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PIETER BRUEGEL'S *SERIES OF THE SEASONS*
ON THE PERCEPTION OF DIVINE ORDER*

Recent interpretations of the paintings by Flemish artist Pieter Bruegel the Elder (ca. 1528–1569) suggest that his representations of nature, and man's relation to nature, are governed by principles of order and harmony.¹ These principles are associated with Neostoic humanist thought, allegedly popular in circles of Bruegel's friends and patrons. In this view, nature in Bruegel's landscape paintings – above all in his famous *Series of the Seasons* (1565, figs. 1–5)² – is presented to the viewer as an object of reflection on the Divine rational order which underlies the beauty, variety, and cyclical change of the natural scenery. This Divine order is more an abstract philosophical principle, i.e. *Reason*, than the God of the theologians, i.e. the spiritual force that in personified form intervenes in human history in order to redeem mankind from its sins. Nature and man are conceptualized as distinct entities, if one may use this phrase, that are

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¹ See for example J. MÜLLER-HOFSTEDT, 'Zur Interpretation von Bruegel's Landschaft: Ästhetischer Landschaftsbegriff und Stoische Weltbetrachtung', in *Pieter Bruegel und seine Welt*, ed. O. von Simson – H. Mielke (Berlin 1979), p. 73–142; J. F. GREGORY, 'Toward the Contextualization of Pieter Bruegel's *Peccezzion to Calvary*: Constructing the Beholder From Within the Eyckian Tradition', *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 47 (1996), p. 207–221. Cf. E. M. KAVALLER, *Pieter Bruegel: Parables of Order and Enterprise* (Cambridge 1999).

² *Return of the Herd: Hunters in the Snow, Dark Day*, Vienna Kunsthistorisches Museum inv. Nrs. 1018, 1838, 1837; *Hay Harvest*, Prague Národní Galerie; *Wheat Harvest*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rudolfs Fund 1919, 19, 164. See for the series as a whole F. NOVOTNY, *Die Monatsbilder Pieter Bruegel d. Ä.* (Wien 1948); E. VAN DER VOSSEN, *De Maandenreeks van Pieter Bruegel den Ouden, Oud Holland* 66 (1951), p. 103–116; I. BUCHANAN, 'The Collection of Nicolaes Jongelincx II: The Months by Pieter Bruegel the Elder', *Burlington Magazine* 132 (1990), p. 541–550. For the three paintings in Vienna see for example K. DEMUS, 'The Pictures of Pieter Bruegel the Elder in the Kunsthistorisches Museum', in *Pieter Bruegel the Elder at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna*, ed. W. Seipel (Milan – Vienna 1999), p. 88–89. For the painting in Prague J. ŠÍP, *Pieter Bruegel d. Ä. Die Heuente* (Prag 1960). And for the New York painting *ex cat. From Van Eyck to Bruegel: Early Netherlandish Painting in The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, ed. M. AINSWORTH – K. CHRISTIANSEN (New York 1998), p. 386–391.

separated from each other even though they share a common (Divine) principle of rational order and harmony, which also reigns when seasonal vicissitudes strike as natural disasters, as can be observed in Bruegel's *Dark Day* in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna (fig. 1). This sense of separateness, of personal detachment, enables the viewer to contemplate the underlying goodness, harmony and order even in such scenes of apparent chaos and destruction. As such, this interpretation does not differ fundamentally from earlier interpretations of nature as a self-contained aesthetic entity (under the rubric "landscape"), which is offered to the viewer as an object of visual delight.³ Both interpretations not only share an objectified concept of nature, but also the idea that man, i.e. the viewer of Bruegel's paintings, is separated from nature in and through the act of observation and contemplation. This act has a self-referential quality, not unlike the appeal to (the viewer's) self-knowledge, personal moral, and rational judgment, vis à vis the folly and sinful behaviour of mankind portrayed in many of Bruegel's figure pieces. The perceptual act in which Bruegel's paintings involve the viewer must therefore be characterized with words that emphasize the mental and visual distance, detachment, of observer and observed.⁴

In this article I would like to present a different view of the perceptual act in which Bruegel's *Series of the Seasons* involves the viewer, and a different view of the order, or principle, underlying the representation of nature in these paintings. It is based on previous work that I have done on religious scenes in early sixteenth-century landscape paintings and their function as aids for meditation.⁵ Although formal connections between Bruegel's landscape paintings and the earlier "world landscape" tradition have been acknowledged for a long time⁶, few authors have paid attention to thematic and perceptual relationships.⁷ It may seem rather odd, I realize, to suggest that we should try to understand Bruegel's *Series of the Seasons* in the context of the religious imagery in sixteenth-century landscape paintings, since Bruegel's landscapes are usually seen as essentially secular paintings. Even those authors who have

³ See W. S. GIBSON, *Mirror of the Earth: The World Landscape in Sixteenth Century Flemish Painting* (Princeton, 1989).

⁴ Cf. GIBSON (1989), p. 58–59.

⁵ See R. L. FALKENBURG, *Joachim Patinir: Landscape as an Image of the Pilgrimage of Life* (Amsterdam & Philadelphia, 1988). ID., *Marginal Motifs in Early Flemish Landscape Paintings: Heint met de Bles. Studies and Explorations on the World Landscape Tradition*, ed. N. E. Muller et al. (Princeton (The Art Museum) – Turnhout, 1998), p. 153–169.

⁶ See already L. VON BALDASS, *Die niederländische Landschaftsmalerei von Patinir bis Bruegel*, *Jahrbuch der Kunsthistorischen Sammlungen in Wien* 34 (1918), p. 111–157.

⁷ See R. L. FALKENBURG, *Pieter Bruegel's Kruisdraging: een proeve van close reading*, *Oud Holland* 107 (1993), p. 17–33, and FALKENBURG (1998).



