

Holy Shit: Bosch's Bluebird and the Junction of the Scatological and the Eschatological in Late Medieval Art

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In the 'Hell' panel of the *Garden of Earthly Delights* (ca. 1500), a devil with the head of a bird and a humanoid body with glowing blue skin devours one naked soul and drops two more, in a transparent blue bubble, into a cesspool (Figure 1). Its black eye conveys no hint of consciousness; glinting with two white highlights, it is all surface and all abyss. Although the orifice that expels the bubble is hidden by the seat of a throne-like privy chair, in its hue the bubble is a material extension of the devil's body, a body shown to be doubly po-



Figure 1: Hieronymus Bosh (Netherlandish, ca. 1450-1516) *Garden of Earthly Delights*, ca. 1500
Detail from interior right panel: "Bird-headed devil" Museo del Prado, Madrid.
Image courtesy of Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY

*I would like to express my thanks to Jeffrey F. Hamburger who helped inspire this paper.

rous: half-ruptured from the bubble, a naked male falls from one abjection towards another, his arms still flailing inside the blue membrane, his legs dangling over the cesspool he will join. Another victim follows him headfirst. Their tormentor is an eating and defecating machine. Moreover, the half-eaten victim in its raised claw has been infected with the latter of these modes, releasing (no doubt in terror, as in a literal 'fight or flight' response) a smoky cloud of black-birds from his or her anus.

The scene continues below, around a circular cesspool to which two pale bystanders add their helpings. One hides his face and defecates golden coins, while another, eyes bulging, vomits as a nun positions his head over the pool. To their left, a woman and a donkey-devil with its arms wrapped around her naked torso are shown their visages in a convex mirror, fused onto the backside of another devil whose face is hidden by a white cloth trailing down from the bird's lap. The mirror gleams blue along its edges, perhaps also reflecting the bird and its bubble. But the woman's eyes are closed: she does not see what we see, namely, that her reflection emerges from the backside of a devil, likening her to its excrement.

The *Garden of Earthly Delights* has been a favourite terrain of iconographers attempting to uncover the original meaning of its bizarre imagery.¹ Yet as Keith Moxey has argued, one of the most meaningful aspects of the work has nothing to do with hidden symbolism: rather, it is the fact that Bosch has taken the sacred format of a triptych, formerly reserved for altarpieces, and filled it with the kinds of fantastical and licentious imagery seen in the margins of medieval manuscripts.² The breach in genre enables him to invoke a Last Judgment altarpiece only to replace it with an idiosyncratic essay on the fate of God's

¹ A list of explanations for the triptych 'in terms of astrology, alchemy, rare forms of heresy, illustrated puns, and so forth' up to 1994 is given in Keith Moxey, 'Hieronymus Bosch and the "World Upside Down": The Case of the *Garden of Earthly Delights*,' in *Visual Culture: Images and Interpretation*, ed. by Norman Bryson, Michael Ann Holly, and Keith Moxey (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), pp. 104-140 (p. 135, note 2); quote from p. 105. More recent iconographic studies include Ulrich Fritzsche, *Jheronimus Bosch: das ausgewogene Welt-Bild; der "Garten der Lüste" offenbart sein Geheimnis* (Schallenberg: Hazeka, 1996); Eric de Bruyn, 'The Cat and the Mouse (or Rat) on the Left Panel of Bosch's "Garden of Delights" Triptych: An Iconological Approach,' *Jaarboek / Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten* (2001), 6-55; and Peter Glum, *The Key to Bosch's "Garden of Earthly Delights" Found in Allegorical Bible Interpretation* (Tokyo: Chuo-Koron Bijutsu Shuppan, 2007).

² Moxey, p. 140.



Figure 2: Hieronymus Bosch
Garden of Earthly Delights, ca. 1500:
 Exterior closed state ("Third Day of
 Creation")
 Image courtesy of Erich Lessing /
 Art Resource, NY

Creation,³ depicted on the closed state as a watery grisaille globe (Figure 2).⁴ On the left interior wing, Christ leads Eve to Adam in a garden recognizable as Eden, though already rife with portents of natural, spiritual, and bodily corruption.⁵ Meanwhile, the central panel teems with allusions to terrestrial, literally 'seedier' forms of creation: human sexual intercourse (or simply delectation), natural generation, and possibly alchemy.⁶ A multiplicative energy and freedom is conveyed throughout by the relentless variety, not just of bizarre creatures and contortionist poses, but also of colours, shapes, and textures. In the 'Hell' panel, this formal variety is still present – but the freedom is now in the hands of bestial devils, who march, cajole, impale, ride, or hang their human victims around a decrepit and burning landscape.

A subterranean 'world upside down', Hell had in fact long been an artistic subject-realm in which nudity and fantastical hybrids could take centre stage. Keeping this in mind, and focusing on the bird-headed monster, the following essay will examine a metaphorical strain in late medieval art – of special interest

³ My understanding of the *Garden of Earthly Delights*, and of Bosch's art in general, has been deeply informed by lectures given by Joseph Leo Koerner, as well as by his article 'Self-Portraiture Direct and Oblique,' in *Self Portrait: Renaissance to Contemporary*, ed. by Joanna Woodall and Anthony Bond (London: National Portrait Gallery, 2006), pp. 67-80.

⁴ This is the most broadly-accepted interpretation of the globe. Another is that it represents the Earth after the flood; see Ernst Gombrich, 'Bosch's Garden of Earthly Delights: A Progress Report,' *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 32 (1969), 162-70.

⁵ Bosch's Eden is filled with creatures that were associated with putrefaction, melancholy, and evil; see Laurinda S. Dixon, *Alchemical Imagery in Bosch's Garden of Delights* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1981), esp. pp. 41-45.

