

## **In the Beginning, there was St Jerome**

The painting by Jeroen (or Jerome, or Hieronymus) Bosch in the Ghent Museum of Fine Arts could be taken as the symbolic starting point of the story of the creation of Hans Vandekerckhove's painterly oeuvre. Now the fact that this very same painting also happens to be a variation (albeit a typically Boschian one) on the widespread theme of St Jerome, the devout hermit with a penchant for austerity and introspection, will turn out to be far from accidental.

From his very first visits to the Ghent Museum of Fine Arts, in the company of his parents, Hans Vandekerckhove today remembers first and foremost the inerasable impression made by this particular emblematic canvas by Jeroen Bosch, *St Jerome at Prayer*. Even more than *Christ Carrying the Cross*, the other and better-known Bosch in the Ghent museum collection, this alienating early portrait of the hermit, showing him as a figure clad only in a white undershirt, lying across the canvas, dividing in the landscape into two zones, one of paradisiacal light and the other of ominous darkness, was to become as an iconic beacon for him, that guided him on the tortuous path of his future artist's career.

More than thirty years later, he has come full circle and Vandekerckhove has paid homage to this illuminating and edifying example of this primordial artistic experience in a cycle of paintings that combines two of his lifelong fascinations, obsessions almost: *Stalking Hieronymus*.

## **The Hieronymic creed – The current relevance of the Hieronymic genre – The laicised Jerome as a modern (anti-)hero – The current relevance of the Hieronymic genre (repeated)**

With his own revision, updated to suit the purposes of the contemporary eye, of the figure of Jerome and of the Hieronymic metaphor, Vandekerckhove deliberately places himself at the centre of a deeply rooted iconographical tradition and in the full light of the canonical history of art. St Jerome, second in the hierarchy of Doctors of the Church, with his strong spiritual attraction and his quite literal appeal to the *imagination* – in spite of himself – is beyond a doubt one of the most 'popular' iconographical motifs in the history of (Western) art. Not only can his professed credo of introspection, of forsaking the world as will and representation, of isolation and retreat, already be read as a philosophical statement of intent of the artist's life, as the ideological blueprint of the artistic vocation, long before the origin of these separate artistic traditions; but as the apostle of solitude and the apologist of 'withdrawal', St Jerome can also be understood as the patron saint of the artist in the modern sense.

According to tradition, St Jerome was born around 340 in Stridon, modern-day Sdrin in Croatia, a scion of a prosperous and Latinised dynasty of merchants, predestined for great worldly success. After a sinful pagan youth in Rome and Trier, Jerome was converted to Christendom in 365. During his subsequent stay in high papal circles in Rome, he devoted himself to translating the Bible from its original Greek and Hebrew into Latin (and therefore popularising Holy Scripture). It is to the titanic labour of this Vulgate that Jerome owes his canonisation. Partly under the influence of his friendship with that other Father of the Church, St Gregory of Nazianzus, he withdrew shortly afterwards to live an ascetic life in the barren and desolate wilderness of Syria, where he wrote a short biography of the first hermit, St Paul

– not the apostle Paul, but Paul of Thebes (c. 230–340), the first Desert Father and presumably the originator of the eremitic ideal. Endless discussions could be held about the historical accuracy and authenticity of this saint’s life – in which Jerome flatly opposed the generally accepted belief that not St Paul but St Anthony had been the founder of the ascetic rule – but what is more important is that Jerome turned this inspired piece of hagiographic prose into a manifesto for his own choice in life, which would have a much greater impact, in the long term, than Athanasius’s *Life of St Anthony*, which was immensely popular at the time. That is amply illustrated by the fact that neither Athanasius nor Anthony ever made it to the same iconic status as St Jerome, whose patronage of writers and scholars, librarians and archivists, students, translators and exegetes, exiles, seekers and loners, would lead to an impressive array of historical depictions and galleries full of portraits.

At the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Jeroen Bosch painted a triptych of hermits, which is currently kept at the Doge’s Palace in Venice (in not all too good a condition). It shows the holy anchorites St Anthony and St Giles on the panels to the left and right, respectively, and St Jerome, in full glory, at the centre of attention. It is not his best-known work, but nevertheless it has since become a canonised symbolic representation of the balance of power between these three rival ascetics. Giotto, Masaccio, Botticelli, and Piero della Francesca all immortalised St Jerome as a penitent in the barren desert or as a *studiosus maximus* at his desk. Dürer’s well-known portrait engraving of the bookworm and Bible translator Erasmus, whom many, quite rightly, considered the Jerome of his age, is unmistakably modelled on the example of Jan Van Eyck’s portrait of St Jerome. In later eras, Lucas Cranach, Caravaggio, Veronese, El Greco, Tiepolo, Zurbaran, and Velazquez all fell for the charismatic charms and existential symbolism of the Hieronymic paradigm.

