GRZEGORZ KUBIES

FANTASY OR A TRANSCENDENT EXPERIENCE?
STUDY OF THE PAINTING ASCENT INTO HEAVEN
BY JHERONIMUS BOSCH
FROM THE PALAZZO DUCALE IN VENICE*

Ascent into Heaven (Venice, Palazzo Ducale) is one of four panels of eschatological subjects, which were most likely in the 1520s in the collection of Domenico Grimani (1461–1523), a Venetian cardinal, an eminent art collector (ill. 1).1 The panels are unsigned, and their attribution to Jheronimus

Dr GRZEGORZ KUBIES—musicologist and art historian, he lives in Warsaw. He deals with the musical culture of ancient Israel / Palestine and late-medieval religious and musical iconography; e-mail: kubies1971@interia.pl

The Polish version of the article was published in Roczniki Humanistyczne vol. 63, issue 4 (2015).

Bosch is mainly due to stylistic affinities. Apart from the four paintings, the cardinal, as is commonly conjectured, was in possession of at least two other works by the painter from ‘s-Hertogenbosch, currently held in the Doges’ Palace, namely The Triptych of the Hermits and The Saint Wilgefortis Triptych (St. Julia). One could moreover find in Grimani’s palace paintings by Hans Memling (ca. 1435–1494), Joachim Patinir (ca. 1485–1524) and Herri met de Bles (ca. 1510–1555/60).2

The most fundamental and at the same time earliest reference linking the figures of Domenico Grimani and Jheronimus Bosch, used by art historians, is an account of Marcantonio Michiel (1484–1552), a Venetian humanist, author of the manuscript of Notizia d’opere di disegno,3 who in 1521 paid a visit to the cardinal. The passage related to Bosch’s works reads as follows: “La tela dell’Inferno con la gran diversita de mostri fu de mano de Ieronimo Bosch. La tela deli Sogni fu de man de l’istesso. La tela della fortuna con el ceto che inghiotte Giona fu de man de l’istesso. (In casa del cardinal Grimano).4 Michiel described three paintings: Hell (inferno), Dreams (sogni) and Fortuna with a Whale Devouring Jonas (fortuna con el ceto che inghiotte Giona).5 Two panels from the Palazzo Ducale may be easily

---


4 Notizia d’opere di disegno nella prima metà del secolo XVI, esistenti in Padova, Cremona, Milano, Pavia, Bergamo, Crema e Venezia, scritta da un anonimo di quel tempo, pubblicata e illustrata da d. Iacopo Morelli, custode della Regia biblioteca di S. Marco di Venezia (Bassano 1800), 77.

5 Probably the Italian term tela—canvas—should be understood here as a general term, meaning simply a painting, regardless of the type of the ground on which it was painted. See Erik LARSEN, Hieronymus Bosch (New York: Smithmark, 1998), 121.
related to the expression “la tela dell’inferno,” since they actually depict the *Fall of the Damned and Hell*. The account does not provide any information on the two other panels—*Ascent into Heaven and Earthly Paradise*, which makes their provenance dubious. Possibly, Michiel did not mention them as he regarded them as rather typical representations of the hereafter. What did attract his attention was the “gran diversita de mostri,” linked to ideas such as *novita, invenzione, fantasia, bizarro*, held in high esteem by Venetian *amatori d’arte* in the upper echelons of society. Possibly, too, Michiel was not familiar with the panels with the visions of Paradise. Upon the cardinal’s death, some of the paintings were transferred to the monastery of Santa Chiara on Murano Island, while eight sealed chests with paintings—“casse otto […] piene de quadri”7 were moved to the basement of the Palazzo Ducale. Another documented information comes from ca. 1528, when Domenico Grimani’s nephew, Marino Grimani (1489–1546),8 himself a Catholic hierarch, sent twenty one paintings to Rome, leaving in Venice among others *The Last Judgement Altar* and the depiction of *Hell*: “uno quadro con due sportelli fiandrese iudecio di Christo,” and “uno quadro con lo inferno a oglio.”9 In light of the above records, questions posed below must remain unanswered. Was the painting representing *Hell (inferno)* described by Marcanonio Michiel the same which Marino Grimani decided to preserve? Were these visions of the afterlife once part of *The Last Judgement Altar (iudecio di Christo)*?

Leonard J. Slatkes,10 referring to the date attributed by Dirk Bax11 and Mia Cinotti12 to two works: *The Triptych of the Hermits* and *The Saint

---


8 Marino was Giovani’s elder brother; see footnote 1.


12 Dino Buzzati, Mia Cinotti, L’opera completa di Bosch (Milano: Rizzoli, 1966), 96 and 104.
GRZEGORZ KUBIES

Wilgefortis Triptych—ca. 1500, suspected that the oeuvre of Jheronimus Bosch was to some extent recognised in Italy as early as the beginning of the 16th century. The fact that there are no documents confirming the painter’s journey to the Apennine Peninsula limits us to conjure only as to his stay abroad. No documents have been preserved to prove the acquisition by Cardinal Domenico Grimani of Bosch’s works. It is also unknown how the paintings made their way to Venice. Bernard Aikema and Stefan Fischer imply that this occurred via a publisher Daniel van Bomberghen, who in the period 1515–1549 was a merchant in Venice, selling luxury goods shipped from Flanders, or via Lodewijk Beys, a merchant from Bosch’s hometown, travelling to (and doing business in) Jerusalem in the years 1500, 1504 and 1513. The former was to buy the paintings after the artist’s death and soon sell them to the cardinal.

Contemporary art historians, like the first authors of Jheronimus Bosch’s monograph, Charles de Tolnay and Ludwig von Baldass, are of the opinion that the panels from Venice in the vertical arrangement (2 + 2) were originally wings of a triptych which has not survived, and whose central section was to represent The Last Judgement, or that this is a separate case, of Fortuna. Isidro Bango Torviso and Fernando Marías put forth...

