Chapter 10. Man’s Possibility: Spiritual Work

The Road to Calvary

Peter Bruegel the Elder ca.1525-1569. The Road to Calvary (1564), oil on wood panel, 124 x 170 cm. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna (fig. 1).

Fig. 1

The artist sets the scene of Christ’s journey on the road to Calvary in a wide landscape peopled with hundreds of figures the majority of whom are engaged in the kind of activities one would expect to see at a fairground or carnival rather than at a solemn religious occasion. The whole town has turned out on a blustery spring day to see the
execution of two local criminals and the ‘misguided fool’ who tried to raise a revolution against the state.

The two thieves in the cart sloshing through slime and mud attract plenty of respectful, if horrified, attention (fig. 2);
but the stumbling figure of Christ, surrounded and taunted by the bully-boys of the town garrison, is merely a joke, a minor incident on a day otherwise given over to a fun outing (fig. 3). The path to the cross follows the painting’s circular composition and we have the impression that the whole picture, in which is included the incident of *The Carrying of the Cross*, represents the Wheel of Life.¹

¹See above p. 69 ff for a discussion on this central idea in the Perennial Philosophy.
Fig. 4
At the centre is a windmill on top of a fantastic rocky spindle (fig. 4). This incongruous detail alerts the viewer to the possibility that the artist engages with significant philosophical ideas.

Giorgio de Santillana & Hertha Von Dechend’s book, *Hamlet’s Mill* is an important exposition of the symbolism of a theme in world mythology in which a mill turns on a spindle representing the earth turning under the heavens. The authors argue that, contrary to our contemporary theory of evolution, people of prehistoric cultures were adept at observing and accurately measuring celestial events. Further, they inscribed the knowledge thus derived in mythological dramas and stories of the struggles and wars of great gods or kings or powerful rulers:

> cosmological myths are understood to be stories that come from the sky, encoded maps about the arrangement of celestial features and the movement of planets and stars during the year. The universal storyboard of the night sky is viewed around the globe and, in this way, similar cosmologies and metaphors arise to explain the great questions: human origins, the mystery of life, time, and death, and the exploits of deities (who are really stars and planets). Echoes of a unified Neolithic world religion? Even in Greco-Roman myth it is obvious that Saturn, Jupiter and other mytho-cosmic deities refer to planets.

---

… ancient people around the globe observed the slow shifting of the celestial framework, what we call the precession of the equinoxes. Among academics and without good reason, the suggestion of this knowledge in ancient times has been dismissed out of hand, and this is exactly the problem. It is considered to be so patently impossible that no rational examination of the mythic forms describing precession has ever taken place. *Hamlet's Mill* is the first study to seriously address this question.³

Much of humanity's oldest myths were derived from celestial observations. The important ideas that *Hamlet's Mill* offers were met with little academic acceptance when it was published in 1969 though that is less the case today and the book has become something of a classic.

‘Hamlet's Mill’ is one of the common themes running through the world's mythology: that of a mill which turns on a spindle representing the Earth turning under the heavens (or more precisely: the heavens turning over the earth; or more precisely still, the heavens turning over the ‘four-cornered earth’. Some major event occurs and the mill is destroyed. In the process, a great ruler/king/god is overturned and a new ruler/king/god comes into power. This is not just an adventure story but rather is a scientific explanation of precession. The ruler/king/god associated with the old astrological sign is overthrown by the new one.⁴

⁴ Craig Rairdin  http://www.craigr.com/books/hamlets.htm
The authors contend that knowledge of the precession of the equinoxes – the ‘wobble’ of the earth’s axis during its 26,000-year cycle – was known long before its ‘discovery’ by Hipparchus in the second century BC. This knowledge helps humanity locate itself in cosmic space and cosmic time – what Plato called the ‘dance of the stars’ – and was derived from observing in which constellation the sun rises on the vernal equinox and the fact that, over a long period, this changes. At present the sun rises in Pisces and formerly (i.e. between two and three thousand years ago) it rose in Aries. Hamlet’s Mill demonstrates that the intention of myths was to transmit the knowledge of the precession of the equinoxes from one generation to another across very long periods of time. This mythology was transmitted in traditional songs or stories such as the Kalevala, the Finnish National Epic. They are magical in character and filled with sky lore. The Finnish cultural heritage, like its language, is not of Indo-European origin, and suggests an origin in Central Asia rather than Europe. Some of the Kalevala stories, according to Jenkins, ‘describe a sacred Mill called the Sampo (derived from Sanskrit skambha = pillar or pole) with a "many ciphered cover". He continues:

This spinning Mill is a metaphor for a Golden Age of plenty and the starry sky spinning around the Pole Star (known as the ‘Nail of the North’), which in the Far North is almost straight over head. The Mill at some point is disturbed, its pillar being pulled out of its peg, and a new one – a new ‘age’ – must be constructed. This becomes the chore of Ilmarinen, the primeval smith. In this legend, ancient