Fig. 1 Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Dark Day*
(Copyright Vienna Kunsthistorisches Museum)



Fig. 2 Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Hay Harvest*
(Copy right Smečno Nostitz-collection)



Fig. 3 Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Wheat Harvest*
(Copyright New York The Metropolitan Museum of Art
Rogers Fund 1919 (19164))



Fig 4 Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Return of the Herd*
(Copyright Vienna Kunsthistorisches Museum)



Fig 5 Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Hunters in the Snow*
(Copyright Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum)

approached his landscape paintings from a certain philosophical, “weltanschaulichen”, point of view (see above) have characterized their content in secular terms, or in terms that indicate a breach with traditional religiosity. And one has to acknowledge, right from the start, that whereas landscapes by Joachim Patinir and his followers contain little scenes that relate a story from the life of a saint, or a biblical story – mostly from the New Testament –, Bruegel’s *Series of the Seasons* clearly do not do so. A few of his other landscape paintings, however, do contain a small religious scenes, such as his *Carrying of the Cross* in Vienna (1564, fig. 6)⁸, where the figure of Christ collapsing under the weight of the Cross is almost hidden from view because of the multitude of bystanders and participants in the Calvary procession.⁹ In order to show that the thematic connections between Bruegel’s work and the religious imagery in the world landscape tradition go beyond this example, and include his *Series of the Seasons* as well, I will follow a two tiered line of reasoning. The first consists of a summary of my former analyses of the religious scenes in earlier landscape paintings as meditation vignettes that address the theme of “sight and insight”. The second is an effort to show that Bruegel’s *Seasons* do contain religious vignettes of some sort, after all, although in a disguised form that has prevented their recognition so far. This will lead me to some concluding remarks regarding the hypothesis that there is a certain unifying theme underlying the content of these vignettes, one that puts the perception of (Divine) order in these paintings as a whole in a different perspective.¹⁰

Early Netherlandish landscape painting offers a whole series of pictures the matizing the notion “sight and insight” with the help of a series of small, sometimes minute scenes that are spread out in the vast space of a natural scenery which encompasses the various geographical characteristics of the entire world as it was then known.¹¹ This multi-scenic device is derived from late medieval “Andachtsbilder”, devotional images designed to engage the viewer in a process of meditation on events epigrammatically represented in minuscule figures. Their small size is not indicative of a lack of meaning, but serves as an

⁸ Vienna Kunsthistorisches Museum inv. Nr. 1017 Cf. K. DIMITS (1999) p. 68–69. See also the references in notes 7 and 9.

⁹ Cf. F. WINKLER, *Die Wiener Kreuztragung*, *Niederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 9 (1958) p. 83–108. Bruegel’s *Landscape with the Preaching of John* (1566, Szepmúvészeti Múzeum) and his *Conversion of Saul* (1567, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna inv. Nr. 3690) bare witness of the iconographic relationship between Bruegel’s paintings and the earlier landscape tradition; both themes occur in paintings by Patinir and (the group) *Herri met de Bles*.

¹⁰ I will offer a more elaborate exposition of these ideas in a book on “The Mind’s Eye View” in Early Netherlandish Painting, which I am currently preparing.

¹¹ See for the following especially FALKENBURG (1988) and (1998).



Fig 6 Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Carrying of the Cross*
(Copyright Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum)

incentive for a meditation by the viewer that comprises at least as much visualization as (literal) vision: the imaginative input, the mental “Ausmalung” of the story by the viewer, generates almost more images, imagery, than the respective pictorial “mnemograms” themselves. Traditional “Andachtsbilder” let the viewer memorize and meditate on events from the life of the protagonist that have a strong emotional impact and stimulate feelings of empathy and compassion with the holy person. Early sixteenth-century landscapes, however, engage the viewer in a mental and visual voyage through the painted world that make him or her experience, and reflect on, the following of a spiritual path in the real, material world. They do so by taking up certain stories from the New Testament that thematize notions of sight and insight, revelation and belief, often along the lines of an antithesis between the material world and the world of the spirit, the visible and the invisible, seeing and being blind, and, most fundamentally, Christ and the rest of mankind.

Thus some landscapes depict the story of the Men of Emmaus (Luke 24:13-31) who, while on their way from Jerusalem to their home village, encounter Jesus but do not recognize him (after his Resurrection). While one scene, in the foreground, depicts the travelers on their way to Emmaus, another, located far in the background, refers to the episode after their arrival in Emmaus.¹² The Scriptures relate how the travelers invited their companion to stay with them and how, only when he broke and blessed the bread at their table, “their eyes were opened and they recognized him; and he vanished out of their sight”. By casting this last event in a tiny, hardly visible scene in the far distance, located on the edge of the composition, the picture constructs the viewer’s visual experience as a replication of the original narrative’s theme of recognition and spiritual insight.

Other landscapes depict the Preaching of John the Baptist to the crowd.¹³ They, too, use the tiny mnemogram literally as an eye-opener, following the biblical account of how “The next day he [John the Baptist] saw Jesus coming toward him, and declared, ‘Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world... I saw the Spirit descend as a dove from heaven... And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God’”. (John 1:29-34). While John makes a pointing gesture, indicating to the crowd to “behold” Jesus, his figure cannot be found in the direction of the outstretched arm. Only

¹² See, for example, Herri Bles (or workshop), *Journey to Emmaus*, Antwerp, Museum Mayer van den Bergh, inv. Nr. 40 – Gibson (1989), p. 30 and fig. 2.47.

¹³ Herri Bles (circle of), *Landscape with the Preaching of John the Baptist*, Formerly Gallery Heim-Gautier, Paris – see Falkenburg (1998), p. 161 and fig. 131; cf. Herri Bles, *Landscape with the Preaching of John the Baptist*, Dortmund, Museum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte der Stadt Dortmund – see Gibson (1989), p. 31-32 and fig. 2.56.

a viewer eagerly scanning the whole panorama will notice Jesus' inconspicuous silhouette as he emerges from the woods in the background, where one may also detect the equally unobtrusive scene of the Baptism of Jesus in the river Jordan. Form, content, and the careful placing of the little scene work together in leading the viewer to recognition and spiritual insight through the adventures of his outward eye.

