

The Life and  
Times of  
Hieronymus  
Bosch

A Historical Novel

Rolf Gross

Pacific Palisades

2011



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A Historical Novel

Illustrated with Bosch's Paintings

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The cover uses a little-known painting by an unknown painter: *Portrait of Hieronymus Bosch* at the age of 45, mid 16th cent, Amherst College, Mass, scanned from the catalogue of the Rotterdam Bosch Exhibition, 2001. Other reproductions are from the authors collection.

To accommodate the pictures in their present size, it was occasionally necessary to insert partly empty pages

# 1.

On a late September day in 1467 Jacob wandered among the booths of the Michaelis Fair in s'Hertogenbosch. A good-looking, tall man with a prominent nose, a sensuous mouth, and intelligent dark eyes below a two-part receding hairline. Jacob was well-dressed for a semi-itinerant magister of philosophy, astrology, and mathematics. He had arrived in Brabant as one of the tutors of the eight-year-old Maximilian of Hapsburg.

Maximilian had been sent by his father Friedrich III, Archduke of Austria and Roman Emperor, as an emissary to attend the inauguration of Charles the Bold as Duke of Brabant. But the true purpose of Maximilian's journey was for him to make the acquaintance of ten-year-old Marie of Burgundy, the heiress to Charles the Bold's possessions in Brabant, the Low Countries, and Burgundy. A delicate political mission which offered the promise to greatly increase the realm of the Hapsburg dynasty. Jacob had much free time to explore s'Hertogenbosch. One reception followed the other, at which he was not needed. They were roasting three oxen in the town square, which together with an abundance of wine the influential citizens of the city had presented to Duke Charles. The common folks crowded the fair in a meadow *extra-murus* of town. Jacob liked what he saw, the people, their bucolic dances, and their refreshing spirit. Innsbruck, where he had spent most of the year with Maximilian, was a small, sedate town trapped between mountains. Before his appointment to the Emperors court he had lived several years at Galeazzo Sforza's court in Milan and in Florence at the feet of Marsilio Ficino, at Cosimo di Medici's famous Neoplatonic Academy. Italy was ruled by autocrats and the all-pervasive Church. By comparison Brabant was a wide open country inhabited by unruly people. The power lay in the hands of the wealthy merchants, of its rich cities, and a few landowners. Their Burgundian Dukes lived far away. The simple people stood on two legs, always ready to defend their independence. They were strong-willed and obstinate, a trait which was missing among the commoners of Austria and Italy. There was an openness to revolutionary, often heretical ideas here, which the Church suppressed further south.

Jacob was Jewish. Although he did not practice his religion, the Christian Church was anathema to him. A mind-set he had learned to hide. He had been born in the German Rhineland, which had earned him the surname van Almaengien. He had left his town and the narrowness of its community early in exchange for a life as an independent wanderer through the learned cities of Europe.

There were dozens of stands on the fair grounds, temporary tents and scaffolding. Anything was being sold from trinkets, to kitchen utensils, earthenware, bread, vegetables, and precious cloth. In its central square, surrounded by eateries and wine merchants, they were dancing to a simple band of fiddles, drums and pipes. A chaotic, burlesque scene. He walked down a narrow lane in which fortune tellers, vendors of herbal medicines, and dentist practiced their trades. At the end of the lane ladies of easy virtue beckoned to the "feine Herr." The lane opened into a meadow, where in a guest-house a troop of prostitutes from Amsterdam had taken up residence for the occasion. The wings of a windmill turned on a neighboring hill.

He turned into a neighboring lane and found himself in front of two booths. A sign on the first said "*Jeroen van Aken – Schildereij*,"---paintings. In the other sat a young, red-blond woman with her back to him. The sign on her stall announced "*Sibylle - Palm Reader - Pilgrim's Badges*." Sibylle and the young Jeroen, a man of about eighteen with curly hair, broad lips, and a tanned complexion, were absorbed in an intense conversation. Sibylle gesticulated with her hands to make a point to Jeroen, who every

now and then broke out in hearty laughter. Although he saw her only from the back, her graceful, lively gestures and her intensity intrigued him. She radiated a power, which he could not explain. He watched them for a while. Absorbed as they were with each other, they did not notice him.

Suddenly Sibylle turned and stared at him. For a few seconds she said nothing, then got up, made a deep curtsy before him, and to his surprise addressed him in Hebrew, "My Lord, are you the Messiah who will deliver us from this vale of tears? I offer you my life." Jacob stared at her in bewilderment. Her ageless face, her eyes! He courtly extended his hand to raise her. She examined his hand, but said nothing. "How did you guess that I speak Hebrew?" he asked perplexed. She looked at him and their eyes met, full of intense questions.

Jeroen's laughter broke the spell. "I didn't understand what she said to you," said Jeroen innocently. "Sibylle often has attacks of clairvoyance. She sees things, we cannot see. Sir, don't be offended by her words. She means no harm. Come sit with us." Jeroen went into the back of his stall to get a stool for Jacob.

Avoiding her eyes Jacob said embarrassed "I am no Messiah," and added with annoyance in his voice, "What a preposterous idea." Sibylle did not respond. She sat on her stool staring at him, mute. Jeroen took over. "She is exhausted from *seeing* you," he said. "Sir, look at her trinkets."

Fig.1



Pilgrim's Badges excavated in Den Bosch, 15th cent, Rotterdam

He pointed at Sibylle's table. It was strewn with pewter amulets, a Madonna in a mandorla, Christ with thorns, various saints, a witch riding a broom, and an assortment of profane objects, a penis with wings and feet, a couple copulating, a vulva carried in state by three penises. Jeroen explained, "The pilgrims who come to the fair buy these amulets. They are very fashionable. I design them, and she has them cast from wooden molds."



Jacob listened absentmindedly, the silent woman disturbed him. What else did she know? Where was she from? He felt a confused attraction to her. "Let me show you my schildereren," said Jeroen. They got up and walked into his stall. Being out of reach of Sibylle's intense gaze helped.

Fig.2



Fragment of a "Last Judgment", 1466, Munich

In the back of his booth Jeroen kept a large panel. On a dark background he had painted a motley collection of suffering people with such realism as Jacob had never seen before. A naked woman standing in the black lava issuing from a fire-spewing volcano watching over an emaciated man trying to rise from the ground. A king or pope crowned with a tiara but without clothes wringing his hands in agony. People drowning, writhing, dying. In the center of the panel colorful hybrid creatures, half insect, half bird attacked more naked people. One animal half rat, half bird dragged a woman upside down across rocky terrain. On the far right an old witch hovered under the fire rain of another volcano.... A chill crept over Jacob's back. How far he had ventured from sunny Italy, from its restrained formal beauty! No Italian would paint this "vale of tears" as drastically or as horrifyingly as this young man. The passions under the surface of these Brabantian Northerners were frightening. He asked Jeroen, what this painting was. Jeroen shrugged, "A pattern sheet, an example of my abilities. From it people can chose their own hell or just order a painting of one of those creatures for their private use. I am known as the *faiseur des diables* to the French speaking-people from Flanders, who like this kind of excitement."

Compared to Jeroen's the beasts of the apocalypse seemed harmless. Jacob asked where he had seen these creatures. Jeroen said light-heartedly, "In my dreams at times. Some, however, are the inventions of Sibylle. To imitate the creatures she sees in her visions, she will beat her arms, make a rat face and screech like an owl. Then I see such a mixed animal in my imagination, and when the Guelders devastate the country one can see any number of mutilated people dying. Sibylle also has visions of great fires and is much afraid of them. The world can be a horrifying place."

Sibylle had recovered, and asked Jacob to chose one of her trinkets. He could not have said why he selected the thorn-crowned Christ. When he pulled out his money, she

insisted on making the pendant a present to him. "If you are not the Savior," she said enigmatically, "Christ *is* the Messiah."

For the remainder of the day Sibylle's haunting face and Jeroen's strange creatures befuddled Jacob's mind.

Maximilian's mission was going well, and it was decided to stay longer in Hertogenbosch. Jacob was content. Occasionally he had to attend Maximilian's meetings with Marie and her ladies-in-waiting. It was Jacob's obligation to show-off the intelligence of his student to the Burgundians. Maximilian was bright, quick in comprehension, and had an excellent memory. It was a pleasure to work with him. At the same time he was unusually self-confident for his age, without arrogance. One day Jacob made the two youngsters play mathematical games with a magic square. At another Maximilian recited the neoplatonic teachings of Ficino by heart. The great success came when Jacob had carefully rehearsed him in the complete horoscope of Marie. The courtiers of both parties were utterly astonished. They had to perform this show twice. At the second time Maximilian added his own illustrious horoscope and showed how, by the constellation of their natal planets, Marie and he were practically destined for each other.

However, Jacob's mind was preoccupied with the Brabantian Sibyl and the imaginative talents of Jeroen the painter. One afternoon he slipped away and walked out to the tent city of the Fair. To his disappointment, Sibylle was not there, but Jeroen received him with a show of pleasure and a measure of ironic amusement. "Your friend is supervising the casting of more badges. She sold most of the ones you saw," he said tilting his curly head. "She has been talking about you ever since she met you. I cannot tell why she is attracted by you, maybe because you are Jewish like she is, maybe just because you are an elegantly dressed foreigner"

Jacob took the opportunity to learn more about her. Jeroen described how they had known each other since early childhood. She lived in Vught, a village a mile away on the other side of the river Dommel. His grandmother had also lived in Vught. There was a small Jewish community there. "Oh well," he said. "Sibylle was my first sweetheart, and her visions have held me captive to this very day. She knows more than you can imagine, all learned from her grandmother. Her grandparents fled to Vught from Provence in Southern France." He laughed. "I guess, there were more heretics in Provence than good Christians."

Jeroen looked inquisitively at Jacob. Maybe he shouldn't say such dangerous things, he hardly knew Jacob. He hated the Church and its corrupt clergy, and yet the Church had been a very generous client to his father and brothers, all painters. He said, "After the great fire five years ago we painted several triptychs for the burnt-out monasteries and for city hall. All religious subjects. I should not revile the hands who feed us, but I can no longer see pictures of fat priors sitting in pomp before a sweet Mother Mary."

Jacob asked, "Your grandmother in Vught is not Jewish, is she?" Jeroen blinked. "You mean, because I am against Christian institutions? -- She is dead, and we don't talk about such things at home. She went to church, but that doesn't mean much. She was an old woman, when I knew her." Jeroen, suddenly pensive, said, "However, this would be a good explanation, Grandmother van Aken, a converted Jewess?" He shook his head and continued, "I have always attributed my un-Christian state of mind to the influence of Sibylle, she is two years older than I. But I also dislike Jews, certain dishonest Jews." Jacob smiled sadly, some of the worst Jew-haters were Jews who had broken with their religion. Jeroen's face brightened. "You are right. Sibylle's father is such a Jew. He buys and sells 'antiques' and lends money to the local landowners and merchants. At her



house they celebrate the Jewish holidays in Hebrew, but to prove his modern independence her father eats pork, and they never attend Jewish services. But nobody in that house is baptized. Her mother died at Sibylle's birth. Her stepmother brought her up. After the death of his wife her father turned into a pompous man. This is why Sibylle is searching for the Messiah and gave you this Christ-with-thorns pendant. She believes that Christ is the Messiah. I have kept her from getting herself baptized in Church." Jacob turned these news over in his mind. He had stumbled into a complicated family tangle. He was not a medical healer as many of the scholars were whom he had met. He enjoyed teaching young people, but he knew enough about the mind and soul to guess that Sibylle's precariously hypersensitive imagination was connected with the chaotic religious situation at her home.

Jeroen interrupted his thoughts. "But who are you?" he asked bluntly. "I have heard in town that you are the tutor of young Maximilian. Are you a scholar then? Your dress and behavior is not that of one of the rich and powerful. They don't come here." Jacob, seeing that Jeroen's question was more than justified, briefly told him his story. "Sibylle thought me a wandering missionary or even a prophet," he added recalling his shock at her Hebrew pronouncement. "I have no religious message or want to reform the world. I think much like you do. The people I come in contact with, although they are often nominal priests like my teacher Ficino, are open-minded. They pay lip-service to the Church, but we occasionally discuss the failings of Christianity. Ficino considers the Greek philosophers to be his great models."

The idea occurred to Jacob to find out what Jeroen knew of Italian Renaissance painting. As it turned out, Jeroen had seen some contemporary paintings which had been brought back by rich Brabantian merchants from Italy. "Their application of paint is very clever and formal," Jeroen said, "but they don't expose the troubles we have here, the brutality of the wars, the suffering of our people, the deplorable state of our Church and governors." He finally said emphatically, "Their way of seeing and painting doesn't suit me." Jacob told him of his astonishment at his free and scathing handling of the human body. Jeroen laughed. "But that is what man looks like and what some of us see. Why should I brighten up reality?" "No," said Jacob, "I mean that you paint people like that. In Italy and Germany that is difficult to do. Naked people are still relegated to mythological or approved religious themes or have to be established saints, like St. Anthony, according to Athanasius he had visions like yours." Jeroen pulled a face. "Saint Antonius is not my lucky subject. I'll show you."

Fig.3



Temptation of St. Anthony, 1466, Madrid

From the recess of the booth he brought a modestly sized panel, a contemplative St. Anthony sitting in a tree stump by a brook. A number of grotesque but rather harmless monsters were threatening the hermit. Between trees a city of white, tall buildings was visible in the background. "The New Jerusalem," said Jeroen. The painting appeared flat and unimaginative compared to his "pattern-sheet." Jeroen said, "This Anthony was a commission, which I painted two years ago. The client rejected it. He felt, the saint was too well-fed. I am now trying to sell it to some enthusiast. I have been told that nobody has ever painted Anthony's visions." Jacob asked whether such a rejection was not a sizable financial loss. Jeroen told him that it was painted on some old planks his father had bought at an auction of a bankrupt painter's shop. Jacob was right, competition for commissions was fierce. Jeroen returned to Jacob's earlier question. "But there is one painter in Leuven, Dieric Bouts, who paints Hell like I see it. He also has an unusual vision of the Last Judgment. The good people go straight to heaven without the help of the Church. That is what I sometimes hope for. I admire Bouts." Jacob had not heard of Bouts. He was impressed by Jeroen's directness and by his uncompromising opinions. He would make an exceptional student.

Sibylle appeared with a young man carrying a basket holding the day's production of amulets. She seemed a different person. Her eyes sparkled when she saw him, "Here you are! I shouldn't tell you, that I have been thinking of you all these days. I am happy to see you and that you haven't forgotten us." Jacob felt that, if Jeroen had not been present, he would have embraced the vibrant figure. Awkwardly he attempted to help take the heavy burden from the man's shoulders. "No," she said cheerfully, "the badges are too fragile." The man carefully backed the basket on top of her table and slipped out of its straps. Together the three unwrapped the amulets. Among them was a new, more complicated casting. A large circle enclosing a naked man with a crown and an ornately dressed woman. Between them in a rectangular box stood an angel protecting a young boy. The contraption was topped by a man and a tiger holding up what looked like a shirt. Jacob looked at it in puzzlement. She laughed. "The knight is you, he has a sword in his hand. The lady is I, and in the center stands Jeroen protected by his guardian angel." Jacob blushed and asked, "But whose shirt are the two figures on top holding up?" She winked at him. "That is the Golden Fleece. The amulet is really supposed to show Jason and Medea and her brother being led to sleep. But today I saw us three in it."

Watching her nimble hands arrange her wares in careful patterns, Jacob mused about this allegory. Now she saw him stealing the Golden Fleece with her! He felt tempted to purchase this second prophecy, but restrained himself. Don't fan the flames! Her soul was afire, not to mention his own.

As if she had read his thoughts, she began in an agitated voice relating a dream of a few nights ago. A great conflagration. A city burning, smoke and fire billowing from the houses, people with hooks precariously balancing on ladders trying to tear down burning timbers. The sky all red. A burning windmill. Across a bridge over a river an army marched behind an armored knight on an old horse led on by a half-crazed footman. Naked people were jumping into the river to escape the heat, only to drown. Sibylle looked at Jacob, "You appeared in my dream and said that they were Spaniards devastating the Low Countries." She said. "If you had called them Guelders or Frenchmen, but Spaniards?" She shook her head. "I woke. Fires frighten me."

Jeroen had got a piece of paper and in rapid strokes drew a sketch of her dream. His houses were tall. He had added birds fleeing from the flames and people running from the city through a burning gate tower. They stood around him watching the drawing grow. Sibylle offered some additional detail, a single tree by the river and a sailboat on a lake at the foot of the city where more people were drowning. Jacob watched him draw this frightening scene. Full of admiration Jacob asked, "Now you will convert the drawing into a painting? I already see the red sky, the white heat, and the black smoke." Jeroen nodded. "She is going to dream up other parts of Our World." He said excited. "*Terra Nostra* will be a large panel and take me a couple of months."

Jacob visited them a last time before Maximilian's court moved on to Dijon, the Burgundian capital. Sibylle had invaded his dreams. She was around him all the time. On the one hand he pondered what could be done to stabilize her dangerously virulent mind, on the other he knew that it was her visions that attracted him. His consciousness reminded him of Jeroen, who had been her companion for many years. She would probably endow him with the power to separate her from Jeroen. What could he do to keep the friendship between the three of them in balance? Should he try to remove Sibylle from her miserable family and take her with him? So far this loomed like a large unresolved responsibility in his mind. He smiled at himself: Jacob the Savior!

Jacob found them both in their booths. Jeroen had made several new drawings for his envisioned painting. Most eager to hear Jacob's opinion, he laid the sketches out on the counter of his stall. To Jacob they were as strange as the large panel of model monsters, but the details of the drawings were precisely controlled and highly evocative.

Two oversized ears cut apart by a large butcher knife and speared together by an arrow. Jacob noticed that the knife's edge was chipped. "Yes," said Jeroen, "we once threatened each other with a knife in an argument over 'hear who has ears,' When I threw the knife at Sibylle, it hit the ground and got chipped." He opened a drawer and pulled out the knife. Sibylle covered her eyes with her hands. "His neighbor, a knife-smith, makes them." Inside the ear Jacob discovered a small black figure with a lance. "The devil," explained Jeroen, "who makes our ears ring and arouses our passions."

He pulled out a large sheet with a tree-man. Two ghostly withered willow trunks as legs supported the body of the man: a hollow egg-shaped deformity, broken open. Inside of this belly Jacob noticed five comrades tipping the wine an old woman drew from a barrel. However, most disturbing, this unnatural figure had a head with a highly intelligent face looking critically at the observer. The head of the tree-man was covered by a circular disk on which all kind of people danced around an enormous bagpipe. The feet of the grotesque creature were two derelict boats stuck in a frozen lake, where naked skaters drew circles.

"This drawing is an old dream of mine," Sibylle said, "from the days of the knife quarrel. Only in the last weeks have I understood its meaning. The frozen lake represents our frozen consciousness. The body of the tree-man is lifeless and rotting. His belly is inhabited by five intoxicated good-for-nothings: our five senses. On his hat a couple is being mislead by desire and debauchery, turning round and round to the frivolous tune of an obscene bag-pipe." She looked straight at Jacob, and said, "and the Face observing *Our World* from the center of the painting you know."

"Yes," said Jacob, narrowly evading her allusion. "He is the *New Man*. Pico, a friend and co-student in Florence described him to me. Pico's writings are the quintessence of Marsilio Ficino's teachings." And he recited the celebrated paragraph of *Pico della Mirandola's Oratio De Hominis Dignitate*:

*"The Supreme Maker said: 'We have placed you at the center of the world, so that you may observe and consider all that is in the world. We have made you a creature neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, in order that you may, as the free and proud shaper, mold yourself in the form you may prefer. It will be in your power to descend to the lowest brutish forms of life; but you will be able, through your own decision, to rise again to the superior orders whose life is divine.'"*

Jeroen had listened with rapt attention, and asked Jacob to repeat the quotation. He exclaimed, "You have put my deepest beliefs into words. It will be the theme of this painting. I now see a great triptych describing this New Man. The center panel is still empty. Will you teach me what should go there?"

Quietly Jacob said "Yes, I will." It would be a larger challenge than he had ever taken on as teacher. He had no experience in painting. *Seeing*, real or spiritual, was not his domain, his strength were words. The new aesthetic theories of the Italian Renaissance would obviously not apply here. But to become the instructor and friend of this young man would justify any effort on his part. Jeroen would supply more than enough imagination for the two of them. He recalled Pico's affiliation with Boticelli, but they were of the same mind. His relationship to Jeroen would be full of dark, completely new adventures into the unknown recesses of man's mind. And Sibylle? He soberly analyzed

his attraction to her as physical, but no less there was his deep curiosity about her unstable female soul.

He turned to Sibylle, "What would you think if I became Jeroen's teacher?" "I often cannot put words to my visions," She said sweetly. "Jeroen intuitively understands me and paints what I see. But I have to find the explanations of my visions myself. He is not a man given to words. Being with you has opened a new understanding of old dreams." There remained his obligations to Maximilian and his father Emperor Friedrich. For the time being his livelihood depended on them. He had saved some money, Friedrich was very generous, but he would need a job in Brabant to be near Jeroen and Sibylle.

Jacob had left with Maximilian's entourage. Winter shrouded the country in ice and snow. Gray clouds drifted across the wide sky. Sibylle was often crying over the loss of Jacob, who had expanded her mind with such ease. She and Jeroen did not see each other often. Jeroen was kept busy in his father's shop. Several commissions had to be finished before Christmas. The drawings for the triptych of the *New Man* lay idle. Besides Sibylle depressed him. She was in love with Jacob, and he knew no remedy for that.

The thought of marrying Sibylle had occurred to him many times in the past, but his parents were decidedly against such a liaison. Apart from her being Jewish, their reasoning was straightforward. He was the most imaginatively gifted of his brothers. He should take over the shop. But he was, in his father's opinion, too restless and moreover sloppy at times. He could paint a panel with great speed and without any under-drawing, but his brush work was often hasty and careless, which displeased their clients as much as his revolutionary ideas. If he wanted to continue this free-style life, he better marry a well-heeled woman whose means could provide for his independence and, as his father hoped, tame his unruliness. Jeroen laughed, the first perhaps, the second never. However, he conceded that Sibylle, as much as he loved her, was not the woman who would make a suitable companion for the rest of his life. He did not feel inclined to follow Jacob's unsteady wandering life. Maybe his mind was restless, but his heart was surely conservative.

He realized that the triptych of the *New Man* was a grandiose plan that far exceeded anything he had worked on. He smiled thinking of his father's exhortations, but he was fully aware that to make this project a success, he had to refine his painting technique and do a carefully considered layout. He still could not see the middle or the third panel of the triptych. Jacob and he had not discussed that. Did Jacob know? Skeptical as he was, he doubted it. He talked to several people who had been to Florence, and whom he occasionally met at the illustrious "Confraternity of Our Lady", of which his father was an elected member. One or the other traveler had heard of Marsilio Ficino, the Neoplatonist, but could not put his philosophy into words. Where was Jacob? He would finish the right wing with Sibylle, the other two parts would have to wait for Jacob's return.

Jeroen took his drawings for the new triptych to his beloved sister Herberte's place, who lived with her twins, a boy and a girl, in the large house of their grandmother's in Vught. Herberte was the dark sheep in Jeroen's family. The father of her children had been black and so were the twins. Holland had proven too cold for him, and he had left her. Sibylle and Jeroen's meetings at Herberte's were often tense. He had added a sketch of monsters attacking armored knights which would fit into the area behind the Face. Sibylle dismissed them with a shrug. The leader of the knights, stretched out on a circular disk, was being torn apart by reptiles. A knight was being hanged in a tree. Several more knights poured from a stable lantern, driven on by gnomes with spears. This scene was balanced on the edge of another of his neighbor's butcher knives. Below

them, in a cave a naked man was riding on a whore, and two whimsical figures on a plank above the frozen lake were quietly discussing the mayhem. These scenes would cover the upper half of the panel. What to do with the lower half? Sibylle had a suggestion. Jeroen had long been fascinated by the obscenity of certain oversized musical instruments like the bassoon and the bag-pipe. There were already several sketches of those around. Sibylle said, "People will think that this is an ordinary rendition of hell. If you would add one of your bassoons that would show them that this is not a Christian Hell. Who has ever heard of music in hell?" Jeroen set to work. Soon a long "bombard," issuing curly smoke from its end, crossed the center of a new sheet. The bassoon was blown by a blustering man in a long-pointed night-cap. Sibylle remarked that the bassoon needed a female companion. Before her eyes Jeroen created a life-like hurdy-gurdy as tall as a house. A nude man lying on its top was turning the crank. From its sound hole a woman striking a triangle looked intensely at the beholder. Jeroen turned to Sibylle, "She is the female counterpart to the Face, the only person who makes a pure sound."

They couldn't agree on other equally ribald instruments. She left, and late that night Jeroen started over again, adding an oversized harp. Into its strings a naked man was strung. Next to it a reptilian monster had hanged a man to the neck of a giant lute. Below and between the instruments a group of naked people, led by a chimera, sang Christian hymns from notes emblazoned on the naked behind of a prostrate man. In the early morning hours Jeroen examined his drawing with pleasure.

A few weeks later Sibylle tracked him down. She was very excited. "Tonight I had a vision of the Emperor sitting on a kind of high-chair, a latrine over a sewage hole. He appeared as a bird-man devouring people, which he excreted in a amniotic sack into the hole below. At his feet sat a young pregnant woman, maybe Eva, in the spindly arms of a fox-monster, who was feeling her all over." She shook herself, the vision had been revolting, but she thought it would fit into his layout.

They went to Herbert's house and Jeroen drew her dream. He added a few details like a big fart and a flight of birds escaping from the behind of a victim the bird-man was eating. He put an inverted copper-cauldron on the emperor's head to show his empty bird-brain. He made a man and a woman issue in the amniotic sack, and below them a man vomiting into the sewer, supported by a woman. Eva in the arms of the fox-devil saw herself in a mirror covering the backside of a tree-monster, an old, favorite subject of his.

