

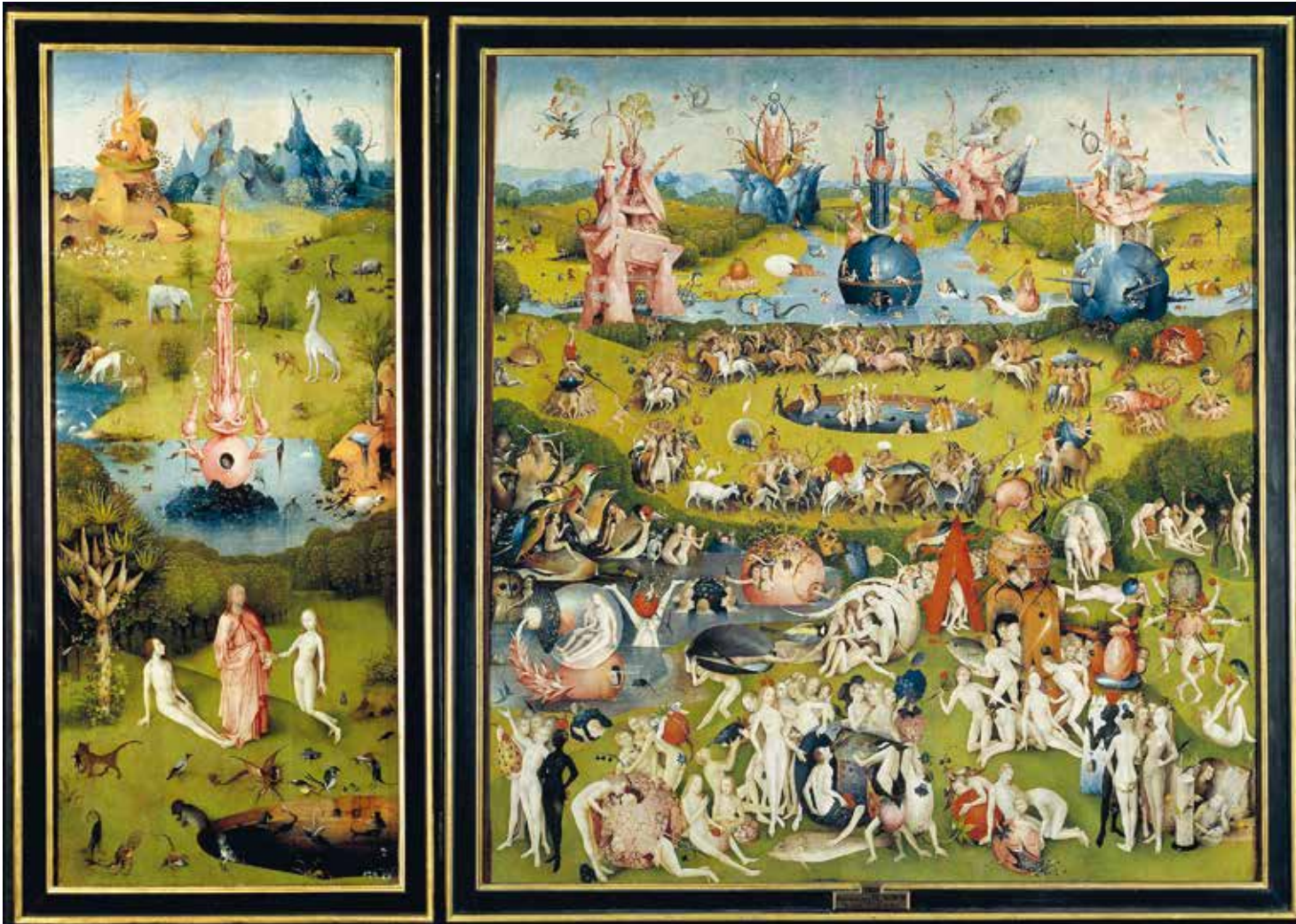
Reindert Falkenburg, *The Land of Unlikeness. Hieronymus Bosch, The Garden of Earthly Delights. Studies in Netherlandish Art and Cultural History – volume X, s.l., 2011, 320 pages. ISBN 978 90 400 7767 8.*