⁶ On alchemical symbolism in the painting see Dixon, as above.

will be paintings, including altarpieces, manuscript illuminations, and frescos – in which ideas about creation and judgment came to be linked with ones about the scatological body of the devil. What light can this medieval tradition shed on Bosch's bluebird and its role within the eschatological framework of the *Garden*? Although this study is retrospective in focus, its purpose is not to deny Bosch's novelty or void his agency – as if artworks simply appear, one after another, in some blind mechanical procession. His bluebird is a highly, even ostentatiously, original creation. However, only by seeing how it is typical can we see how it is also idiomatic, how Bosch transforms inherited metaphors into new terms.

Hellmouths and Frames

Devouring beasts appear as agents of the underworld or of the passage thereof in medieval art of many regions and periods. A canonical example from Romanesque sculpture is the large trumeau at Souillac (ca. 1135), featuring an interlace of gnawing beasts topped by a human whose head is clenched in the jaws of a griffin (image available online at http://www.wga.hu/frames-e.html?/html/zgothic/1romanes/po-12c11/11f_1100.html).⁷ As Carol Knicely notes in her article on the trumeau, animal symbolism played an important part in monastic liturgies for the dead and dying: dramatizing the pleas of those facing death, the monks of Souillac would chant, 'Deliver me from the mouth of the lion [...] / Deliver not up to beasts the souls that confess you.'⁸ Such symbolism had a typological formulation in the story of Jonah, whose swallowing and regurgitation by the whale was construed as a foreshadowing of the death and resurrection of Christ.⁹

The metaphor of death as devouring was also expressed in the convention of showing the entrance to Hell as a giant maw or rictus – a 'hellmouth'. This mask of the underworld was envisioned in highly imaginative ways. Sometimes it appears as a giant mouth abstracted from any geological setting, acting as a synecdoche of Hell itself.¹⁰ Exemplary of this mode is a miniature from the Winchester Psalter (ca. 1150) in which the hellmouth, crammed with souls, functions

⁷ Carol Knicely, 'Food for Thought in the Souillac Pillar: Devouring Beasts, Pain and the Subversion of Heroic Codes of Violence,' *Racar* 24.1997 (2000), 14-37 (p. 30).

⁸ Knicely, p. 30.

⁹ Isabel Grübel, 'Lucifer als Seelenfresser. Überlegungen zu einer zentralen Gestalt des mittelalterlichen Jenseitsglaubens,' in *Frömmigkeitsstile im Mittelalter*, ed. by Wolfgang Haubrichs (Göttingen, 1991), pp. 49-60 (p. 51).

¹⁰ Grübel (p. 51) likewise notes that the Hellmouth 'became a required element of representations of the afterlife, either as an entrance to the underworld or as a symbol of hell itself' (translation from the German mine).

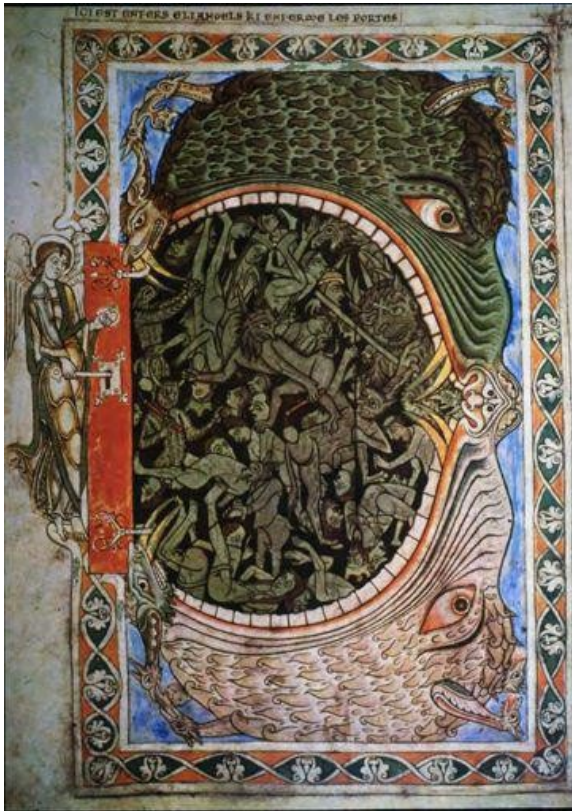


Figure 3: Angel Locking the Damned in Hell

Illumination from the Winchester Psalter (Psalter of Henry of Blois), ca. 1150
© The British Library Board, Ms Cotton Nero C. IV, fol. 39

both as a prison and as a kind of enlivened frame-within-the-frame (Figure 3). The link between hellmouths and frames is also seen in miniatures where the hellmouth interacts with the marginalia. For example, in a Last Judgment miniature attributed to the Boucicaut Master (active ca. 1390-1430), a hellmouth appears to vomit out all of the marginal decorations while two demons attend it, one fanning the flames it belches, the other prodding the damned with a pitchfork to keep them inside (Figures 4, 4a, and 4b). In the lower right, the 'netherface' of another demon sprouts a thorny flower of the same kind seen running through the margins. In such images, the hellmouth is simply the largest member of Satan's protean army, a demon blown up into a symbolic container or mask for everything demonic or grotesque. Indeed, as Mikhail Bakhtin has explained, 'The most important of all human features for the grotesque is the mouth. It dominates all else. The grotesque face is actually reduced to the gaping mouth; the other features are only a frame encasing this wide-open bodily abyss.'¹¹

In a fourteenth-century Apocalypse in the Cloisters collection, a hellmouth with two faces not only contains the hydra-headed Beast of Revelation

¹¹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Hélène Iswolsky (Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 317.