During the summer Jeroen began to paint. He carried his easel, brushes, and the mineral pigments to Herbert's house and ground and mixed the paints himself. The days were longer now, and he often worked by candle light way into the night.



Fig.4



Garden Triptych, Right Wing, the Burning City, 1467, Madrid

Sibylle's dream of the burning city rose in apocalyptic terror: The windows of the buildings, glowing in white heat, sent rays of light into the black sky. Following their quixotic leader the Spanish army, a frightened bunch of heavily armored soldiers, retreated across the bridge. The winged crosses of two windmills were ablaze, and naked people drowned *en masse* in the lake.

Fig.5



Garden Triptych, Right Wing, the Tree Man, 1467, Madrid

Below this skyline the scenes spun around the Tree-Man and his Face in a tight spiral driven by the visual power of the three-story-high musical instruments and the ears forever disconnected by the ominous knife of his discord with Sibylle .



Fig.6



Garden Triptych, Right Wing, Musical Instruments, 1467, Madrid

The ghastly blue Emperor-bird sat on his throne. In one bottom corner of the panel he added Fortuna disrobed holding on to a turned-over gaming table to which one of the players had been staked by a sting-ray shark. A crowd of shouting people demanded the resumption of their games of fortune. In the lower right corner a young member of the Knights of St. John carried a sealed ecclesiastical Bulle to be signed by a fat pig in the dress of an abbess, who was about to swindle an honest man out of his property.

Fig.7



Garden Triptych, Right Wing, the Emperor Bird, 1467, Madrid

Sibylle liked the additions and examined the panel. His brushstrokes were precisely controlled, the layout of the crowded painting superb. The colors and objects of the lower half created a fitting contrast to the burning city. She exclaimed cheerfully, "You have outdone yourself. The other two panels of this triptych will celebrate my wedding." Jeroen was taken aback and gloomily asked, whom she was going to marry. "Oh," she said nonchalantly, "the New Man, of course, if he ever comes back! Whom did you think of?" He had expected that, but not that she would say it so frankly. He dropped his brush. His hands hanging by his side he looked at her, tears in his eyes. He said in an defeated voice, "So this is how our friendship will end." "Nonsense," she said stroking his head. "It has just started. Look at your painting. We have never worked together like this. Jacob has opened my mind. I have been able to give names to what I see and tell you. This has never happened before." She kissed him and smiling at his saddened face said, "You may not realize that you have also become a new man. Instead of doodling monsters of your fantasies, you painted an extraordinary panel which will become a timeless masterpiece. You are revolutionizing Brabantian painting. Everyone will imitate and copy you. I love you and our friendship will remain as long as I live. Together with Jacob we will change this world to the better. I see it and believe in it like I have never believed in anything else before."

Sibylle hugged him and his tears slowly dried. Sibylle said sweetly, "My stepmother told me that to the Persians birds are symbols of the souls of men. All people have a soul-bird



which reflects their personal character. Jacob's is a magpie. He knows and talks a lot and inquisitively pries into other people's minds. He may also be argumentative and jealous. Yours is a hoopoe." Jeroen looked at her mockingly and asked what a hoopoe stood for. She said cheerfully, "You see the invisible and paint what you see. You are the messenger of the other world." He smiled and said, "You always know hidden things I have never thought of. I a hoopoe?" He shook his head.

Sibylle said, "Let me tell you the Fable of the Birds which my stepmother told me. It is a Sufi teaching story which these wandering minstrels brought to Provence from Persia." "Once upon a time," she began, "the birds congregated to elect a king. They felt they had no aim and purpose in this world, maybe a king would give them direction. They asked the hoopoe. He told them that the name of their true king was *Simurgh*, but he lived far away behind seven valleys which they would have to cross to find him. It would be a perilous journey. Like you, the hoopoe made them see a vast wasteland cut by terrifying valleys where lost people were dying.

The vain Parrot was all for this journey, he longed for immortality. The Peacock wanting to become whole joined him. But the Partridge said he was content with his collection of precious stones, the Sparrow considered himself too weak and insignificant for such a labor, and the Nightingale was in love with the rose and didn't want to leave its intoxicating smell. The hoopoe showed them their conceit. The passionate attachment of the Nightingale to the rose would prevent her from recognizing the Simurgh, when she finally reached the end of the path.

They set out to cross the first Valley of the Quest, a vast stony desert. Every night some birds got lost, others died of thirst in the heat of the day. The Hoopoe told them, that only those will survive who gave themselves completely to the quest and divested themselves of all that seemed certain in their previous life: convention, dogma, religion, beliefs or unbeliefs. One night he gave the birds a vision of the beautiful realm of the Simurgh, and they flew on in their search.

The second valley, the Valley of Love they saw themselves among men and women in the fiery flames of love for each other and God. The lukewarm were consumed by the fire and perished in ecstasy. You must be free, said the Hoopoe to sacrifice your heart to the beloved or you will never grasp its secret.

This you will learn in the third Valley of Understanding, which has no end or beginning: Knowledge is useless and temporary. How many have lost their way, cried the Hoopoe, in search for one who claims to possess the knowledge of the mysteries. Once you have stripped yourself of this false goal you will become aware of the secrets, which God has hidden in your soul. There are as many different ways to cross this valley as there are different souls, but those who are sluggish or asleep will perish by the wayside.

The weak littered the path of the fourth valley, the Valley of Independence and Detachment. An icy wind so violent that it devastates the landscape of your mind, unless you can rise and detach yourself from all desire to possess your deepest longings and cravings. Nothing old or new had value here. If you survived bared of all false power you emerged like a new-born in the drop of water from which the world was created.

What was left of them was broken into a thousand pieces and then recomposed in the fifth Valley of Unity. The hoopoe made them see that the myriad of different people despite their multitude are one complete whole. He showed them that the secret of this valley was beyond words and names. The New Being, they will become, will cease to think of eternity as before and after.

The hoopoe showed them how the sixth Valley of Bewilderment and Astonishment will overcome them. There sighs will be like swords, each breath an agony of bitterness.

Sorrow and lamentation will be their lot, and they will be attacked by depression and despondency. But he who has achieved unity will overcome these sorrows and himself and understand with certainty, that he knows nothing, that he is unaware of his soul, that he is in love, but knows not with whom.

The last Valley of Deprivation and Death the hoopoe could not describe, it could only be experienced. You will fall like a drop into a big ocean and cease to exist, but when you emerge from this deprivation of your senses you will become aware that you have been created a New Being who has lost its separate existence and participates in the harmony of the movements of the Ocean of his Soul, which is God.

Only thirty of the hundreds of birds who set out survived this journey of many months and years. They became aware that the Simurgh was an allegory of the ocean of their soul. By immersing themselves in the Simurgh they found joy, became part of all secrets, and died to receive immortality."

She turned to face Jeroen. "Do you think you can paint these visions for all of us to see? It will be the subject of the middle panel."

In late September a letter from Jacob arrived.

*Carregi-Fiorentino, 20 August, 1467*

*Dear Jeroen, beloved Sibylle!*

*A full year has passed since I met you, and many things have happened. I left Friedrich's and Maximilian's employ and moved back to Florence for the winter. Maximilian has become increasingly engaged in the political schemes of his father. We moved around a great deal, no time for leisurely philosophical conversations. We separated on good terms, he will always remain a friend and student of mine.*

*Marsilio Ficino has become the head of the Florentine Academy. Cosimo di Medici has given him a beautiful house in Carregi, where Marsilio has collected a congenial group of young students. His love for them is ever present. A wonderful place to be and discuss Plato, whose dialogues he has just finished translating into Latin. He is now working on an extensive commentary to Plato's "Symposium" to which each of us is encouraged to contribute. Imagine, all about Love! We celebrated Plato's birthday with a philosophical banquet in his spirit.*

*Following Plotinus, Marsilio envisions a hierarchy through which man rises to perfection. At the bottom are physical man, animals, and minerals. On the next level man perfects his divine qualities until he acquires the "rational soul" which occupies the third level. Above resides the angelic world and finally God. Central to this universe is a "world soul" in which all men partake and which is the true essence of all things created by God. He is convinced that this universe is held together by the force of love in the Platonic sense. True love between people always involves at least three, two individuals and God. He advocates contemplation to ascend to this joyful state. Any person should be able to attain the ultimate goal. The reward is immortality of the soul.*

*How is Jeroen's painting coming? I have looked at many paintings. Some painters, for example Boticelli, have tried to translate Ficino's thoughts into images, but they don't have your power and acuity, Jeroen. If I return to you, and I am planning to do so coming Spring, I would like to be involved with the layout of this triptych. I spent many days thinking about the central panel. At this time I feel it should depict the second, third, and fourth level of Ficino's universe. The misery of our physical world you have shown more powerful than he, the kind man, could ever imagine ---and God is invisible, indescribable, and unimaginable to me. He does not have a fatherly beard and should not be shown.*



*There is one question Ficino does not address, except by implication. It is death. We have discussed Plato's "Phaedo", and Marsilio has avoided illuminating us how man, who is both body and soul, could cope with his fear of death, except by giving up the body and becoming all soul. Is suicide an option? I have a hunch that a woman might know the answer, but there isn't a woman in Ficino's circle. I am hoping dearly that Sibylle knows. Who else could?*

*Another disagreement I have with Marsilio is that he tends more and more to an all-Christian point of view. I still am not reconciled to the idea that Christ is the Messiah and Savior of all mankind, who facilitates and through the Church controls our ascent to God. Marsilio is. But one must not forget that the Church holds a powerful sway over the life of people in Italy. They constantly search for heretics, and Ficino is closely watched. Of course, he is a priest who is preparing to be ordained as a canon of the Duomo in Florence next year.*

*I like your critical view of Christian institutions, Jeroen. Life in Brabant is much freer than here. I even found the canon of St. Janskerk sufficiently open-minded to discuss this subject. Again I must listen to Sibylle who believes in Christ, as a Jewess.*

*I am planning to make the pilgrimage to Den Bosch as soon as the passes open. Maybe I could collect a small circle of people in s'Hertogenbosch who are interested in exploring neoplatonic ideas. Ficino's Academy is a persuasive example. But although I have met many influential and educated people in Brabant, I see no one who would be the equal of Cosimo di Medici.*

*I am longing to be with you, my dearest friends.*

*In Love.*

*Your*

*Jacob*

They discussed Jacob's letter, and Sibylle pointed out that the story of the birds fitted Jacob's vision of the middle triptych. "The birds and Ficino are on the same quest, but to me the Messiah is missing, He would be able to resolve the imbalances of Ficino's universe."

Sibylle was overwhelmed by Jacob's expectation that she would solve the ultimate mystery of man's life. She was a young woman who had not born children conceived in the fire of a great love. "I am not afraid of death as you are and Jacob seems to be," she tenderly confided to Jeroen, who did not feel strong enough to object, "but I cannot explain why I have this certainty."

She thought about her dilemma, and late that night told Jeroen a strange story: "I have never told this to anybody, but when I first became a woman my stepmother said this event had to be celebrated. She asked me to bring a kerchief with my menstrual blood as proof, and late at night, from a chest she had rescued from her life in Provence, she unpacked a number of strange objects. They were not large, the size of a hand, and looked very ordinary. She first took out a white replica of a woman's breast cut by a slit. She said the slit was the vagina and that it represented the cycle of fertility that I was entering into. Then she brought to light two large crocks and a smaller one and placed them on a shelf next to the breast. They represented the family, two parents and a child between them. On the right of the breast she set up an ibis, pulling with its beak at the down of its chest to make a bed for its young, and an earthenware pot, which she said was the womb of the earth. This she explained represented the lowest level of a woman's life.

On a next higher shelf she placed a mortar with a pestle, an obscure object, which she said was a frog holding up an egg, an old, bent-over woman with a cane, a couple

dancing back-to-back holding up a funnel, and another pot she called an urn. I stared at these things uncomprehending. Stepmother explained that these objects represented the secret knowledge of woman: the grinding of the male organ in a woman's crotch. The frog rising from its fertile moisture holding up the egg of the world. The woman with the cane represented woman at an advanced age. The dancing couple was fighting over the meaning of life, and the urn represented inevitable death.

She dug up one more object, an ancient oil lamp incised with a frog and a cross around which was a Greek inscription. She read it to me: '*ego eime anastatis*'---I am the resurrection. I did not understand, resurrection? A frog? Stepmother explained that this lamp came from Egypt, where the frog was an ancient symbol of resurrection from the swamps of the world. She placed the lamp on a third shelf above the frog holding the egg.

Fig.8



Wedding at Canaa, Female Initiation Altar, copy 1570 (original 1475), Cologne

High above this collection, which she called the 'Female Initiation Altar', she placed a sponge under a large bell-shaped hood, saying that in the original setup moisture from the heavenly bell and the sponge rained down on this secret woman's world to make the new woman fertile.

She hung the kerchief with my menstrual blood on the altar, made me undress, and lie with my head towards the altar. Mumbling invocations in Provençal Hebrew, she touched my mouth, my breasts, my belly, and my crotch. At the end she bade me to remember these symbols, saying that I was now fully initiated into the female secrets of maternity. Next morning she took me to the Jewish bathhouse where I had to take a purification bath under her supervision."

Sibylle shook her head and looking at Jeroen's perplexed face asked, "Do you understand any of this? I still don't." Jeroen looking past her said, "How can I, I am a man. I will make a drawing of this altar and think about what you told me."

A few nights later he showed her his drawing. She suggested a few corrections. The objects were much cruder than he had imagined. "You should," said Jeroen, "talk to your stepmother again about death and female insights. I cannot deduce anything from this altar." She said, "If you come with me, my hoopoe, my lover, I will."

Jeroen had met Sibylle's stepmother before. On this occasion she appeared more formidable and frightening to him. She is a witch, he thought. Sibylle broached the subject by asking how, when everyone seemed scared of death, she should not feel this apprehension. "My child I am not surprised," said the woman severely, "you experienced your mother's death when you were born. People who have experienced death are not afraid of it." Sibylle, embarrassed by this explanation asked how she could teach other people this certainty. The old woman fidgeted with her answer. Eying Jeroen with suspicion she said, "You don't mean this young man?" Sibylle blushed. "Yes, but you know Jeroen since he was a small boy." With a severe voice stepmother retorted, "He still is a man. Men are to be pitied, they cannot bear children and will never understand that giving birth and dying are closely related. This experience is the great secret of women. Life is like a circle without beginning and end. A woman knows this beyond words." She glanced at Jeroen and in a sharp tone said. "Men throughout their life make up words and idle designs trying to escape this circle and go straight to heaven, where they think they will finally find peace from their nagging fear of death."

Jeroen's face had darkened. He stepped a few feet back and kept silent. On their way Sibylle said, "She suspects that we are lovers. You will never be acceptable to her as a son-in-law. But she did not tell the full truth. A woman can teach a man what she knows, if she loves him with all she has."

That night Sibylle had a dream. She was drowning in a dark ocean. A fierce wind was blowing, and she clutched her first-born child.. She knew the child was dead. She made some frustrated attempts at swimming and suddenly saw the Jeroen's great triptych with all the people loving each other. A great peace came over her. The wind died. She let loose of her body and became part of the great ocean that filled her soul.

## 2.

Sibylle saw him walking down the lane between the stalls. It was Easter week, and she and Jeroen had set up their booths at the annual Spring Market. In wild abandon, crying and laughing, she ran to take Jacob into her arms. His clothes were crumpled and dusty from his long journey. With closed eyes Sibylle ran her fingers over his face. He took her hand and tenderly kissed it. A brown mongrel followed Jacob, which sat down next to him, wagging his tail. "May I introduce you to Maxi?" said Jacob pointing at the dog. "He has been my companion on this long journey."

She took him by the hand to Jeroen who embraced Jacob. "Sit down, you look tired," said Sibylle. "You must have traveled a long way." Jacob looked at the woman who had left him no peace. Her dark, loving eyes beguiled him and at the same time made him shy. Screeching and cawing a magpie landed next to them. Maxi barked ferociously at the bird and chased it away. "Ever since I have set foot on Dutch soil, I seem to be pursued by this kind of bird," said Jacob. "What do you call it?" "It was a magpie," said Sibylle with an enigmatic glance at Jeroen "The moment has passed. Maxi doesn't like the bird." They put up Jacob at Herbert's. He offered to pay for his meals. The twins were a surprise to him, but they could see, he liked Herbert.

Fig.9



Garden Triptych, Right Wing, Terra Nostra, 1468

They took Jacob into the room where Jeroen kept the finished painting. Jacob spellbound at first, finally said. "If the middle panel will be twice the size of this one it will be a large triptych. It is taller than I!" He stared at this hell for a long time. The burning city had turned out more frightening than he had imagined from Jeroen's drawings. He remembered the wise face of the New Man with his ironic smile. The enormous musical instruments attracted his attention. Sibylle explained that the instruments would mystify those who thought this was an ordinary Hell and said, "There is no music in Christian Hell!" Jacob nodded and said, "There is more to this. Ficino thinks that his universe is composed of heavenly harmonies and all Italian poets and painters are enamored by this

Pythagorean idea. You destroyed that dream most effectively." He made a dismissive gesture and continued. "These days music has ceased to be a pleasure to God's ears. It has been degraded into a cacophony produced by obscene instruments and the hymns of liars." He shook his head. "I would have never conceived of such a fitting symbol for the depravity of our misbegotten world. How did it occur to you?" Jeroen described how Sibylle had demanded a bassoon, and how he had spent a night drawing this entire orchestra. He pointed at the woman with the triangle inside the hurdy-gurdy. "Did you notice her? The only pure sound in this world, my counterpoint to the Face." "And the blue bird on the latrine?" exclaimed Jacob. "Who is he?". Sibylle said gaily, "Isn't he ghastly? He is the Emperor of the Underworld devouring people. Another nightmare of mine." Jacob, as Jeroen had expected, liked the piggish abbe, but did not recognize the young man carrying the papal Bull as a Knight of St. John. "Why the Order of St. John?" asked Jacob. "Well," said Jeroen, "because our *Johannites* think they own spirituality and holiness."

As it grew dark Sibylle brought candles. The panel glowed in the background. Jeroen asked Jacob about his ideas for the middle panel. "In your letter you said that it should contain three levels of Ficino's speculation about the ascent of the soul." Jacob explained that he dreamed of the triptych as a teaching aid for his lectures on Ficino's interpretation of Plato. The lowest level of the central painting should show, what Ficino, borrowing from Plotinus, called the variations of 'rational love' in an idealized future world. A *Platonic love*, by which Ficino meant a spiritual relationship between two people and God. This did not exclude physical love, if undertaken in the right spirit. It should show how man's soul can be animated by love, how it will ennoble him and raise him to higher levels, closer to God. "I see a great garden," he described a circle with his hands, "a kind of paradise in which people purify their souls in the pursuit of loving each other. Sometimes these people appear to me like phantoms, not quite real. Like children fully grown but without guile. Having shed their worldly disguises they should all be in the nude, which will not startle you. I'll leave that to your imagination."

"And the next stage?" asked Jeroen. Jacob explained that the second level should be populated by souls with wings flying in a Pythagorean landscape, and as they ascended to the next higher level they would lose their human shapes and become winged creatures. "Call them cherubim." Said Jacob. "But you will see such winged souls much easier than I can." After some thought Jacob added, "As a Jew I cannot imagine God hovering above this world. God is invisible, not describable and should be omitted as a figure. His glory permeates all levels, which will be difficult to show, but he himself remains elusive." Jeroen nodded. He saw the beauty of the enchanted people in this painting, how could a man-made image of God surpass it? He too had doubts about showing God in a painting. The Bible explicitly forbade it. "All my life, I have seen and painted the misery of man on the cross and elsewhere. It will cost me an effort to show only man's joy and bliss. However, if I imagine these people as not being real men, not being weighted down by earthly toils and the fear of death. I can see what you describe." Sibylle asked whether Jacob had ever heard of the Persian tale of the 'Conference of the Birds'. Jacob was astonished. He had, but only very recently. An Arabic scholar, who a few years ago had fled from Constantinople to Florence, had translated the *Mantiq at Tayr*, the Language of the Birds, a long poem by the Persian poet Farid ud-Din Attar and read it at Ficino's Academy. "Where did you come across this piece of Persian Sufi lore?" Sibylle explained that her Provençal stepmother had told her the story. Of course, she had not known the name of the poet. She told Jacob a shortened version of the tale and asked, "Isn't this the same quest as Ficino's? Both seem to come to very similar



conclusions." Jacob shook his head and said, "Yes, of course, and Attar says it in a much more flowery language. Some of us remarked on that after the reading, but Ficino thought that Attar's a poem would not be transparent to Western audiences. But you and Jeroen, who are used to seeing winged creatures have no such problems." Jeroen showed him some sketches of birds he had made and said, "They will be very colorful and more real than the people in the painting. I think their arrival on the scene of your future paradise will be an excellent allusion to the meaning of Ficino's vision." Jacob was delighted.

Sibylle raised the difficult subject. "You wrote, that death is part of this Garden of Eden and that I as a woman might be able to enlighten you on why and how." Jacob put his head between his hands and said softly, "This is my view. In Ficino's world there is no death as we know it. His souls, as they get lighter, fly straight to heaven leaving the useless body behind. If you wish, man becomes more and more transparent by breathing in God's glory. In discussing Plato's *Phaedo*, the account of Socrates' death, the suspicion arose in my mind that Ficino is swayed by his all-pervasive Christian belief. To him death is powerless, and man's fear of it could be overcome by a strong faith. I doubt that and see a need for incorporating the death experience in my vision of this non-Christian paradise. We don't go straight to heaven, we have to pass a dark tunnel to the next world."

Sibylle became serious. "You are right to suspect that a woman may have a different view of Life, Love, and Death compared to a man. I have no fear of dying, but lack the experience and courage to explain why. I questioned my stepmother. She says that in giving birth, a woman can experience her death and understand intuitively that life is a closed circle. Men, who cannot have this experience must forever search for a religious or philosophical theory to calm their fear of death." Jacob raised his hands towards her and said, "You confirm one of my oldest intuitions. In Ficino's Academy there are no women, and like with the story of the birds, no one dared raise that question in earnest." He paused thinking and said, "Only now it occurs to me that Heraklitos the Greek—a man!—has left us an obscure mystical utterance: '*There is no beginning or end on the periphery of a circle.*' For the first time I understand what he meant. He must have learned it from a woman." Sibylle exclaimed, "Those are the exact words my stepmother used."

Jeroen produced a bottle of wine and they drank to their reunion. Staring into his glass Jacob said, "How to incorporate death into that joyful assembly of loving people, I don't know." Sibylle looked at him. "You are not thinking of a male skeleton with a scythe, are you? He would be out of place." "No," said Jacob, "But how else can we show death? I have thought that a suicide scene might describe death, but suicide has likewise no place in this vision." Jacob took a gulp of wine and said with a laugh, "Maybe we should allow drunkenness in paradise. The Persian poets are experts at that."

Jacob grew serious again and returned to Plato. "In *Phaedo* Plato described in minute detail the death of Socrates by poisoning. But Socrates had been condemned to drink the poison, because he had taught the Athenian youths ways of understanding themselves, which disturbed the conventional notions of their elders. Similar things are happening again, but they should not be part of this painting." Jeroen reminded him that there were other drugs that were less poisonous and produced hallucinations which, he was sure, could *reveal* one's death. Jacob asked whether he had experience with that. "No," said Jeroen laughing, "I don't need drugs, my imagination is already virulent enough as is." Jacob nodded and pointedly asked, "So, what do you know about dying?" Jeroen fell silent.

Sibylle came to their rescue. Excited by a sudden inspiration she suggested, "How about depicting death as a beautiful woman, who beguiles man with her charm, love, and female knowledge?" The two men looked at each other. Jeroen guessed what she meant, but Jacob seemed confounded. A moment later, knocking his head with his fist, he said, "I am a fool, in Italian death is female, *la morte*, and some poets write love poems to the beautiful woman whom they will meet at death. However, in painting death is a skeleton just like here." He looked questioningly at Sibylle, who blushed deeply.

While Sibylle sailed high on Jacob's attention, Jeroen grew ever more downhearted. He locked himself into his room for hours. When they asked him what he was doing, he mumbled that he was struggling with the layout and details of the middle panel. No, he was not going to show them his work until he was sure of his version of Jacob's paradise. But the reasons for Jeroen's despair lay elsewhere. He was fighting a wild attack of jealousy. "Rational Love!" he cried to himself one night. "These two can say that easily. I am expected to paint their dreams, but how can I do that without her? She spends all her love on Jacob. I need her for this journey." He did not argue with himself about who was going to marry her. Jacob would. There his mind was clear. But the excitement of working with her in Jacob's absence was gone. His dark mood effected the whole house. Whenever he emerged his friends avoided him, feeling guilty without knowing why. One night he drew Sibylle in her full beauty, the irreproachable personification of love and death and female knowledge. She would stand at the center of the garden. He surrounded the garden with a rose hedge, the *hortus conclusus* of female secrets. Its entrance would be on the right. A smaller garden with strawberry trees *ante muris* would receive the chosen from the hell of Our World. On its left he indicated a lake, representing the Ocean of Souls the birds were searching for. A vanguard of birds, larger than people, would arrive from the left.

Whenever he was depressed he looked at his drawing of Sibylle. It reminded him of the nights they had spent together and that consoled him. He recalled that she had said that this triptych would celebrate her wedding. Somewhere there had to be a wedding.

Fig.10



Garden Triptych, Central Panel, Wedding Cavalcade, 1468, Madrid

In his wounded blindness a bizarre cavalcade floated before his eyes. Dozens of male animals of all species carrying naked men circling a pool from which young women were watching the parade. Riding on a white horse the bridal pair, concealed by the red flower petals of a sweet-pea, closed the relentlessly circling riders. He had to laugh, this would startle Jacob. The pestle and the mortar in reverse! A male circle in this female paradise. Good Ficino, the Italian, would be horrified by such barbarian ribaldry desecrating his universe. Cheered he drew a second oval above the mystical garden and filled it with a fantastic ring, of, four abreast, horses, boars, bears, camels, stags, a billy goat and a unicorn, a panther and a kind of huge lizard which he had seen on a drawing brought back by a traveler from Africa.

