



المرحلة الرابعة / الشعر الحديث

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Musee des Beaux Arts

W. H. Auden

About suffering they were never wrong,
The old Masters: how well they understood
Its human position: how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully
along;
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:
They never forgot
That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course
Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot
Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

In Breughel's Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,



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.

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Analysis

Lines 1-2

The poem opens with a very general statement which establishes the distinguishing quality of the first section of the poem (that is, generalization). Auden does this by categorizing all artists of the Renaissance period into one group, “Old Masters.” By disregarding their country of origin, Flemish artist versus Italian painters for instance, and their pictorial depiction, the “common” or “everyday” scenes of many Flemish artists as opposed to the human suffering (or, the suffering of Christ) popular with Italian painters, the poet establishes a broad historical perspective. In doing so, the poem implies a universal truth—that all artists agree upon the significance and understanding of suffering, and as the opening line states, that their perspective is “never wrong.”

Lines 3-4

Here the poet elaborates on the Old Masters’ perspective regarding suffering. The details outlined in these two lines indicate that human suffering is understood chiefly as an individual burden, a burden the rest of the world is oblivious or indifferent to. The actions noted in line 3, of an individual opening a window, or “just walking dully along,” are deliberately banal, trivial, and commonplace. They underscore the indifference society exhibits toward human suffering. The daily side-by-side existence of both extraordinary events of suffering and common experiences is the universal truth the Old Masters recognize and capture in their work.



Lines 5-8

Elaborating on the previous two lines, the poet notes how an extraordinary event, such as the “miraculous birth” of Christ is visually displaced by the seemingly less significant image of children skating on a pond. This perspective is ironic and implies that the poet, like the painters, recognizes that great historic or prophetic events which are often the focus of humanity are less important than those which mark the recurring rhythms of life.

Lines 9-13

These five lines like the previous four, treat an extraordinary event contextually. That is, the “dreadful martyrdom” is placed within the human context of ordinariness. Thus, as a martyrdom occurs, dogs live out their “doggy life.” This juxtaposition of the ordinary and extraordinary suggests a condemnation of humankind’s indifference to human suffering. However, it also forces the viewer/reader to question the accepted distinction between the ordinary and the extraordinary. The poet, like the “Old Master” Brueghel, engages us to recognize the details of daily life, for it is here that extraordinary events of suffering and miracles occur. The extraordinary events, then, are the children skating, or the animal stirring.

The flat, colloquial language the poet employs, for instance such phrase as “anyhow in a corner,” and “dogs go on with their doggy life,” is deliberately unpoetic and suggests that the speaker is discussing a well-known notion. Recalling a familiar idea links back to the opening lines of the poem and the poet’s assertion that a universally recognized and accepted “truth” regarding human suffering exists.

Lines 14-15

At this point in the poem, Auden moves from the general to the specific. In the second section, the poet dwells upon a particular canvas,



Brueghel's Icarus, a work which hangs in the Musée des Beaux Arts in Brussels. This painting, as suggested in these two lines, contains a visual representation of the blasé or detached attitude of humankind discussed in the previous lines. Note how the indifference of humankind is expressed by their actions as "everything turns away" in a "leisurely" fashion from the disaster. Thus, in this section the implied indifference noted in the first section of the poem is made explicit.

Despite their seeming differences, the extraordinary events alluded to in each section are linked. In the first section, the poet alludes to Christian events, the Nativity and the Crucifixion. In the second section, the Greek myth of Icarus, a boy whose overwhelming aspirations proved to be his downfall, is depicted. While the events spring from disparate cultures and times, humankind's response to the events is the same for in all instances the fated implications are ignored.

Lines 16-19

In these four lines, the poem mirrors the painting. Both depict the ploughman and his work in the foreground while the human tragedy of Icarus plunging to his death is relegated to the background. The painting is literally composed in this manner, and the poetic composition is equally as clearly as Icarus is depicted as simply a splash, a cry, a pair of "white legs." Despite being relegated to the background of the text, the disaster, the martyrdom, the death and suffering are part of the landscape even if those occupying the landscape are oblivious to it. Life fails to romanticize and celebrate such events, and this awareness further suggests that the extraordinary exists within the daily activities of one's life.

Lines 20-21

The closing lines of the poem continue to meticulously describe Brueghel's painting. The attention to detail, for instance the ship is defined as both "expensive" and "delicate," underscores the insignificance of personal tragedy within the scheme of life, and thus implies that the extraordinary exists within ordinary experience. This is the image the poem concludes with for despite the death of Icarus, the



sun continues to shine and the ship sails “calmly on” to its preordained destination.

