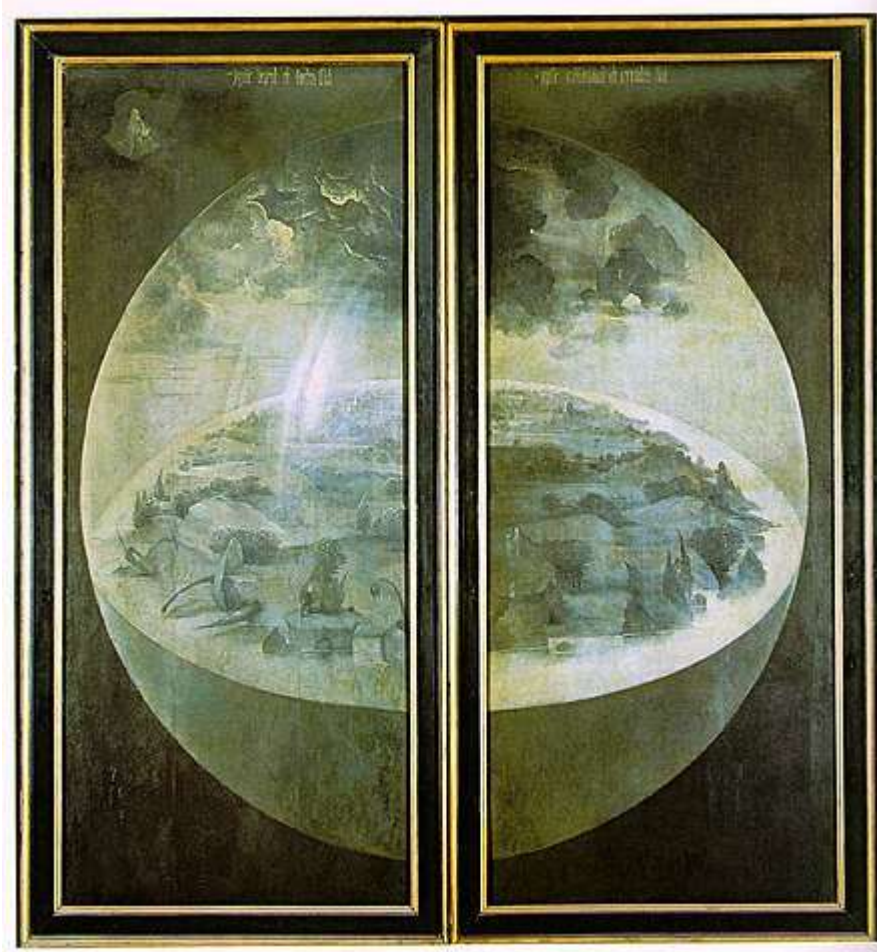


A possible source for Bosch's choice of the Third Day of the Creation for the outer wings of the triptych of *The Garden of Earthly Delights*

The outer wings of Bosch's famous *The Garden of Earthly Delights* triptych show, enclosed in a huge transparent sphere set against a dark background, a hilly landscape with trees surrounded by water under an impressive, partly lighted dark cloudy sky. Strangely shaped forms with spiky thorns rise from the water along the shore. In the upper left corner of the triptych, seated in an opening in dark clouds, appears a tiny figure, God the Father depicted according to the iconographical tradition of Bosch's time with tiara and book. The book symbolizes the Word by which he is creating all, as can be deduced both from the speaking gesture of his right hand and the Latin inscription on the wings 'Ipse dixit et facta su[n]t' – 'Ipse ma[n]davit et creata su[n]t' 'For he spoke and they were made: he commanded and they were created') (Ps 32 (33), 9; Ps 148(49), 5). These words de-



rive from psalms which invite to praise the Lord, Creator of all.

Most art historians agree that the outer wings of *The Garden of Earthly Delights* triptych represent the third day of the creation, when God gathered the waters together into one place and let the dry land appear.¹ They consider the image an introduction to the inside of the triptych that shows in the left wing *The Creation of Adam and Eve*, in the centre panel the so-called *Garden of Earthly Delights*, and in the right wing *Hell*. However, it remains obscure why Bosch chose precisely an image

lights, and in the right wing *Hell*. However, it remains obscure why Bosch chose precisely an image

¹Genesis 1, 9-11.

of the third day of creation for his ‘introduction’ and why he provided it with strangely shaped forms with spiky thorns.²