The story of the Good Samaritan is the subject of the human staffage in another group of landscapes. In this case, the biblical narrative contrasts the behaviour of a priest and a Levite, who did not act when they saw the victim of a robbery lying half dead on the side of a road, with that of a Samaritan who "when he saw him, ... was moved with pity..." (Luke 10:31-34). The paintings bring out the tenor of the parable by showing the Samaritan taking care of the victim, whereas the priest and the Levite – in the attire of sixteenth-century clerics – are seen passing by and turning their backs on him while keeping their eyes fixed on their (probably religious) reading.¹⁴ This *mise-en-scène* is probably not so much a (Protestant) critique of the Church, as an effort to engage the viewer in recognizing that true Christianity is born out of inner spirituality and compassion, and is the opposite of shallow outward religion.¹⁵ Sight and insight are staged here as antagonistic qualities and offered to the viewer for reflection and introspection.

This pattern also underlies a series of landscapes with the Carrying of the Cross, which culminate in Bruegel's version in Vienna. Christ is always depicted as visually almost lost in the crowd; and in a sense, this whole crowd is characterized as his adversaries, who put him to death, withhold from him their compassion, and pursue their own worldly interests. Their lack of recognition of Jesus' true identity and mission in the world is exemplified by some figures that are positioned on the fringes of the crowd and watch the procession go by. In most cases they are peasants and vendors who are on their way to the market with the produce of the fields. They are the antipodes of Jesus, because they are heading in the opposite direction, and sometimes bluntly cut across the Calvary procession with their carts, horses, and market ware (fig. 7).¹⁶ These figures, always located on the edge of the crowd or in the margin of the composition, also occur in other landscapes as

¹⁴ HEIN BLES, *Landscape with the Parable of the Good Samaritan*, Namur, Musée des Arts Anciens du Namurois – cf. FALKENBURG (1998), p. 165 and fig. 132

¹⁵ Cf. R. L. FALKENBURG, *Érasme de Rotterdam et la peinture de paysage aux Pays-Bas, Actes du cycle de conférences "De la puissance de l'image: les artistes du Nord face à la réforme" au Musée du Louvre*, ed. M. R. Recht, Paris (Musée du Louvre), 2001 (in press)

¹⁶ Jan van Amstel (the Brunswick Monogrammist), *Christ Carrying the Cross*, formerly Amsterdam, collection P. de Boer – cf. GIBSON (1989), p. 23-24 and fig. 2.28

antipodes, or antagonists, of the religious protagonist. They belong to a repertoire of marginal motifs that ultimately are derived from, and share the pictorial rhetoric of, marginal illustrations in Books of Hours and other late-medieval manuscript decorations. There, they act as (parodic) glosses on the main scene, mimicking or counteracting its protagonist, and this is also the role they seem to have in early sixteenth-century landscape paintings. Thus in some landscapes one finds the blind pilgrim and his guide (traditional types of the "false pilgrim") in a corner of the landscape, calling attention, by way of illustrating the opposite, to the spiritual path advocated by their antipode.¹⁷ In landscapes with the Carrying of the Cross, this role of marginal antitype is given to peasants who, by going in the opposite direction, implicitly allude to the *following* of Christ, the "imitatio Christi".¹⁸

This whole idiom is used and elaborated upon in Bruegel's own version of this theme and in a series of other paintings in which he crosses the boundaries between landscape and history painting. In his *Vienna Carrying of the Cross* the peasants are only part of a whole array of marginal gloss figures, many of which are of a rather wry sort (fig. 6). The wife of Simon of Cyrene, who tries to prevent her husband from helping Jesus to carry the cross (while carrying on her belt a rosary with a crucifix as sign of her devotion)¹⁹, is an example of hypocrisy which has been noticed by many authors. This is just one among many examples, however, of non- and outright anti-Christian behavior among the crowd, which is even more blatant than that of the peasants exactly because of the "innocence" and "humane playfulness" which they display. It is not the blatant aggression or the demonic features of Jesus' tormentors that one finds in many contemporary (Netherlandish and German) paintings of the Passion which Bruegel chooses to portray. He uses the less obvious, but more subtle, idiom of the marginal gloss to express looming threat, evil, and crass ignorance of the redemptive nature of the event. To give just one example, the raven and the wheel high on top of a stake in the upper right corner echo the adjacent circle of onlookers who have positioned themselves on top of the Golgotha hill in expectation of the immanent crucifixion. The raven qualifies them as scavengers waiting for their prey.²⁰ By casting the historical event in

¹⁷ See, for example, Joachim Patinir, *Landscape with Saint Jerome*, Madrid, Museo del Prado, inv. Nr. 1614 – cf. K. JONES HILLSTEDT, *The blind man and his guide in Netherlandish painting*, *Simiolus*, 13, 1983, p. 163–181.

¹⁸ Cf. Henri Bles's *Road to Calvary* in The Princeton Art Museum, where peasants as well as the blind pilgrim and his guide are among the bystanders in the Calvary procession – see FALKENBURG (1998).

¹⁹ Cf. Luke 23:26.

²⁰ See for a fuller account FALKENBURG (1993) and also (2001).