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Themes

1. Art and Experience

One of the most interesting things about “Musee des Beaux Arts” is that it gives credit to artists, or at least to a particular school of artists, for understanding the experience of suffering better than people ordinarily do. Art is often accused of being out of touch with the realities of the world, of portraying life in a way that is either simplified or idealized. Transforming reality is the nature of art. Some artists feel that it is also the job of the artist to make the world appear better than it actually is or to show how it could be better. Here, Auden is standing beside the Renaissance painters who believed in showing one of the worst, most unpleasant aspects of the human condition: the fact that the problems of one person do not actually affect anyone else in a significant way. The poem tells us by implication that the artist who tries to depict humans as understanding the importance of another’s failures is cheating.

Near the end of the poem, the style changes slightly, using more adjectives, becoming more specific about what is contained in “The Fall of Icarus”: “white legs,” “green water, and “delicate ship” do not give readers the actual vivid experience of viewing Brueghel’s painting, but they are more specific about the details than the earlier part of the poem had been. The poem moves from general concepts (such as “suffering”) to examples (the skating children, the dog and horse) to details. In doing this, Auden is covering all of the artist’s concerns, from social philosophy down to particular shades and hues. He is also following the movement of a museum tour, from general categories down to focal points on specific works.

2. Morals and Morality

The question that this poem implies is at the very core of any moral system: Why should any being care about what happens to another? At



first, the issue seems innocent enough, since it makes sense that somebody must be walking, eating or opening windows while suffering occurs. The world does not stop. As the poem goes on, though, Auden gives us more serious examples of events which should affect people, and the lack of effect that these events have. If “the miraculous birth” or “the dreadful martyrdom” (references to the birth and death of Christ, a common theme in Renaissance paintings) could be so easily ignored, then it would follow that there would be no reward or punishment for good or evil. The lack of morality in the human condition is most clearly implied in lines 12 and 13, where the impassive observers are a dog and a horse but their disinterest is no different than the humans’. The specific example of Icarus allows Auden the opportunity to go further with this relationship between humanity and inhumanity. He personifies the sun, saying that it “shone / As it had to,” and also the ship that “must have seen” what happened but “sailed calmly on.” We are accustomed to thinking of these items as performing their duties mechanically, without the capacity for thinking about what is right or wrong. By discussing them in the same tone that is used for the ploughman, the poem removes the whole aspect of morality from the range of human ability.

3. Public vs. Private

The noteworthy events discussed in the poem are public events that people could observe and react to, but the people in the poem do not react. We know from popular culture, however, that people are very interested in finding out what other, more famous people are doing: whole newspapers, magazines and television shows are devoted to reporting what celebrities are up to. The difference between celebrity worship today and scenes painted by the Old Masters is that the poem specifies the painters’ area of expertise to be “suffering.” We cannot say whether the witnesses in the paintings would be any more involved in the events around them if those events were pleasant, because all of the events Auden describes are about suffering. Even though the “miraculous birth” should be an occasion for joy, the focus of the pictures, as Auden



tells it, is “the aged ... reverently, passionately waiting,” so it may be that the skating children are avoiding the seriousness, not the situation. The use of the word “important” tells us that some things that are available for public interaction will make an impression, but that suffering does not make the leap from one person’s life to another’s. According to the poem, suffering will even make us turn in toward our own private thoughts when “something amazing” happens, overpowering natural curiosity.

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Style

“Musée des Beaux Arts” is written in free verse, meaning that the poem is essentially “free” of meter, regular rhythm, or a rhyme scheme. Unlike, a Petrarchan sonnet, for instance, which is written in iambic pentameter (each line contains five divisions or feet, and each foot consists of an unaccented syllable followed by an accented syllable), and is divided into two parts, an octave and a sestet, the octave rhyming abbaabba and the sestet usually rhyming cdecde, free verse employs varying line lengths and an irregular rhyme pattern, often shunning a rhyme scheme altogether.

Like the specific structural considerations of the sonnet form, the seeming lack of structure which free verse offers is purposely employed and works to illuminate the poem’s meaning. In Auden’s lyric, the long irregular lines, subtly enforced by the irregular end rhyme pattern, create a casual, conversational air more prosaic than poetic, and a somewhat blase tone which is reflective of the benign world illustrated in Brueghel’s art. The casual, easygoing argument the tone suggests is ironic for the topic of discussion, the human position and its seeming indifference to suffering, is anything but light and easygoing.

Appearing to be the antithesis of the sonnet, the poem does reflect the Petrarchan sonnet form in one way: Auden’s poem is distinguished by two parts which relate to one another much like the octave and sestet of a sonnet. Thus, like a sonnet, the poem is marked by a definite break or turn in thought. The first thirteen lines of the poem introduce the poem’s



theme and discuss it in general term, while the second half of the poem develops and illustrates the general idea with a specific example.

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