He emerged from his seclusion laughing, and found Sibylle and Jacob engaged in an argument. Sibylle was demanding that the Messiah be given some role in the triptych and Jacob adamantly refused. Jeroen listened to them for a while. He laughed that they appeared like a fighting couple under an inverted funnel. Sibylle gave him a warning look, he wouldn't dare reveal her altar! "Listen," said Jeroen, "why such an argument. I will include Christ in the form of a fish, his old symbol. I like fish! Few will recognize him in this disguise." Ashamed by his obstinacy Jacob relented and finally praised Jeroen's cleverness. Jeroen drew the two in the ante-garden fighting each other back-to-back under a shrubbery of thorns. On top of the bush he placed an owl deep in thought.

One day Jacob noticed Herberte beating her laundry with a large wooden paddle with longer and shorter notches along its length. He recognized it at once as a calendar used in Jewish communities to remember their holidays. He asked Herberte where it came from. She had inherited it from her grandmother. He didn't tell her, what he knew, but asked whether there were other things left behind by her grandmother. Herberte waved at the furniture, most of which had been hers and then took him to the attic. She opened a big chest with her grandmother's belongings. Hidden below old clothes Jacob found a Bible printed from wood-blocks in Portugal at the beginning of the last century. It was

written in Hebrew. Herberte told him that Portugal was where her paternal great-grandparents had come from. She couldn't read Portuguese and had never looked at the book. Jacob asked her permission to take it to his room, where he spent the night deciphering the difficult to read Hebrew writing. He had guessed right when he had asked Jeroen. Their grandmother was a *conversa*, whose parents had fled to the freedom of Brabant. Jeroen was not available, he would tell him some day. Meanwhile he kept his discovery to himself.

Vught was a small village and its tightly knit Sephardic community held together. Jacob, the foreigner, had, of course, been noticed and his comings and goings at Herberte's house were watched from behind closed curtains. His association with Sibylle, the strange, medial daughter of the man who openly defied Jewish customs and raised pigs at his house, was much talked about. One had to be careful of outsiders spying in their midst, especially if they were Jews who were not part of their group. Jacob's aloof Ashkenazi ways had made matters worse. He had never talked to any of the neighbors. It should not have surprised anyone in the know, when one night Jacob returned in unfamiliar clothes badly beaten up. His eyes stared transported at his friends. "What has happened to you?" asked Sibylle. "You look like you have gone out of your mind." Stuttering, he told them that he had been attacked by a gang of men who had beaten him up and then taken his clothes away. They had spoken Hebrew. "As I lay by the wayside an angel appeared with clothes to cover my nakedness." His words left him. His eyes bulged, staring at some apparition they couldn't see. He began to cry. Sibylle touched his blotched, stony face with her fingertips. He passed out. Sibylle ran to get some cold water. Jeroen took a knife and cut the ill-fitting shirt to give him air. They watched him helplessly. When he finally opened his eyes he said in Hebrew, "I have seen the Messiah." Sibylle, kneeling by his side, barely caught his words.

It took Jacob a week to recover. Sibylle tenderly cared for him. She guessed that he had seen his death but kept quiet. Jacob never spoke about the experiences of this night. He was much the same and did not proclaim Christ like Saulus-Paulus had, but he never objected again to Sibylle's longing for the Messiah.

A couple of months later another incident occurred. One night a messenger came running telling them that the house of Sibylle's father was on fire. Sibylle was not with them. They knew her to be at home to celebrate Yom Kippur with her family. They rushed there in great alarm. Flames were blazing from the house. A man in the courtyard was beating one of the guests. Jacob knelt by the wayside and prayed. Screaming, Sibylle in formal Jewish dress came running from the flames, unhurt. Jacob took her into his arms. "My fear of fire and now this!" she said breathlessly. They took her to Herberte's house. When she had recovered, she told them that the arsonists had been unknown Jews, who must have resented her father's liberated ways and his affront of keeping pigs. Jacob was sure that they were the same people who had robbed and beaten him, but they all knew that the magistrate would not investigate these crimes. They were Jews.

This tragic event finally broke the spell between them. Jacob cleared the air by asking Sibylle to marry him, and at Hanukkah he was formally invited to the restored house of her father.

The oppressing clouds having been swept away, Jeroen recovered his creativity. He did not show them his drawings, but he asked Jacob about the "Pythagorean landscape" of the next level of the panel. Jacob described four crystalline structures, from which the four rivers of paradise issued. Jeroen immediately saw what they looked like. Two should

be male and two female to show the unification of opposites at that stage. "Leave it to me," he said. "They will be most resplendent."

The question of the left panel was less easily resolved. Jacob wanted it to show the *hieros gamos*, the sacred marriage in God which signified the ultimate goal of the path. But he adamantly refused to accept God hovering above the first couple in the way the left panels of contemporary triptychs showed Adam and Eve in a Christian paradise.

"Then you would have to include their Fall and Expulsion from paradise. Here Genesis does not hold. In this *future* paradise they will live in blissful union forever." Sibylle solved this impasse for them, by saying, "Long ago I told Jeroen that this triptych will celebrate my betrothal to you, Jacob. I want Jeroen to show Christ marrying us in this side panel." Jacob let her be, mumbling, "It will look like the creation of Eve from Adam's rib." She was unmoved. "It will add to the mystery of this triptych when people realize that it is Christ who performs this marriage not God." Jacob looked at her saying, "You are right, it should express the New Covenant created by Christ for all people, Jews and Gentiles alike, which St. Paul is talking about."

Jeroen now saw the entire triptych, but he still labored over the middle panel. The upper parts, the castles of Pythagoras and the flying souls would be easy, but the happenings around the entry, the arrangement of so many euphoric people, and the death scenes still troubled him. He had consulted a trusted pharmacist in town about hallucinatory potions. The man had offered him a box of small red pills containing refined opium imported from India. He had said that he always kept them around for another, God forbid, epidemic of the plague. This potion was the last resort of the dying. They would be freed of their pain and see the most glorious visions of the Hereafter. Jeroen bought the box and would have experimented with the pills ---Jacob's question whether he had tried drugs still nagged him ---had the pharmacist not warned him at the last moment, never to use the pills when he was depressed or alone. He didn't want to share this experiment with Jacob, and he was not sure that he wasn't still depressed.



Fig.11



Garden Triptych, Central Panel, Sibylle and Death in Paradise, 1468, Madrid

The idea of using fish as symbols of Christ and His resurrection appealed to him. He lovingly redrew Sibylle and placed her next to a "death" experience, which he would shimmer in all colors of the rainbow. A man was sitting in the open maw of a barrel, or was it the entrance to the tunnel to the next world Jacob had talked about? Above the gaping opening he placed a dark Barbary Duck, the one who doesn't speak. It held one of the red opium pills in its beak ready to drop it into the open mouth of the man. He redrew the sketch and placed the duck on the bent knee of a woman who was trying to make a handstand. Her head and upper body would be covered with colorful feathers: a half-complete transformation into a soul-bird. The woman like the duck could not see nor talk, but touched with one anxious hand a large fish to reassure herself of her resurrection. Jacob had told him, that in Pythagoras' world only the fully balanced people could achieve a perfect handstand. He drew another woman next to the half-finished metamorphosis who, fully plumed, stood freely balanced on her hands. He sketched in a crowd of men and women watching eagerly from behind the barrel. Imagining it in color, he looked at his drawing and saw it was good.

Were the people of this future world all beautifully young, innocent, and nubile? He shook his head. Sibylle certainly was neither innocent nor ignorant. There should also be older people, and seasoned Beghines past their prime and, he thought of Herbert's



twins, black people who would find entrance to this realm. He decided that he would include a few older men as teachers and moral guardians. He laughed, bliss alone offered no guarantee for keeping this paradise in harmonious balance.

Jacob had said, making love "in the right spirit" was permitted. Right spirit? He thought of Sibylle's passion. Finally he drew an old man carrying a big, half-open, black mussel from which protruded the four legs of a couple in tight embrace. Two pearls rolled from between their legs. The man would carry his precious burden towards the lake.

Fig.12



Garden Triptych, Central Panel, Love and Death in Paradise 1468, Madrid

In the entrance gate, a phallic Pythagorean fantasy, a man with a large carp under his arm had just passed and asked the elderly gatekeeper for directions. A tightly packed crowd eagerly waited for admission under a grass-covered overhang, on which a reclining man with a blueberry head was telling his girlfriend that he loved her. Below the gate a black and two white men were trying to convince a skeptical Beghine to join, her body completely covered with a fuzz of blond hair. Amused, Jeroen drew a kneeling man who was playfully being beaten by another man with a dahlia. A blue-flowered fart escaped from the kneeler.

Jeroen laid his drawings on the floor and was led again to reconsider the difficult subject of dying. Couldn't deaths occur in this realm beyond any mystical experiences? He was too sober, he could not persuade himself that in this paradise people would never age or fall ill. It appeared too unnatural to him who had seen so much misery and dying. So he drew a real death scene. A fallen man, gasping for breath, lay splayed in a broken-open seed-pod, above which a giant monarch butterfly had settled on a thistle. A second man attended to the dying, taking his pulse. A third man, kneeling close to the dying, took no notice. Disinterested he held on to the thistle. No crowd watched this private death, it was out of place.

Jeroen had spent many nights on the layout, and yet had only covered a quarter of the panel. He sighed but he had solved the most difficult parts of his vision. The



transcendent upper half would not require much labor. In his mind he added a Fountain of Life which would rise in the middle of the confluence of the four rivers. A few people had climbed the fountain. Two were trying the perfect handstand. He felt that he could paint that portion without a detailed layout, just following his imagination. The same would be true of the wedding cavalcade.

Fig.13



Garden Triptych, Central Panel, Loving Couple in a Pomegranate, 1468, Madrid

In his dreams he saw the lake in the garden, where he would place his most lovely scenes. In its upper bay an endearing couple would look out from a floating pomegranate topped by vines. As he drew them, he saw that the girl was Sibylle once again. He realized that the lover was he and gave him his curly locks. The party of birds, a proud hoopoe in their midst, would arrive at the opposite shore.

Fig.14

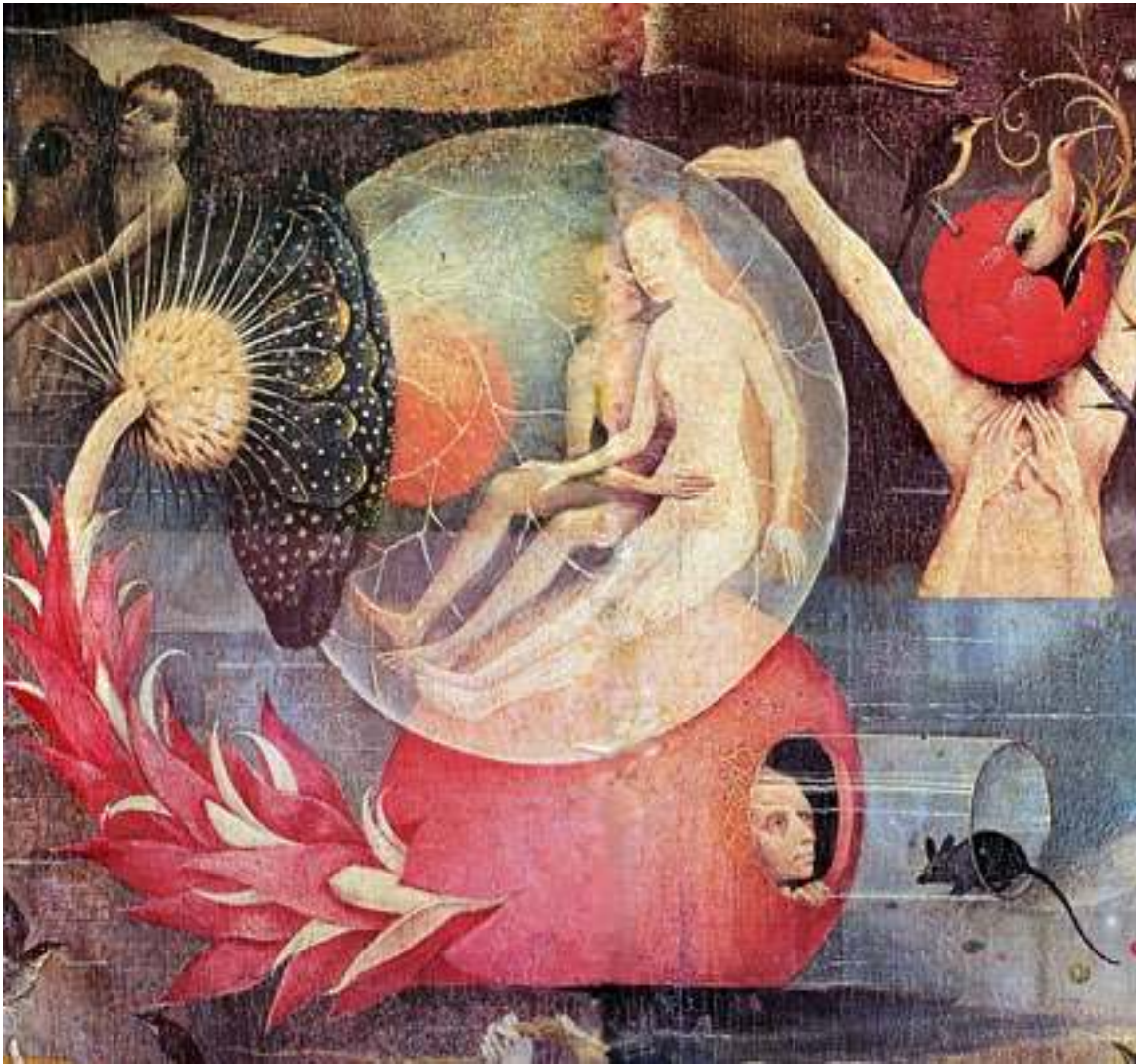


Garden Triptych, Central Panel, The Hoopoe and the Persian Birds, 1468, Madrid

Below them a transparent flower pod would float with another loving couple. Her lover delicately touched her belly, looking at her full of intense longing. From the pomegranate underneath an older guardian peered distracted at a mouse in a glass tube. He really was not needed. One embarrassed man covering his private parts, stands up-side-down in the lake. He appears to be circumcised!



Fig.15



Garden Triptych, Central Panel, Jeroen and Sibylle 1468, Madrid

Jeroen approached his father begging for the planks for this large triptych. Jeroen knew that the wood had cost the family shop only half the usual price. His father demurred that good, fully seasoned oak from Poland was costly, and only agreed after Jeroen had given him a glorious description of the painting: a creation of Eve to the left, a vision of paradise in the middle, and a terrifying hell to the right. Describing it like an ordinary triptych and hiding its esoteric content, Jeroen suddenly realized that without any discussion or thought they had all the time been reading the triptych from right to left, like the Jews read their Bible! Who would ever decipher these three panels who was not a Jew? And those who were would be fooled and repulsed by its superficial Christian iconography.

It took Jeroen six months to paint the middle panel, often by candle light till late into the night. As he, standing on a ladder, filled in the last souls and flying fish in the sky above the four castles, he had become as elated as the people in the garden below him. He stood back and looked at the glowing colors, and the many scenes now so familiar to him.

Fig.16



Garden Triptych, Central Panel, The Cave, Jacob, Sibylle, and Jeroen 1468, Madrid  
At last, following a sudden inspiration, he painted a cave into the wall of the garden from which Jacob, dressed as he had been on their first meeting, looked at the viewer. Inside a glass cylinder sat a finch, on its upper rim balanced a magpie. Jacob pointed at a nude Sibylle reclining in the entrance. He hid his own laughing face in the dark recess behind Jacob. As a whimsy he added Maxi the dog, attentively staring at his master. Highly excited he ran to summon the inhabitants of the house. Stunned, they stood before the painting. Nobody was able to speak. Finally Sibylle, tears running down her face, embraced Jeroen and kissed him. Jeroen was trembling uncontrollably.



Fig.17



Garden Triptych, Central Panel, The Neoplatonic Paradise, 1468, Madrid

Jacob was so moved that he only found words on the following morning. The three locked themselves in with the painting and spent the day discussing every detail. Jacob heaped praise on the beauty and the care of execution of the painting, but he was clearly disturbed by the wedding cavalcade. Jeroen defended himself, he was no Boticelli for whom esthetics overruled all other concerns, for him man was the object of interest. His subject was man's compassion and love. This was Sibylle's wedding triptych, and a wedding procession had no place in the lower part of the painting. He had clearly separated the riders from the garden of bliss. "Besides," he added, "I was getting tired of painting female pleasures. As a counterpoint to the lower half the riders show man's exuberance." Jacob was silent but un-reconciled. This explosion of exuberance had no



place in his pedagogical speculations. Once again he felt exiled among northern aliens who did not appreciate the refined sensitivities of the Italian Renaissance.

To hide his disappointment he praised the fabulous crystalline constructions in the upper half which were glowing red and blue like precious jewels. The Fountain of Life, which also was Jeroen's idea not his, was an excellent addition, and so was the couple who had achieved a perfected handstand. He also liked the winged dolphins and the fantastic boat crowded with souls floating on the river.

Jeroen was waiting what Jacob would say to the death scenes he had labored over for so long. But Jacob next commented on the three in the cave. Why had Jeroen hidden himself so deeply in the dark of the cave? "Well," said Jeroen, "in Brabant we don't sign our paintings. Moreover I feel that you are the chief-architect of this painting, and Sibylle its main source of inspiration. I learned more from the two of you than I had bargained for. Except for a few details I mostly followed your visions. It was not always easy."

Jacob said, "You are right, Sibylle holds the secret to this painting. Even I learned only through her that Ficino and his Greek philosophers must have obtained much of their wisdom from women. Could you hide her better? And the dog must go. He is unclean and should not occupy such a prominent position." Jeroen conceded his objection. He would remove Maxi. It had been a gratuitous joke. As to hiding Sibylle, he had an idea. He would place her into a transparent glass cylinder like the cage for her soul bird. The glass would have knobs which would seal her mouth and cover her conjugal vein, her exposed breast, and the part of her pubic hair that was visible. This would increase her mystique and remove her nude portrait further from reality.

Sibylle tried to ease Jacob's stern examination. "How did you guess," she asked, "that my soul-bird is a finch?" Jeroen smiled gratefully at her. "The finch appeared to me one night. Is he right?" "Yes," she said happily. She saw that they were still close enough that she could freely enter his dreams with her love.

Jacob moved to the middle of the garden. Trying to mitigate his tone, he said softly, "The fabulous woman in the center must also be Sibylle." Jeroen gave Sibylle a clandestine smile and said, "Of course, the all-knowing goddess of the mysterious connection between love and death." He looked at Jacob trying to steer him to acknowledge his main subject. "The scene next to her shows my version of a death experience at the entrance to the tunnel to the thereafter you spoke of. The two feather-covered women are trying to obtain the same insight by Pythagorean means." Jacob's voice became sharp again, "Contemplation is the way Ficino recommends on how to acquire this experience. But what kind of red berry is the duck dropping into the mouth of the man in the dark barrel?"

Jeroen nearly lost his good-natured composure. "In our tradition the Barbary duck, who is speechless, is the bird of death. She holds an opium pill in his beak, which is the last-resort potion given to those dying of the plague. It stills their pain and anxiety and gives them a fabulous vision of heaven. Not all people have the power of mind to enter a death experience consciously and on their own free will." Jacob was silently pondering what he knew of dying. Jeroen was right, he had had to be beaten nearly unconscious before he had such an experience. But the use of drug-induced hallucinations was decidedly not part of his repertory. Jeroen quietly picked up the little box with the red pills and said gently, "This is what our pharmacist gave me, when I consulted with him." Jacob inspected the pills, they smelled completely innocuous. "You want to try one?" asked Jeroen. "I have refrained from doing that, because the pharmacist warned me not to use them alone or when one was depressed." Jacob raised his brows and said, "Maybe I should. I have not found it easy to still my mind as Ficino urged me to."

A few nights later they carried some cushions into the room, and Jacob courageously swallowed one of the pills. Jeroen declined, one of them had to remain sober. Sibylle shook her head, she saw no need to see the glory of the thereafter, she would contemplate Jeroen's painting instead.---Jacob had, in his own words, an unimaginably beautiful vision and a bad hangover next morning. He became the one who henceforth swore by the power of the red pills and occasionally recommended them to people with minds as uncompromisingly obdurate as his.

Fig.18



Garden Triptych, Left Panel, Creation of the New Covenant, 1469, Madrid

The left panel took only six weeks to paint. Jeroen made liberal use of symbols from conventional depictions of paradise, but he banned a *palm* tree with the snake into the innocuous background. A unicorn and a collection of animals from India romp in a green meadow. In the middle of a lake rise the Gothic spires of a pink, androgynous Fountain of Life: for Sibylle. In its very center, from a dark hole an owl looks at the viewer: for Jacob to concentrate his mind on. Jacob half-reclining in the grass intently watches

Christ taking Sibylle's pulse. There are no fig leaves. Sibylle floats, balancing with bent knees on her toes. Her lids are lowered in modesty. Christ's youthful face is reddened from the inner fire of his love. He raises his right hand to bless the couple. Next to them stands, fruitless an exotic Joshua tree, the Tree of Knowledge.

Fig.19



Garden Triptych, Left Panel, Betrothal of Jacob and Sibylle, 1469, Madrid

To trip the viewer, to remind him that this is no ordinary paradise, Jeroen placed a large cesspool into the foreground. All kinds of nefarious critters, birds, animals, and cross-breeds swarm from the pool onto the lawn at the threesome's feet. A tiger-cat has caught a mouse in its fangs, two partridges perform a mating dance. A secret fence, over which the viewer would stumble and see.

Among this invasion, near Jacob's feet, calmly observing, sits Jacob's soul-bird, the magpie.

The three panels were leaning to the largest wall of the room, one on top the other. The room was too small to arrange them side by side. Jeroen decided to have the wall to the next room removed and close two windows. In this way Jacob would also gain a large enough room for his lectures.



Fig.20



Garden Triptych, 1470, Madrid

Simply framed and hinged the triptych covered the entire width of the wall. "Like in a mosque," Jacob joked. "The mihrab is hidden behind Sibylle's slender figure." Closing the wings, Jeroen suggested, "I see a picture of the creation of the earth on the outside." Sibylle and Jacob agreed. "Wait," said Jacob. "let's do it right." He returned with the old Hebrew Bible and said, "The Septuaginta and the Vulgata, its Latin version, are both inaccurate translations." He began reading Genesis in Hebrew translating it stanza by stanza. When he came to the third day of creation, he exclaimed, "Here is what I suggest: *'God the Lord had not let it rain yet on Earth, and there was no one to cultivate it. But mists rose from the Earth and moistened all lands.'* You see, the Hebrew word is *red*, mists, which the Vulgata translates with *fonts*, fountains. It is a completely different image."

Fig.21



Garden Triptych, Outside, Third Day of Creation, 1470, Madrid

To refer to its Hebrew origin, Jeroen painted an old-fashioned earth in subtle *grisaille*. Enclosed by a shimmering crystalline sphere floats a *disc* of the Earth surrounded by the Ocean. Pale sun rays from a cloudy sky illuminate the early morning hour of the newly created continent. From its hills rise mists to feed the first clouds. An inscription shows the words: *Ipse dixit et facta sunt* on the left, and *Ipse mandavit et creata sunt* on the right panel. "He spoke and it was done," and "He commanded and they were created." Jacob took these words from the *Psalms of David* 33.9 and 148.5, and *not* from Genesis!



### 3.

During the winter of 1471-72 Jacob let it be known that in the Spring he would present a series of symposia on Plato and Italian Renaissance philosophy. He worked hard on his preparations, translating several Hebrew texts, and reading Albertus Magnus whom Ficino had occasionally referred to, and Jacob now adopted as his local spiritual patron. Albertus was well-known and would make a good advertisement for his lectures among his Northern audiences. The response was more enthusiastic than he had expected. At the first meeting twelve gentlemen appeared, most of them well-educated local noblemen, eager to be part of the fabled Renaissance. Among them were Cornelis van Bergen and Johann von Nassau. Both were younger than he, but had inherited large landownings and political power, von Nassau in southern Brabant and van Bergen locally. Moreover Cornelis van Bergen was a friend of Maximilian von Hapsburg. Jacob knew him well. Jeroen sat among them. Sibylle and Herberte were the only women present. It was a pleasure to watch Jacob in his role as teacher. Emulating Ficino at the sessions of the Florentine Academy Jacob lost his usual sarcastic tone. Sitting in front of his eager, young students, backed by Jeroen's triptych, he first gave a general introduction to Ficino's philosophy, enriched by his own recent insights into the deeper questions of the meaning of life. Starting with Albertus he painted a humanist view of the future of man that combined Greek, Christian, and Hebrew elements. Later they read Plato's discourses using Ficino's translation and commentaries. A Platonic banquet concluded the five days.

Johann von Nassau approached Jeroen and Jacob with an offer to buy the triptych for a sizable sum of money. It was a great temptation. Jacob had not charged for his discourses but needed money badly. On the other hand, he required the triptych for future lectures, and, last not least, the painting belonged to Jeroen not him. After a lengthy negotiation, von Nassau suggested to pay a portion of the price and leave the triptych with Jeroen as long as it would be needed by Jacob. The other gentlemen followed von Nassau's generous example. Jacob's lectures would be well endowed for a while. The triptych quickly became famous in the illustrious circles of Brabant. One night Sibylle brought disturbing news. The Jewish community of Vught was grumbling about the large influx of outsiders. A few extremists were even threatening to put fire to Herberte's house. This was no empty threat, and the fear of losing the triptych made them apprehensive. The situation was resolved by Cornelis van Bergen at the second symposium. He offered Jacob the use of his townhouse in s'Hertogenbosch not far from the house of the *Confraternity of Our Lady*, the highly regarded intellectual meeting place in northern Brabant.