Fig. 7. Jan van Amstel (the Brunswick Monogrammist), *Christ Carrying the Cross*. Panel, 33 x 47 cm. Private Collection.

a realistic contemporary scene and using the pictorial rhetoric of inconspicuousness and apparent contingency, Bruegel relies heavily on the visual and mental “work-out” of the viewer.²¹ Here, far more than in earlier landscapes, the visible, material world itself becomes the playground for the viewer’s search for manifestations of the invisible, divine world: but these manifestations are only “visible” for the mind’s eye of the viewer and not, or hardly, for his physical eyesight. The marginal scene of the Virgin Mary, John and the accompanying women in the foreground, who have turned their eyes away from the visual spectacle, signal to the viewer that to be near Christ and to have compassion with him is a matter of spiritual seeing rather than outward seeing. The most remarkable feature of this antithetical setting is, however, that the viewer of the painting can reach that mode of inward seeing by involving himself in the very contingencies of the physical world, seeing through them, and unraveling their nature as telling details of an underlying story. But as with the subsidiary scenes in earlier landscapes, this story has to be told by the viewer as much as by the painting itself.

²¹ Cf. the remarks on contingency in Hieronymus Bosch’s and Pieter Bruegel’s paintings offered by J. L. KOERNER, Hieronymus Bosch’s World Picture, *Picturing Science Producing Art*, ed. C. A. Jones – P. Galison, New York and London, 1998, p. 297-323.

The *Conversion of Saul* in Vienna (1567) uses the same strategies to involve the viewer in the theme of sight and insight, blindness and revelation.²² Already the subject of the biblical tale itself (Acts 9 1-9, 17-18), this theme is brought home to the viewer through formal and iconographic means. The protagonist is depicted in the center of the composition, but is visually marginalized and obscured by the multitude of Saul's fellow persecutors who are crowded together in a relatively small segment of the composition. Their spiritual confusion, lack of direction, and inner blindness is expressed, among other ways, by their headgear, which has sunk so far over their eyes that they literally and figuratively cannot clearly see. They visualize the opposite of what is the implicit appeal of the central scene: do not follow the spiritual blindness of Saul but open one's inner eyes to the message of Christ. The function of these subsidiary figures is fairly obvious, as is the meaningfulness of their disorderly grouping, which obstructs the central scene from view.²³ What has not been recognized is the fact that this arrangement is part of a conscious strategy to "trap" the viewer in the complexities of spiritually "seeing through" outward reality, which Bruegel adopted directly from the world landscape tradition.

It is telling that Bruegel used the same device of visually obscuring the scene of the Adoration of the Magi in his *Winterlandscape* in Winterthur (dated 1567)²⁴ traditionally this event was celebrated by the Church as the feast of "Epiphany", or "revelation". Here, as in earlier landscapes, the religious scene itself has been relegated to the margins of the composition, but Bruegel has enhanced its inconspicuousness by blurring the whole scene with falling snow. This device causes the viewer to engage in the Magi's search for the newborn king, the Son of God, in the contingency of ordinary life. He is revealed to the viewer, to his spiritual sight rather than to his outward eye, in the guise of a poor child, almost lost in the corner of what looks like one's own local habitat. The painting shows him how the signs of a Divine reality may be fully "snowed under" in real life. It is striking, in this context, to note (and this holds true also for the *Conversion of Saul*) how cramped the clustering of the human figures in the composition is, compared to the free space given to the depiction of apparently meaningless (in the sense of trivial) details and motifs. (How trivial, however, are the tiny figures of the lanquenets which are barely visible in the background of the Flemish village?) The attention paid to the precise rendering of

²² Kunsthistorisches Museum inv. Nr. 3690

²³ Cf. for example G. STRIDBLCK, *Bruegelstudien. Untersuchungen zu den ikonologischen Problemen bei Pieter Bruegel d. Ä. sowie dessen Beziehungen zum niederländischen Romanismus* Soest 1977 (reprint ed. Stockholm, 1956), p. 252-255, who already pointed to the spiritual theme (to follow the inner Christ) of the central scene.

²⁴ Collection Oskar Reinhart

surface textures of brick, ruinous walls and other architectural structures, ice and snow etc. is inversely proportional to the epigrammatic rendering of the biblical tale. That this constellation is not to be understood (as art historians often have done) as token that the landscape is "liberated" from the constraints of religious content and is depicted "for its own sake", may be clear now. We are better equipped to "see through" Bruegel's pictorial rhetoric.

When we turn to Bruegel's *Series of the Seasons*, it is with alertness that these paintings may present a similar challenge to the viewer's power of discernment in the form of an inconspicuous religious scene or motif. Perhaps the most obvious candidate for such a motif is the rainbow in the background of the *Return of the Herd* (fig. 4), which represents autumn. This optical phenomenon is part of the depiction of the weather, to which Bruegel pays much attention in this series, always in accordance with the time of the year. Here, the rainbow helps to signal the approaching rain and storm season. At the same time, however, the rainbow immediately brings to mind the story of Noah and the Flood, and God's promise never to destroy life on earth again and never to halt the succession of "sowing and harvesting, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night" (Genesis 8:22). Thus, the rainbow is a natural sign of both seasonal and cosmic dimensions. Understood as reference to the vicissitudes of seasonal weather, it expresses the hope and expectation that nature will show its brighter side after Fall and Winter have passed and given way to happier seasons.

At the same time, this promise has a redemptive and, beyond that, an eschatological dimension. In the Christian tradition, following Augustine, the general pattern of time is not that of endless repetition, but of beginning and end, sin and redemption, of the salutary "arrow of time" of the history of salvation. In this tradition, the rainbow reminds the viewer of the fall of mankind, as punishment for which God has ordered man to toil the earth "in the sweat of one's face", but also of Christ whose act of redemption breaks the otherwise endless cycle of human effort and misery.²⁵ To the modern viewer, this redemptive perspective may seem not particularly relevant here if it is not substantiated by additional visual evidence. There is indeed, in Bruegel's painting something of a visual context for this thought. Near the rainbow and the dark approaching clouds, some men are working in a vineyard located on the top of a high, otherwise barren, mountain. This seems to be a rather unusual place for a vineyard, which one would expect in far more accessible and fertile grounds – as we actually see depicted in the region further below, near the river that winds into the distance. As these workers, according to the age-old tradition of the "labors