---

knowledge of precession among unsophisticated ‘peasants’ who were nonetheless astute sky watchers, was preserved via oral tradition almost down to modern times.\textsuperscript{6}

It has already been suggested in this thesis that Bruegel grasped the cosmological dimension of great religious events. For him, the gospel narratives were never only historical. He saw, in \textit{The Numbering at Bethlehem}, the birth of Christ as a cosmic event. An elaborate mythology associates Christ’s birth with the age of Pisces (it is cryptically referred to in early Christian art by the acronym ІΧΘΥΣ [\textit{ichtus}, fish]). The idea is very ancient; it is said by theologians to have been foretold by Virgil and it fits seamlessly into the humanist ideal of the integration of classical and Christian ideas.\textsuperscript{7} A Renaissance humanist of intellectual grandeur such as Bruegel could hardly see otherwise.

The wind blows, the wheel turns, and the gigantic merry-go-round of life moves on. Bruegel observes every figure, both from the point of view of their relation to the central event of whose significance they are ignorant, and also in relation to every fleeting influence that momentarily attracts their attention. He observes what a man is and depicts him through his understanding that a person’s thought and awareness go no further than what his attention is attached to.

\textsuperscript{6} Jenkins, \textit{op. cit.}
A man chasing his hat is a man chasing his hat: no more and no less (fig. 5). The situation involves him totally: his movements and his posture, his thoughts and feelings, all his energies, all his awareness, are identified with the circumstance of the moment.
The next moment he may be a man running to catch up with his friends (fig. 6) and the next, a man goggling at the prospect of the gallows (fig. 7).

In discussing *The Numbering at Bethlehem*, and *The Adoration of the Kings* this thesis has proposed the idea that in Bruegel’s pictures people – at least ordinary people – are depicted in various circumstances and engaged in various activities but always in the state that the gospels refer to as blindness, or sleep, and which in today’s language can be understood as unconscious identification. People, occupied with the distraction of the moment and lacking higher awareness, are not conscious of the larger situation in which the events are taking place. By including the windmill, Bruegel shows us what they cannot see: the higher, unseen influences that create the circumstances in which men live out their lives.

Every figure is caught up both momentarily and by the larger events. Bruegel shares with us his observation of how each person is identified with what has attracted his interest. It may be just the fun of the day’s outing, the curiosity of watching soldiers arresting a citizen, Simon of Cyrene, and pressing him into service (fig. 8),
or the macabre fascination of an execution. It is fun to see something spectacular or dramatic, even if it is horrific — and, for some, especially if it is horrific. But, then, your hat gets blown off in the wind.
or you have to wade through the flooded meadow (fig. 9),

or you get hired to help on a digging job (fig. 10).
Above it all, the windmill turns, spinning the vast panorama of life on its up-and-down, merry course (fig. 5). The mill, itself, is turned by the winds: unseen forces, laws of nature and laws of the cosmos – perhaps one could say the law of karma – that are beyond man’s awareness, beyond his comprehension, but to which he is subject and on whose actions he is dependent.

Such is life and such is man’s situation. In our present usual state of consciousness, according to traditional esoteric ideas, we do not know Reality; our faculties of perception are inadequate and our view of the world is illusory. From Plato to Schopenhauer, philosophers constantly return to this archetypal theme. If we accept the symbolism of the Gospels, we will find the same message: Man is described as being blind, deaf, lame, possessed by devils and, in some cases, even dead. According to an esoteric interpretation of these afflictions they symbolise Man’s low psychological or spiritual level – his low level of consciousness. Bruegel is direct; he shows how things actually are, leaving his viewers to draw the conclusion that Man’s awareness does not extend to the existence of a higher level of consciousness. At the same time he shows us that the higher level, represented by Christ and the Holy Family group in the foreground, is clearly present here in the midst of ‘life’ with implications for all to see – if they wish.

---

8 cf. Maurice Nicol, *The New Man*. Dr Nicol worked with C. G. Jung and later with P. D. Ouspensky; but his work on the gospels is also influenced by Origen, in particular, the latter’s *Commentary on the Gospel of Saint John*. 
Bruegel shows that consciousness is a matter of degree and that not everybody stands on the same level. This is clear from the presence of the Mary and her attendants on the raised promontory in the foreground (fig. 11). This group represents the possibility for human beings to stand in a different relationship to the mechanical forces that drive our lives. Even so, the higher awareness of the Holy Family does not free them from the consequences of humanity’s psychological blindness and stupidity – for we see that, like Christ, they must suffer for this. Bruegel’s composition separates them from the general run of events and from the circular composition, the wheel of Fortune. He has gone to some lengths to define the difference between them and the masses of people who represent ordinary humanity. Their scale is proportionately quite different. He has even adopted the artistic style of a previous generation, working in the manner of Hans
Memling or Hugo van der Goes; these figures are thus idealised; their elegant, aristocratic bearing signifying a level of being beyond that of the general mass of the people.⁹

In the paintings we have considered so far – *The Numbering at Bethlehem, The Adoration of the Kings, The Massacre of the Innocents* – we have suggested that, behind the pictorial anecdote, Bruegel illustrates basic flaws in the human condition. He shows us how the mass of humanity lives in ignorance of the higher laws of the universe and the divine influences that come to the earth with the specific purpose of redeeming us.

