Ekphrasis in Ecocriticism: A Deeper Understanding of Auden’s “Musée des Beaux Arts”

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If ekphrasis is a literary description of a visual work of art, and ecocriticism uses literature to study nature and ecological concerns, but how do the two mix? Auden’s poem is the quintessential ekphrastic poem, yet it has never been examined in terms of how it is both informed by and informs an eco-critical reading. 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 and Bruegel, the painter of Landscape with the Fall of Icarus, which Auden based his poem on, express nature through the imagery of animals, a common theme, as animals are the most generic and common form of nature. 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, and, by combining Auden’s lyrical beauty 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

Finished in the 1560s, the influential painting, Landscape with the Fall of Icarus is over four hundred and fifty years old, yet its relevance has not wavered. The painting was neither signed nor dated, and as 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). The
painting as it is known today is most likely a close copy version of Bruegel’s original work. Considered and suspected to be a 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 of Bruegel’s, 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 be Bruegel’s, it is considered his idea, and hence all credit is given to him. The incredibly 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 arch 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. However, with the boy’s tiny legs barely noticeable in the corner of the painting’s background, the painting speaks volumes about the importance and relevance of life and death. 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' allegiance to language (124).

Icarus, a character in 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 not to fly too close to the sun, as the heat would melt the wax and he would fall. Icarus promised, yet his excitement overcame him, as is human nature. Overwhelmed with the gift of flight he did exactly what he was not supposed to and flew towards the sun. 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 about the literal 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’ 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 transitions the nephew into a partridge to save him from death. This was another nod 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. Yet, with a tale like that surely *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* would depict and portray the horrid death. However, on the contrary, Bruegel’s message was bigger than the death of a demigod. By emphasizing only areas around Icarus-- the plowman in his field, the farmer with his sheep, and
the fisherman working on the sea-- Bruegel spreads an even bigger message than that of a dying demigod: life goes on. The plowman is dressed in the only spurt of color to be found in the painting, a bright red shirt, but that comes unexpectedly to viewer, as Icarus is nearly invisible to the naked eye. Even with his monumental death, the world is all the same. No one bends over backwards to save him, and no one stops his or her daily tasks to gawk. Another incredible aspect of the painting is the extreme detail and artistry put into the ship in the background. An unnecessary and nonessential part of the painting, its extreme and minutely detailed parts are almost mocking the last appearance of Icarus, as though the artist almost forgot to ever include him. Literary, musical, scientific, and various other areas of study boast people who can, to this day, recognize and understand the painting. Yet, somehow, it is simply timeless. 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’ 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 as World War II was about to engulf the entire world. Auden illustrates his point about the loveliness of life in "Musée des Beaux Arts" by bringing up 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. However, Alexander Nemerov helps the reader see the history of Auden’s life:

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 seeing a lot of bombs dropped, very reminiscent of 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)

Auden uses these lines to invoke incredible excitement and joy from the readers. Even though they may seem unimportant or trivial, they give the reader a true sense of joy, 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 chooses to nod toward Bruegel and his paintings by writing,

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 way unaffected by the traumas and tribulations of others. However, Thomas Dilworth helps us to view the poem in a different way entirely, shining light on the specific reason Auden wrote the piece the way he did:

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 fight 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 bit of the artistic world of a whole, by showing what Auden wanted to be seen and understood from his poem. Dilworth helps explain the 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. And, while both the painting and the poem lead us into
different perspectives of the world, different critical theories can also reveal much about the artworks.

**ECOCRITICISM**

Ecocriticism is the study of the connection between literature and the natural environment. Literary scholars will analyze texts that depict environmental concerns and examine the various ways literature emphasizes and explains the subject of nature. Ecocriticism is an excellent way to deepen a current understanding of a work. By using ecocriticism to analyze a text, another aspect of the work is revealed. It can take an ordinary work that may be considered a fiction or a drama and expose its natural aspects, the way nature develops its characters and heightens its storyline. Ecocriticism also usually is used to talk about ecological problems found in pieces; it is a viewpoint that acts as leverage to explain and discuss topics like global warming or deforestation. Ecocriticism uses the reader’s blind spots to show them areas they have yet to explore. Rueckert helps his reader understand the intricacy of ecology by giving an example of how it helps clarify life:

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).