²⁵ See R. BITTNER, *Augustine's Philosophy of History: The Augustinian Tradition*, ed. G. B. Matthews, Berkeley – Los Angeles – London, 1999, p. 345–360.

of the months", perform the preparatory work on the vines in order for them to bear fruit in the next season, this small scene carries with it the promise of future harvest and fulfillment. Seen in conjunction with the nearby rainbow, however, the vineyard and the high grounds may signal in particular the promise of the best future harvest possible, the blood of Christ on Golgotha.²⁶

Were it not for the context of the series as a whole, where other slightly more visibly manifest signs of the presence of Christ in the world may be detected, I admit that this reading would be rather gratuitous. The next painting in the series, however, seems to offer such a sign, albeit in an unexpected place and, again, in an apparently contingent mode of expression associated with the representation of ordinary daily life. This is, literally, a sign, attached to the exterior of an inn in the left corner of the *Hunters in the Snow* (fig. 5). This sign shows the traces of a crude image, and a text which clarifies the representation – and the name of the inn: "Dit is inden hert" (This is in the Stag). The image is taken from the legend of St. Hubert, the patron saint of hunters, who converted to Christianity when an image of the Cross appeared to him in a stag's antlers. The reason for Bruegel to incorporate this image in his winter landscape may have to do with the saint's popularity in the Southern Netherlands as patron saint of hunters.²⁷ The problem with this interpretation is that, in the case of the hunters who pass by the inn, this patronage does not seem to have been very effective. They appear to be returning from a hunt with only a single catch, a fox dangling over the shoulders of one of the men. Perhaps, as some commentators have proposed, Bruegel shows himself here a "honest humorist" by suggesting that their scant catch results from not having St. Hubert "inden hert": in their heart.²⁸

It certainly seems natural to connect the sign with the hunters, as does the thought that there is a friction between the two motifs, but this tension may be of a more serious nature and wider scope than has been recognized. There is a rather striking analogy between the tense constellation of these motifs and the religious and profane scenery in some earlier paintings belonging to the world landscape tradition. In several paintings with Christ carrying the Cross and the Crucifixion by Jan van Amstel and Pieter Aertsen, some peasants who act out

²⁶ Cf. the metaphor of Christ, the wine-press, which was wide-spread in the late Middle Ages – see, for example, D. ALIBFRI, *Aux Origines du Pressoir mystique, images d'arbres et de vignes dans l'art médiéval, Le Pressoir mystique Actes du Colloque de Recloses*, 27 mai 1989, Paris, 1990, p. 27-42 and A. THOMAS – M. ZLINDER – F. J. HEYEN, *Die Darstellung Christi in der Kelter Eine theologische und kulturhistorische Studie, zugleich ein Beitrag zur Geschichte und Volkskunde des Weinbaus*, Dusseldorf, 1981.

²⁷ See the *Lexikon der Christlichen Ikonographie*, VI, Rome – Freiburg – Basel – Vienna, 1974, 547-551.

²⁸ See DEMUS (1999), p. 88-89.

the role of antitypes of Christ are shown bowing their heads and looking away when they pass Jesus, or literally turning their backs on him.²⁹ In this way their spiritual blindness and lack of concern is given clear visual expression. By implication, their averted gazes call for opposite behavior: compassion with the suffering Jesus. In Bruegel's *Hunters in the Snow* the arrangement of the hunters relative to the image on the sign of the inn is similar. Their bowed heads, their gazes fixed to the snow-covered ground, signal their blindness to their patron saint, and indirectly point to the theme of Christ's appearance and revelation, which is the subject of crude painting on the inn's sign. The ultimate "image partner" of the hunters is therefore Christ: it is he whom they don't have in their hearts. What gives the viewer visual support for this reading is the slanted position of the sign: in itself it signals negligence, disregard for Christ, and spiritual blindness, that reign in this corner of the world. The straw fire in front of the inn, which is lighted to singe a pig – a traditional activity for November and December – adds to this impression, as the wind-swept flames flare up high and dangerously close to the front of the building.³⁰ As a result of this interpretation, these and other "Laborers of the Months" start to lose their "innocence", which is inherent in the naturalness and "appropriateness" of their activities to the specific time of the year, and may become objects of moral scrutiny by the viewer. I will not elaborate on the possible content of these reflections here, but confine myself to the observation that this constellation of motifs is instrumental in making the viewer aware of Christ as the true, but unrecognized, pivot of the world. The image on the sign, and its tiny dimensions, seem to serve a similar purpose as the small religious vignettes in earlier landscapes, i.e. to help the viewer recognize Christ with his inward eye, following St. Hubert who "saw" the crucifix appearing to him. The theme of appearance may even have a specific historical connotation, given the fact that according to the traditional Church calendar December was the time when Christ's birth, his literal appearance in the world, occurred. But as there was no place for him in the inn when he was about to be born (Luke 2:7), so is the location of his appearance in the modern world. His place is relegated to a marginal position, a disregarded sign exposed to wind and winter cold.

The next painting, the *Dark Day* (fig. 1), which shows the stormy weather and the seasonal activities of January and February, contains a few motifs that

²⁹ Jan van Amstel, *Landscape with the Crucifixion*, Basel, Öffentliche Kunstsammlung, Kunstmuseum – see GIBSON (1989), fig. 2.29, and two landscapes with the *Carrying of the Cross* by Pieter Aertsen in Antwerp, Museum voor Schone Kunsten, and formerly Berlin, Gemäldegalerie (1552; destroyed) – see FALKENBURG (1993), p. 27; and FALKENBURG (1998), p. 163.

