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Ekphrasis in Ecocriticism: Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts" and Bruegel's "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus"

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Peer Review

This work has undergone a double-blind review by a minimum of two faculty members from institutions of higher learning from around the world. The faculty reviewers have expertise in disciplines closely related to those represented by this work. If possible, the work was also reviewed by undergraduates in collaboration with the faculty reviewers.

Abstract

If *ekphrasis* is a literary description of a visual work of art, and ecocriticism uses literature to study nature and ecological concerns, how do the two mix? The ekphrastic poem "Musée des Beaux Arts" by W.H. Auden not only expands the understanding of the genre but also broadens the understanding of nature. Auden's poem is quintessentially ekphrastic, yet it has never been examined in terms of how it is both informed by and informs an eco-critical reading. Auden and Pieter Bruegel, the painter of "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" upon which Auden based his poem, express nature through the imagery of animals; however, Auden enriches his poem by synthesizing ecological nature, human nature, and inner nature, all of which not only help deepen understanding of Bruegel's painting, but also create a more complex image of nature through the reader's eyes. By combining Auden's lyrical beauty, as he was heavily inspired by Freud in understanding suffering as exquisite, with Bruegel's fantastical imagery, the viewer is able to understand the mythology of Icarus and how human nature, perhaps emphasized through ecological nature, has told the tale of Icarus many times over.

Keywords

Ecocriticism, Ecopoetics, Pieter Bruegel, W.H. Auden, Musée des Beaux Arts, Landscape with the Fall of Icarus, ekphrasis

If *ekphrasis* is a literary description of a visual work of art, and ecocriticism uses literature to study nature and ecological concerns, how do the two mix? The ekphrastic poem “Musée des Beaux Arts” by W.H. Auden not only expands the understanding of the genre but also broadens the understanding of nature. Auden’s poem is quintessentially ekphrastic, yet it has never been examined in terms of how it is both informed by and informs an eco-critical reading. Auden and Pieter Bruegel, the painter of “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus” upon which Auden based his poem, express nature through the imagery of animals; however, Auden enriches his poem by synthesizing ecological nature, human nature, and inner nature, all of which not only help deepen understanding of Bruegel’s painting, but also create a more complex image of nature through the reader’s eyes. By combining Auden’s lyrical beauty, as he was heavily inspired by Freud in understanding suffering as exquisite, with Bruegel’s fantastical imagery, the viewer is able to understand the mythology of Icarus and how human nature, perhaps emphasized through ecological nature, has told the tale of Icarus many times over.

The Painting: “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus”

Completed in the 1560’s, the influential painting “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus” was neither signed nor dated, and as Lyckle de Vries explains, it appeared on the art market in 1912 and became part of the collection at the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium in the same year (122). Considered and suspected to be a close copy of Bruegel’s painting, this version is not the real piece for two main reasons: the arguably poor quality of the painting compared to other pieces’, and the fact that it is an oil painting on canvas, an exception in the works of Bruegel, who made all his other oil paintings on panel (de Vries 120). So, while the work may not literally be Bruegel’s, it is considered his idea, and hence all credit is given to him. The unique use of color also emphasizes Bruegel’s, and more eminently Ovid’s, message. By starting with dark, deep browns, and working toward the clear and bright blue airiness of the sea and sky, it could be argued that the color palette itself represents the arc of human nature. While one might first notice the dark and foreboding colors, everyone’s eye moves on, eventually getting to the light and tranquil sky. Showing a scene that is only prevalent because of the painting’s name, Bruegel immediately creates an interesting composition.

With a name like “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus” an onlooker would expect to see the fall of Icarus. The painting only gestures at the scene, however, with the boy’s tiny legs barely noticeable in the corner of the painting’s background. Ruth Yeazell further explains that phenomenon:

The impulse to see the painting as focused on the drowning boy began—though it clearly did not end—with those who first titled the painting “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus.” For the poets themselves, of course, the very degree to which the painting appears to impede the interpretation implicit in its title has proved a powerful catalyst for writing. Whether or not Bruegel deliberately composed the image “to frustrate verbal appropriation,” as James V. Mirollo has argued, there is an obvious tension between the importance accorded Icarus by the design of the picture and the poets’ own allegiance to language. (124)

Icarus, a character from Greek mythology, was a demigod who was the first to achieve flight. His father put wings on his back using wax, and his only warning was to not fly too close to the sun, as the heat would melt the off wax and he would fall. Icarus promised, yet in the thrill of escaping their imprisonment, he did exactly what he was not supposed to. With the heat pelting his back and melting off his wings, he plummeted to his death in the ocean, falling long and hard, and dying alone.

