

THE IDENTITY OF HIERONYMUS BOSCH'S WAYFARER

# *The Identity of Hieronymus Bosch's Wayfarer*

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Perhaps no single figure in all of Hieronymus Bosch's work has elicited a more chaotic array of interpretations than the so-called *Wayfarer* (ca.1510) and

the almost identical figure on the outer panels of the famous triptych, *The Haywain*, painted about ten years earlier.

1

The iconographical problems posed are the most basic. Who is he? What is he meant to represent? Is his position on the outside panels of the *Haywain* significant to the narrative of that work, and, if so, in what way? An explanation that seems to provide a more complete answer

Fig. 1: Hieronymus Bosch, *The Wayfarer*, ca. 1510. Boymans-van Beuninger Museum, Rotterdam.

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than any so far advanced is that the figure is a representation of the Eternal (or Wandering) Jew.

The legend of the Wandering Jew is quickly told. According to it, a certain Cartaphilus was present as Jesus passed, carrying his cross to Calvary:

Cartaphilus passed by him, hit him and told him to go more quickly.

Thereupon Jesus said to him, "I am going, and you shall wait until I return." Cartaphilus became a

Christian, was baptised in the name of Jesus, and by returning to his then age of thirty every hundred years, kept living as a pious witness to the passion of Christ, hoping for his redemption at the end of the world.

2

(Figs. 5, 6)

Histories of the Eternal Jew recite a seemingly endless number of variations on this tale, along with various "sightings" of the Wandering Jew. One of the best-known is the account of Paulus von Eitzen, bishop of Schleswig, who "saw" the figure praying in a Hamburg church in the winter of 1542. He is described as ...a tall man, dressed in threadbare garments, with long hair, standing barefoot in the chancel; whenever the name of Jesus was pronounced he bowed his head, beat his breast and sighed profoundly. It was reported that he was a shoemaker

named Ahasuerus who had cursed Jesus on the way to the crucifixion.

On further questioning he related the historical events that had

Fig. 2: Caricature of a Jew, *Kikeriki*, Vienna, ca. 1900 (after Schreckenberg 1996:327).

Fig. 3: Hieronymus Bosch, outer panels of *The Haywain*, Prado Museum, Madrid.

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occurred since. He conversed in the language of the country he happened to be visiting.

3

This version contains several of the most common attributes of the Wandering

Jew as the tale was elaborated over the centuries: the name Ahasuerus, the poverty-stricken appearance, the wild hair, and the occupation of a shoemaker.

In his most basic form, he is reduced to a simple figure, striding along with his

walking stick as shown in figures 7 and 8, and, in more recent, overtly anti-Semitic form, he is large-nosed (Fig. 9), carrying a money-bag (Fig. 10), or the

caricatured Jewish peddler, pursued by barking dogs (Fig. 2).

It seems hardly necessary to point out that anyone familiar with the overall silhouette of the Wandering Jew must be struck by the similarity between it and Bosch's *Wayfarer*, striding along, driving a barking dog from his heels, his

“long hair” coming through a rent in his hat, “in threadbare garments,” his shoemaker’s awl (Fig. 11) attached to the hat in his extended hand. In the tree behind him an owl perches, symbolic of, among other things, blindness, in this case the blindness of Jewry to the true faith. Featured more prominently in the foreground than mere composition might account for is an animal casually taken to be a cow, but which is more probably an ox, the ox being, among other things, also a symbol of Jewry (stubbornness).

4

Several scholars have found in the details of the landscapes of both the *Haywain* panels and *The Wayfarer* elements that are linked to the astrological symbolism of **Saturn**, the planetary body which presides over criminals, beggars, cripples and those afflicted with *acedia*, sometimes translated as sloth

Fig. 4: *The Haywain* (open). Prado Museum, Madrid.

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Fig. 5: Gustave Doré,  
*Cartaphilus (or Ahasuerus)*  
*Observing the Procession*  
*to Calvary from his*  
*Shoemaker’s Shop*, 1856  
(after Schreckenberg  
1996: 295).