³⁰ This motif is echoed in the background by the tiny scene of a chimney fire in a farmhouse, which people try to extinguish, such a fire usually results from a lack of care and maintenance.

also may be understood as references to the veiled manifestation of God's son in this world. The people who are portrayed in the right corner of the composition are involved, as so many others in this landscape, in activities that are associated with the specific time of the year. Some of them are pruning trees, others repair weather beaten houses, and two adults and a child form a group of merry-makers whom, to judge from the crown the child is wearing, we can associate with the feast of Epiphany, which traditionally was celebrated on January 6th.³¹ This feast commemorated the visit of the three Magi to the newly born Christ Child and the "epiphany", the revelation, of his divine nature to them. A few years later Bruegel also treated this theme in a rather inconspicuous way, as we have noted, but in the *Winterthur* picture the three Magi – if not the Christ Child – are at least visible to a certain degree. In the *Dark Day*, however, it is only the indirect, playful reference of the child's crown that could bring the Magi's search for the newly born king to the mind of the viewer. In this connection one might also take the small sign of the inn on the other side of the composition into consideration. This sign shows an image of a star against a blue background, and a text that seems to read "dit is inden ster" – a constellation that might be understood as a visual gloss on the star that led the Magi to the birthplace of Christ. For the rest, however, this inn seems to be rather the opposite of a godly place, given such details as a man urinating against its wall, a fiddler, and a woman and a child who drag a man towards (*sic*) its entrance. The visually veiled reference, in other words, to the Magi's search for Christ and the revelation of his identity acts as a gloss on the veiled manifestation of the Divine in this world and constructs the viewer's visual and mental re-enactment of the Magi's experience of this manifestation.

³¹ So far, the association of each painting with two particular months has been based on the medieval iconography of the Labors of the Months. As this tradition had always known a certain degree of variation in the connection of each individual labor with a particular month (within the general frame of the four seasons), there has been much discussion on the precise identification of the months, and their sequence, in Bruegel's *Series of the Seasons* (See, among others, K. TOINAI, *Studien zu den Gemälden P. Bruegels d. Ä., Jahrbuch der Kunsthistorischen Sammlungen in Wien*, n.s., 8, 1934, p. 125-128; F. NOVOTNY, *Die Monatsbilder Pieter Bruegels des Älteren*, Vienna, 1948; H. J. VAN MIEGROET, *The twelve months reconsidered: how a drawing by Pieter Stevens clarifies a Bruegel enigma*, *Simiolus*, 16, 1986, p. 29-35.) If one accepts, however, the hypothesis that these paintings contain religious motifs, some of which can be related to a specific date on the Christian calendar, the problem how to relate each painting with which two months can be solved in the following way. As the commemoration of St. Hubert's name day was November 3rd and Epiphany was celebrated on January 6th (cf. B. BLACKBURN and L. HOLFORD-SIREVENS, *The Oxford Companion to the year*, Oxford, 1999, p. 445 and 21-24), the *Hunters in the Snow* and the *Dark Day* would consequently represent November-December and January-February, respectively. The identification of (or association with) the respective months in the remaining pictures becomes self-explanatory (resulting in a scheme that differs from the one suggested by Van Miegroet).

While Bruegel, in this painting as well as in his *Hunters in the Snow*, embroiders on the pictorial language of the marginal gloss in early sixteenth-century landscape painting, he also goes a step beyond his predecessors. In the earlier tradition, the small religious vignettes thematize sight and insight and involve the viewer through their very optical elusiveness in the paradox of "seeing" the invisible. Bruegel, however, has transformed these vignettes into contingent, and therefore apparently "meaningless", details in the pictorial evocation of everyday life. Thus he makes it even harder for the viewer to obtain an understanding of the underlying order of the world, judging by the haphazardness of its outward appearance.

The consequence of this strategy is, for that matter, that the more strongly Bruegel appealed to the imaginative powers of the viewer, the harder it is to find evidence for this reading, since the whole device lives on indirect suggestion and is destroyed by proof. Bruegel's concern, of course, was not to help, or hamper, future art historical discourse, but to construct a rich visual experience for the contemporary viewer. I mention the hermeneutic problems for the modern academic interpreter not in order to make this reading unamenable to criticism (by suggesting that it is substantiated by its very visual elusiveness). I only want to point out that the limited demonstrability of this reading may be due, in part at least, to the inherent properties of the pictorial language Bruegel seems to have employed.

My interpretation is further complicated and handicapped by the disappearance of the next painting in the sequence, a representation of what must have been an evocation of Spring, or March and April. I will not speculate what it may have looked like, or what religious motif, if any, it may have contained.³² Instead, I will focus on the following painting, the landscape with the *Hay Harvest* (fig. 2) in the Nostitz collection, Smecno. This is the only instance in this series where we encounter motifs that directly relate to the pictorial tradition of the world landscape. The foreground on the right shows a group of peasants who are seen from behind and who are on their way to the market. They are loaded with the early summer produce of the fields and carry with them large baskets with fruit and vegetables. They form an instructive example of how, at the intersection of two iconographic traditions, we find a motif that belongs to the representation of the Labors of the Months, and at the same time relates to the antagonism between peasants and religious figures in early 16th century landscape painting. In this painting we do not find any figures that depict, or refer to, a specific biblical story, but there is again a small religious configuration that, once

³² Michael Frayn has made the rediscovery of the long lost sixth painting the subject of his recent novel *Headlong* (Metropolitan Books) New York 1999.

