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Meinhard Michael

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From Meinhard Michael

The oversized butterfly by a thistle flower almost in the centre of the *Garden of Earthly Delights* (**fig. 1**) attracted new attention at the *5th International Jheronimus Bosch Conference* thanks to Manuel Berdoy. *A novel reading for the Garden of Earthly Delights: from new evidence in the image to a political narrative interpretation (the ABC hypothesis)* is the title of the following essay in the conference proceedings.¹ ABC stands for ‘The Alliance of Burgundy and Castile’. According to the new and surprising thesis, the painting recapitulates events from Burgundian-Castilian history between the death of Charles the Bold at the Battle of Nancy in 1477 and the death of Philip the Fair in Spain in 1506. A whole series of ‘over 40’ details point to this, led by ‘signposts’, or flags, motifs that are purposely contradictory or visually highlighted in some way’. The five signposts presented by the author in the aforementioned essay indeed provokes scepticism, but a general critique of the *ABC hypothesis* will have to wait until more is published. For the time being, Berdoy’s analysis provides a number of observations that need to be scrutinised. His interpretation of the butterfly serves here as a welcome opportunity to review and present my own considerations. Manuel Berdoy is exemplary in how the *Garden of Earthly Delights* needs to be read detail by detail.

This article is limited to the butterfly, although the thistle belongs directly to it and others must at least be taken into account. Firstly, Berdoy’s analysis is presented and discussed with reference to previous publications. This is followed by a sketch of my reading of the picture, which also assumes an essential scene, if not a culmination and tipping point, of butterfly and thistle. Finally, the critique continues and examines how Berdoy’s observations give rise to new considerations.

Berdoy’s butterfly as a ‘signpost’

According to Manuel Berdoy, the butterfly, which is huge in relation to its surroundings, ‘constitutes a visual contradiction, a kind of internal oxymoron’². Like others before him, Berdoy identifies the species as a *Small Tortoiseshell*, *Aglais urticae*, to distinguish it clearly from similar species such as the *Large Tortoiseshell*. However, Bosch had created contradictions with four abnormal markings. Firstly, the moth has only two wings instead of four, the back wings are missing (**fig. 1**). Secondly, the remaining forewings are reversed. The half-covered wing is incorrectly visible with the underside instead of the upper side, as can be seen from the upper edges. At the front, on the wing closer to the viewer, the underside should

¹ Jo Timmermans, Jos Koldewej, Willeke Cornelissen (eds.), *Jheronimus Bosch. His workshop, and his followers. 5th International Jheronimus Bosch Conference, May 11-13, 2023*, ’s-Hertogenbosch: Jheronimus Bosch Art Centre, 2023, pp. 50-73.

² Timmermans et al. 2023 (note 1), p. 53.

actually be visible. There, however, the characteristic pattern of the upper side can be seen incorrectly – two small dark dots and one large dot. However, again abnormally, the dot pattern is not on a strong red background, as would normally be expected on the upper side. This means, thirdly, that the incorrectly presented upper wing side with the dot pattern (instead of the lower one) has the wrong colour, or the brown colour of the underside has merged with the misplaced pattern on the upper side. Fourthly, the dot pattern is accurate enough to identify the species, but at the same time “significantly different from what would be expected” (p. 56).



Fig. 1: Hieronymus Bosch, *Garden of Earthly Delights*, centre panel, detail *Small Tortoiseshell*, 205.5 x 384.9 cm, Madrid, Museo del Prado, inv. P2833. (the position on the whole picture see figs. 2, 10)

Fig. 2: Detail centre panel: Three men at a thistle bowl with thistle blossom and butterfly.

Fig. 3: *Small Tortoiseshell* on a thistle. In front, the underside of the wings without the characteristic dot pattern and the hind wings laid out correctly, unlike Bosch. Photo: Nabu, Helge May.

The contradictions were designed to draw the attention of 16th-century viewers, who were more familiar with the butterfly, to the hidden content of the picture by means of this ‘signpost’. The manipulated dot pattern (fourth abnormal marking) is cardinal to Berdoy’s interpretation. It signalled something ‘significantly different’ than would be expected: a façade with a round-arched gate and two slanted windows (**cf. fig. 1**). Possibly a city gate of Nancy or another building in which Engelbert II of Nassau was imprisoned after the Battle of Nancy is meant – thus naming the first historical event of the *ABC hypothesis*. The two men in the pale thistle ball (**fig. 2**) are understood to be representing Charles the Bold, who was killed in 1477, and his opponent René II of Lorraine, and the thistle as a symbol for the Lorraine himself or the city of Nancy.

An approach: The butterfly on a flower is a mass-produced item of book illumination after the motif became fashionable around 1475. It is found above all in Ghent-Bruges book illumination. The Master of the First Prayer Book of Maximilian has as many as six butterflies per page (supplemented by a fat fly and a dragonfly). Three of them sit on daisies and three perch somewhat vaguely on other flowers. Even the entomological layman recognises the painter’s intention to distinguish at least five species, one of which resembles

the specimen in the *Garden of Earthly Delights*.³ The *Small Tortoiseshell*, also known today as the Nettle butterfly, is indeed attracted to thistles (although it is said to feed almost exclusively on nettles and lays its eggs there). The book illumination followed a number of traditional types for the purpose of decoration, but the *Small Tortoiseshell* never advanced, it is not so common.⁴

From Nabokov to Prost-about the *Small Tortoiseshell*

Others had already noticed that there was something wrong with the butterfly in the *Garden of Earthly Delights*. Perhaps Vladimir Nabokov, who was educated and fascinated by the subject, was the first? In the novel *Ada*, Demon recognises the knowledge of the girls Ada and Lucette, who had noticed that Bosch had switched the sides of the wings. Bosch, according to the narrator, ‘evidently found a wing or two in the corner cobweb of his casement and showed the prettier upper surface in depicting this incorrectly folded insect’.⁵



Fig. 4: Detail centre panel, *Small Tortoiseshell*.

Fig. 5: Dead *Small Tortoiseshell* in a spider's web (lying on its back, dead), Photo BUND, Walter Schön.

Alcimar do Lago Carvalho (with reference to Nabokov) confirms that the clearly visible wing shows the dorsal side instead of the ventral side.⁶ Berdoy refers to him. Carvalho identifies ‘a

³ *Older (First) Prayer book of Maximilian I.*, Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Cod. 1907, Ghent or Bruges, after 1486, fol. 61v. See Andreas Fingernagel, *Goldene Zeiten. Meisterwerke der Buchkunst von der Gotik bis zur Renaissance*, Luzern: Quaternio, 2015, p. 94.