Since the irregularly shaped forms with spiky thorns rising from the water that surrounds the dry land are far from naturalistic features, their sense cannot but be symbolic. Both the Bible with glosses and postils by Nicolaus de Lyra, of which printed editions appeared already in the fifteenth century, and the Bible Moralisée offer an allegorical exegesis of the third day of creation. The water symbolizes the world with its sinners, the faithless harassing the dry land, the community of the faithful, the Church thirsty for God. Their exegeses derive from Augustine who in book XIII of his *Confessiones* offers an allegorical explanation of the first chapter of Genesis, the story of the creation seen as an account of redemption.³ ‘I have also considered what spiritual truths you intended to be expressed by the order in which the world was created and the order in which creation is described. I have seen that while each single one of your works is good, collectively they are very good, and that heaven and earth, which represent the Head and the body of the Church, were predestined in your Word, that is in your only begotten Son, before time began, when there was no morning and no evening.’⁴

After he explained the first days of creation, he arrives in chapter seventeen at the third day and the explanation of the verse ‘God also said: Let the waters that are under the heaven, be gathered together into one place: and let the dry land appear.’ (Genesis 1, 9-11) ‘Who gathered the bitter sea of humanity into one society? All men are united by one purpose, temporal happiness on earth, and all that they do is aimed at this goal [...] But there are souls that thirst for you, souls which in your eyes are set apart from the great main of the sea for a different purpose’.⁵ The sea are the faithless gathered into one body, ‘so that the earnest devotion of the faithful [the dry land] might be clearly seen and they might bear you fruit in works of mercy [the trees of the dry land also created on the third day]’⁶

It is plausible that Bosch and his public were familiar with Augustine’s exegesis of the ‘waters’ and the ‘dry land’. In that case, they will have recognized in the strange forms, which by their irregular shapes and spiky thorns suggest evil, symbols of those who live according to the flesh harassing the dry land, the community of the faithful thirsting for God. But how does this relate to the representations of the inside of the triptych where, by the way, similar strange forms can be detected, both in

² Yona Pinson, ‘“Let there be...” – The World Corrupted from its Inception’, in *Jheronimus Bosch, his life and work* (4th International Jheronimus Bosch Conference, April 14-16, 2016, Den Bosch 2016, pp. 236-259.

³ Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, translated and with an introduction by R.S. Pine-Coffin, Harmondsworth 1970

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 344-45

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 324

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 324

the Garden of Eden represented in the left panel and, even more elaborated, in the so-called Garden of Earthly Delights in the centre panel?

Both Augustine and Bosch continue the story of God's creation, Augustine in the following chapters of Book XIII of *Confessiones*, Bosch in the left wing of the open triptych. Augustine continues with God who creates on the fourth day the stars, the saints 'possessed of the word that gives life'.⁷ He goes on to explain the allegorical sense of the creation of the birds and the fishes on the fifth day. 'Let the sea too conceive and give birth to your works. *Let the waters produce that have life in them.* For by separating *worth* from *dross* you become *true spokesmen* of God, who bade the waters produce, not the living soul which the earth was to bear, but *moving things that have life in them and winged things that fly above the earth.* By the work of your saints, O God, your sacraments have moved amidst the flood of the world's temptations to bathe its peoples in the waters of your baptism and imprint your name upon them. [...] The words of your messengers have soared like winged things above the earth beneath the firmament of your Book, for this was the authority given to them and beneath it they were to take wing wherever their journey lay. There is *no word, no accent of theirs that does not make itself heard, till their utterance fills every land, till their message reaches the end of the world.* And this is because you, O God, have blessed their work and multiplied it.'⁸ 'But the living soul takes its first beginnings from the earth, for only those who already have faith can profit by detaching themselves from earthly loves so that the soul which lived in death when it lived in luxury may live in you instead. For those pleasures kill, but you, O Lord, are the joy that gives life to the pure heart.'⁹

On the sixth day, God created the animals interpreted by Augustine as the impulses of the soul, and finally he created man, allegorically understood as the rebirth of the individual in baptism, remade in God's image and likeness. 'You bless men, O Lord, and bid them to *increase and multiply and fill the earth.* What are we to understand by this? What mystery do these words contain? [...] I take the reproduction of humankind to refer to the thoughts which our minds conceive, because reason is fertile and productive [...] And it explains how the offspring of men fill the earth, because the dry land appears when men are eager to learn and reason prevails.'¹⁰

Augustine ends his allegorical exegesis thanking God for all that we see, heaven and earth, light separated from darkness, the waters and the dry land, plants and trees, fishes, birds and animals. 'And finally we see man, made in your image and likeness, ruling over all the irrational animals for

⁷ Ibid., p. 345.

⁸ Ibid., p. 328.

