeton, Oxford 2016, S. 179-222. Margaret A. Sullivan, *The timely art of Hieronymus Bosch. The left panel of 'The Garden of Earthly Delights'*, in: *Oud Holland 127* (2014), 4, S. 165-194.

that the central panel reveals belongs to this human dream. It contains a vision and thus an appeal to the dreaming woman herself, and she follows this appeal.²

First of all, this essay demonstrates how, with a slightly varied topos, viewers are invited to interpret a dream. The second paragraph identifies more elements that are important for the relationship between dreamer and dream. Third follows the discussion of how the dream modifies the conventions of dream representation, whereby its specific representation – being narrated from awakening – is underlined. Fourth, it can be roughly determined that the woman has experienced a ‘mixed dream’; the dream contains both fantastic and seductive details as well as a ‘code of conduct’.³

Fifth, it is suggested that a passage from William of St. Thierry's *Golden Epistle* is a kind of ‘exposé’ for *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. The last, the sixth section, outlines how, at the moment of awakening, at the ‘dream border’, the whole picture is brought together. The awakening and the dream together form the didactic core of the triptych.

1. For an explanation of the dream in *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, reference should be made to a method of book illustration which is incidentally further proof of the often-discussed suggestions of book illustration by Bosch. It’s about the woman in the cave at the bottom right, who rests her head in her left hand and looks up to the left (**Fig. 2**).



Fig. 2: Central panel, detail, the awakening from the dream starts the narrative.

Fig. 3: Opening illustration from *The Romance of the Rose*, French, second quarter of the 14th century British Library, Additional 31840, vol. 3. © The British Library.

The staging of the gazes of the figures in the ‘cave’, similarly intense as on the paradise wing and opposite to the creation of Eve, suggests that there is no mere marginal communication here.⁴ The necessary elements of a simple dream constellation, such as Jean-Claude Schmitt

² The text published here is an English version of my essay *Der Garten der Lüste als Traum – der zu entschlüsseln ist*, Art-Dok Heidelberg 2017, with references also to later publications. – Cf. M.M., *Hieronymus Bosch's The Garden of Earthly Delights*, Norderstedt 2018, and the essays *Einen Herzschlag lang hinüber. Die Disposition der Zeit im Garten der Lüste von Hieronymus Bosch*, Art-Dok 2017, (below Michael 2017 Herzschlag). – *Wenn Paradiestore sich in Luftschlösser verwandeln. Imagination und Vision im Garten der Lüste von Hieronymus Bosch*, Art-Dok 2018, (Michael 2018 Imagination). – *Bestrafter Geldwechsler ohne Maß und Verstand? ‚Discretio spirituum‘ und der ‚Goldene Brief‘ als Methode und als Quelle im ‚Garten der Lüste‘ von Hieronymus Bosch*, ebd. 2018 (Michael 2018 Geldwechsler). – *Neues von der Nonnen-Sau. Die Hauptfigur und der Konzepteur des Gartens der Lüste von Hieronymus Bosch*, Art-Dok 2020 (Michael 2018 Nonnensau)

³ See M.M., *Hüte deine Seele! Die Fünf Sinne und ein Verhaltensgebot im Garten der Lüste von Hieronymus Bosch*, Art-Dok Heidelberg 2017.

⁴ See esp. the eyes of the first man behind the woman: his right eye looks to the bird; his left eye looks out of the painting. Cf. Michael 2018, p. 85.

defined, are present: The figure we see is the one that dreams (although afterwards). Secondly, the dream is shown, which in this case provides her with better insight by means of a vision. We find there also the third element of the structure of a dream representation, according to Jean-Claude Schmitt: The compositional details that connect dreams and dreamers, almost regardless of the means used.⁵

Several medieval texts are told as dreams. In both the Late Middle Ages, as well as in Early Modern Times, the dream is a signpost for a successful life. The practice of dressing something incredible in dreams was extremely common at the end of the 15th century. On a carpet featuring the finale of the *Romance of the Rose*, the designer noted that the poet told it as a dream, ‘so that he would not be reproached too much’.⁶

Several illustration cycles of the *Romance of the Rose* begin with a depiction of the dreaming figure lying on a bed. In many cases, the dreamer puts one hand on their cheek, which applies also to other dreams and visions (**Fig. 3**).⁷ In the opening illustration of René d’Anjou’s (1409-1480) *Book of the Beloved Heart* (*Le Livre du coeur d’amour épris*, c. 1465-70), Cupid takes the heart from the hero sleeping with his hand on his cheek so that it can prove itself in the adventures he dreams of. The poet-monk of *Pèlerinage de vie humain*, the pilgrimage of human life, is sometimes seen at the beginning of the text on his bed, a hand on his cheek as an indication that he’s dreaming.⁸

Thus, the first assumption is that the woman in the cave – even though she has already awakened – is presented as a type of dreamer. There are several arguments for this. The most important is the above-mentioned gesture and the convention of dream representation itself. Despite the small change, the hand on the cheek suggests that the woman in the cave should be identified as a dreamer. Although the head is not heavy in the hand, but is detached from it, the convention of that ‘hand on the cheek’ is recognizable.

There is an essential difference to be noted. In the *Romance of the Rose*, in the *Pèlerinage de vie humain* and other texts, the heroes ‘awaken’ only *into* their dreams. The dreamers continue to sleep, and their dream of adventures and hellish journeys is shown, from which they only awaken again afterwards. This final awakening is usually not illustrated.⁹ The woman in *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, on the other hand, does not awaken into the dream, but from the dream. In order to be recognized, she has turned her head slightly out of her hand.

