

Speculative Imagemaking in Late Medieval and Early Modern Art

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BRILL

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Saint Christopher's Quest

James Clifton

One of the happier and more helpful delusions of travel is that one is on a quest.
(Paul Theroux)¹

Wise man was he who counselled that Speculation should have free course, and
look fearlessly towards all the thirty-two points of the compass, whithersoever
and howsoever it listed. (Thomas Carlyle)²

In his first book, *Joachim Patinir: Landscape as an Image of the Pilgrimage of Life*, published in 1988, Reindert Falkenburg took up the question of the so-called “world landscape” (*Weltlandschaft*). Noting that the term had been applied to Patinir to describe an expansive depiction of created nature in its beauty and variety, he concluded that it “is a particularly apt characterization of the background landscape in his paintings, provided one uses it in the sense of a world that has surrendered to sin.”³ Through these landscapes fraught with obstacles and temptations, figures characterized by Falkenburg as pilgrim and *homo viator perigrinans* may make their way according to the common metaphors of the *peregrinatio vitae* (pilgrimage of life) and life’s two paths (a choice between the easy path of vice that leads to hell and the difficult path of virtue that leads to heaven). Such a geographical iconography is most salient in Patinir’s *Landscape with Charon and the Human Soul* (Fig. 19.1).⁴ The ferryman

1 Paul Theroux, *Ghost Train to the Eastern Star: On the Tracks of the Great Railway Bazaar* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2008), 258.

2 Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, 2nd ed. (Boston: James Munroe, 1837), 11.

3 Reindert L. Falkenburg, *Joachim Patinir: Landscape as an Image of the Pilgrimage of Life*, translated by Michael Hoyle, *Oculi: Studies in the Arts of the Low Countries 2* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1988), 66. See also Reindert Falkenburg, *Especulaciones sobre el paisaje: del Bosco a Bruegel* (Madrid: Catedra Museo del Prado, 2019), 11–16 and *passim*.

4 Falkenburg, *Joachim Patinir*, 73–82; Reindert L. Falkenburg, “Marginal Motifs in Early Flemish Landscape Paintings,” in *Herri met de Bles: Studies and Explorations of the World Landscape Tradition*, ed. Norman E. Muller, Betsy J. Rosasco, and James H. Marrow (Princeton: The Art Museum, Princeton University; and Turnhout: Brepols, 1998), 58–59; Reindert L. Falkenburg, “The Devil Is in the Detail: Ways of Seeing Joachim Patinir’s ‘World Landscapes,’” in *Patinir: Essays and Critical Catalogue*, ed. Alejandro Vergara (Madrid: Museo Nacional del Prado, 2007), 63; Falkenburg, *Especulaciones*, 40–44. See also Pilar Silver Maroto, “Charon Crossing



FIGURE 19.1 Joachim Patinir, *Landscape with Charon and the Human Soul*, c.1520–1524, oil on panel, 64 × 103 cm, Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid, P001616

of classical myth, Charon, who traditionally transports the souls of the dead from the land of the living to Hades, here brings a human soul down a river that divides heaven on the viewer's left from hell on the right. The boat seems to be just now turning to follow the gaze of the soul toward the more inviting of life's paths, the one that leads to hell.

Among the individualized travelers frequently met in depicted landscapes of the sixteenth century was Saint Christopher, who was most often shown carrying the Christ Child across a dangerous river. In his book, Falkenburg addressed Patinir's *Landscape with Saint Christopher* in El Escorial only in passing, claiming to leave it outside his discussion because he had "been quite unable to unravel the meaning of many of the details in this picture" (Fig. 19.2).⁵ Yet he provided a concise explication of the painting, albeit one couched in tentative terms. Referring to Christopher as "homo viator," he proposed that "[i]t is possible that in Patinir's painting ... the saint's fording of the river was intended as an example of those who take the hard road in a world full of sin and the horrors of war."⁶ He suggested that with this landscape, as with others

the River Styx, c.1520–24. Joachim Patinir," in *Patinir: Essays and Critical Catalogue*, ed. Alejandro Vergara (Madrid: Museo Nacional del Prado, 2007), 150–61.

⁵ Falkenburg, *Joachim Patinir*, 106.

⁶ Falkenburg, *Joachim Patinir*, 106.