Fig. 6: *The Wandering Jew*,  
French, 18  
th  
century

(after Schreckenberg  
1996: 29).

Fig. 7: *The Jew Ahasuerus*,  
German, 1618 (after  
Schreckenberg 1996:  
296).

Fig. 8: *Le Juif-Errant* (The  
Wandering Jew), French,  
before 1869 (after  
Schreckenberg 1996: 293).

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or melancholia. None, however, have pursued with serious curiosity the connection between such a landscape and the main figure within it. In this regard, two interesting images reproduced by Eric Zafran in his fascinating study, "**Saturn** and the **Jews**,"

5

suggest the solution. The first (Fig. 12) shows us a figure simply described as "A Jew," and the second (Fig.13), two figures described as "melancholics." They are strikingly similar, though made by different artists and separated by almost 50 years, and this because, as it turns out, in medieval thought, the Jew, too, is "born under **Saturn**."

As early as the fourth century, St. Augustine considered **Saturn** a god of the **Jews**, and the idea seems to have become well-fixed in the Christian imagination by the ninth or tenth c.

when a Christian scholar named Alcabitius wrote:

He [i.e., **Saturn**] is bad, masculine, in daytime cold, dry, melancholy, presides over...hatred, obstinacy, care, grief, lamenting, evil opinion...miserly gains, over old age and impossible things, far travels, long absence, great poverty, avarice...He has the faith of Judaism, black clothing; of days, Saturday and the night of Wednesday.

6

Saturnian landscapes typically feature a gallows or a pillory (like those seen in the distance behind the ox in *The Wayfarer*), scenes of robbery, murder and other criminal violence, alongside images of agricultural labors, since earth is **Saturn**'s element. Because it roots in the earth, the pig is frequently found in many

Fig. 9: *The Wandering Jew*, Sweden, 1833/57 (after Schreckenberg 1996).

Fig. 10: Jobst Mellern, *Der Gelb Geckl* (The Yellow Fop). Prague,

16

th

century (after Rubens 1973:89).

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depictions of the world of the “children of **Saturn**” (Figs. 14,15,16); and, because it is so loathsome to the **Jews**, it can almost always be counted on to be found somewhere in his vicinity, as it is, for example, in both *The Wayfarer* and *The Haywain*.

A final, less harmless manner in which **Jews** are associated with **Saturn** involves the seemingly ineradicable myth of blood libel, the ritual murder of children. The most enduring image of **Saturn** in the popular mind is the one so savagely rendered by Goya: that of the enraged god devouring his children (Fig. 17). The most appalling assimilation of Jewry with **Saturn** is undoubtedly that which finds a metaphorical identity between **Saturn** devouring his children and the Jew devouring the (Christian) children whose blood is needed for the making of Passover *matzoh* (Fig. 18). In sum, because it seems likely that all of this would have been considerably more familiar to Bosch’s contemporaries than it is to us, the identity of our figure might have been much more easily available to them than it might be to ordinary viewers in our own times.

\* \* \* \* \*

One regards the opened *Haywain* with a heavy heart: it is relentless in its religious pessimism. Left panel: the fall of man. Center panel, a distant Jesus displays before us a world gone mad with avarice. In pursuit of meaningless enrichment – it’s all hay! – mankind robs, kills, plunders, gulls, tears his neighbor’s clothes from his back. Dear God, even the holy Church

stuffs its sacks with hay, following the haywain like an idol! Right panel: the inescapable end, in hell, eternal torment, eternal damnation. It is a work of endless lamentation, a "wehe-

Fig. 11: Hieronymus Bosch,  
*The Wayfarer*, Rotterdam, detail.

Fig. 12: *A Jew*, German, 1510  
(after Zafran 1979: 7).

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klage" over the lost state of God's world. One closes the triptych with a sigh: is it so? Forever and ever and ever and ever and ever? The closed panels confront us: the Christian heart lifts as it recalls the promise of return and redemption embodied in the figure of the Eternal Jew, doomed to wander the wretched world until Christ's promise to him is redeemed.