First of all, it should therefore be noted that a thoroughly conventional gestural topos of dream representation – easily confused with other meanings of the hand on the cheek – is used from book illustrations.

2. What happens *in front* of and what happens *in* the cave work together as a bracket (third part of the dream structure) between the dreaming and the dreamed (Fig. 6**). The**

⁵ Claude Schmitt, *Bildhaftes Denken. Die Darstellung biblischer Träume in mittelalterlichen Handschriften*, in: *Träume im Mittelalter. Ikonologische Studien*, ed. Agostino Paravicini Bagliani and Giorgio Stabile, Stuttgart, Zürich 1989, p. 9-24, p. 10. The means connecting dreams and dreaming human beings are extremely variable.

⁶ Cited in Anna Rapp Buri, Monica Stucky-Schürer, *Burgundische Tapisserien*, München 2001, p. 451.

⁷ Cf. the examples in Herman Braet, *Der Roman der Rose, Raum im Blick*, in: Paravicini Bagliani/Stabile 1989, pp.183-192.

⁸ *Le Coeur d’amour épris*, ca. 1460, Wien, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Cod. 2597. Cf. Otto Pächt, Dagmar Thoss, *Französische Schule*, Wien 1974, vol. 1, pp. 37-48, vol. 2, Fig 57. – *Pèlerinage de vie humain: Die Pilgerfahrt zum himmlischen Jerusalem. Ein allegorisches Gedicht des Spätmittelalters aus der Heidelberger Bilderhandschrift. Cod. Pal. Lat. 1969, des Guillaume de Déguiville*, ed. Rosemarie Bergmann, Wiesbaden 1983, fig.1, p. 81.

⁹ Cf. Eberhard König, ‘*Atant fu jourz, et je m’esveille*’. *Zur Darstellung des Traums im Rosenroman*, in: Paravicini Bagliani / Stabile 1989, pp. 171-182, p. 178.

dreaming/awakening woman in the cave is slightly hairy. The ‘fur’ appears rather thin and only curls on the right shoulder. She is often mistaken for Eve, like her companion dressed in the fur skirts of original sin, or for a wild, un-Christian woman. The first woman in front of the cave is also much hairier than the others. This is the first connecting motif.

The second: Both times a man points a finger at the woman. The parallel scenes correspond to the experience that a ‘last dream scene’ leads to consciousness, for example when an alarm clock rings to replace a dream sound and so on. The first waking scene and the last dream moment combine details that are somehow similar, and so the two states are linked.



Fig. 4, 5: Marcantonio Raimondi, *The Dream of Raphael*, 1507-8, engraving, Commons Wikimedia (London, British Museum).

Marcantonio Raimondi, in his copperplate engraving *The Dream of Raphael* (1506-1508), also juxtaposes the dreamer with a dreamed figure of herself (**Figs. 4, 5**). The, in this case, “faithful mirror image of the two sleeping women in the foreground” suggests that there, too, it is meant that a woman has her dreamed counterpart in front of her.¹⁰

As is well known, painting and book illustration of the flat lands often employed visions in the 15th century. Basically, with *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, there is only a variant of a vision transformed into a dream, as can be seen in the *Book of Hours* of Mary of Burgundy. Behind a flat aesthetic (window) threshold, Mary of Burgundy sees herself adoring Mary and the Christ Child, or in the role of the Mother of God in the Passion.¹¹ The assumption that there is a dreaming woman in the cave and a dream outside the cave is confirmed by the preliminary drawing of the scene. The underdrawing and the final version differ from each other.

The woman, hairy like a Mary of Egypt, in front of the cave, is looking now at her neighbors. But according to the preliminary drawing she should look in the opposite direction, towards the bottom right, from the viewer’s perspective towards the cave (**Fig. 6**). The woman standing to her left should look at her and should put her right arm around her waist as if to stop her moving towards the cave.

¹⁰ Cf. Horst Bredekamp, *Traumbilder von Marcantonio Raimondi bis Giorgio Ghisi*, in: Werner Hofmann, ed., *Zauber der Medusa*, Wien 1987, p. 62-72, quot. 64.

¹¹ Wien, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Cod. 1857, fol. 13v. See Hans Belting, Christiane Kruse, *Die Erfindung des Gemäldes. Das erste Jahrhundert der niederländischen Malerei*, München 1994, p. 56, pp. 224-225; cf. Jean-Claude Schmitt, *L’imagination efficace*, in: Klaus Krüger, Alessandro Nova, ed., *Imagination und Wirklichkeit. Zum Verhältnis von mentalen und realen Bildern in der Kunst der frühen Neuzeit*, Mainz 2001, p. 13-20.