perceived, opens up a critical view of what otherwise looks like a perfectly good example of industrious labor and correspondingly rich rewards. The peasants are just passing by a small roadside chapel on a pole, in which we glimpse a tiny sculpture of Mary and the Christ Child. Such roadside chapels were widespread in Flanders and were incentives to, and objects of, prayers and other practices of popular religion. There is another painting by Bruegel that testifies to one particular custom that is relevant to mention in this connection. His *Peasant Dance* in Vienna (1568)³³ shows in the extreme right corner a crude wooden frame, attached to a tree, with a hand-colored woodcut of Mary and the Christ Child. Below this image hangs a pot in which someone has stuck some freshly picked flowers, apparently as a token of his or her gratitude to, or reverence for, the Virgin Mother. The structure is reminiscent of the roadside shrine in Bruegel's *Hay Harvest*; it also shows the pot, but not the flowers. In effect we have a motif constellation that is very similar to the hunters and the St. Hubert sign in the *Hunters in the Snow* and may be suggestive of a similar message. The peasants pass the chapel without paying any attention to it. Their heads are "filled" with other concerns: the large baskets that they carry on their heads are painted in such a way that it looks as if their heads "are" these baskets. In other paintings too, Bruegel uses this device of an object "replacing", or covering, the head of a person in order to signal the material concerns, and spiritual blindness, by which such minds are clouded. The same impression is suggested here, enhanced by the fact that the man closest to the shrine has turned his back on it. This may be read as a coincidence, as may the whole composition of these motifs. A viewer alerted to such tiny ripples in the stream of "natural" events in other paintings in the series may see things differently, though.

My last example is the most difficult to argue. In the paintings discussed so far, we were able to find certain small signs that, although not directly representing a biblical event or figure, undoubtedly have a religious connotation – regardless of the specific meaning one attributes to them. Despite their inconspicuousness, these signs are recognizable for the viewer as such, i.e., as man-made signs, or "God-made" in the case of the rainbow. In the *Wheat Harvest* (fig. 3) in New York, however, I have not been able to detect any such signs. But there is one motif belonging to the natural scenery that allows for a similar reading as the religious signs in the other paintings of the series. This is the pear tree in the foreground with a large barren branch protruding from its trunk. Having reached the harvest season, Bruegel includes motifs that relate to the "labors" of the months August and September. In addition to the wheat harvest, he depicts the gathering of apples and pears by workers in the field. A

³³ Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum inv. Nr. 1059.

fruit-bearing pear tree is therefore fully appropriate for this time of the year. The barren branch, which is somewhat isolated from the crown of the tree, may be seen as the result of Bruegel's effort to give the whole landscape a natural appearance, that is, the look of real nature where death and decay reign as much as life and growth do. The pear tree shows a few other barren branches as well, though thinner and irregularly forked in smaller twigs, which stretch out from the crown just above the heads of some peasants below who are having their meal. The larger branch has a human echo in a sleeping peasant on the other side of the trunk, whose legs stretch away from the tree.

At first sight, therefore, there is nothing to suggest that the dry branches would have any specific meaning at all. And we would be foolish to deny that there may be a reluctance among modern (and perhaps also 16th century) viewers to spend much time and deliberation on an inconspicuous motif that may well have served exclusively to enhance the suggestion of natural growth and decay. Yet barrenness in a world of fertility and productivity is potentially a charged theme. I wonder, therefore, if these dry branches are meant as a gloss on the resting peasants below, especially in view of the fact that their fellow workers are still busy performing the "labor of the month".

The idea that these resting peasants should be seen with a critical eye finds indirect endorsement in a similar constellation of motifs in Bruegel's painting *The Land of Cockaigne* (1567).³⁴ Here a "food-bearing" tree is at the center of an image of a paradisiacal country whose inhabitants, according to folk legend, feast on an abundance of food all day long without needing to work. At the foot of this tree lie representatives of different working classes: a soldier, a clerk and a peasant who is resting on top of his flail – exhausted not from work but from heavy food consumption. A contemporary print made by Pieter van der Heyden after this painting contains an inscription, which explicitly disapproves of the lazy and gluttonous nature of these greedy-guts.³⁵ The dry branches in Bruegel's *Wheat Harvest* may offer a similar, pictorial, gloss on peasants who sleep and eat but don't work.

Further endorsement of this interpretation may be found in the combination of a fruit-bearing tree with a large barren branch proper. We find such a combination in contemporary representations of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. One particular example worth mentioning here, since it regards one of the first major landscapes painted in the Southern Netherlands in the beginning of

³⁴ Munich, Alte Pinakothek – see also L. LEBLER, *Le Pays de Cocagne* (Het Luilekkerland), *Bulletin des Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique*, 4, 1955, p. 199-214

³⁵ Pieter van der Heyden, *Land of Cockaigne*, after Pieter Bruegel, ca. 1567. Etching, Brussels, Bibliothèque Royale, Cabinet des Estampes

the 16th century, is Joachim Patinir's *Landscape with the Rest on the Flight to Egypt*, in Madrid.³⁶ In the foreground, next to Mary and the Child, rises an old apple tree – fruits in top – with one isolated barren branch sticking out from the rest of the crown. This is the tree of knowledge of good and evil as late medieval popular religious lore imagined it: withered after the Fall, but fruit-bearing again at Christ's Passion and redemption of mankind.³⁷ The pear tree in Bruegel's *Wheat Harvest* closely resembles this apple tree but is, of course, not a literal depiction of the tree of knowledge.³⁸ Through an evocation of its traditional iconography, though, the painter may have wished to critically comment on the "barrenness" of the resting peasants in view of God's punishment of man after the Fall to toil the earth "in the sweat of one's face".

This explanation does not take into account the Christological component of the legend of the withered and newly blossoming and fruit-bearing tree. Since the religious motifs in other paintings of the series seem to relate to the unrecognized manifestation of the Divine in this world, i.e. to Christ, I am led to believe that this perspective is relevant in this instance as well. As the legend commemorates Jesus' redemption of mankind as the "fruit" of the history of salvation, the eating peasants in Bruegel's painting would have a particular meaning in this context. Their meals consists of bread, porridge, and pears fallen from the tree. The numb expression in their faces, which Bruegel clearly has emphasized, betrays that they are unaware of the nature of the tree, and its fruit – and of their own fallen state. They do not know what they eat, so to speak, bringing to mind Adam and Eve's effort to "know" good and evil by eating from the fruit of the tree of knowledge. The eating peasants, in other words, help to articulate in a way that is reminiscent of the marginal gloss in early sixteenth-century landscape painting, i.e. through a play with resonance and inversion, what the viewer is supposed to do: to recognize the nature of the fruit.