In his excellent *Landscape and Western Art*, art historian Malcolm Andrews refers no fewer than four times to the typology of Hieronymic seclusion in virginal, god-created nature – very often, Renaissance artists transformed the original Syrian desert into a paradisiacal green oasis – to help explain the genealogy and the historical impact of Western landscape painting and art: an engraving depicting St Jerome by Lucas Cranach from 1509, two allegorical ‘portraits’ by Giovanni Bellini (from 1450 and from 1471-1474), and a landscape with St Jerome by Joachim Patinir from 1515-1519. As the patron of self-chosen withdrawal from public (city) life, Jerome, in this pre-eminently urban-inspired era of the Rinascimento, was apparently also a symbol of an ‘ecological’ revival that would have pleased even Rousseau; Andrew interprets the Hieronymic precept of asceticism and renunciation as a summons ‘back to nature’ and calls the imagery of this Hieronymic creed and closely related motifs the actual starting point of the Western landscape tradition.

The saint’s portrait by Jeroen Bosch with which we commenced this reflection also features this double concept of nature as the pleasure garden of creation on the one hand (the brightly lit scene at the top), and as the ‘devil’s playground’ of detachment, temptation, and – both literal and metaphorical – desertification on the other (the dark and dismal scene at the bottom). From saintly image and portraiture proper to the art of landscape painting: the oeuvre of Hans Vandekerckhove also features the desecrated, or at least, demystified and de-idealised silhouette of Jerome, the Stalker, as a symbolic bridge between the two poles and pillars of the art of painting, the portrait and the landscape – united, as an allegory, in *Pilgrim*, a portrait of a traveller on the road to Emmaus, on the bridge among the foliage.

When the ecclesiastical tutelage of the artistic field and its various practices came to an end, this inevitably led to the bankruptcy of the traditional iconographical themes. After the end of

the 18<sup>th</sup> century, that is, after the start of the Age of Reason, the number of portraits of St Jerome dwindled. The few that were still committed to canvas can be counted on the fingers of one hand. The subject of St Jerome, in the strict and literal sense, had become a touching anachronism and a superseded model of spiritual and moral masochism. However, that does not go to say that Hieronymic *metaphor*, the Ecce Homo of a Man Alone – the precepts of renunciation and asceticism, the fate, deliberately chosen, of a solitary life – ended up in the rubbish heap of the history of art together with the concrete case history of St Jerome of Stridon, whose feast day is 30 September. It is not because St Jerome disappeared from the artistic picture as a patron saint and patristic figure that the message of the Hieronymic genre lost any of its impact, effect, or presence. Quite on the contrary: precisely because of the gradual process of disenchantment of the world and the secularisation of worldly society that started with that accursed Enlightenment, the true meaning of the figure of Jerome as a model for the modern emancipated human being was able to come to the fore in even sharper outline. Kantian humanism with its categorical imperative, the central dogma of the moral philosophy of the Age of Reason, is not without its strain of ‘Hieronymism’: an emancipated, laicised and free man, liberated from the chains of divine patronizing and terrestrial superstition, is, by definition, also a lonelier being than he was before, a man forced to undertake a solitary journey through the desert of the self, and a hermit in the depths of his being. Disenchantment and emancipation invariably bring along alienation and a sense of solitude, and an ethical isolation which may or may not be wished for. The modern era, that truly started with the critical project of the Enlightenment, is the era of the loner, of the desecrated and therefore desperate ‘Hieronymus/[anonymus]’.

As an iconographical motif, St Jerome may have become an anachronism, as the timeless hero of a philosophical parable and as a model of man *pur sang*, he is still very much relevant to and evident in our times. Precisely because of that pregnant timelessness – because we, modern humans, are all a little ‘Hieronymic’ in a sense – we can, paradoxically enough, call the pictorial oeuvre of Hans Vandekerckhove, as a refuge and sanctuary of a new Hieronymic image, very much *contemporary* again. It is an oeuvre with a ‘message’ (and an eloquent one at that) that is significant, both now and tomorrow. For in these alienating, post-ironic times, on the threshold of a new millennium, an era of so many diasporas and of new complexities of chaos, it is abundantly clear that there is an urgent need for convincing images of loners, seekers, and exiles, whether voluntary or forced; in short, for a reformulation and a radical contemporary revision of the Hieronymic tradition.