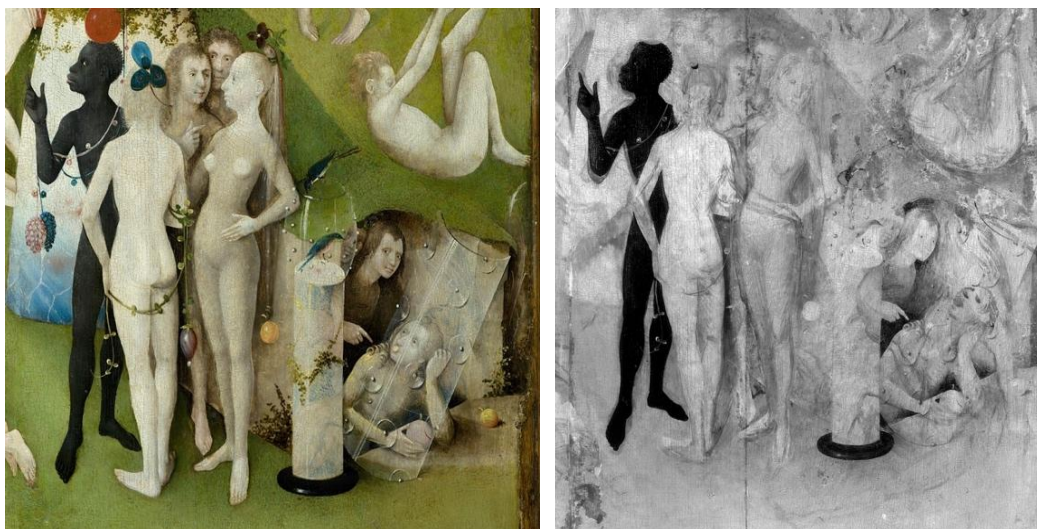


Fig. 6: Central panel, detail ‘dream threshold’: groups with partly similar designs in front of and in the cave.

Fig. 7: IRR, underdrawing of the same area with the woman in front of the cave turning down towards the cave, ‘moving’ herself as if being dreamed to ‘herself’ as an awakened woman.

The woman in front of the cave, hairy like Maria Aegyptiaca, was to turn out of the embrace and bend spatially ‘out of the dream’. No doubt this would have supported the dream logic: With one last dreamy gesture of her alter ego, the woman in the cave awakens. The reasons for the changes in the painting process cannot be further discussed here.

3. Another argument for accepting the gesture of a dream – and of awakening – is the relationship between the cave and the central image as a whole. The formal relocation of dreamers in older representations, the ‘inclusion’ in a ‘capsule’ for example a mattress¹³, is represented by the ‘cave’ in *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. The cave is the dream ‘capsule’; the dream starts outside. “In the late Middle Ages, the inner space developed into the dominant dispositive for the visualization of an inner vision: the cell, the chamber, the cave, the tower, the monastery, the house.”¹⁴

According to even older pictorial conventions of dream representation, this would not strictly be necessary. Long before 1500, the identification of the dreamer and the dreamed was not made by physical differences, as it were in brackets or quotation marks, but a simple locale shift, often even the simple ‘continuation’ after the depiction of the dreamer, was sufficient to make the dream readable as such.¹⁵ Often, for example, a figure of which the dreamer dreams appears directly next to the bed, i.e. the dream begins, as it were, at the foot of the bed. Often one sees the dreamer himself lying in his bed, as well as getting dressed or getting up, and so forth within his dream, that is, the dreamer and the dream are represented simultaneously

In this way, the opening illustration of *The Romance of the Rose* is composed in a manuscript that may have been commissioned by Engelbert II of Nassau between 1490 and 1500 (**Fig. 8**).

¹³ Steffen Bogen, *Träumen und Erzählen. Selbstreflexion der Bildkunst vor 1300*, München 2001, cit. p. 68, 72.

¹⁴ David Ganz, *Medien der Offenbarung. Visionsdarstellungen im Mittelalter*, Berlin 2008, p. 247-279, cit. p. 247.

¹⁵ David Ganz: „Die Differenz zwischen geistiger Schau und körperlichem Sehen wird primär über einen Diskurs der Orte vermittelt.“. Cf. David Ganz, *Oculus inferior. Orte der inneren Schau in mittelalterlichen Visionsdarstellungen*, in: *anima und sele: Darstellungen und Systematisierungen von Seele im Mittelalter*, ed. Katharina Philipowski, Anne Prior, Berlin 2006, pp. 113-143, cit. p. 114. Cf. Marianne Zehnpfennig, „Traum“ und „Vision“ in Darstellungen des 16. und 17. Jahrhunderts, Tübingen 1979, p. 27.



Fig. 8: The Romance of the Rose, opening illustration (detail), 1490-1500, London, British Library, Ms. Harley MSS 4425, fol. 7; © The British Library.

Fig. 9: Albrecht Dürer, The Dream of the Doctor, engraving, ca. 1498.

The one who dreams and acts can be seen several times: in bed, although not here with the hand on the cheek, then a second time in the house, then twice in front of the house, once as a back view, once with the face out of the picture.¹⁶

The plot of the dream starts, therefore, very often without any separation between dreamer and dream. The contrast between sleep and wakefulness, dream and reality is not played out, “but rather concealed.”¹⁷ At times, even in early modern times, dream suggestion seems to have been about blurring the dream and the dreamed, for example in Albrecht Dürer’s copperplate engraving *Traum des Doktors* (**Fig. 9**). Dürer’s naked woman in the foreground, just as realistic to the eye as the rest of the picture, is the dream of the man who has fallen asleep, with a devil blowing the evil images into his ear with a bellows – as an evil reversal of a *conceptio per aurem* into Mary’s ear.¹⁸

Dürer’s dreamer receives the whispers of the devil – with the morally negative result in the foreground. The example makes it clear that there are various incidental methods of revealing a dream and keeping it hidden. But whenever a ‘dream formula’ shines through a composition, a dream should be suspected.