FIGURE 19.2 Joachim Patinir, *Landscape with St. Christopher*, c.1520–1524, oil on panel, 127 × 172 cm, Patrimonio Nacional, Real Monasterio de San Lorenzo del Escorial, inv. no. 10014400

he discussed, “we are dealing with the meditational images of the pilgrimage of life.”⁷ He elaborated these suggestions in an endnote replete with question marks. Details in the right half of the landscape, he wrote, “have an air of menace: warfare, arson, murder and pillage.” Those in the left half are more resistant to interpretation—a hermitage undergoing renovation while occupied by a devil; two monks apparently slipping a corpse into the water—leading him to ask: “Is this meant to be a satire on the life of hermits?” He wondered further: “Are the scenes on the right an illustration of the sinful world and the degenerate nature of those who live in the earthly city, and those on the left a metaphor of the perverted life of those who start out on the arduous path but lack the will to resist the blandishments of the devil and the world? And is St Christopher himself an exemplar of the steadfastness of the true pilgrim in the face of life’s temptations?”⁸ Virtually in passing, Falkenburg, characteristically,

⁷ Falkenburg, *Joachim Patinir*, 106.

⁸ Falkenburg, *Joachim Patinir*, 138 n.481.

provided a plausible—even compelling—interpretation of a complicated painting, posited as speculation.⁹

The difficulty in deciphering the meaning of the details in Patinir's *Saint Christopher*, he noted, derives from the close relationship—in this painting more than in any others by Patinir—to Hieronymus Bosch's formal vocabulary.¹⁰ Even more Boschian, perhaps, than Patinir's El Escorial painting—or at least evoking those paintings by Bosch especially dense with more fantastical motifs—is a composition of the subject known in several versions of varying dimensions and by different hands.¹¹ Brimming with *diableries*, the paintings recall in motifs and sensibility the Bosch of, for example, the Lisbon *Temptation of Saint Anthony*, the Madrid *Garden of Earthly Delights*, and the paintings of the *Last Judgment* in Bruges and Vienna (less so Bosch's engagement with the subject: the Rotterdam *Saint Christopher* [Fig. 19.3]),¹² but there is no known compositional prototype by Bosch himself. The most well known of these paintings is in the Noordbrabants Museum in 's-Hertogenbosch (Fig. 19.4),¹³ but the earliest may be the panel in the collection of the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation in Houston, dated by Gerd Unverfehrt to the early 1520s (Fig. 19.5).¹⁴ Even a cursory glance at the two paintings indicates the variety in

- 9 Interpretation of the painting remains inconclusive and lacks consensus; see, for example, Carmen García-Frías Checa, "Landscape with St Christopher, c.1520–24. Joachim Patinir," in Vergara, ed., *Patinir: Essays and Critical Catalogue*, 268–77.
- 10 Falkenburg, *Joachim Patinir*, 138 n. 481.
- 11 Gerd Unverfehrt, *Hieronymus Bosch. Die Rezeption seiner Kunst im frühen 16. Jahrhundert* (Berlin: Gebr. Mann Verlag, 1980), 195, 197, 276 (cat. nos. 104–107), lists seven and illustrates five versions. Another version was on the European art market in 2008 with an attribution to Jan Mandijn; it is very close to, but not identical with, Unverfehrt, *Hieronymus Bosch*, 276 (cat. no. 106a).
- 12 Matthijs IJssink, et al., *Hieronymus Bosch, Painter and Draughtsman: Catalogue Raisonné* (Brussels: Mercatorfonds, 2016), 140–59; 356–79; 278–307; 180–87.
- 13 Unverfehrt, *Hieronymus Bosch*, 276 (cat. no. 106b) includes it among those "in einigen späteren, den Figurenstil stark plastisch überformenden Fassungen bekannt," but the Noordbrabants Museum dates the painting to 1510–1520. See also Alain Tapié, ed., *Fables du paysage flamand: Bosch, Bles, Brueghel, Bril*, exh. cat. Palais des Beaux Arts de Lille (Paris: Somogy éditions d'art, 2012), 186–87 (cat. no. 31), where the painting is dated "début du XVI^e siècle."
- 14 Unverfehrt, *Hieronymus Bosch*, 195, 276 (cat. no. 105), listed as previously unpublished and on the art market in Seville in 1956, but by the time of publication (1980), the painting had entered the collection of the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation (1979). It had been attributed to Peter Huys and to Bosch himself (by Frits Lugt). Lotte Brand Philip suggested that the Houston painting is datable to the 1520s, even the early 1520s, and that the painter, "while inspired by a Bosch original now lost, was the artist who transformed this composition to the more modern demon-crowded image," that is, that the painting "was the direct or indirect model of most of the members of the group" (letter of 3 May 1980 in the archives of the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation, Houston).