In his figurative fascination with the contemporary Hieronymus (‘Stalker’) as a solitary and anonymous Everyman, Vandekerckhove indeed shows himself to be a full-blooded modernist, or at least an artist for whom the dramas, dilemmas, aporias and Gordian knots of modernity and of the modern condition are still – or again? – as pressing and pregnant as ever. For is the magnificent image of the solitary man, abandoned by God and his fellow being, the hermit, the ascetic, the anchorite, the recluse, Tarkovsky’s Stalker, and Bosch’s Jerome, united in an exemplary way in the vacant self-portrait of a ‘nobody’ – literally and figuratively – in *Stalker* (x 3), *Planet Waves* or *My Head is My Only Home*, not a key element of the modern experience, and one of the mainstays of modern imagery in particular? It is no accident that Paul Johnson opened his history of modernity, *The Birth of the Modern: World Society 1815-1830*, with the iconic image of the most famous *Rückenfigur* from the history of art – *Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer* by Caspar David Friedrich, a painting that, in addition to being a magisterial manifesto of the Romantic impulse, can also be seen as a visual blueprint of modern anthropology. (Romanticism, in the art-historical sense, which dominated a period that largely coincides with the decade and a half covered by Johnson’s chronicle, was of

course nothing but a philosophy of loneliness and the solitary life elevated to an aesthetics.) Ecce homo solo: Friedrich's lonely wanderer, haughtily superior to the goings-on of (social) reality, in the splendid isolation of his self-chosen exile, was not even accountable anymore to God the Father, his own Creator. Indeed, the modern age to which this heroic soloist seems to look forward with such great expectations would be his par excellence, the age of the Loner. Max Stirner, Schopenhauer, Dostoevsky, and later Friedrich Nietzsche – in particular the Nietzsche of *Zarathustra* – supplied the philosophical raw material; Goethe's *Werther* and *Faust*, Byron's *Don Juan*, and Shelley's *Prometheus*, all modelled, in a different fashion, on the edifying example of Napoleon himself, performed the leading roles; the piano sonatas of Beethoven, Schubert, and Schumann, and Wagner's *Siegfried* and *Parsifal*, provided a suitable soundtrack; and Goya, Van Gogh, Munch, and Modigliani embodied the ideological mythologem of the tormented artist in his philosophical seclusion.

And did the ground-breaking Viennese development of psychoanalysis at the turn of the century not achieve its redrawing of the map of humanity on the strength of precisely the tragic knowledge of man's fundamental, traumatic isolation and his life sentence to loneliness and *Unheimlichkeit*? All the great novels and great heroes and heroines of the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are pre-eminently laicised reincarnations of the Hieronymic Everyman motif, all influenced in some decisive way or other by the sobering findings of depth psychology: Thomas Mann's *Zauberberg* and *Doctor Faustus*, Alfred Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, Robert Musil's *Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, the anonymous antiheroes of Kafka's claustrophobic microverse or the many heteronyms under which Fernando Pessoa operated, the Good Soldier Svejk, the loners of Hamsun and Hesse, Stephen Dedalus, 'the artist as a young man', Leopold Bloom in Joyce's *Ulysses* – a book that would have been almost unthinkable if the way had not been paved for it by Italo Svevo's solipsistic confessional novel, *The Confessions of Zeno*... All, in their different ways, apostate or renegade descendants and heirs of St Jerome – in the desert, that is.