⁴ An exception is the Master of the *First Prayer book of Maximilian I.* Other examples: *Psalter* by Petrus Vaillant, dated with certainty to 1482 due to the consecration of the Dune Abbey church. There, the *Small Tortoiseshell* adorns the page of the *Annunciation* to Mary, as a kind of counterpoint in the border to the dove of the Holy Spirit. London, British Library, Add. Ms. 116969, fol.91. See Bodo Brinkmann, *Die Flämische Buchmalerei am Ende des Burgunderreiches. Der Meister des Dresdener Gebetbuchs und die Miniaturen seiner Zeit*, Turnhout: Brepols, 1997, plate volume, fig. 111, text volume, pp. 129-130. – Less precise in the *Huth Hours*, see Brinkmann 1997, text volume, fig. 51. Further examples in Viktor J. Montserrat, *Los artrópos de Hieronymus van Aken (El Bosco)*, in: *Boletín Sociedad Entomológica Aragonesa* 45 (2009), pp. 589-615.

⁵ Cited here after Liana Ashenden, *Ada and Bosch*, in: Gerard de Vries, D. Barton Johnson, Liana Ashenden (eds.), *Nabokov and the Art of Painting*, Amsterdam: University Press, 2005, pp. 145-165, p. 157.

⁶ Alcimar do Lago Carvalho, *Butterflies at the mouth of hell: traces of biology of two species of Nymphalidae (Lepidoptera) in European paintings of the fifteenth century*, in: *Filosofia e História da Biologia* V (2010) 2, pp. 177-193.

giant butterfly monster without posterior wings and with anterior pair reversed exhibiting the pattern of *A. urticae*' in the *Garden of Earthly Delights*. Like Nabokov, he also gives a possible explanation: 'A plausible explanation (...) would be due to the habit of this species of landing and feeding on liquids from feces and decaying organic matter.' (S. 188)

Viktor J. Monserrat had also noticed the posture of the butterfly: 'The wings, in an unnatural position and reversed in relation to the position of the body, nevertheless reflect the direct observation of a dead specimen, which often remains in this position and must have served as a model.'⁷ (fig. 5)

The observations outlined by Vladimir Nabokov, Alcimar do Lago Carvalho and Victor J. Monserrat certainly relativise Berdoy's emphasis on the motif as a *signpost*, but do not wipe the problem off the table. For the question really does arise as to why the painter has placed an altered or dead specimen – not convincing as 'dead' – next to the thistle. Even if earlier attentive observers have already suggested reasons for the irritating shape of the *Small Tortoiseshell* – which Berdoy does not discuss – it is still puzzling that the painter has allowed himself these deviations at this important position in the picture.

In fact, the butterfly has received little attention in the interpretation of the *Garden of Earthly Delights* to date. Charles Prost was an exception. As his book title suggests, the thistle and the butterfly play two main roles: *Les Chardons et la Petite Tortue ou le Jardin des délices de Jérôme Bosch décrypté* (Tournai: Casterman, 1992). The man lying back with outstretched arms in the pale capsule of thistles is understood by Prost as a hidden Christ or Christian, as a figure 'identifiable autant par son contexte – chardon, papillon – que par elle-même' (p. 52). He refers to the *Haywain* (Madrid, Museo del Prado, cat. P002052) and the Vienna *Last Judgement* (Akademie der bildenden Künste, inv. GG-579-581) where a man is lying or being punished in a similar position – knees drawn up, arms stretched out to the side on the ground.⁸ The thistle next to it is used as a traditional symbol for the Passion.⁹

Prost also described the butterfly as 'l'aglaïs urticae ou petite tortue' (p. 55). It is a male specimen that Bosch must have seen with his own eyes. He cites the general suitability of the butterfly as a symbol of resurrection – transformed from caterpillar (life) to chrysalis (death) to new life (resurrected).¹⁰ Charles Prost's subsequent interpretation is exclusive. Like other butterflies, the *Small Tortoiseshell* also excretes one or more drops during its transformation from chrysalis to moth. They are dark-coloured, red, yellow and brown, and could apparently

⁷ Monserrat 2009 (note 4), p. 604: 'Las alas, en posición antinatural e invertida respecto a la posición del cuerpo, pero reflejan no obstante la observación directa a partir de un ejemplar muerto que frecuentemente queda en esta postura y que debió servir como modelo.'

⁸ Prost sees numerous figures in the Hell panel 'en position de crucifiés', which is probably not generally the case, and suspects Italian inspiration, see p. 52.

⁹ The motif is known to be widespread. The thistle-gold brocade behind Mary and in the robe of St Catherine in the *Mystical Marriage of St Catherine*, Bruges, Memling Museum, 1479, 172x172 cm, is worth mentioning here.

¹⁰ Prost 1992, p. 55, referred to the same butterfly within the Bosch group in the later painting *The 12-year-old Jesus in the Temple* in the Louvre (Inv. RF 970 (also in the variant in Opočno). – The butterfly as a symbol of resurrection: *Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie*, ed. by Engelbert Kirschbaum, ed. by Wolfgang Braunfels, Rom et.al., 4, 1973, Sp. 96 (G. Seib) with reference to Basilus of Caesarea (Hexaemeron VIII 8) and some pictorial examples also around 1500. – Christian Heck and Rémy Cordonnier write that the biology of butterflies and the symbolism involved was rather unknown in the Middle Ages. See Christian Hecht, Rémy Cordonnier, *Bestiarium. Das Tier in mittelalterlichen Handschriften*, Darmstadt: WBG, 2020, p. 462.

colour entire areas. Prost cites mentions of the frightening ‘blood rains’, the ‘fameuses pluies de sang ‘qui ont effrayé les nations’ au Moyen Age’.¹¹ Charles Prost’s thesis was that at least one such rain of blood had fallen in the area around ’s-Hertogenbosch. Someone recognised the cause even then and interpreted the blood rain and the butterfly in Christian terms: ‘Toute pensée était alors chrétienne : la pluie ne fut pas désacralisée mais on christifia le papillon.’

