

the question of Thomas Jefferson and that philosophical movement known as the Enlightenment. The core impulses that motivated Benjamin Franklin and other Founding Fathers, themselves deeply influenced by the anti-Enlightenment Leibniz, were specifically *in opposition* to such Enlightenment degenerates as Francis Bacon, Isaac Newton, John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, Adam Smith, Bernard de Mandeville, and Voltaire.

The problem with Jefferson is, that he worshipped the key figures of the Anglo-Scottish Enlightenment. O'Brien is evasive on this matter, because he himself is a propagandist for the Enlightenment. The ultimate expression of this, is his *laudatio* to Edmund Burke, *The Great Melody* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). In economics and political strategy, Burke was an impassioned supporter of Adam Smith, as was Jefferson.

O'Brien's 'New American Civil War'

O'Brien's evasiveness is driven by the obvious problem: If Jefferson's bad ideas were caused by his affection for the Enlightenment, then one simply need blame the Enlightenment. To cure the disease, do away with the infectious agent: Destroy the Enlightenment.

Evidently, O'Brien has had a premonition, that the current direction of "Jef-

erson revisionism," could lead insightful Americans precisely in this direction. The cleverer British strategists know that the current period of history, in which much of the world has been subjected to Enlightenment modes of thinking, is coming to an end. Either this will mean that the Enlightenment will be finally replaced by a reawakening of the kinds of ideas associated with the Golden Renaissance and promoted by Lyndon LaRouche today, or it will mean that the world crashes into what might be called "post-Enlightenment chaos." O'Brien has opted for the latter.

O'Brien frets that Jefferson is already becoming the ideological standard-bearer for the right-wing, racist militia groups that are sprouting up in the United States. He paints a dark picture, in which a "new civil war"—a race war on a massive scale—might occur, with the "militant extremists" being part of a "neo-Jeffersonian racist schism" that will rip apart what he calls the American Civil Religion Official Version (ACROV).

"American civil religion," he writes, "may . . . be the major force working for the preservation of the Enlightenment. . . . Enlightenment and democracy are unlikely to survive in the rest of the world if they go down in America. . . . The sacred documents of the American civil religion are Enlighten-

ment documents. . . . The Constitution is an *Enlightenment* document." [Emphasis in original]

What is involved here is a threat. O'Brien writes that "the implications of a schism in the American civil religion," caused by the re-evaluation of Founding Father Jefferson, "are potentially so far-reaching that they defy all prediction. . . . A drama is about to manifest itself." He feels "awe and foreboding, at the potential consequences in the coming century, for the world as well as for America, of the impending schism in the American civil religion and of the concomitant emergence of Thomas Jefferson—the mystic, implacable Jefferson of the French Revolution—as prophet and patron of the fanatical racist far right in America."

The message is: Try to extirpate the evil that the Enlightenment has done in the United States, and we will drown you in blood.

Those who are sane among us, will learn from Jefferson's errors, to seek ways to bury the Enlightenment once and for all, and replace it with truly human forms of thought. By contrast, the Conor Cruise O'Briens of this world want to drive us all into a Dark Age, as the "alternative" to their doomed Enlightenment paradigm. The handwriting on the wall reads: "Zaire."

—Mark Burdman

The Bold Freshness of Artistic Discovery

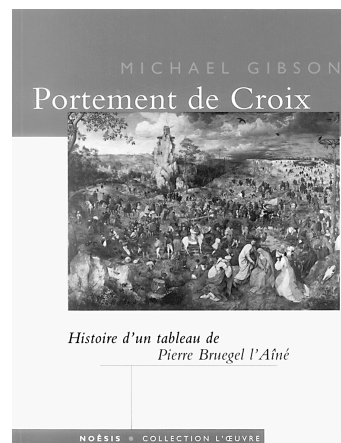
"As a child, I grew angry when anyone tried to tell me what I ought to think of a person or a work before I had even had a glimpse of it. Standing before a painting is like encountering a living person: The impression it makes on us arises from that relationship. The information that others are so intent on communicating to us, remains subordinate to that."

"Recalling this induces me to make you the following proposition: Don't read this book yet. First turn to the picture, to the images. Make their acquaintance. Enter fully into their world. Somewhere in this multitude, with careful searching, you will discover Christ carrying the cross on which, soon enough, He will be crucified."