Figure 4: Last Judgment

Attributed to the Boucicaut Master
(act. ca. 1390-1430)

Illumination from a Book of Hours,
use of Paris

Image courtesy of the Bodleian
Library, University of Oxford
Ms Douce 80, fol. 192r



Figure 4a: Detail of Figure 4;
“Hellmouth attended by demons”



Figure 4b: Detail of Figure 4; “Demon with
flower-sprouting netherface”



Figure 5: Dragon and the Beasts Cast into Hell

Illumination from an Apocalypse (the Cloisters Apocalypse), Normandy, ca. 1330
The Cloisters Collection, Ms 68.174, fol. 34v-35

Image courtesy of Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY

but is also a breeding ground for other monstrous masks, which pile up in front of one another (Figure 5). Likewise, the hellmouth from the Hours of Catherine of Cleves (image available online at <http://www.themorgan.org/collections/works/cleves/manuscriptEnlarge.asp?page=75>) is an nightmarish *mise-en-abyme*. A tiny replica even appears in the lower margin, a green monster spewing inscribed banderols that initiate the formal rhythm of the vine-scroll borders – suggesting not just the margins but the *entire image* as a site of scatological excess. Whereas the Winchester Psalter showed the jaws of Hell being locked, later miniatures like these emphasise the hellmouth more as an appropriate container for what Paul Binski has called the ‘promiscuity of forms’ that characterises hellish imagery in general:

Where Heaven represents order and harmony, Hell represents disorder; again, it is an anti-representation [...] and in some ways it is a representational sphere that offered to medieval writers and artists vastly greater scope than the calm aesthetic numbness of Heaven. Hell as the sphere of ego was the ideal sphere of artistic egotism [and] thus inevitably the realm of variety and fantasy [...].¹²

¹² Paul Binski, *Medieval Death: Ritual and Representation* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), pp. 172-73.

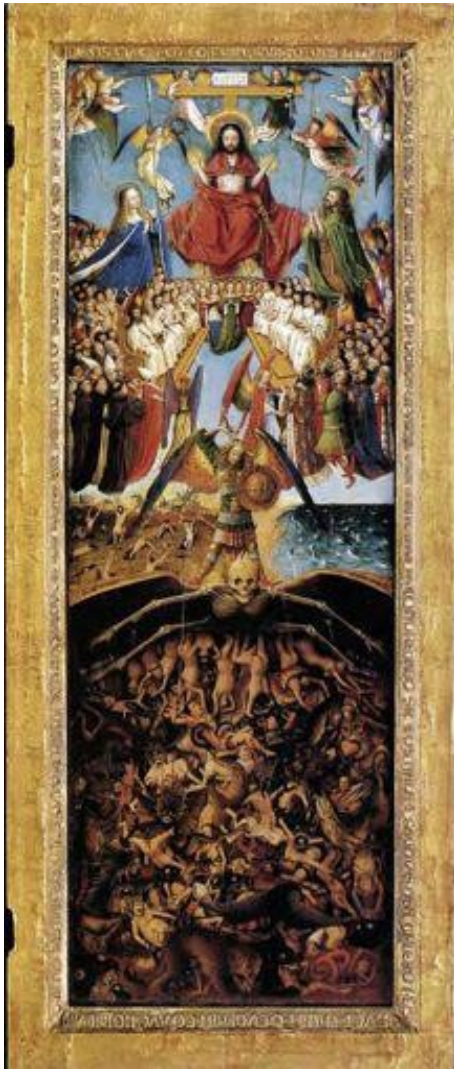


Figure 6: Jan van Eyck (Netherlandish, ca. 1390-1441)

Last Judgment (right wing from a diptych altarpiece), ca. 1430

Image courtesy of Images for Academic Publishing, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Figure 6a: Detail, "Devouring Beasts"

The expressiveness of a mouth, its relation to speech, makes the hell-mouth the perfect symbolic frame for such a realm.¹³ Binski is one of many scholars who have stressed the space for invention offered to medieval artists by monstrous, grotesque, carnivalesque imagery, as well as by the margins of manuscripts, in which such imagery flourished.¹⁴ This is relevant to Bosch, who most likely trained as a manuscript illuminator specializing in the creation of fantastical marginal imagery before transitioning to panel painting.¹⁵ In fact,

¹³ See Michael Camille, 'Mouths and Meaning: Towards an Anti-Iconography of Medieval Art,' in *Iconography at the Crossroads*, ed. by Brendan Cassidy (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 43-57.

¹⁴ See especially Meyer Schapiro, 'On the Aesthetic Attitude in Romanesque Art,' in his *Romanesque Art* (New York, NY: Braziller, 1977), pp. 1-27; and Michael Camille, *Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art* (London: Reaktion, 1992).

¹⁵ See Suzanne Sulzberger, 'Jérôme Bosch et les maîtres de l'enluminure,' *Scriptorium* 16 (1962), 46-49.

Moxey argues that the *Garden of Earthly Delights* was conceived by Bosch, and understood by his patrons, as an allegory of artistic freedom – a claim that shall be addressed at the conclusion of this paper. For the time being, however, let us continue to trace the prehistory of Bosch's bluebird.

Devouring Beasts and the Rapacious Earth

Being ingested by animals represented a means not only of passage to the other world but also of punishment at the hands of Satan and his bestial army. From a medieval Christian perspective, the bodies of animals inhabit a liminal ontological territory: capable of independent movement and appetite, they appear animated, yet are soulless. Conversely, a human being, once he or she passes on, is *only* a soul (even if this soul remains attached to a single bodily identity).¹⁶ Being repeatedly devoured by beasts thus forces the soul to submit to – or pass through, as is the case with Bosch's bluebird and other creatures we shall examine – a body that represents a hideous inversion of its own, *inanimate* but alive.

It was in Northern European paintings of the fifteenth century that depictions of souls being masticated by zoomorphic devils reached a height of cruelty, inventiveness, and verisimilitude. In Jan van Eyck's Last Judgment panel in the Metropolitan Museum (ca. 1430) (Figures 6 and 6a), Hell is shown as the crammed underbelly of the earth's surface, presided over by a skeleton doing the splits. Its prisoners are gnawed upon by beasts running the gamut of animal genera – mammals, reptiles, and birds.