According to Prost, four Christian symbols of passion and resurrection thus come together in this compositionally emphasised place and – with the rain of blood in the background – create an ultimately eschatological threat: the ‘crucified’ man, lying, the *Small Tortoiseshell*, the thistle and the Great Tit, which in Bosch’s work must always be understood positively (p. 57). As on the *Table of the Seven Deadly Sins* from the Bosch group (Madrid, Museo del Prado, inv. P002822), all the lines on the central panel of the *Garden of Earthly Delights* lead to the centre, to Christ. Because he remains hidden, the warning words of the *Table of the Seven Deadly Sins* can also be applied to the *Garden of Earthly Delights*: I will hide my face from them, I will see what their end shall be... (S. 52-62; Deut 32:20).

As far as I can see, Prost’s interpretation is the only one before Berdoy’s that recognised the butterfly/thistle duo as playing an important role. However, he overlooked the negative meaning that the *Small Tortoiseshell* carried. It had possibly acquired it through its name alone. As already mentioned, the butterfly actually symbolises the resurrection and transformation into the heavenly soul. Scholars knew that the Greeks used the same word for the butterfly and for the soul: psyche. The sweeping analogy between nature and the hoped-for vague resurrection was simply too tempting: the new beautiful form that ‘transfigures’ from the chrysalis into a completely different and more beautiful being.

The *Small Tortoiseshell* with Memling

But the *Small Tortoiseshell* was to meet a different fate. According to Sigrid and Lothar Dittrich, it became a symbol of evil as a substitute for the fox.¹² Due to the similarity of names in German and Dutch (*Kleine Vos*, *Kleiner Fuchs*), the *little fox butterfly* or *Small Tortoiseshell* also became a symbol of the devil and of evil in general in direct analogy to the devious forest dweller. The evidence is not overwhelming, there are too few examples, but they are already clear even in the 15th century.¹³

¹¹ Prost refers p. 56 without further details to Jacques F. Aubert, *Papillons d'Europe*, Neufchâtel et al: Delachaux et Niestlé, 1949-1952, but apart from an uncertain source from the beginning of the 17th century, which recognises this fear only from hearsay, Prost brings no evidence for it.

¹² Sigrid and Lothar Dittrich, *Tiersubstitute für tradierte Tiersymbole. Die Erweiterung des Kanons von Tieren mit Sinnbildbedeutung in der Tafelmalerei des 15. und 16. Jahrhunderts*, in: *Walraff-Richartz-Jahrbuch* LIX, 1998, pp. 123-154, here p. 146 and note 9, p. 136 on the *Small Tortoiseshell* as a symbol of evil in the *Garden of Earthly Delights*. However, the butterfly as a whole was already regarded as a negative symbol in popular belief, also as a “devil’s epiphany”. See Hanns Bächtold-Stäubli, ed., *Handwörterbuch des Deutschen Aberglaubens*, Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1987 (1927) 7, col. 1237-1254. Sometimes the light-coloured butterflies were seen as positive and dark-coloured butterflies or moths as negative.

¹³ Carvalho 2010 (note 6), p. 189 speculates whether, in addition to the contrast between the dark beauties and the purity of the white cabbage white butterfly, some of the biological practices could have been the cause of their damnation: ‘such as how they land (open wings, connoting pride and debauchery), larval food plant (nettle, connoting lust and the fires of hell) and food items of adults (decomposing organic matter and liquid excrement, connoting death and putrefaction).’ In my opinion, the contrast between the beautiful upper side and the dark underside is also possible for a fallen angel.

In Hans Memling's *Last Judgement* (after 1467), the *Small Tortoiseshell* even appears as an allegory of the fallen Lucifer.¹⁴ The painter uses this species to thematise the apostasy of Lucifer and the fallen angels – the beginning of evil in the world. At the key point in the painting, where the fate of a soul is modelled, the wing ornamentation of the *Small Tortoiseshell* is the decisive sign.



Fig. 6: Hans Memling, *Last Judgement*, centre panel, detail foreground, after 1467, 242 x 180 cm (centre panel). On the right foreground a devil (with a victim upside down) with the same decoration on the wing as the archangel. Gdansk, Muzeum Narodowe, inv. SD/413/M.

Memling places several devil figures where the ‘rainbow’ of the celestial mandorla meets the earth (**fig. 6**). The transition from the angel of light to the devil – a tipping point in ‘world history’ – is exposed as follows by means of the wing decorations. On the right foreground, a devil has grabbed a man upside down and is leading him away (somewhat small in **fig. 6**). As in the transition, the painter has given him the fluffy wing with the peacock pattern with which he is labelling the Archangel Michael on both sides. The fluffy brown stripes of the downward-facing wings of the Archangel (his left wing) and the devil in front (his right wing) correspond with each other. However, the devil in front is clearly negative. At the same time, he has the positive design of the Archangel, so he is characterised as ambivalent – bearing in mind the fall of the angel in the background, he is therefore in transition.

To the left of the archangel (top view), a dark little devilish winged creature (‘wing to wing’ to the archangel) is fighting with a white-clad angel for a soul between them (**fig. 7**).

¹⁴ This *Small Tortoiseshell* is also mentioned by Prost 1992, p. 57 and Montferrat 2009 (note 4), p. 610.



Fig. 7: Hans Memling, *Last Judgement*, detail centre panel, battle for the soul, decoration of the *Small Tortoiseshell* and peacock's eye motif of the archangel next to each other.

This devil has butterfly wings. The front edges of the wings show the characteristic keyboard of the *Small Tortoiseshell*, as well as the red colouring, and the beginning of the dot pattern can be guessed. In other words, the Archangel and the most characteristic, the 'first' of the fallen angels, collide there on the basis of their decorations (**figs. 6, 7**). The proximity of the *Small Tortoiseshell* decoration to the Archangel (wing to wing) in Memling's work illustrates the traditional understanding of the duo Lucifer and Michael as a compression of the poles of salvation.

The *Small Tortoiseshell* returns on the Hell panel. Despite the unclean cut of the pattern in Hell – it must not and cannot be seductively iridescent here – it was probably the painter's intention to make the *Small Tortoiseshell* recognisable.¹⁵ Here, the devil marked in this way is the highest of the infernal devils (**fig. 8**).



Fig. 8 a-b: Hans Memling, *Last Judgement*, details of hell, devil with wings like the *Little Fox*.