* * *

On that passionate note begins this little jewel of a book on "The Procession to Calvary" ("Christ Carrying the Cross"), that great picture in the Kunsthistorisches Museum of Vienna, painted in 1564 by Pieter Bruegel the Elder [SEE page 103]. The author of this work in French, Michael Gibson, is art critic for the *International Herald Tribune*, and the author of monographs on numerous painters, one of them Bruegel (Paris: Nouvelles Editions Francaises).

Boldly devoting himself here to a single work, which he examines in its many facets, diamond-like, the author



Portement de Croix:
Histoire d'un tableau de
Pierre Bruegel l'Ainé
 by Michael Gibson
 Noesis, Paris, 1996
 160 pages, paperbound, 78ff

presents us his interpretation (which he does not claim to be the only one, or even the right one) in the course of 24 compact, conceptually dense chapters. He teaches us to consider and to put forward hypotheses; thus, the painting thus becomes the springboard for an entire philosophical and theological reflection.

Such an endeavor finishes off those simplistic interpretations of the meaning of the Bruegelesque approach, which, unhappily, continue to have their supporters. Let us briefly analyze these oversimplifications, in order to make clear Mr. Gibson's fundamental contribution:

(1) The first school of oversimplification prefers to see in Bruegel only the humorous expression of the "collective soul" (here, Flemish) emanating from peasant backwardness elevated to the status of virtue. This "Romantic" vision is above all an instrument for the enslavement of the population, and of a certain bourgeoisie which is pleased to think itself highly intelligent. The irony of history made it such that the Flemish nationalism of the Nineteenth century, which forcefully claimed to have liberated the people, proceeded to take over from its (French-speaking) oppressor this Romantic vision of "our Bruegel," which is only a very partial explication of the body of his work.

The origin of this view is to be found, first of all, in the account which Karel van Mander gave of the life of Bruegel in his *Schildersboeck* of 1604. Having himself created very fashionable peasant scenes, van Mander brought this cave-art aspect well to the fore. Finally, the Romantic vision profited from the fact that the most explicitly political pictures (e.g., "The Massacre of the Innocents," etc.), were relatively rare: Bruegel, on his deathbed, had ordered the destruction by his wife of writings, drawings, and paintings which could have brought down upon her and her children the wrath of the (in this case) Spanish oppressor.

(2) To this deadening and apolitical viewpoint, is opposed the "revolutionary" view which makes of Bruegel a kind of Till Eulenspiegel* of painting, an incorrigible prankster who makes fun

of the Spanish oppression with the audacity of great farce. Bruegel is thus reduced to being a mere pamphleteer, denouncing the exploitation of the "little people"/Flemish peasants by the "capitalist bourgeois"/Spaniards; that is, reduced to a figure lacking any profound philosophical vision. We are still in the Romantic vision here, but its "class war" version, one which is always based on this dubious deification of the "people" as good—not for what they do, but for what they are (which is to say, people), representing thus, in any case, the embodiment of the interests of the greatest number.

(3) The third current emerged after World War II, with the development of scientific techniques of analysis (which, in the domain of art history, brought about the collapse of numerous assumptions which had become truths by force of repetition). This outlook boils down, slightly caricatured, to this: "Let us stop trying to explain anything, and instead confine ourselves solely to objective scientific facts." This current, being ultimately self-sterilizing, ended up by no longer wanting to grapple with the world of ideas, because, basically, hypotheses can not be "objective facts." Instead, its adherents merely provide the reader with compilations of historical sources, leaving it to him to make of it whatever what he chooses.