Such, too, is one of the underlying themes in *The Carrying of the Cross*; though into it Bruegel has introduced a new element. The figures placed on the raised foreground do not belong to the general condition of men blinded by their identification with the immediate moment and unable to see the influences under which they live. They are on a higher level in several senses of the term. How this level is found is revealed in the next two paintings that we shall discuss: *The Fall of Icarus* and *The Harvesters*

---

⁹ Hans Memling (Memlinc) (c. 1430 -1494) was an Early Netherlandish painter, born in Germany, who was the last major fifteenth century artist in the Netherlands, the successor to Jan van Eyck and Rogier van der Weyden, whose tradition he continued with little innovation.

Hugo van der Goes (c. 1440 -1482) is generally regarded as the greatest Netherlandish painter of the second half of the 15th century. In 1475 he became dean of the painters' guild at Ghent. His masterpiece is a large triptych of the Nativity known as the *Portinari Altarpiece* is in the Uffizi, Florence. This was commissioned by Tommaso Portinari, the representative of the House of Medici in Bruges for the church of the Hospital of Santa Maria Nuova in Florence.
The Harvesters

*The Harvesters* (1565) Oil on wood panel, 177 x 163 cm. Metropolitan Museum, New York. (Fig. 1)
June and July from the months of the *Tres Riches Heures of the Duc de Berry*, the de Limbourg brothers, *circa* 1410. Musée Condé, Chantilly.

It has been shown that, from the art historical point of view, Bruegel comes out of the traditions of late medieval miniature illumination painting\(^\text{10}\) of which the finest example is generally considered to be the famous *Très Riches Heures* of the Duc de Berry (figs. 2, 3), preserved today at Chantilly just north of Paris. Books of Hours had developed through the Middle Ages as aids for the private devotion of lay people. The feast days celebrating the major events in the life of Christ (his Birth, Death, Resurrection, and Ascension) were set within longer periods of time known as ‘seasons’ or ‘times’ (*tempores*).\(^\text{11}\)

\(^{10}\) Catalogue, *Illuminating the Renaissance*, Royal Academy, 2004

The Hours made for the Duc de Berry in 1410, in common with Bruegel’s *Seasons* series of paintings, depict human activities appropriate for the time of year in a wide landscape context and taking place under the appropriate astrological sign. Although the signs are not actually seen in Bruegel’s *Harvesters* it is not difficult to sense their influence in the vast sweep of the ‘cosmic landscape’ referred to by many writers. This thesis has suggested, in the case of *The Numbering at Bethlehem* and *The Road to Calvary*, that Bruegel provides a vision of cosmological time and its influence on human affairs though most of humanity remains oblivious to it because of its imprisonment within planetary time. So it is likely that, like the de Limbourg brothers 150 years before him, Bruegel had in mind the great cycles of time involving man’s relationship to nature, to the cosmos and to God. The commentary in Bruegel’s case – and it is a theme running through many of his later works – being that man, without a higher influence to help him, is ignorant of the world around him and the higher presence acting in it. This ignorance is the spiritual sleep from which man needs to awaken that mystics traditionally speak of.

Turning to *The Harvesters* we see that Bruegel has placed a group of people in the foreground of the composition and, with regard to the topography of the landscape, on a relatively high level, overlooking the valley. In the light of other ideas symbolised in the painting it seems likely that Bruegel means us to understand that the group placed at this point are situated in a different relationship to the theme of the painting than those down in the valley. The main theme is the idea of work of the harvest; but we shall return to this below. As in *The Carrying of the Cross*, (and also in *The Fall of Icarus*) the locating of certain figures at specific places – ‘higher’ or ‘lower’ – in the topography of the image
indicates that Bruegel alludes to a psychological and cosmological principle that accords with the traditional idea of the correspondence between the macrocosm and the microcosm.\textsuperscript{12} Psychological, in that it refers to higher and lower levels within an individual person’s being or consciousness (the inner cosmos); cosmological in its reference to higher and lower levels in the created universe. Christian sacred texts abound with references to mountains and valleys\textsuperscript{13} and patristic commentators, such as the 4\textsuperscript{th}-century Cappadocian bishop Gregory of Nyssa,\textsuperscript{14} differentiating between the anecdotal and the symbolic, speak specifically of the ‘Mountain of God’.\textsuperscript{15} This writer has shown elsewhere that in the Byzantine artistic tradition, at least in the older icons, mountains have this allegorical significance.\textsuperscript{16}