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³⁶ Madrid, Museo del Prado, inv. Nr. 1611, see for the following R. FALKENBURG *Joachim Patinir: Landscape as an Image of the Pilgrimage of Life*, Amsterdam – Philadelphia, 1988, p. 30-31.

³⁷ See M. R. BINNETT, The Legend of the Green Tree and the Day, *Archaeological Journal*, 83, 1926, p. 21-32. The image of the withered, and then revived tree was sometimes also applied to the tree of life – see M. LEVI-D'ANCONA, *The Garden of the Renaissance: Botanical Symbolism in Italian Painting*, Florence, 1977, p. 382. See for other representations of the tree of knowledge in 15th- and 16th-century Netherlandish art P. VANDINBROECK, Jheronimus Bosch' zogenaamde Tuin der Lusten I, *Jaarboek Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen*, 1989, p. 97-99.

³⁸ Cf., however, L. VI-D'ANCONA (1977), p. 298, who points out that, in addition to the apple, the pear was also seen as the fruit of the tree of knowledge.

In which way does this interpretation change our conception of the underlying thematic principle in Bruegel's *Series of the Seasons* as a whole and the relationship between observer and observed in these paintings? I wish to emphasize that the following concluding remarks are only of a preliminary nature since I have only discussed one particular type of motif and have not addressed each individual landscape in its full aesthetic and semantic complexity.

The theme that the religious vignettes in this series have in common is man's spiritual blindness to the manifestation of the Divine in this world. These vignettes are the reason that Bruegel's series is thematically far more connected to the preceding world landscape tradition than has been acknowledged so far. As the manifestation of the Divine becomes concrete – though hardly visible – in the person of Jesus, in references to his Incarnation, Passion, and role as man's redeemer from sin, the underlying and unifying principle of the series as a whole can be called the veiled manifestation of the history of salvation. This is the "arrow of time" of truly divine-cosmic dimension that underlies the seasonal cycle of nature and the labors of the months, and that breaks nature's repetitive order with an eschatological perspective. It is this "divine calendar", which underlies the whole creation and includes man as well as nature, that is given to the viewer as prime principle to contemplate.³⁹ The veiled way in which this order is alluded to in Bruegel's paintings serves not only to illustrate the lack of recognition on part of the inhabitants of the world, but also to evoke the participation of the viewer in the unveiling of this order. The formal and thematic focus on sight and insight is directed to their personal involvement: their contemplation, therefore, should be characterized not by distance and detachment, but by engagement. Their own sight and insight are at stake, are the real subject of this series.

³⁹ In this way, Bruegel's series is much closer to medieval conceptions and illustrations of Christ as the Ruler of time and the late medieval calendar tradition as depicted, among other things, in Books of Hours than it generally has been assumed. (Cf. for a recent survey of medieval conceptions and representations of time V. PIRKER-AURENHAMMER, *Modelle der Zeit in symbolischen Darstellungen des Mittelalters, Das Münster*, 53, 2000, p. 98-119.) I will discuss this relationship in more detail in my forthcoming book on "The Mind's Eye View" in Early Netherlandish Painting.

Samenvatting

Dit artikel biedt een nieuwe zienswijze op Pieter Bruegel's serie schilderijen van de *Seizoenen*. Zienswijze is hier letterlijk bedoeld: een manier van zien, of beter, doorzien, van het verbeelde landschap in deze schilderijen. Gewoonlijk worden zij gezien als voorstellingen die de kijker uitnodigen tot een esthetisch-filosofische (neo-stoïsche) beschouwing van de mens in zijn relatie tot de natuur en de daaraan ten grondslag liggende goddelijke orde. Het onderhavige artikel betoogt echter dat er een meer specifiek heilshistorisch en christologisch perspectief in deze schilderijen geboden wordt, dat evenzeer met het inwendige als met het uitwendige oog waargenomen moet worden. Het aanknopingspunt voor deze interpretatie is vervat in een kleine religieuze scene, vignet of motief, in elk van de vijf overgebleven schilderijen van deze serie. Door hun onopvallende positie in het schilderij zijn deze motieven tot nog toe onopgemerkt gebleven in het kunsthistorisch vertoog. Zij maken het echter mogelijk een verband te leggen met landschappen vervaardigd door Joachim Patinir en zijn navolgers in de eerste helft van de zestiende eeuw. De kleine religieuze scenes in deze eerdere landschappen verbeelden op een Erasmiaansspeelse wijze de thematiek van "ziende blind zijn" en laten de beschouwer door hun onopvallende positie in de compositie aan den lijve ervaren wat het betekent om de ogen te openen voor de geestelijke en goddelijke dimensie van de werkelijkheid. Bruegels schilderijen, landschappen met religieuze thematiek (o.a. de *Kruisdraging* in Wenen) zowel als de serie *Seizoenen*, worden vervolgens ook met deze picturale strategie tot verkrijging van "zicht en inzicht" geassocieerd. In een korte analyse van elk van de *Seizoenen* wordt het desbetreffende religieuze motief uitgelicht en toegelicht. Het resultaat van deze zienswijze is de ponering van de stelling dat Pieter Bruegel in deze schilderijen heeft getracht de geestelijke blindheid van de mens voor de manifestering van de goddelijke heilsgeschiedenis in de persoon van Jezus in de wereld aan- en beschouwelijk te maken. Versluisde evocaties van de Zondeval, de Incarnatie, de Passie en Jezus' heilsmessie op aarde staan alle in het teken van de openbaring, de revelatie, van deze goddelijke orde. Te midden van dit spel met zicht in inzicht staat de beschouwer, wiens persoonlijk inzicht en oordeelsvermogen – zoals zo vaak in Bruegels schilderijen – het eigenlijke onderwerp van de voorstelling is.