In the present case, however, there is a decisive difference. The woman has awakened. Perhaps this is precisely why we do not see the dream one hundred percent the same as the dreamer, and not divorced from the dreamer, but rather separated. Several motifs of distance are built in. Firstly, the few millimeters between hand and cheek are already a displacement: In the figures directly in front of the cave, the dream of the woman who has moved slightly away from the dream position begins or ends in the cave. The temporal distance is spatially confirmed, because the cave actually stands out from the rest of the picture. *The Romance of the Rose* needs 20 verses before it dives into the dream for thousands more. The relation is similar in *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, although the woman has awakened.

If we compare the dream-reality relationship between Dürer’s dream of the doctor and the dream in *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, we see what Aurelius Augustine wrote about the nature of dreams in *De Genesi ad Litteram* (12, II, 3). The person who dreams does not

¹⁶ London, British Library, Ms. Harley MSS 4425, fol. 7. Already in Walter S. Gibson, *The Strawberries of Hieronymus Bosch*, in: *Cleveland Studies in the History of Art* 8 (2003), pp. 24-33.

¹⁷ Bogen 2001, p. 32.

¹⁸ Cf. Tanja Klemm, *Bildphysiologie. Wahrnehmung und Körper in Mittelalter und Renaissance*, Berlin 2013, pp. 206, 213.

distinguish the images he sees from himself, as Augustine puts it, he accepts their unreal circumstances as real. If, on the other hand, he awakens, he immediately recognizes them as imaginary.¹⁹ It is important to awaken.

4. What does the woman dream in the cave? Among other things, she dreams of a *Wheel of Five Senses* in which the senses are misused. She dreams of a hub of this circle of senses (psychologically the *sensus communis*) as a shell in which lies a presumably naked couple, and of other erotic scenes. She dreams of a code of conduct that warns against bending like the tree-human. She dreams also of flying people, women with fish tails, huge fruits that people snap greedily at, of fruit that transforms like insects; of giant fruit bowls in which people frolic, of hybrid beings and hybrid forms. This means that although the woman's dream contains a didactic reference, it is metaphorically packaged, and it is mixed among a whole range of unreal things.



Fig. 10: Middle panel, foreground. On the left in the five 'fruit bowls' the Wheel of the (outer) Senses, with the shell carrier as its hub. To the right the red 'tree tent', the 'portal' and the whitish 'tree/column stump' as three small scale architectures for the (four) inner senses/soul powers (like three cerebral ventricles in brain representations). In the right half, on the lower edge, the slightly isolated group of three men as 'code of conduct' and as three stages of the soul's progress (two 'beginning' souls with bent backs as the type *homo curvatus*) based on the *Golden Epistle* by Wilhelm von Thierry.

Dreams are illusion or revelation, produced by your own soul, by demons or given by God. In the Early Modern period, scholars continually referred to Macrobius' *Commentarii in Somnium Scipionis*. Macrobius had distinguished true visions from dreams that have no prophetic power. The latter arise, for example, from fear and from eating food that is too heavy before sleep (*insomnium*).

Despite all the differences in the evaluations of dreams, it can be generalized that the later Middle Ages understood dreams much more as the result of an individually experienced past than as predictions for the future, and that the dreaming body was much more calculated.

¹⁹ Aurelius Augustinus, *Psychologie und Mystik (De Genesi ad Litteram 12)*, Einsiedeln 1960, pp. 28-29. Cf. Bogen 2001, pp. 52-55, about 'embedding' the dream pp. 66-68.

Nevertheless, thanks to the biblical examples and the dreams of revival in many legends, the religious and moral ‘visionary call’ of dreams never completely disappeared.²³

Tertullian’s dream is best served by a light morning sleep – shortly before awakening.²⁴ In the first ‘sleeping fog’ (*prima somni nebula*) a specific dream (*visum, phantasma*) is created. Here one sees “forms (...) whirling around (...), which differ from natural things in essence, size and shape and which, in their onslaught, evoke joy and excitement”.²⁵ The example of Macrobius, the ugly images that produce the hallucinations, the dreams most distant from God, are the fish-tailed women. One sees some of them in the background of the pleasure garden

In the dream of the awakening woman, characteristics of different dreams can be recognized; it is a mixed dream. The dreamer sees herself in the phantasmal love strawberry dream, and at the same time she sees the appeal, the curved backs in the ‘code of conduct’, which are clearly parallel to each other in form, in the shell-bearer and the tree-man as images of *homo curvatus*.²⁶ Her dream, which is confused, seductive and moralistic, also tells her: You must not do that. But the appeal is concealed in pictorial narrative, like the *somnium*, which encodes its message in metaphors. *The Garden of Earthly Delights* can thus be deciphered as *somnium*, not only by the awakening, but also by the beholders, by dream definition. In other words, the most striking aesthetic quality of *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, its mysteriousness, is also due to the fact that it is this kind of dream.

It would be astounding if the cause of a dream that leads to ‘awakening’ were to be presumed to lie with the woman alone. Instead, divine influence must be taken into account, either directly or in a spiritual disposition of the soul. The dream of the woman in the cave corresponds astonishingly to a classification which Steffen Bogen established for the older dream representation. He distinguishes between a dream of commission, a dream of promise and a dream of recognition.²⁷ The latter provides the visionary with a “conversion experience”. He “recognizes his previous actions as misconduct and makes a new conviction his own.” In dreams of cognition, the desired behavior is condensed into a “symbolic dream image” and the visionary is required “not only to do the right thing but also to see correctly”. These dreams are repeatedly dichotomous, the positive side of the action is contrasted with the negative.²⁸

Although the woman’s dream fits into this epistemological category, one may well expect that around 1500, the expanded psychological and physiological insights, above all the aesthetic practice, that had long since incorporated dreams, would have broken tight functional constraints. However, it becomes clear that although the desired ingredients – from ironically dressed-up sex to exotic hybrid inventions to didactic-religious references – were mixed at will, the function of the dream as a means of knowledge remains the same. However, the playful irony in *The Garden of Earthly Delights* probably indicates that the patron was less interested in actual educational success.

