

How To Look at Painting: Icarus, Daedalus, and Science

*'Bruegel painted many things that cannot be painted.
As Pliny said of Apelles: In all his works, there is always
more thought than paint.'*

—Abraham Ortelius,
the great geographer and friend of
Bruegel, in his *Album amicorum* (1574-1598)

Let us take the time to look at Pieter Bruegel the Elder's painting, *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*. From the beginning, what may surprise us is that we must search carefully before finding Icarus, although he is the principal character of the work. It's as if he were "drowning," one might say, in the painting. Although all the other representations of this myth, without exception, make this story the visual center of their works, in showing the falling Icarus, Bruegel decided, on the contrary, not to use this spectacular image. Rather than grieving over the tragic fate of Icarus, the artist wants us to interest ourselves in other things.

So, what is it we do see?

First of all, the artist gives direction to our reading of the picture, the direction of the wind that fills the sails of the ship, mirroring the farmer's stride. These two movements push us to shift our gaze from right to left, along one of the two diagonal axes of the painting.

We have, on the the lowest level at the right, a fisherman, who occupies a very tiny part of the painting. Next, at a higher level and on a more important plane, we find a shepherd with his sheep. Next, we see a farmer on the primary plane, on a level still more elevated and occupying an even greater area. Lastly, we notice, in raising our eyes to the horizon, the ships on an immense sea.

Some people may think that Bruegel was striving merely to describe faithfully the economic activities of his age. But the role of a true artist is not reduced to that of being a faithful witness of his time, relating "objectively" what he sees around him. It's not a question of doing this; nor ought this painting to awaken the curiosity of any but the most fanatic, about the history of folklore and traditions. The point is, there exists a principle which unifies these different activities—the relationship of man to nature. In fact, Bruegel is celebrating the progress

and the accomplishments of man in mastering nature, even ordering these achievements according to their importance.

Let us go back to the beginning. The activity of fishing (like that of hunting or gathering) represents the simplest intervention of man into nature: man takes from nature that which he needs for his own sustenance. Even though he uses tools, he depends entirely on the environment in which he lives. If nature is not prolific in the place where he finds himself, he must leave to search for another place which will supply him with the means to survive.

With the breeding of livestock, the shepherd achieves a more important intervention: he does not limit himself to taking, but domesticates nature. He selects the best animals, nourishes them, cares for them, and protects them from predators. He thus reduces considerably his dependence on nature's whims. The farmer, for his part, brings about a still more profound transformation. The tools he uses are no longer those designed to trap his food—which even certain animals succeed in making—but those designed to perfect his capacity to produce it. He increases the abundance of nature. He harvests not just what nature offers him, but the fruits of his labor. Then, finally, with the ships, we see man leaving his natural environment—dry land—to conquer a world which is foreign to him, the sea.

Transforming Nature 'Willfully'

With each progression, man opens for himself a greater field of freedom and of intervention. He is less and less subject to his environment, and he is increasing his capacity to support more people, in better conditions. This is the story, simply, of the history of mankind. Man possesses a quality which is not shared by any other species of animal: he can understand the laws of nature, master them, and use them for technological applications. Thus it is that, since the first appearance of life on Earth, the human species alone has been able, *deliberately*, to augment its population, from a few million individuals, to about 6 billion today. While the other species of animals transform nature *by instinct*, man is capable of transforming nature *willfully* to improve the conditions of life of his own species, so as to favor the development of the Kingdom of Life. As the poet Friedrich Schiller said, provocatively, in imag-



Pieter Bruegel the Elder, "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus," c. 1558.

ining that man had remained eternally in the Garden of Eden: "He would have changed Paradise into a desert, thence to transform this desert into a Paradise."

An element of the painting illustrates particularly well this transformation of nature by man. It involves the island found almost at the center of the painting. This island exists between two conditions—the state of nature, and the state of human labor. The artist shows us the ambiguous moment in which this rock is no longer really that—but without yet being an architectural edifice.

How To Surpass Our Limits

Bruegel's painting would be idyllic, were it not for one little detail: Icarus drowning. Let us see, by way of how the Roman poet Ovid (43 B.C.-c. A.D. 14/17) recounted the story, how this tragedy came about.

Daedalus, the father of Icarus, was a renowned architect who, on orders from King Minos of the island of Crete, had constructed the famed labyrinth in which the Minotaur was imprisoned. Thereafter, the architect and his son found themselves held captive by Minos. Ovid writes*:

But Daedalus was weary; by this time,
he'd been exiled in Crete too long; he pined
for his own land; but he was blocked—the sea
stood in his way. "Though Minos bars escape
by land or waves," he said, "I still can take
the sky—there lies my path. Though he owns all,
he does not own the air!" At once he starts
to work on unknown arts, to alter nature.
He lays out feathers—all in order, first
the shorter, then the longer (you'd have said
they'd grown along a slope); just like the kind
that country people used to fashion,
where from the unequal reed to reed the rise
is gradual. And these he held together
with twine around the center; at the base
he fastened them with wax; and thus arranged—
he'd bent them slightly—they could imitate
the wings of true birds.

