Change of Signification in Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*¹

En face du discours, il y a la figure-image; dans le discours il y a la figure-forme. Le redoublement de l'une sur l'autre est ce qui permet peut-être à la poésie de représenter la distance présente.

J. F. Lyotard, *Discours Figure*

1. Painting in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance is for the most part anchored firmly to a story. The figures make up a Nativity, a Crucifixion, or something from a large repertoire of events out of Scripture, legend, and the lives of saints. All the presentational strategies of composition, painterly skill, and special interpretation of the story remain secondary to the represented event. The story is signified, the painting a signifier that may include in what signifies some additional slants on traditions of the story. The viewer's main attention to the painting, as he is immersed in its pictorial splendors, feeds into his perception of the story. The signified story mediates other signifiers into relation with itself, and this process produces an impression of univocal signification, an impression reinforced by the coordination of iconographic themes and motifs into the work. The significative strategies even of 'humanistic' paintings like the allegories of Mantegna and others do not depart from this pattern. The allegory coordinates its themes and motifs as signifiers that refer to an abstract signified, say the Virtues and the Vices.

This pattern was being changed, intermittently, hesitantly, and often only partially, by certain arresting painters, all of whom were active from 1480 to 1510: Bosch, Botticelli, Carpaccio, and Giorgione. While Dürer, Leonardo, and the young Michelangelo were refining their visual and compositional means and retaining the old pattern of signification, these contemporaries, independently of each other, were radically redefining it by disestablishing a story or an allegory from the locus of signification in the painting. *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, *The Primavera*, *The Portrait of a Knight*, and *The Tempest*, refer their signifiers to a signified that is almost wholly within the painting itself: significance increases as mediation decreases, while the adaptation of traditional themes and motifs is subordinated to secondary status and never allowed a univocal function in the work. Consequently even the most strenuous attempts to provide a plausible univocal reading, a story, for *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, the *Primavera*, the *Portrait of a Knight* and the *Tempest*, have notably foundered. Nor have they foundered because they are unwittingly conditioned by some version of hermeneutic interminacy. Whatever prior position we should adopt about hermeneutic principles, there are plausible univocal readings of *Oedipus Rex*, *Hamlet*, *Moby Dick*, *Madame Bovary*, and *The Castle*. Their plausibility remains after they are rightly qualified, amplified, or even replaced by others, to be qualified and amplified in turn. The differences, as well as the likenesses, between literature
and painting in this regard would lead us far afield, but it may be briefly noted that the painting’s relative freedom from the syntactic and lexical constraints allows it to change its conditions of signification more radically. The hermeneutic circle in these works can remain broken. I should like to explore the implications of this kind of change in signification by considering at some length *The Garden of Earthly Delights.*

Panofsky concludes his masterly *Early Netherlandish Painting* by demurring before the task of providing for Hieronymus Bosch any coordinate set of iconological principles:

‘In spite of all the ingenious, erudite and in part extremely useful research devoted to the task of “decoding Jerome Bosch”, I cannot help feeling that the real secret of his magnificent nightmares and daydreams has still to be disclosed. We have bored a few holes through the door of the locked room; but somehow we do not seem to have discovered the key...’

He goes on, characteristically, to quote what is itself a quotation by Ficino’s translator, ‘This too high for my wit/I prefer to omit.’

It is striking that Panofsky’s combination of massive learning, deep connoisseurship, and originating subtlety at iconological formulation, cannot establish a