Less easily smoothed over were the increasing difficulties between Sibylle's father Noah and Jacob. Impressed by Jacob's learned intelligence, her father had received him with open arms after Jacob had "rescued" Sibylle from the fire. He could hardly have wished for a better husband for her. Jacob was less sanguine. Sensitive as he was to fanatics, Jacob found Noah's demonstrative, anti-Jewish *and* anti-Gentile posturings offensive and stupid. Now, after Noah witnessed Jacob's success, he tried to recruit him as a loan-shark among the rich and powerful. Jacob refused in no uncertain words, and to Sibylle's distress it almost came to blows between the two. She and Jacob were planning to have their wedding at her father's house in March. She narrowly patched their intransigent differences.

Fig.22



Wedding at Canaa, copy 1562 (original 1476?), Cologne

Their wedding became a strange affair. Later, in 1476 Jeroen made a painting of the wedding. It became one of Jeroen's first aggressive pictures. His anguish of having to watch his beloved Sibylle getting married brought his hatred of Noah's pompous ways to the surface, as well as his crushing criticism of the Christian Church.

It was a Jewish wedding. In Jeroen's painting, Jacob and Sibylle sit at an L-shaped table, she in the proscribed demure, orthodox bridal posture, her eyes despondently lowered. Jacob wears a prophetic pink cape, like Christ in the left *Garden* panel, her personal Messiah. Next to Sibylle, in her mother's stead, sits her stepmother. Across from the bridal pair Sibylle's red-haired younger brother stands in his best, festive coat. A cup in his hand, he is about to serve the couple with the traditional wedding toast. Her sister, equally formally dressed appears on the far right, drinking from an old wine bowl. Two gentiles on the right of Jacob - one a dubious nun or a Beghine, the other a physician, eying the assembled people with suspicion are engaged in a conversation with

her father. Noah, gesticulating with his hand, gives a speech which nobody seems to listen to. The usurer with his fat belly and self-important mien could not be more devastatingly characterized. Two Jews, their backs to the viewer, are discussing business, a third one on the far right wears the characteristic conical hat of a rabbi. A variety of people from both faiths are present, business friends of Noah. Such a mixed wedding would not have been unusual, had Jeroen not added three most prominent virtual guests. On the right side of the table, in front of a precious gold tapestry appear Christ framed by Marsilio Ficino on his right and Albertus Magnus on his left. Jacob's spiritual mentors.

Fig.23



Wedding at Canaa, Christ framed by Ficino and Albertus Magnus, 1562 (original 1476), Cologne  
Jeroen made Christ's apparition less conspicuous by casting the scene in the guise of a conventional "Wedding at Canaa". A servant in the foreground, filling wine jugs, has just discovered the miracle. But this slight-of-hand only increases the almost palpable tensions between the three Christian honorables and the trio around Noah.



Fig.24



Wedding at Canaa, Jacob, Sibylle, stepmother, and the Female Altar, 1562 (original 1476), Cologne

Not satisfied with these corrosive allusions to the spiritual depravity of the assembled wedding guests, Jeroen filled the background with obscure objects. Behind Sibylle's stepmother a hooded hierophant dressed in a white cassock, points at Sibylle's female-initiation altar, clearly delineated at the center of the room. And in the left corner of the picture arrive the forbidden, not-kosher dishes of the wedding feast: a boar's head and a swan. A head-waiter asks an indifferently aloof Jacob whether the time was right for this presentation. On a ledge above the dark entrance from the kitchen a musician plays bagpipes.

Fig.25



Wedding at Canaa, Drawing after Bosch, 16th cent, Louvre

Originally, as shown by a drawing, a woman and child sat next to the musicians on this ledge, they were painted over, as were two figures in the left foreground: Ghjisbert de Bijie, the deacon of Saint John's cathedral and his superior the Archbishop of Cologne in miter and formal robe. They appear fleeing the place in horror. The bishop with up-turned eyes. Were they invited guests? Ghjisbert de Bijie had been an acquaintance of Jacob and a participant of his second symposium, but more likely is that the bishop stood in for the Church hierarchy, which Jeroen disliked. Did Jeroen or someone else overpaint the Church notables with two dogs, which seem to be sniffing at the "holy" traces of the vanished guests?

When they moved the precious Garden triptych to Cornelis van Bergen's house, four men carefully carrying it, the burghers of Den Bosch stopped in the street trying to get a glimpse. Jacob, carrying his books, joked, "Our entrance into the New Jerusalem." It was then that Jeroen discovered the Hebrew Bible. Admiring the old wood-prints, he asked Jacob where he had found this antique. Jacob shot him a glance and said, "In the attic of Herbert's house." Jeroen, taken by surprise, recalling Sibylle's characterization of Jacob's magpie, inquired edgily who had taken him there. Jacob said truthfully, "Herbert did. She showed me an old chest with the belongings of your grandmother, in the bottom



of which I found this priceless Bible. It was printed in Portugal in the middle of last century." Jeroen was silent for a few minutes and then inquired, "Did you tell her what you concluded?" "No," said Jacob, "why disturb her? It is enough that you know. I kept my thoughts to myself. But Herberte told me that your great-grandparents had come from Portugal. They must have been *conversos*."

This revelation occupied Jeroen's mind for a long time. Herberte and he with his curls looked as if they were not the children of their parents. He had always felt to be different from his brothers, and it was not only because of his wild imagination. Nobody in his family shared his sarcasm or agreed with his often angry attacks on the glaring inadequacies of the Church and its honorables. He thought of Jacob. He had asked him that question before and had become his friend, with whom he could freely share his peculiar views. He was Jewish! An unexpected insight into himself. But he decided that this was not a subject to be discussed at home or with Sibylle. He did not ask Jacob what else he knew, but his friendship with this unusual man grew even closer.

Now that Jacob and Sibylle lived in van Bergen's townhouse, and the Garden triptych was in a respectable location, Jeroen's father paid a visit and inspected his son's three panels for the first time. To Jeroen's surprise his father admitted to be overwhelmed. Examining it's details at close range he praised Jeroen's careful hand and layout. He commented on how thin Jeroen had applied the paint. In places one could see the over-painted substructure, like the dog behind Sibylle. Jeroen explained that Jacob had objected to the dog, he considered it unclean, but he was happy that one could still make out Maxi, his good friend. His father joked that there was hope that Jeroen would become a great painter. "No," said his father. "I should be more generous. I am proud of you. This triptych already establishes you among the great Flemish painters of today." Jeroen was very pleased. Sibylle's praise had been that of a woman in love, but his father was a professional and hard to please. The subject of the paintings was a different matter. His father had read the panels from left to right and wisely withheld judgment. He admitted that he didn't understand the reason and meaning for the profusion of nude people in the middle panel. Was it a depiction of purgatory, and were they sinners to be redeemed or going to Hell? If Jacob would permit, he would like to attend one of his lectures.

It could have been the high time of their lives had it not been for Sibylle's father. He approached Jeroen with an offer to sell the triptych to an unnamed French client for twice the price that Johann von Nassau had offered. His eyes were bulging at the prospect of the commission he would make. Jeroen shrugged, the triptych was no longer for sale, and Jacob lost his patience and shouted at his father-in-law to stop meddling in their affairs. Noah could not understand their resistance in the face of so much money! Finally Jacob swore never to set foot into Noah's house again. Sibylle cried, and Jacob decided that their time in Hertogenbosch had come to an end. They would leave. This decision was helped along by the dwindling attendance of his lectures. Den Bosch was far from Ghent and Brügge, not to mention Brussels, the centers of Brabantian intellectual life. Maybe he should transfer his lectures to Ghent. A deeply unhappy Jeroen made a futile attempt at forestalling their departure. He reminded Jacob that the agreement stipulated that the triptych would revert to Johann von Nassau, if Jacob abandoned his lectures in Hertogenbosch. Jacob reiterated that to protect Sibylle and his marriage he couldn't remain any longer in the same town with his father-in-law. In November of 1475, they left for Ghent in tears. The triptych was shipped to Brussels.

A few months later a letter from Jacob arrived with the disturbing news that they had found Ghent too expensive and that its busy burghers were not interested in his lectures. They would move to Antwerp, where they could find cheaper accommodations in the Jewish ghetto. Sibylle was pregnant.

For over a year Jeroen heard nothing from Jacob, except for a message carried by a friend that Sibylle had given birth to a son. The years of labor on the triptych and the realization that he had irretrievably lost his closest friends, threw Jeroen into a deep depression. To get him out of this state his father persuaded him to take on a commission from the Confraternity of Our Lady to paint a panel for an altar at the fraternity's chapel at Sint Jan's. The work dragged on for months. Jeroen was barely interested. The subjects of the paintings, closely proscribed by the Confraternity, were none of his invention.

The year 1477 began with the death of Charles the Bold of Burgundy and ended in disaster. Charles, relying on his legendary but poorly judged power, had since 1474 tried to wrench Lorraine and the Alsatian towns from King Louis XI of France and in the process had alienated the Swiss Confederates, who came to Louis' help. In 1476 Charles was badly routed by the Swiss. In the following Spring Charles attacked Nancy with a new army. He was utterly defeated. Days after the battle his mutilated body was discovered among the dead.

With her father dead, Duke Charles' sole heiress, the 30-year-old Marie of Burgundy, in a surprise move, married 18-year-old Maximilian of Hapsburg, who had, at least in the view of the Austrians, been her avowed fiancée since 1473. Their hasty wedding took place in Ghent. To assuage the powerful and rich towns of Brabant, Marie immediately granted a decree, the "Groote Privilege", reinstating their rights, which her father had taken from them. But everyone understood that through this marriage Brabant and the Low Countries had become part of the Hapsburgian empire. Charles had been the last Duke of Burgundy. They resented the Austrian and the future German Emperor in Maximilian. The Low Countries were in turmoil, travel became dangerous, and the future looked ominous.

To add to these troubles, on September 29, the disastrous *Cosmas and Damianus Flood* of 1477 devastated the coasts of the Low Countries. Since the last such disaster in 1421 Charles the Bold had done little to improve and fortify the dike systems of Holland. The damage was large and many thousands died.

The storm was blowing fiercely during that night. Jeroen lay awake, listening to the driving rain. Along the coast the north-western wind drove the already high tide into the estuary of the Maas and Schelde. In Den Bosch they were far from the sea. The Maas would back up and flood the low-lying land outside of town, but there would be little serious damage. But his friends in Antwerp, how would they fare? He had no idea where they lived. Next morning the meadow where the fairs took place was under water. The inn frequented by the prostitutes had been turned into an island in the sea. In a few days the water would recede. He was waiting for a message from Jacob, but none came. Eventually, a month later a letter arrived which confirmed Jeroen's worst fears. Sibylle and the child had drowned. Jacob had stayed in Ghent after attending Maximilian's and Marie's wedding to make new connections, and when he reached home after the storm, he had found her, still clutching the child, among the debris in a devastated polder. He was inconsolable. His life had been destroyed in one night.

## 4.

Jeroen mourned his lost love. Despondent and preoccupied, he locked himself into his room and covered endless sheets of paper with doodles, witches, monsters, entire landscapes covered with eyes and ears and distorted human beings. His mind was a wasteland. In his darkest hours he berated himself for having let go of her so easily, first to Jacob and then to Ghent and Antwerp. Had he persuaded them to stay, Sibylle would still be alive. Why had Jacob left her alone in Antwerp when he went to Ghent? Why had he stayed that long? On the other hand had Jacob been in Antwerp during that night, he might well have both been among the dead. Jacob, the foreigner, had no respect for the sea and its dangerous vagaries like all inhabitants of the Low Countries had. Jeroen's emotional condition had reached a disturbing low.

Jeroen's father felt that maybe a wife could assuage his pain and revive his will to live. He had long had his eyes on Aleit van de Mervenne, the sole daughter of a close acquaintance who owned a number of properties in town, which he rented. Jeroen could offer no comparable inheritance to bring into a marriage with Aleit, but the triptych had made him famous in Brabant. They were not a bad match. He approached Jeroen with this suggestion, who shrugged, it was all the same to him. His father looked at his sullen face. If he could only reanimate this most gifted of his sons. "Look," said his father. "You have not laughed ever since this Jacob disappeared. Maybe a wife could cheer you up. You know Aleit, she is a kind and decent woman, five years younger than you." Jeroen nodded unresolved. His father spread his arms and with a trace of impatience in his voice described her assets. "Aleit will inherit a small fortune. As long as she lives, both of you will be well provided for by her income from her properties. If you would only learn to control your dark moods, yours could be a perfect marriage. May I ask her father for her hand in your stead?" Jeroen said faint-hearted, "Dear father, no woman can replace the one I lost, but I promise you that I will be a devoted husband to Aleit and treat her well, if she agrees to this arranged marriage. Talk to her father. I will do everything that is expected of me. Maybe love as I have known will come later."

In Spring 1478 Aleit van de Mervenne and Jeroen van Aken were married by deacon Ghjisbert de Bijde at Sint Jan's Cathedral. Jeroen made his vow loud and clear and even smiled at the unexpected turn his life had taken. Everybody thought they made a most handsome pair.

Almost overnight Jeroen had become the co-owner of a four-story townhouse on the *Groote Plats* in Den Bosch. By the end of the century Jeroen van Aken was, as the records show, among the five highest taxpayers in Den Bosch. A rare and enviable situation among artists of his time, he was at liberty to paint what he liked. No patron could dictate what he painted. The uninteresting commissions he left to the family shop, of which he became the head after his father's death. This is one reason, why the paintings attributed to Jeroen van Aken, *dit* Hieronymus Bosch, are so uneven in quality and execution. His own idiosyncratic paintings stand out like beacons along the path of his long life.

In the same year of 1478, at Ghent, Marie of Burgundy gave birth to a male heir. They named him Philip, to which his subjects added the by-name *the Fair*, because in contrast to his bold Burgundian grandfather and resolute mother, he was a meek child, a mere pawn in the hands of his powerful Hapsburgian father. Three years later, in 1481, Maximilian convened the Order of the Golden Fleece in s'Hertogenbosch. It was the only major city in Brabant where he could show himself. His enemies in Ghent would have chased him out of town. To stem the widespread discontent of his rule, Maximilian took

the opportunity to knight three-year-old Philip. This heraldic move did little to subdue the impeccable hostility of his Brabantian subjects. A year later Philip's mother, Marie of Burgundy fell from a horse and broke her neck. Despite Philip's tender age, the Brabantians declared him Duke of Brabant in earnest. To give their claim substance, the good burghers of Ghent seized Philip and kept him hostage for the next three years. Maximilian, urgently engaged elsewhere, was forced to let it happen. But Philip's guardians were agreeable to let Maximilian hire Jacob as tutor for his son. The first steady job Jacob had held in fifteen years.

Fig.26



St. Hieronymus in Prayer, 1482, Ghent

In 1482 Anthonius van Aken, Jeroen's father, died. Jeroen, shaken by the death of this man, whom he had resented as much as he had loved him, resorted to painting. A small panel in warm colors shows a penitent St. Hieronymus in Prayer. Not a likeness of himself, Jeroen placed the saint into a shallow cave. Under the roots of a tree, he lies half-nude on his knees, begging for forgiveness for his sins of transgression. The saint's



bishop's hat and coat are draped over a hollow tree stump. A somber but peaceful landscape stretches into the distance. A fitting tribute to his father and a touching atonement for Jeroen's omissions.

In 1481 Cornelis van Bergen had introduced Jeroen to Maximilian, who had seen his Garden Triptych in Brussels and had heard much about him. Maximilian graciously ordered a "Last Judgment" triptych from Jeroen. It was Jeroen's first large commission as head of the family shop, and the order came from Jacob's revered patron. He set the shop to work, but, apparently reluctantly, retained a guiding influence. The work on the painting dragged on for 14 years. Jeroen was simply not interested in this conventional painting. The triptych was probably delivered only in 1496 and was never fully paid for. However, it appears to have been in the possession of the Archdukes of Austria, where in 1501 Lucas Cranach the Elder, during a stay in Vienna, copied it.

Fig.27



The Second Coming of Christ, 1482-1496, Vienna

It shows "Christ's Second Coming" instead of a "Last Judgment," in which the Angel of Judgment occupies center stage. Christ, Mary, and a few just souls float in a bright mandorla above a chaotic world over-populated by a variety of Boschian monsters. The right side-wing, normally a vivid, apocalyptic hell in which the damned souls perish, distinguishes itself thematically little from the scenes of the middle panel. The left wing is entirely conventional. In a green pasture God creates Eve from Adam's rib. The female snake in the Tree of Knowledge seduces the couple. In the background, in a stand of trees an angel plays hide and seek with the paradisaical pair. The "Boschian touch" is a swarm of locust-souls or birds, which flies through billowing clouds towards a tiny Christ(!) in heaven. Almost certainly this panel is a production of the shop. The layout of the monsters and events in the depraved world of the middle panel is so arbitrary and



confused that Jeroen could hardly have painted it himself. It was easy to copy Bosch's weird hybrids. They were public property in Brabant. In his own paintings they are a mere flourish of his "handwriting." Nowhere can as much as a breath of Jacob's neoplatonic influence be detected. But the painting shows that Jeroen had recovered from his depression and had actively taken hold of his father's position.

A year later, in 1483, a former participant of Jacob's symposia, Herr van Bronchorst, a learned man from Leuven, approached Jeroen with the request to have a triptych painted, which would show Christ as the "New Adam". Bronchorst asked that the triptych at the same time fulfill a vow he had made, when he and his wife had escaped an attack by wolves.

Bronchorst had been struck by Jacob's erudite re-interpretation of Saint Paul's words alluding to the New Covenant as being intimately connected with Christ as the "New Adam". Speculations on this subject were widely in vogue in Brabant during the time, and Jacob had, on general demand, expanded on this theme in his last lectures. He had been unable to find St. Paul's sources in the Bible, but uncovered numerous prophetic references to the Messiah as the "New Adam" in the Haggadah.

According to these Hebrew sources the "Old" Adam of Genesis, had saved three precious substances from the Garden of Eden: gold, myrrh, and frankincense. Like the three crowns which were ascribed to him they symbolized Adam's threefold title: King, Priest, and Prophet. Noah's sons saved not only Adam's bones, but also these three substances, which, after a long journey, were presented to Christ at his birth by the Three Wise Men. This established Christ as the "New Adam", the deeper meaning of Epiphany. Noah buried Adam's bones at the Hill of Golgotha, the place of Christ's crucifixion. Many medieval pictures of the Crucifixion show Adam's skull and bones in the mound under the cross.

Fig.28



The Bronchorst Epiphany, 1485, Madrid

Herr van Bronchorst and Jeroen agreed that the triptych would be a regular Epiphany, which would, however, most unconventionally show the Old Adam witnessing his rebirth and salvation. Bronchorst, an admirer of Jeroen's *Garden Triptych*, gave him a free hand. Jeroen was very excited, but realized that the execution of the details would once again stretch his imagination and his understanding to its limits. He remembered Jacob's lectures vividly, but Jacob, his advisor and critic, was no longer present.

Fig.29



The Bronchorst Epiphany, Adam 1485, Madrid

He drew and redrew Adam for weeks. There was no example he could have followed. He had decided that Adam would be naked to make him symbolically and visually stand out next to the sumptuous robes of the Three Wise Men. But he had to cover Adam's nakedness somehow. He finally gave him the flimsiest of a diaphanous garment. He holds a prophetic red cape over his left arm, knotted at one end, to indicate the reconnection (*re-ligio!*) of the terrestrial and the heavenly spheres in his priestly incarnation. A thin gold chain ties him to God. He is girded with a wide belt, which, hanging down, is embroidered with a generation-chain of stylized men holding spheres between them. They indicate Adam's magical connection to the underworld. On his right leg a glass vial enshrines a *carbuncle* alluding to the Messiah's Biblical Hebrew attribute *Chawwara*, the White One, the sacred leper. Adam's triple crown? A tiara? The Pope had already appropriated for similar reasons Adam's tiara. It wouldn't do. Finally Jeroen designed a piece of intricate jewelry which would have done honor to the goldsmiths of Bruges and Ghent: Placed on Adam's head is a spherical crown of thorns topped by a cylindrical reliquary containing a blue rose, a reference to *Zemach*, rose, flower, one of the Hebrew names of the Messiah. Over this double crown fits an intricately ornamented pot-like gold shell, open on top and bottom, which is so light that he can hold it with the two fingers of his left hand.

Literally covered with prophetic Old-Testament symbols of the Messiah, Adam, robust, a great smile of curious joy on his bearded face is the true center of the triptych, leaning relaxed in the door frame of the stable. An enigma and an annoyance to all unwary viewers. Caspar, a beautiful black man in a white garment, stands next to him. He holds

a precious, ivory capsule with myrrh, on which a pink bird spreads its wings offering a seed. The white-haired, senile Melchior, wearing a red robe, kneels bent-over with folded hands, and Balthazar kneels erect behind him, a Brabantian nobleman, offering his present of frankincense on a plate. The elaborate collar of his coat depicts the meeting of King David with the Queen of Sheba! Melchior's gift of gold is not the accustomed chalice, but a sculpture of Abraham sacrificing his son. Melchior has just pulled a red cloth from it to reveal this prophecy of Christ's sacrifice.

Visually separated from this assembly of symbolically charged visitors, a modest, if not colorless Mary sits enthroned with a tiny, rigid child on her lap. Jeroen's heart was obviously not with her, who in all other Epiphany altars is the embroidered center of attention of the artist as much as of the viewer. The Madonna has never held Bosch's interest. This painting is one of only three in which she appears.

The wings show, identified by their coats of arms, van Bronchorst with St. Peter on the left and his wife van Bosschuyse presented by St. Agnes on the right. They are stereotypes of little artistic interest but form a close visual unit with the people in the middle panel. The attack of the Bronchorsts by wolves is dutifully incorporated in the background behind Bronchorst's wife. A lovely Dutch landscape undulates across all three panels, the oriental domes and towers of Jerusalem at its center. In a deep blue sky shines the Star of Bethlehem.

Despite the tranquil background the whole composition is pervaded by a peculiar restlessness. The rickety stable leans asymmetric to the left, the crooked roof post only adds to this impression. Two shepherds, one on the roof, another behind a barred window, gawk at the sacred initiation rite. Christ has come into a transient, uncomprehending world. Only a close examination of Adam reveals the deeper meaning of the appearance of the "Three Magi".

For the first time Jeronimus proudly signed the triptych with his new artistic alias *jheronymus bosch* in formal Gothic letters. It was his very own creation.

As his father had hoped the marriage to Aleit was good for Jeroen. Aleit must have adored her protean husband. Jeroen recovered and in the next few years created several superb paintings. The discipline required in leading the family shop and the respect accorded to him by the profession may have added to his emotional stability. He began to regularly attend the meetings of the Confraternity of Our Lady and in 1486 became an honorable member of this hundred-year-old institution. Operated like a guild, a place for the intelligentsia and the nobility of Brabant to meet, receive invited foreign dignitaries, worship together, and work out business deals. These were Bosch's most tranquil and prosperous years.

In 1485 a letter from Jacob arrived telling them that Philip the Fair would be released and would join his father in Austria. Jacob had been told that his services would no longer be required. He was going to move back to Antwerp. The letter ended with a confession. Plagued by insomnia and haunted by Sibylle's unrequited ghost, he had become accustomed to the little red pills. Unfortunately they had interfered with his teaching duties. Some days he could not collect himself. Anyway, Philip was an unexciting pupil. He would not miss him.

These news hit the house on the Groote Plats like lightening. They knew what opium dependence meant. Many of the prostitutes from Antwerp used the potion. Jeroen was overcome by his conscience. He had introduced his friend to the drug. Aleit became Jeroen's angel. She urged him to return to serious painting. Jeroen, his mind focused on



the once more elusive, distant friend suffering in the slums of Antwerp, returned to an old elusive subject, the Last Judgment.

In 1484 and again in 1488 the Black Death ravaged the cities of the Low Countries. It seems not to have reached Den Bosch, but everyone was scared. Jeroen returned to his quest for a salvation of man from his miseries. This time in his own interpretation of *Christ's Second Coming*. Four large wings (1491) now in the Doge's palace in Venice are all that survive of this polyptych. Its middle panel is lost. What is left is extraordinary. The panels may have originally been part of a Last Judgment in St. Janskerk in Den Bosch, which was destroyed by Protestant fanatics in the 17th century.

