Bosch’s representation of acedia and the Pilgrimage of Everyman

IRVING L. ZUPNICK

Bosch’s painting in Boymans Museum, Rotterdam, known either as The Peddler, or The Prodigal Son (fig. 1), has inspired more than its share of conflicting interpretations
d. Indeed, two impressive, if quite contradictory explanations have already appeared in this journal
d; which, as a measure of its praiseworthy scholarly impartiality, has consented to air a third view. The chief justification for a new elucidation of this fascinating painting is that, in spite of the intensive scholarship and ingenuity that has gone into earlier investigations, we still have the distinct impression that its basic meaning has not been revealed. We must admit that neither of the two titles by which it is known seem to describe its contents; and we can only conclude that the major secrets of this painting will not reveal themselves to the methodological techniques which have been applied before. Earlier studies have been painstakingly analytic, considering each of its many details seriatim, showing parallels to other art motifs and to the symbolic, allegorical, and metaphorical, discourse of the times. We must step back from the close perusal of details in order to view the Rotterdam painting from an historical perspective that includes Bosch’s other works, and that takes into account the moral philosophy of his period as it was expressed in literature and folklore. Once we do this, we discover a cohesive, synthesizing pattern that brings the details into line. This approach clearly indicates that it was Bosch’s intent to illustrate the then popular literary theme of The Pilgrimage of Everyman
d.


3 Among the many literary expositions of this popular theme the most famous were the Visions of Tundale and Le pèlerinage de la vie humaine and Le pèlerinage de l’âme by Guillaume de Deguilleville. Recently Rosemond Tuve showed the lasting popularity of the latter work in her book, Allegorical Imagery, Princeton 1966, and Tundale was published in Bosch’s home town in 1484. The idea was still
and to show that Acedia, or Sloth, is the vice that makes mankind most susceptible to the Devil.

The pattern begins to emerge when we consider the relationship between the Rotterdam painting and an earlier work by Bosch, the so-called *Vagabond* (fig. 2), which is on the covering panels of his famous *Hay-Wagon* triptych. The *Vagabond* affords significant and fairly reliable clues to the artist's intentions, because as part of a triptych, its meaning is clarified by the contribution it makes to a larger thematic program.

The *Vagabond* and the *Hay-Wagon* panels of the triptych are obviously related to one another, interchangeable when you close or open the wings, and equally suggestive of motion to the right. In the case of the *Hay-Wagon* the immediate pertinence of the action is indicated by its position as a central panel (fig. 3), between a depiction of the vanished Eden and another that portrays the punishments in Hell that are to come. The impression of continuing action is reinforced by subtle compositional devices that make the wagon seem to be in motion; the wheels, the diagonal accents of ladders and pitchforks that reach after the departing vehicle, and the uneasy suggestion that the wagon is being drawn into the Hell panel by evil demons.

Tolnay has shown that an old Flemish proverb, "The world is a haystack, and everyman plucks from it what he can," explains the meaning of the wagon that lures its followers to inevitable doom. The vices that make mankind susceptible to worldly things are exemplified, rather than symbolized, by the performances of those around the wagon. Avaritia and Invidia are dramatized by the grasping,

vital enough to inspire the famous Dutch drama, *Elckerlijc*, at the beginning of the sixteenth century, and this drama in turn seems to have influenced Pieter Bruegel (cf. I. L. Zupnick, "The Meaning of Bruegel's 'Nobody' and 'Everyman'", Gazette des beaux-arts 67 (1967) 257-270).

4 The Prado and the Escorial each have a copy of the triptych. The problem of which is earlier is not my concern here; and I am using the Prado's photographs. Charles de Tolnay, *Hieronymus Bosch*, London 1966, 24 f., and 355 f., and Ludwig von Baldass, *Hieronymus Bosch*, New York 1960, 222-224, have both reconfirmed their earlier opinion that the *Hay-Wagon* triptych dates from between 1485 and 1490. The presence of the Pope, the Holy Roman Emperor, and the King of France, among the followers of the Hay-Wagon suggests that it could have been painted in 1488 or slightly later, at a time when these three rulers were in bad repute in the Netherlands for their roles in the events following the arrest of Archduke Maximilian in Bruges.

5 The mobility of the wagon has interesting connotations. Caesarius of Heisterbach, *The Dialogue of Miracles*, trans. H. von E. Scott and C. C. S. Bland, London 1921, 1, 196, has an exegesis of Joel 1:4 in which the Pharaoh's chariot moves on four wheels (lust, pride, gluttony, and anger) and is pulled by three horses (envy, sloth, and avarice). It is also interesting that wagons had a traditional symbolic meaning as a method of transporting the dead to the other world (cf. O. Prausnitz, *Der Wagen in der Religion; seine Würdigung in der Kunst*, Strassburg 1916, 101 f.).

6 Tolnay, *op. cit.*, 355

7 J. Th. Welte, *L' exemple dans la littérature religieuse et didactique du moyen âge* (Bibliothèque d'histoire