FIGURE 19.3 Hieronymus Bosch, *Saint Christopher Carrying the Christ Child*, c.1500, oil on panel, 113 × 71.5 cm, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, St 26



FIGURE 19.4 Follower of Hieronymus Bosch, *St. Christopher*, 1520s (?), oil on panel, 31 × 46 cm, Noordbrabants Museum, 's-Hertogenbosch



FIGURE 19.5 Circle of Hieronymus Bosch, *Saint Christopher Carrying the Christ Child through a Sinful World*, early 1520s, oil on panel, 57.2 × 79.4 cm, Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation, Houston, 1979.1

both style and conception of individual motifs, on the one hand, and the consistency in composition and specific types of motifs, on the other hand, which are evident in other versions as well.

The Houston *Saint Christopher* shows the giant crossing a river that, with the reflected sky above, splits an extensive landscape vertically, dividing it into three roughly equal parts. This compositional device may derive directly from Bosch or Patinir, but it has a notable pedigree in Netherlandish painting—one might think of the *Baptism of Christ* in Rogier van der Weyden's *Saint John Altarpiece*, for example. In the *Saint Christopher*, the two sides of the composition echo each other in that each side features a dark triangular opening to a mass (on the left, a cave; on the right, a giant bust of a woman whose cloak opens to an interior space) in which people can be seen; and the background of each side includes a conflagration of buildings silhouetted against a glow of yellow and orange. There are innumerable figures throughout the painting—human, animal, and hybrid. Aside from the woman-architecture hybrid at the right, Christopher, leaning on a tall tree branch as he works his way across the river, is the most dominant figure in the composition. The diminutive Christ Child on his shoulder holds a small orb surmounted by an unusually large cross. Both he and Christopher reach out as they approach the shore. Another recognizable figure from Christopher's legend is the hermit at left who holds aloft a lantern.

Several motifs have cognates in the work of Bosch or his followers. Most prominent is the giant woman, recalling the figure in the Bosch workshop *Temptation of Saint Anthony* in Madrid, in which she is both roof and procuress of a brothel with a nude woman standing in the doorway (Fig. 19.6).¹⁵ In the *Saint Christopher*, however, her cloak opens to reveal a group of armed and armored warriors, some chimerical, gathered behind a large battlefield shield. More armed figures appear in her crown of dead trees/antlers and beehive.¹⁶ As in Bosch's *Saint Christopher* (Fig. 19.3), a single fish of unclear significance (though perhaps a symbol of Christ) hangs from the giant's staff, albeit in a different place.¹⁷ Other correlations (which is not to say borrowings) may include the buildings on fire and the owl perched at the extreme upper edge of the painting next to the tree, the latter of which is extremely common in Bosch's work, but certainly not specific to him. The great majority of the forms and

15 Reindert Falkenburg, *The Land of Unlikeness: Hieronymus Bosch, The Garden of Earthly Delights*, Studies in Netherlandish Art and Cultural History 10 (Zwolle: WBOOKS, 2011), 50–53, citing also the 's-Hertogenbosch version of the Houston composition.

16 Beehives in Bosch's works are identified as symbols of gluttony, possibly associated with lust as well, by D. Bax, *Hieronymus Bosch: His Picture-Writing Deciphered*, translated by M.A. Bax-Botha (Rotterdam: A. A. Balkema, 1979), 220–22, 267, 309.

17 Bax, *Hieronymus Bosch*, 305, suggest that the piscine Christ symbol makes Christopher “doubly the bearer of Christ.”



FIGURE 19.6 Workshop of Hieronymus Bosch, *The Temptations of St. Anthony Abbot*, c.1510–1515, oil on panel, 70 × 115 cm, Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid, P002913

motifs in the Houston painting, however, are not close to Bosch's elements, but inventions in the same spirit.