---

13 Bernard Aikema, “Hieronymus Bosch and Italy?,” 29.
19 José Manuel Cruz Valdovinos, “La clientela del El Bosco,” in Victoria Malet (ed.), El...
a hypothesis that the paintings used to be wings of two triptychs: *The Last Judgement* and *The Resurrection*. Charles de Tolnay21 implied that the work may have been a polyptych. The paintings were seen as a single whole by Patrik Reutterswärd,22 who suggested that they were a triptych with the central panel made up of *The Fall of the Damned* (which panel is interpreted by the scholar as *Purgatory*) and *Earthly Paradise*. Walter S. Gibson23 believed that the four panels were made by the painter to illustrate awards and punishments resultant from individual judgement of the deceased.

As to their iconography, the panels from the Palazzo Ducale are said to show affinities with two wings of *The Last Judgement Altar* (Lille, Palais des Beaux Arts; the central panel partially preserved—*Christ’s Head*, Stockholm, Nationalmuseum; 1468/69), painted by Dieric Bouts (1410/20–1475) and commissioned by the city council of Leuven,24 as well as some miniatures by Simon Marmion (ca. 1425–1489) in the manuscript *Les Visions du chevalier Tondal* (Los Angeles, The J. Paul Getty Museum, MS. 30, ca. 1470; fol. 14v, 30v), made for Princess of Burgundy Margaret of York (1446–1503).25 As to *Ascent into Heaven*, apart from the left wing of *The

---

Bosco y la tradición pictórica de lo fantástico (Barcelona-Madrid: Galaxia Gutenberg–Círculo de Lectores, 2006), 124.

20 Isidro B. Torviso; Fernando Marías, Bosch. Realidad, símbolo y fantasía (Vitoria: Ediciones Silex, 1982), 172.

21 Charles de Tolnay, Hieronymus Bosch, 353.


**Last Judgement Altar by Bouts** (ill. 2), two other most probable sources of inspiration for Jheronimus Bosch are Marmion’s miniatures in *Le livre des sept âges du monde* (Brussels, Koninklijke Bibliotheek van België, Ms. 9047, ca. 1455; fol. IV, fol. 12r) (ill. 3) and texts by Jan van Ruysbroeck (1293–1381).  

Four panels (*Ascent into Heaven* [88.8 x 39.9 cm], *Earthly Paradise* [88.5 x 39.8 cm], *The Fall of the Damned* [88.8 x 39.6 cm], *Hell* [88.8 x 39.6 cm])27 from the Palazzo Ducale are dated dendrochronologically to the 1480s (1482–1490)28. The dating of the paintings proposed in 1966 by Mia Cinotti29 is currently sustained by Frédéric Elsig30, who implied that the paintings were made in the 1502–1503 period. Stefan Fischer31 assumes a later timeframe: ca. 1505–1515. Erik Larsen32 believed that the works were painted ca. 1480–1482.

***

In this text, which attempts to answer the question posed by the title of the study, I situate panel representing *Ascent into Heaven* primarily in two contexts fundamental for the iconographic research of this work: eschatological writings and Netherlandish/Flemish painting, and in the context of

---


29 Dino BUZZATI, Mia CINOTTI, *L’opera completa di Bosch*, 98. Mia Cinotti dates the panels to 1500–1504.

30 Frédéric ELSIG, *Hieronymus Bosch*, 52–60.


32 Erik LARSEN, *Hieronymus Bosch*, 121.
near-death experiences. Aware of the limitations and pitfalls it brings, using the term coined by Jan Bialostocki—interpretative iconography,33 I remain on the outskirts of the rhetoric of certainty,34 within a critical discourse which is not the mainstream in the art-historical literature. My reflections focus on four motifs: the human soul, angel, tunnel, and light. Due to the impossibility of a credible reconstruction of the alleged triptych or polyptych, the wings of which were supposed to depict the afterlife, I accept, like Walter S. Gibson, the four-part form of the work created by the aforementioned Venetian panels.

The originality of Jheronimus Bosch’s vision lies in a realistic rendition of the tunnel.35 The “link” leading towards another reality, shown in the form of light, is traversed by naked human souls on their own. Against the background of a light circle, we see an outline of two (three?) figures; another one is introduced into the tunnel by an angel. Four representatives of the saved, presented below, are accompanied by winged angels wearing albs and coats. Each human soul, with the exception of the one shown at the highest point, assisted by one pure being, is carried by a pair of angels towards the entrance to the tunnel. The background of the journey to the afterlife is a layer of dark clouds.

The basis for an exceptionally negative statement on the moral condition of the earth’s inhabitants and, consequently, the infernal finale of almost all humanity—as this is the spirit in which some paintings by Jheronimus Bosch are interpreted—is provided by two triptychs of The Last Judgement ascribed to the painter from ‘s-Hertogenbosch: The Altar at the Akademie der Bildenden Künste in Vienna (ca. 1482 or later) and The Altar from the Groeningemuseum in Bruges (ca. 1486 or later),36 seen as either made by Bosch himself and/or his workshop. Some little hope for a symbolic participation in the paradise reality, which remains a mystery which St. Paul

35 Larry SILVER, Hieronymus Bosch, ill. 277, p. 353. A high-resolution illustration is available on the BRCP website: http://boschproject.org. Ludwig von Baldass claimed that the entrance to paradise through the tunnel was familiar to 15th-century miniature painting, however, his monograph provides no specific example of such depictions; IDEM, Hieronymus Bosch, 224.
could not or would not reveal (1 Cor 2,9),\(^{37}\) is offered by the figures of angels painted in the upper left corner of the central section of *The Altar* from Vienna, which carry the souls of the deceased towards a luminous crevice in heaven, as well as by winged human souls in the left wing of the other *Altar*. The handful of saved individuals seems to illustrate Christ’s words: “For many are invited, but not all are chosen” (Mt 22,14). In his theory of predestination, St. Augustine (354–430) assumed that the number of saved will correspond to that of the fallen angels (*City of God*, 22,1).\(^{38}\) In the panels from Venice, relative to both *Altars* which did not depict paradise, sometimes shown on the left wing, with a gate leading to heavenly Jerusalem,\(^{39}\) Bosch preserved the balance in the representation of two dimensions of eternity—heaven and hell. Both “realms” are peopled by saved and damned in almost equal proportions. The medallions representing *Hell* and *Paradise* from the panel *Seven Deadly Sins and the Four Last Things* (Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado; 1500–1525),\(^{40}\) considered to be a work by Bosch or his imitator, due to links with the ideas espoused in the treatises *Speculum humanae salvationis* (prior to 1324), *Le Pèlerinage de la vie humaine* by Guillaume de Digulleville (ca. 1295–ca. 1380?), *Cordiale de quatuor novissimis*, most probably by Gerard van Vliederhoven (ca. 1340–1402) and *De quattuor novissimis* by Denis the Carthusian (1402–1471), do not allow their evaluation in the context of the painter’s personal views on the ultimate matters. Still, we may notice that in the community living in paradise (the medallion from *Seven Deadly Sins and the Four Last Things*), in which the central position is occupied by Christ surrounded by angels, there are God-fearing Old Testament men and Christians.