In Dieric Bouts the Elder's *Fall of the Damned* (ca. 1470) (Figure 7), a motley crew of reptilian devils attack naked souls in a landscape so rocky it practically has teeth. Indeed, many of the damned are shown partially submerged into the earth; this is the endgame of their fall, which began when they were dropped here by flying devils (and were thus forced to repeat the devils' own prior fall from Heaven). The grammar of fallenness is also one of inversion, as many of the devils hold their victims upside down. In the lower right, a lizard inserts its open jaw into the picture to bite off a soul's head. In the upper left, an entrance to Hell appears as a flame-spewing cave, inside of which the tiny heads of about a dozen captive souls are visible, becoming less and less distinct the further inside they appear.

¹⁶ As Carolyn Walker Bynum has argued, the enduring integrity of body and soul was considered essential for human salvation, and was a topic of concern for many theologians; see *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), esp. Ch. 3, pp. 117-55: 'Reassemblage and Regurgitation: Ideas of Bodily Resurrection in Early Scholasticism.'



Figure 7: Dieric Bouts (Netherlandish, ca. 1415-1475)

Fall of the Damned, ca. 1470

Musée des Beaux Arts, Lille

Image courtesy of Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY

Here, then, the body of Hell has been replaced by the body of the earth, sucking the damned downwards as if by some infernal gravity and incinerating them within its cavities. Indeed, as Peter Dinzelbacher has argued, in medieval thought the place of Hell was not simply allegorical: Hell was also understood to be ‘a real cavelike prison’ in central earth, divided into a number of chambers and with Satan’s seat at its core.¹⁷ This led to speculation about the coordinates of its point or points of entry. For example, Emperor Frederic II of Hohenstaufen ‘asked his court philosopher Michael Scot where on or under or above this our earth Hell and purgatory might be found, how many abysses existed, and, in connection with this, what one ought to think about volcanoes.’¹⁸ The main hellmouth was believed to be located somewhere on Golgotha, the hill on which Christ was crucified over the bones of Adam.¹⁹

The idea of the earth as a consuming body with creatural appetites is made even more explicit in a miniature of ca. 1480, attributed to Simon Mar-
mion, in which Paradise and Hell appear as opposite ends of an eschatological

¹⁷ The terrestrial existence of Hell was asserted by Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* III, 97, 7 (196). See Peter Dinzelbacher, ‘The Way to the Other World in Medieval Literature and Art,’ *Folklore* 97, No. 1 (1986), 70-87 (p. 70).

¹⁸ Dinzelbacher, p. 70.

¹⁹ Robert Lima, ‘The Mouth of Hell: The Iconography of Damnation on the Stage of the Middle Ages,’ in *European Iconography East and West: Selected Papers of the Szeged International Conference, June 9-12*, ed. by György E. Szőnyi (Leiden and NY: Brill, 1996), pp. 35-48 (p. 36).

Figure 8: "Hellmouth with bridge to Paradise"
Attributed to Simon Marmion (French, ca. 1425-1489)

Illumination from a Book of Hours

Image courtesy of V&A Images / Victoria and Albert Museum, London, Ms Salting 1221, fol. 153



panorama (Figure 8).²⁰ In the foreground, the visage of Hell is fused onto a fiery lake over which souls must traverse across a very narrow bridge. Determined not to let them pass, it is the landscape itself that sucks up the souls and spits them out through its mouth and nostrils.

If Hell could be conceived of as a geological container, its body was thus also characterised by a grotesque *lack* of boundaries. Another passage from Bakhtin is worth citing here at length:

The grotesque body [...] is never finished, never completed; rather, it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body. Moreover the body swallows the world and is itself swallowed by the world [...]. This is why the essential role belongs to those parts of the grotesque body in which it outgrows its own self, transgressing its own body, in which it conceives a new, second body [...]. Next to the bowels and the genital organs is the mouth, through which enters the world to be swallowed up. And next is the anus. All these convexities and orifices have a common characteristic; it is within them that the confines between bodies and between the body and the world are overcome: there is an interchange and an interorientation. This is why the main events in the life of the grotesque body, the acts of the bodily drama, take place in this sphere. Eating, drinking, defecation and other elimination [...] as well as copula-

²⁰ See *Himmel, Hölle, Fegefeuer: Das Jenseits im Mittelalter*, ed. by Peter Jenzler (Zürich: Schweizerisches Landmuseum, 1994), cat. no. 130, 338-9.

tion, pregnancy, dismemberment, swallowing up by another body [...].²¹

An excellent example of such a body is seen in this miniature from the Bodleian Library's *Livre de la Vigne nostre Seigneur* (c. 1450-70) (Figure 9). Satan places a foot in each lower corner, straddling the border and staring out at the viewer. Faces with gaping mouths cover his shoulders, elbows, and knees, suggesting that his limbs have been spat out (or are about to be swallowed up) by these orifices. In place of his navel is an eye; beneath it, a giant grinning face sticks out a phallic tongue. The implication is not just that his body is limitless – ingesting and expelling with equally disgusting ease – but that it is able to mul-



Figure 9: "Lucifer with many faces, judged by Christ in majesty"
Illumination from the *Livre de la Vigne nostre Seigneur*, ca. 1450-70
Image courtesy of the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, MS. Douce 134, fol. 67v

Figure 10: Martin Schongauer (ca. 1430-1491) or his school
The Harrowing of Hell
Inner right wing of altarpiece ("The Dominican Altarpiece"), ca. 1480.
Musée d'Unterdenlinden, Colmar
Image courtesy of Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY



²¹ Bakhtin, p. 317.

tiply, to spawn other bodies, and perhaps even to leap off the page. It is thus the body of Satan, rather than that of Christ, that conveys the liveliness and communicative power of the image.

What goes into the devil must come out

The openness of Hell could have positive soteriological implications, confirming the potential for souls to be released upwards on the Day of Judgment and re-constituted in Heaven; frequently described as vomiting forth flames, the hell-mouth could not only swallow the souls of the damned but could also expurgate those of the redeemed. Carolyn Walker Bynum has noted that one of the many metaphors used for resurrection was 'the vomiting up of bits of shipwrecked bodies by fishes that have consumed them.'²² Such a reverse trajectory is seen in the Harrowing of Hell, in which the entrance to Hell becomes an exit.²³ In a late fifteenth-century altarpiece attributed to Martin Schongauer or his school in Colmar, the gates of Hell have fallen open to form a bridge across which Christ leads the saved (Fig. 10). But Hell's army still has plenty of ammunition: a green devil twists backwards, its brown netherface extending a tail-like nose towards Christ whilst gazing at the viewer as if to share the joke that 'what comes in can also go out'.

