

The Allegory of the Intellect in the Garden of Earthly Delights



There are, in a rough count, more than 100 fruits present in the [central panel of the Garden of Earthly Delights](#) (assuming one includes the apples in the center right hand section depicting a reprise of the events that take place in paradise during the fall of man.) Almost without exception, the fruits are either pink, red, or blue; representing either sacred or profane temptation of one kind or another. Blue fruits, generally speaking, represent earthly temptations in their earthly guises. Red fruits represent heavenly temptations in their earthly guises; and for various esoteric reasons we cannot begin to explore in this essay, heavenly temptations, translated into earthly material, become covertly sexual ones.

All temptation is, of course, ultimately heavenly in its origins, and we see this in the vignette in the upper left-hand corner of the painting, where the tempting angel – primary signifier of temptation in all its guises throughout the central panel – dangles a cherry. (see below.)

There is, however, one form of temptation of quite unique and unusual character, and this is the yellow fruit being held by the group in the lower left-hand corner of the panel.

Why, one might ask, is this alone, among all the fruits, a *yellow* fruit—and why is it decorated with blue flowers? We must surmise it's unique in its significance.

Earth tones and ocher tones are used, throughout the painting, to signify man's mind. So this particular fruit represents *man's mind* and the earthly flowers (trefoil blue blossoms) that it produces. It is, in other words, the *fruit of the intellect*: and it gives birth to *thoughts*.

In Genesis, birds (as Swedenborg points out in *Secrets of Heaven*) represent both the contents of the intellect and rational thinking. In this particular vignette, the central figure holds a blue bird

above his hand — one of clearly positive spiritual aspects. It represents the rational aspects of man's thinking. This idealized spiritual philosopher is directly paired with what may be the devil of his own temptation — designated by the cherry resting on his head, and the apple which he holds behind his back.

But in order to understand some of the deeper allegory present in this piece, we need first to turn to the bird:



The bird is blue, symbolizing earthly rational thought. Yet in the [left-hand panel](#) of the painting, it perches upon a transparent crystal— related to all the transparent crystals and cylinders in the center panel, which are entirely absent from the right hand panel of hell.

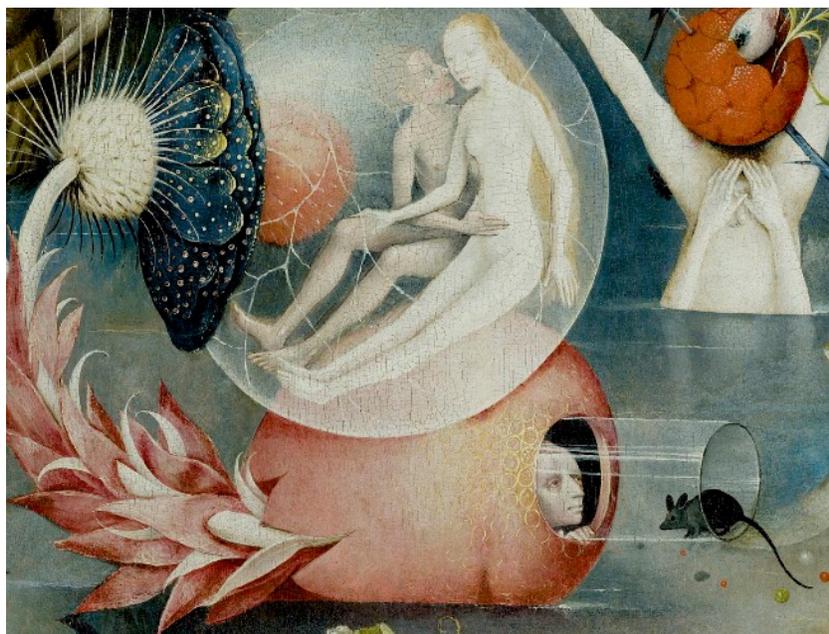


The transparency implies an ability to *see*; to reveal what is otherwise hidden, to inspect, to attempt to understand. And indeed, the transparent cylinders play that role in a number of places in the central panel. The theme begins, however, with the transparent globes of the divine fountain in the right hand panel, which first appear *above* its contact with Earth. These globes are