The three sections of the landscape are affirmed chromatically: to the left and right, brown warmed with hues of red, orange, and yellow; in the center, blue shading from nearly black in the foreground to lighter blue at the horizon and from there near white upwards in the sky to a deep blue. Christopher links the two shores with his garments of yellow, red, and brown. The two landmasses are slightly different in that the one on the left features rocky outcroppings at the shore, and the one on the right affords a more distant view, reaching to the horizon, but neither is more inviting than the other, and the little bit of green ground in front of the hermit at the left does little to relieve an impression of a harsh and hostile landscape on both sides of the watery divide. Signs of harlotry and lust that the Madrid *Temptation of Saint Anthony* might have led us to expect with the architectural woman at the right—literally in the interior and figuratively with the dovecote (a traditional symbol of a brothel) crowning the structure¹⁸—instead appear at the left in the cave, where a man embraces a woman, a sign of intemperate behavior, and on the house visually above it, the roof and eaves of which serve as a dovecote; in

18 On the dovecote, see Bax, *Hieronymus Bosch*, 124, 309; Falkenburg, *The Land of Unlikeness*, 50.

front of that house, the woman punishing a child with a switch resembles the architectural woman at right in physiognomy and wimple. All these correspondences, complements, and echoes help establish the formal balance and iconographic equivalence between the two outer thirds of the composition. The landscape is thus divided spatially, but not geographically. There is no sense of a geographical antithesis between the two sides that might afford a Hesiodic choice for a *homo viator perigrinans* between life's two paths, pleasant and easy or rough and rocky, between an Augustinian *civitas terrena* and *civitas Dei*, as Falkenburg explicated in his analysis of works by Patinir, such as the *Landscape with Charon and the Human Soul*, and other artists.¹⁹ The story does not require a densely demon-infested landscape, but the river is described as dangerous, an idea that is expanded to encompass the entire landscape, and the danger is transformed from the physical to the spiritual. As Marisa Bass has pointed out, Saint Christopher was a very popular subject from the beginnings of European printmaking in the first half of the fifteenth century, but also on a grander scale in other media at the exits of churches, "promising an auspicious journey to departing worshippers"²⁰—a journey, we can imagine, into a sinful world. But Christopher's journey was by no means an easy one, and at the moment most often depicted, he does not know if it will be successful or even if he will survive it.

How, then, might we understand Christopher as he is situated within this diabolical landscape? Without positing specific interpretations of the painting or its many individual motifs, I would like to point to certain structural aspects of the composition, as well as of the verbal legend, that not only convey meaning but also may act as paradigmatic figurations of the act of interpretation, its hesitations and speculations.

1 A Hero's Journey

Jacobus de Voragine's thirteenth-century *Golden Legend* (*Legenda aurea*), which was printed many times by the early sixteenth century in both its original Latin and various modern languages, provides the most well-known account of Saint Christopher's life.²¹ According to Jacobus, Christopher was a Canaanite

19 Falkenburg, *Joachim Patinir*, 61–96.

20 Marisa Bass and Elizabeth Wyckoff, *Beyond Bosch: The Afterlife of a Renaissance Master in Print*, exh. cat., Saint Louis Art Museum (St. Louis: 2015), 97.

21 Iacopo da Varazze [Jacobus de Voragine], *Legenda aurea con le miniature dal codice Ambrosiano C 240 inf*, ed. Giovanni Paolo Maggioni, 2 vols. (Florence: SISMEL, Edizioni del

of immense size, twelve cubits tall, who was determined to seek and serve the greatest lord in the world (*maiozem principem qui in mundo esset quereret et ad eundem secum moraturus accederet*). He stayed with a king for a while but then discovered that the king feared the devil (*dyabolum*), so, assuming the devil to be the most powerful lord, Christopher left in search of him. Having found and pledged to serve the devil, however, he saw him shrink in terror from a roadside cross. Realizing that there was someone even more powerful than the devil, Christopher determined to find Christ and serve him, concluding that he was the greatest prince in the world. Finding him was not so simple, but a hermit taught him about Christ, who, he said, required Christopher to fast and pray. Christopher said he could do neither, so the hermit told him to dwell by a dangerous river and carry people across, which would please Christ, who might someday reveal himself. One day, Christopher carried a small child across the river, but as he did so, the water grew rougher and the child grew nearly unbearably heavy to such an extent that Christopher felt as if he were carrying the whole world on his shoulders. He feared he would founder but managed to reach the other bank where the child revealed himself as Christ the king, telling Christopher: “You were not only carrying the whole world, you had him who created the world upon your shoulders!”²² Afterwards, Christopher went to the city of Samos, where he converted many to Christ (forty-eight thousand by Ambrose’s account, reported by Jacobus de Voragine). Refusing to sacrifice to the local gods, he was eventually beheaded.