²³ Die „Grundformen des Wissens über den Traum (...) konnten jedoch je nach Kontext erheblich variieren.“ Claire Gantet, *Der Traum in der Frühen Neuzeit*, Berlin/New York 2010, p. 3.

²⁴ Cf. Jacques Le Goff, *Phantasie und Realität des Mittelalters*, Stuttgart 1990, pp. 293, 299.

²⁵ Macrobius, *Commentarii in Somnium Scipionis*, I, 3, cf. Klemm 2013, pp. 220-229, cit. p. S. 221. Cf. Gantet 2010, pp. 13-54.

²⁶ Cf. Michael 2018, pp. 18-20, also Michael 2018 (Geldwechsler).

²⁷ Bogen 2001, pp. 110-120.

²⁸ The best time for dream vision was ‘nach mette’, (after midnight), in the early morning when the tired prayers again fell asleep. Cf. Alois M. Haas, *Traum und Traumvision in der Deutschen Mystik*, in: *Spätmittelalterliche geistliche Literatur in der Nationalsprache I*, (Analecta Cartusiana 106), Salzburg 1983, pp. 22-55, esp. pp. 37, 42. According to my interpretation the hell of the triptych is a vision of Psalm 68/69, which was read on Thursday morning. Cf. Michael 2018, pp. 113-120.

5. Nevertheless, the dream of *The Garden of Earthly Delights* can even be called something like an ‘exposé’. William of Thierry recommended to the monastic addressees of his *Golden Epistle* a step-by-step path to get beyond the *status animalis* and the *status rationalis* in order to become ‘spiritual people’ in the *status spiritualis*.²⁹ His treatise remained influential in the late Middle Ages, for example for Dionysius the Carthusian.³⁰

The kind of dream she had can be determined more precisely through William of St. Thierry. In the first part of his *Golden Epistle* he writes about the very earliest believers. They are sinners, but already conscience-smitten people. William distinguishes between two kinds of the ‘animal man’. The one man continues his bad behaviour. The second wants to improve, but cannot defeat the older desires in his mind: “as long as this is so, he is plagued with the imaginations of what he has done and seen and heard, and this brings him a pleasure which he hates” (§ 62).³¹ Because he cannot completely overcome his inclinations, he “cannot rid himself of the imaginations”. (§ 63).³²

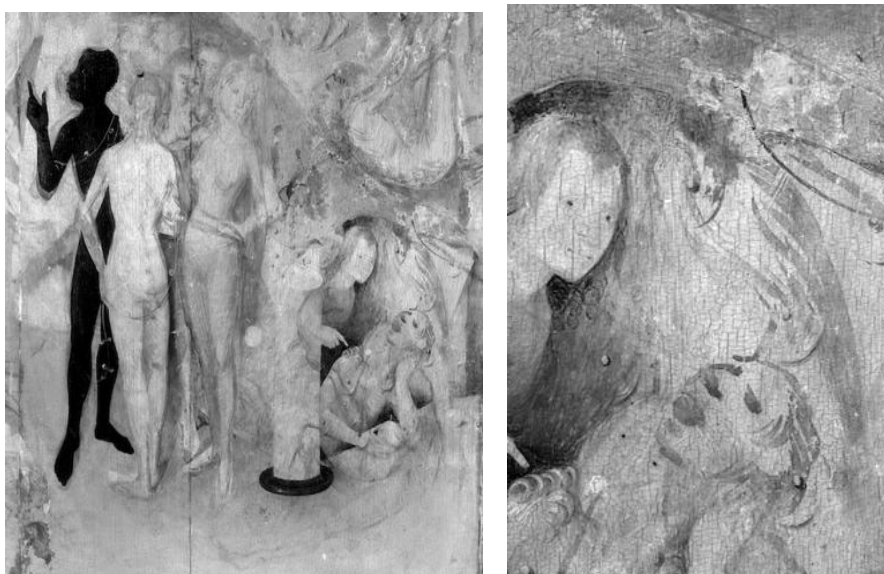


Fig. 11, 12: Infrared reflectography of the cave area, to the right in the enlargement. In evidence, the bird feet and bird body on top of the slightly higher head of the woman. Photo: Prado, Banco Imagines.

Then a paragraph follows (§ 64), which actually sounds like an ‘exposé’ for the center panel of the triptych:

²⁹ Wilhelm von Saint-Thierry, *Goldener Brief* (Texte der Zisterzienser-Väter 5), Eschenbach 1992. Cf. William of St. Thierry, *The Golden Epistle*, transl. by Theodore Berkeley OCSO, Kalamazoo (Mi), 1980; cited below according to the paragraphs.

³⁰ Cf. Dirk Wassermann, *Dionysius der Kartäuser. Einführung in Werk und Gedankenwelt*, Salzburg 1996, pp. 46-49.

³¹ „...Qui uero iam concupiscentiam uicit, quamdiu tamen ueri boni maior concupiscentia uel maior delectatio mentem eius non obtinuerit, cum exosa quadam uoluptate gestorum, uisorum, auditorum patitur imaginationes.“ Cit. Gvillielmi a Sancto Theodorico Opera Omnia, Pars 3, Turnhout 2003 (CCCM LXXXVIII) (§ 62).