This era of the loner – which is not coincidentally also the era of mass ideologies – finally culminated in the tragic awareness of the fate of the *condition moderne* that awaits all of us, the alienation of man in an ever lonelier technicistic universe, taking what has meanwhile become its 'classic' form in the European cultural traditions of the thirties and forties of the last century. This was the seedbed for the philosophy of Heidegger and Sartrean existentialism; the sculptures of Giacometti (so often gratefully welcomed as perfect illustrations of existentialism as a philosophy of loneliness); the salon art of the surrealists, in which Magritte and de Chirico count as paradigmatic dissidents; the literature of Beckett, Camus, Céline, Cioran, Ionesco (author of a book entitled *Le solitaire!*), and Primo Levi; hard-boiled movies and *film noir* and despondent neo-realism. Central in this culture of gloomy modernity ('high modernism') sits enthroned the philosophical experience of solitude, isolation, alienation – a Man Alone – and in the centre, therefore, sits the solitary, the loner, the hermit and recluse as the *Geworfene*, Diogenes and hero. Heroic life and inescapable fate: Andrei Roublev and the Stalker in the films of Tarkovsky, Demian in *Demian*, Beuys – as a Germanic shaman, *Einzelgänger par excellence* – in his own work, Easy Riders, Taxi Drivers and Raging Bulls, prophets and saviours, Bas Jan Ader's *In Search of the Miraculous*, portraits of American Land Art artists as insignificant dots, 'Hieronymi', in the immeasurable and overwhelming West, artistic counterparts of the lonely avengers from the hieratic tradition of the Western.

According to the American cultural theorist Fredric Jameson, there is no image that better expresses this fate of loneliness at the heart of the modern condition than Edvard Munch's *The*

*Scream*. (The allegorical similarities between the apocalyptic and dystopian landscapes in which Munch sets his best-known icons – see, among others, also his portrait of Nietzsche – and the colourful no man’s land of the Zone in which Hans Vandekerckhove’s Hieronymi are featured will not have escaped the notice of spectators with a trained art-historian’s eye.) In this singular snapshot of the bad conscience of modernity, Jameson distinguishes a whole catalogue of pathologies of personal development, all of which point to the same Omega. He calls *The Scream* ‘a canonical expression of the great modernist themes of alienation, anomie, solitude, social fragmentation, and isolation – a virtually programmatic emblem of what used to be called the age of anxiety’. The modern subject is the searching soul, the voice crying in the wilderness – and it is this fate of exile, this alienation and loneliness, that makes his status that of a *modern* subject. Jameson made this diagnosis in his seminal book *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Capitalism*, in which he looks on, with sorrow and a bleeding heart, at how this postmodernism brushes aside the classic neuroses and fears of the modern sentiment: ‘concepts such as anxiety and alienation are no longer appropriate in the world of the postmodern. ... The shift in the dynamics of cultural pathology can be characterized as one in which the alienation of the subject is displaced by the latter’s fragmentation.’ With the end of the traditional ‘bourgeois ego’ – the ‘death of the subject’ announced by Michel Foucault – Jameson now also establishes the tragic end of the pathologies of that ego, ‘the waning of affect’: now that there is no longer a subject in the classic-centralist and existentialist sense of the word, there is no longer anyone to feel, or to experience ‘subjectively’. The postmodern age is, literally, a *post-subjective* age, in which concepts and quintessentially ‘modern’ experiences such as alienation, isolation and loneliness no longer seem relevant or seem to have lost their cultural meaning or value. There is simply no subject anymore to experience them. (Perhaps this could explain why the existentialist issues of the Jerome figure were hardly ever addressed in the arts of the eighties and the early nineties, in spite of their overt narcissism?)

However, these concepts and experiences merely *seem* to have lost their cultural meaning or value. Of course, they have not lost their meaning in the least, and they could not possibly have lost it. Not only has so-called ‘postmodernism’, as a philosophy and as an aesthetic programme, now been superseded itself, as a project that has been played out, completed, labelled, and classified in the catalogue of the recent history of art and ideas, but, as Jameson noted with such acumen, this postmodernism was also always an ideological project that had to present certain cultural consequences of the late-capitalist regime as irreversible and inviolable truths, and the death or the end of the subject (and therefore also of her/his loneliness) was undoubtedly one of them. Differently to modernism or postmodernism, or all the preceding -isms, the existential experience of alienation, loneliness and isolation, as well as the proverbial call of the wilderness and the desire for introspection, are not historically contingent constructions, but belong *to all ages* – and are innate, if not in the modern subject of the postmodern post-subject, then at least in *man*. The Hieronymic credo and the mythology of the Hieronymic hero transcend all the limits of time, space, and culture, and this is what makes the Hieronymic genre, of which this specific aspect of the work of Hans Vandekerckhove is such a beautiful example, forever significant and relevant. All of us will always be, to some extent, Hieronymus, the Stalker.