Beginning in the fourteenth century, though, some artists began to take this metaphor to its most literal depths, showing the openness of the hellish body not as a path to resurrection but as one of the most gruesome means of eternal punishment – in fact, as the mechanism that made eternal punishment possible. As Isabel Grübel has argued in her article on 'Lucifer as a devourer of souls',

The difficulty with this kind of hellish punishment lies in the fact that, once eaten, the souls of the damned would no longer exist, thereby depopulating Hell. But because the punishments of Hell were by definition eternal, artists looked for ways to lead the devoured souls to further rounds of punishment. The most plausible solution seemed to be to allow the souls to emerge 'naturally', so to speak, from the other side of the monster.²⁴

The progenitor of such representations, which flourished in Italian painting of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, was Giotto, who depicted an eating

²² Bynum, p. 6.

²³ For an interesting discussion of the 'dramatic implications of Hades' gastric troubles' in early Christian art and literature see Margaret English Frazer, 'Hades Stabbed by the Cross of Christ,' *Metropolitan Museum Journal*, Vol. 9 (1974), 153-161.

²⁴ Grübel, p. 53 (translation from the German mine).

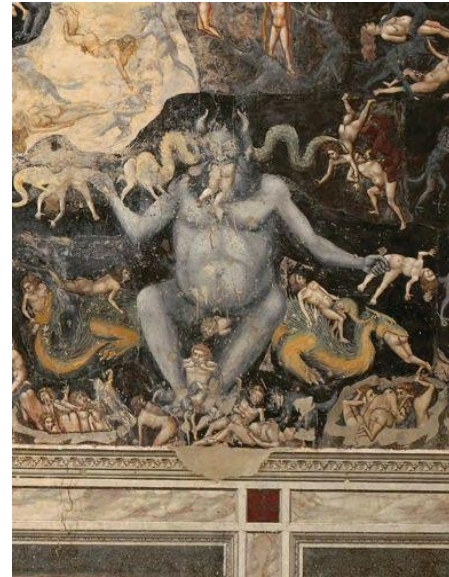
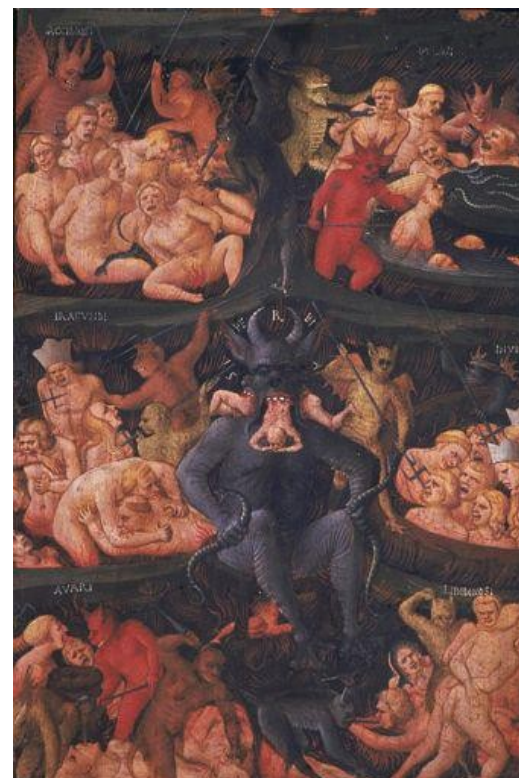


Figure 11: Giotto (Italian, 1266/67-1337)
Last Judgment Fresco
Scrovegni Chapel, Padua, ca. 1305
Detail: Hell
Image courtesy of Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY
Figure 11b (above): Detail of Figure 11

Figure 12: Fra Angelico (ca. 1400-55)
Last Judgment triptych, ca. 1450
Detail from right wing: "Satan in Hell"
Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Preußischer Kulturbesitz
Photo: Jörg P. Anders



and defecating Satan in his Last Judgment fresco at the Scrovegni chapel in Padua (ca. 1305) (Figures 11a and b). From the lower corner of Christ's rainbow aureole, rivers of fire stream down to Hell like blazing arteries or intestines. At the bottommost core, Satan—whose blue colour makes him an especially close forerunner of Bosch's bluebird²⁵—is shown gorging on souls and excreting them into a pile on the cornice. Two snakes extend from his ears to bite further victims; flanking his hips are two dragons that act as auxiliary devourers, feeding souls directly into his stomach. Likewise, in Fra Angelico's Last Judgment triptych of ca. 1450, Satan is shown with three mouths (Figure 12), a fleshy soul crammed into each one; another soul is excreted headfirst into the flames, where further tortures are carried out by devils with zoomorphic faces and humanoid bodies.

In these images, a direct link is made between the soul's eschatological progress and Satan's bodily processes. We will now examine a text and an illuminated manuscript in which this conjunction found equally vivid expression north of the Alps.

Demonic Digestion in the Visions of Tundal

Scholars have long viewed the *Visio Tnugdali* as a potential source for Bosch's demonology.²⁶ Written in ca. 1149 by an Irish monk living in the South German city of Regensburg, the text offered the most comprehensive descriptions of Hell before Dante, and by the fifteenth century had been translated into at least thirteen languages;²⁷ a Dutch version appeared in Bosch's hometown of 's-Hertogenbosch in 1484.²⁸ However, only one artist is known to have illuminated the text from start to finish: Simon Marmion (ca. 1425-1489), who in 1475 recreated it in twenty miniatures for Margaret of York, the Duchess of Burgundy.²⁹

In the opening scene, Tundal, a pleasure-seeking Irish knight, has a seizure at a dinner party. His soul leaves his body, whereupon it is led by an angel on a three-day tour of the afterlife that includes some truly horrific visionary

²⁵ Gröbel, p. 52.