Christian thought knows the concept of earthly pilgrimage. This state, the *status viae*, ends with death, which theology does not see as an exclusively biological fact. Treating the panels of Palazzo Ducale as a quadriptych, in

---


\(^{39}\) See for example the *Last Judgement* polyptych (Beaune, Hôtel-Dieu; between 1443 and 1451) by Rogier van der Weyden (1399/1400–1464), the *Last Judgement* triptych (Gdansk, National Museum; ca. 1471) by Hans Memling.

\(^{40}\) Source of the illustration: https://www.museodelprado.es (access: 21.06.2014).
the context of the teaching of two judgements, one individual and the other universal.\footnote{The issues of individual judgement and of an intermediary state are addressed e.g. by Josef FINKENZELLER, “Eschatologia” [Eschatology], in Wolfgang BEINERT (ed.), Podręcznik Teologii Dogmatycznej [A handbook of dogmatic theology], transl. Wiesław Szymona, vol. XI (Kraków: Wydawnictwo M, 2000), 81–120; Czesław S. BARTNIK, “Traktat XI. O rzeczach ostatecznych (Eschatologia)” [Treatise XI. On the last things (eschatology)], in Czesław S. BARTNIK, Dogmatyka katolicka [Catholic Dogmatics], vol. II (Łublin: Wydawnictwo KUL, 2003), 838–841; Tadeusz D. ŁUKASZUK, Ostateczny los człowieka i świata w świetle wiary katolickiej. Zarzys eschatologii katolickiej [The ultimate fate of man and the world in the light of the Catholic faith. An outline of Catholic eschatology] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PAT, 2006), 105–119; Zbigniew DANIELEWICZ, “Traktat o rzeczywistości ostatecznej” [A treatise on the ultimate reality], in Elżbieta ADAMIANK, Andrzej CZAJA, Józef MAJEWSKI (ed.), Dogmatyka [Dogmatics], vol. VI (Warszawa: Więź, 2007), 349–366.} I link Hieronymus Bosch’s vision with the first of the aforementioned ideas, with an important question of an intermediary state (\textit{status intermedius}), which refers to the manner of existence of the soul (\textit{anima separata}) between death and the resurrection of the body at the end of time.

Words offering hope for reaching heaven before the last judgement were uttered by Christ on the cross, to the contrite thief: “Today you will be with me in paradise” (Lk 23,43). During the time of the painter was in force the constitution \textit{Benedictus Deus}, announced in 1336 by Pope Benedict XII (1280/85–1342). It was a response to the statements of his predecessor, John XXII (ca. 1245–1334), who implied that souls were to see God only after last judgement and the resurrection of bodies (sermons for All Saints’ Day of 1331).\footnote{See Zbigniew DANIELEWICZ, “Traktat o rzeczywistości ostatecznej,” 483–487.} We read there:

\begin{quote}
By this Constitution which is to remain in force for ever, we, with apostolic authority, define the following: According to the general disposition of God, the souls of all the saints who departed from this world before the passion of our Lord Jesus Christ and also of the holy apostles, martyrs, confessors, virgins and other faithful who died after receiving the holy baptism of Christ—provided they were not in need of any purification when they died, or will not be in need of any when they die in the future, or else, if they then needed or will need some purification, after they have been purified after death—and again the souls of children who have been reborn by the same baptism of Christ or will be when baptism is conferred on them, if they die before attaining the use of free will: all these souls, immediately (\textit{mox}) after death and, in the case of those in need of purification, after the purification mentioned above, since the ascension of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ into heaven, already before they take up their bodies again and before the general judgment, have been, are and will be with Christ in heaven, in the heavenly kingdom and paradise, joined to the company of the holy angels (BF 263; DS 1000).\footnote{Quoted after: Breviaire fidei. Wybór doktrynalnych wypowiedzi Kościoła, ed. Ignacy Bokwa, 3rd edition (Poznań: Księgarnia św. Wojciecha, 2007), 156. For the Latin text see Henricus}.
\end{quote}
In the painting from Venice, naked souls, as we can surmise referring to the Bible and the 1336 papal constitution, upon individual judgement, if they did not require purification or upon earlier stay in purgatory, are bound to heaven. Ascent into Heaven seems to continue the narrative begun in the Earthly Paradise, where the souls are most probably purified and prepare for the very last stage of the extraterrestrial journey.

Eight representatives of the universe of pure beings shown in the painting from Venice are no guardian angels (as their care over people concludes at the moment of death), but rather angels—guides of souls, whose tasks relate to the activities of ancient psychopompoi (ψυχοπόμποι). In biblical terms, the grounds for this identification is the passage: “The poor man died and was carried by the angels into Abraham’s embrace” (Lk 16,22). The function of psychopompos, as testified by ancient apocrypha, is performed by angels with unique names: the angel of peace (Testament of Asher 6, 6).

---

De Zinger (ed.), Enchiridion Symbolorum et Definitionum quae de rebus fidei et morum a Conciliis Oecumenicis et summis Pontificibus emanarunt, 3rd edition (Wirceburgi: Sumptibus Staheliani, 1856), 182.


45 Referring to the biblical foundation (Th 5,17; Hi 33,23; Ps 91,11; Mt 18,10; Acts 12,16), the Fathers of the Church taught that each man has their guardian angel, who take care of them during their earthly peregrination. See Stanisław Longosz, “Opiekuncka funkcja Aniołów w nauce Ojców Kościoła” [The guardianship of angels in the teaching of the Fathers of the Church], in Herbert Oleschko (ed.), Księga o aniołach [Book on angels] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo WAM, 2002), 177–192.