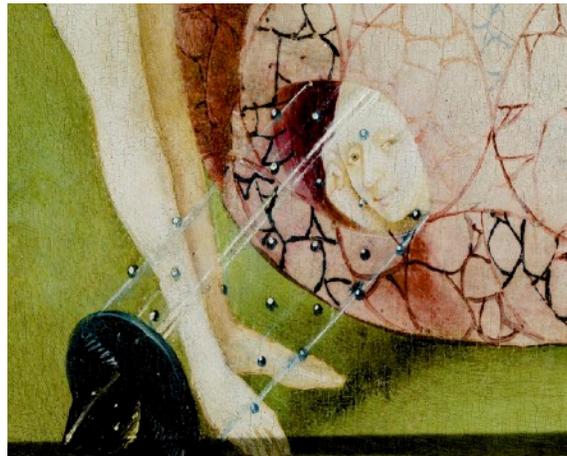
empty, symbolizing purity and an ability to see that is, as yet, uncontaminated. Unoccupied, in some senses they represent divine insight *before its contact with the material world*. The bird, perched on the transparent cylinder — in this manifestation, a transparent gem like the tourmalines to the left — represents pure rational thought of a spiritual (not heavenly) nature. We know it is spiritual (earthly) because the bird is not pink; and because the Divine energy has already entered the earthly plane.

In other locations, the transparency is employed as the only form of technology of any kind seen in the central panel. This relates the transparent objects, on the whole, directly to man's mind and its activities — especially when it appears in the form of cylinders and domes. The instance where it is spherical, encompassing the tender scene of love in the central panel, is clearly a reference to divine insight:



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The allegories here could not be more appropriate. Employed in its divine (spherical, all-encompassing) manifestation, the ability to gain insight should be used above all to understand Divine Love in both its earthly and heavenly aspects. That insight is born of a heavenly inspiration; hence the way the fruit emerges from a pink inflorescence below it. (Note, in passing, how what will eventually become the blue corruption of the earthly world is already showing up as a faint yellow scale on the fruit.) Yet man's mind is internally tempted by rational thinking and his belief in his own insight (see Swedenborg's *Heaven and Hell*, chapters on Genesis) and he uses it instead to inspect the lower things of the natural world (the rat.) The activities of man's mind which emerge from this heavenly impulse see the world through a veil of lies, symbolized by the transparent cylinder studded with pearls.



On the right side of the painting, the bluebird itself is imprisoned in a glass jar studded with pearls; man's rational thought imprisons itself in lies. Lest we don't understand the message,



Bosch himself, in his arch self-portrait in the lower right-hand corner, points to fallen man (holding the apple of temptation) trapped in a cylinder, and painted in grisaille— which is the color he uses for shades, those half-alive souls whose spiritual fate remains in question.

Here, as well, on the right side of the central panel, we meet more or less the same group we met



on the left-hand side. There isn't any doubt that the groups are related; and they are related by passage of time, read from left to right, because the exact same man appears in both the left and right groups, and in the center group, of which more shortly.



There's little doubt, then, that we can read the allegory of the intellect from left to right— both across the bottom of the painting and in its intrusions into other areas of the visual dialogue — and understand a storyline about its consequences.

The overall storyline shares an identity with Swedenborg's explanation of the fall from Grace in the Garden of Eden, where man — originally of a whole with the divine purpose and heavenly intention— had a wish for independent Being, which was granted by God. This immediately degenerated into more and more egoistic manifestations on the part of man, especially in his insistence on believing in his own ideas, his own thoughts, and his own impulses. That is to say, the fall from the Garden of Eden represents a moment in the development of humanity where mankind saw itself as distinct and apart from God.

According to Swedenborg's interpretation of Genesis, God was at first favorably disposed towards this; but later, man distanced himself more and more from divine principles. This was (and is) done principally by a *belief in rational thought and its products*; that is to say, by firm and unyielding belief in the material world. We can say, roughly speaking, that the central panel of the Garden of Earthly Delights represents the *inner* part of man's soul that acquires this belief in rational thinking. It has descended further than the divine influence ever intended it to.