While the mythological imagery is clear and obvious in reference to the literally story of Icarus, it is not the only nod towards mythology in the painting. There is a bird perched over the fisherman’s head, said to be a partridge, referring to another part of Greek mythology. To clarify the Greek mythology used in “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus”, Daedalus, Icarus’s father, tasked with

educating his nephew, becomes jealous of his nephew's advanced talent. He pushes him from the top of a castle, out of frustration and envy. Yet Pallas, the goddess of wisdom, quickly intervenes and transforms the nephew into a partridge to save him from death. This was another allusion on Bruegel's part to emphasize the importance of mythology, as was the island painted in the foreground.

In appearance, the island looks almost like a prison or a castle of sorts, believed to have been used by Bruegel to imitate the Island of Crete, the place imprisoning Icarus and his father. 'By emphasizing only areas around Icarus—the plowman in his field, the farmer with his sheep, and the fisherman working on the sea—Bruegel suggests that mundane life goes on, despite the seemingly significant death of a demigod. The ploughman is dressed in the only spurt of color to be found in the painting: a bright red shirt which strikes the viewer unexpectedly as Icarus by comparison could be so easily missed. Reinforcing this notion, too, is the ostensibly nonessential part of the painting; its extreme and minutely detailed parts such as the ship is almost mocking the last appearance of Icarus, as though the artist almost forgot to even include him. As Icarus crashes to his death, the onlookers go about their lives, continuing to plow the fields, fish in the sea, and herd their animals. Although Icarus's death should have been momentous, as he was the first to achieve flight, it went unnoticed. In literature, Icarus is often used as a metaphor for human pride and ambition, that nature assumes that humans will push the envelope beyond a comfortable area.

The Poem: “Musée des Beaux Arts”

W.H. Auden wrote his poem right at the break of World War. Auden illustrates his point about the loveliness of life in “Musée des Beaux Arts” by alluding to Bruegel's “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus.” This painting shows a world in bliss despite the drowning of a demigod occurring in the lower right corner. With war freshly past and soon to come again, it is arguable that Auden, as well as many contemporaries of the time felt completely overwhelmed by the pain and suffering around them, as though life truly couldn't go on. Alexander Nemerov argues that, in relation to Auden's biography:

What is striking about the poem, first, is its relation to Auden's experiences in 1938. From January to June, he and Isherwood had been in China, writing a book about the Sino-Japanese War called *Journey to a War*, which they finished in Brussels at the end of the year. (784)

This makes sense, as viewing the Sino-Japanese War included witnessing bombing not unlike a “boy falling from the sky.” Yet, Auden tries to highlight the ever-present beauty in life by using Bruegel's painting as an example, even with death and suffering in overabundance, one can choose to focus on the beauty in life. Auden creates images of the beautiful life we all live by using common, yet impeccable scenarios.

How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting
For the miraculous birth, there always must be
Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating
On a pond at the edge of the wood: (5–8)

These lines evoke joy and an almost tangible excitement. Auden is using this scene to provoke the reader into remembering the beautiful things that happen in life, not just the overwhelming pain, suffering, and war.

Yet Auden also alludes to the suffering depicted by Bruegel as “some untidy spot / Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse / Scratches its innocent behind on a tree” (10–12). This passage is often considered to reference the dog that can be seen with the shepherd in Bruegel's work. Much like the dogs, everyone in Bruegel's painting continues on their own way unaffected by the traumas and tribulations of others. Thomas Dilworth argues:

In response to suffering, art has an anesthetic effect. When made the content of art, suffering ceases to be existential in its meaning and becomes aesthetic. It is subsumed by beauty if the art is successful, by ugliness if it is not. In either case, sympathy or horror elicited by suffering gives way to aesthetic response. In this sense, art displaces suffering and generates apathy. This effect has a symbol in the flight of Icarus, which tries to do in time what art does psychologically. The wings of Daedalus made for himself and his son both postpone the inevitable, and, for Icarus, inadvertently help bring it to pass. (150)

Dilworth's perspective reveals a unique connection between horror, pain, suffering, and strangely, beauty. Throughout the massive brutality and suffering seen in Auden's poem, it is still incredibly beautiful. There is certainly a powerful force in poetry that allows us to momentarily forget the suffering, if only to focus on the natural, inevitable beauty of everything, including suffering. His use of technique leveraged his work to draw the response he wanted. While both the painting and the poem lead us into different perspectives of the world, different critical theories can also reveal much about the art works.