47 See Ex 23,20.

angel of the covenant (Apocalypse of Paul 14,1–9); the last text mentions moreover archangel Michael. The topos of an angel guide was later taken over by the middle ages. It appears e.g. in sermons (e.g. Sermons for the Day of St. Michael by St. Bonaventura [ca. 1217–1274]) and prayers. Every believer was strongly impacted by the message of the famous antiphon In paradisum (May the angels lead you into paradise), included e.g. in the Gelasian Sacramentary from the 8th century (Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Cod. Vat. Reg. lat. 316), sung at the end of the requiem mass, during the procession towards the cemetery.

In Netherlandish panel painting, the motif of an angel carrying a soul/figure was used by, among others, Robert Campin (ca. 1375–1444) and Petrus Christus (1415/20–1475) in the rendition of the theme from the cycle: The Glory of Mary—Dormition of Mary. Another theme of this cycle, The Assumption of Mary, with a prominent motif of an angel, is represented by paintings by the Master of the Legend of St. Lucy (active ca. 1475–1505) and Michiel Sittow (ca. 1469–1525/26).

49 Apokryfy Nowego Testamentu. Listy i Apokalipsy chrześcijańskie [Apocrypha of the New Testament. Christian letters and apocalypses], ed. Marek Starowieyski (Kraków: WAM, 2001) (repr. 2007), 251. Apocalypse of Paul was penned between mid-2nd and mid-3rd century; it is one of the most popular apocrypha.

50 David KICK, Angels and Angelology in the Middle Ages (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 204.


52 David HILEY, Western Plainchant. A Handbook (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 45. Initially, the antiphon In paradisum was recited during the washing of the deceased person’s body, only later was it used during the procession. Bogusław NADOLSKI, Liturgika [Liturgics], vol. III: Sakramenty, sakramentalia, błogosławieństwa (Poznań: Pallottinum, 1992), 278. The text in this reading: “In paradisum deducant te Angeli; in tuo adventu suscipiant te martyres, et perducant te in civitatem sanctam Ierusalem. Chorus angelorum te suscipiat, et cum Lazaro quondam paupere aeternam habeas requiem,” was a merger of two antiphons In paradisum and Chorus angelorum. The document which confirmed the joint wording of both within one text is the Franciscan Breviary of 1260. See Richard RUTHERFORD, Tony BARR, The Death of a Christian. The Order of Christian Funerals, 2nd edition (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1990), 100.

53 The painting is known only from replicas and a copy. One of them (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Gemäldegalerie) is by Bartolomeo Bermejo (ca. 1440—after 1495). See Till-Holger BORCHERT (ed.), The Age of Van Eyck. The Mediterranean World and Early Netherlandish Painting 1430–1530, transl. Ted Atkin, et al. (Ghent–Amsterdam: Ludion, 2002), 264 (information in the catalogue, no. 110).


1455–1460, Simon Marmion made paintings for the *Altar of St. Bertin*; The National Gallery in London holds two upper panels of the wings. In the painting *The Soul of St. Bertin carried up to God* two angels accompany the seventh-century monk in his eschatological journey (ill. 5). The winged creatures as guides of souls were painted by Dieric Bouts in the aforementioned left wing of *The Last Judgement Altar—Ascent into Heaven.* Each of the five groups of the saved is guided by an angel. One of the representatives of the immaterial world, after breaking away from the top of the mountain, introduces the soul of a man into the illuminated ring of clouds, which is a gateway to another reality. An attempt to prove a direct dependence of the type: pattern—its imitation, between the wing of *The Last Judgement Altar* by Bouts and Jheronimus Bosch’s painting (see the central panel of *The Last Judgement* triptych from Vienna) is not the intention of the author here, even if iconographic affinities are unquestionable. The motif is exemplified in book painting, e.g. in *Arenberg Hours* (Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum, Ms. Ludwig IX 8; fol. 221r) from the early 1460s executed in Bruges and in *William Hastings Hours* (London, The British Library, Add. MS 54782; fol. 230r), from between 1475 and 1483, made probably in Ghent or Bruges. Iconographic analogies between a miniature from the second codex and the panel from Venice include the motif of an angel carrying a naked soul and the visualisation of heaven shown as a “space” in a golden hue, with two circles surrounding Christ.

The *topos* of the tunnel, a single-direction “connection” between the earthly world and the heavenly one, was known to ancient cultures; it features, among others in the Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh* (Table IX). The symbolism of the tunnel involves the hardships of the transition to a new life. The tunnel plays an important role in the initiation rites. It is a permanent element of architecture, which appears in medieval literature.

---

(La Prise d’Orange, 12th century; Sir Orfeo, 14th century), but not in visionary writings, where a bridge is the most common element. As Manfred Lurker wrote apropos of Jheronimus Bosch’s painting from the Doges’ Palace “In myths, sagas and tales, the intermediary realm, the no one’s land may take the form of a forest, highland, river, or sea.” In reference to the rites of “passage,” Mircea Eliade pointed to two motifs: a dangerous bridge and a narrow gate. When discussing myths and rites of initiation, he invoked three other motifs: tree, line and ladder. In Christian culture, a ladder is a significant connector between two worlds. Patriarch Jacob saw in his dream “God’s angels were going up and down on it” (Gn 28,12). The Gospel according to Matthew mentions in two passages a narrow gate (Mt 7,13–14) and a needle’s eye (Mt 19,24). Let us bear in mind that Charles de Tolnay saw the tunnel in Bosch’s paintings as a Manichean “column of glory,” symbol of the journey of a soul to heaven. Prayers are also supposed to be conveyed through this transmission channel.

The question of Jheronimus Bosch’s knowledge of two miniatures (fol. IV and fol. 12r) with astral elements, showing God in the centre of the universe, made by Simon Marmion in the manuscript of Le livre des sept âges du monde, remains undecided. Although the representation of God (fol. 12r) surrounded by eight celestial spheres (in the first, external, the moon dominates, while the last one is occupied by seraphim) is closer to the picture of the tunnel from the Venetian painting, the spatial qualities of this illumination are far from the “three-dimensional” vision of the Brabant painter. Probably both artists had some knowledge of astronomy from before Copernicus, and were versed in astrology. Following ancient authors, the

---


63 Manfred Lurker, Przesłanie symboli w mitach, kulturach i religiach [The message of symbols in myths, cultures and religions], transl. Ryszard Wojnakowski (Warszawa: Aletheia, 2011), 365.