As he worked at this,
his young son, Icarus, inquisitive,
stood by and—unaware that what he did
involved a thing that would imperil him—
delighted, grabbed the feathers that the wind
teased, fluttering, about; or he would ply
the blond wax with his thumb; and as he played,
the boy disturbed his father's wonder-work.

When Daedalus had given the last touch,

* Excerpts are from *The Metamorphoses of Ovid*, Book VIII, verse translation by Allen Mandelbaum (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1993), pp. 254-256.

the craftsman thought he'd try two wings himself;
 so balanced, as he beat the wings, he hung
 poised in the air. And then to his dear son,
 he gave another pair. "O Icarus,
 he said, "I warn you: fly a middle course.
 If you're too low, sea spray may damp your
 wings;
 and if you fly too high, the heat is scorching.
 Keep to the middle then. And keep your eyes
 on me, and not on Helice, Boötes,
 or on Orion's unsheathed sword. Where I
 shall lead—that's where you fly: I'll be your
 guide."
 And as he taught his son the rules of flight,
 he fitted to the shoulders of the boy
 those wings that none had ever seen before.
 The old man worked and warned; his cheeks
 grew damp

with tears; and with a father's fears, his hands
 began to tremble. Then he kissed his son
 (he never would embrace the boy again);
 and poised upon his wings, he flew ahead,
 still anxious for the follower he led
 (much like the bird who, from her nest on high,
 leads out her tender fledglings to the sky).
 He urges on his son, saying he must
 keep up, not fall behind; so he instructs
 the boy in flight, an art most dangerous;
 and while the father beats his wings, he turns
 to watch his son, to see what he has done.

A fisherman, who with his pliant rod
 was angling there below, caught sight of them;
 and then a shepherd leaning on his staff
 and, too, a peasant leaning on his plow
 saw them and were dismayed; they thought that
 these

Art Is Metaphorical, or It's Not Art

There exists a copy of Bruegel's painting, and the mistakes that it contains are rich in lessons. The copyist strives to stick closely to the story told by Ovid, and for that reason, he corrects the "errors" in Bruegel's canvas: He adds Daedalus back into the sky at the top (Bruegel obviously forgot!); in so doing, he makes the shepherd a witness to the tragedy; and, lastly, he repositions the sun at the zenith. But, describing "objectively" what's occurring, is more like the redaction of a police report than the creation of a work of art. Our copyist tries to represent the facts faithfully, but forgets to consider the ideas which Bruegel and Ovid wanted to transmit. For a literal representation is not capable of transmitting ideas: it gives nothing but *information*.

The true artist is he who "provides much to understand beyond what he paints." And if he wishes to transmit ideas to us, that is to say, to change our way of thinking, it is essential that he have recourse to metaphor (literally, in Greek, "to carry beyond"). The artist puts us face to face with paradoxes (the position of



Anonymous copyist, "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus."

the sun, the indifference of the characters to Icarus's fate, the absence of Daedalus, etc.), or with ambiguities (the island), so that we may, by ourselves, reflect on the profound meaning of the work. In place of telling us what is "good" and what is "bad," he opens a dialogue with us (and that, despite the centuries that separate us), so as to cause us to "be delivered of

ideas." He is a Socratic midwife.

And thus, a true artist wants to change your life. He aims to create at the deepest level of your self, a question about your own behavior. Without giving you the "moral," he takes you by the hand and shows you, often in a provocative way, what you are, all the while suggesting what you ought to be.
 —PM

must surely be some gods, sky-voyaging.

Now on their left they had already passed the isle of Samos—Juno's favorite—Delos, and Paros, and Calymne, rich in honey, and Labyrinthos, on the right. The boy had now begun to take delight in his audacity; he left his guide and, fascinated by the open sky, flew higher; and the scorching sun was close; the fragrant wax that bound his wings grew soft, then melted. As he beats upon the air, his arms can get no grip; they're wingless—bare.

The father—though that word is hollow now—cried: "Icarus! Where are you?" And that cry echoed again, again till he caught sight of feathers on the surface of the sea. And Daedalus cursed his own artistry, then built a tomb to house his dear son's body. There, where the boy was buried, now his name remains: that island is Icaria.