²⁶ See the bibliography given in *Margaret of York, Simon Marmion, and The Visions of Tundal*, ed. by Thomas Kren (Malibu, CA: J. Paul Getty Museum, 1992), p. 26, note 58.

²⁷ Eileen Gardiner, *Visions of Heaven and Hell Before Dante* (Ithaca, NY: Ithaca Press, 1989), p. 253 and xiv.

²⁸ See *Tondalus Visioen en S. Patricius Vagevuur*, 2 vols., ed. by René Verdeyen and Joseph Endepols, (Ghent, 1914-17). For other translations see Nigel F. Palmer, "*Visio Tnugdali*": *The German and Dutch Translations and their Circulations in the Later Middle Ages* (Munich: Artemis, 1982); and *Visio Tnugdali: Lateinisch und Altddeutsch*, ed. by Albrecht Wager (Hildesheim and Zurich: Georg Olms, 1989).

²⁹ On this manuscript (Ms. 30) see Thomas Kren and Roger S. Wieck, *The Visions of Tondal from the Library of Margaret of York* (Malibu, CA: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 1990).

experiences of Hell. The *mise-en-scène* of the departure is telling: as Tundal reaches for a plate of food, he cannot complete the gesture of raising hand to mouth. That death is preceded and signified by a sudden paralysis of the consuming body is appropriate, for the regions Tundal and the angel will visit are repeatedly constructed in spectacles of eating, digestion, and defecation. Consider this description of the valley where murderers are punished:

This valley was very deep, full of burning coals. Over the valley was a round iron lid, burning and massive. On top of this lid was falling a great multitude of damned souls who were burned and roasted there and were then liquefied and strained through the burning lid like a sauce strained through a canvas sieve. From there they would fall onto the fire, from whence their torments were continuously renewed.³⁰

Marmion interprets the valley as a giant bowl into which souls – who look distinctly like pieces of excrement – are falling and mixing in with a hellish soup (Figure 13). Likewise, the Punishments of the Greedy entail being devoured by the beast Acheron, whose enormous mouth continually belches flames and is propped open by two columnar devils (Figure 14). Once Tundal is forced to enter, he is attacked by various beasts (lions, dogs, serpents) and is also

Figure 13: Simon Marmion (French, ca. 1425-1489), attributed “The Torment of Murderers” Illumination from *Les Visions du Chevalier Tondal* (The Visions of Tundal), Ghent, 1475
Tempera colors, gold leaf, gold paint, and ink on parchment 36.3 x 26.2 cm
Detail courtesy of the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, Ms 30, fol. 13v (Detail)



³⁰ Translation from Kren and Wieck, p. 41.



Figure 14: Simon Mar-
mion (French, ca. 1425-
1489), attributed
“The Beast Acheron”
Illumination from **Les
Visions du Chevalier
Tondal** (The Visions of
Tondal), Ghent, 1475
Tempera colors, gold
leaf, gold paint, and ink
on parchment
36.3 x 26.2 cm
Detail courtesy of the J.
Paul Getty Museum, Los
Angeles, MS. 30, fol. 17.

Figure 15: Simon Mar-
mion (French, ca. 1425-
1489), attributed
“The House of Phris-
tinus”
Illumination from **Les
Visions du Chevalier
Tondal** (The Visions of
Tondal), Ghent, 1475
Tempera colors, gold
leaf, gold paint, and ink
on parchment
36.3 x 26.2 cm
Detail courtesy of the J.
Paul Getty Museum, Los
Angeles, MS. 30, fol. 21v
(Detail)



Figure 16: Simon Mar-
mion (French, ca. 1425-
1489), attributed
“The Forge of Vulcan”
Illumination from **Les
Visions du Chevalier
Tondal** (The Visions of
Tondal), Ghent, 1475
Tempera colors, gold
leaf, gold paint, and ink
on parchment
36.3 x 26.2 cm
Detail courtesy of the J.
Paul Getty Museum, Los
Angeles, MS. 30, fol. 27



'suffocated' by the smell of sulphur. The Latin text goes further, describing the entire mouth of Acheron as emitting an 'incomparable stink' (*fetor incomparabilis*).³¹ The multitude inside the mouth of Acheron is thus not only subjected to the killing equation of rotting and digestion, but is also made to smell its product.

The House of Phristinus, where gluttons and fornicators are punished, is compared to an oven. Its proprietor is insatiably gluttonous, a baker-demon whose victims are attacked by executioners wielding knives, pitchforks, and other implements. The narrator reports that Tundal also saw these victims being tortured in their genitals – 'yet in response, their genitals, putrid and corrupt, seemed to gush with worms' (*doloribus quoque verendorum locorum cruciabantur quam maximis, set contra verenda ipsa putredine corrupta scaturire videbantur vermibus*).³² By a hideous reversal, the organs of fecundity are baked into cornucopias of corruption that will attack the very body that generated them. Self-multiplying and self-deleting, the damned are forced to take part in their own punishment, involving a breakdown of their selves that is nonetheless infinitely re-enactable. Tundal is forced to experience this firsthand when Phristinus's henchmen surround him, chop him into pieces and throw his disconnected parts (*dissipatam*) into the flames.³³ The blazing red oven of Marmion's miniature reveals only a few abstract shadows (Figure 15), confirming that the end-game of this 'bakery' is total formal and ontological dissolution – becoming repackaged by Satan and unrecognizable to God. The same threat is delivered in the Valley of Fires, in which

souls were cooked and recooked to the point where they were reduced to nothing. Then the devils would take them with their iron forks and place them on burning anvils, where they would forge them together with big hammers, so that twenty, thirty, or fifty, or a hundred of them would become one mass. Tormenting them, the devils would say, one to the other, 'Are they forged enough?'³⁴

Marmion depicts a recessed pit, surrounded by pure blackness, in which the only identifiable beings are the devils themselves: their victims have decomposed into red or blue blotches or streaks (Figure 16).