66 Charles de Tolnay, Hieronymus Bosch, 354.


following succession of heavenly bodies was adopted: Earth, Moon, Mercury, Venus, Sun, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn. They were followed by the sphere of permanent stars—*Primum Mobile*, followed by *Empireum*. Unlike Marmion, Bosch gave up the division of the tunnel into eight parts and astrological references (signs of the zodiac). While both approaches do not conclusively prove alleged affinities, they are arguments in their contestation. Five circles of the tunnel in *Ascent into Heaven* do not correspond to the first five heavenly zones (Earth—Sun), because only the compatibility of the sun’s sphere with the light closing the tunnel would give rise to such an assumption.

In the search for the iconographic sources of the Venice panel one should take into account late medieval illustrations of the cosmos, which, however, is usually presented in the form of concentric spheres with centrally located earth (e.g. *L’Image du monde* by Gossuin de Metz, 13th century, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ms. fr. 14964; fol. 117r), never as a tunnel, a very rare motif in religious late medieval painting. The manuscript *Le Pèlerinage de la vie humaine* (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ms. fr. 376) contains an unusual illumination (fol. 160r), which shows the solar circle in the centre of the universe; the manuscript was made in Rennes ca. 1425–1450 (ill. 6). As a literary source of inspiration for Jheronimus Bosch, one can point to St. Paul’s account of the ascending of a man “still in the body? (…) or out of the body” to heaven; its structure, while it does not have five parts, demonstrates a complex composition and is tripartite (2 Cor 12,2). Certain indications for interpretation are to be found in the specula-
tive thought of ancient Greece and its later resonance in the Bible. Namely, in the Pythagorean system, the number five as a result of addition of a prime even number and an odd number, a male and a female element, was symbolic of a wedding.\(^{72}\) In this context, the number appears in the eschatological parable of five foolish and five wise virgins, who went out to meet the groom (Mt 25,1–13). The figure of the groom facilitates a parallel with the Song of Songs, a book which is read in literal as well as figurative terms, as an image of the relationship of Christ with His Church, or even in the mystical way, as a union of souls with God.\(^{73}\) Given the interest of Lynda Harris in Manichean and Cathar elements in Bosch’s oeuvre (the number five is of key importance\(^{74}\)), it is interesting to note her opinion that the painting from Venice as far from heretical, but actually exceptional and mystical.\(^{75}\)

It cannot be ruled out that Jheronimus Bosch, referring to his astronomical knowledge and his own optical-visual experience,\(^{76}\) visualised a simplified cosmos, whose individual zones must be traversed by a human soul upon leaving the body on its way to heavenly Jerusalem. Can the painter’s hypothetical reflection on the Pythagorean tradition and biblical texts be linked to the representation of a five-part tunnel in *Ascent into Heaven*? Note that the number of tunnel rings corresponds to the number of souls carried by angels. It is impossible to unequivocally state whether this analogy is intended and whether the five-part structure of the tunnel has symbolic meaning.


\(^{73}\) See e.g. *Sermones super Cantica Canticorum of Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153)*.


\(^{76}\) The exploration of the Binnendieze canal system fed by the river Dieze in the centre of 's Hertogenbosch, with its numerous bridges and tunnels created by the construction of individual waterways as a result of urban expansion within the city walls, provides an interesting experience. We should also pay attention to a certain element of sacred architecture. Namely, some rosettes in the facades or other gable walls of Gothic churches filled with decoration (stained-glass window) with a concentric arrangement, are adorned with the central image of Christ, *sol salutis*. 
Heaven, as numerous passages from the New Testament attest,\textsuperscript{77} is a state of personal human existence, rather than a tangible, physical place; it is a metaphorical “space”\textsuperscript{78} of co-existence with Christ-God (Jn 14,3; Phil 1,23; 1 Thes 4,17). Although we are to see Him “as He is” (1 J 3,2), “face to face” (1 Cor 13,12), in accordance with the testimony of St. Paul, the Lord of Lords “whose home is in inaccessible light, whom no human being has seen or is able to see” (1 Tim 6,16).\textsuperscript{79} The mystery of theophany was indicated moreover by St. John the Evangelist (Jn 1,18; 6,46). The image of heaven, which essence is \textit{visio Dei} / \textit{visio beatificans}, inscribed in these few passages from the New Testament, leaves us in cognitively ambiguous situation. The key statement concerning the “heavenly kingdom” (Mt 7,21), found in the aforementioned constitution \textit{Benedictus Deus}, is as follows: “the souls of all the saints […] have seen and see the divine essence with an intuitive vision, and even face to face, without the mediation of any creature by way of object of vision; rather the divine essence immediately manifests itself to them, plainly, clearly and openly” (BF 263; DS 1000).\textsuperscript{80}

A radiographic examination of the panel from Venice indicated in the luminous circle a presence of a silhouette of God.\textsuperscript{81} The preserved state of the painting, then, would prove a change of the painter’s original idea, closer to the official interpretation of the Church and medieval iconography of heaven with anthropomorphic representations of Christ-God. In light of the above, an attempt to prove correlations between the panel by Jheronimus Bosch and the ouevre of Jan van Ruysbroeck, which the painter could have known through the religious movement called \textit{devotio moderna},\textsuperscript{82} originating


\textsuperscript{78} On various biblical images of heaven, see Josef FINKENZELLER, \textit{Eschatologia}, 227–235.

\textsuperscript{79} See 1 Tim 1,17.

\textsuperscript{80} Quoted after: Ignacy Bokwa (ed.), \textit{Breviarium fidei}, 156–157. Latin text: \textit{Enchiridion Symbolorum et Definitionum}, 182. At the Council of Florence of 1439 it was added that the blessed will enjoy vision proportionate to their merits (DS 1305).

\textsuperscript{81} Frédéric ELSIG, \textit{Jheronimus Bosch}, 53. See BRCP: http://boschproject.org.