Auden's Ecopoetics

Ecocriticism is the study of the connection between literature and the natural environment; it is a viewpoint that acts like a leverage to explain and discuss topics like global warming or deforestation. As William Rueckert explains:

the problem . . . is to find ways of keeping the human community from destroying the natural community, and with it the human community. This is what ecologists like to call the self-destructive or suicidal motive that is inherent in our prevailing and paradoxical attitude toward nature. The conceptual and practical problem is to find the grounds upon which the two communities—the human, the natural—can coexist, cooperate, and flourish in the biosphere. (107)

'By using ecocriticism, that anthropocentric outlook is diminished and one is able to interrogate what is nature. Technically everything has an origin or beginning that can be traced back to "nature" as it usually defined, so what should count as nature or as natural? Although ecocriticism is effective and revealing, it isn't the purpose of this research. To simply view the painting and poem through ecocriticism would reveal the connection of nature, but that leaves out human nature and inner nature. Recently, literary critics are exploring the many faucets where ecocriticism may be applied anew to pre-modern works.'"

Auden implies ecology when he writes, "Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse / Scratches its innocent behind on a tree" (12–13). "Regardless of what is going on, as it does not seem to matter, the animals continue to be animals. Bruegel and Auden rely heavily on ecological image to suggest the limits of the constant struggle of civilization to overtake a nature'. For example, Bruegel paints a plowman working the fields, a shepherd with his dog keeping his herd, and a fisherman at sea. The painting shows the way that these humans interact with their surroundings, yet it also shows the futility of their actions, upon which Auden later capitalized. Auden shows the lack of connection with nature and humans, almost implying that the relationship is one-sided. While the fields may be plowed, the dogs help herd, and the fish be caught, it is almost an illusion of cohesiveness. They will not last forever, but something about nature is prevailing and eternal. Regardless of the devastation, nature will return. It is as though Bruegel is painting Icarus not as being killed, but as being consumed, engulfed in his fate.

The painting may, as Auden's poem suggests, depict humankind's indifference to suffering by highlighting the ordinary events which continue to occur, despite the unobserved death of Icarus:

But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone
As it had to 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. (17–21)

Seeing Icarus slowly drowning in the ocean seems so trivial 'from the poem's viewpoint. Although the boy is literally dying in the painting, and in Auden's poem, it seems to only highlight all the beauty found in the rest of the scene. Yet the dark shadows muddying the foreground tempt the viewer to see unclear and unexpected things: a corpse lying in the underbrush and a snake slithering on the rock, cradling a sword'. As Ruth Yeazell explains, "[Scholars] also remark upon the comparative dignity of the plowman's costume and suggest that what appears to be a corpse in the bushes doubles the applicability of the plow's proverbial refusal to stop for a dying man" (122). The hidden secrets of the painting not only speak about the depth and intensity of subject that Bruegel pulls from in order to create a piece, but they also speak about the cultural indifference. The speaker not only infers that the subjects are indifferent to Icarus' suffering, but also that the painter also included many nods to past mythology and proverbs to solidify the indifference that everything in the painting holds towards Icarus' death, and arguably change and trauma as a whole.

The painting and its meaning are timeless, and the impact of the message still maintains relevancy today, through the use of human nature. Bruegel, by using the plowman to illustrate the foreground, and Icarus to encompass the background, shows how trivial life can be. However, the fields being plowed will be overrun by nature. They will experience landslides, droughts, and storms. The sea which the fisherman prowls can just as easily turn on him, leaving another sailor lost at sea. And the shepherd, try as he might to keep his herd, will lose them all in time, to any number of causes of death, loss, or illness. Even with their best possible strengths, nature will win over all of their joint efforts in the end. Instead of idealizing great ideas, creations, or inventions, the painting shows the more trivial aspect to life: the short-term expectancy of hard work and labor. Every day is the same to these laborious men, and all their hard, physical efforts will go unseen in the long run; still they are the ones alive. What should be groundbreaking, a demigod achieving flight, and then plummeting to his death, goes completely unnoticed.