We have seen how Bruegel, through his association with Plantin, Ortelius and others, would have had access to such ideas. Hendrick Niclaes’ \textit{Terra Pacis} is an example of an allegorical landscape providing a context in which a mystical journey is undertaken and Bruegel’s association with its author, the founder of the House of Love, can be inferred not only from the overwhelming weight of circumstantial evidence but from the paintings themselves when correctly interpreted. This thesis has also suggested the school of Agostino Steuco in Rome, where Bruegel was between 1525 and 1530, as well as the tradition of the Rhineland mystics and the Brotherhood of the Common Life, of which

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{12} See above, pp. 105 ff.
\item \textsuperscript{13} Christ \textit{ascends} a mountain in order to deliver the beatitudes and \textit{ascends} Mount Thabor to be transfigured by God’s ‘uncreated’ light; he \textit{descends} into hell to redeem Adam and Eve
\item \textsuperscript{14} 4\textsuperscript{th} century bishop in Cappodocia. A product of the School of Alexandria, he was trained in the \textit{Allegorical Method} of Origen and in the oral (or esoteric) tradition of Ammonius Saccas.
\item \textsuperscript{15} E.g. ‘Sandaled feet cannot ascend the mountain of God’. Gregory of Nyssa \textit{Commentary on the Life of Moses}. The Classics of Western Spirituality. New York: Paulist Press, p. 59
\end{itemize}
the House of Love is a product – all more or less tending towards gnostic or cases, esoteric ideas.

It has recently been suggested that Van Eyck had access to, and made use of, Byzantine imagery during a supposed visit to Italy. The significance of the resulting impact on Van Eyck’s paintings would not have been lost on so perceptive an eye as Bruegel’s. If Bruegel’s art corresponds to immutable laws of nature, as Ortelius suggests, then it is not a surprise to find such ideas – whether explained by ‘influences’ or not – any more than it is a surprise to find the Fibonacci series in a pinecone. The laws of nature could not permit otherwise.

In The Harvest, the first of several mystical ideas is found in the composition itself which is based on a series of triads. The cornfield is divided into three separate areas by lanes that pass through it.

---

17 Craig Harbison devotes a chapter ‘Van Eyck’s Modern Icon’ to this idea in his Jan Van Eyck, the Play of Realism, Reaktion Books, 1990, pp. 158-167. Scholars are somewhat exercised over the absence of evidence supporting what has to be no more than a supposition that Van Eyck visited Italy. However Greek Scholars have unearthed material proving that there was a flow of Byzantine icons from Crete to Flanders in the 15th century. See M. Catapan, ‘Nove elenchi e documenti dei pittoni di Creta dal 1300 al 1500’ in Thesaurismata, 9 (1972) docs. Nos. 6-8, pp. 211-13; M. Constantoudaki-Kitromiledes, Taste and the Market in Cretan Icons in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries, From Byzantium to El Greco, London, 1987, pp 51-3.

18 See above, p. 261 ff for the discussion of Ortelius’ remarks in his Liber Amicorum.
In the foreground on the left are two men scything and one carrying water (fig. 4); three women, two of whom are carrying sheaves, are walking up the central pathway (fig. 5); on the far right are three more figures, two of them gathering pears that have fallen to the ground (fig. 6) while the third –

– (you have to look rather carefully to find him) is half-way up the tree; all three are gathering the fruit (fig. 7).

To the right of the central tree are a group of three figures (fig. 8); one is scything, one is cutting and binding a sheaf while the third, a woman, bends to pick up a sheaf before joining her companions walking down the hill.
Under the tree, eating their midday meal are nine workers: three times three (the triple triad) (fig. 9). The principle of ennead has its roots in Egypt (the ‘nine gods’ of Heliopolis) and in Neoplatonism (*The Enneads* of Plotinus); there are schools of thought that consider the number nine to combine the Law of Seven and the Law of Three.\(^{19}\)

The picture speaks to us about the abundance of nature and how her riches reward those who earn them by work. The fact that in the basket under the tree are loaves of bread and that the peasants are eating bread – the product of the corn field – emphasises the higher meaning of the triad for which bread, the product of flour, water and fire, expressing the interaction of three forces, is a traditional symbol.

\[^{19}\text{Enneagram theory has seen a popular explosion in New Age literature of the last 20 years but see P. D. Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, London, 1950, pp. 294-5, 376-8 for a traditional exposition.}\]
No word which John uses conveys this truth better than ‘seed’: ‘Whoever is born of God does not commit sin, for His seed is in him and he cannot sin because he is born of God’. (John iii, 9). It is a word that mystics have used again and again to express the implanting of the Divine Life within the human soul … the same idea is expressed by ‘water’ and ‘bread’: ‘The water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life’ (John iv, 14). ‘I am the Bread of Life’ (John vi, 35-63). ‘If any man eat of this bread he shall live for ever’.