The confrontation with Lucifer and the version as a butterfly confirms Pieter Bruegel's *Fall of the Rebellious Angels* (1562 Brussels, KMSK, inv. 584). The painting focusses the confrontation even more closely: the Archangel is now in direct personal combat with Lucifer (**fig. 9**). The latter's wings have a light-dark register on the upper edges and a jagged frieze on

¹⁵ Carvalho 2010 (note 6), p. 182, recognises here the *Red Admiral*, *Vanessa atalanta*.

the underside (**fig. 9b**). However, the proximity to the *Small Tortoiseshell* is only schematic and rough, it is a *Swallowtail*, *Papilio machaon*.¹⁶

Why, of all things, was a butterfly with a keyboard pattern on its upper edge, as in the case of the *Small Tortoiseshell*, as used by Memling, chosen for precisely the same purpose? But perhaps the *Swallowtail* had also fallen into disrepute as a butterfly that loves the dark and therefore shuns the light, like the owl? The example should be noted as a more recent example of direct confrontation and the butterfly symbol for Lucifer.



Fig. 9 a-b: Jan Bruegel, *Angel's Fall*, details of the battle between the Archangel Michael and Lucifer with the wings of the *Swallowtail*, *Papilio machaon*, 1562, 117 x 162 cm, Brussels, Royal Museum of Fine Arts, inv. 584.

Jan Memling's older practice is decisive for the *Garden of Earthly Delights*, and it provides two strong arguments against Berdoy's reading of the *Small Tortoiseshell*. Firstly, Memling's application (which Berdoy also does not discuss) demonstrates how the *Small Tortoiseshell* was understood around 1480. Would it be possible for the butterfly to be used in the *Garden of Earthly Delights* without it being a reference to Lucifer specifically or evil in general? No, this question must be answered in the negative. The *Small Tortoiseshell* placed ostentatiously in the centre of the picture carries *nolens volens* the central evil of Christianity into the *Garden of Earthly Delights*, the 'first fall of man'. The foremost of the fallen angels or even the prince of devils is such an eminent figure that it overpowers other meanings. That the painter uses the *Small Tortoiseshell* in ignorance of its eminent significance can be ruled out.

Secondly: Memling's devil side by side with Archangel Michael can be seen from the belly side, but shows – also! – the colourful and lively wing pattern on the reverse (**fig. 7**). Memling used the characteristic side because it was obviously a symbol of what he wanted to convey: the fall of the former angel of light. Like Bosch, he used the recognisable wing side anatomically incorrectly. The reason is probably of a practical nature: The brown-toned underside of the wing, which moreover can be confused with those of other moths, was simply out of the question for this purpose. I suspect, moreover, that it was specifically the iridescent beauty – dark on the reverse side – that characterised the formerly most beautiful Angel of Light – which is why it is now cavorting around in hell with a more mangy design.

Admittedly, the negative meaning of the butterfly as Lucifer or evil, which the *Small Tortoiseshell* undoubtedly has, at least does not *entirely* rule out the possibility that it is

¹⁶ Montserrat 2009 (note 4), p. 609.

delivering something else on a political level. But whatever it would be, it would be less important for the interpretation of the picture as a whole.

Butterfly and thistle belong together

Better knowledge of the symbolic potency of the *Small Tortoiseshell* has consequences for further interpretation. If this butterfly at the end of the 15th century apparently has this cardinal religious meaning, the first arrogance against God, then the thistle should be interpreted on the same level. It makes much less sense for the symbol of the evil ex-angel to be placed on a symbol of René de Lorraine or for the city of Nancy.¹⁷

With the – a priori dominant – religious meaning, on the other hand, the thistle would act on the level of the *Small Tortoiseshell*. However, thistle and thorns are ambivalent symbols. The origin of the negative evaluation is the Bible with the chapter from the Fall of Man to the expulsion from paradise (Gen 3). Immediately after the fall of man, God confronts Adam. He refers to the woman that God had given him, the woman to the serpent – and God begins to punish. The serpent will crawl on its belly, mankind will live in enmity, the woman will give birth in pain, long for her husband, who will dominate her – and the field will be cursed: ‘He will make thorns and thistles grow for you...’ (Gen 3:18). Christ redeemed humanity from this so-called hereditary guilt – with the suffering of his passion and death on the cross. The crown of thorns as a sign of the Passion turns the tide. Thorns and thistles become symbols of suffering and life. The exemplary life ‘among thorns’ promises redemption.¹⁸

It would be permissible to explain the anomalies of the *Small Tortoiseshell* with the aforementioned religious-theological meanings, the practical circumstances and the references of the authors mentioned. The convention as a sign of evil – evil blinds, falsifies, seduces – allows the anatomically incorrect use of the wing decoration. And it is a well-known solution, as Memling proves. Bosch found two wings in the corner (Nabokov) or recalled a dead butterfly (Montserrat), or he captured a certain moment in flight or feeding behaviour (Carvalho).

However, this is not the end of the case, as Manuel Berdoy provides an important clue. What – in this respect – could the false *Small Tortoiseshell* mean at this exposed point? According to my thesis, we are actually dealing with a key moment, even a tipping point in the picture. In the duo *Small Tortoiseshell*/thistle, the devilish spirit and Christian good morals meet.

This encounter lasts only a moment. For, as will now be shown, two narrative strands or levels of argumentation in the painting come together in *Small Tortoiseshell*/thistle. The

¹⁷ It is probably only logical to attribute the thistle to Nancy within the framework of the *ABC hypothesis*. One of the panellists on the heraldry site <https://heraldique.forumactif.org/t1553-le-chardon> (24.1.24) writes about the distribution of the thistle: ‘En France outre Nancy le chardon fleurit sur les écus de Asnieres, Frotey les Lure, Pithiviers, Cessieux Crantenois, Esconnets, Gannats, Heillecourt, Ligny en Barrois, Lomné, Maizières, Montgiscard, Nogent sur oise, Saint savin, Yzeure... et en plus il ‘chante’ en France à Cardesse, et en Espagne à Valls de Cardos (et probablement ailleurs....)’ However, I have not checked how many examples are more recent. The thistle, the symbol of Scotland, is also very common among Scottish nobles.

¹⁸ Another example of the thistle as a Passion companion: so-called *Book of Hours of Philip the Fair and John of Castile*, London, British Library Add.Ms.17280, fol. 113v (Capture of Christ), see Brinkmann 1997 (note 4), plate volume, fig. 260.

thistle finalises the depiction of a woman's psyche. The temporal organisation of the picture culminates in the *Small Tortoiseshell*. The moment when butterfly and thistle come together is the moment of the heartbeat (Augustine) or lightning strike (Ruusbroec) – or the flapping of a butterfly's wings. So let's start with the psychological aspect and how the thistle concludes it. For the sake of brevity, see my earlier essays.¹⁹

The psychological structure in the *Garden of Earthly Delights*

To be clear: we are not talking here about the interpreter's ideas, but those of the painter and his possible conceptualisers. In the foreground of the centre panel, the painter has staged a system of external and internal senses (**fig. 10**). A *Wheel of the Senses* is hidden in the landscape: five fruit shells around the shell carrier. This forms the 'hub' of the wheel.