³² The model of the two kinds of ‘beginning believers’ or of two kinds of the ‘animal man’ is also relevant for the ‘instruction for behavior’ or ‘code of moral conduct’ in the foreground of the painting: the group of three men, two of them parallel with bent backs. The better of the two bent men is the foremost, he only has to endure the imaginations of his earlier behavior (that of the rear man). William of St. Thierry twice quotes in § 63 Psalm 37/38 (verses 8 and 11), where Bosch could have found that these passages talk about the *homo curvatus*. Verse 37,7: *adflictus sum et incurvatus...* . Cf. Michael 2018 (Geldwechsler).

“Hence it is that at the time of psalmody or prayer and other spiritual exercises, the heart of God’s servant, for all he refuses to admit them and struggles against them, is beset with imaginations and fantastic thoughts. Like unclean birds they perch upon him or fly round him, so that the sacrifice of his devotion is either snatched from the hand that holds it or, often, is defiled, to the extent that the offeror is reduced to tears.”

There has been much speculation about the bird on the head of the woman in the cave, which was planned at the time of the preliminary drawing but then was not painted (**Fig. 12**).³⁴ Infrared reflectography shows the distinctive head of the woman, nose and eyes higher and a little further to the right than in the painting; on the head, bird feet are shown and a large bird’s torso. Originally, therefore, a bird was meant to be on her head.

This or a similar idea of the ‘digressive dream’ in the monotony of the song, which, tempted by the earlier sensual lust, awakens ‘impure’ thoughts, which, with the help of the imagination, have crept into the dream as ‘illusory creations’ and circle around the poor dreamer, who cannot resist them, like impure birds. This could be imagined in the intellectual background of the picture. Augustine, on whose *Confessiones* in this respect the passage from the *Golden Epistle* of Wilhelm von Thierry is probably also based, had used the metaphor of “birdlike, fleeting thoughts” – man must master them like the instincts.³⁵

The woman, who is marked by body language as dreamer/awakened, was given a very special dream symbol on her head in the preliminary drawing. This accent was no longer to mark the woman in the painted version. But even if this special form of ‘illusory image’ is no longer to be taken into account (or only: no longer indicated), the woman’s dream ‘half asleep’ remains visibly marked by the dubious fantastic forms and actions of a ratio-inhibited dream imagination – and contains a dichotomous warning against it. The elimination of the bird on the head does not change the dream.

6. The dreamer sees in the dream the ‘code of conduct’ and in awakening she is someone else. Two very different moments can be named briefly, which mark the threshold of awakening. The woman in the cave and the woman in front of it can be understood as allegories to the two repentant sinners, Mary Magdalene and Mary Aegyptiaca. The example of Magdalene in the cave awakens to salvation after dreaming herself as Aegyptiaca. It is logical that the two were misunderstood as ‘savages’, they are perhaps also marked as savages. Johann Geiler von Kaysersberg attributed those saints who had long lived in the wilderness (Maria Aegyptiaca, Maria Magdalena, Aegidius, Onophrius) “to the ‘wild people’,” writes Lise Lotte Möller.³⁶

The dream, her vision, that is in the didactic sense, has transformed the dreamer. At first glance, Magdalene’s fur is barely visible. However, it clearly curls at the shoulder (**Fig. 14**).³⁷

³⁴ It has become visible again through the faded color. The detail was important. In the drawing this area is one of a few drawn with deep black brush strokes. Cf. Carmen Garrido, Roger Van Schoute, *Bosch at the Museo del Prado*, Madrid 2001, p. 169, fig. 12, p. 166.

³⁵ Cit. Kurt Flasch, *Eva und Adam. Wandlungen eines Motivs*, München 2004, p. 38, p. 105, note 43.

³⁶ Catalogue *Die Wilden Leute des Mittelalters*, Hamburg 1963 (Introduction Lise Lotte Möller), p. XI. The question of how, in general, the figure is designed is difficult to answer. According to further investigations it is possible that her role is that of the mystic *l’âme pécheresse* and like the famous Heloise, especially as has been interpreted by Jean Molinet in his *Romance of the Rose* moralized (1500). Cf. Michael 2020 Nonnen-Sau.

³⁷ Losing her fur is of course not characteristic to Magdalene. We have to understand the woman as a transitory figure with a mystical body from Eva to Magdalena to Heloise. According to Reindert Falkenburg the paradise fountain varies the Trees of Virtues/Vices of the *Speculum Virginum* tradition. The basic idea of the cave – the place at the bottom – could well have been inspired by the representation of the ‘Three Grades (Types) of Women’ from the *Speculum Virginum*, in which Eve (and Adam) are placed (in a capsule below) by the roots of the tree. Cf. *Speculum Virginum*, ca. 1140, London, British Library, MS Arundel 44, fol. 70r.