Every book or article about Hieronymus Bosch's famous *Garden of Earthly Delights* triptych (Madrid, Prado) begins with a truism: despite the vast number of publications devoted to the painting, no stable framework for interpretation has emerged so far. *The Land of Unlikeness*, Reindert Falkenburg's recent monograph in which he offers an extensive analysis of the *Garden's* iconography with the intention to open up new horizons on the subject, is no exception to this. By his own account Falkenburg (who is currently teaching art history at New York University in Abu Dhabi) has spent more than ten years on researching and writing this book. It definitely shows. *The Land of Unlikeness* is by no means yet another superficial and insipid publication about Bosch. Falkenburg's comprehensive text meets with high scholarly standards, the author proves to be well-informed about the latest Bosch research, he has a rich knowledge of medieval art and culture in general and in spite of its rather modest size, the book can boast on an attractive lay-out thanks to the numerous illustrations and their functional support of the writer's argument.

Falkenburg's ambitious aim is to reconstruct the historical viewership of Bosch's *Garden*. This means that he wants to look at the triptych with the same eyes and in the same way as the intended viewers were supposed to look at the painting around 1500. As the triptych was spotted in the Brussels palace of count Henry III of Nassau in 1517, Bosch scholars agree that it was either this Henry or his (childless) uncle count Engelbert II of Nassau (whose heir Henry was) who commissioned the *Garden*. According to Falkenburg the patron was Engelbert II, who had in mind the circle of young Burgundian noblemen around duke Philip the Fair (to which the young Henry III also belonged). The triptych would then have been designed to serve the artistic, intellectual, religious and perhaps even political education of these young courtiers. This hypothesis is founded on the argument that at the Burgundian court in the late fifteenth century there was a 'literary circle' of high noblemen who joined in reading sessions and literary debates in which they could 'show off' their learning and outwit their opponents. Falkenburg's conclusion is that Bosch's *Garden* with its allegorical and enigmatic imagery was meant to be a 'conversation piece' for the Burgundian high nobility: the triptych was supposed to engender disputation and 'speculative' argumentation.

In recent years fewer and fewer (if any) Bosch scholars seem prepared to defend the idea that the *Garden* once functioned as an altarpiece in a church or chapel. In this respect Falkenburg's suggestion that the painting functioned as a conversation piece to entertain and teach a high-class audience, comes as no surprise and sounds very convincing. Of course, it is a relatively small step to suggest that the numerous astounding and cryptical details of the *Garden* invited the late-medieval viewer to speculate and debate about their potential meaning, but it is a much larger and also riskier step to start speculating about those details oneself, at least if reconstructing the historical viewership of the painting is at stake. Stepping in the shoes of a fifteenth-century nobleman and trying to look at a painting through his eyes and with his knowledge of the world is by no means a piece of cake, all the more so because the modern viewer is supposed to *speculate*, which makes the reconstruction even trickier. At the same time this approach doesn't (or shouldn't) boil down to an iconographic 'your guess is as good as mine' puzzle.

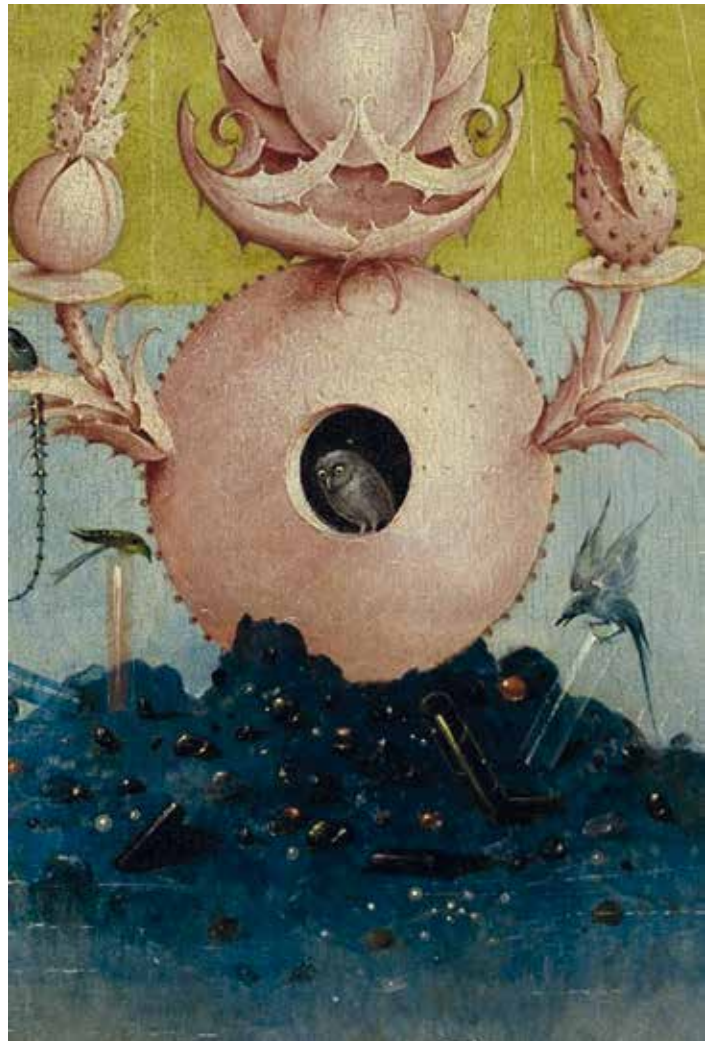
And yet, this is exactly the trying mission Falkenburg endeavors upon in the major part of his book. In doing so, his analysis of Bosch's triptych seems to be based on three methodological keynotes. First, there is the so-called 'mnemonic quality' of the *Garden*. During a lecture at the Third International Hieronymus Bosch Conference ('s-Hertogenbosch, September 2012), in which he introduced and commented upon *The Land of Unlikeness*, Falkenburg explained that according to him Bosch is playing a kind of 'memory game' with the viewer. Bosch's imagery often evokes memories of *other* images – images that the (contemporary) viewer may have seen elsewhere, in other contexts or works, be it pictorial or textual. This