As with the upper left-hand corner motif, which represents a struggle between divine influence and temptation— and in fact serves as a vignette that introduces this as the subject of the whole



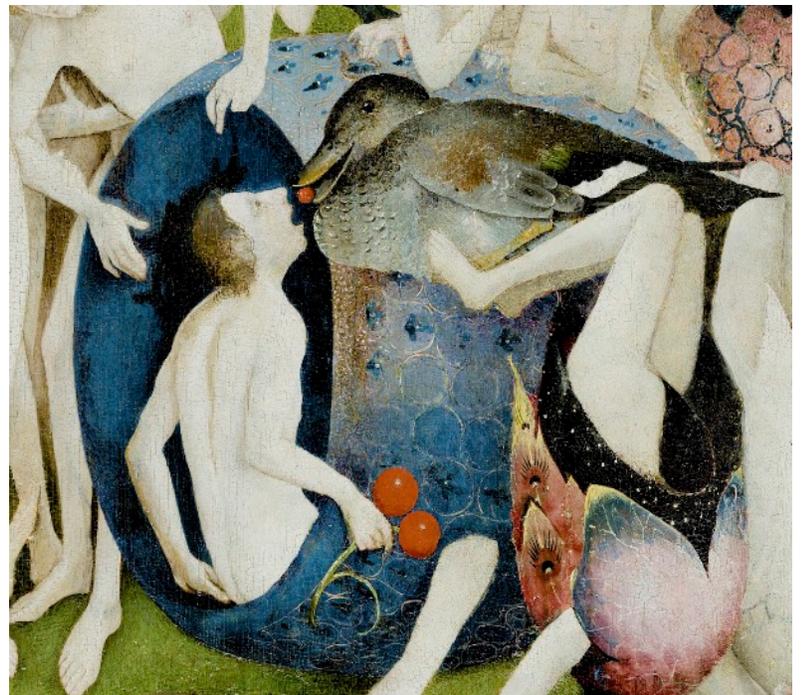
panel — so, as well, does the vignette at the bottom of the central panel in the left-hand corner serve as an introduction to the theme that runs across the bottom, or earthly, realm.

By the time we reach the right hand side of the center panel, reading from left to right, mankind has encountered the virtues and advantages of his ability to use the rational mind, facts, and analysis of the material world: overall, there is an allegory here of tasting all the things in heaven



and earth. In other words, mankind uses his rational mind to taste both spiritual and heavenly temptations (the pink, red, and blue fruits.)

In the process of doing this, he builds a temple of the rational mind: and we know this particular structure is directly related to the fruit of the rational mind because the blue floral decorations on its canopy (see next page) are *identical* to the decorations found on the fruit held by the philosopher in the left-hand corner. Those same blue flowers appear, as well, on the blue “egg” or fruit in the center bottom of the central panel; so all these objects together symbolize





superficial or literal facts: man's ideas about the natural — as opposed to the spiritual — world.

The thorny temple relates to the passage from Hosea 10:8, *the thorn and thistle shall grow on their altars*. This complex structure, representing man's rational corruption of the divine, deserves an entire treatment of its own which I will not get into here.

Returning to the subject of the narrative from the left to the right hand side, we can clinch the matter of the passage through time from left to right in the bottom central panel by the fact that our friend the black man appears not just in the left and right-hand



groups, but also in the center allegory of tasting all the things of heaven and earth.

What remains as a question here is the resolution, or consequence, of the ingestion of all of these facts and rational ideas. We have already touched on the fact that the bird is, by the time we reach the right hand side, caged in a glass jar studded with pearls: the rational mind, which ought to have spiritual qualities, is imprisoned, like the fallen man below it,

who Bosch himself (as is conjectured) is pointing to. Coming back to that, we might mention that all of the characters engaged in this allegory appear to be self-portraits of one kind or another, as the below comparison indicates.

Bosch himself, then, appears to crop up over and over again throughout the allegory in the foreground of the central panel, finally playing his trump card as the main figure in the vision of hell. We can interpret this as the author of the painting indicating that his insights — by turns,



unearthly, divine, extraordinary, and terrifying — are all personally gleaned from his examination of his inner self, and not just sterile repetitions of doctrine learned from books.