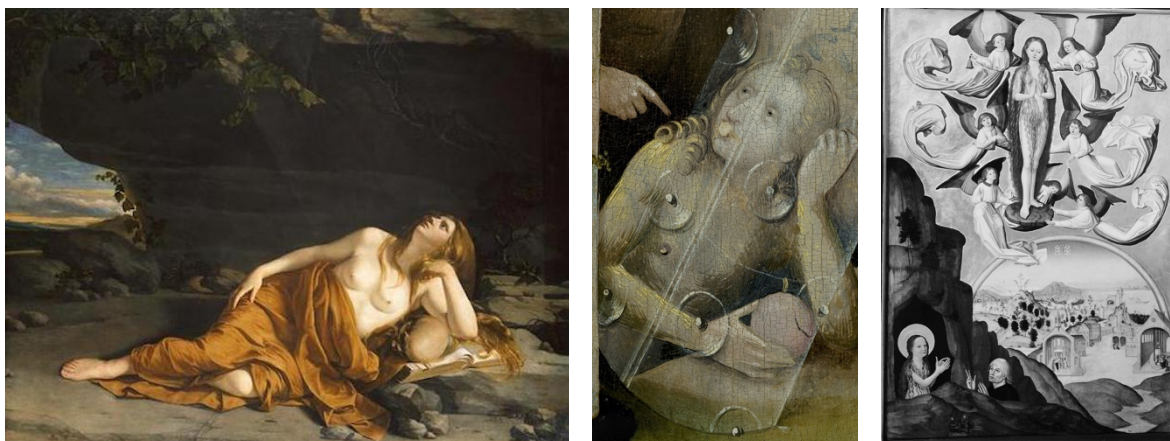


Fig. 13: Orazio Gentileschi, Repentant Magdalene, just being hit by the divine ray (163 x 208 cm, 1622-1628), Wien, Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien, Inv. GG 179.

Fig. 14: Detail, the woman in the cave. Did she awaken without divine intervention?³⁸

Fig. 15: Altar of the Cistercian Abbey Lichtenthal, 1496, Magdalene in front of her cave and scenes of her life, Landesarchiv Baden-Württemberg.

In order to emphasize the awakening of Magdalene, now far away from her bodily dreamed sins, she is, in contrast to her dreamed alter ego, the ‘more erotic’ Mary of Egypt in front of the cave, clearly haggardly masculine, so that some interpreters even think she is a man. Once you have understood the dream and the awakening, the change can be understood. It is known that until well into modern times the religious status of women was considered to be lower than that of men. Women could only reach a higher understanding of the message of salvation and a higher spiritual status by becoming as ‘manly’ as possible. In the aforementioned *Golden Epistle* of William of Thierry, in the third, highest stage on the way to God (§ 198), the female soul becomes an *animus*, a male soul, unexpectedly.⁴⁰ Several other theological testimonies could be cited. The woman in the cave has awakened to a higher spiritual status and her “sensuousness is reduced to an allegory” (Edith Wenzel), a common male view of women in religious imagery, if the women are not seen as seducers, but serve as moral examples.⁴¹ Her breasts have almost disappeared. This Magdalene can no longer be an erotic figure, because the change from her previous erotic-sensual life is made clear.

The change is also noteworthy for dream-theoretical reasons. It occurs, as David Ganz encompasses, with the vision of a “bodily sign”.⁴² As with the miracles in the Gregory Mass, the stigmatization of Francis and the self-stigmatization of Heinrich Seuse, this dream vision does not only bring about a spiritual awakening, but also causes a physical transformation. In

³⁸ For a discussion of the divine impact see Michael, 2018, *Imagination*; also M.M. *Magdalena mit Bundeszeichen im Garten der Lüste von Hieronymus Bosch – und bei Godefridus Schalcken?*, Art-Dok Heidelberg 2017; cf. also M.M., *Die Hölle den Heuchlern. Hypokrisie als Politik bei Auftraggeber und Konzepteur des Gartens der Lüste von Jheronimus Bosch*, Art-Dok Heidelberg 2020 (forthcoming).

⁴⁰ Cf. Peter Dinzelbacher, *Christliche Mystik im Abendland: ihre Geschichte von den Anfängen bis zum Ende des Mittelalters*, Paderborn et al. 1994, p. 123. Cf. Paul Gerhard Schmidt, *Der Rangstreit zwischen Mann und Frau im lateinischen Mittelalter. Mit einer Edition der Altercatio inter Virum et Mulierem*, in: *Dispute Poems and Dialogues in the Ancient Near East*, ed. G.J. Reinink / Herman L.J. Vanstiphout, Leuven 1991, pp. 213-235, esp. p. 216.

⁴¹ Cf. Edith Wenzel, *David und Bathseba: Zum Wandel der Weiblichkeit im männlichen Blick*, in: *Zentrum für interdisziplinäre Frauenforschung* 11 (1995), pp. 41-55, cit. p. 49. – Daniela Hammer-Tugendhat, *Judith und ihre Schwestern. Konstanz und Veränderung von Weiblichkeitsbildern*, in: Anette Kuhn, Bea Lundt (Eds.), *Lustgarten und Dämonenpein: Konzepte von Weiblichkeit in Mittelalter und früher Neuzeit*, Dortmund 1997, pp. 343-385.

⁴² Ganz 2008 p. 281, chapter III as a whole.

the present case not as a direct imprint of the vision on the dispositive of the body, but as its immediate physical transformation. (Fig. 16, 17).



Fig. 16, 17: Lucas van Leyden, Conversion of the Magdalene with visionary ‘bodily sign’ (as in dream visions) in the moment of direct divine influence, ca 1506, Wien, Albertina, DG1926/2021.

So far, the first – theological and didactic – aspect that marks the limit of awakening. The second leads back to the composition of the picture. Awakening is not merely the end of a narrative but a religious turning point, a moral achievement. In the dream/awakening gesture of the woman in the cave, rhetorical gimmick and allegorical meaning are merged.⁴³ At one point, in one moment, rhetorical awakening and allegorical salvation converge.⁴⁴

The fact that this short moment of awakening to salvation is actually meant can be seen in the central motif of the picture, both as a summary figure and with special motives. The most important indication of a break with old life can be found in this supposedly eternal ride in the circle of sinners around the pond in the middle. The circle is broken (Figs. 18, 1). On the left and right we can observe gaps between the groups of riders.