In Bruegel’s art the symbolism is allegorical and, beyond that, anagogical. It is necessary to search for meaning beyond the allegorical. With Bruegel we can go further than the idea of contagious magic. As van Reyrl writes:

A more potent example of the symbolism of bread is in the Catholic mass. In the act of transubstantiation the host, the wafer of bread that is taken during communion, becomes the body of Christ. Bread becomes not just physically life giving but spiritually life-giving. This is a strong example of what James George Frazer in *The Golden Bough* termed contagious magic, where some aspect of one object is transferred into another through the two things being brought into contact in some way. Here, like in Dionysian rites, the worshipper is ingesting god and so is taking on some of the nature of god … I believe it is not bread *per se* that is carrying the meanings, but the whole cycle from planting to eating. In

---

20 See above p. 118, note 16.
fact, not until the bread is eaten can the cycle be complete ... Let me draw a parallel. A traditional English folk song tells the tale of John Barleycorn. John is the barley plant, more particularly the barley seed. In the song men come into the field and cut down John Barleycorn, then beat him (threshing), grind him between two stones and bung him in a vat, effectively killing him. The punch line, though, is that John Barleycorn ‘lives to tell the tale, for they pour him out of oaken vat and they call him nut brown ale’. This is a story of resurrection, as of course are the stories of Christ and of Persephone ... The common thread in all of this is the cycle from seed to plant to product, through which the properties of this whole cycle are incorporated into the human consumer through contagious magic. To the pre-scientific mind the transformation of seed under the earth into grass, of flower into seed again, of powdered seed and water into a pulpy lump must have seemed miraculous.  

The peasants have worked. This is the first thing we notice about them. We see that the physical demands of the harvest are total and demand all of their strength. Their utter exhaustion is expressed by the sleeping figure beneath the tree and by the urgent need with which they replenish themselves with food: bread, milk and fruit. The strength, power and movement of their work are vividly suggested by the rhythm of the two scythes on the left. Touching, and even sacred, in its simplicity is the posture of the peasant woman bending forward to tie a sheaf of corn. She expresses the essential...

loneliness and devotion of the worker. We do not see her face yet, in her anonymity, as Van Gogh was to show, there is great human dignity.

An alternative title for this painting could be The Workers for its theme is the essential truth of indefatigable commitment to work. Though this work, while certainly true literally, should also be considered in the light of the ideas that are present but hidden in the painting that call the viewer to consider a spiritual dimension.

It is the lot of humanity to bear a hard life: people must work to live. Bread represents the necessities of life earned only by great effort and sweat. At the same time it means the divine or higher nourishment that enables man’s spiritual nature to grow: the ‘supersubstantial’ bread of the Lord’s Prayer, translated (incorrectly according to some commentators) as ‘daily bread’. Christ himself instructed his followers saying, ‘I am the Bread of life, who came down from Heaven. If any man shall eat of My Bread he shall live forever.’

Scriptural scholarship is in agreement with the early tradition of the Greek and western Fathers, who concur in their interpretation that Jesus' prayer teaches us to pray for the supersubstantial bread, the Bread of Life, which is Jesus Himself in the mystery of the Eucharist and to ask for this daily. The Greek text of the Lord’s Prayer in St. Matthew (originally in Aramaic), ton arton hemon ton epiouasion, ‘our supersubstantial bread’ is accurately translated in the Latin Vulgate as panem supersubstantialem. St. Luke's Latin translation renders it ‘our daily bread’, panem quotidiam. St. Jerome – the great Doctor of the Church who translated the Holy Gospels from Greek into Latin – states that give us this day our daily or supersubstantial bread means that we ask for heavenly bread, the bread of the Eucharist. St. Ambrose, St.

22 John 6, 51.
Augustine, St. John Chrysostom have dwelt in their sermons and in their writings upon our daily bread, which is Jesus Christ in the form of the sacrament. The sacrament was the daily practice, hence daily bread, of the early Christians. St. Luke tells us this in the Acts of the Apostles (2; 46). And so does St. Cyprian, a saint and martyr of the early Church.23

The representation of the ‘peasants’ as workers can be considered to have an anagogical meaning. This means that Bruegel is inviting the viewer to experience the events’ mystical meaning as a real event in the world of gnosis, an insight into the knowledge of man and the world that lies beyond the short boundaries of sense perception and of rational thought. The ‘peasants’ belong to Nature (creation and the great laws of the cosmos) to whom they must give their life and work, looking for no reward other than to live and eat. And here Bruegel introduces the marvellous idea that Nature grants a further gift. There is another harvest.