1
 Jheronimus Bosch, *Garden of Delight* triptych, interior panels. Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado, inv.nr. 2823.

idea may not sound new to Bosch scholars, but it does stand on firm ground. One example out of many is Bosch's *Saint Christopher* (Rotterdam, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen) in which the painter borrows well-known elements from the saint's legend (the hermit, his lantern and broken pitcher, the tree in which he lives) but at the same time adapts them by giving them a diabolical turn. The contemporary viewers of Bosch's *Garden* being courtiers, it is logical that Falkenburg points out a lot of references to courtly life and culture in the triptych, especially in the central and the right interior panel.

When Falkenburg describes the central panel he observes correspondences with the Burgundian pleasure garden at Hesdin, with illustrations in the margins of late-medieval manuscripts, with 'entremets' (entertaining theatrical installations and performances during ceremonial banquets) at the Burgundian court, with contemporary representations of love gardens and with tapestries showing noble men and women. He associates the scenes around Lucifer in the foreground of the right wing with music making and game playing as forms of entertainment typical of late-medieval court banquets, especially at the Burgundian court. According to Falkenburg a major point of reference for the central panel is the *Roman de la Rose* (Engelbert II commissioned a lavishly illustrated manuscript of this text), not only because of its (textual and pictorial) sexual imagery, but also because it teaches us that there are two types of dreams in medieval dream theory: 'true dreams' (somnia) and 'false dreams' (insomnia), both types being enigmatic but the latter also being deceitful. Falkenburg then argues that what we see in the central panel is a dream-like and delusional Edenic pleasure garden, created by an evil force (the devil) to captivate mankind and lead it away from its Creator. Among other things this evil force is symbolized by the fabulous structures in the background of the central panel. Falkenburg draws attention to the fact that many details of these structures are reminiscent of late-medieval siege machines and warfare (he calls



2
 Jheronimus Bosch,
Garden of Delight triptych, detail
 of fig. 1: left interior panel. A
 keen observation by Reindert
 Falkenburg: the Fountain of
 Paradise's lower part suggests a
 monster with a grinning face.

them 'bastions' and 'watchtowers'), a military aspect that will certainly have appealed to the high nobility for whom the triptych was intended.

The notion of a deceitful pleasure garden created by an evil force leads us to the second keynote of Falkenburg's approach which he coins the '(para-)typological nature' of Bosch's *Garden*. Typological illustrations in texts such as the *Bible moralisé* or the *Speculum humanae salvationis* (with three scenes from the Old Testament and one scene from the New Testament) expect the viewer to compare the different scenes and to project elements from one scene into the other. According to Falkenburg Bosch expected his viewers to apply the same kind of 'relational hermeneutic skills' throughout the *Garden*. This means that when looking at motifs in one of the (exterior or interior) panels of the triptych, the viewer should keep in mind motifs in the other panels and relate them to each other. Whereas it is obvious (because of their chronology) that we should first 'read' the closed wings and then the interior panels (from left to right), the viewer, whose eye is 'travelling' back and forth between exterior and interior and from one interior panel to another, will soon find out that 'earlier' motifs foreshadow 'later' ones and that – in hindsight – 'later' motifs' are the fulfillment of 'earlier' ones. Again this may sound as the forcing of an open door but when Falkenburg applies this method of interpretation to Bosch's triptych he is definitely breaking new ground because it allows him to point out an important *leitmotiv* within the triptych and to produce strong arguments against the opinion of some Bosch scholars who suggest a positive interpretation of the central panel.