⁹ Ibid., p. 330.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 334.

the very reason that he was made in your image and resembles you, that is, because he has the power of reason and understanding. And just as in man's soul there are two forces, one which is dominant because it deliberates and one which obeys because it is subject to such guidance, in the same way, in the physical sense, woman has been made for man. In her mind and her rational intelligence she has a nature equal of man's, but in sex she is physically subject to him in the same way as our natural impulses need to be subjected to the reasoning power of the mind, in order that the actions to which they lead may be inspired by the principles of good conduct.' ¹¹

Bosch represents in front of a huge fountain the just created Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. The garden is provided with a rich vegetation, all kinds of birds and animals, and, in the background, irregularly shaped 'mountains' which remind us of the strange shapes present in the outer wings. These 'mountains' are divided in a sunny part with swarms of birds and a sinister looking blue part (blue the colour of deception) with a perched owl. Researchers not only wondered about the strange shapes. They also wondered why Bosch did not represent the creation of Adam and Eve according to the well-known iconographical traditions as a couple standing beside the tree of knowledge (Fall), as a standing couple being wedded by God (marriage of Christ and the Church), or with Adam lying asleep while God creates Eve from sleeping Adam's rib (birth of the Church). Instead, he represents Adam sitting erect with stiff legs (he does not look like someone who just woke up) looking at God while touching God's feet. This suggests that Adam is just created in God's likeness, that is, that he just received a soul, for the likeness is in the soul, not in the body. God, represented in the shape of Christ, the Word, holds a demurely kneeling Eve by the wrist, a gesture denoting his intention to give her Adam for wife.¹² Christ makes a blessing gesture while looking not at Adam or Eve but at the beholder.

We can hypothesize that by deviating from iconographical tradition Bosch wants to make it clear that this creation of Adam and Eve has a particular meaning. The irregularly shaped 'rocks' in the background of Bosch's Eden are not only symbols of evil and a reference to the fall, they also symbolize the works of God's messengers in the world. The sunny part with the swarms of birds is to be understood as the works among the waters [the world] of God's messengers, whose words 'have soared like winged things above the earth' till their message reaches the end of the world. It is the Church active among the faithless, the sinners, whereas the blue mountains with the perched owl, a

¹¹ Ibid, p. 344.

¹² Jeanne van Waadenoijen, "'Salmen genoegte hebben met wiven?'" The Garden of Earthly Delights, interpretations and prejudices,' in *Jheronimus Bosch, his life and work* (4th International Jheronimus Bosch Conference, April 14-16, 2016, Den Bosch 2016, pp.388-404, esp. 396.

hunter's device to catch birds, will refer to the devil and his temptations. Christ looks at the beholder to remind him that by baptism he is reborn in the likeness with God, signifying that he is a



living soul which has learnt to control its passions by unremitting continence, that man's mind was renewed in God's image and likeness and that rational action was made subject to the rule of the intellect, as woman is subject to man (expressed by Eve's demure attitude).¹³

The signs of evil in the Garden of Eden refer to the fall and the necessity of redemption. Adam's sin brought down the curse of death upon all humanity, but Christ's sacrificial death on the cross has redeemed it. Christ, here in his dual role of Creator and Redeemer, looks at the beholder to remind him that 'the words "Seek God, and your soul shall have life", are not mere sounds that strike man's ears,' but that 'they are a call to action, so that the earth may produce a living soul. *Do not fall in with the manners of this world, but keep yourself intact from it. The soul lives when it avoids the things which it is death to seek. Keep yourselves intact from the savage monster pride, from the sloth and the sensual pleasures of lust, and from quibbling knowledge that is knowledge only in name, so that the beast may be tamed, the herds be broken in, and the serpents be made to lose their sting. For these creatures are the symbols of the impulses of the soul. But the arrogance of pride, the pleas-*

ures of lust, and the poison of vain curiosity are the impulses of the soul that is dead, nor so dead that it lacks all impulse, but one that is dead because it has forsaken the fountain of life and is swept along by the fleeting things of this world, lending itself to their ways.'¹⁴

These words by Augustine, which also express the moral values of Bosch's time, leave no doubt as to the interpretation of that which the centre panel represents. The careless youngsters represent the 'waters', the sinners whose end will be eternal death (Hell). They give themselves over to the sensual pleasures of lust guided by their passions, which are not 'tamed into submission by the practice

¹³ Augustine, op. cit. (note 2), p. 345.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 330-31.

of chastity, by fasting, and by the soul's regard for its duty to God'.¹⁵ They do not seek God, but *fall in with the manner of this world*, do not avoid the things *which it is death to seek*, the sensual pleasures of lust; they do not tame the beasts. Their souls are dead because they have forsaken the fountain of life and are swept along by the fleeting things of this world. They were not eager to learn, did not let reason prevail; on the contrary, they behave themselves as the brute beasts and the wild men devoid of reason and understanding. The punishment of such behaviour of those who do not want to hear is eternal death in the Hell in the right wing.

¹⁵ Ibid., p.334.