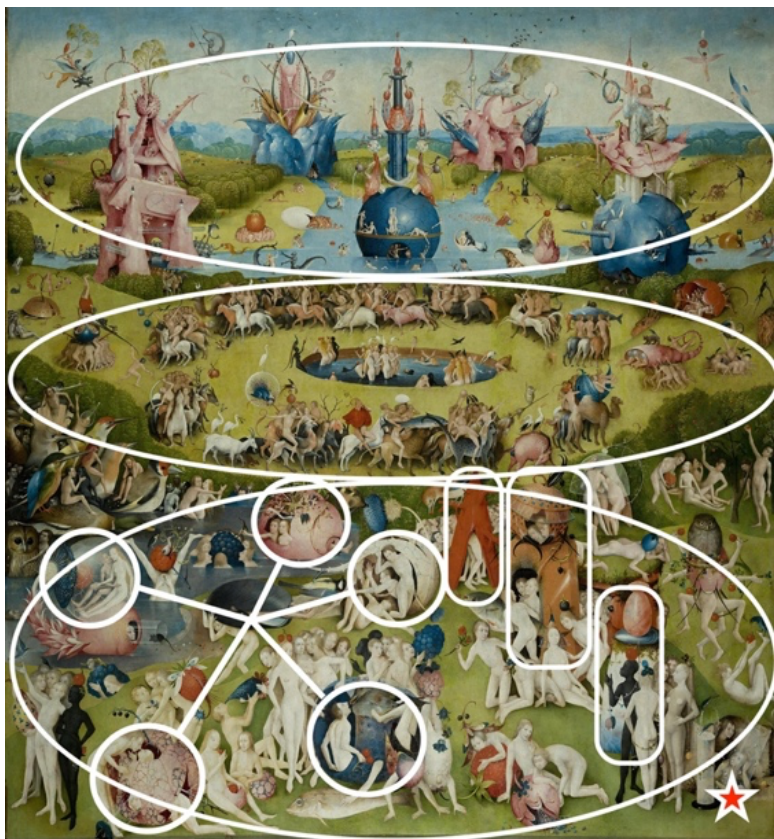


Fig. 10: Diagrammatic structure of the five external senses and the three small architectures for four internal soul forces (the *sensus communis* as the fifth is 'outsourced' to the shell in the *Wheel of the Senses*) and for the tripartite division of the centre panel as both a psychological (*anima vegetativa/sensitiva/rationalis*) structure and a temporal structure (*ante legem/sub lege/sub gratia*).

¹⁹ Most recently M.M., *The female soul and its external and internal senses*, Heidelberg: Art-Dok, 2024. – M.M., *Von Hypokriten und falschen Hochzeiten. Die politische Positionierung des Gartens der Lüste*, Heidelberg: Art-Dok, 2022. – M.M., *The Garden of Earthly delights by Hieronymus Bosch as a dream to be deciphered*, Heidelberg: Art-Dok, 2020. – M.M., *Wenn Paradiestore sich in Luftschlösser verwandeln. Imagination und Vision im Garten der Lüste von Hieronymus Bosch*, Heidelberg: Art-Dok, 2018. – M.M., *Einen Herzschlag lang hinüber. Die Disposition der Zeit im Garten der Lüste von Hieronymus Bosch*, Heidelberg, Art-Dok, 2017.

From the bottom centre in a clockwise direction, the senses are taste, touch, sight, smell and hearing. The butterfly and thistle duo skilfully close the *Wheel of the Senses* between hearing and smelling. Because the misuse of the five senses is depicted, the ‘back’ of the man carrying the shell is curved in the same way as the ‘back’ of the tree-man, and the backs of two men above the giant strawberries in the foreground on the right are also curved. They are two figures of the *homo curvatus* (or *incurvatus*) type with an upright figure like Adam between them.

The *Wheel of the Senses* ‘ends’ on the centre axis in the pale thistle fruit shell with the three men, with the sense of hearing. As in older practice (Richard de Fournival), the capitulation of the sense of hearing summarises the defeat of all the senses as a whole. The consequences are falling asleep and imminent death (**Fig. 2**). Because the sum of the five *external* senses is formulated here, the stage is logically set for the *internal* senses or powers of the soul or spirit directly to the right (**fig. 10**). The group of three small architectures in the right-hand half of the picture harbours the inner mental powers (analogous to the three ventricles of the brain in head depictions). The mind (in the tree tent), imagination and memory (brown portal with extension behind it) and fantasy (whitish column with egg) could be localised. This completes the perceptual scheme of a human psyche as it was conceived around 1500. The five misused external and internal senses (**fig. 10**) denounce a female psyche, as can be deduced from the motif (with the shells) and the misogynistic psychology typical of the time (denounced fantasy).²⁰

The ‘compositional-origin’ of the thistle is not good, *actually*, because of the continuous misuse in the *Wheel of the Senses*. It grows out of the abuse. But the lying man in the pale thistle shell is obviously only almost dead, his hand is still flesh-coloured (**figs. 2, 15**). This ‘duality’ in his body, of the pale dead man and his flesh-coloured hand, is transferred to the thistle: its shell, the ball, is ostentatiously white, while the thistle blossoms are blue. Here, too, a flower grows out of the thorns (**figs. 2, 15**).

Arguments in favour of the positive role of the thistle also result from the composition. Let us first stay with the epistemological-psychological level. Around 1500, it was assumed that the soul was fundamentally turned towards the divine spirit or predisposed accordingly. This means that even the worst sinner has a good Christian core. He can be saved. The best-known model for this is the spark of the soul that is alive in every person.²¹

The pale thistle ball and the tent as a form of the mind are directly adjacent to each other as the ‘last’ station of the misuse of the outer senses and the ‘first’ station of inner signal

²⁰ In case anyone is counting: The fifth (or first) inner sense, the *sensus communis*, which would actually belong in a small architecture, is shifted to the centre of the *Wheel of the Senses*. – It should be noted that the encounter with God (according to Bernard of Clairvaux as ‘vicissitudo’, the teasing ‘Hide-and-Seek’ between mother and child) was also generally understood as a to-and-fro. See Stefan Podlech, *Discretio: zur Hermeneutik der religiösen Erfahrung bei Dionysius dem Kartäuser*, Salzburg 2002, pp. 278-302. See M.M., *Bestrafter Geldwechsler ohne Maß und Verstand? "Discretio spirituum" und der „Goldene Brief“ als Methode und als Quelle in Jheronimus Bosch’s „Garten der Lüste“*, Heidelberg: Art-Dok, 2018.