The circle actually stops. First detail: the grey horse in the first group rears up and braces its front legs against the direction of the ride. The movement of the circle has stopped. Second detail: On the white horse on the left of the circle, the leader of the breakaway group has, unlike any other, brought his arms together around the neck of his horse. Appropriately, his wrists are together as if he is holding reins. He has taken the reins in his hands.

The reason for the break is found ‘in the sky’ above. The front rider leans sharply back and looks directly upwards. Another rider protects his head as if something above has happened. Some others also look up. They all look up in the same way as the angels and the Saved in Bosch’s *Vision of the Hereafter* in Venice (Fig. 19). There the upward looks preponderate. Here in the Garden only a few look up at first, but the rhetoric of the image is used in the same way.

The famous ‘penis animal’ also came about because the painter wanted it to look up – and make a joke that even an animal hears the voice of the Lord. The awakening of the woman in the cave ends the unconscious ride around the pond in the middle.

⁴³ For some examples from sermons and other texts see e.g. Bram Rossano, *Die deutschen und niederländischen Bearbeitungen der Pseudo-Origines-Magdalenenklage*, in: Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur 126 (2004), S. 233-260.

⁴⁴ That happens in a very short moment ‘beyond time’, cf. Michael 2017 Herzsclag.



Fig. 18: Detail of suddenly stopping horse (above), other riders and ‘penis animal’ looking up.

Fig. 19: Hieronymus Bosch, *Vision of the Paradise*, with figures looking up, 1505-1515, Venice, Museo di Palazzo Grimani, Inv. 184.

Fig. 20: Paradise panel, detail, devil’s head with tears and suddenly – all together – fleeing monsters.

Evidence of the awakening of the formerly dreaming, however, can already be seen in paradise. It remains to be seen how quickly it became clear to the contemporary audience. Reindert Falkenburg’s pictorial concept of *The Garden of Earthly Delights* estimates the viewer’s recall of the images, plays a “memory game” and hides meanings in the “double image” in order to gently teach manners to the young courtly elite as a “conversation piece”.⁴⁵ Its purpose may be called dream interpretation.

The awakening of the woman happens in ‘eenen eewighen nu’ (Jan van Ruusbroec). That is a very short temporal *now* beyond (earthly) time. That is the reason for the strange disc of the Paradise fountain. The painter froze – with a vision of genius – the transformation between an older (mill disc) and a new (mirror) state to show the condition *in between*. He attempted to fix exactly this ‘eewighen nu’ between earthly time and divine eternity.

Only with the knowledge of such an exclusive moment will details, which would otherwise seem strange and picturesque, become intelligible. In the water, to the left of and below the blind and deaf devil’s head, small reptilian monsters are clustered; descendants of evil. As if in a race, they all try to reach the bank at the same time. They are suddenly in a great rush to enter the ear of the devil’s head to save themselves from the water (and from the just-transformed fountain therein).

Yes, something has happened. Everything has happened. It is also strange that the tail of the animal forming the ‘eye’ of the devil hangs down as far as it does (**Fig. 20**). Because some Bosch researchers – like Erwin Panofsky – rightly identified this as falling tears, they interpreted the head as the Rock of Remorse from the *Pèlerinage de vie humain* where the rock is illustrated anthropomorphically. But in *The Garden of Earthly Delights* it is the devil who is close to tears. In some Passion plays there is a scene in which Magdalene repents at the feet of Christ. She confesses and the devil, who had just joked and danced with her, “bursts into tears like a deserted lover”.⁴⁶ The tears simply pour down his cheeks. The sinful soul has awakened, the devil has lost his power over the woman.

It may at first sound paradoxical to claim these symbols for the awakening of the woman who has dreamed and awakened, even on the paradise panel. The explanation lies in the allegorical character and in the special temporal construction of *The Garden of Earthly Delights*: it is only this ‘eternal now’, only this ‘eternal nu’ long, in which the divine ‘breath

⁴⁵ Falkenburg 2011, e.g. introduction.

⁴⁶ Dorothea Freise, *Geistliche Spiele in der Stadt des ausgehenden Mittelalters: Frankfurt – Friedberg – Alsfeld*, Göttingen 2002, p. 334-335.

of His mouth' from Creation and the second of the woman's awakening do not differ from each other.

Above the Creation, on the outside, is written *Ipse dixit et facta sunt. Ipse mandavit et creata sunt* – For He spoke and it came to be; He commanded and it was fulfilled. (Ps 32/33:9) With that temporally paradoxical 'breath of His mouth' (32:6), in the second of awakening the woman in the cave has accepted the divine offer and evil's rule of her life is stopped. The devil howls, evil flees. Even the implied Fall of the Angels in paradise has, with the swiftly moving bird migration, long since been reversed.

All these details signal the end of a dream in a very short moment. For more than 500 years, in the eternity of its orchestration and behind its hundreds of details, most of which cast doubt on the possibility of a happy ending, *The Garden of Earthly Delights* captures that mystical second when a human awakens and realizes his dream as an impulse that his soul can now follow towards salvation. But let's not overlook the owl in our mirror.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Cf. Michael 2020 Nonnen-Sau.