Without ecocriticism, a reader’s viewpoint can be seen as very self-centered, usually focused on how it relates to themselves. While reading a certain book, poem, or looking at a specific
painting, commonly the reader or viewer to internalize it by relating it all back to their own life. By using ecocriticism, that outlook is diminished, and the perspective is completely expanded upon. Ecocriticism allows the reader to think more completely about assumed definitions, such as nature itself. 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? Using ecocriticism allows the reader to have a more advanced and complete understanding of the work. However, although ecocriticism is effective and revealing, it isn’t the purpose of this research. To view the painting and poem through ecocriticism would reveal the connection of nature and all natural aspects in the works. However, that completely leaves out human nature and inner nature. Ecocriticism maxes out at ecological nature, a good, albeit basic, viewpoint. But by viewing the work through human and inner nature, hopefully Bruegel’s painting and Auden’s ekphrastic poem will be expanded upon. After all, so much of nature is found inside the human, and to limit the research to only include ecological nature, the reader is missing many of Bruegel’s and Auden’s most important points.

ECOLOGY IN “MUSÉE DES BEAUX ARTS”

Auden discusses and implies ecological nature 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). Auden is showing the ecology that he finds in Bruegel’s work. There is a very obvious form of nature that the animals take in Bruegel’s painting, and it is shown by their inability to be anything less than animals. 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 nature to portray their messages. Bruegel shows the constant struggle of civilization to overtake a nature that will
never prevail and never lessen. A nature that, in the end, will win every time. Nature has a stasis, as to say a true equilibrium. Nature is naturally balanced, and nothing humans can do will disrupt that. While keeping the earth well is still crucial, and issues like global warming and the ozone layers deteriorating are very serious, in the end, it is human lives being bartered with. The earth will heal itself completely over thousands of millions of years, but only humans’ likelihood of surviving is shrinking.

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, which is what Auden later capitalized on in his poem. Auden shows the lack of connection with nature and humans, almost implying that the relationship is one-sided. While the fields may plow, the dogs help herd, and the fish be caught; it is almost an illusion of cohesiveness. There is nothing humans can do to really and truly control the natural world around them. Earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes, and tornadoes wreak havoc among humans, killing thousands and leaving their endless creations of buildings, cities, and infrastructures in absolute ruin, yet nature, in these times of trouble, does nothing but flourish. Trees regrow healthier than ever; animals repopulate before it is even obvious that they were gone. Humans will die. They will not last forever, but something about nature is prevailing and eternal. Regardless of the devastation, nature will return. It is only under illusion that humans think they are in control, that they have the upper hand. Nature renders human agency to an almost meaningless thing. To live or die, plow the field or succumb to weeds, fish the sea or starve-- it is all trivial and unimportant. None of it has the lasting power that nature has. It is as
though Brueghel is painting Icarus not as being killed, but as being consumed, engulfed in his fate. Not a death, but a reconnection. It is as if magnetic.

**AUDEN AND THE FAULT OF HUMANKIND**

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 in Auden’s viewpoint. Although the boy is dying in the painting, and in Auden’s poem, it seems only to 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. With claims of a corpse lying in the underbrush and a snake slithering on the rock, cradling a sword, nature found beneath the obvious surface of Bruegel’s work is almost more tantalizing than the clear references. As 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 to create a piece, but they also speak about the cultural indifference that Bruegel includes. 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.

Yet Auden seems to think that the entire purpose of the painting is to show that death is trivial and that perhaps nothing matters but the innocence found in ignorance. There is a childlike twist that Auden emphasizes, as though children neither notice nor mind pain, as though their lives do not revolve around the bad, but rather exclusively around the good. Children don’t seem to mind; they don’t seem to be bothered. They are left seemingly indifferent by the tragedy around them, yet it is the child who is dying. It is the child facing pain. The essential nature of humanity can perhaps be seen through the unaltered eyes of a child, who focuses so purely and innocently on the good.