²¹ Also as *apex mentis*, often as *sinderesis*, as an unavailable remnant of divine wisdom in every soul. Possibly we see it, often described as the *highest* faculty in the soul, as the darkly separated tip of the tent of the mind (**fig. 15**). This would correspond to Bosch’s practice of taking certain theorems (such as *homo curvatus*) literally: The highest part of the mind is *sinderesis*. See Michael 2022 (note 19 – Hypokriten).

processing. But despite all the denunciation, what is happening? The woman is awakening from a dream. And indications of suddenness, her ‘male transformation’, the dissolution of the ‘skin of sin’ and deictic-didactic details of her dream (the trio with the *homo curvatus*) suggest that she leaves the erotic escapades of her dream behind her and is thus *awakened*. This cannot succeed without the co-operation of God’s grace. In other words, there are supreme forces at play – and they leave their mark. In other words, there is hope. For the time being, let us just note that it is therefore possible that the thistle must be understood positively.

Time structures in the *Garden of Earthly Delights*

The temporal organisation of the picture supports this thesis. The woman in the cave is woken at the moment of her awakening, she has or had a brief vision. With her hand on her cheek, the figure varies the topos of waking up, as it is used in many stories and illustrations.²² Her dream contains sensual misdemeanours, but also didactic elements. According to the conviction of the time, her awakening can only take place with the help of divine grace and as a brief event.²³ At the moment of divine intervention for her vision, the divine – timeless – eternity ‘collides’ with the woman’s earthly time. That is necessary! This moment is as short as a heartbeat (St Augustine) or a flash of lightning and a blink of an eye (Ruusbroec).²⁴

The pictorial and theological basis is the moment of creation. The inscription on the outside of the painting emphasises the simultaneous creation – as he said, so it was done. The emanation of light – thus of divine grace and love – is profiled as the moment of creation: the double arch that bends from the clouds to the earth (**fig. 18**). The moment of the *creation* of grace on the outside corresponds to the moment of the *effect* of grace at the moment of the woman’s awakening.

For this exclusive heartbeat tension between creation and revival, an unrivalled creation theological framework is used, which only needs to be outlined here. It is organised on the basis of the three- or four-stage world age model. The centre panel with its striking tripartite division (**fig. 10**) distinguishes – the picture is a complex ‘psychological treatise’ – three parts of the human soul (*anima vegetativa/sensitiva/rationalis*). As has been customary since Augustine, they are parallelised with the ages of the world, here with the times *ante legem* (behind), *sub lege* (equestrian circle) and *sub gratia* (foreground). The fourth period *in pace* is missing, because the image ‘stops’ at the moment of the vision. However, the quality *in pace* is of course the goal, the appeal of the picture, which is composed also in temporal respect with the viewer in mind.

The ages are already announced on the paradise panel. The three bluish elevations in the background are to be read in the order backwards as signs for the times *ante legem*, *sub lege* and *sub gratia*, as can be explained individually (**fig. 11**).

²² See Michael 2020 (note 19 – dream). For the temporal structure, see Michael 2018 (note 19 – Herzschlag).

²³ Two light phenomena – on the glass in front of her, right through her head and body, and on the portal (her imagination) – indicate the divine intervention.

²⁴ See Michael 2018 (note 19 – Herzschlag).



Fig. 11 a-b: *Garden of Earthly Delights*, paradise panel, detail of world era formations

The first of the formations, the yellowish one, is essential – also for the *Small Tortoiseshell*. It signals – before the bluish trio for the entire time of the world – the *now* of both the awakened woman in the cave and her counter-image, the tree-man (the figure therefore wears a disc like the tree-man) – as well as the addressees of the picture. It is only a moment, as the indications of suddenness convey – which, of course, must be seen and discovered. For the sensual-animalic-negative circle of riders stops in this second. The first rider on the top left and others have perceived something ‘from above’ and are reacting (**fig. 12**). There are only a few figures who have ‘heard’ something, but the body language is ostentatious, like the angels in the Venetian *Vision of paradise* (**figs. 12, 13**). The famous ‘penis’ is also the neck of an animal looking upwards. Bosch is perhaps making the joke here that the animal has also received the divine impulse.



Fig. 12: Detail centre panel, the second of the end of the equestrian circle with the white horse and with men looking up after an apparition from ‘above’.

Fig. 13: Jheronimus Bosch, *Vision of Paradise*, detail with ostentatiously upwards gazing angels, 1505-1515, Venice, Museo di Palazzo Grimani, inv. 184.

Fig. 14: Detail of the paradise panel, ‘howling’ devil and shortly after the ‘start’ of the diabolical reptiles all at once, in the same second.

Other signs of suddenness are the race of the reptiles, who apparently all want to save themselves at the same time, and the flood of tears from the eye of the hidden devil's head, which Panofsky and others also saw (the devil bursts into tears, **fig. 14**). What is actually 'simultaneous' about this *now*, however, is that the circle of riders is immediately closed again, as has already been observed (**fig. 10**). The temporal structure of the *Garden of Earthly Delights* is extraordinarily complex and differentiated. The butterfly is one of its most important motifs for the *now*.

Synthesis of psychological and temporal structure for butterfly/thistle

The symbolically negative meaning of the butterfly can now also be confirmed by its positioning, based on an understanding of the division of the soul into three parts in the centre panel. For like a few other important pictorial elements, for example the tree tent (mind) and the portal (imagination), one of the butterfly's wings protrudes beyond the hedge that separates the *anima rationalis* from the *anima sensitiva* (**fig. 15, 10, 4**).



Fig. 15: Detail centre panel, butterfly, tree tent (mind) and portal (imagination) protrude over the hedge into the sensitive-animalic soul layer.

This means that the butterfly and the aforementioned soul forces are 'fed' in a sensitive-animalistic way – not a good prerequisite for countering the misuse of the senses.²⁵ This means that the butterfly is not only negative in itself, symbolically, but also in terms of its positioning.