In the transition from the left-hand side of the panel, where the intellect (the yellow fruit) and its spiritual potential (the bluebird) is unveiled, to the right, where the bird itself becomes the object of temptation, and is ultimately caged, we encounter many wry and (once they are understood) obvious and amusing commentaries on our inner nature. The figures turn out not to be obscure and impossible to understand, but touchingly human illustrations of the way our mind works and how eagerly we betray ourselves and our divine origins. The matter of interpretation, at this point, becomes easier, since so many of the images now fit into understandable contexts.



Let's take, for example, the man peering out of the pink divine fruit next to the left hand group. He is using the transparent tube, studded with pearls, to examine the lowest part of a human being: the feet. Even though he finds himself within (and thus under) divine influences, already his mind lead him astray, and causes him not to look upward towards heavenly influences, but instead downward towards earthly ones. Even worse, the divine influence he ought to be contemplating is love itself. This has already come under the shadow of the rational mind. The man who carries the thorny strawberry on his back has already had the blossom of failed understanding passed on to him, and grasps a thorny branch which has grown out of the now rotting fruit of what should have been love.

The strawberry exhibits an especially ingenious character. An unabashed fruit of temptation, the man carries it on his back like a pilgrim, despite its thorny nature: and it has not only sprouted wings of white which make



it appear to be pure and lofty, the green sepals imply a certain vitality. At the same time, it has grown a thorny tale, a lash that terminates in a weapon: a spiked mace.

The thorny fruit grasped by strawberry man has its counterpart pointing directly at the consequence of misunderstanding love as a divine influence: it becomes, with ease, an earthly temptation, as indicated by the thorn and black fruit that point towards the couple eagerly sharing a cherry. Earthly temptation, it turns out, is a *good* thing; at least in our eyes.



Behind them, a man eagerly imbibes the products of rational thought; they become a drunken man's nectar. The consequence of this inebriation with man and self is the fecundity of rational human thought, symbolized by the introduction of a woman wearing a pair of cherries that serve, without any doubt about it, as testicles. The highest product of man's mind, now, is temptation: and it's very sexy.



A group of philosophers gather behind her to the right, now, in earnest conference; one of them listens carefully to the black man, representing the darker side of man's impulses, or, the devil in us. (This is not, mind you, an exclusively negative role, because the light at the dark sides of human nature are both necessary, as is illustrated by the presence of black maidens in the central pool the upper middle portion of the central panel.)



The product of this wholesale acceptance of belief in rational thought and the natural world, and the essence of it as belonging to man — not God — becomes evident in the man who now *dwells inside an earthly fruit*. He is, comically, being fed more temptations by a duck — the exact same creature who marks, in the left-hand panel, the transition from divine waters, where unicorns drink, to the place of contact

between the divine in the earthly realm—a marshy, lower place.



In the left hand panel, the ducks serve as the decisive symbol for the initial transition from the higher to the lower. Bosch's symbolism here in the central panel is now unmistakable; man is hereby fed by the lower, earthly influences of his rational mind, and he clutches the testicular symbols of this degeneration in his right hand.



The consequences of this embrace of the worldly are inevitable and immediate. First of all, we fall in love with the *multiplicity* of the earthly world, symbolized by the blackberry, where many individual drupels [fruitlets] form the atarvio, or compound fruit. Bosch has cleverly and deftly crafted this image by placing it in the hands of an individual who holds it directly above a divine pink fruit—already contaminated by the corruption of the ordinary world. We elevate the products of the rational mind, facts about the earthly nature of things, above the spiritual; everything, in other words, is seen upside down. The figures in the foreground emphasize this; and they of course refer to the many other upside-down figures in the central panel, which appear in approximately seven other places. Collectively, they refer to an inversion of understanding. This particular set of inversions suggests two obvious interpretations: the one on the left is an inversion of the understanding of what is beautiful (rainbow-colored, like a peacock); the one on the right is an inversion of the understanding



of what is pure (white.) The flowers of mistaken understandings dangle down from the feed across the genitals and onto the belly of the right-hand character.

It's worth while, for a moment, to follow these flowers of mistaken understanding, which emerge from the genitals of the Negroid figure on the left-hand side.



They then become an offering in the hands of a tempter in the next group of figures to the right.



In the very center of the panel, they morph into a full-blown dangling garland in the central group.



They make their final appearance on the head of the figure with his back to us in the final right hand grouping.