\textsuperscript{82} This implication is to be found in Roger H. MARINISSEN, Peter RUYFFELAERE, \textit{Hieronymus Bosch}, 303. In the treatise \textit{The Imitation of Christ} [\textit{De imitatione Christi}], ascribed to the German mystic Tomas à Kempis (ca. 1379–1471), we read about the eschatological light: “Peace will come on a day that is known only to the Lord, and it will not be a day or night such as we know now, but it will be everlasting light, infinite brightness, steadfast peace, and secure rest” (3,47). Thomas à Kempis, \textit{The Imitation of Christ}, transl. William C. Creasy (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2007), 107. Latin text see Tiburzio LUPO (ed.), \textit{De imitatione Christi libri quattuor} (Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1982). On the subject of \textit{devotio moderna} see Regnerus R. POST, \textit{De Moderne Devotie. Geert Groote en zijn stichtingen} (Amsterdam: Kampen, 1940).
in the 14th century in the Netherlands, seems justified. By far the most prominent work by the Brabant theologian and mystic that conveys the *topos* of light seen symbolically and metaphorically is *The Realm of Lovers* (*Dat rike der ghelieven*).

Light, which remains undoubtedly a physical phenomenon, belongs to the permanent repertoire of linguistic means of religious art. Different categories of light, brightness, and luminosity appear very often in the accounts of mystics referring to God. The concepts of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (5th/6th century), who invokes in the aspect discussed here *The Republic* (VI, 509B) by Plato (ca. 427–347 B.C.), was known in the West thanks to a translation by John Scotus Eriugena (ca. 800–ca. 877). The

---


85 See Paul ROREM, “The Early Latin Dionysius. Eriugena and Hugh of St. Victor,” in Sarah COAKLEY, Charles M. STANG (ed.), *Re-thinking Dionysius the Areopagite* (Chichester: Wiley-
popularity of *Corpus Dionysiacum* is proven by the comments made e.g. by St. Albert the Great (ca. 1193–1280), St. Bonaventura and St. Thomas Aquinas (ca. 1225–1274). In the treatise *On the Divine Names (De divinis nominibus)* Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite wrote: “After all, light comes from goodness and is an image of goodness. Hence goodness is praised under the name of light; and so the original is revealed in its reflection” (IV, 4).86 A little further, at the end of the argument, he added: “In accordance with its characteristics—the visible image of goodness—light gathers and attracts to itself all that one sees, what moves, and what is able to receive light and warmth” (IV, 4).87 Light is a recurrent element of the description of heaven.88 Dante Alighieri (1265–1321) in *The Divine Comedy (Divina Commedia)* in very expressive yet simple terms showed the Empyrean as “Heaven which is itself pure Light; Light intellectual which is full of Love, Love of true Goodness which is full of Joy; Joy which transcendeth every kind of Pleasure” (Paradise, 30:39–41).89

Jan van Ruysbroeck, whose texts demonstrate identifiable traces of impact of the Neo-Platonians, the mysticism of Cistercians, Victorines, Franciscans, and Rheine authors, begins the first chapter of *The Realm of Lovers* with an analysis of the word “Lord”, which implies creative powers. This is what he thought of angels, with whom God adorned heaven, beings to own “the infinite kingdom of eternal immutability” (I): “Spirits turning to God are happy since the turn of each power takes place in the light of glory, and

---


87 PSEUDO-DIONYSI AREOPAGITA, Pisma teologiczne. Imiona Boskie, 81.


they find pleasure and essential brightness in the Divine unity” (I).\(^{90}\) Using the antonym of brightness, he observed that the intellect of spirits turned to one another which are unhappy “was obscured by sin and removed from Divine brightness” (I).\(^{91}\) The notions such as *lumen gloriae* and *lux gratiae*, seen as the gift of “the light of glory”, a precondition for fathoming God, who is in His essence unfathomable, had already developed in patristic theology.\(^{92}\) Jan van Ruysbroeck saw this gift as indispensable on the path of moving closer towards the Creator, upon man’s reaching the end of their own capabilities. It is then that, according to the mystic “God comes with supernatural light and illuminates intellect” (IV, 3).\(^{93}\) Through the gift of counsel (actually its higher degree) with the aid of the Holy Trinity it is possible to come closer to the Divine being:

Divine Persons concentrate in unity and naturally turn to the essence with delight. The gulf [between creation and God] behaves like a simple light—it is the very Being itself, shining in the unity of Persons and in the unity of every concentrated spirit created, at its peak seeking pleasure. This incomprehensible light enlightens the concentrated intellect of the spirits, for it is the eternal Wisdom born in the soul. In this light you can see the simplicity from which light is born—the nature of God. Only in this light, which is Christ,\(^{94}\) can one blissfully see an incomprehensible being. He, in his human and divine nature, is the gate through which one has to pass. Only he can enter the palace of eternal pleasure, whoever lives according to the model of Christ the man, who contemplates and returns to himself in His immeasurable clarity. The simple light of this being is inexhaustible, immeasurable and infinite. It embraces the unity of the Divine Persons, the unity of the soul and of all its powers, it embraces and permeates the natural fundamental aspiration and delightful adherence to God and to all those whom He has united with Himself in this light. Thus arises the delightful unity of God and loving spirits, for all spirits above themselves, in an immeasurable light, in a divine way are immersed in delightful unity. In this incomprehensible light in which they immerse themselves, the work of God and creatures ceases (...) Here God and all those united with Him are transformed by simple light” (IV, 4e).\(^{95}\)

---


\(^{91}\) *Królestwo miłujących*, 54.


\(^{93}\) *Królestwo miłujących*, 72.

\(^{94}\) *The Spiritual Espousals (Die gheestelike bralocht)* define Christ as “an eternal sun,” “glorious Sun,” “Divine brightness” (II, BC, 1a); *Zasłubiny duchowe*, in *Bl. Jan van Ruusbroec. Dzieła*, vol. I, 180.