Yet it is the punishment of fornicators that occasions Marmion's most literal depiction of 'holy shit' (Figure 17). The chief torturer of this section is a bird

³¹ Latin text from Wagner, p. 16.

³² Translation from Gardiner, p. 166; Latin text from Wagner, p. 24.

³³ Translation from Gardiner, p. 166; Latin text from Wagner, p. 24.

³⁴ Translation from Kren and Wieck, p. 50.

-monster that repeatedly devours the fornicators and drops them into a frozen pond. Not surprisingly, both this section and the corresponding miniature have been seen as possible sources of inspiration for Bosch's bluebird.³⁵ We are told that while still inside the House of Phristinus,

The angel and the soul soon came upon a beast unlike all those they had already seen. This beast had two feet and two wings, a very long neck, and an iron beak and iron claws. From its jaws it breathed fire and flame and stood upon a large pond, all frozen. There it would devour all the souls it could reach. When it had eaten the souls, and they had been reduced to nothing in its belly, the beast would defecate, dropping them onto the ice where their torments were renewed.³⁶

The souls are 'reduced to nothing' in the bird's belly, but when the bird drops them onto the pond, they magically re-exist. Again, if the souls were to be truly digested, they would cease to exist – fundamentally altering the Christian narrative, in which souls are not only immortal but are also attached to one particular bodily identity.³⁷ The fornicating priests and nuns are threatened with total ontological breakdown, only, in the cruellest of jokes, to be 'reborn' intact to spin through the cycle of punishment *ad infinitum*. Demonic defecation is thereby construed as a parody of rebirth or resurrection. Indeed, the original Latin states that the bird-demon 'was giving birth to' the souls (*pariebat*); it was Margaret of York's French translator who changed the verb to 'defecated' (*reiettoit par derriere*, literally, 're-existed through the derriere').³⁸

It is thus important to note that many images in the Italian tradition previously examined actually show Satan extruding souls from the *lower* front of his torso.³⁹ For instance, in a fresco by Giovanni da Modena in the Basilica of San Petronio in Bologna (ca. 1410-15), a black, furry Satan squats in the pose of a

³⁵ See for example Robert L. McGrath, 'Satan and Bosch: The "Visio Tundali" and the Monastic Vices,' *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 6/71 (1968), 45-50. As Kren points out, Bosch's bird-devil departs significantly from the one described in the text; for this and a bibliography on the subject see Thomas Kren, ed., *Margaret of York, Simon Marmion, and The Visions of Tondal* (Malibu, CA: J. Paul Getty Museum, 1992), p. 26 and note 58.

³⁶ Translation from Kren and Wieck, p. 49.

³⁷ See Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body*, esp. pp. 117-55.

³⁸ Roger S. Wieck, 'Margaret of York's *Visions of Tondal*: Relationship of the Miniatures to a Text Transformed by Translator and Illuminator,' in *Margaret of York, Simon Marmion, and the Visions of Tondal*, pp. 119-128 (p. 120, note 12). Wieck argues that this was a mistake caused by the French translator's 'imperfect' knowledge of Latin; however, it seems just as likely that the change was intentional.

³⁹ See James J. Paxson, 'The Nether-faced Devil and the Allegory of Parturition,' *Studies in Iconography* 19 (1998), 139-176.



Figure 17: Simon Marmion (French, ca. 1425-1489), attributed; "The Torment of Unchaste Priests and Nuns"
Illumination from **Les Visions du Chevalier Tondal** (The Visions of Tondal), Ghent, 1475
Tempera colors, gold leaf, gold paint, and ink on parchment
36.3 x 26.2 cm
Detail courtesy of the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, MS. 30, fol. 24v

Figure 18: Giovanni da Modena (Italian, active ca. 1409-55)
Last Judgment, ca. 1410-15
Fresco
Detail: "Devouring and Excreting Satan"
Basilica di San Petronio, Bologna
Image courtesy of Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY



Figure 19: Hieronymus Bosch (Netherlandish, ca. 1450-1516)
Garden of Earthly Delights
Detail from left and central wing:
"Two couples"
Image courtesy of Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY

woman giving birth while a grimacing face on his lower stomach pushes out a human body (Figure 18).⁴⁰ As James J. Paxson has argued, such images demonise the female body via its most defining process; they also echo Dante's *Inferno*, in which 'the earth's core, at Hell's centre [...] happens to be the crux or crotch of Satan's actual body.'⁴¹ Their horror is enhanced by the fact that Satan is shown simultaneously 'giving birth' and devouring, clearly implying an elision of birthing and shitting (of course, such an elision does not require much, given the proximity of the organs involved).

Conclusion: Satan as Anti-Creator

The same elision, I would argue, is performed as Bosch's bluebird consumes and releases souls in a bubble whose shape and context clearly invoke an egg. The bubble's glossy, transparent membrane is also reminiscent of other bubble-like objects depicted in the *Garden*, particularly a large one shown budding from a plant-stalk in the lower left corner of the central panel to encase a naked couple (Figure 19). The male places a hand on his partner's lower belly, a gesture that would seem to imply her pregnancy, or at least the desire to cause it. However, as Keith Moxey argues, these paramours are a postlapsarian inversion of the pair shown directly to their right – Adam and Eve, whose 'marriage' in Eden is mediated by Christ and 'enacted for the sole purpose of human procreation.'⁴² By contrast, the second couple unites within a garden in which seeds are spilled, as it were, everywhere, but in which there is not a child in sight. The man's belly-rubbing gesture is thus an ironic one; his exposed genitalia indeed show his true motivations.⁴³ Significantly, their bubble occupies the same horizontal axis as the one excreted by the bluebird. In Hell, the cycle of inversion is made complete: the fornicators who inverted (or rather perverted) the sanctioned union to their right are punished, 'hatched' within an egg-shaped bubble mocking the one that enveloped their purely sensual bliss.