Above the scene depicted, reaching up out of the picture, up into the sky – up onto a higher level – is a pear tree laden with fruit. The pears are so ripe and so heavy that they fall unbidden, or with only a shake. On the right we see a man in the branches of another smaller pear tree shaking them out onto the ground where they are being gathered. Bruegel was clearly interested in all this and was at pains to recount the details fully and precisely. Looking carefully we see a ladder by the tree and a basket into which the pears are gathered; he has even painted the moment when the pears are actually falling through

Thus the prominent central pear tree with its burden of fruit thus attain significance and whose meaning is related to the parallel imagery of the harvest. Thus the spiritual writer Valentin Weigel, a follower of Sebastian Franck and a contemporary of Bruegel, in a passage under the title *That the Contemplation of the Eternal Deity and of the Six Works of Creation, and also the Knowledge of Oneself, are Most Useful* emphasises that the cycle of concepts – work, life, nature, reward – operates on both the visible level and the spiritual plane. He says that:

> the visible physical tree remains in the invisible spiritual tree … whence does the tree come? Indeed, from the *astrum* or invisible seed. Whence comes the pear? From the tree … from the invisible *asta* of the stars that make the invisible visible. Whence the human being? Out of the *limus terrae*, which is to say from the clump of earth that is the entire world. Invisibly Adam lay in the world and [then] became visible. Spiritually, he lay within the world, and [then] became visible. That out of which one has been made one has and also bears within one: the pear is of the tree, the seed of the pear.25

We may ask what work. And what reward? This thesis holds that this must be a matter of enquiry on the basis of psychological and philosophical ideas associated with a profound allegory of the mystical life and, in particular, with the symbolism of different spiritual levels and the use of landscape as the symbolic *Terra Pacis* makes clear. While depicting

---

24 This detail cannot be seen in any reproduction.
the scene of the harvest in terms of the eternal cycles of nature and the zodiac in relation to man.\textsuperscript{26} Bruegel also conveys the idea of man’s possible spiritual evolution, his ‘escape’, in the gnostic sense, from the terrestrial sphere. Neoplatonic and gnostic traditions tell us that man’s true ‘home’ is much higher; St Paul tells us ‘If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God’.\textsuperscript{27}

We see in the painting that down in the valley life seems more pleasant; it is cool and green; people do not work, they play games in the field and swim in the pond. The group of peasants/workers is already a certain distance up the hillside where they are rewarded by the pear tree. Even a little further up the hill is the church.

\textsuperscript{26} The \textit{Harvest} is generally supposed to be one of a series of six paintings depicting the Months. Others are the \textit{Haymakers}, the \textit{Dark Day}, the \textit{Return of the Herd} and the \textit{Hunters in the Snow}. One is lost.

\textsuperscript{27} Colossians 3:1
But the church is obscured, in front of it is an awkward ditch, and around it has grown up a tangle of dark trees and unkempt shrubs so that, though it is there at a relatively higher point, with its spire reaching up into the sky, access to it has become difficult (fig. 10). Here, Bruegel is not necessarily passing a judgement, though the crisis of the Reformation in the Low Countries was at its height in the middle of the 16th-century; he states no more than the truth – objectively and compassionately that access to spiritual truth via the church is difficult. But the pear tree and the law it signifies reaches higher than the church. It is the climax of the whole design of the picture, drawing everything below it towards its roots and trunk after which all its lines ascend, spreading upwards and outwards into a level altogether above the picture (fig. 11).

---

28 Religion is no more than an outer shell; see above p. 254
The Fall of Icarus

*The Fall of Icarus*, tempera and oil on canvas, 73.5 x 112 cm. Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgiques, Brussels, (1567).

![The Fall of Icarus painting](image)

These, as the angler at the silent brook,

Or mountain-shepherd leaning on his crook,

Or gaping ploughman, from the vale descrys,

They stare, and view ’em with religious eyes.

And strait conclude ’em Gods; since none, but they,
Bruegel’s theme of work in relation to nature and laws is further elaborated in one of his most famous and enigmatic works: *The Fall of Icarus*. Once again Bruegel departs from the prototype, in this case not a painting or a gospel text but Ovid’s poem. Typically he illustrates one story while telling another in order to express ideas relevant to the possible spiritual development of man.

The highest point in the composition is a promontory in the foreground of the picture where the main narrative is taking place. Here we find the red-shirted ploughman situated at the intersection of the two main diagonals of the composition. This compositional device is also used in *The Marriage at Cana* to draw attention to the blue-jacketed server, a figure whose proportion dominates the over-all design in a similar way (figs. 2, 3).