Mankind's emphasis on rational — as opposed to spiritual and heavenly — thinking results in an inability to see or understand the spiritual. Here, two figures have broken over a pink fruit representing divine inspiration and wisdom. What spills out of it are blue "facts": objects of the rational mind which can only be understood by the rational mind. In attempting to understand the heavenly by using the earthly mind, they end up with nothing more than earthly things. This image, in a sense, is the thesis of the entire foreground of the central panel; and it remains only for the final group to sum up the condition of man's existence after this process is complete.



We end, then with the right hand group, who forms a counterpoint in both time and spiritual evolution to the left-hand group. We've lost one nonessential character, the cyclopean figure who peers from us on the left-hand side; but otherwise, the guest list is consistent, with the substitution of a woman for one of the men. There is a reason for this, of course; the rational mind, as received from God, cannot procreate and has no need to, since it has its own fecundity and represents a perfect intelligence by itself. By the time, however, that earthly (egoistic) thought has infected man and transformed his belief from a spiritual and heavenly one to a natural one, it has acquired a self-induced fecundity, that is, the process of literal thinking breeds. Both the woman and her companion (they each carry a fruit dangling on a vine) wear the flower of mistaken understandings as crowns or diadems.

The figure with his back to us holds an eggplant, cited by Avicenna (Abu Ibn Sina) as the cause of many harmful health problems. Oranges are, of course, symbols of love and marriage; and by the time we process this, one is led to suspect that we are witnessing a marriage in which man's stubborn belief in rational thought ties him forever into unhealthy ideas about the world

— a thesis closely mirrored by Swedenborg’s later interpretation of Genesis.

Our black man, who began as a passive figure on the left side of the central panel, morphs from an advisor in the center group into a signifier on the right; and so he may simply represent our human, as opposed to divine, nature. It’s important to remember that this figure does not by any means play an emphatically negative role. St. Maurice, a celebrated black Christian saint, is commonly represented as one of the three Kings in nativities by Hieronymus Bosch. We can presume a connection of some kind here. It may even be that the black man is meant to represent a certain kind of wisdom which is being ignored by the white man. If that interpretation is correct, it would explain why he holds both pink and blue fruits on his arms, which could represent real (as opposed to invented) divine and earthly facts.

Readers familiar with Gurdjieff’s story of the organ Kundabuffer and its malevolent consequences will be able to see parallels between the decay of man’s intelligence and spiritual imagination as depicted in this painting, and as encountered in his masterpiece, *Beelzebub’s Tales to His Grandson*. Both the painting and the book are allegorical representations of the decay and destruction of man’s moral, spiritual, and heavenly reasoning. They are both critiques, moreover, that utterly defy that very same rational analysis which has caused breakdown of our spiritual faculties; and this is what makes them so valuable. Each one has a chance, one way or another, of penetrating the concrete we have poured between our understanding and objective spiritual truths.

It’s impossible to write anything about a Bosch painting without being drawn into hundreds of accessory subjects by the symbolism; the matter of transparency, for example, is a whole subject unto itself, as are the upside-down figures. Generally speaking, themes like this tend to be related throughout the entire painting; and deserve treatments of their own. This particular treatise, for example, was really intended to write only about the yellow fruit the man in the lower left-hand corner is holding; and you can see where it has led us. Everything, in the end, is connected in a Bosch painting, and once you pull one thread, entire sections of weave begin to unravel in front of you.

As anyone who has done something like this knows, it’s easy to pull on the thread and get something to fall apart; but far more difficult to put it back together.

Further reading:

Swedenborg’s [Heaven and Hell can be downloaded for free](#) in e-format by clicking the link. His writings on the esoteric and symbolic meaning of Genesis are essential to understanding some of the metaphysical underpinnings of this particular painting, even though they were written several hundred years later.

William Chittick’s [Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul](#) offers some essential insights not just into Islamic thinking — its scope is in fact far broader — but the exact nature of literal, or

transmitted, knowledge as opposed to that which is inspired from Divine Sources. The medieval schools of philosophy and theology were far more interested in the second kind of knowledge; this tradition, as Swedenborg points out, had died out by the time the Enlightenment had its say. This book is an important adjunct if one wants to understand the allegory Bosch has created here, in the way that it relates visually to the theological and philosophical premises of esoteric religious thinking.