Fig.30



Four Wings of Christ's Second Coming, 1492, Venice

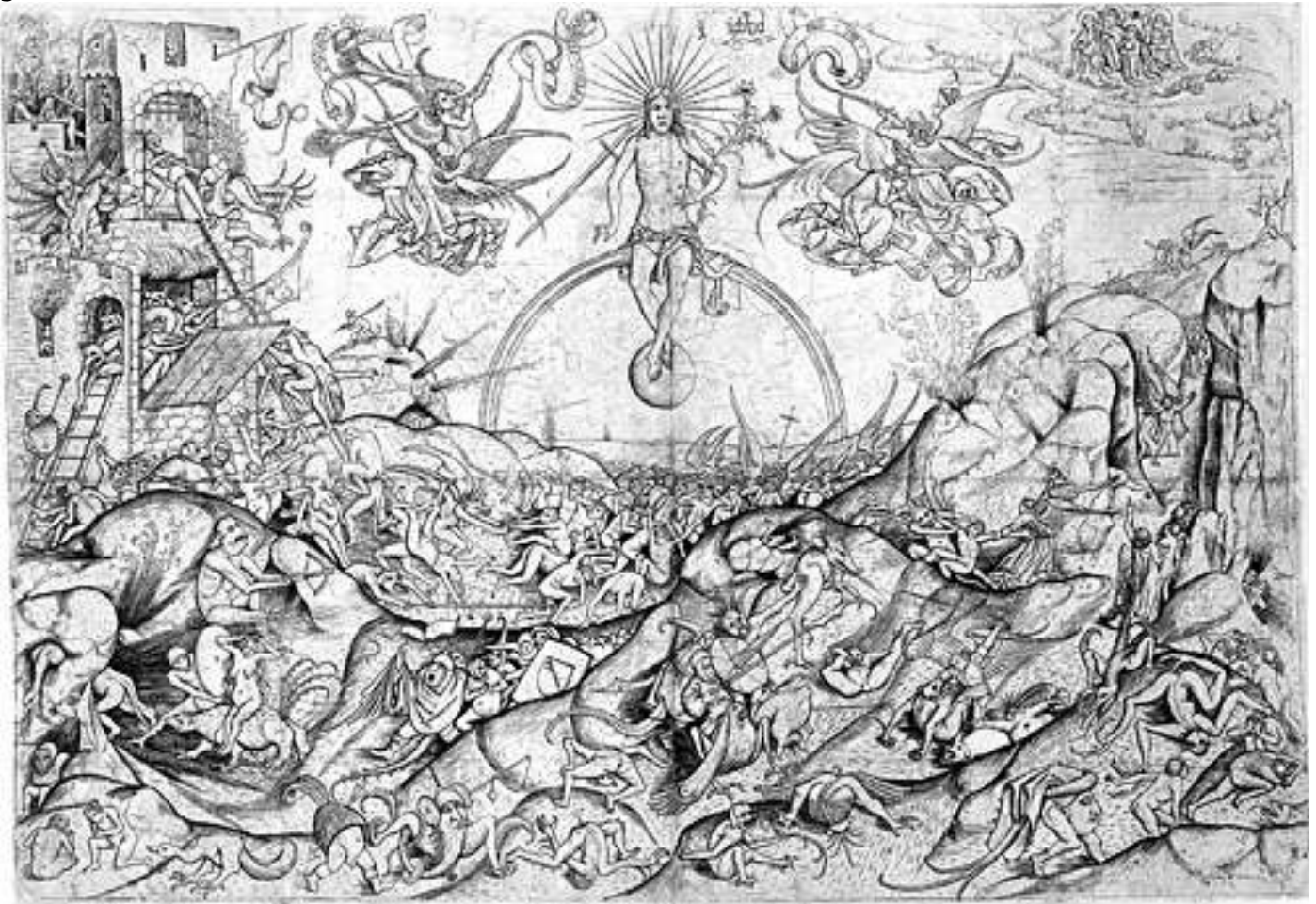
The arrangement of the four panels is in dispute. Two of the panels depict the fall of the damned into hell, and two the ascent of the chosen. If the layout of this polyptych did follow convention, the hell panels should be on the right. Some suggest one *above* the other, which would have made the middle panel 40 cm wide and 175 cm high, an oddly elongated shape. If we arrange all four next to each other, the layout of the two panels showing the ascent to the Beyond visually appear to be on the wrong side -- unless we *invert* the conventional order of all four wings showing hell on the left! This would not be the first time Bosch read from right to left. This suggests an interpretation more closely dependent on Jacob van Almaengien than is intended here. For esthetic and practical reason I will, nevertheless, put the ascent panels on the right, because a red-robed Jacob *does* appear there in a small garden leading the chosen towards the Fountain of Life and the great Beyond.

The astonishing way by which the souls reach "Heaven" is unique in painting. Angels carry the worthy souls to the entrance of an enormous tunnel, through which they are swept at high speed by a wind towards a great white light at its end.

Dream and meditation visions have probably been the same at all ages. Flying through a tunnel is a well-known metaphor of shamanic experiences -- but Bosch, a "sewage pipe", and the "Astral World" of the seers of the Aquarian Age are unlikely bed fellows.

There exists an engraving by Allart Duhameel, which fits the proportions of the missing middle panel between Bosch's wings exactly and could be a copy of Bosch's destroyed Last Judgment in Den Bosch.

Fig.31



Allard Duhameel, Engraving of a Last Judgment after Bosch, 15th cent, Amsterdam

Allart Duhameel (1449-1507) was the chief architect of the new St. John's Cathedral in Den Bosch, and one of the first master printers in Brabant. He certainly knew Bosch and his paintings. The print shows a youthful Christ sitting with nonchalantly crossed legs on a rainbow above an earth filled with armies of every conceivable "Boschian" monster. To the right the chosen are guided by armed angels upwards through a canyon between fire-spewing hills, where on top of a mesa stands a small group of the blessed, praying and waiting to sail off. This example shows that conceptions of a path to the Hereafter without the help of the Church were entertained in the Low Countries -- not only by Bosch.

## 5.

In the first light of a gray October day in 1494 an emaciated vagrant knocked on Herbert's door in Vught. Frightened by the strange man, she would have slammed the door on him, had he not said with a choked voice. "Herbert, don't you recognize me? I am Jacob, Jeroen's friend." She let him in, but didn't hug him. "My Lord," she said, "you look terrible. Come in and warm yourself." He set a hamper with his possessions on the tiles of the hall and leaned his long walking stick to it. A dog was barking and scratching at the door. Jacob looked pleadingly at Herbert. "It's Maxi-the-Third, would you allow him in? Please!" She opened the door a crack and a mongrel almost indistinguishable from Maxi I slipped in, shying from her, but wagging its curled tail. Hollowed cheeks in a pallid face, his hair almost completely white, Jacob looked ten years older than she knew he was. Around his left leg he wore a bandage over a festering sore. His pants were torn at the knee, his jacket threadbare. He was shivering uncontrollably.

Fig.32



The Prodigal Son, 1495, Rotterdam

She went to make hot tea and warm-up some leftovers from the night before. As she returned from the kitchen, she saw him hiding a small vial with pills. "What pills are you taking?" she asked quietly. She guessed what the pills were. "Something against hunger," he said abashed. "I haven't eaten or slept for two days. I walked all night in the hope of finding shelter at your house." She sat down at the table with him, and while he ate, she talked to him in her quiet voice without reproach or accusation. "Be honest with me, these are the same pills Jeroen gave you to try twenty years ago." She looked at him saddened. "When my husband and I lived in Antwerp, we helped a man from Africa to get over this habit. I make you a proposal, I will put you up, if you'll agree to let me



wean you from this scourge. I know a herbal tea that counteracts the effects of the pills and will help you get over the withdrawal symptoms of your addiction." Jacob let his food stand and on his knees, tears running down his cheeks, thanked her for her Samaritan kindness. "It will be hard on you," she warned him, "and take a few months, but if you wish to get cured, we will succeed. Promise me that you will try ---and give me that vial." Jacob went crimson and sheepishly handed her the vial. She smiled and said, "You already got some color in your face. I promise you that your addiction problem will remain between the two of us. I will tell only Jeroen. He has worried too much about you."

She kept Jacob hidden in the house for several days, before she told Jeroen of his return. These first days were hell for Jacob, but he stuck to her regimen and her bitter tea. Herberte bought a keg of beer, and in the evening Jacob often went asleep drunk. When Jeroen came to see him, he had slept and eaten regularly and looked much better, only the pernicious sore on his leg was still festering. Herberte had warned Jeroen not to mention the little red pills. She would tell him about this problem at a later time. Jeroen arrived with an assortment of clothes. The two friends hugged each other in tears. "My prodigal teacher has returned," cried Jeroen. Jacob looked at him and remarked with a chuckle, "Do you remember the evening I had seen an angel who brought me clothes after the fracas with the Orthodox? You look better than this heavenly messenger. Your pants will hang loose around my frame. Nothing left but bones." Herberte, watching the two, laughed. "Jacob, you have recovered your old sarcastic self. You make me happy. We will succeed." Herberte brought beer. The three sat around the table. "Twenty years have passed," said Jeroen. "So much has happened. Have you heard that your father-in-law has died?" Jacob nodded. The Vught magistrate had notified him of Noah's death and that he had stipulated in his will that his son-in-law should receive only one ducat from his estate. "Don't remind me of this old miser," he said, "but the knowledge of his demise encouraged me to return to Den Bosch." To divert him Jeroen suggested to take him upstairs where in Jacob's old lecture room he had set up a gallery of his paintings.

Jeroen had let the shop paint a series of copies of his panels. The big triptychs he had reduced in size, of some he had retained only the middle panels. They all hung or leaned against the walls of the room. Jacob walked from painting to painting in awed silence. He stopped before their portraits in the cave. "Look, how young we were then," said Jacob. "How irresponsibly self-sure we took on this enormous task. And you were laughing and then painted this masterpiece!" He sighed. "What glorious days they were!" After a while Jacob was overcome by a severe shaking of his whole body, the emotional reunion had tired him out. Herberte sent him to bed. "I will spend many hours up here," Jacob said as they parted. Jeroen walked home in deep thought. They would keep Jacob in Den Bosch. He was sure Aleit would agree.

Jeroen, deeply affected by the emaciated condition of his friend painted Jacob as he imagined him on the morning of his return. In the painting, commonly known as the *Prodigal Son* or *the Pedlar*, Jacob is walking past the whore house in the meadow on the way to Vught. Jacob's leg is bandaged, the hamper on his back, a scarf around his short-cropped head and unshaven face. He wears two unequal shoes and holds a floppy hat in his left in which sticks a once cocky feather. Maxi III follows him. It is early, a cow moos wanting to be milked, and in the lowest quadrangle of the a-gate sits Jacob's dispirited magpie. Jacob looks better than Herberte had seen him, wasted and shivering from his addiction. In the painting Jacob has some spirit left, some spring in his gait. Apparently Jeroen could not bring himself to show his teacher in his lowest hour.

At the next meeting of the Confraternity Jeroen told Cornelis van Bergen of Jacob's return. Cornelis was delighted and persuaded the Confraternity to collect a charitable sum to relieve Jacob's dire financial situation.

Herberte's withdrawal treatment became a rocky path for Jacob. Fortunately there was no place in Den Bosch where he could have bought the pills except at the pharmacist's, whom Jeroen had warned. Herberte had immediately put the content of his vial into the fire. The smoke had nearly overcome her. Jacob suffered through nights of sweating and shivers, which Herberte fought with plenty of food and a liberal supply of beer. He would take his beer upstairs into Jeroen's gallery and often fall asleep there, drunk. Jeroen brought the old Bible and the books and notes Jacob had left with him. In the morning Jacob would read in his lecture notes and even wrote a letter to Ficino. Ficino had meanwhile expanded his search into a peculiar version of mystical astrology. Jacob only shook his head.

One day he and Jeroen discussed the Epiphany triptych. Jacob was impressed how well Jeroen had explained the complex tradition of the Old and New Adam. He couldn't have formulated it better. Jacob told him about a sect of Adamites near Brussels, which the Church had declared heretic. The authorities were dutifully persecuting its adherents. A dangerous subject. Persecutions by the Church had increased. Jacob felt, waving a sheet of his old notes, that today he could no longer say what he had taught in 1474 and warned Jeroen to be careful. Jeroen was depressed by these news. He had hoped that it would help Jacob to recover, if he were to give lectures at the Confraternity. Yes, Jacob said, if he followed Christian doctrine and were not a Jew. A watered-down version of Ficino's Neoplatonic philosophy could still be discussed in Den Bosch. In Italy even that had become impossible. His friend Pico della Mirandola, Ficino's brightest student, had been imprisoned by Pope Innocent VIII despite that Pico had padded his celebrated manifesto of Renaissance philosophy with much flattering praise of the Church's notables.

Did he want to sit idle in Den Bosch, asked Jeroen and never use his sharp mind again? "Oh, very simple," said Jacob with a derisive laugh. "I would first have to get baptized, and then use all my intelligence to avoid displeasure and persecution." Jeroen pondered this novel aspect. He told himself that Jacob was probably right. He felt terribly dispirited. Alone on his way home through the night he relieved his frustration with a string of obscenities against the Church.

Their conversation was reinforced by Cornelis van Bergen, who took Jeroen aside one night and told him that in order to become a full, elected member of the Confraternity Jacob had to become a Christian. Jacob was, in his mind, such an honest, learned man that he should be offered an *honorable* membership. Van Bergen had tried, but regretted to have to inform him of this verdict of the admission committee. Times were tight, the commission had no choice. Jeroen listened in such obvious dismay that Cornelis bought him a drink.

Jacob's cure dragged on. He still had an occasional miserable night. Aleit invited him to her house. It was a good day, and Jacob over dinner, in a brilliant delivery described his life in Florence and the gossip at Il Moro's court in Milan. There were rumors that Maximilian I was about to make Bianca Sforza, Il Moro's daughter, his second wife. Jacob doubted that Bianca, a spoiled and fashionable lady, could ever replace Marie in Maximilian's life, whom he had loved dearly. Jeroen silently thought of Sibylle. Seeing his friend's mind shine, Jeroen once again suggested that Jacob give a lecture on Plato's Symposium at the Confraternity. Jacob raised his brows and said, "Dear Jeroen, you are

overoptimistic. Don't be surprised if they refuse you. I am not a Christian." Aleit protested, among intelligent men this had never been a important matter. Fate would interfere before Jeroen could test his persuasion at the Confraternity.

Emperor Maximilian I married Bianca Sforza in 1494, and soaring on this political success he arranged a marriage for his juvenile eighteen-year-old son Philip the Fair with Juana, the daughter of Ferdinand II of Aragon and Isabella of Castile, king and queen of unified Spain. A great dynastic victory for Maximilian. To boost his son's position in Brabant, which strenuously fought Maximilian's proxy-rule in Philip's stead with two uprisings, Maximilian decided to have Philip acclaimed as Duke of Burgundy in s'Hertogenbosch, one of the least rebellious towns in Brabant.

In December 1496 a newly married Philip the Fair, Emperor Maximilian, and a large entourage of nobles descended on Den Bosch. Albertus Cuperinus, the chronicler of Hertogenbosch reports: *the town presented Maximilian, the Roman King with two large, expensive oxen with silvered horns and two cart-loads of wine*. There was feasting for two days. At a reception of the illustrious guests at the Confraternity of Our Lady, Cornelis van Bergen pleaded with Maximilian for Jacob. Maximilian was surprised that he had not been informed of his former teacher's destitute existence in town and indicated that he would take care of Jacob's difficulties. Jacob was called into the presence of Maximilian who graciously told him that he had arranged for Jacob to be baptized at Sint Jan's Cathedral next day, right after the homage to Philip. The Emperor would not accept any objections. He himself, Philip, Cornelis and his brother Johannes van Bergen, and several other of Jacob's friends would be present and act as godparents.

Next day Jacob was escorted in great pomp to St. John's Cathedral and before the entire Brabantian assembly of nobles dunked into the Holy Font.

Albertus Cuperinus records this remarkable event: *When the homage was done, young Prince Philip rode to Sint Jans-Church and there a Jew was baptized by Master Ghjisbert den Bije the Deacon of Sint Jans, in presence of Duke Philip, the Herren Jan van Bergen and Cornelis van (Zeven)Bergen and other great Herren, who were all friends and godfathers of the baptized Jew, and they gave him a name, to wit: Philip van Sint Jans, who had previously been named Jacob van Almaengien*.---The baptism of a Jew on orders of the Emperor must have been a scandal in Brabant, a clear, imperial infringement by Maximilian upon local customs and an affront to the Archbishop of Cologne, to whose diocese northern Brabant belonged.

Jacob was humiliated. How could his imperious friend and student baptize him against his reservations and wishes? He had reduced him to a mere pawn in his power game with the Brabantian nobles and the Church. This baptism would cause endless troubles to his already precarious existence.

The records of the Confraternity of Our Lady show that at their annual Christmas meeting of 1496 *Magister Philip van Sint Jans, formerly a Jew*, was admitted as a full member. Jacob gave an acceptance lecture on Plato's *Phaedo*, carefully cleansed of any content that could be construed as being offensive to the Church. He said laughing to Jeroen, "I might yet learn how to teach a superficial, bland course on the history of Greek philosophy. How similar Socrates' times were to ours. Everything was changing rapidly, thinking, religion, and the life of the polis. But I will take care not to remind my well-fed listeners of that." Amazed by Jacob's erudition the Confraternity asked him to give a series of monthly lectures on the philosophy of Plato and his time.

Jeroen was relieved. He could not comprehend the demeaning effect this forced conversion had on Jacob. In his, admittedly naive view, Maximilian had done well: with



one simple sweep of his imperial hand he had removed all the obstacles in Jacob's way. Jeroen had been brought up as a Christian. Religious abstractions were not his preoccupation. He said to Jacob, "Sometimes I use my inherited Christian symbols to express my thinking, at other times to hide a deeper, possibly heretic meaning from the unwary. But my conscience doesn't bother me, when I do that." Jacob looked at him thoughtfully and said, "Would you become a Jew?" Jeroen was puzzled. "Why should I? I see no reason or advantage in becoming a Jew. You could teach me Hebrew, but would that make me a Jew?" "No," said Jacob with an edge in his voice. "But your grandmother would make you one. You have no idea, what troubles with her conscience she had to cope with, or I for that matter. By any measure I am an irreligious Jew, I have not taken part in a Jewish service for fifty years, but my conscience still bothers me." Jacob shook his head and continued darkly, "I have not been able to unravel this conundrum. I don't know how to free myself from this ancient bond, even if I wanted to. Like your Adam I am tied to the fearsome Old-Testament God with a thin chain, while you Gentiles are promised to fly straight to heaven." Jeroen suggested kindly, "Maybe your problems are connected with your impeccable dislike of the Church. I also hate the Church, but does that mean I am not a Christian?" "No," said Jacob sadly. "The Church is not the reason for my problems with myself. They lie deeper. But my practical troubles have only just begun. The Church is vindictive and pursues its goals in secrecy. They wouldn't face off with Maximilian over such a small matter, but they will haunt me, and maybe even you, the friend of a convert."

The first person to get to feel the displeasure of the Cologne Archbishop was deacon Ghjisbert den Bijel. He was quietly transferred to a parish in Limburg closer to Cologne. It was customary to present a gift to the Confraternity on the occasion of one's election as a member, and such gifts were carefully recorded in the expense reports of the fraternity. An existing altar carved by Adrian van Wesel lacked two leaves. Jeroen set to work to commemorate Jacob's initiation. Appropriately the altar was dedicated to the two St. Johns. In 1494 Jeroen had painted a *St. John the Baptist in the Desert* for a customer who had rejected the painting. The Baptist was too well-fed and comfortable. Bosch overprinted the donor with a large black thistle and used it as one of the two leaves. The painting shows the grandfatherly Baptist reclining on a rock in an open landscape contemplating a lamb in the foreground. With one hand he points at this representation of Christ.

Fig.33



St. John the Evangelist on Patmos, 1496, Berlin

The second leaf, *St. John the Evangelist on Patmos*, Bosch painted in 1496. The Evangelist in the familiar red coat, quill in hand writes in the Apocalypse on his knees. He has paused to gaze at an apparition of Mary and the Child in a mandorla in the sky. An angel speaks to him. A lovely Dutch landscape fills the background. The dark hill on which the angel stands distinctly off-sets the youthful saint's face. A high, bushy tree, symbolizes the savior. St. John's eagle watches him and an armed Boschian hybrid with a fanatical face. To judge by his cape the hybrid is a magister of canonical law. He is poised to interrupt the saint's reverie. Aside from this creature no disturbing elements trouble the tranquil scene. On closer inspection one recognizes that the saint's profile is that of Jacob's in the betrothal scene in the *Garden*. Philip van Sint Jan rejuvenated to the time of his and Jeroen's first encounter! Only then does one become aware that Mary has reddish hair and Sibylle's oval face, and that this St. John is writing in Hebrew, from right to left. The right page is finished, and he is poised to complete the first sentence on the left page. Jeroen knew, of course, that the Apocalypse was written in Greek. He wanted to make a subtle point. Jacob's magpie has metamorphosed into the eagle, the Evangelist's symbol. A hopeful Jeroen shows Jacob van Almaengien's transformation into Philip van Sint Jans.

Fig.34



St. John the Evangelist on Patmos, Reverse: Christ's Passion, 1496, Berlin

The *St. John on Patmos* panel carries a less euphoric message on its outside. A tondo in predominantly brown *grisaille* shows Christ's Passion in a circular band surrounding an ibis on a steep rock drawing blood from his chest to feed its young. The stations of Christ's path to Golgotha are arranged like a clock. His last day begins at Gethsemane at four in the early morning. He is praying to the invisible God to take this chalice from Him. His disciples are asleep. At five o'clock He is surrounded by a tumultuous group of armed soldiers. Judas kisses Him as one Oriental pursuer lays hands on Him. At seven He is being presented to Caiaphas. The bulbous domes of Herod's palace separate Him from carrying His cross up the Hill of Golgotha. At twelve noon, the sky half-darkened by the eclipse of the sun, John and Mary Magdalene are the only people left under His Cross and those of the two men who were crucified with Him. The last scene shows Him at three in the afternoon, being laid to rest in Joseph of Arimatheas' tomb. Jacob is not present unless one wants to detect his profile in that of Christ praying at Gethsemane. The space between the tondo and the dark edge of the panel is filled with barely visible Boschian monsters and mutilated human beings, probably by a different hand. In its concentration and layout this tondo is one of Bosch's masterpieces. Few if any depictions of Christ's Passion have achieved a comparable cohesion and visual brevity. Jeroen proudly signed the Patmos panel *Jhieronymus Bosch*. His second signed painting. Bosch's authorship of the two paintings was dutifully mentioned in the records of the Confraternity, but the occasion and the name of the donor have been omitted.



A few months after the altar had been set up at St. John's Cathedral, at a meeting of the Confraternity a man sidled up to Jeroen and praised his work. The man whispered confidentially, "Isn't St. John on the painting really Jacob van Almaengien? I give you a friendly advice, stay away from this baptized Jew." He grinned and vanished in the crowd. Jeroen was speechless. Nobody seemed to have noticed the stranger, or knew who he was. Furious, he told Jacob of the incident. Jacob said darkly, "Yes, I know, some such unidentified strangers have appeared also at my lectures on Plato." Jeroen in disbelief asked, "Why don't you throw them out?" Jacob shrugged. "What would that help? The Archbishop has been ordered by Pope Innocent VIII to vanquish all dissidents." Jeroen couldn't quite see how the Church could accomplish that. Jacob laughed briefly. "By force and intimidation as you have seen. You have to become more careful. I will teach you the Jewish way of keeping a low profile."

6.

1497, the twentieth anniversary of Sibylle's death. The memory hung heavily over Jacob and Jeroen. Quietly Jeroen painted a simple *Adoration of the Child* with Sibylle and Jacob bent over the Christ Child.

Fig.35



Adoration of the Christ Child, copy 1568, (original 1496), Cologne

Jacob's magpie, fat and well taken care of, sits on top a wall behind him. A ruddy shepherd peers at the three. Is he a self-portrait of Jeroen? He doesn't look like him. In the background a peasant couple, the same as in the Epiphany triptych, has lit a blazing fire to warm themselves. He gave the painting to Jacob on *Cosmas and Damianus* day. Sibylle's quiet oval face and red hair make this painting the loveliest portrait of the woman they both loved. Jacob is not idealized as St. John on Patmos was. His face reflects Jacob's full age of fifty-seven years. But Jeroen has dressed him in the red robe and black shawl of a learned magister. Notwithstanding the intimacy of their relationship, he still revered the teacher in him. We only have a copy of this small panel, but Jacob's age suggests this fateful year for Bosch's original.

Slowly the Inquisition was spreading through northern Europe. On his deathbed Pope Innocent VIII issued the infamous Bull *Malleus Maleficarum*, the "Hammer for the Infidels," a lengthy, meticulously worded legal document authorizing the persecution of "witches" and heretic scholars. It had been prepared by two German canons at the diocese of Cologne. Over time this Papal Bull would cost many thousands of women their lives. Innocent VIII also, primarily for political reasons, actively encouraged the Inquisition in Spain, where Isabella and Ferdinand had made Tomás de Torquemada, Isabelle's father confessor, a Dominican of Jewish descent, their chief inquisitor. In an overzealous letter to the worldly rulers of Germany, England, France, and the Low Countries Innocent VIII demanded that they return all non-baptized immigrant Jews to Spain for trial. In Northern Europe the Church denounced suspected people, but in general left their prosecution to the worldly authorities, who did little fearing to estrange their money lenders. In Flanders and Brabant a few leaders of heretic sects were tried and condemned to the stake, but there was no outbreak of anti-heretic hysteria among the populace. In 1484 Pope Innocent VIII died and was succeeded by Alexander VI, born Rodrigo Borgia. Alexander VI browbeat the Florentine government to try and burn Savanorola, who had exposed the corruption of the Church and Alexander's excesses. But Alexander was more interested in expanding the personal power of the Borgias than the Inquisition. A debauchee, he left much of his ambitious political campaigns to Cesare Borgia, one of the several children he had fathered with his favorite mistress. Ferdinand and Isabella were free to institutionalize the Inquisition in Spain.

In this politically and religiously volatile climate Jacob made a mistake. A few people, all trusted former participants of his early lectures, had approached Jacob to head a small group who wanted to try to expand their religious understanding by reading original Hebrew texts. Jacob's knowledge of the Jewish scriptures would allow them to go beyond the Church-sanctioned Biblical translations. They would meet at the private houses of the participants, change the location of their meetings every time, and restrict the group to less than twelve. Jacob considered the proposal. The undertaking was decidedly heretic, but the safeguards seemed sufficient. He was not going to be able to continue his philosophical lectures at the Confraternity much longer, they were infiltrated too easily. He longed to teach again, to present his treasure of Hebrew texts to an intelligent audience. Jeroen would later accuse him of hubris, but Jacob agreed to the proposal. The group met for the first time in Jeroen's upstairs gallery at Herbert's house. Another tactical mistake because of the overwhelming effect of Jeroen's paintings, which no one had ever seen assembled. A good part of the evening was spent with Jeroen explaining the intricacies of the Bronchorst triptych. During the second half of the meeting Jacob read from his translation of Deuteronomy. Jeroen could not understand why this description of the deeds of Mose attracted Jacob. None of his listeners had ever read or heard this part of the Old Testament.