The Stalker, the enigmatic protagonist from the eponymous movie by the Russian film-maker Andrej Tarkovsky, forms the thematic spectrum in which the history, metaphor, and figuration of the Jerome tradition are narrowed down in the work of Hans Vandekerckhove: *Stalking Hieronymus*. In this recalcitrant poetic classic of European film art from 1979, Alexander Kaidanovsky plays the role of the Stalker, the shabby and short-winded guide with

the characteristically furrowed face – note, here in particular, the many prophetic and Christological connotations of the Hieronymic paradigm – who does not come to life until he can turn his back on the grisly and ashen reality of his daily life in an unspecified and unnamed industrial city (consistently shot by Tarkovsky in austere sepia-tinted black-and-white), whether or not followed by the self-contained ‘seekers’ who hire him for his soteriological services, and submerge himself in the green wilderness of the Zone. In the film *Stalker*, the (self-)portrait of the guide Stalker as an Everyman torn apart by doubt is alternated with the story of the power struggle between his wayward and quarrelsome ‘followers’, glimpses of the dubious idyll of the Zone (‘wilderness’) as an antidote to the grey and prosaic reality of mundane life, and the account of the existential Journey to and through the Zone as a kind of futuristic Odyssey with the Stalker as the reluctant Odysseus. No ‘Hieronymism’ or Hieronymic (anti-)heroism without its quest or existential journey. The narrative mythological archetype of the Path, the Tao of loneliness, therefore also features prominently in the canvas *Pilgrim*; the arching stone bridge bearing the masked pilgrim symbolises the Zone or the Hieronymic desert as a place of passage, metamorphosis and transformation of consciousness.

The bird’s eye view of Stalker’s crew-cut skull surrounded by dark shrubs (one of the three ‘portraits’ that are literally entitled *Stalker*) mimics not only the orphic self-portrait annex Hieronymic statement *My Head Is My Only Home* – does the artist consider himself Stalker’s body double? – but is also a highly efficient dramatisation of the character of the Stalker as the restless Seeker. Now, as regards the alienating, ‘romantic’ exoticism of both the Zone and the slightly psychedelic (or ‘Munchian’) landscape of *Stalking Hieronymus*: the contrast between the morbid imagery of the grey industrial dystopia which is Stalker’s ‘objective’ home and the wild and rampant growth of the Zone as his ‘subjective’ habitat are not only reminiscent of the traditional biblical, but definitely also Hieronymic, opposition between the city as the Whore of Babylon, the Sodom and Gomorrha or the place of material decadence, and the wilderness as the uninhabitable test site of the faith or as the oasis and paradisiacal refuge for introspection, contemplation and expansion of consciousness, but it also refers, for instance, to the stone garden created by the late Derek Jarman on the coast of Dungeness – a late-20<sup>th</sup>-century hermitage and refuge which Hans Vandekerckhove has cited as a major source of inspiration for his own artistic practice. [Moreover, the obvious reference, with regard to Jarman’s ‘Beckettian’ garden, to the famous Zen Buddhist stone garden in Kyoto, not only underlines the Derek Jarman’s monastic – and therefore also Hieronymic – life philosophy, but also indirectly opens up our analysis of the work of Hans Vandekerckhove towards a syncretic lecture of *Stalking Hieronymus* as tributary to the Eastern traditions of religious monism and shamanism and the Hieronymic individualism of Bodhisattvas, yogis and Taoist wise men. In a more superficial iconographical sense too, one could speak of an ‘oriental’ overtone in *Stalking Hieronymus*. In one of the larger works, for instance, one of the first things that struck me was a resemblance to the veiled silhouette of the Fujiyama, rendered in ‘typically’ Japanese pink tones.]

Except for the predicate of the *studiosus* or bookworm, perhaps – but this is made up by his archetypal companions, the Writer and the Scientist – the Stalker meets the main criteria of the Hieronymic (anti-)hero. A number of key scenes of Tarkovsky’s film, all of which are set in the Zone, even resound with literal echoes of that initial, original Hieronymic experience – Bosch’s portrait of the saint in the Ghent Museum of Fine Arts – that set the imagination of the young Vandekerckhove so decisively on its track. Three large paintings, all with the same title, *Stalking Hieronymus*, the central triptych of the exhibition, refer to one of these key scenes in Tarkovsky’s film, in which the Stalker, seemingly tired, at his wit’s end, or bored,