The first thing one could say is, that Icarus behaved in an infantile fashion. He did not remember the wise counsel of his father, and his disobedience doomed him. We see Icarus drunk with his newfound power. Certainly, he discovers that man is capable of surpassing certain constraints, but in the process comes to take himself for a god: he has the delusion that constraints don't exist any longer. To emphasize this issue even further, the painter introduces an anomaly—the sun is on the horizon, and thus cannot be responsible, as it is in Ovid's story, for the tragic destiny of Icarus. The light that has melted the wax of his wings is of a different nature. One can clearly distinguish the reflection of a light on the sea, a light whose source we cannot see.

But, don't we say that man is made in the image of God, that he possesses a "divine spark"? In fact, the divine quality of man lies in his creative powers, which allow him to perfect himself—himself and the world in which he lives—but *in no way* to become omnipotent and omniscient. As soon as man, thanks to a fundamental scientific discovery, passes beyond a frontier, he increases considerably his liberty and his domain of intervention. All the same, this new domain brings with it new frontiers which, although certainly farther off, will some day have to be surpassed in the same way. Man, if he wishes to develop and survive, must always turn his eyes to the horizon—where the next frontier is to be found.

Let us now return to the other characters of the painting. It is shocking that, contrary to Ovid's story, they totally ignore the presence of Icarus. The



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"The island exists between two conditions—the state of nature, and the state of human labor. The artist shows us the ambiguous moment in which this rock is no longer really that—but without yet being an architectural edifice."

fisherman concentrates on his fishing rod, the shepherd looks tranquilly at the sky, the peasant, in a posture resembling that of his horse, moves along toward the shadows, and so forth. Indeed, Icarus's problem escapes them entirely. Each finds himself at a given technological level, but all are ignorant of how to pass from that level to a higher one. Ironically, at the very moment that Icarus thinks that he is no longer bound by any constraints, they believe themselves to be shut in by theirs; and, as a result, they do not even imagine the existence of a passage from level to level, and still less its difficulty. Their level of understanding is limited to the utilization of one technology; it does not seek to know whence that technology arises, nor how to pass beyond it to a level still more advanced.

The artist shows us that man has been able to improve his mastery over nature, but, astonishingly, none of the figures represented is depicted at the origin, in the causal act, of this progress. Thus, Icarus, believing that he has no limits, fails in his attempt to fly; the other characters, believing that they cannot transcend their limits, condemn themselves to remain at a fixed level of knowledge.

There is, however, one character of the painting who succeeds brilliantly in passing beyond the frontier, so to speak—but he is not presented at all. It is the scientist Daedalus! It is he who, as Ovid says, "starts to work on unknown arts, to alter nature." And he does it with success, since, unlike his son, he arrives safe on land. As a good scientist, he is con-

vinced that man will develop the technology to fly, and that he will be able to do it without great risk, once he has thoroughly understood all the conditions involved (“if you fly too low, sea spray may damp your wings; and if you fly too high, the heat is scorching”). Thus, the central character of the painting seems to be the very person on whose absence the painter has deliberately decided. But once this absence is noticed, it paradoxically reinforces the presence of Daedalus in the painting.

Icarus—Victim of Daedalus?

Many are those who see in the fall of Icarus a warning against the danger which science represents. They associate themselves with Daedalus at the point at which he begins “cursing his own artistry.” In light of this painting, mustn’t we consider science or technology as the cause of the tragedy? Certainly, Icarus would *perhaps* have lived longer if his father had not made his discovery. Whatever the case, we must recognize that Daedalus bears an important part of the responsibility for the loss of his son. But this responsibility is not to be found where people habitually locate it, that is to say, in his scientific invention. The problem lies elsewhere, and a detail

of the painting shows it to us. Near Icarus, one can see the provocative presence of a bird—a partridge, to be more precise. To what is Bruegel making reference? Let us turn to Ovid once more:

While Daedalus was burying the corpse
of his ill-fated son, a chattering partridge,
lodged in a muddy ditch, caught sight of him.
The bird knew Daedalus at once; he beat
his wings and seemed to chirp maliciously—
a bird that was indeed a novelty,
till then, the only partridge ever seen—
but one who knew how guilty you had been,
O Daedalus, when you connived against him.

That bird had been your sister’s son, a boy
whom she—not knowing what his fate would
be—
confided to your care, that you might teach
your arts to one so young and yet so keen:
a twelve-year-old, alert and shrewd. Indeed,
on noting how a fish’s spine was shaped,
the boy cut out, along a sharpened blade,
a row of teeth, inventing—thus—the saw.
He also was the first to twin a pair
of metal arms joined by the hinge they shared;

The Congress for Cultural Freedom on Bruegel’s *Icarus*

It is noteworthy that one of the most influential (one might almost say, iconic) poems produced by the post-war existentialists of the Congress for Cultural Freedom, W.H. Auden’s heavily anthologized “Musée des Beaux Arts,” pretends to draw its moral from Bruegel’s *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*.