\(^{95}\) *Królestwo miłujących*, 106–107.
The Realm of Lovers treatise concludes with reflections on the five meanings of the term kingdom of God: “For the fifth time, it is shown to the lover of the kingdom of God in an immeasurable, divine light, above reason, in a spirit focused on the existence of God. There man receives a threefold fruit: immeasurable brightness, incomprehensible love and divine delight” (V, E). This is how Jan van Ruysbroeck described their interplay: “Immeasurable brightness and incomprehensible love permeate the soul to such an extent that it experiences the third fruit, i.e. bliss. This delight is so great that God, all the saints and major people are immersed and dissolved in infinity—in ignorance and eternal loss, but they find the utmost taste in this immersion and dissolution” (V, E). The man whom he describes as “common” is to remain essentially in God, “so that he may be transformed into an immense clarity, as the divine Persons at any moment immerse themselves in an immense being and overflow with delight” (V, E).

Bosch’s vision of the encounter of human souls with God no doubt corresponds with the mystical vision of Jan van Ruysbroeck, a vision of heaven as man’s coexistence in the unity of the three Divine Persons, whose nature is light. However, the fundamental difficulty in accepting this correlation lies in the assumption of the painter’s knowledge of the theologian’s texts.

Interestingly, generally literature related to Bosch leaves out the Bible when seeking ideological sources of the painting from Venice. Although

---

96 Królestwo miłujących, 130.
97 The image of heaven in The Realm of Lovers is not the only one left by Jan van Ruysbroeck. In Christian Faith (Vanden kerstenen ghelove) he implied, just like St. Augustin in The City of God (22, 19) that the saved in the heavenly kingdom will use both inner and outer eyes and ears (2, 1). Wiara chrześcijańska [Christian faith], in Bi Jan van Ruusbroec. Dzela, vol. III, 67.
98 See Antoni Ziemba’s criticism of the concept of theological program in Netherlandish painting; IDEM, Sztuka Burgundii i Niderlandów, 658–694. See the extant contract for the execution of the Last Supper Altar for the Brotherhood of the Most Blessed Sacrament at the Sint-Pieterskerk in Louvain, signed in 1464 by Dieric Bouts. While the consultations gathered theologians, the contract does not have phrases of clearly dogmatic nature. The content of the contract see Wolfgang Stechow, Northern Renaissance art, 1400–1600. Sources and documents, 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Northwestern University Press,1999), 10–11.
Jacques Le Goff wrote that: “*Doctrina christiana*—is first of all and instead of all Holy Scripture. *Sacra pagina* will be the foundation of all medieval culture—yet the reader is separated from the text by a double pillar,” which according to the scholar is both the difficult text that calls for exegesis and the substantial length of the Book itself. However, works by Jheronimus Bosch prove a substantial level of the painter’s familiarity with both the Old and the New Testament (themes, motifs, quotations). Jeanne van Waadenoijen, when interpreting the painter’s oeuvre in the context of late medieval Christian thought, indicates in particular the Bible. In the Book of Psalms, the God of Israel is called the sun (Ps 84,12). His attribute is light, with which He is “clothed with majesty and glory” (Ps 104,2), “light lives with Him” (Dt 2,22). God is light, and “there is no darkness in Him at all” (1 Jn 1,5). The transcendent character of light is indicated in the Book of Wisdom: “[Wisdom] is the reflection of the eternal light, un tarnished mirror of God’s active power” (Wis 7,26). The metaphor of a reflection of light demonstrates the tenet of the faith concerning the identity of two persons of the Holy Trinity. Christ—*Lumen de Lumine* is “the reflection of God’s glory and bears the impress of God’s own being” (Hbr 1,3). “The Ruler of all, King of kings, and Lord of lords” has His home in “inaccessible light,” beyond the impact of death (1 Tim 6,15–16). Christ spoke about himself as follows: “I am the light of the world; anyone who follows me will not be walking in the dark, but will have the light of life” (Jn 8,12), and called those who follow Him “children of light” (Jn 12,36). Heavenly Jerusalem needs no sun and no moon since it is illuminated by the glory of God, with the Lamb as its lamp; “the nations will come to its light” (Rev 21,24). Shouldn’t the source research of Bosch’s image include the rich symbolism of light in relation to God-Christ and heaven which emerges from the Bible, the fundamental and universally available source text?

---


102 See Jn 1,1.

103 See Manfred Lurker, *Słownik obrazów i symboli biblijnych* [Dictionary of Biblical Terms and Symbols], transl. Kazimierz Romanik (Poznań; Pallotinum, 1989), 237–239; André Feuillet, Pierre Grelot, *Światło i cienności* [Light and the dark], in Xavier Léon-Dufour (ed.), *Słownik...*
Medieval visionary literature (the protagonist of the vision is guided either by an angel or archangel) offers accounts of travels to the afterlife made *in corpore*, in one’s dreams and in a state which we call today near-death experience (NDE). The latter is addressed in the analysis of the panel from Venice by Patrik Reutersward. In his opinion, the content of the painting does not dramatically differ from the accounts of people who “were brought back to life”. A short allusion to near-death experience was made by Paul Vandenbroeck in the margin of his reflections on the depictions of paradise in Hieronymus Bosch’s painting. This phenomenon was likewise mentioned by Stefan Fischer. Of major importance in the debate at hand is the opinion of the medieval scholar Peter Dinzelbacher, who also links Bosch’s painting to NDE. An increased interest in NDE was undoubtedly


due to the books by Raymond A. Moody Jr.,[109] published in the 1970s. NDEs are currently examined by representatives of various scholarly disciplines.[110] The degree of polarisation of opinions on NDE in the scientific community is reflected in two research positions outlined below. While the psychologists Dean Mobbs and Caroline Watt[111] attempt to explain NDE in rational terms, cardiologist Pim van Lommel[112] sees NDE as genuine experience which cannot be explained by references to the power of imagination, psychoses or disorders in brain operation.