In my opinion, the symmetrical arrangement of the picture suggests anyway that the *Small Tortoiseshell* and the thistle should not be read together (as Manuel Berdoy assumes), but as an *opposing* pair.²⁶ The *Small Tortoiseshell* in contemporary and older usage serves this purpose. Here we should refer to another sheet by the painter of *Maximilian I's Older Prayer Book*. On the page dedicated to St Christopher, a correct *Small Tortoiseshell* with folded

²⁵ On the Aristotelian model of the soul and the senses, in which – just as the red tent in the *Garden* – a triangle leads to the next layer (but there to the angelic sphere), see Meinhard Michael, *The female soul and its external and internal senses. Jheronimus Bosch's Garden of Earthly Delights as a satirical psychology*, Heidelberg: Art-Dok, 2024. – The opposite direction, that the rational part of the soul would *control* the physical part, no longer makes sense in the next step and can therefore be ruled out.

²⁶ Since the butterfly/thistle duo is positioned directly below the bridegroom/bride on the pale horse in the equestrian circle (**fig. 15**), there would also be arguments in favour of this from political interpretation, which, however, should not be attempted here. See Michael 2022 (note 19 – Hypokriten).

wings and thus the ventral view can be recognised below the text field. There is only one other butterfly. At the top left is a cabbage white butterfly (**fig. 16**).²⁷ The white, light-coloured butterflies are symbolically understood in a positive way. This means that the *Small Tortoiseshell* marks the negative side in a confrontation between it, the dark butterfly on a light-coloured flower (hence the underside here?) and the light-coloured butterfly on the dark one.

The *Small Tortoiseshell* was also placed in contrast in a sheet with the *Enthroned Madonna and Child* from the 14th century (**fig. 17**).²⁸ The juxtaposition with the *goldfinch* on Mary's side, sitting on the staff she is holding, can hardly be meant in any other way.



Fig. 16: Master of the First Prayer Book of Maximilian I, Book of Hours, text page with floral border, *Hastings Hours*, London, BL, Add MS 54782.

Fig. 17: *Virgin and Child* (detail) single sheet, Laon, c. 1320, Vienna MAK, Inv. 1073.

The goldfinch symbolises Christ, the butterfly opposite is his antithesis. Admittedly, the proximity into which Jesus and Evil are placed here is irritating, even if he apparently just lets it fly away. Theologically 'abstract', the image is correct: the Passion of Christ cancels out the pride of Lucifer. The *Enthroned Madonna and Child* in the *Garden of Earthly Delights* should be placed in just such a confrontation.

Understood in this way, the *Small Tortoiseshell* and the thistle form the same contrast as between Lucifer and the Archangel in Memling's *Last Judgement* (**fig. 5**), albeit in a more clearly formulated temporal compression. If we take a closer look at the duo, this can also be read from their posture and positioning. Firstly, let us consider whether the butterfly could be dead. In fact, as can be seen in **fig. 5**, its posture is characteristic of a dead specimen of this species. It is in the supine position, with the hind wings retracted. Even without a spider's web, as in the illustration, for example when killed for scientific purposes, the moth adopts

²⁷ *Hastings Hours* (c.1480), BL Add MS 54782. see

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Hastings_Hours_\(c.1480\)_-_BL_Add_MS_54782](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Hastings_Hours_(c.1480)_-_BL_Add_MS_54782).

²⁸ *Enthroned Madonna and Child*, single sheet, Wien, MAK, inv. 1073. See Dagmar Thoss, *Französische Gotik und Renaissance in Meisterwerken der Buchmalerei*, Kat. Wien 1978, Kat. 7, pp. 78-79. fig. 21, Ile de France (Laon), 1320.

this supine posture, as was kindly explained to me.²⁹ Nabokov's and Montserrat's observations are correct.

In the present case, however, this can be ruled out because the *Small Tortoiseshell* is ostentatiously active, even flying and even positioned *in flight*. The characterisation as a dead butterfly does not fit. Positioning and posture play no role at all in Manuel Berdoy's work, but they are striking. It is worth visualising the painter's *decisions* on wing position and positioning of the butterfly. If Bosch had wanted to depict a *Small Tortoiseshell* sitting on a thistle, why didn't he do it in the simplest and most attractive way: with its wings spread out? He would have had the opportunity to do so – slightly from above. It would have been the characteristic posture for this species with its wings spread wide. The *Small Tortoiseshell* vainly spreads out its jewellery.

The decision in favour of the present pose: the wings not closed, not open, is directly related to the position of the butterfly. A comparison with the photograph from nature (**figs. 1, 2**) quickly convinces us that Bosch's butterfly is not *sitting* on the thistle. Instead, the butterfly is on the left *in front of* the thistle. This is because it is obvious to assume that it is flying to the right. It has arrived directly at the thistle, but not yet, compare the photo, it is not yet *sitting*. Why did the painter choose this position?

With a psychological and temporal understanding of the image, the explanation is obvious, almost inevitable. We see a butterfly with half-open, half-closed wings – i.e. in the middle of 'flapping its wings' or immediately before the next movement. And we see it about to reach the thistle. Once again, the aforementioned exclusive point in time is reached. The circle of riders stops, the woman in the cave is awakened in this second. The flapping of the butterfly's wings marks that moment of the Augustinian 'heartbeat', here from a diabolical direction. The image culminates between the butterfly and the thistle, as in all other moments of suddenness.

This moment is actually a liminal one in which the decision swings back and forth. For the tips of the mind (tree tent) and the imagination (portal) also protrude into the image third of the sensitive soul (**fig. 15**). *Sinderesis*, another name for the spark of the soul – if the darkly set-off tip of the tree tent can be understood in this way – is thus also caricatured as the 'highest realm' of the mind. But of course it *works*, because God's intervention does not miss its target. But what will the woman make of it? The 'Christian law of nature' applies, but the 'psychic nature' of the woman stands against it. In this way, her revival is signalled and denounced at the same time. The circle of riders stops and closes again, continuing the eternal ride of sin. We see a to and fro of this woman's soul, her awakening and the doubts – in the middle of a wing beat.