Christopher’s story conforms, albeit not entirely neatly, to some persistent patterns in myths, legends, and folktales across cultures.²³ The Christopher narrative might be usefully brought into relation with the “hero’s journey” as formulated by Joseph Campbell and subsequently invoked in countless contexts from film (most famously, the original *Star Wars* trilogy) to music

Galluzzo; and Milan: Biblioteca Ambrosiana, 2007), vol. 1, 740–47; Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, translated by William Granger Ryan, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), vol. 2, 10–14.

22 Jacobus de Voragine, *Golden Legend*, 12; Iacopo da Varazze, *Legenda aurea*, vol. 1, 742: “non solum totum mundum super te habuisti, sed etiam illum qui creauit mundum tuis humeris baiulasti.”

23 For definitions of these three forms of tales, see William Bascom, “The Forms of Folklore: Prose Narratives,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 78 (1965): 3–20; Alan Dundes, “Binary Opposition in Myth: The Propp/Lévi-Strauss Debate in Retrospect,” *Western Folklore* 56 (1997): 39–50. The Saint Christopher narrative fits most comfortably in the myth and legend categories (or unified myth-legend category, as some would have it), in that it was not generally regarded as fiction.

teacher socialization to extreme fitness exercise infomercials and beyond.²⁴ Campbell writes that “the adventure of the hero normally follows the pattern of ... a separation from the world, a penetration to some source of power, and a life-enhancing return.”²⁵ Although the result of Christopher’s encounter with the source of power (Christ) is a life-fulfilling extension of his journey rather than a life-enhancing return, the heroic structure is easily recognizable. The hero reaches the goal of the quest by levels; the hero is aided by a wise recluse; the hero undergoes a trial. Not surprisingly, Christopher’s story deploys a narrative convention common in the Bible. According to the *Golden Legend*, while Christopher rested in his riverside shelter, the Christ Child called out “Christopher, come out and carry me across!” and Christopher rushed out to find no one there; a second time he heard the voice and found no one there; but “[t]he third time he responded to the same call and found a child standing on the riverbank.”²⁶ This pattern of repetitious (often thrice) asking or replying was established in scripture: the bodiless, divine voice calling the hero to begin the next stage of his journey is especially reminiscent of the Lord’s calling Samuel three times without appearing before Samuel is made to understand who calls (1 Samuel 3:2–10). But it may also recall Jesus’s praying three times in the Garden of Gethsemane that the chalice might pass from him (Matthew 26:39–44); Jesus’s asking Peter three times if he loves him (John 21:15–17); and Paul’s praying three times that the thorn might be removed from his flesh (2 Corinthians 12:8), among other instances.²⁷

The structure of the painting manifests an essential aspect of the structure of the narrative: the river-crossing scene is the fulcrum of Christopher’s story, a passage (*transitio*) across the river, from one side of the painting to the other and from one phase of his life to the next. That this moment was most

24 Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Bollingen Series 17, 3rd ed. (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2008). For a précis of Campbell’s notion of the “hero’s journey,” as well as an introduction to a good sampling of applications, see Stephan Sonnenburg and Mark Runco, “Pathways to the Hero’s Journey: A Tribute to Joseph Campbell and the 30th Anniversary of His Death,” *Journal of Genius and Eminence* 2 (2017): 1–7.

25 Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 58.

26 Jacobus de Voragine, *Golden Legend*, 12; Iacopo da Varazze, *Legenda aurea*, vol. 1, 742: “Christophore, ueni foras et me ipsum traducas! ... Tertia uice ab eodem ut prius ocatus exiit et puerum quendam iuxta ripam fluminis inuenit.”