The bluebird's bubble also resembles the translucent Creation globe on the exterior state (see Figure 2) – although the shape of Creation, a perfect sphere, is now distorted into an oval. Scholars have argued that the globe specifically

⁴⁰ Cited in connection to Bosch by Grübel, p. 53.

⁴¹ *Quando noi fummo là dove la coscia / si volge, a punto in sul grosso de l'anche / lo duca, con fatica e con angoscia, / volse la testia ov'elli avea le zanche, / e aggrapossi al pel [...]* ('When we had reached the point at which the thigh / revolves, just at the swelling of the hip, / my guide, with heavy strain and rugged work, / reversed his head to where his legs had been / and grappled on the hair [...]'). Cited Paxson, p. 148.

⁴² Moxey, pp. 126-7.

⁴³ Moxey, pp. 126-7.

represents the third day of Creation, 'when no plant of the field was yet in the earth' (Gen 2:5).⁴⁴ In the upper left spandrel, a tiny figure of God the Father is shown gesturing towards an inscription that runs across the top: *Ipse dixit et facta su[n]t. Ipse ma[n]davit et creata su[n]t* ('For he spoke and they were made / for he commanded and they were created').⁴⁵ As the triptych is opened, the viewer is thus prompted to compare God's creative act with the various procreative or pseudo-procreative spectacles that ensue in the interior.

Moxey's claim that the triptych is also an allegory of *artistic* creation therefore seems reasonable. His argument can be summarised as follows: starting with Cennino Cennini's *Libro dell'Arte* (1400), Italian art theorists had used the related notions of *fantasia* and *licenza* – denoting the ability and the right of painters to create unnatural, fantastical forms at will by recombining those of nature – to align painting with poetry, thereby elevating its status. The hybrid monster, an artistic 'fantasy' that also displayed the imaginative faculty of the artist, and whose *locus classicus* was the mermaid described by Horace in the opening lines of the *Ars poetica*, became emblematic of a less mimetic and more poetical art, whose hero was Michelangelo.⁴⁶ Interest in such an art had been stimulated by the discovery, in the late fifteenth century, of the ruined *Domus Aurea* or 'Golden House' of Nero in Rome, whose walls were covered with interlacing hybrids of human, animal, and vegetal forms – a style of ornament named *grotesche* or 'grottoesque' in reference to the ruins' subterranean locale.⁴⁷ Bosch's chief patrons were the humanistically-educated Counts of Nassau-Breda, who possessed a vast library and in whose Brussels palace the *Garden of Earthly Delights* hung next to a portrait by the Dutch classicist painter Jan Gossaert.⁴⁸ In this milieu, Bosch must have become aware of the 'value attached to fantasy' in Italian art theory, and of its potential for elevating a kind of imagery in which he was already proficient.⁴⁹ Moxey thus interprets the *Garden* as 'a manifestation of the rising aspirations of the Renaissance artist,' which co-opts 'the satirical and entertainment value of the notion of the world upside down,

⁴⁴ Dixon, p. 65.

⁴⁵ Dixon, p. 65.

⁴⁶ See David Summers' chapter on *Fantasia* in his *Michelangelo and the Language of Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), pp. 103-143.

⁴⁷ On this topic see Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grottesque in Art and Literature*, trans. by Ulrich Weisstein (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1963), esp. pp. 20-30; and Dorothea Scholl, *Von den 'Grotesken' zum Grotesken: die Konstituierung einer Poetik des Grotesken in der italienischen Renaissance* (Münster: Lit, 2004).

⁴⁸ See Paul Vandenbroeck, *Jheronimus Bosch. Tussen Volksleven en Stadscultuur* (Berchem: EPO, 1987); cited Moxey, p. 136 (note 4).

⁴⁹ Moxey, p. 113.

⁵⁰ Moxey, pp. 122 and 124.

as well as of fabricated monsters, in order to demonstrate the humanist artist's new claim to artistic freedom.⁵⁰

Yet the identification of this freedom with an art of the grotesque was never a purely positive one, and had to be defended in the face of anxieties about transgression and meaninglessness; even Horace had warned that an imagery too detached from the laws of nature risked unravelling into sheer nonsense and vanity.⁵¹ How is such an art defended in the Hell panel of the *Garden*, in which the laws of nature no longer apply and are replaced with an order of the monstrous?

Bosch's bluebird offers an alternative figure of an artist, one who does not make anything new but simply recycles the world's formal detritus – and whose subject matter, moreover, is human beings, literally rendered as matter that is 'thrown under'. That the bird's victims are posited as subjects of a kind of demonic representation is further suggested by two nearby allusions to mirrors: most obviously, the convex one on the backside of the green devil, but also the cesspool, in which the faces of two souls already submerged appear to stare back up towards the souls vomiting or defecating into the pool, thus resembling their reflections.⁵² In both of these cases, the mirrors are black and the reflections are murky, darkened versions of subjects to which they are juxtaposed. Nonetheless, the truth of their identification – that human beings are vanities, as meaningless as shit – is confirmed by the bluebird and its falling egg. In a twist, Bosch's hybrid monster hatches its images in the same forms in which they are received; devoid of fantasy, it reproduces them mimetically and in tact.

⁵¹ As Summers points out, anxiousness about an art of the fantastical, underwritten by accusations of artistic 'vanity' leveled by Horace and Vitruvius, were always present and grew especially urgent later in the sixteenth century with the counter-reformation emphasis on decorum: 'Back once again were the comparisons of painting and sophistry, and the denunciations of the children of imagination as nothing; nothing, however, fraught with danger for the immortal soul, like devils and evil itself' (Summers, *Michelangelo and the Language of Art*, p. 140). That the Renaissance discourse on the grotesque comprised both praise and criticism is not properly acknowledged by Moxey, who focuses on famous defenders such as Francisco de Holanda.

⁵² The figure shown vomiting, and staring, into the cesspool distinctly resembles later images of Narcissus at the fountain, particularly the painting of the subject by Caravaggio.