Falkenburg's starting point are two small *Earthly Paradise* panels (Vienna and Chicago), both sixteenth-century Bosch pastiches that have clearly been influenced by the *Garden* triptych. As a matter of fact, in

the first chapters of his book Falkenburg pays a lot of attention to paintings by sixteenth-century Bosch followers. In the past, other Bosch scholars have also signalled that in many (not all!) cases the works of imitators who respond to the challenge of Bosch's imagery, can be 'read' as painted comments on Bosch and are often more reliable than what modern art historians have to tell. Both the Vienna and the Chicago panel show a rock promontory with a mainly paradisiac-looking upper part and a lower part which consists of a dark cave and exotic protuberances, thus suggesting that there is a dark, infernal reality looming underneath the paradisiacal surface. In other words: these two landscapes are shallow worlds that seem to be sieged by a (satanic) force emerging from the 'bowels' of the earth.

Falkenburg argues that this idea is also one of the important *leitmotivs* in the *Garden*. In the past, more than one author writing about the triptych's exterior panels has felt an awkward discrepancy between the Psalm lines cited at the top (praising the power of the Almighty Creator) and the weird vegetative and mineral forms manifesting themselves on the outskirts of the earth. Basing his interpretation on the Augustinian idea that *Malum* (Evil) is a force that causes the corruption of God's harmonious creation and on the fact that in the left interior panel of Bosch's *Haywain* triptych the Fall of the Rebel Angels seems to affect earth and even Paradise itself, causing a degeneration of animate and inanimate nature, Falkenburg sees the strange forms growing at the edge of the earth as the first manifestation of an evil force that corrupts and undermines the natural order of God's Creation. The Fall of the Rebel Angels may not be immediately apparent in the *Garden's* closed wings but when in his *De civitate Dei* Augustine writes about the Psalm lines cited by Bosch he connects them with Genesis 1: 3-5 and interprets the division of light and darkness as pointing to the bad angels' fall and their expulsion from Heaven.

In the left interior panel, representing Christ, Adam and Eve in Eden, a number of portentous details show that the corrupting work of the evil force (the devil) has been making progress: animals are killing other animals, the blue mountains in the distance remind the viewer of late-medieval war machines and suggest a phalanx attacking Paradise, some of these mountains look like the wide-opened jaw of an animal or like forges from Hell, to the right of the central fountain we see a disturbing 'rock face' and the owl and the cavity it guards inside the fountain have dark connotations. Falkenburg proves to be a brilliant observer when he points out (as the first author in modern Bosch scholarship) that Satan's veiled image is hidden in the fountain: the interlaced vegetative forms directly above the fountain's base suggest the eyes and the grin of a monstrous face. Nobody has ever noticed this before (at least not in modern times) but once you know the grinning face is there, it is impossible to overlook it.

In the central panel the all-pervasive evil force increasingly captivates the earth and mankind. The fabulous rock formations, coined 'siege towers in disguise' by Falkenburg, remind the viewer of the strange forms 'besieging' the outskirts of the earth in the exterior panels and of the 'phalanx mountains' in the left interior panel and at the same time they foreshadow the black fire-spitting mountains in Hell at the top of the right interior panel. As has been signalled above Falkenburg interprets the central panel as the depiction of a delusional 'dream paradise' and an erotic pleasure garden created by the devil to lead mankind astray. The numerous fruits that are being consumed by the naked inhabitants of this garden show similarities with the seed- and berry-like growths in the left wing and the exterior panels.