In both cases the artist has chosen to give the principal visual emphasis to a figure who – apparently – plays an unimportant role in the narrative.

---

He is a young man, perhaps not more than 20 years old, working with skill and intelligence. He does not crack the whip he holds in his left hand but lays it in the horse’s hind quarters, maintaining contact between man and animal. This connection is also established through the reins held in the right hand, which also guides the plough. Thus horse, plough and ploughman are intimately co-ordinated, collectively engaged in humanity’s oldest task. The scene – so often depicted in art – has perhaps never been observed with such compassion or invested with such meaning: its three components expressing the triadic law that defines the elemental constituent parts of man. Platonic and, later, Christian Neoplatonic ideas saw man as a ‘tripartite being’ consisting of body, soul and spirit. In *The Republic* we find:
… with regard to that which is within and in the true sense concerns one’s self …

It means that a man must not suffer the principles of his soul to do each the work of some other and interfere and meddle with one another, but that he should dispose well of what in the true sense of the word is properly his own, and having first attained to self-mastery and beautiful order within himself, and having harmonised these three principles … and having linked and bound all three together and made of himself a unit, one man instead of many, self-controlled and in unison, he should then and only then turn to practice.31

From this it is clear that the imagery refers to inner life, inner order.

A famous example of ancient art, dating from the 5th-century BC, The Charioteer of Delphi (now without horse or chariot), once constituted a similar symbolic triad. The same idea is found in Plotinus where he speaks of the necessity of the driver’s presence and ‘intelligence’ without which the horse’s motion is haphazard.32

This central figure, the central idea, of the picture, then, is not Icarus but the ploughman; he is the ‘hero’ while the ‘anti-hero’, as we shall see, is the nearby shepherd leaning on his crook (fig. 5).

32 Plotinus, Enneads, p.99
The ploughman’s posture, with delicate step and attentive attitude, has a curious fragility in keeping with the picture’s elusive and dream-like atmosphere celebrated by Auden and others.33 Bearing in mind Bruegel’s famed realism, this young man’s look is incongruously refined and thoughtful. One might have expected a blunter, more rustic look such as we see on the face of the shepherd nearby (figs. 6, 7).

If Bruegel’s commentary is based on an inner, psycho-spiritual vision of reality – a vision consonant with the teachings of the Perennial Philosophy – then it is possible to see in this imagery a study of conscious attention, the ‘awakened state’ on the one hand and the sleep of (spiritual) ignorance on the other. The ploughman is an accurate and attentive worker. The act of ploughing the land in preparation for receiving the seed are images that call to mind an ancient and universal symbolism of the active inner life such as we

33 Cf. W. H. Auden,
‘In Brueghel’s Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone
As it had on the white legs disappearing into the green
Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.’
From ‘Musée des Beaux Arts’ Another Time (London, 1946), p.47. Altogether the painting has been the inspiration of at least 48 poems; see http://rechten.uvt.nl/koops/biblicar.htm
find in the Mystery Religions of late antiquity and in the gospel of St John where ‘seed’, like ‘water’ or ‘wine’, may be understood as representatives of divine or cosmic energies acting in the material world according to the laws of spiritual evolution. ‘Spirit endows matter to produce form’ in the formulation of Plotinus.  

To emphasise the quality of the ploughman Bruegel shows us the contrasting figure of the shepherd. Traditionally the idea of the shepherd symbolises care and attention while its esoteric meaning refers to a state of awareness associated with contemplation; we read, for example, in St John of Damascus (676-754): ‘Joachim kept a strict watch over his thoughts as a shepherd over his flock, having them entirely under his control’. The symbolism is subtle and refers to the psychology of spiritual work, but Bruegel, typically for his originality of mind, buries the thought more deeply by switching the meaning: the shepherd has no control over his thoughts. He is a dreamer; leaning on his staff, with his ignorant snout turned up to the sky, he fails in his task; his sheep stray on the mountainside and are in danger of falling into the sea like Icarus, the greatest dreamer of all.

Further below him, to the right, is a fisherman. Our eye is carried down to the water on which is a great ship and, between it and the land, the ineffectual splash where Icarus’ legs are seen disappearing below the surface (fig. 8).

---

34 Plotinus, *Enneads*, ‘Matter has been entered by Idea, the union constitutes a body’, p. 106
35 From the *Three Sermons on the Dormition* (Sermon I) of John of Damascus
http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/johndamasc-komesis.html
The juxtaposition of this last glimpse of Icarus and the nearby stately ship sailing from an area of darkness towards the light provides a similar idea to the contrast between the ploughman and the shepherd (fig. 8). Both pairs of juxtaposed ideas show the contrast between attentive intelligent care directed towards the right ordering of natural forces and the consequences of inattention through carelessness or impractical dreams.