No wonder Bosch paints him with such sympathy! He is the very incarnation of the promise of redemption, of salvation at the end of days. Jewry fits into the course of Christian history as an

...indispensable entity. Its survival up to the end of history and its final conversion in the last moment of history, or shortly before it, was a condition *sine qua non* for the salvation of mankind, the second advent of the Lord and the dawn of



a new day, of the Kingdom of  
Heaven.

7

In the essay in which this passage appears, Leschnitzer is attempting to account for the profound ambivalence in Christian consciousness concerning the Jew. Part of his method is to make an assumption frequently made about the Wandering Jew: that he is a symbol of the Jewish people as a whole, a model of their history and an explanation of their endurance long after mighty powers have risen and fallen. Put with brutal simplicity the question he addresses is one which all students of Jewish history come to ask at one time or another: why didn't Christianity kill them all off and be done with this stiff-necked people

Fig. 13: *Melancholics*, German, 1557 (after Zafran 1979: 7).

Fig. 14: Hans Sebald Beham (or George Pencz), *Children of Saturn*, ca. 1531 (after Zafran 1979: 5).

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once and for all? And the answer, or a large part of the answer, is that whenever this solution is offered, some segment of the Christian world is always there to remind the rest that this otherwise vile nation of deicides

still has a role to play in the world: they are a constant reminder of the promise of the second coming of Christ.

This final caveat explains the non-stereotypical manner in which the Eternal Jew is so often depicted. He is frequently shown (as in Figs. 6, 7 and 8) dressed in contemporary garments, with few, and often none of the clichéd anti-Semitic elements so universal in other depictions of **Jews**. And this removes a last objection to the identification of our figure as the Wandering Jew: the objection that he “does not look like a Jew.” Leaving aside his conversion at the time of his life-altering experience, his very existence represents not *denial* but *proof* of the divinity of Jesus, and proof that the world depicted in *The Haywain* will *not* go on forever and ever and ever. No wonder, then, that Bosch could give him the kindly, worldly-wise, almost sweet sadness with which he views the corrupt world through which he has wandered since the Crucifixion. He is the only ray of hope in the painting.

Fig. 16: Anonymous , *Children of Saturn*, German, 1445 (after Zafran 1979: 5).

Fig. 15: Anonymous, *The Children of Saturn*, German, 3rd quarter of the 15th century (after Panofsky 1955: Ill. 213).

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Fig. 17: Francisco Goya, **Saturn** devouring his Children, ca. 1820. Prado Museum, Madrid.

### Notes

1. A summary of the various interpretations of the figure is provided by Snyder 1973:
- 3: "A good example of the problems encountered in interpreting Bosch's works is the bewildering scholarship of the so-called *Landloper* (tramp). The striding figure... has been identified as the Biblical prodigal son (Gluck, De Tolnay), a peddler (Seligman), a vagabond thief (Conway), an errant drunkard (Bax), a wayward shepherd (Calas), a personification of Sloth (Zupnick), a child of **Saturn** (Pigler), a personification of the melancholic humor of **Saturn** (Philip), and finally an image of *Elck* (Everyman) of Netherlandish proverbs." More recently, Graziani 1982 has suggested that the figure is a representation of Poverty. See Graziani, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 45, 1982: 211-16.
2. Schreckenberg 1996: 291.
3. *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 1971: 259-62.
4. I am grateful to Leanna Friedman of San Francisco who brought this attribute of the ox to my attention, and to Beverly Zimmer, editor of *The Midwest Ox Drovers Association Newsletter*, for her expert help in confirming my intuition that

the animal  
in *The Wayfarer* might indeed be an ox. (Private correspondence).

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5. Zafran 1979: 16-27.

6. *Ibid.*: 16.

7. Leschnitzer 1986:227-35

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Fig. 18: Saturn, Peter Wagner, *Almanach*, Nuremberg,

1492

(after

Schrekenberg 1996:331). The

distinctive "Jewish" hat and the

"rota", a round yellow ring or wheel

on his breast identify **Saturn** as a Jew.