At a later meeting one of the participants, a man with some theological education, suggested to extend their meetings by setting up an altar on which they could occasionally celebrate communion in the Old-Testament way. In the Jewish tradition only a quorum of three men was required, said the theologian, a rabbi was not necessary. Jeroen raised his brows but remained silent, leaving the decision to Jacob. Jacob came up with a description of such a table from Ezekiel 41.22: *In the Temple stood a wooden altar three cubits high and two cubits wide and its walls were of wood, and God said to me "This is the table that is before the Lord."* Jacob explained, which as long as the Temple existed served as altar for the atonement of the Israelites. Later, after the destruction of the Temple, it lost its numinosity and degenerated into a simple dining



table from which the rich fed the poor. Jacob was all for such a symbolic altar and looking at Jeroen suggested that he might be able to paint it with a cycle of the Seven Deadly Sins and the Four Last Things. Jeroen indicated that he needed time to think about the project.

When the two friends were alone, Jeroen, visibly angered, called Jacob a hypocrite possessed by hubris. "Don't you remember," he shouted at him, "when Sibylle asked whether you were the Messiah? Now the devil has shown you how to become just that for these ignorant men. You are playing with the fire of which you warned me." Jacob haughtily said, "I have no intention to play the Messiah. Besides, there should be no danger in this reasonable request, we all know each other." Jeroen was unmoved. "You will create a tangible proof of your heretic activities for anybody to see. You are foolish to believe that you can hide this piece of furniture from the curious eyes of others. Sooner or later someone will denounce you. What then? You can hide thoughts and maybe words but not such hard evidence." Jacob indicated that the table would use Christian symbols, only the initiated would know its meaning. Jeroen took a deep breath and said with finality, "I will not be part of such a project of modifying the Holy Sacrament, and since you have been baptized, you shouldn't either." Jacob stung by this reference straightened himself and said irritated, "I will design this table myself and persuade one of your brothers to paint it in the shop. They will not look through its purpose. I'll pay for it myself." Jeroen realized that he could not warn his brothers of this commission without revealing the existence of their group. He stayed away from their meetings, and the two friends did not speak to one another for several months.

Fig.36



The Table of the Seven Deadly Sins, 1498, Madrid

The curious *Table of the Seven Deadly Sins* was surely painted by the van Aken shop, although it has been attributed to Bosch himself. It is undated and unsigned. 1498 seems a likely year. Jacob designed its layout. He took its inscriptions from the *Song of Mose* (Deuteronomy). The two bands read, at the top: *Gens absque concilio est, et sine prudentia. Utinam saperent, et intelligerent, ac novissima providerent*, at the bottom: *Abscondam faciem meam ab eis, et considerabo novissima eorum*, and in the center: *Cave, cave Dominus vidit*.— In the Standard King James translation: "For they are a people void of counsel, neither is there any understanding in them. O that they were wise, that they understood this, that they would consider their end." and below: "I will hide my face from them, I will see what their end shall be." At the center: "Beware, beware, the Lord sees you." To Jeroen, who saw the table at the shop, these quotations seemed to have no connection to the Christian Sacrament of the Holy Communion. Mose addressed the Israelites. The riddle of Jacob's preoccupation with Deuteronomy had deepened.

The table is an almost square rectangle. Its center, surrounded by a magical Pythagorean mandorla of exactly 128 golden rays, is God's eye. A dark-blue circle, in which Christ appears with a raised finger standing in his grave. This is enclosed in a wide concentric circle depicting the Seven Deadly Sins: *Ira*—rage, *Superbia*—pride, *Luxuria*—

lust, *Accidia*—bad temper, *Gula*—gluttony, *Invidia*—envy, and *Avarice*—greed. A few of the illustrations follow Brabantian proverbs, others are more sophisticated and obscure, all are crudely painted. In the four corners of the table appear four medallions showing the *Four Last Things*: Death, Resurrection, the entry of the blessed into Heaven, and Hell. They are not only stereotypically simple but some, like the entry into Heaven, are outright mindless. They fall far below similar conventional depictions of the subject in Flemish painting. All four are, if possible, even cruder in execution than the illustrations of the seven sins. Bosch had no hand in this venture.

Fig.37



Christ Bearing the Cross, 1499, Escorial

Disheartened by his quarrel with Jacob and truly worried about his friend, Jeroen painted him as *Simon of Cyrene carrying Christ's Cross* to Golgotha. Christ has broken down and is on his knees looking at the viewer. A Jewish elder tells Simon-Jacob to pick up the heavy load. Jacob dressed in a white cassock with a hood grimly looks straight ahead. A



huge henchman in pink is whipping the fallen Christ. A crowd of Jews follow them. In the far distance before the towers of Jerusalem St. John embraces Maria Magdalene. Jeroen felt that Jacob was on the way to get himself crucified, that he was following a deep-seated penchant for self-sacrifice. Why, he could not understand. The meetings, rotating from one house to another, were continuing unnoticed by the authorities. Jeroen knew that they celebrated their communion on the first Friday of the month. He resolved to try to heal their estrangement and went to one of Jacob's lecture meetings. Jacob noticed and welcomed him with a smile of happiness.

For Jeroen's benefit Jacob changed his subject that day and read the last four chapters of Deuteronomy: The Israelites were poised to cross the river Jordan to the Promised Land of Canaan. Mose had been told by God that he would not set foot into the Promised Land. He knew he was close to death. He assembled the elders of the tribes and in an impassioned speech one last time made them swear to abide by Yahweh's Covenant. He reminded them that they should not forget their God, who had rescued them from the slavery of Egypt, had led them through the Red Sea and the desert, and ruthlessly slain their enemies. However, he foresaw that once they lived in the Promised Land, they would get fat and lazy. They would forget their God and follow other gods. It had happened before, when he had been on Mount Sinai to receive the Tablets of the Ten Commandments. Like they had followed the golden calf then, they would follow other idols again. Their God was a jealous God, who would punish them terribly. In the end God ordered Mose to sing of their doom.

Jacob explained, that Mose was one of the greatest seer of all times, but he had had a lisp and stuttered. He had been a poor orator and the Israelites were a stubborn, argumentative people. Throughout his life Mose had never been successful in rousing his people. God's command to sing of their doom had been a great hardship for Mose. Jeroen listened with increasing fascination when Jacob read the entire text as if it was a promise of his own salvation, a litany of his personal sins and omissions, and finally his condemnation. He had never seen his friend so emotionally moved.

The Song of Mose

Deuteronomy 32: 15-33:

*[15] Jeshurun (Israel) you waxed fat, you grew thick, you became sleek; then you forsook God who made you, and scoffed at the Rock (covenant) of your salvation.*

*[16] They stirred him to jealousy with strange gods; with abominable practices they provoked him to anger. [17] They sacrificed to demons which were no gods, to gods they had never known, to new gods that had come in of late, whom your fathers had never dreaded. [18] You were unmindful of the Rock that begot you, and you forgot the God who gave you birth.*

*[19] The Lord saw it, and spurned them, because of the provocation of his sons and his daughters. [20] And he said, I will hide my face from them, I will see what their end will be, for they are a perverse generation, children in whom is no faithfulness. [21] They have stirred me to jealousy with what is no god; they have provoked me with their idols. So I will stir them to jealousy with those who are no people; I will provoke them with a foolish nation. [22] For a fire is kindled by my anger, and it burns to the depths of hell, devours the earth and its increase, and sets on fire the foundations of the mountains.*

*[23] And I will heap evils upon them; I will spend my arrows upon them; [24] they shall be wasted with hunger, and devoured with burning heat and poisonous pestilence; and I will send the teeth of beasts against them, with venom of crawling things of the dust.*

*[25] In the open the sword shall bereave, and in the chambers shall be terror, destroying both young man and virgin, the sucking child with the man of gray hairs.*

*[26] I would have said, I will scatter them afar, I will wipe their name out from among men," [27] had I not feared provocation by the enemy, lest their adversaries should judge amiss, lest they should say, "Our hand is triumphant, the Lord has not wrought all this.*

*[28] For they are a nation void of counsel, and there is no understanding in them. [29] O, if they were wise, they would understand this, they would discern their latter end!*

*[30] How could one chase a thousand, and then put ten thousand to flight, unless they had sold their Rock, and the Lord had given them up?*

*[31] For their rock is not like our Rock, even our enemies themselves agree. [32] For their vine comes from the vine of Sodom, and from the fields of Gomorrah; their grapes are grapes of poison, their clusters are bitter. [33] For their wine is the poison of serpents, and the cruel venom of asps.*

After the session, alone, Jeroen and Jacob hugged each other in tears and happiness. Jeroen took Jacob to show him his *Christ Bearing the Cross* panel. Jacob was moved, but said, "I thought I could carry Christ's Cross, but I cannot follow him. Christ cannot remove my disregard of the Covenant of my forefathers, but as a Jew he might be able to intercede on my behalf with the God you just heard speak. For that to work I would have to believe in Christ and that I cannot."

Jeroen was silent. He finally understood the deeper meaning of the table and its incoherent inscription.. It had been Jacob's attempt to atone his trespasses against the commands of Deuteronomy through Christ. It had proven a failure.

As if Jacob had guessed his thoughts, he said, "Jeroen, *schilderer*, painter of pictures, I need your help. Had we worked together on this table, you might have been able to prevent my downfall. I didn't know that the sins which this table is to atone are not my trespasses. This is one insight my forced baptism has taught me." Jeroen looked at him and asked, "Aren't Moses's Ten Commandments the same for Jews and Christians?"

"Yes," said Jacob, "but the Jews are God's chosen people. If we neglect paying attention to Him, if we follow other gods, He threatens to bring terrible punishments upon us.

Christ has changed all this for the people of the New Covenant. Christ has assuaged God's wrath for His believers, but you Gentiles are not God's chosen people. During the past year I have come a long way in understanding myself. My friendship with you is crucial. I need you, visionary, to paint Mose's terrible words in this song to understand my sins against the faith of my ancestors. O, had God allowed us to visualize Him! God forbade us to make graven images and instead sent us a stutterer to illustrate his will!"

Fig.38



St Christopher carrying the Christ Child, 1497, Rotterdam

Temporarily relieved of his fears by their reunion Jeroen painted *St. Christopher carrying the Christ Child*. He had always identified with this giant. Among Jacob's learned friends he sometimes felt as slow in comprehension and as naive as St. Christopher. While painting the picture he made a solemn vow that he would save Jacob from his troubles and from his restless mind. St. Christopher was the protector of wanderers and pilgrims. Sibylle had sold many Christopher badges. He resolved to take his friend on a pilgrimage to Compostela. He looked at his painting. St. Christopher walking through the river of forgetting! The idea excited him. Yes, he thought, along Saint Jacob's Way! They were no longer young, it might take them two years, but the journey would remove them from the turmoil of Brabant. He gave the painting a cheerful green landscape with woods on the other side of the river and the towers of Compostela in the distance. He did not show the painting to Jacob, but kept it for a future day.

One night Jacob met with Jeroen in his gallery to discuss the new painting. Jacob wanted a panel showing the idols of Egypt, the temptation of the Chosen People, the wrath of God, and its effect on the renegade Israelites. Jeroen was concerned about how to hide these most surely heretic symbols from the unwary viewer, and came up with the idea of



a *Temptation of St. Anthony*. This would allow him to depict the nefarious Egyptian rites within commonly established images of the saint's temptations. Jacob agreed and suggested that he should show a Black Mass, in which three priestesses used the frog holding the egg from Sibylle's initiation altar. Jeroen was surprised, what had Sibylle told him about this altar? Jacob explained that after he had seen Jeroen's painting of their wedding, he had asked her about the altar, and she had told him as much as she knew. According to her stepmother the altar had been brought from Egypt to Provence several centuries before her time by some Manicheans.

Jeroen worried, no matter how he would paint this scene, it could always be construed as witchcraft under Pope Innocent's VIII new Bull. What did Jacob want to do with this painting? Jacob vacillated. Primarily he wanted to watch Jeroen paint it, to clear his mind. "I urgently have to rid myself of these forces in my life. They poison my mind, whether I remain a Jew or I become a believing Christian." They could eventually sell it to a Jewish art dealer, Jacob knew in Amsterdam. Jacob realized that in the present climate, he was asking Jeroen to risk his life for his salvation. Embarrassed, he said so. Still hoping that Jacob would eventually become a true Christian and swear off his Jewish demons, Jeroen, thinking of his vow to save his friend, asked for time to consider this request.

The complexities of the painting and the dangers it would create became a supreme challenge to Jeroen. He was about to paint a *Temptation* like nobody had ever seen. He resolved to make it into a triptych. The wings would show Anthony in meditation on the right and his fall from his flight of hubris on the left. Jacob's hubris and fall, because that was what he considered this undertaking to be. He would have to use all his ingenuity to hide its real meaning. A labor of love. He had to work by himself. Once again he carried all his painting utensils to Herbert's house, at night, not to arouse suspicion. He instructed Herbert to deny his presence. He asked Jacob to trust him and not to interfere. He would show him the painting when he felt the time was right.

Fig.39



Temptation of St. Anthony, Outside, 1502, Lisbon

The *outside* of the triptych gives no hint of the acrimonious language one will be faced with when one opens it. In yet another masterly, eerily gray-green *grisaille* Jeroen painted Christ's way to Golgotha. Appropriate to the mood of the triptych, the two scenes are more bucolic than the one on the backside of *St. John on Patmos*. Especially the right panel shows ordinary people following the stumbling Christ like in a popular Passion procession in Brabant. There appear a giant and a Flemish Veronica with her sudarium.

Fig.40



Temptation of St. Anthony, Middle Panel, 1502, Lisbon

The middle panel Jeroen laid out as he saw fit. Apart from the appearance of Anthony in a ruined castle, the saint's traditional hermitage, the painting has nothing in common with St. Anthony's legend. The ruddy face of the saint at its very center looks at the viewer. He raises his hand in a blessing. Anthony does not seem to sense that next to him a pretty lady with a reptilian tail is insinuating herself on him. She is offering a silver bowl with the perverted, bitter wine of Sodom to a dubious nun on the saint's right. A sharp gent, elegantly dressed in the head-scarf and pink pants of a scholar, without arms or body, only legs and head, is lewdly eying the reptilian lady. To Anthony's left, around a circular table three priestesses are celebrating a Black Mass. A dark-skinned Egyptian



woman holds up a lunar silver plate on which the flesh-colored frog raises the egg of regeneration in his forepaws. Crowned by a hat of snakes, a priestess offers a golden beaker of ceremonial wine to a pig-man. She is assisted by the third sub-lunar priestess dressed in blinding white. The pig-man, an owl on his head and a guitar under his arm, eagerly pushes his way towards the communion table. He is followed by an aged, one-legged cripple who holds on to his left hand.

Fig.41



Temptation of St. Anthony, Middle Panel, St. Anthony and the Black Mass, 1502, Lisbon

This scene is placed on a seemingly solid bridge from under which spills a lake of sewage carrying all kinds of flotsam: a duck-ship steered by a monkey carries a cleric singing blasphemous hymns from behind bars. To its left sails a boat with a carp's head. Shielded by a stingray an eviscerated priest furtively reads from the Bible. A beggar wearing a magician's top hat displays his amputated leg on a tablecloth on the floor of the bridge.

Fig.42

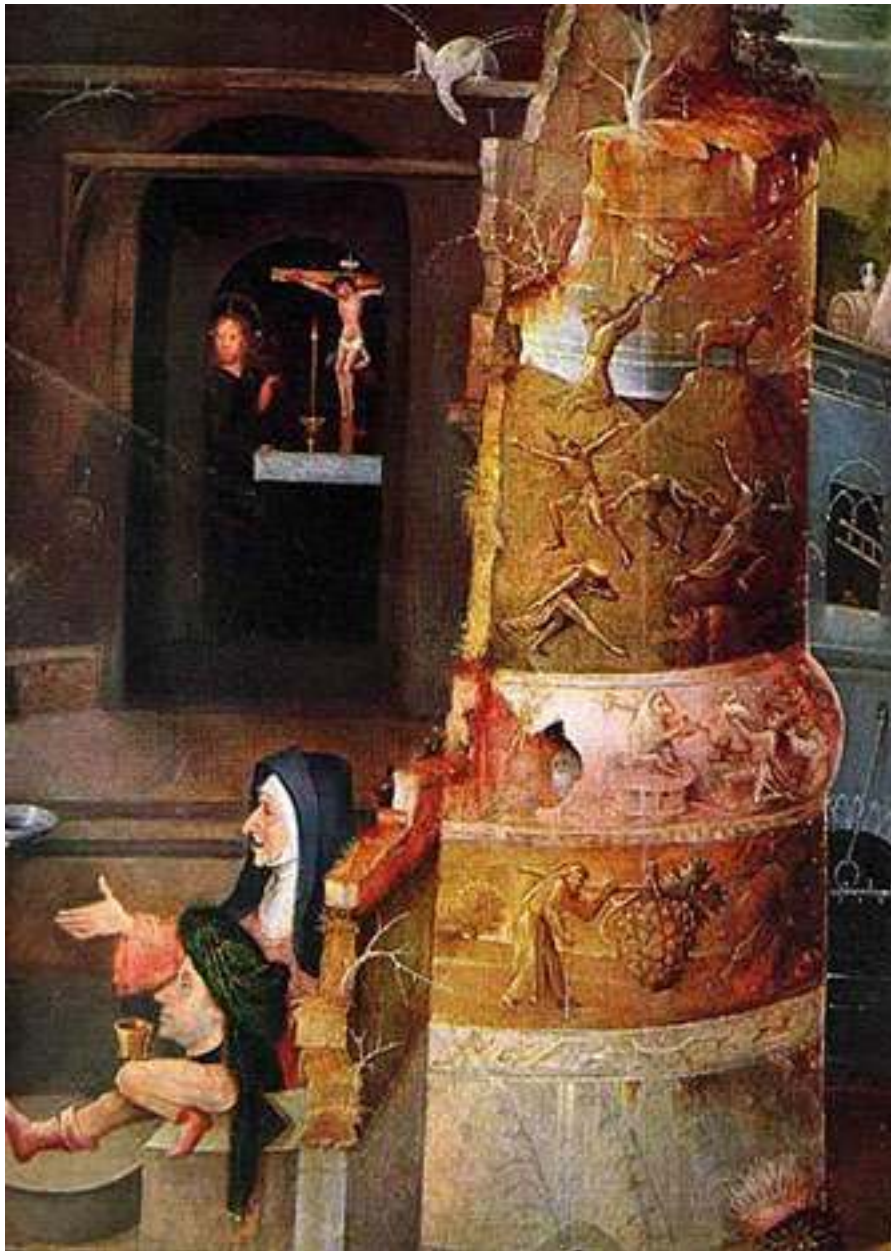


Temptation of St. Anthony, Middle Panel, The Duck-Ship, 1502, Lisbon

Behind this spook, in the dark chapel inside the hermitage, Christ points at His crucifixion, as if to protect Anthony and the viewer from these evil forces. In the upper left of the panel a village is burning and two airships ply the skies. Adjacent to the hermitage rises an obscure water tower and a bathhouse frequented by animals. People are jumping from its stairs and galleries into the murky waters.



Fig.43



Temptation of St. Anthony, Middle Panel, The Broken Column of Deuteronomy, 1502, Lisbon  
Jeroen inscribed the Deuteronomy text, the key to the triptych, in a relief frieze which spirals around a crumbling obelisk. On the topmost level Mose receives the Tablets of the Ten Commandments from the hands of an invisible Yahweh.. Directly below the Israelites dance around the Golden Calf. The movements of the dancers reveal them to be *Moriskos*, Spanish Sufis, who at the time traveled in Maximilian's I entourage. In the next lower level of the frieze appears, in his customary form of a dog, the Egyptian god Anubis, who watched over the embalming of the dead. Characterized by their head gear, a group of Jews offers a lamb, an ox, and a forbidden swan to this false god. A reference to Exodus 14: 11-12, where against God's orders and Mose's exhortations, the recalcitrant tribe of Jacob (sic!) embalmed their dead during their long march through the desert. On the lowest spiral tier, two scouts return from the Promised Land carrying a huge bunch of grapes.



Fig.44



Temptation of St. Anthony, Middle Panel, The Army of Enemies, 1502, Lisbon

From both sides approach groups of deformed people. Faithful to Jacob's wish Jeroen on the middle left illustrated the "Armies" which a wrathful Yahweh will send, and on the lower right the suffering of the plague-stricken people. Both are examples of Bosch's unshackled imagination. The vanguard of the army is led by a twin pair of armored dogs, followed by a willow witch, who grabs a fierce Basilisk with the cloven feet of a goat and a unicorn's horn. According to medieval legend, the Basilisk was a reptile with the wings of a rooster. A relative of the Greek Gorgo it had the power to annihilate anyone with a single glance. Behind this formidable beast and its female retainer walks a pert rat with rouge on her cheeks and pearls in her ears, a broken flower pot on her head. She shoulders a wagon wheel, on which hangs the withered leg of the last quartered criminal. Apparently the rat comes from the *Schindanger*, the place of execution. To top this off Bosch has hung a second victim from the rat's wheel, the carcass of a pig. In medieval times animals, which had attacked humans, were executed like criminals. Obviously a double horror in this Jewish context. A sword-wielding ghost of a knight concludes the

troupe. His armor is empty! "*I will stir them to jealousy with those who are no people; I will provoke them with a foolish nation.*"  
Fig.45



Temptation of St. Anthony, Middle Panel, The Stricken People, 1502, Lisbon

While this enemy is bizarre but clearly shown, the sufferings of the Stricken People are as vague and subliminal as the rest of Bosch's visions in this painting. They wade or ride into the morass of the cloaca in the process of undergoing a mysterious transformation. The hind-part of the horse of a young falconer has been turned into an earthen crock from which pours stinking putrefaction. The rider has grown wings, his head has been turned into the fruit of the psychotropic Jimsonweed (*Stechapfel*, *datura stramonium*). A woman riding a fat rat has been turned into a willow-witch with a reptilian tail. She is cradling her baby. Her husband's dreamy gaze seems to express the poison creeping up his legs like Socrates' experience in *Phaedo*.

Jeroen showed the panel to Jacob, who spent a candle-light vigil before the painting alone. As Jeroen had expected he said nothing to indicate the state of his mind. "Oh,"

said Jeroen, "I will now add wings to this triptych, to explain how it connects to you."  
Jacob shuddered.  
Fig.46



Temptation of St. Anthony, Right Wing, St. Anthony in the Desert, 1502, Lisbon

The right wing allowed Jeroen to vent his rage against the corrupt Church. Next to the meditating saint a sprawled frog impregnates a virgin in the hollow of a willow. A table, held up by men exposing their mutilated sexual organs, is laid with a simple meal for the hermit, who seems completely unaware of these travesties. Looking straight from the picture, a wane smile on this face, he seems to wink at the viewer. Behind this scene a lake borders on the bulbous defense towers of a city, the only trace of reality in the painting. All other structures are crumbling or burning or vanishing in the decay and morass that surrounds them. A childish cretin wanders through the middle ground, and a couple sails in the green sky on a large fish.



Fig.47



Temptation of St. Anthony, Right Wing, St. Anthony among the Travesties, 1502, Lisbon  
The left wing connects these happenings with Jacob and his fall from grace. Splayed backwards on an obscene frog Anthony sails the skies in a sodomite's airship from which he is about to fall. Below, three men carry the fallen hermit across the wooden bridge that separates reality from the nightmare of the middle panel. Their leader is Jacob in his magister's robe. Under the bridge a bishop reads Jacob's indictment to two canal-rats. Bosch's most famous messenger, a bird dressed as a canon, an inverted funnel on his head to indicate his up-side-down mind, is skating on the frozen waters of conscience. He carries the Papal condemnation.

Fig.48



Temptation of St. Anthony, Left Wing, St. Anthony's Fall from Grace, 1502, Lisbon  
Jeroen extended his daring sexual innuendo on the Church to the left wing. At the right edge of the panel, in continuation of the riffraff approaching the Black Mass, moving in the opposite direction, a fake cardinal beckons a stag-headed cleric to enter a dark sodomites' pub between the legs of a laughing monster. Jeroen shrugged: Not all dignitaries of the Church could afford the means to maintain three mistresses and brazenly produce a score of illegitimate children like Alexander VI, their Pope. Some were reduced to satisfy their lust on little altar boys.

Fig.49



Temptation of St. Anthony, Left Wing, St. Anthony flying on a Sodomite Airship, 1502, Lisbon

When Jeroen had finished, he showed the triptych to Jacob, who was overwhelmed. A couple of days later Jacob said, "You finally succeeded to get under my skin. I have had wild dreams of flying for two nights. It is, of course, I who is in danger of falling from my flight of hubris. Sibylle's magpie is dead. I couldn't say who killed him, Maximilian or the Church. Thank you for giving me a second chance as my own rescuer. I might yet succeed."

But Jacob's mind was not at ease. In true Jacob fashion he returned a few days later with a manuscript of a free translation of a passage from Isaiah. "Let me read this to you," he said. "it is the Biblical text underlying the left panel and my confusion."

(Isaiah 59)

*Hear ye this, O house of Jacob; thus said the Lord: Your iniquity has separated you and your Lord. Your hands are defiled with blood. Your lips have spoken lies, your mouths muttered perverseness. No one caller for justice, nor any pleadeth for truth: they trust in vanity. They hatch adders' eggs, they weave the spider's web; he who eats their eggs dies, and from one which is crushed a viper is hatched. Their works are works of iniquity, and deeds of violence are in their hands. Their feet run to evil, and they make haste to shed innocent blood; their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity, desolation and destruction are in their highways. The way of peace they know not, and there is no justice in their paths; they have made their roads crooked, no one who walks on them knows peace. Therefore, justice is far from you and righteousness does not overtake you; we look for light, and behold darkness, and for brightness, but we walk in gloom. We grope for the wall like the blind, we grope like those who have no eyes; we stumble at noon as in the twilight, among those in full vigor we are like dead men.*

Jacob said, "You have already shown the Basilisk. He is my vision of death. Unless I drag him out and face him, unless I unmask him, he will destroy me with his glance. Could you paint the Adder's Egg, laid by a rooster and hatched by a toad, from which the



Basilisk emerged, in the empty corner next to the bridge and the frozen brook of my conscience?" He watched while Jeroen inserted the cracked egg on which stands a bird swallowing the toad.