The right interior panel, with the so-called 'Tree-man' in its center, shows the triumph of the evil force that has been corrupting God's Creation since the beginning of time. According to Falkenburg this panel shows a *regio dissimilitudinis*, a region of dissemblance, a land of unlikeness. With this term late-medieval theologians, influenced by Augustine, referred to man's alienation from God and to the transformation of the soul from divine likeness (see Genesis 1: 26-28: where God says: "Let us make man in our image and likeness") to bestial resemblance. Bosch's Hell portrays the dismantling of man's original God-like nature and his total subordination to the rule of evil and the Tree-man is the embodiment of man's loss of divine likeness. Its gaze leads the viewer back to the gaze of Christ in the left interior panel, the two faces summarizing the two extremes between which Bosch's narrative of similitude and dissimilitude oscillates.

The Tree-man's composite character (it is a tree, a broken eggshell and a plucked goose at the same time) is a nice example of the third keynote in Falkenburg's text which deals with Bosch's 'double images' or 'double mimesis'. This refers to parts of a landscape or to hybrid forms which on closer inspection hide another form, such as the 'rock face' and the grinning 'fountain monster' in the left interior panel. The identification of these hidden or double images relies on an interaction of image and viewer but in many

of these cases it remains open to debate whether a particular viewer's observation is correct. According to Falkenburg this is an important characteristic of Bosch's assemblage method and composition principle. In the *Garden* Bosch has taken this 'double mimesis' principle a step further: because to interpret this triptych we have to go back and forth from one panel to the other this results in images that overlap, with one image shining through another. In other words: when looking at one panel of Bosch's triptych we should at the same time be taking into account the preceding and the following panel(s), which will lead to the conclusion that underneath the shining surface of the delusional Edenic garden in the central panel is lurking a diabolical force. As is nicely illustrated by the inner jacket at the back of the book (designed by Rosa Choi) where we see a distorted picture of the left part of the central panel with some of the strange forms at the edge of the earth in the left exterior panel shimmering through.

'Double imagery' also plays a role when the sexually charged motifs in the *Garden's* central panel are discussed. An example are the two red 'berries' on the head of the naked woman standing next to a bluish vessel in the foreground: according to Falkenburg they echo a similar pair of 'berries' in the hands of the figure sitting inside the vessel. "The position of these fruits relative to the body and to what the viewer may imagine is going on in the vessel, as well as with regard to what is on the woman's mind, is telling", Falkenburg writes somewhat prudishly [p. 221], but it is obvious that he interprets the two pairs of 'berries' as testicles. In this respect it is a bit comical that Falkenburg first states it is erroneous to see an allusion to eroticism in almost every detail of the central panel [p. 171], but when it comes down to actually interpreting the sexual motifs he boldly goes where no author has gone before. Some of the details are associated with anal sex, others with masturbation and promiscuity and in one case (the man who is plucking flowers from the anus of his companion) it is even argued that the smell of anal sex is involved because in Dutch a bunch of sweet-smelling flowers is called a *ruiker* (literally: a 'smeller').

The bottom line of Falkenburg's analysis is that Bosch's *Garden* triptych is filled with opaque and deceptive images resulting from an all-pervasive evil force by which everything, from man to nature, is turned upside down and decomposed. Although the overall composition of the painting resembles the composition of Last Judgment triptychs, Bosch did not paint a judgmental authority (the Second Coming of Christ). Instead Christ's gaze in the left interior panel invites the viewer to become himself the judge of nature and meaning of the triptych's imagery, thereby opening his 'spiritual eye' to what is true and false. By speculating (and debating with others) about what he sees, the viewer will realize the impact of Evil on God's Creation and be brought back to biblical passages such as Genesis 1: 26-28, 2: 16-17 or 3: 5-6 (which talk about being 'like' God). And in the end Bosch's intended viewers will understand what it is, to quote Augustine, "to be far off from (God) in the land of unlikeness".

As has been mentioned before Falkenburg's approach of Bosch's *Garden* triptych implies that every viewer, including Falkenburg, is supposed to speculate about the painting's often astounding and bewildering imagery. Falkenburg's study is indeed highly speculative in nature (he says so himself on page 7), from his ideas about the triptych's patronage to the final conclusion about its iconography, but it has to be admitted that he always tries to support his interpretations with solid arguments based on a fair amount of iconographic and literary material. Unfortunately, as the reader may have noticed already, his train of thought is sometimes partially blurred by a preference for big words (mnemonic, para-typological, double mimesis, some other examples being teratomorphic, discombobulation, epigrammatic and ekphrastic) and every now and then he loses himself (and the reader) in rather cumbersome academic digressions, at which moments his objective seems to be "to show off (his) learning and outwit (his) opponents" [p. 270], not unlike the *Garden's* supposed intended viewers 500 years ago.