Ovid's influence on Western art and literature cannot be exaggerated. The *Metamorphoses* is regarded as the best classical source of some 250 myths. ‘The poem is the most comprehensive, creative mythological work that has come down to us from
antiquity’. Based on its influence, ‘European literature and art would be poorer for the loss of the Metamorphoses than for the loss of Homer’. Ovid was a major inspiration for Dante, Chaucer, Shakespeare and Milton. ‘If Virgil is Rome's greatest poet, Ovid is the most popular (even in his own time; Ovidian graffiti has been found on the walls of Pompeii’.

Charles Boer, the author of a recent translation, summarises Ovid’s work as ‘a poem of grotesque injustices, of fierce emotion and frightening political inuendo … all besetting the darker aspects of human personality. Ovid pathologizes these aspects through the mythical images of metamorphosis. Many [of which] are terrifyingly downward to a sub-human state in plant's and animals, not upward into stars or Gods … Yet it all comes wrapped in a deceptively smooth and polished Latin verse, and narrated by a remarkably cool mythographer who keeps intruding himself coyly into the narrative, constantly qualifying, reminding us that he is writing all this with ancient myth handbooks open before him as if he were only some edit-as-you-go scholar or, at best, a detached and gentle onlooker like ourselves.’ Boer goes on to warn us that ‘The posture is, as so much with Ovid, treacherous, and the reader should beware of falling into the conventional literary trap of thinking this “high comedy”. It is most certainly sprightly, but ever so deadly. The radiant humour, the endless irony, Ovid's famous charm, all sit gracefully on

---

36 GK Galinsky, Ovid’s Metamorphoses. An Introduction to the Basic Aspects (Oxford 1975)


a stage of murders, rapes, tortures, plagues, starvations, and universal heartache, with the horror of metamorphosis itself only a welcome (or unwelcome) denouement.’

The warning that we should avoid the trap of regarding Ovid’s work as no more than ‘high comedy’ parallels the situation with Bruegel who, until recent times was considered merely a painter of ‘drolleries’. Ovid’s influence on the greatest poets and artists of European civilisation suggests a power in his work that comes from the highest possible source. Ovid’s English Renaissance translator, discussing in his ‘Epistle’ or prologue, three levels of soul, refers to Pythagoras, regarded by students of the Perennial Philosophy as the father of the esoteric tradition in the West:

He bringeth in Pythagoras disswading men from feare
Of death, and preaching abstinence from flesh of living things.
But as for that opinion which Pythagoras there brings
Of soules removing out of beasts to men, and out of men
Too birdes and beasts both wyld and tame, both to and fro agen:
It is not to be understand (sic) of that same soule whereby
Wee are endewd with reason and discretion from on hie: ...

If Bruegel is an artist in the tradition of the Perennial Philosophy then we may look beyond moral, psychological and allegoric meanings; all of these are in his painting but these are not all, for beyond them is the anagogic, the highest note that symbolism can

---

What Bruegel has depicted is mystical vision – insight or gnosis. This is what Ortelius means when he says that Bruegel ‘painted … things that cannot be painted’. This does not mean that the moral or allegorical meaning is excluded; the image of the ploughman representing religion was well known in the 16th century. For example, we find the great Hugh Latimer, martyred in 1555, telling us ‘the preaching of the gospel is one of God’s plough-works, and the preacher is God’s ploughmen’.

Bruegel’s paintings are universal in their appeal. The gnostic element does not reserve them exclusively for specialists. They are for all humanity because, as the Tradition maintains, everyone contains a spark of the divine within himself or herself. There are many ways to access this part of ourselves, all of them demanding the long and difficult work of developing interior attention or mindfulness. Tradition uses many words for this practice: ‘watch’, ‘pray’, meditate, ‘awaken’, ‘labour’ and so on. Meditation as a spiritual discipline – maintaining attention on one’s thoughts and inner energies – is a concept almost lost in our present culture whereas Bruegel, following Tradition and acknowledging its central importance uses events in the world as analogies for this inner spiritual activity. The ordered, expert work of maintaining the ship’s trim – as it progresses from darkness to light – is an image of humanity’s possibility for attentive and intelligent transformation of natural forces (fig. 9). The possibility of inner transformation, according to traditional mystical ideas, is equally a matter of active,

---

40 See above, p. 104.  
41 See above, p. 263.  
42 Englander et al. eds. ‘Latimer’s Sermon on the Ploughers, 1548’ in Culture and Belief in Europe 1450-1600, An Antholgy of Sources Oxford UK & Cammbridge USA: Blackwell, 1990
contemplative regulation of subtle energies. It is worth noting that from a tradition at least as old as the Catacombs in Rome, a ship sailing signified the human soul.\textsuperscript{43}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image}
\caption{Fig. 9}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{43} See for example, Burckhardt, T. op. cit. p.14