Fig.50



Temptation of St. Anthony, Left Wing, the Papal Bulle and St. Anthony's Rescue, 1502, Lisbon  
Jeroen's most touching reference to Jacob is easily overlooked. On the frozen brook lies his soul-bird, his magpie, killed by an arrow. The blood of the bird is splattered in a puddle on the bridge.  
Jeroen deeply affected by Jacob's humiliation, brought out his St. Christopher panel and told him of his vow to take him on a pilgrimage to Compostela. Jacob hugged him in tears of relief.

## 7.

The birth of a male heir, whom they named Charles, had greatly enhanced Philip the Fair's and Juana's position. In time Charles would become Emperor Maximilian's I successor, the heir to Philip the Fair's possessions in Burgundy and the Low Countries, and King of Spain and its heavily mortgaged world-wide empire.

In 1502 Ferdinand and Isabella summoned Philip and Juana to Spain. Philip soon found the morally and religiously restricted court life trying and tedious. Juana was pregnant again, her third child in two years. After a violent quarrel with Juana, Philip left his wife behind and returned to Ghent. Juana went berserk. She demanded to be united with her husband. To subdue her willful daughter, her mother declared her uncontrollable and locked her up in the castle of La Mota.

Dynastic politics were the reason for this extreme measure. After the deaths of Juana's only brother John, of her older sister Isabella, and of her sister's infant son, Juana suddenly was the sole heiress to the Spanish kingdoms. In 1502 the *Cortez* of Castile and Aragon, attributing Juana's behavior to her pregnancy and recognized her and her husband as the future sovereigns of Spain.

In March of 1503 she gave birth to Ferdinand. Juana became ever more frenzied. On a cold November night, consumed by her infatuation with her handsome husband, threatening her keepers with the Inquisition, she fled La Mota in her nightshirt. She was stopped at the gates of the city. When her mother arrived, she insulted her with foul language. Her parents could no longer contain her and had to let the Queen designate of Spain return to Ghent. There she found a philandering Philip in bed with one of her buxom ladies-in-waiting. The chroniclers report that Juana in a terrifying scene cut off the woman's long hair, and threw her out. Philip slapped Juana's face. She went on a hunger strike. After a few days Philip ruefully returned to her bed.

In November 1504 her mother Isabella died, and Juana was proclaimed Queen of Castile. Ferdinand, her Machiavellian father, refused to vacate the throne and for two years ruled both Spains nominally together with Juana. Whereupon Juana, who had followed Philip to Ghent, induced-complacent Philip to contest Ferdinand's kingship with the Spanish Cortez. The process dragged on until 1506.

In 1505 Juana gave birth to her fifth child. Leaving her older children in the care of Philip's sister Margaret of Austria, she took her husband back to Spain. After they nearly drowned in a shipwreck on the coast of England, they reached Burgos on April 28, 1506. Ferdinand tried to persuade Philip to declare Juana incompetent, lock her up, and rule Spain with him. The attempt failed, because Ferdinand of Aragon and Philip of Hapsburg were equally suspect to the Castilian nobles. As the lesser evil, the Cortez, in early 1506, proclaimed Philip I King of both Spains. Six months later, on September 25, 1506 Philip died in Burgos from a mysterious illness. He was probably poisoned by Ferdinand, with whom he had had a series of violent quarrels. Juana pregnant with their sixth child went insane—or so the Spanish historians claim. For months she journeyed with Philip's coffin through the barren vicinity of Burgos, bemoaning her love. Never divested of her title of Queen of Castile, Ferdinand locked her up in the castle of Tordesillas in 1509. There she died forty-six years later. In 1555 her son Charles V had her and Philip entombed in Granada. From Philip the Fair and Charles V the Spanish royal house inherited the famous deformed Hapsburgian jaw and from Juana a tendency to "madness." The Low Countries became a Spanish dominion.

In early 1504 most of these royal intrigues and portentous events were still hidden in the not-so-distant future. Curiously, court records show, that in the beginning of the year

Philip the Fair had ordered a very large "Last Judgment" from the van Aken shop. Apparently Philip made a down payment, but there exists no indication that the triptych was ever paid for, or, for that matter, painted. Philip, pressed by his personal problems, seems to have defaulted on his order. Or were there other reasons—connected with Jacob?

Disaster struck when Jacob and Jeroen had almost forgotten the dangers they lived in. Jacob's study group had continued to meet, last at Cornelis van Bergen's house. The cursed altar table had, well hidden, been left there. A few days after the meeting Jacob was asked to appear before the city magistrate, who politely but obviously annoyed asked him, what kind of clandestine meetings he was conducting in van Bergen's house. A maid had denounced them at the Bishop's palace. She claimed to have found a magician's table in Cornelis' room and had told the churchmen that this was not the first meeting of these men at the house. Of course, the names of the eight participants were well known. Jacob remained cool and explained that he had been teaching Hebrew to the group. But what was the table for? countered the magistrate. He demanded that the meetings stop immediately. He would take up the matter with van Bergen. For the time being he would not take the issue before a Court. They were upright citizen in good standing and moreover some were personal friends of Duke Philip. However, he could not tolerate such activities in town. Besides he, Philip van Sint-Jan, was a baptized Jew. He was being watched by the Bishop, who could pressure the city magistrate to take more severe action against his person.

Jacob did not panic, but two members of his reading group let him know that they would no longer attend the meetings. A third one, a young monk who had been a student of Erasmus' of Rotterdam, vanished. They later found that he had been severely reprimanded by his order and sent overseas. Cornelis van Bergen was perturbed after he had had a talk with the magistrate. He suggested, now that the Church had got wind of their meetings, to disband the sessions.

Jacob claimed that he was being followed in town. More obvious was that at night an unknown person was prowling around Herbert's house, where he still lived. Visibly disconcerted Jacob got everyone alarmed by pointing out that Jeroen's even more damaging paintings were hanging in the upstairs gallery. A raid on Herbert's house would be a real disaster. Cornelis van Bergen came to their help. He offered to hide Jeroen's paintings in the attic of one of his secluded country houses. They moved the entire lot including the Temptation of St. Anthony in the darkness of a foggy December night.

The issue was further aggravated by the Bishop of Den Bosch, who did not let the matter rest. He complained to Duke Philip about the clandestine activities of his proteges, and Philip, through his secretary, issued a formal warning to Cornelis and Jacob. Van Bergen got cold feet and without Jeroen's permission sold the St. Anthony triptych to a Jewish art dealer in Amsterdam. *Post factum* Cornelis paid the lion share of the proceeds to an upset Jeroen, the rest he kept as a commission.

According to Dutch art-dealers the Anthony triptych was in 1530 bought by the young Damiaan de Goes. De Goes (1502-1574) was a widely traveled Portuguese historian and humanist, a friend of Luther's and Erasmus'. In 1571 when the Inquisition convicted de Goes of Lutheran heresies and imprisoned him for life, the triptych appears to have been appropriated by King Juan III of Portugal, one of the four sons-in-law of Juana's and Philip's. It is the only major Bosch triptych which escaped the henchmen of King Philip II of Spain.



Jacob, dismissed by Philip for the second time, sat brooding at home. He became a depressing liability to all of them. Jeroen, having lost his entire private collection, was fuming at Cornelis van Bergen. Alone by himself he would curse the altar table, but he never accused Jacob for the mishap. He had foreseen it years ago. This was not the time to burden Jacob with more guilt. Philip's default on his order caused Jeroen less pain. He had given this order to the shop anyway.

Jacob suggested to leave for their planned pilgrimage to Compostela. His initiative cheered up Jeroen. "Wait a few months," said Jeroen, "I first have to work off my anger at the masters of this world. You don't want to start in the middle of winter, do you?"

Jacob agreed grumbling, "I am tired of these Christian charades. I feel tempted to declare my apostasy and disappear in the Jewish ghetto of Amsterdam." Laughing, Jeroen reminded him, that before he could pose as an intellectual martyr and renounce his baptism, he first had to get a pilgrim's pass from some willing parish priest. He offered to take care of that.

Fig.51



The Haywain, Middle Panel, copy 1516, (original 1504), Madrid

Once again Jeroen set out to paint a triptych. Compared to the Anthony panels the *Haywain* appears like a harmless genre piece, which, however, would prove no less enigmatic to posterity. The center of the middle panel is occupied by a large farmer's cart stacked with hay. It is pulled by a chaotic troupe of hybrid monsters towards the right, as it were to Hell. On top of the hay load sits a young man with a lute accompanying his girl singing love songs. A devil blowing a long shalm and a praying angel try to influence the outcome of this *tête-à-tête*. As a warning or as an imagined temptation a second couple is seen kissing in front of a dark tree behind them. In a cloud above Christ helplessly raises his hands and with a kindly tilted head commiserates the foolishness of the world.

The foreground is populated by a colorful variety of everyday scenes. A quack pulls the tooth of a love-sick woman. Two pregnant women commiserate each other about their misfortune. A vagrant tries to abduct a child. While tending a roasting chicken over a fire, a woman feeds her baby. Three women bring sacks of hay to an overweight prior. Closer to the cart all hell has broken loose. A robber is about to cut the throat of a man on the ground. A friar is trying to restrain a man from beating his wife. A one-legged cripple is strangled by another man, and half a dozen people are trying to grab some hay from the wagon. We finally understand that the solution to this riddle is the simple figure of speech: "You are making money like hay."

Those who do, in Bosch's angered view, are riding to Hell: the Pope, the Emperor, Cornelis van Bergen, and to the very left a childish, stupid-looking Philip the Fair in an ermine-fringed light-blue cape. The Emperor has a bearded face, which Maximilian had not. Neither he nor the Pope bear any likeness to the contemporary potentates whom Bosch knew well.

Jeroen showed it to Jacob, and the two laughed at the naive Philip. Jacob wanted to know who was the turbaned prophet preaching to the doomed crowd. "Don't you recognize him?" said Jeroen. "It is your favorite Jesaia! Nobody is listening to him." The two wings were leaning on the wall, unfinished. "I will let the shop paint them," said Jeroen, "but the outside is finished." With Jacob's help he turned the panels around. They showed Jacob the Wanderer, in the same posture as in the *Prodigal Son*, only his hair was now completely white. Carrying his travel pannier, Jacob is dressed almost elegantly in a brown cape and pants. Maxi III follows him with bared teeth. The background has changed. In a hilly landscape a couple is dancing to a bagpipes-player, and robbers are stripping their hapless victim. A gallows threatens on a nearby hilltop. Jacob is about to cross a wooden foot bridge over a brook.



Fig.52



The Haywain, Outside of Triptych, Jacob on Pilgrimage, copy 1516, (original 1504), Madrid  
"Where am I going?" asked a perplexed Jacob. "To Compostela!" Jeroen said chuckling. "While our enemies go to hell, you are crossing the bridge to a new life. This landscape is in Spain. You haven't found the magpie yet. With a little imagination, it appears twice in the lower corner. The old magpie of Sibylle's time sits on Adam's thigh bone next to an ass' scull, and the second one flies away. I don't yet know why. Maybe it isn't even a magpie!"

Jeroen came home with two pilgrim's passes from the parish priest. "He issued me one for you too," he exclaimed exulted. "For an extra ducat he re-baptized you Jacob van Sint-Jans. Now I don't confuse you with Philip any longer. The man remembered your baptism well." Jeroen suggested that they buy two horses to ride at least as far as Vezelay, where the path began. They could sell them later, when their money ran low.

## 8.

On a beautiful May morning in 1505 they started out towards Leuven. Jeroen, who had never been farther afield than Tilburg, was excited. He would finally get to see the world. He had persuaded Jacob to take an extended route and visit some of the places where his famous contemporaries had left their paintings. In Leuven they stayed at the Bronchorst's house, where Jeroen's Epiphany hung in a conspicuous place. He took Jacob to Saint Peter's Church. "I want to show you the work of two painters which I have never seen," said Jeroen, "Dieric Bouts the Elder and Rogier van der Weyden. Van der Weyden is a giant. Dieric Bouts died 15 years ago. He was the official painter of Leuven. He is closer to me. His *Holy Eucharist Altar* is barely forty years old. It was commissioned by the Leuven Confraternity of the Holy Eucharist. Bouts painted it with the help of two canons from Leuven University, Masters Jan Varennecker and Aegidius Ballawel, who, like you, instructed him as to the subjects the Confraternity wanted. It is a large triptych, larger than my *Garden*."

Bouts' painting turned out to be unique. In the center panel Christ celebrates the Eucharist among the Apostles. Jacob counted twelve! "Judas is putting on his coat," suggested Jeroen. "He is about to leave the table. Look at Christ's mystical face. These days everyone likes Bouts' Christ. This face recurs on several of Bouts' paintings." The two scholars were standing in the background. "He repeated them," said sharp Jacob pointing, "in the double portrait hanging on the wall!" The Old Testament subjects of the four side panels were equally unusual: The Meeting of Abraham and Melchizedek, The Gathering of Manna, Elijah in the Desert, and a Celebration of Passover among four Jews and two women in contemporary costumes. "Amazing," exclaimed Jeroen. "This must be the only assembly of Jews on an altar of our times. The courageous canons must have expressly sanctioned them." After a while he added, "Forty years ago this was still possible, besides Leuven belongs to the archdiocese of Liege. They are more independent from the Pope there than in Cologne."

Van der Weyden's *Deposition Altar*, thirty years older and slightly smaller than the Bouts, hung in the neighboring Chapel of the Confraternity of the Archers. "Fabulous, look at it! This is Flemish painting at its most exalted," said Jeroen. "Rogier died when I was fourteen. My father was always holding him up to me. I have to admit that he was right. Rogier's brush control is superb. By comparison I am a fast and sloppy painter. He must have spent months on it." Jeroen examined the detail close up and noted the saturation of colors, which Rogier could only have obtained with solid layers of thick paint. "To be able to work faster I thin my paint until it flows like water. This makes any under-drawing visible, like Maxi in the *Garden*. So, I eliminated extensive under-drawings and paint from sketches." Musing about van der Weyden he continued. "Rogier had a large shop and often left the detailing to his assistants. But he must have painted this altar by himself. Look at the faces. Beautiful craftsmanship!" They stood in silence before the painting, and then Jeroen said, "I have lost the patience for this kind of painting. I might be the last painter of his generation. After me these costly altar triptychs will die out. The customers will demand that the painter paints everything himself." With emphasis he added, "This is not my kind of subject and not my style. I don't see the world with such clarity and definition. To me everything floats, good and evil, the sacred and the profane, and God and the Devil are intertwined. Bouts knew that too, but he worked on commission."

They passed through Aachen, Liege, Auxerre and in June, drenched from three days riding in the rain, arrived in Vezelay. Vezelay was a disappointment. Jeroen had heard so

much about thousands of devout pilgrims crowding the place that he had been apprehensive. The place was empty. There were only two dozens pilgrims present, and they were mostly local country folk. The Cathedral of the Magdalene, too, was not as magnificent as he had imagined. For the first time they stayed at a pilgrims lodge. A grimy dormitory and a communal refectory with rough benches and coarse food. Jacob laughed, "We have been living like kings. This is the real world you wanted to see." Early next morning they went up to the cathedral. A priest was celebrating mass for a group of pilgrims on their knees. The two friends stood hidden in the dark recesses, spectators both. Jeroen discovered the sculpted capitals on top the columns. Whispering he pointed them out to Jacob. "They are lovely and down to earth." People milling grain, Mary on a tired donkey fleeing Egypt, the grape harvest, a few saints and many expressive devils pursuing the faithful.

The pilgrims had vanished on a circumambulation through the chapels behind the altar. "I really don't like churches," said Jeroen. "May we leave?" Jacob nodded. They had entered through a side door. Meanwhile the main gates had been opened. As they walked out, Jeroen looked back and noticed the sandstone tympanum over the inner entry. He stood rooted. The *Second Coming of a most lively Christ*, his legs turned sideways, his arms spread over the multitude of small people below him, his loose robes flowing in great, almost transparent folds exposing his limbs. He said to Jacob, "I thought that only my generation had discovered the human aspect of Christ. This was made two hundred years ago!" The movement continued through the people to Christ's left and right, as if a holy wind made their garments cling to their bodies. "Had I seen this tympanum earlier," said Jeroen, "I would have painted Christ like this." He laughed, "but I would have given him Dieric Bouts' mystical Holy Face."

In the late afternoon Jeroen suggested to go back to the cathedral. The sun had come out and was casting the western facade into warm light. The great tympanum stood out in sharp contrast in the light coming from the open doors. The nave was empty. They walked down the isles looking at the capitals.

Suddenly, halfway down the nave Jeroen felt dizzy. He noticed that he was standing in the center of a large spiral maze inscribed into the floor. He closed his eyes. When he opened them again, Jacob was gone. He shuddered. A wind was blowing through the immense building. He heard the wind moan in the upper galleries. The giddiness returned, and he sat down in the center of the mandala with closed eyes. He had a strong vision of Jacob and himself on a promontory overlooking the blue sea. It was sunny, a wind was blowing, and he could hear the surf pounding. Jacob was lying on the ground motionless. He knew Jacob was dying. He tried to help him but couldn't move. Jacob cried out in Hebrew. Then it was all over.

Jeroen shook off the spell. Jacob was calling him from the side nave. On his question why he had suddenly sat down, Jeroen said, "I got trapped in the old maze. A giddy spell overcame me, nothing to worry about." But he feared that Jacob would die on their way, some place near the sea, perhaps in Portugal.

They agreed to keep the horses and, as Jacob pointed out sarcastically, their good life. Beaune was not far. They took their time, rode up the lovely valley of the Cousin, through rolling vineyards, small Burgundian villages, and seemingly endless woods. In four-days time they reached Beaune. Jeroen pressed to see the *Rogier van der Weyden's polyptych*, which, however, was not that easy. The painting hung in the Hôtel de Dieu, a large hospital foundation for the poor. They had to get special permission and then walk through several wards, where behind red curtains stood the beds of the sick. Jacob was



impressed by the cleanliness and order. Jeroen was forging ahead without looking right or left saying, "I don't like sick people nor these smiling nuns." When they finally stood before the enormous altar piece, two pairs of wings on each side of the central panel, Jeroen began at once to analyze its composition. "Here you see the work of a large workshop. Christ and the Angel of the Apocalypse weighing the good and the bad souls is by Rogier himself. Probably some of the heads in the wings, the Fall into Hell, and the Blessed being admitted through the Church to Heaven are his work, too. But the naked people resurrected from their graves and the angels above are painted by his assistants. Famous as he was, he had some excellent painters in his shop. But these small figures are crude and unimaginative." He walked a few steps back and continued, "An old-fashioned treatment of the subject. How far we have come in the years since the forties! Hans Memling, who worked for a while in Rogier's shop, had a less rigid hand. I have only seen a copy of the *Last Judgment* Memling painted for St. Mary's Church in Danzig twenty years later. I now see that Rogier's *Deposition* in Leuven is his greatest masterpiece. This polyptych doesn't come close."

Jacob listened amused. He couldn't have found a more critical guide to Flemish painting than this outspoken, latter-day master. He thought of the contemporary Italians he had seen and met in Florence. How distant their sensitivity was from Flanders. But Jeroen, who had never seen any of their paintings except in reproductions, would not listen to him. "The Italians are shallow," Jeroen said with the same finality with which he had just reduced this van der Weyden to its weaknesses and faults. "In their preoccupation with form and painterly surface they lack the depth of the emotions we have." Which was, Jacob felt, clearly untrue. The rich Brabantian merchants obviously thought much like his friend. They had never commissioned a Boticelli painting as the Florentine merchant Potinari had done by ordering an altar and a lovely *Nativity* from Hugo van der Goes. It was all a matter of the heart.

Heading southwest they left Burgundy. The neighboring Auvergne was a sparsely populated moon-scape dotted with bizarre cones of ancient volcanoes. Hundreds of sheep, few trees, impoverished villages. Because of the scarcity of tolerable accommodations they rode fast and long distances,. It had become July and the weather had stabilized. Jeroen had acquired a full gray beard shot with white, while Jacob's was completely white and pointed. It complemented his haggard, dark, hook-nosed face. At an inn in Riom they made the acquaintance of a gentleman who, besides French, spoke German and Italian. Jacob was delighted. Hyppolitus d'Andreae, a native of Geneva, had spent a month at the University of Paris and was on his way home. It soon transpired that he was a *Dottore juris*, a doctor of civil law. In his late thirties, he was slender, and vivacious. His long brown hair framed a sharp, well-shaven profile. A good-looking man in his prime.

Hyppolitus, hearing that they came from Brabant, filled them in on the political news. Philip the Fair had been elected King of Spain. He and his wife had moved to Burgos in April from where they were contesting the throne of both Spains, which Philip's father-in-law refused to vacate. The outcome was not yet known. "Just imagine," said Hyppolitus, "Maximilian's grand scheme of securing the crowns of half of Europe for the Hapsburg dynasty might be within reach!" How came that he, a scholar of law, was so well informed on these matters, asked Jacob. Lowering his eyes Hyppolitus confessed that he was the ambassador of the Swiss Confederacy to Maximilian's court. "Traveling alone?" asked Jacob. Hyppolitus looked quizzically at Jacob and explained, "This is a personal journey. In Paris I attended a series of lectures by Erasmus of Rotterdam, who is on his way from Oxford to Italy. I like traveling incognito. It gives me time to think." With a

smile he added, "Erasmus' sober view of the world is encouraging." Jacob sighed and in a softer voice said, "I have lived pent up in s'Hertogenbosch for so long that I have lost contact with academia. We have more acquaintances in common, than either of us could have guessed. I was Maximilian's tutor before he became Emperor designate."

Hyppolitus' face brightened, "I have heard of a Master Jacob van Almaengien, but Jacob van Sint-Jans?" Jacob smiled, "The Babylonian confusion of names in northern Europe! Both refer to the same person, who sits before you. Maximilian in 1496 graciously decided to have me baptized Philip van Sint-Jans. For various reasons I reverted back to Jacob, the only name that is truly mine." Hyppolitus spontaneously shook Jacob's hand. They clinked glasses and Jacob with a sarcastic smile toasted to "Maximilian the Last Knight." Hyppolitus asked who Jacob's friend was. "He is a painter," said Jacob with a grand gesture of his hand. "He is better known by his artist's name: Hieronymus Bosch." Surprised, Hyppolitus changed to German and turned to Jeroen, "Did you paint the large triptych crowded with exalted nude people, which I saw at Johann von Nassau's palatial house in Brussels?" Jeroen shyly acceded. Hyppolitus jumped up and bowed to Jeroen. "I am most honored to find myself in your company. We must drink to this meeting." He ordered a bottle of the best Burgundy in the house. "Now you will have to explain to me what this painting is about," said Hyppolitus, when the wine arrived.

In the course of this long evening Jeroen gave a description of the *Garden* without having recourse to the painting, and Jacob of his years at the feet of Ficino in Florence and his lectures in Den Bosch. Testing Hyppolitus' mindset he mentioned his troubles with the Archdiocese of Cologne and the high-handed Maximilian. Hyppolitus did not comment and described his own life. He had been born in Turin. His father had been the vice president of the civil court there. The family came from Bologna, where he had studied. In the end Hyppolitus mentioned that he was heading to a symposium of philosophers, poets, and statesmen at the nearby Chateau-de-Tournoël. He invited them. "You will enjoy it," he said. "The hostess and owner of the chateau is Françoise de Talaru, a twenty-five-year-old *égérie* of great men."

The chateau de Tournoël crowned a mountain spur above the river Ambène. Françoise received Hyppolitus with open arms and the two pilgrims with graceful charm. Magister Jacob's intimate knowledge of the Neoplatonists would greatly contribute to their discussions. She turned to Jeroen and said in slow French, "Hyppolitus has been very impressed by your work in Brussels. Your compatriot Gerard David visited me last month. He presented me with a small Madonna with Child by his hand. It hangs in the library." Jeroen thanked her in his broken French, he had heard of David but not seen any of his paintings.

After having been shown to their room, the two friends explored the library. Jeroen at once found *David's Madonna*. "You know," he said in a low voice. "Put this Madonna into the elegant, low-cut dress Françoise is wearing, and you'll recognize her as our hostess! Had I had such a beguiling patroness, maybe I would also have painted Madonnas." Jacob saw something else, he grinned saying, "This will be your first Italianate painting! By Florentine standards it is not a great piece of art, but the angels definitely speak Italian." Jeroen shot him an annoyed glance, "Yes, I see that," he said. "David is as Flemish as I am. The only difference is that he speaks French. He lives in Bruges and is a student of Memling's. The painting is as Flemish as it could be. Look at the city in the background. The angels are a concession to his darling."

On the shelves Jacob found the complete works of Ficino and next to them a copy of Christine de Pizan's revolutionary *Book of the City of Ladies*. He was suddenly struck by a vague recollection: "D'Andreae?" he mumbled. "Her name was Novella d'Andreae!" He

found Pizan's account of Novella and read it to Jeroen: "*Giovanni d'Andreae, a solemn canonicus in Bologna had a fair and good daughter, named Novella, who was educated in the law to such an advanced degree that, when he was occupied with some other matter, he let her present his lectures to his students. And to prevent her beauty from distracting her audience, she had a small curtain drawn in front of her.*" She must be an ancestor of Hyppolitus!" He shook his head, "The sorcery of beautiful women! We have entered a magic circle of learned people."