The Enthusiasm of Discovery

In analyzing Bruegel's painting step by step, the author recreates the enthusiasm of discovery: What is the meaning of that giant crag crowned with a windmill near the center of the work, and what is its relationship to the story? Does it have anything to do with "the inflexible rule of the Law under which humanity groans from the moment of its emergence into consciousness"? The author sees in it a symbol for the fulfillment of the destiny proclaimed in Holy Scrip-

* Till Eulenspiegel: A legendary German peasant of the late Middle Ages. Known for his playing of pranks directed mostly against inn-keepers and merchants, although his targets also included priests and noblemen, Till was seen in European popular culture a voice of the peasantry against the townsfolk.

ture: ". . . The death of Christ brought humanity out from the rule of Law into the reign of Grace. . . ." The movement of the crowd is organized like a vast gyrosopic motion around the crag. By placing Christ at the intersection of the diagonals, surrounded by more than five hundred characters—soldiers, cavaliers, spectators, and more—Bruegel presents Him as "The Son of God become Man among men . . ."—and therefore at the center of, but in no way above, Man.

In Italy, in the same period, a picture like this would have been censured by the Church for "representing Jesus in an unseemly fashion." And yet, Bruegel seems truly animated by that Christian humanism which Erasmus of Rotterdam and Rabelais championed before him. For them, the love of God is conveyed above all by love of one's neighbor. In the picture, too, we see the two condemned thieves, one of whom clutches his crucifix. The anachronism is sadly ironic here, for it was in the name of Christ that the Spanish put the Flemish "heretics" to death: death by the sword for the men, and by being buried alive for the women. "Whatever you do unto the least of these my brethren, you do unto me," Bruegel seems to want to say, by showing that the sufferings of all are met in the suffering of Christ.

The author also evokes the humanist circles which Bruegel frequented: the "Chamber of Rhetoric" (a literary and poetic circle) where Bruegel's employer, Hieronymus Cock, patron of the Antwerp printing house called "The Four Winds," held sway; as well as all those who gravitated around the "Schola Charitatis" (School of Charity) network founded by Hendrik Nicolay (a religious "sect" founded upon tolerance, so that no one had to abandon his religion to participate in it). The Touraine printer Christophe Plantin was a member, as were close friends of Bruegel: the geographer and greatest cartographer of his age, Abraham Ortelius, as well as Bruegel's intimate friend, Hans Franckert. Dirk V. Coornhert, engraver and philosopher shaped by Talesius, former secretary to Erasmus, and confidante of the leader of the revolt of the Low Countries, William

the Silent, participated too.

This network was the primary target of the Duke of Alba, who was sent by King Philip II of Spain to suppress the Reformation in fire and blood. In “The Procession to Calvary” there appear the “Rhoode Rocx,” those mounted police, mercenaries, clad in red and acting in the service of the Spanish, leading Christ from the city to Golgotha. These same police persecuted Plantin, and beheaded van Straelen, the Mayor of Antwerp who was accused of laxity toward the “heretics.”

Otherwise, Gibson offers us his interpretation of another work: “The Magpie and the Gallows” (Hessisches Landesmuseum, Darmstadt). According to Gibson, the absence of a corpse hanging from the gibbet, combined with the presence of dancing peasants, represents a prayer for the future: the Spanish withdrawn into the distance, the mass execu-

tions stopped, and the return of joy.

We also note that Bruegel resisted the Italianate mannerisms which transformed the art of the Sixteenth century into a vast production-line of stereotypical, honeyed images, heralding the hypocrisy of the Baroque. Quoting from the memorial eulogy which Ortelius dedicated to him in 1573 (Bruegel had died in 1569):

“In this Bruegel whom I eulogize—he has painted masses of things which cannot be painted. . . . In all his works, he always endeavored to make understandable everything he presented for us to look upon. . . . The painters who strive to render the beautiful proportions of a model in the full bloom of youth—and who want to add to their work some charm, something pleasant, of their own invention—completely deform the personality of the person

whom they are trying to represent. In proceeding thus, they betray the individuality of the person who is serving as the model, as much as they do his actual appearance. Our Bruegel is free from any such failing.”

This book does justice to the Old Master in some degree, by grappling with one of his most ambiguous pictures—that is, one that is approachable and intelligible on many levels. To pause over such an image, truly constitutes a breath of fresh air, which can get the mind working again. The pleasure in it lies not in “decoding” of this or that symbolism, but in going through the connective process from one hypothesis to another. In any case, as a human being and a painter (and Flemish, to boot), I thank the author for these very beautiful pages, at a price affordable to everyone.

—by Karel Vereycken



Pieter Bruegel the Elder, “The Procession to Calvary,” 1564.



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