The painting and its meaning are timeless, and the impact of the message still maintains relevant 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. And what should be groundbreaking:
a demigod achieving flight, and then plummeting to his death, goes completely unnoticed - instantly forgotten. Everyone moves on, back to their monotonous tasks. The beauty and calmness found in simplicity seems to be human nature. To be involved in something unknown, something foreign comes much harder. To be constant in comfort comes so naturally. That is why people say they’re going to move away, but don’t. It is why people marry their high school sweethearts. It is why people go to their parent’s alma mater. It is hard to go against comfort. It doesn’t come naturally to go against the grain.

Through both human nature and inner nature, the reader of Auden’s poem can see nods and references to Freud, who was a large influence on Auden’s life. Not only does Auden’s perspective on child-like innocence reference a Freud-like perspective, but Auden as a person was deeply inspired and affected by Freud’s ideologies.

**FREUD’S BELIEF IN INNER NATURE**

Auden was deeply inspired and entranced by Freud. His concepts on psychoanalysis changed a lot of Auden’s beliefs. Freud’s belief in 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. 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. Yet much like Marx, Freud believed that people sometimes make rational decisions and judgments, as though humans have the power to go against nature if it is utilizing rational thought. As Nietzsche would say, “Truth is a mobile army of metaphors” (218). To Auden, truth seemed incredibly important. Doing what is rational, what is sane, is the only way to have control. Auden believed in the power of the mind. He claimed to have taken LSD while in his experimental phase. Yet, through the power of psychoanalysis, he claims he was unaffected. He was able, through the power of his mind, to control every feeling and emotion of his own. Malvern Jack tells an interesting tale of Auden’s relation with LSD. In his in-depth article he says, “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. The 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'." Nature, to Auden was his choice, not beyond him, and not a guarantee. So, to view his poem through the view of ecocriticism is not very effective or revealing; rather, one should acknowledge the nature Auden uses, but it isn’t used in the way ecocriticism is implying. Auden uses nature to establish his viewpoint, and while readers can see that simply through his words, it can also be seen through his core beliefs:

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 (Randall 633).

Robert Randall is dictating the pain and suffering Icarus faced, but more importantly, how Bruegel decided to portray it. 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 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 is alone absolutely breathtaking, in connection with William’s poem, it creates an even more exposed review of Brugel’s work.

With a sinking sun, a rippling ocean, and a plethora of natural images bordering between beautiful and mundane, the reader is slammed with Auden’s perspective: pain doesn’t matter, life is beautiful. It is an interesting contrast to other ekphrastic poems written on Bruegel’s painting, poems that highlight Icarus’ pain or emphasis the injustice in forgetting him. Notably popular is William Carlos Williams’ attempt at an ekphrastic poem also based on Bruegel’s painting.

Yeazell continues to clarify ekphrasis surrounding Bruegel by writing, 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).

This quote quite wonderfully explains the difference between Auden’s and Williams’s individual attempts at how to best confront and describe what they are seeing in Bruegel’s work. While Auden focused on human pain and suffering, on how the entirety of life goes on, even with the traumas surrounding everyone’s life, he also managed to emphasize the expansiveness of everything by marveling so much on the very depth of the painting, even those things that would seem trivial, like a dog’s world. 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. Williams writes,

of the year was

awake tingling

near (7-9)

This excerpt vividly shows the more flowery, poetic language Williams uses. These are two very different views, and perhaps Auden’s more expansive and encompassing view is what makes it so much more iconic than Williams work.

Overall, “Musée des Beaux Arts” is an iconic poem, and rightfully so. The poem manages to integrate and even undermine many critical theories that are applied to it. This was shown by ecocriticism, and yet the poem went even past that. Any number of incredibly complex
theories could be applied to it, such as feminist, Marxist, structuralist, or even formalist theories could be applied to the poem, and the poem would end up widening and clarifying points of the theory, deepening the very concepts of the theory. To be known as such an iconic ekphrasis poem comes with incredible weight. Something about “Musée des Beaux Arts,” adds complexity and integrity to any teaching or theory. It deepens even the most complete concepts. Using “Musée des Beaux Arts” improves the theory, not the other way around.
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