

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