27 Consider similar threefold utterances: Balaam prophesies blessings for Israel (Numbers 24:10); Saul’s messengers prophesy (1 Samuel 19:20–21); Pilate proclaims three times that he finds no fault in Jesus (Luke 23:4–22); Peter denies Christ three times (Matthew 26:69–75; Mark 14:66–72; Luke 22:54–62; John 18:15–18, 26–27); Peter has a vision in which he is told three times to kill and eat the animals that descended from heaven (Acts 10:9–16; Acts 11:5–10).

commonly chosen for depictions of Saint Christopher is remarkable (though now largely unquestioned) in that it is of an incomplete action, an unsatisfying moment in an as yet unsatisfied quest. Christopher's quest is essentially linear: he seeks the most powerful ruler of all and advances steadily toward that objective. His brief sojourns with the terrestrial king and the devil are merely way stations on his route, but after taking instruction from the hermit, he finds himself advancing no farther, oscillating forward and backward, crossing and re-crossing the river with no progress. If his is a hero's journey, it is a stymied one. Ferrying passengers is a type of trial, a pale form of the Labors of Hercules, with whom Christopher was sometimes compared. The Christ Child will be his last passenger, but he does not know this. Christopher does not know who this child is nor, under an increasingly heavy burden, whether he will make it to the other side. The moment depicted is, at least for Christopher, one of suspension (and suspense). It is not a moment of revelation or epiphany—that comes on the far shore when Christ reveals himself. This is a Road to Emmaus rather than a Supper at Emmaus, the journey rather than the destination, the former characterized by uncertainty and ignorance, the latter by insight and understanding.

The compositional symmetry of the Houston *Saint Christopher* gives visual form to the narrative element of back-and-forth traveling without progress, in contrast to the voyage-of-life images of Patinir and others.²⁸ Because the two sides of the composition are not in moral opposition to each other (in spite of the presence of the hermit on one side), traveling from one side to the other suggests little or no progress in the Pilgrimage of Life for Christopher's passengers, more emphatically so for Christopher himself, whose story has him wading back and forth across the river. Though various forms of folklore often feature binary oppositions weighted with meaning, such is not realized in the landscape of this *Saint Christopher*.²⁹

2 “A light to my paths”

In many depictions of Saint Christopher, including the Houston painting, the hermit holds a lantern. He has instructed Christopher in the means to please and find Christ; he is evidently the wise, helpful recluse of legend conventions; and we might reasonably expect his lantern to offer figurative as well as physical enlightenment, in keeping with the psalmist's declaration, “Thy word is a

²⁸ Unverfehrt, *Hieronymus Bosch*, 197, noted the painting's symmetry.

²⁹ Cf. Dundes, “Binary Opposition in Myth.”

lamp to my feet, and a light to my paths" (Psalm 119:105). However, even taking into account the distortions of scale and space inherent in the Houston *Saint Christopher*, the hermit seems substantially further back than Christopher and is thus not in a direct spatial (or narrative) relationship with the saint and his charge. His lantern is not lighting the saint's way, but is perhaps signaling to the fantastic ship headed toward him—an ambiguous motif hailing an obscure one. Though the hermit in some other depictions of the subject carries one,³⁰ the *Golden Legend* makes no mention of a lantern, which can be an equivocal or clearly negative symbol, connoting the bearer's blind groping in the dark as readily as a shared enlightenment. Later in the century, in an engraving by Johannes Wierix after a design by Maarten de Vos and iconography by Willem and Godevaard van Haecht, titled *Triumphus Veritatis* (*The Triumph of Truth*), a discalced monk is confronted with Christ as Truth. Christ raises a lamp labeled "Light of the World" ("Lux Mundi") (John 8:12) against which the monk, said in the inscription to represent Opinion, must shield his eyes; he holds his own useless lantern away from the true light (Fig. 19.7).³¹ Though born of the Van Haechts' Lutheran convictions, the depiction of the monk is in keeping with pre-Reformation anti-clerical imagery. A panel of *Scenes from the Life of Saint Anthony* by an unknown Leiden painter offers another kind of reversal: one of the saint's demonic tormentors waves a lantern above his head in mockery of its enlightening function (Fig. 19.8). With it, the demon competes brazenly with the divine light from the upper left. Within the *Saint Christopher*, the hermit's lantern acts as a synecdoche for the uncertain meaning of the entire painting.

Writing directly on Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* nearly a quarter of a century after his tentative comments on Patinir's *Landscape with Saint Christopher*, Falkenburg embraced the uncertainty generated by the details of such paintings and the speculative nature of any analysis they prompt. The uncertainty is not only an effect of Bosch's painting, he suggested, but is a constitutive aspect of its function: "If I am correct that, quite literally, the *Garden of Earthly Delights* was intended as a 'debatable' painting—a *summa* or *speculum* of learning in its own right ...—my interpretation cannot reach any definite conclusion or closure. Viewing the *Garden of Earthly Delights*, also for the modern beholder, remains an act of speculation, embedded as this mode

30 E.g. Alart du Hameel's engraving, in which the hermit seems to be holding the lantern more directly toward Christopher and in which it may more reasonably be said to symbolize "the hermit's role in guiding Christopher to Christ" (Bass and Wyckoff, *Beyond Bosch*, 96–101).