Once again, we can take note of the misogynistic infamy of the composition and marvel at its meaningfulness: The *Wheel of the Senses* begins at the bottom centre, bringing the two basal senses of taste and touch closer to the viewer than the other three – they are placed closer to the front edge of the picture. The *Wheel of the Senses* returns to the centre axis with the sense of hearing, where the area of the inner powers of the soul connects to the right with the small architectures. With the sense of hearing, the theologically highest sense, the *Wheel of the Senses* is brought to the internal soul forces, to the mind in the tree tent. There, what happens morally and through the will in the cave is decided intellectually, as it were. In the

²⁹ I would like to thank Mario Graul from the Leipzig Natural History Museum.

tree tent, *Sinderesis* acts as the ‘supreme power’ of the human mind as the indestructible core of the Christian good, as an unavailable spark that does not go out even in the greatest darkness. *Sinderesis* works, can be seen in the thistle and the man lying on his back, in that even the humble spirit of Christ's Passion rises from the sum of sin in *the Wheel of the Senses*.³⁰

The thistle blossoms out of the dead fruit husk despite the abuse of the senses. But the powers of the evil butterfly do not rest. Even in the heartbeat or blink or flash of the woman's awakening, her animalistic-sensual imprint is at work. Devilish pride – Lucifer – fights with humility ready to suffer.



Fig. 18: Garden of Earthly Delights, exterior view.

As incredible as it sounds, it is great cinema. On the outside, the first created light, which according to St Augustine is the timeless Word, the Spirit, bends ostentatiously over the two panels in anticipation of the sign of the covenant (**fig. 18**). God's breath and the awakening of the woman flow together in that unspeakable heartbeat. As he said it, it was there. On the earth of the breath of creation (*and* of the third day *and* the now of awakening) there are both bushes and seeds from which something bursts forth, as well as destroyed giant seeds, and even castle ruins. They are only paradoxical for those who remain outside the exclusive moment of the picture. Incidentally, even in the exterior view, a positive moment actually predominates: the uniformity of the sprouting trees dominates. These are the rising forest trees that Bosch also used as a contrast to the ruined tree in the drawing *The Field has Eyes, the Forest has Ears* (Berlin, Staatliche Museen, KdZ 549).

³⁰ Reindert F. Falkenburg, *The Land of Unlikeness. Hieronymus Bosch, The Garden of Earthly Delights*, Zwolle: WBooks, 2011, pp. 245-248 on the typological Passion subtext between paradise and hell. Seen in this way, the thistle would be at the centre.

Definitely a ‘signpost’

The first three anomalies, which Berdoy summarises as *signposts*, are contradictory in and of themselves, but explanations can be found for them. For the *Garden of Earthly Delights*, as in Memling's *Last Judgement*, it would then have to apply that the errant diabolical spirit can be recognised as negative. The fact that this happens as a naturalistic mistake, as it were, is of course a signpost.³¹

The fourth of his observations, which claims that the visible pattern is ‘significantly different from what would be expected’, is dependent on the impression made by the eye, i.e. on preconceptions. The entomologist I consulted said that the dot pattern of the *Small Tortoiseshell* looks as it should. Berdoy says that without the ‘butterfly preset’, the constellation of the large and the two small dark dots would inevitably be recognised as a façade. However, the strong perspective slant, especially of the lower ‘window’, if seen as a façade, is unknown in representations of the 15th century (**fig. 1**). I hope I have put together enough arguments as to why I cannot follow the *ABC hypothesis* – for the time being only as far as the butterfly and thistle are concerned. I have mentioned a number of specifics that integrate the *Small Tortoiseshell*/thistle motif into the temporal-moral structure of the picture in a meaningful and logical way. They would make no sense in the context of the *ABC hypothesis*.

However, one must be cautious. Every hypothesis harbours the danger of excluding too much that does not fit into the ‘hyperimage’ that follows its own syntax. Therein lies the dilemma of ‘syntagmatic hermeneutics’, especially in allegorical images, especially in an image with so many details. Because inevitably – it is impossible to keep free of this – one finds preferentially *fitting* meanings. The more individual points are available, the greater the variability in bringing ‘suitable’ points into a system. The principle of falsification is a difficult business – with which I also failed here.

For me, the important impulse of Manuel Berdoy lies in his precise access, more remains to be seen. The details are taken seriously. This is the only way to understand the *Garden of Earthly Delights*. The concrete meanings of each group of figures and each peculiar shape in the picture must be determined. Everything together could form a consistent pictorial narrative, in this Berdoy is to be fully agreed. In this sense, the *signposts* presented are a challenge. All subsequent interpretations have to integrate them or reject them with better arguments.³²

Finally, let’s return to Vladimir Nabokov. He incorporated his message about the false *Small Tortoiseshell* into a longer passage, which also contains an invective critical of interpretation. It is quoted here as a final gesture of humility before the difficulties of

³¹ The religious level in the *Garden of Earthly Delights* has an intense erotic background, including secret sex and hidden sexual ecstasy. Even before 1500, poetry sometimes cunningly interwove one level with the other. I wouldn’t be surprised if it turned out that Alphonse de Lamartine (*Le papillon*, 1823) had a predecessor in the 15th century.

³² Also stimulating is Berdoy’s access to Lucifer on the poop chair on the infernal tablet, for which Margaret Carroll has recently made other innovative suggestions, see Margaret D. Carroll *Hieronymus Bosch. Time and Transformation in the Garden of Earthly Delights*, New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2022, pp. 110-115.

systematic and syntagmatic interpretation.³³ If Nabokov were right, everything would be much simpler, but would it really be *nicer*? As for me, I ‘don’t follow him’...

“‘If I could write’, mused Demon, ‘I would describe, in too many words no doubt, how passionately, how incandescently, how incestuously – c’est le mot – art and science meet in an insect, in a thrush, in a thistle of that ducal bosquet. Ada is marrying an outdoor man, but her mind is a closed museum, and she, and dear Lucette, once drew my attention, by a creepy coincidence, to certain details of that other triptych, that tremendous garden of tongue-in-cheek delights, circa 1500, and, namely to the butterflies in it – a Meadow Brown, female, in the center of the right panel, and a Tortoiseshell in the middle panel, placed there as if settled on a flower – mark the ‘as if’, for here we have an example of exact knowledge on the part of those two admirable little girls, because they say that actually the *wrong* side of the bug is shown, it should have been the underside, if seen, as it is, in profile, but Bosch evidently found a wing or two in the corner cobweb of his casement and showed the prettier upper surface in depicting his incorrectly folded insect. I mean I don’t give a hoot for the esoteric meaning, for the myth behind the moth, for the masterpiece-baiter who makes Bosch express some bosh of his time, I’m allergic to allegory and am quite sure he was just enjoying himself by crossbreeding casual fancies just for the fun of the contour and color, and what we have to study, as I was telling your cousins, is the joy of the eye, the feel and the taste of the woman-sized strawberry that you embrace *with* him, or the exquisite surprise of an unusual orifice – but you are not following me...’”

³³ Vladimir Nabokov, *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle*, New York, Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 1969, pp. 436-437.