Auden sets out to belittle the cherished values of past ages, by invoking the indifference shown by the common man, to the great acts of courage (hence, often, of suffering) undertaken in striving for the betterment of the human condition, for progress and the good. Hence, the poet instructs us,

... when the aged are reverently,
passionately waiting
For the miraculous birth, there
must always be
Children who did not specially
want it to happen

(that’s the story of Christianity, in case you missed it), or

... even the dreadful martyrdom
must run its course
Anyhow in a corner ...
... and the torturer’s horse
Scratches its innocent behind on
a tree.

(Martyrdom? In other words: It just doesn’t pay to try to change things: it won’t work, and besides, no one will notice. Try telling that to, say, Jeanne d’Arc!)

Then, Auden gets down to Bruegel’s *Icarus*, which, incidentally, is located in the Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts in Brussels, so you see that the poem’s title is punning on the name of the museum, to assert some universal “truth” about the role of art in human society (which explains why the poem opens with reference to the Old Masters).

In Bruegel’s *Icarus* for instance:
how everything turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster ...

And he goes on to catalogue the unseeing indifference of the characters in the painting to the main event,

Something amazing, a boy falling
out of the sky.

In thinking about the cultural degeneration wrought by the likes of Auden’s CCF on the Baby Boomer generation as it was growing up, consider how closely aligned, ironically, are the “Turn on, tune in, drop out” hedonism of the 1960’s and ’70’s, and the murderous “free trade” imperialism that cloaks itself in bloodless bankers’ terms like “privatization” and “globalization.” That irony is a good perspective from which to view the so-called “culture” of today.

—Ken Kronberg

and while the first stood firm—erect and central—
the second, moving arm described a circle.

And Daedalus, in envy, threw him headlong down from Minerva's sacred citadel and—lying—said he'd fallen. But Minerva,* who favors those with ingenuity, caught up the boy before he struck the earth: while he was in midair, the goddess clothed his form with feathers; he became a bird.

It is here that we now hear the enemies of science rejoice. According to some of them, the proof is complete: Daedalus, the very image of the scientist, was an assassin. For others, it is nothing but the reflection of human nature, sharing Bertrand Russell's vision that men are nothing but "bundles of passions and instincts—instincts of power and rivalry." Saying this, they focus exclusively on the part of the painting depicting Icarus and the partridge, and ignore all the rest. This type of selective blindness is, alas, extremely widespread today. One can no longer count the number of people in the West who refuse to see the benefits of science and technology, forgetting even the reason why they have potable water when they turn on the tap, or light when they flick the switch. Their minds are wholly fixed on the danger represented by technological progress, to such a degree that they refuse to see the tragedy created for many millions of people by the absence of technology.

Bruegel did not paint this picture so that we would take the side of Icarus, however, or of Daedalus, or of the farmer—a guessing game in which we must find out who is the "good" guy and who the "bad." Instead, Bruegel shows us the great progress and accomplishments of man, all the while indicating what happens when man refuses to behave like a true human being. For the instincts of power and rivalry are in no way human—they are the instincts of the beasts. Thus, it is not necessary to "curse" science or technology; rather, we should curse all behavior determined by the most bestial instincts. As the great atomic scientist Lise Meitner said, "If technological progress weighs on mankind by way of complicated problems, let us not accuse some 'diabolical spirit' of science itself, but let us admit the fact that we other human beings are far from having attained the 'age of reason' pursued by the ancient Greeks."

If we do not want to share the same fate as Daedalus, our lives must indeed be guided by reason. It is not a matter of "practical reason"—that



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"Those who see in Bruegel's picture a condemnation of science, focus exclusively on the part of the painting depicting Icarus and the partridge, and ignore all the rest."

which can assure our individual survival, our power, and our reputation; nor is it a matter of "pure reason," which flatters our ego, so comfortably installed in an ivory tower. We mean to speak of a reason that is *inseparable* from the sentiment which the Greeks called *agapē*—that is to say, where action is guided by an emotion of love and fraternity towards the human race.

If Daedalus had had *agapē*, if he had behaved like a true human being, he would have felt a moment of ineffable joy in seeing his nephew invent the saw and the compass, as well as imagining all the potential that lay concealed within the boy. With the murder of his nephew, Daedalus made sure that that would never be revealed. But, someone who does not reflect this *agapē*—is he really capable of making himself respected by his child? Is he worthy to represent any authority for future generations? Even the exclusive love that Daedalus bore Icarus was not enough to make his son *really* listen to him.

We are capable of finding practical solutions to present problems, but if we scorn people, do we not condemn the future? And further: Are we sure that we are today doing everything within our power, so that the human race may approach the "age of reason," and so that our children will truly hear us, before they take their flight?

—Philippe Messer,
translated from the French
by Molly Kronberg

* Roman (Latin) name for the Greek goddess Athena.—Ed.