Freud's Belief in Inner Nature

Through both human nature and inner nature, Auden alludes to concepts from Sigmund Freud's development of psychoanalysis, namely child-like innocence. Freud's study of psychoanalysis was rooted in his studies that hypothesized that emotional problems and difficulties had their footings in long-forgotten, past emotional traumas that needed to be reflected on so that the emotional trauma associated with it could be let go. Laura Cowen explains, "Auden celebrates these theories because he believes that they enable people to live more virtuous lives. They allow one to escape involuntary behavior and make self-conscious, moral decisions. Because Freudian theory reconciles warring contraries and makes a person whole, to him, Freudian thought is inherently moral" (2). Freud's view on nature is that consciousness is determined by an individual's psychological and biological drives, hence implying that humans are created to live one way, that people are already wired for a certain outcome, a specific response.

However much like Marx Freud believed that people sometimes make rational decisions and judgments, he acknowledge their ability to go against nature, if it is utilizing rational thought. As Nietzsche would say, "Truth is a mobile army of metaphors" (218). Malvern Jack describes Auden's relationship with LSD in order to test Freud's ideas during the period of the poem:

While Auden was staying with the Hoggarts in 1967, he told the story of his and his partner's first experiment with LSD. "They invited a doctor friend round to administer the drug," Hoggart explains. "After an hour or so nothing happened, so they decided to go out to a diner." Suddenly Auden saw his postman through the window of the diner, apparently performing an elaborate dance. This was clearly the expected hallucination so they rushed home, where again nothing happened. Next day, the postman knocked on the door. "Hey, Mr. Auden, I had this parcel for you yesterday. I saw you in the diner and I waved at you for a long time but you looked right through me." (*Sunday Times*)

Nature, to Auden, was his choice, not beyond him, and not a guarantee. Auden uses this vision of nature to establish the poem's viewpoint. Accord to Robert Randall:

Tragedy occurs when the soaring's of the self comes crashing down, when one's efforts to fulfill one's dreams fail to happen, whether by accident, over exuberance, or human weakness. It occurs when one's yearning for the applause, affirmation, and understanding of others is fulfilled only occasionally, faintly, or not at all. Like Icarus, we often feel criticized. Like him we often sense the absence of a safety net, no supporting arms for those times when we fall. (633)

According to Randall, by emphasizing just Icarus' drowning legs, instead of his entire body, or even deciding to show the actual fall, Bruegel is showing not the fear of failure or mistakes, but the fear of tragedy, the fear that no one is there to help when a hand up is needed. Bruegel is showing the saddest and most painful part of Icarus' death. The fact that he just died, without help and without love. He didn't have a horrible fall which the onlookers tried to save him from, and he didn't plunge to his death alone and far from assistance. Rather, Bruegel is emphasizing everyone's truest fear, the fear of tragedy, the fear of falling and not having help to get back up.

While Auden's poem stands alone, in connection with Bruegel's work it illuminates a very particular view of suffering as an indifferent experience. With a sinking sun, a rippling ocean, and a plethora of natural images bordering between beautiful and mundane couching the gesture toward Icarus, the poem suggests pain doesn't matter. It is an interesting contrast to other ekphrastic poems written on Bruegel's painting, poems that highlight Icarus' pain or emphasize the injustice in forgetting him. A notable example is William Carlos Williams's attempt. Yeazell argues

Auden's focus on the drowning figure is not surprising. "To me, arts subject is the human clay," he had written two years earlier, "And landscape but a background to a torso." This is far removed from William Carlos Williams's celebrated dictum, "No ideas but in things." For Williams, who published a sequence of poems inspired by Bruegel in 1960, the painter's appeal may have partly inhered in the very concreteness of his images—what one critic terms "his obdurate reproduction of the materiality of the world." (119)

While the poem focuses on human pain and suffering, on how the entirety of life goes on, even with the traumas surrounding everyone's life, it also emphasizes expansiveness. This is in strong contrast to Williams, who uses his work to describe the paintings most obvious interpretation, and what it means to be Icarus, for example, "of the year was / awake tingling / near" (7-9).

Overall, "Musée des Beaux Arts" manages to integrate and even undermine many critical theories of suffering and its relationship with the environment. Using "Musée des Beaux Arts" improves the theory, not the just the assumed other way around. Auden, whether knowingly or not, uses the ekphrastic lens to underscore particular dimensions of Bruegel's work that are highlighted through the use of a more complex understanding of nature.

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