Most of the time, though, Falkenburg smoothly succeeds in getting his message across and because of the absorbing way in which he unravels his views about Bosch's *Garden*, the book reads like a detective novel. Moreover, many of his insights (undoubtedly the result of an intense iconographic interaction with Bosch's triptych) sound very convincing or at least are worth considering. On the other hand: not everything in *The Land of Unlikeness* is beyond criticism. According to Falkenburg Adam's stretched legs and crossed feet in the left interior panel remind the viewer of the legs and feet of the Crucified and thus the detail of Adam's and Christ's touching feet prefigures the Crucifixion and the redemption of mankind. But stretched legs and crossed feet also occur elsewhere in Bosch's oeuvre. The legs and feet of the lute-player on top of the haywain in the *Haywain* triptych for example have the same position as Adam's feet and legs which leads to the suspicion that we are dealing with a pictorial topos and that

Falkenburg's conclusion is *Hineininterpretierung*. The spotted animal to the left of the Creation scene is called a panther instead of a cat and an allegorical interpretation from the bestiary tradition is added to this, but do panthers catch mice (or rats)? Many readers will find it hard to understand why Falkenburg believes that the humans in the background and middle zone of the right interior panel seem to collaborate with the devils and why he spies the gates or the mouth of Hell in almost every cavity and opening.

It is also interesting to note a few things that are *not* mentioned by Falkenburg. The little owl in the base of the Fountain of Life is the exact center of the left interior panel whereas in the exact center of the central panel we see an egg and the Tree-man's body in the center of the right interior panel is a broken eggshell. Why are there several black men and women in the central panel whereas they are absent in the right wing? Why don't we see any children in the central panel? Quite a number of details in the central panel seem to refer to homosexuality, but Falkenburg does not pay much attention to this. According to late-medieval descriptions there is a temple in the middle of Eden with a fountain which is the source of four rivers. The temple is so shiny that it acts like a mirror and it can take all kinds of forms, depending on the viewer's will and imagination. Isn't this popular belief important for a better understanding of the weird 'towers' in the central panel? And what about the glass tubes and objects in the central panel? Do they refer to alchemy?

In one case Falkenburg makes an error which – at least in my opinion – might be crucial when it comes down to a correct interpretation of the central panel and perhaps even of the triptych as a whole. He argues that the hirsute couple in the cave in the bottom right corner of the central panel are wild people, but not Adam and Eve (in spite of the apple the woman is holding in her hand). In endnote 296 he rebukes Dirk Bax and Paul Vandebroek who have pointed out that in the Middle Dutch *Book of Sidrac* Adam and Eve are said to have become 'hairy' after they were driven from Paradise. According to Falkenburg the word 'hairy' does not refer to their skin being hairy all over but to the animal skins they wore. Apparently he has not read the original Middle Dutch text because the lines quoted by Bax and Vandebroek are part of an answer to the question: 'Why did God give hair to man?' A careful reading of the Middle Dutch text makes it clear that after their expulsion from Paradise Adam and Eve's bodies became hairy all over to cover up their nakedness and their hair is explicitly being associated with the Fall and with man's inclination to sin. So Bax and Vandebroek were right after all and the lines from *Sidrac* are a strong argument to identify the hirsute man and woman in the *Garden* as Adam and Eve. An important issue in this respect (totally ignored by Falkenburg) is the identification of the third person in the cave who is pointing an accusing finger at Eve. In Falkenburg's approach of the *Garden* Christ's gaze which is directed at the viewer (left interior panel) is an essential element, but it can easily be checked out that in the bottom right corner of the central panel both Adam and the man to his left are gazing at the viewer as well. Together with the pointing finger this raises the question whether this detail of the central panel isn't as essential for an overall understanding of the triptych as the Creation scene in the left wing.

The fact that *The Land of Unlikeness* causes the reader to reflect upon things like these, is of course a feather in the author's cap. As a result it will prove hard for future authors to write about Bosch's *Garden* without taking into account Falkenburg's book. His analysis does not unriddle all the painting's enigmas and – as is so often the case with Bosch – it is impossible to agree with all his points of view, but on many pages the text broadens our horizon and it definitely acts as a stimulus for further discussion. If Falkenburg is right, this is exactly what Bosch's triptych was meant to do from the very start.

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