goes and lies in the green grass, and a mysterious black dog comes and nestles against his reclining figure. (In fact, there is only the one canvas, *I'm Only Sleeping*, in which we recognise the sumptuous vegetation of the Zone, but no black dog is to be seen here.) Obviously, the black dog refers to the classic Hieronymic attribute, the lion, which St Jerome, according to legend, once helped by removing a thorn from his paw. For that matter, animal love and ecological empathy are classic *topoi* of the eremitic tradition: in the late medieval and early Renaissance art, the iconographical motive of St Francis, the patron saint of animal lovers, was at least as popular as the image of St Jerome. [The most beautiful 'Jerome' I ever set eyes on was really a portrait of St Francis in the desert by Giovanni Bellini, in the Frick Collection in New York...] But at the same time, the black dog, as the symbolic substitute for the Hieronymic lion, also refers to yet another set of eremitic traditions which again condense the so-called 'syncretic' literature mentioned higher. In American-Indian mythology, in fact, the dog (wolf, coyote) is also a totem animal and traditional companion of the loner in transition, the seeker and path-finder. Nobody understood this better than the great shaman ('Hieronymus', 'Stalker') of postwar art, Joseph Beuys, the man whose ritual welcome on transatlantic soil, by way of initiation in the American mysteries cult, consisted of being locked up with a coyote for several days and nights.

Tarkovsky updated his own timeless Hieronymic parable by making the politically significant choice to set the film in the apocalyptic landscape of a post-nuclear fall-out, a dystopic setting that would not have looked out of place in many a contemporary science fiction movie (ranging from *Blade Runner*, *Escape from New York* and *Mad Max* to *Waterworld*, *Minority Report* and *The Matrix Reloaded*). A similar futuristic metaphor also animates Vandekerckhove's *Stalking Hieronymus* cycle: the figures in *Pilgrim* and *Planet Waves* seem to have been borrowed from a stylised high-tech vision of the future, in the genre of *Gattaca* or George Lucas's controversial *THX 1138* rather than from a medieval book of hours or a Coptic monastery. The (fainter) echoes of these sci-fi aesthetics are of course the most emphatic in the monumental black monolith in *The Dust Blows Forward*, a hardly concealed tribute to the mysterious parallelepiped that plays the sinister leading part in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. The 'psychedelic' palette, noted higher, of the large *Stalking Hieronymus* canvases is also reminiscent of the head trip with which master director Stanley Kubrick closed his far-from-optimistic visionary fable about the Faustian pact of modernity. [In 1972, Andrei Tarkovsky shot his SF film *Solyaris* as 'his' answer to *2001: A Space Odyssey*; the figure in *Planet Waves* actually looks a lot like Tarkovsky's protagonist, Doctor Kris Kelvin.]

A modern apocalyptic as a doctrine of demystification and unmasking? Indeed, the 'apocalyptic' tenor of the head trips in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (is space travel, as a *pars pro toto* of the modern belief in progress, not the ultimate bad trip?), *Stalker* (is the journey through the Zone not merely a mental illusion?) and *Stalking Hieronymus* ('is my head my only home?') takes us back to the idiosyncratic late-medieval universe of Jeroen Bosch – as in, for instance, the right-hand panel of his *Haywain*, or his *Garden of Delights*, both at the Prado in Madrid, or his *Last Judgement* at the Vienna Akademie – with which this genealogy of the Hieronymic creed, the Hieronymic genre and the secularised Jerome as a modern (anti)hero commenced – *in* and *from* the work of Hans Vandekerckhove, and in particular the cycle of paintings entitled *Stalking Hieronymus*. More than five centuries later, we have come full circle and St Jerome, so long believed dead or at least forgotten, the patron saint of seekers, loners, hermits and recluses, the patron saint of all of us, who are all Hieronymi in our deepest thoughts – 'my head, my only home' – returns back to us, moderns, for whom the Hieronymic doctrine, precisely because of our imprisonment in the modern condition, will always remain relevant and necessary. As I have written higher, the secularised Hieronymi of

Goethe, Nietzsche, Munch, Beckett, Tarkovsky and Hans Vandekerckhove are the modern (anti-)heroes par excellence.

The current relevance of the Hieronymic genre, repeat: 'In these alienating, post-ironic times, on the threshold of a new millennium, an era of so many diasporas and of new complexities of chaos, it is abundantly clear that there is an urgent need for convincing images of loners, seekers, and exiles, whether voluntary or forced; in short, for a reformulation and a radical contemporary revision of the Hieronymic tradition.'

Dieter Roelstraete  
Brussels, May 2003