There are certain recurrent elements in accounts of Westerners who have experienced near-death experience; the core set includes as many as ten of them.[113] They include those present in Jheronimus Bosch’s painting, namely a luminous figure sometimes interpreted as an angel, tunnel and light.[114]

---

[111] Dean Mobbs, Caroline Watt, “There is nothing paranormal about near-death experiences. How neuroscience can explain seeing bright lights, meeting the dead, or being convinced you are one of them,” Trends in Cognitive Sciences 15, no 10 (2011): 447–449.
Near-death experience is known to many cultures and religions. In the West, the first reference to NDE is Plato’s story about a soldier by the name of Er, which the philosopher contained in The Republic (X, 614B–621D). Attempts to link medieval visions with contemporary records of NDE were made by Carol Zaleski, who pointed out numerous analogies. Nevertheless, the fundamental difference between what medieval authors recorded and contemporary studies is in the nature of these “revelations” belonging to different cultural backgrounds. While the medieval visions are dominated by eschatological aspects, their modern counterparts are dominated by psychological aspects. The fact remains that NDE, due to its partly non-empirical character, despite interdisciplinary attempts to capture the nature of this phenomenon, eludes unambiguous evaluation. In the discourse, in the context of identifying sources of the Palazzo Ducale painting, the issue of the essence of NDE is irrelevant. In other words, both near-death experience


interpreted as exclusively religious experience, and phenomena outside of the field of scholarly research have the same value. Three iconographic elements of the Venetian painting inevitably beg questions about the painter’s relationship with NDE. Did Jheronimus Bosch know any contemporary or earlier stories about journeys to the afterlife? It cannot be completely ruled out that the painter had a vision of the ultimate reality: after all, he was a member of the Marian Brotherhood called Illustre Lieve Vrouwe Broederschap from ’s-Hertogenbosch. Devout prayer of profound meditation might have acted as a kind of window.

***

As to late medieval eschatological iconography, Ascent into Heaven remains, using a vivid phrase from the Gospel according to Matthew—“a voice calling in the desert” (Mt 3,3). As a religious image of the highest degree, with mystical power of expression, it does not conform to the model theories of Hans Belting and Keith Moxey (anthropological theory and poststructuralist theory) and comes closer to the kind of thinking of Jeanne van Waadenoijen (biblical approach). The answer to the question whether Jheronimus Bosch’s vision is a phantasm, or a religious imagination, or whether it is backed up by an experience of extra-historical reality, is in fact double. Ono the basis of data gathered in the study, the content of Ascent into Heaven can be ascertained by references to sources of inspiration the most frequently quoted in relevant literature: a painting by Dieric Bouts, miniatures by of Simon Marmion and texts by Jan van Ruysbroeck. Its content can be equally well captured, let me stress once more, through the reference to


120 I would venture to say that there is some kind of correspondence between the image of Jheronimus Bosch from the Palazzo Ducale and the apophatic theology, which assumes the impossibility to comprehend God.
the role of the artist’s imagination (categories of *inventio* and *fantasia*), which cannot be left out in the first interpretation, harking back to his knowledge of theology, nature and his own optical and visual experiments. The above interpretation, stressing the impact of biblical logosphere (Ps 84,12; 104,2; Dn 2,22; Lk 16,22; 23,43; Jn 8,12; 12,36; 2 Cor 12,2; 1 Tim 6,15-16; 1 Jn 1,5; Acts 21,24), takes into account the unquestionable religious experience of the painter from’s-Hertogenbosch, arising from his being a Church member (liturgy, sermons, prayers). The factor of an epistemological importance which influences the form of the answer to the title question is hypothetical non-verifiable Bosch’s personal transcendental experience, thus it becomes impossible to evaluate the translation of what is spiritual (experience) into visual (image). Due to the elusive, not fully scientific nature of NDE this phenomenon must be excluded from the final conclusion, despite identifiable similarities between NDE and the panel from the Palazzo Ducale.

**LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS**

2. Dieric Bouts, left wing of The Last judgement Altar, oil, panel, 1468/69, Lille, Palais des Beaux Arts.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


FANTASY OR A TRANSCENDENT EXPERIENCE?
STUDY OF THE PAINTING ASCENT INTO HEAVEN
BY JHERONIMUS BOSCH FROM THE PALAZZO DUCALE IN VENICE

Summary

The painting Ascent into Heaven (88.8 x 39.9 cm; dendrochronological dating: 1482–1490) kept in the Palazzo Ducale in Venice is one of the four eschatological panels (the other three are: Earthly Paradise, Fall of the Damned, Hell) which probably were in the collection of the Venetian Cardinal Domenico Grimani in the 1520s. The panels’ original arrangement and function are unknown. The paintings are not signed and their attribution to Jheronimus Bosch (c. 1450–1516) is based largely on the grounds of stylistic criteria. In the study, I put Ascent into Heaven into two fundamental contexts for the iconographic analysis of this work: eschatological literature and Netherlandish/Flemish painting and in the context of near-death experiences (NDE) as well. The answer to the question posed in the title of the study must remain twofold. On the basis of the data gathered in the study, the content of the painting can be comprehended by references to the most frequently quoted sources of inspiration for Bosch: one painting by Dieric Bouts (left wing of the Last Judgement Altarpiece; Lille, Palais des Beaux Arts), two illuminations by Simon Marmion (Le livre des sept Ages du monde; Brussels, Bibliothèque royale de Belgique, Ms. 9047, fols. IV & 12r) and a literary work Dat rike der ghelieven by Jan van Ruusbroec. Its content can be equally understood by reference to the role of the painter’s imagination (categories of inventio and fantasia), using his theological and astronomical knowledge. The above line of interpretation that emphasizes the influence of biblical logosphere, takes into account undeniable religious experience of the painter from ’s-Hertogenbosch resulting from being a member of the Church. The factor of an epistemological importance which influences the form of the answer to the title question is hypothetical non-verifiable Bosch’s personal transcendental experience, thus it becomes impossible to evaluate the translation of what is spiritual (experience) into visual (image). Due to the elusive, not fully scientific nature of NDE this phenomenon must be excluded from the final conclusion.

Key words: Jheronimus Bosch; Netherlandish painting; medieval eschatology; angels; tunnel; light.

Translated by Marcin Turski
2. Dieric Bouts, left wing of *The Last judgement Altar*, oil, panel, 1468/69, Lille, Palais des Beaux Arts
FANTASY OR A TRANSCENDENT EXPERIENCE?


The preparation of the English version of *Roczniki Humanistyczne (Annals of Arts)* and its publication in electronic databases was financed under contract no. 836/P-DUN/2018 from the resources of the Minister of Science and Higher Education for the popularization of science.