At dinner seven gentlemen and one woman, a poet from Southern France, congregated in the dining hall. Françoise, by far the youngest, dressed to her ankles in beautiful green velvet, her lovely breasts half exposed, sat at the head and introduced everyone with a short comment. A bevy of waiters served delicious Burgundian dishes. Jeroen was shocked by an *hors d'oeuvre* of snails in their shells. After he had watched the others eat these lowly creatures, he gobbled them up with gusto. The next dish, pork entrails forced into sausage skins and fried, he was more accustomed to. It was followed by a *gigot de mutton* which had been marinated in old Burgundy and cognac. The wines were dark and heavy. Slightly tipsy, he felt like a barbarian.

The conversation turned around politics and the latest events. One man, who had just arrived from Dijon, brought the news that Philip the Fair had finally been installed as King Philip I of Spain. Instantly, the group split into two parties, one including the hostess and Hyppolitus cheered for Philip and Juana, while most of the older gentlemen regretted the expansion of the power of the Hapsburgs. Françoise offered a spirited defense of Juana, whom she claimed was being suppressed and intimidated by her father and cuckolded by her husband. An older canon from Tourain remarked, "She is crazy and irresponsible, and besides her husband's elevation endangers the fragile peace accord between France, Spain, and Burgundy." Françoise countered that Juana was a woman of intelligence and great courage. She had, practically on her own, saved her entire entourage from perishing in a shipwreck on the shores of England. She raised her glass to Juana who had born two future emperors and three potential queens. Nobody could deny her claim. Whereupon laughter broke the stand-off.

The only Spaniard among them, a Jewish refugee from the Inquisition, changed the subject to the explorations of Christopher Columbus, who had just returned from his fourth voyage to the Western Indies. Spain would finally gain a foothold in India and reap immense fortunes. A lively debate ensued over whether the lands Columbus had discovered were indeed India or a new continent.

An astronomer from Paris pointed out that there was yet another Italian explorer in Spanish employ, Amerigo Vespucci who had sailed west and claimed to have discovered a *New World*. "Now a German cartographer had the ingenuity to call it *America*, after the popular Vespucci!" "Just imagine," added the French canon, "Their Majesties the Catholic Kings of Spain will not only become the richest monarchs in Europe, but will be able to present thousands of heathen souls to the Church!" Everyone but the Jewish Spaniard laughed at this quip. "However," said the astronomer, "more serious are rumors that one Copernicus is maintaining that the earth revolves around the sun. If *this*, supposedly scientific claim, holds true, it will upset our whole concept of the universe. Man will no longer be its center, there may even be people on other planets. I am afraid the All-Catholic Church cannot tolerate this theory, and will persecute the canonicus. We are standing at the abyss of an intellectual revolution." Hyppolitus added, "And of a religious one in addition. Strong anti-Papal sentiments are seething in Geneva, Germany, and Bohemia. Pope Alexander VI has driven the credibility of the Church to its nadir." Françoise threw him a glance of caution, she did not want to get embroiled in this hot



subject, and Hyppolitus fell into polite silence.

One day Hyppolitus gave a talk on Erasmus' cool and sober philosophy. On another Françoise passionately defended the writings of Christine de Pizan, her older sister-in-arms.

On Saturday Françoise introduced Margaret de Beaujeu, a sister of Anne de Beaujeu and a professor of music at Perpignan University. She would present her latest discovery, the once famous *Roman de Fauvel* complete, with singers and musicians..

A little nervous, Margaret gave an introduction.. *Le Roman de Fauvel* had originally been a long satirical poem on the corruption of government and church written in 1310, during the time of the Avignon popes, by a certain Gervais de Bus. The underground poem became so popular that a few years later Chaillou de Pesstain, a Parisian poet, added a second part. In 1316 Phillipe de Vitry, the founder of *Ars Nova*, the New Art of Music inserted a number of musical pieces into the French text: Gregorian chants, courtly songs, narrative lays, obscene street songs, and exquisite examples of new-style polyphony. She had discovered a beautifully illuminated manuscript of the *Roman* including de Vitry's notation, which formed the basis for her present revival. During the performance she would read an arrangement of verses from the poem, and her students would perform and sing de Vitry's music.

The performance became a most enjoyable evening. Margaret presented the first book, "*Fauvel's Career and Aggrandizement*" in the late afternoon, and after dinner she turned to the second, "*Fauvel's Marriage with Vain Glory*" followed by the final "*Tournament of the Virtues against the Vices*."

In the poem *Fauvel* is a dun-colored (fauve: fawn, malodorous) mule. His father was an ass, his mother a mare. However, "*Fauvel*" is also an acronym (in medieval French) for *Flaterie, Avarice, Uilanie, Variete* (fickleness), *Envie*, and *Laschete* (cowardice). These six ladies of vice adore and constantly groom him. They set up Fauvel as their King: *Fauvel no longer had to live in the stable, he sat enthroned in the grand hall and fed from a golden manger*. Fortuna makes him master of her house: *Beggars and nobles, prelates and popes flocked to honor him. There was nobody who didn't seek his favor*, read Margaret. *Crimia, malicia, culpa nescit terminum*, crime, malice, and guilt knew no end, sings the chorus. The six ladies put the idea into Fauvel's head to marry Fortuna: *she is a most proper wife for you, because she is vain and so are you. Marry her and make her your queen*. The first book ends with the chorus lamenting the corruption of the world. During dinner the canon asked Margaret, why she had not staged the piece as a pantomime. She pointed out that the characters are all allegories which are hard to personify, just as the text was a never ending play with words. In the end it was all unreal. In the second book this would reach its culmination, when in his motets de Vitry artfully confuses the listener with multiple, simultaneously sung texts and often starkly dissonant polyphonies.

The second part begins with a hymn on Paris: *N'il na cité si renommee par tout de cretienité*, ---there is no city of higher repute in all of Christendom. There, Fauvel wants to celebrate his wedding. Instead of Bishops and abbots he invites his female admirers: *Charnalité, Yvresse* (drunkenness), *Outrage* (grossness), *Ribaudé* (sloveness), *Lecherie, Ypocrisie, Heresie, Mençonge* (mendacity), etc. However, vain Fauvel makes a mistake. To show off his triumph, he also orders by decree the Virtues *Virginité, Sapience* (wisdom), *Providence, Bonté, Verité*, and more to appear. In a polyphonic motet on four texts the chorus sings the refrain: *Fauvel est mal asseigné*--Fauvel is badly advised. Trumpeters blow their horns. Extravagant feasting begins. The guests are guzzling themselves, followed by a wild *charivari* of dancing. Fortuna, who has two faces and

constantly plays with her wheels, descends to earth. Indignant at the anarchy, Fauvel has created, she refuses to marry the mule and sets him up with *Vain-Glory*, one of her handmaidens. Fauvel spends several nights with her making "*Nouveaus Favaus*." Meanwhile the heavily armed Vices attack the Virtues. The chorus calls the *Virgo Virginens* and Christ for help. In a heated battle the Vices are defeated, and Fauvel is imprisoned. France is free again. Generous applause rewarded Margaret and her students, and nobody blinked an eye, when Françoise disappeared with Hyppolitus to her chambers.

Kissed good-bye by their hostess one early morning Jeroen and Jacob set out on well-fed horses for the Pyrenees.

Jeroen looked at Jacob and laughed, "After this civilized indulgence will we ever recover our resolve to continue this pilgrimage?" "What pilgrimage?" mocked Jacob. Jeroen fell silent. He enjoyed this new view of the world, but where were the spiritual experiences, he had expected? And Jacob? He had noticed that Jacob had lost his usual verve among these educated people. Jacob would not admit to it, but he felt despondent, left behind by the rapid changes in thought and intellectual fashion. Everyone had read Plato, and Ficino had become a philosophical relic, replaced by Pico della Mirandola and now Erasmus. Jacob had not dared to offer giving a lecture on one of his favorite Platonic dialogues. To Jeroen this omission spoke of Jacob's inner condition.

As they rode up the steep road towards the Pyrenean pass, the beauty of the countryside and the physical exercise blew away Jeroen's gloomy thoughts. Breathing heavily, they dismounted and pulled their horses uphill. Jeroen had never seen snow-covered mountains. He laughed delighted. "Our mountains are mere molehills compared to these, yet every Flemish painter puts wild, rocky snow peaks in the background of his panels, pure fantasy." By the end of the second day Jacob was exhausted. They stopped for the night at a primitive hospice in Roncesvalles. Spain at last.

They rested again for a couple of days near Pamplona. Despite being visibly tired, Jacob pressed on. He wanted to get to Burgos to see and hear for himself, what had become of Juana after Philip's death. It turned October, the countryside was bare and monotonous. The harvest had long been brought in. They had now been on their way for over half a year. Jeroen reminded himself, that Jacob was sixty-six, ten years older than he. It took them a week to ride the short distance.

They put up at a modest inn in Burgos. The locals had little more information to offer than what they already knew. Juana had gone completely crazy. She had taken Philip's coffin with her and for weeks had every night been traveling aimlessly from one village to another. During the day she would set up the casket at the village church and take refuge at a nearby monastery. Gruesome rumors were passing around that she had had the casket opened at night and had thrown herself on the decaying corpse, kissing and hugging her lost love. Afraid of being poisoned, she would not allow anybody to get close to her..

Jacob grew more morose every day. "I have never told you," he said to Jeroen, "how I spent the months after Sibylle's death. It was a terrible time. That was when I took refuge in your little red pills." Jeroen commented that Juana was not Sibylle. He had never particularly liked her and had thought little of Philip. Why did these two disturb him so much? "I don't know," said Jacob. "Maybe I have become older and more sentimental. I have terrible dreams about her. She loved this man as much as I loved Sibylle. She is not crazy, only in terrible distress."

They left Burgos before daybreak. Near Hornillos they noticed smoke rising from a fire in the fields. As they drew nearer they came upon a group of peasants gawking at a funeral

procession. The tired carriers had set the elaborate coffin on the ground. A young acolyte was mechanically reciting from a prayer book. Next to the coffin the black-veiled widow stood moaning. Suddenly Jacob fell on his knees and with a crazed voice began praying in Hebrew. The acolyte stopped his litany. Jacob continued in French, "God have mercy upon me. I never buried you, my beloved, my savior. I repent all the wrongs I have done you. God's wrath will follow me to my grave." In a flash Jeroen saw Jacob kneeling illuminated by the flames of the burning house of Sibylle's father. He bent over his friend and asked in Flemish. "Who is she?" The woman turned around, removed her veil, and in a hysterically exalted voice exclaimed, "I am Juana the Queen of Castile." Tears streaming down her face she pointed at the coffin and shouted in Flemish, "And this is your Duke whom you called the Fair. My beloved husband poisoned by my own father, the Aragonese animal. Yes, God's wrath be upon him!" Jeroen now saw that she was hugely pregnant. He tried to calm Jacob, who was trembling all over. Jacob stared at him from hollow eyes full of dread, "The Basilisk! It is gazing at me. Jeroen, protect me from its deadly glance." Jacob collapsed, and Jeroen put his coat over his head.

Juana ordered the carriers to get on their way. They shouldered the casket and vanished towards Hornillos in the gray, uncertain light. There, refusing any help, Juana would give birth all by herself to Catalina, her last child. For fear of her father's henchmen, she chased away all servants and lived on bread and water. After four months, clutching her child, her only consolation, she set out once more to wandering through the villages around Burgos with Philip's casket. The world condemned her as demented, yet she would live fifty more years locked up by her father in Tordesillas.

Jacob was in no condition to continue their journey. Jeroen loaded him on his horse and took him back to Burgos. For several days Jacob lay motionless on his bed. At night he would scream in his sleep, and when Jeroen woke him, would recite passages from the Song of Mose. Jeroen thought that this was the end, and suggested to get a priest to read the last rites over his friend. This got Jacob so angry that he jumped out of bed and at considerable length heaped abuse on the Christian church. After this outbreak he improved and in another week was well enough to continue their journey. Avoiding Hornillos, they rode along a different route.

On the long stretch to Leon through ever more desolate country, Jacob developed a new fixation, he wanted to reach the sea. Jeroen thought of his vision in the cathedral of Vezelay and tried to convince him to return home, after Compostela. Jacob would not hear of it. "I no longer care about Compostela, but before I die, I must unite with the ocean which holds the soul of my beloved." Jeroen sighed, and Jacob said, "Don't you remember the journey of the birds? They drowned themselves in the ocean of love and compassion."

Surprisingly Jacob seemed to gather strength from this abstraction. His sarcasm disappeared. Jeroen suggested to abandon Compostela entirely and turn southwest to Portugal. From Oporto, he was sure, they could find a boat passage back to Amsterdam. Jacob thanked him for this suggestion. He became happier than Jeroen could remember and endured the most strenuous rides.

It took them three weeks. When they entered Oporto, they found the city teeming with refugees. Penniless Spanish Jews who had been robbed of all their possessions and threatened with death had taken advantage of the confusion following Ferdinand's abdication to escape. Some had been forcefully baptized, others were defiantly holding on to their faith. A pitiful lot. There were no cheap accommodations left in town. Jeroen, full of ominous apprehension took Jacob to an inn in a village by the sea. Jacob seemed light-hearted. Watched by a worried Jeroen, he submerged himself completely in the cold

ocean. "Oh no," Jacob said when he came out shivering. "Don't worry, thou shalt not kill and especially not yourself. I will not drown myself."

They sold the horses for a good price, and Jeroen went to town to search for a passage to the Low Countries. It became a long and frustrating search. There were scores of people who would have paid any amount of money for a place on-board a ship. He returned empty handed. He found Jacob on his bed surrounded by a group of villagers. The innkeeper told him that Jacob had collapsed unconscious. He had summoned a competent Jewish doctor, who had diagnosed a stroke. Jeroen threw the curious out and talked to the doctor. Jacob had come-to fairly quickly, but would be paralyzed on one leg for a while. His mind seemed unaffected. Prescribing rest and some medication the doctor promised to be back in a day.

Jacob smiled wanly at Jeroen, apologizing for the trouble he was causing. As gently as he could, Jeroen told him of his poor success. When Jacob would be feeling better, he would go out again. Jacob did not have to ride or walk home. He would find a passage for the two of them.

During this dark night, the sea pounding below the inn from a storm that had come up, Jacob told Jeroen of how he had discovered Sibylle, when he returned from Ghent after the storm-flood in September of 1477. He had searched for hours in the polder below the village, they had lived in. There were piles of debris and many dead bodies strewn over the ground. He had finally found her near a last puddle still tied to the bundle with their dead child. She had lain there for two days and was blue and bloated. A horrifying sight. Because they were Jews, he had not been able to find a cemetery where to bury her as Jewish custom demanded. Together with many unidentified bodies the villagers had put her in a mass grave. "My greatest sin of omission, which cannot ever be atoned."

The doctor returned and told Jeroen to take Jacob on daily short walks to exercise his leg. Jeroen mentioned his futile search for a passage to Amsterdam. The doctor nodded, he had an acquaintance, who was in the shipping business, he would see what he could do.

Every morning Jacob, supported by Jeroen, took walks along a path overlooking the sea. Jacob quietly concentrated on his recovery and very slowly regained enough control over his leg that he could gingerly walk along the walls at the inn. Two weeks later the doctor returned with two passages to Amsterdam. The price was high. Jeroen set aside the money from the horses to pay for food and other expenses on the three-week journey and negotiated a credit-advance with a Portuguese merchant, who had a *Kontor* in Amsterdam.

The catwalk to the ship was narrow, there was the danger that Jacob would fall with his weak leg. Jeroen carried him on board. "Like Christopher in your painting," joked Jacob, accepting the mortification. The boat was overloaded. They were given two bunks in a crowded dormitory. Every place, even on the bare deck, was taken by hapless Jewish refugees. Eventually Jacob made the acquaintance of a learned doctor who spoke Latin and French. The others, despite their shared fate, left him indifferent. He had nothing in common with this Sephardic lot, who spoke a Babel of languages.

They sailed from Oporto on an auspiciously sunny day, but it was late October, and they were sure to encounter bad weather on their way. Jeroen spent the days on deck watching this ship of fools. Spontaneous quarrels and fighting over territory would break out; the wrangling at the daily mass feeding; two were standing in a dark corner below desperately making love; the fear of the sea, and the sick vomiting overboard or wherever they were. The stench soon became unbearable. At the height of Bordeaux the feared storm caught up with them. Everybody crammed into the lower quarters.



Breakers washed over the deck. Every able hand worked at the bilge pumps The ship heaved and groaned frightfully. Jacob, unaccustomed to sea voyages, got sick like all the others. Jeroen tried to spread calm and courage, only one more week and they would be safe.

The storm over, Jacob, at night in his sleep, had a second stroke. Jeroen noticed it only next morning, when Jacob did not rise. All Jeroen's efforts were in vain. The Jewish doctor, whom Jacob had befriended, examined him. He pronounced him dead. Jeroen told the doctor how Jacob had just described to him the rigorous laws by which a dead Jew had to be buried properly. The doctor smiled sadly, these were the laws of a people who for thousands of years had been land-bound. Mose, who could part the Red Sea, was long gone. The rules of the sea demanded that the corpse be given over to the sea. His friend could not be embalmed, nor could he be hidden for another week. The captain demanded an immediate sea burial. The ship was crowded, the danger of an epidemic too large.

Bundled tightly and weighted with a stone, Jacob's body was lowered overboard within sight of the Isles d'Ouessant in front of the coast of Brest. The captain read the last rites and made three crosses over Jacob van Sint-Jans.

## 9.

In late November Jeroen returned to Den Bosch and found his life in shambles. The family shop had gone bankrupt. After their departure rumors had begun to circulate in Brabant that Jacob had abandoned his Christian faith. Both Peter van Os and Cuperinus, the chroniclers of Den Bosch, briefly report his apostasy as simple fact: *die Jode en bleeft niet stantaftig en viel weder van syn Kerstenheyt en wert een Jode.* "---The Jew didn't remain steadfast and deserted Christianity again and became a Jew." Out of fear, several customers had canceled their orders with the shop. Later, an anonymous letter arrived threatening the van Akens with dire consequences, if they produced any more paintings for Jacob's heretic circle. Jeroen, who might have been able to divert the disaster was absent. To keep the family business afloat his brothers had seen themselves forced to sell most of their stock of oak planks. Cornelis van Bergen had quietly sold the remaining copies of Jeroen's pictures on the gray market in Amsterdam. He had shared the proceeds with the Akens, but the amount had been insufficient to pay-off their creditors. Jeroen's older brother shrugged, what could he have done? Business had quickly come to a standstill. He had to dismiss the helping hands. To make things worse, Aleit, not to be drawn into the bankruptcy of the shop, had seen herself forced to separate her inherited assets from Jeroen's. She took Jeroen back into her house and paid his debts for their passage to the Amsterdam merchant, but in eighteen months of absence Jeroen had become a penniless pauper. His brothers had sold the original of the *Haywain*. The shop copy needed to be sold too.

Jacob was dead. His presence no longer irritated the ecclesiastical authorities. Duke Philip had also died. In 1508, Maximilian I, in yet another show of power in s'Hertogenbosch, installed Philip's eight-year-old son Charles as Duke of Brabant keeping the regency of the Low Countries to himself. Slowly the defamations and attacks on of the van Akens stopped. However, Jeroen, depressed by the loss of his closest friend and the collapse of his business ceased to paint.

From the years between the *Haywain* (1504) and Bosch's death in 1516 parts of only one triptych have survived, painted *entirely* in a depressing, gray-brown *grisaille*. It is today generally agreed that the two panels were the wings of the Bosch triptych Carel van Mander described in 1604 in his *Het Schilder Boek* under the name *Sicut erat in Diebus Noë*. Klein dates the panels to 1514/15, a year before Bosch's death.

The subject matter and the, at first, mysterious title have a simple explanation. Jeroen painted the triptych as an epitaph to his friend's life.

Fig.53



*Sicut Erat in Diebus Noë, Sibylle's Rescue, Jacob's Conversion, 1415, Rotterdam*

The two panels carry four tondos in which Jeroen describes the happenings in Jacob's life in the Winter of 1472-73. On the top left a clearly shown Jacob is kneeling in front of Noah's burning house from which a formally dressed Sibylle is fleeing. In a courtyard one of the arsonists beats up an inhabitant of the house. Two of Noah's pigs wallow in the mud. In the tondo below a member of the tribe of the "Nephilim" has thrown Jacob off his horse, and in the top tondo of the right panel two beat him up. The fourth tondo shows a naked Jacob kneeling before an apparition of Christ. In the background an angel brings him new clothes: *Sicut erat in Diebus Noë*, as it happened in the days of Noah!

Fig.54



Sicut Erat in Diebus Noë, The Nephilim, Noah's Ark, 1415, Rotterdam

On the other two panels Jeroen depicts Noah's Ark stranded after the flood on a low hill of a devastated earth, and an apocalyptic landscape populated by miscreant chimeras flying in a sky illuminated by a burning city, or creeping on land among deformed people. Considered formerly to show hell, Fraenger identified the creatures on this panel as *Nephilim*, (Genesis 6, 1-8), the offspring of the fallen angels who coupled with Adam's daughters, including Adam's first wife Lilith, and who were destroyed in the Biblical flood. This finally offers a name and a scriptural pedigree to Bosch's monsters.



Fig.55



Sicut Erat in Diebus Noë, Sibylle and her Child, 1415, Rotterdam

On close inspection of the right panel showing the Ark, one discovers among debris and dozens of dead animals and people, near a last puddle in the very foreground, the body of a drowned woman to whom her dead child is tied, like Jacob had described dead Sibylle to Jeroen. A devastated Jacob is seen praying on his knees to the left. This reading may appear disingenuous, and in fact, the condition of the panel would make the identification of Jacob questionable, if the other two panels did not explicitly support it.

The lost middle panel may have shown the ship Jacob and Jeroen sailed on in the harbor of Oporto: A crowd of Israelites trying to get on board by whatever means possible. They are attacked from behind by a mob people, who are killing and strangling the refugees. The houses of Oporto and the Cathedral of Vezelay on a hill are on fire. The Ocean is rising. The world is coming to an end. An angel leads Jeroen carrying Jacob on his back across a gang plank. On deck of the overloaded ship people are fighting for space.

Hieronymus Bosch died a pauper on the 6th of August, 1516 at the advanced age of 66. Few painters of his time were allotted such a long life, few have had such a strong influence on 15th and 16th century painting in the Low Countries. As the many posthumous copies show, his fame, or was it his notoriety, spread like wildfire all over Protestant Northern Europe. His wife, Aleit van de Mervenne survived him by six years. The archives of s'Hertogenbosch report that Herbert and Bosch's two brothers collected his few belongings from her house. As was the custom with indigent members, the Confraternity of Our Lady paid for his funeral. His co-brethren sang a requiem mass in Sint Jans Cathedral for him. No tomb stone indicates his grave.

## 10. Notes to the unwary Reader

This piece is a historical "*Novel*", albeit on a contentious subject. Its historical events ---Maximilian I's repeated visits to s'Hertogenbosch, Charles the Bold and Marie of Burgundy, the story around Philip and Juana, the manipulations of the Inquisition by Popes Innocent VIII and Alexander VII, and the baptism of Jacob van Almaengien---are facts taken from various historical sources and the Chronicles of s'Hertogenbosch by Cuperinus and van Os.

The connecting story of Jacob van Almaengien, aka Philip van Sint Jans, and Jeroen van Aken, *dit* Hieronymus Bosch, are my arguable invention. Preciously little biographical information on Bosch exists in various city documents and the archives of the Brotherhood of Our Lady of Den Bosch, and only one of his paintings, *St. John on Patmos*, can be dated from these records.

I have tried to read Jeroen's and Jacob's story from Bosch's paintings. This was made possible by the unpublished work of Prof. Paul Klein, a dendrochronology expert at Hamburg University. Beginning in the 1980s Klein dated the wooden planks of, among thousands of Flemish paintings, 54 paintings by or attributed to Bosch. Only the dates of the *Table of the Seven Deadly Sins* and the *Bronchorst Epiphany* could, for technical reasons, not be determined.

And here the controversies begin. To this day the art historians refuse to accept Klein's dates. Klein was prevented from publishing his results. The apparent reasons are disturbing, it seems too many reputations were involved. Meanwhile it has been accepted that only 23 of Bosch's panels were painted during Bosch's lifetime, the remainder are copies by Bosch's shop or by "followers" after his death.

This is no place to discuss this controversy. I resolved to make a novelistic experiment by taking Klein's dates literally, adding uniformly 9 years for drying of the planks, and see how they fit into the historical and other known biographical facts of Bosch's life. I believe that this experiment successfully supports Klein's dates and produces a wealth of insights that were hitherto invisible.

Quite apart from the dating issue, any close examination of Bosch's paintings poses interpretative questions and may yield new understandings. My first important realization was that Bosch could, at the age of 18, not have painted the great *Garden Triptych*---according to Klein his first triptych (1468-70)---nor his last, the *Temptation of St. Anthony* in Lisbon (1502), without advice from a Hebrew-speaking scholar. This insight had first occurred to Wilhelm Fraenger in the 1950s, who discovered Jacob van Almaengien in Cuperinus' Chronicle. Unfortunately Fraenger made the mistake of promoting van Almaengien into a *Hochmeister* of an Adamite sect, which cost him the attention of the art historians---unjustly so, because Fraenger as an anthropologist contributed many interpretative discoveries that had escaped the professionals. In my reading of several paintings, foremost in the *Temptation of St. Anthony Triptych*, I have made liberal use of Fraenger's erudite interpretations.

With no better person in sight I revived Jacob van Almaengien as the learned Jewish intellectual advisor and life-long friend of Bosch. In many ways this novel is the story of their friendship.

As a physicist, who has no art-historical ego to defend, I have tried to de-mystify Hieronymus Bosch wherever possible. Some readers will complain that I have reduced him to a mere painter of Jacob's purported neoplatonic ideas. They should read the part surrounding the *Triptych of the Temptation of St. Anthony*. Bosch was an artistic genius *sine qua non*, but he was not a scholar with Jacob's education.