31 James Clifton, "The Triumph of Truth in an Age of Confessional Conflict," in *Personification: Embodying Meaning and Emotion*, ed. Walter S. Melion and Bart Ramakers, *Intersections: Interdisciplinary Studies in Early Modern Culture* 41 (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 162–85.



FIGURE 19.8 Unknown Leiden painter, *Scenes from the Life of St. Anthony Abbot*, c.1530–1535, oil on panel, 66 × 106.5 cm, Museum De Lakenhal, Leiden, S1130

of the proliferation of obscure Boschian motifs.³³ But I would also like to suggest that the subject itself may operate as a metaphor of interpretation, specifically of inconclusive interpretation. When Christopher heard his name called, he rushed out of his hut, but “neminem repperit” (“he found no one”); on hearing his name a second time and rushing out, “neminem inuenit” (“he discovered no one”).³⁴ When, finally, on the third try, Christopher found the boy, he did not know his identity, though he may have sensed something unusual or meaningful about this passenger who had appeared so mysteriously. We find Christopher halfway across the dangerous waters, struggling to reach both the other shore and an understanding of what is happening.

Christopher’s quest was to find the most powerful ruler, who, unrevealed to him, rides on his shoulders at the moment depicted. The term “quest” evolved from the Latin “quaerere,” varying forms of which appear consistently in the *Golden Legend*; thus, for example, “uenit sibi in mente ut maiorem principem qui in mundo esset quereret” (“it came into his mind to seek the greatest prince in the world”) and “dyabolum querere properabat” (“he hastened to seek the

33 These interpretations may allow room for the humorous, as Falkenburg has speculated for the ‘s-Hertogenbosch version of the composition (Reindert Leonard Falkenburg, “Régions de dissemblance,” in Tapié, ed., *Fables du paysage flamand*, 57).

34 Iacopo da Varazze, *Legenda aurea*, vol. 1, 742.

devil").³⁵ It is a short step from "quest" to "question," and in the passage "Cum igitur diu quesisset quisnam sibi Christi notitiam indicaret" ("seeing then that he had been asking for a long time who would give him notice of Christ"), Christopher is seeking information about the ruler rather than—or as a means to—seeking the ruler himself.³⁶ Inherent in all these forms—to which we might add variations and derivatives of "inquire"—is a lack: a lack of object, a lack of conclusion. Falkenburg has written of "the interpretive quests of the viewer,"³⁷ and we may find in Christopher a figure of the viewer's perpetually unfulfilled quest for meaning in the paintings. Ultimately, however, such paintings may not be puzzles to decipher so much as prompts for the generation of meaning, establishing a field of play for the imagination of both the painter and the viewer.³⁸ What the artist of the Houston *Saint Christopher* has taken from Bosch and other artists is not so much exact motifs, which may or may not have had prescribed meanings, but the license to create such motifs. And the same license might also be extended to the viewer, whose speculative interpretations are a natural extension of the painter's inventive process. Speculation, however, is not to be understood as mere self-indulgence without direction or boundaries, but—rooted in a medieval and early-modern hermeneutic of seeing "through a glass darkly" ("speculum in enigmate"; 1 Corinthians 13:12)—it can be, as Falkenburg points out, a meditative and contemplative process, tied to a transformation of vision from the corporeal to the spiritual, from sight to insight.³⁹ It remains a quest, but, with a heavy burden through dangerous waters, it is never easy going.

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35 Iacopo da Varazze, *Legenda aurea*, vol. 1, 740.

36 Iacopo da Varazze, *Legenda aurea*, vol. 1, 742.

37 Falkenburg, *The Land of Unlikeness*, 9.

38 See Falkenburg, "Régions de dissemblance," 60–62.

39 Falkenburg, *Especulaciones*, 153–57. See also Walter S. Melion and James Clifton, *Through a Glass Darkly: Allegory and Faith in Netherlandish Prints from Lucas van Leyden to Rembrandt*, exh. cat. Michael C. Carlos Museum (Atlanta: 2019).

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