



# CRITICISM

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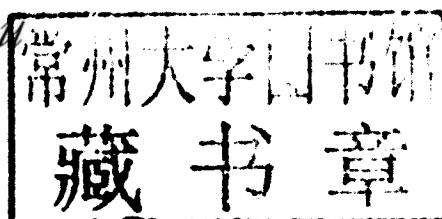
161

# Poetry Criticism

*Excerpts from Criticism of the Works  
of the Most Significant and Widely  
Studied Poets of World Literature*

## Volume 161

*Lawrence J. Trudeau*  
Editor



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## Preface

**P**oetry Criticism (PC) presents significant criticism of the world's greatest poets and provides supplementary biographical and bibliographical material to guide the interested reader to a greater understanding of the genre and its creators. This series was developed in response to suggestions from librarians serving high school, college, and public library patrons, who had noted a considerable number of requests for critical material on poems and poets. Although major poets and literary movements are covered in such Gale Literary Criticism series as *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (CLC), *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (TCLC), *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism* (NCLC), *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800* (LC), and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism* (CMLC), librarians perceived the need for a series devoted solely to poets and poetry.

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author and the critical debates surrounding his or her work.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The first section comprises poetry collections and book-length poems. The second section gives information on other major works by the author. In the case of authors who do not write in English, an English translation of the title is provided as an aid to the reader; the translation is either a published translated title or a free translation provided by the compiler of the entry. In the case of such authors whose works have been translated into English, the **Principal English Translations** focuses primarily on twentieth-century translations, selecting those works most commonly considered the best by critics.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. All individual titles of poems and poetry collections by the author featured in the entry are



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- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Citations conform to recommendations set forth in the Modern Language Association of America's *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 7th ed. (2009).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** describing each piece.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

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Glen, Heather. "Blake's Criticism of Moral Thinking in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*." *Interpreting Blake*. Ed. Michael Phillips. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1978. 32-69. Rpt. in *Poetry Criticism*. Ed. Michelle Lee. Vol. 63. Detroit: Gale, 2005. 34-51. Print.

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# “Musée des Beaux Arts”

W. H. Auden

(Full name Wystan Hugh Auden) English-born American poet, playwright, essayist, critic, librettist, and travel writer.

The following entry provides criticism of Auden’s poem “Musée des Beaux Arts” (1939). For additional information about Auden, see *PC*, Volumes 1 and 92.

## INTRODUCTION

“Musée des Beaux Arts,” by W. H. Auden (1907-1973), is among the best known of his shorter poems. Auden had begun publishing poetry a decade earlier, writing poems influenced by W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot, Sigmund Freud, and Karl Marx. He was deeply interested in ethics and politics, and he wrote the poem in 1938 after a visit to Brussels, the home of the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, not long after returning from a journey in China, where he witnessed the Sino-Japanese war. It was not long before he would leave Europe for America and reconvert to Anglicanism, the faith he abandoned in his youth. He first published the poem as “Palais des Beaux Arts” in 1939 in the journal *New Writing*, and changed the name to “Musée des Beaux Arts” when it appeared in his collection *Another Time* (1940). The poem has been imitated and reprised many times.

“Musée des Beaux Arts” is an example of ekphrasis—usually, the rendering of a visual work of art in a verbal medium, a poetic tradition going back at least as far as Homer. Auden specifically mentions the painting *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* by Pieter Bruegel the Elder as the subject of the second section of the poem, though he noted later in an interview that Bruegel’s *Winter Landscape with Skaters and a Bird Trap* and *The Massacre of the Innocents* also inspired the poem. The poem uses these artworks to guide a meditation on the human response to suffering, although, like the images it describes, the poem holds itself and the reader at a distance from any scene of distress.

## SUBJECT AND FORM

The poem’s title establishes a kind of setting for the poem. The title and Auden’s reference to the “Old Masters” in the second line announce that the rest of the imagery in the poem will be taken from paintings seen at the Belgian Musée. The first line also informs readers that the poem will be about suffering, immediately juxtaposing the beauty

and refinement of an art gallery with the reality of human pain.

The images in the first stanza only suggest suffering in an oblique manner. The speaker catalogs a variety of details from multiple paintings by Bruegel: quotidian actions such as a person eating or opening a window are juxtaposed with the suggestion that children ice skating may fall through a hole in the ice, and the presence of a torturer is implied by the presence of his horse scratching itself on a tree. The poem indicates that the world continues on its way, unconcerned, even at moments of tremendous importance, pain, or evil.

In the second stanza, the speaker turns his attention to *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, the only painting specifically named in the poem. Bruegel’s painting depicts the plunge into the sea of the mythical figure Icarus, who flew too close to the sun and melted his wings made of feathers and wax. As Icarus falls into the water—seen in both the painting and the poem only as a pair of legs sliding into the sea—he is barely noted by the other figures in the landscape. The plowman who inhabits the foreground of the painting “may / Have heard the splash,” but if he did, he seems not to care. The sun itself shines on the event only because it has to. A ship sailing past sees the fall, and the speaker even acknowledges that the sight is “Something amazing,” but it stays on course to reach its destination. The calm sailing of the ship on its way out of view mirrors the action of the speaker and reader at the close of the poem, taking brief note of the momentous tragedy and then leaving it behind.

Formally, the poem resembles a sonnet in its length and combination of quatrains and a tercet, but it is not a sonnet. It begins with three very similar lines, each with ten syllables and roughly four poetic feet, but in the fourth line, that regularity unravels. As the speaker describes the scene of an unknowing bystander “just walking dully along,” the fourth line more than doubles in length. Yet the end of the fourth line rhymes with the end of the first, containing the wayward rambling and reestablishing some sense of poetic harmony. From that point onward, the poem is irregular in line lengths and meter, but the use of end rhymes provides a structure.

## MAJOR THEMES

“Musée des Beaux Arts” announces itself as a poem about two things: suffering and art. The suffering appears in the

poem only indirectly, by reference to the everyday events that happen alongside it. In the first stanza, there is a “miraculous birth” about to happen, often interpreted as the birth of Christ, and “dreadful martyrdom,” a scene thought by many readers to be based on Bruegel’s rendition in *The Massacre of the Innocents* of the New Testament king Herod’s decree commanding the murder of all children under two. We know there is torture happening, but only because “the torturer’s horse” is present. In consequence, the suffering presented in the first stanza is abstract and far removed from the reader. In the second stanza, focused on Icarus, the poem illustrates suffering with more specific detail: the narrator refers to the cry of the falling boy and the sight of his legs just above the water that might have been heard and seen by the plowman. Yet the fragmented description, while seeming to bring the observer closer to the victim, continues to keep suffering in the realm of the ordinary, simply another element in the landscape.

The imagery in the poem focuses on the onlookers of suffering and raises questions about the moral implications of their spectatorship. The bystanders of tragedy in the first stanza are indifferent and barely aware: the person walking and the children skating likely do not know about the consequential events happening nearby. In the case of Icarus, the onlookers seem more culpable. The plowman, however, simply seems to have decided that the scream and the splash are not important—though it is uncertain whether they are unimportant because they are everyday sounds or because the plowman does not care about the death of a child. The ship, however, “must have seen / Something amazing” as the boy fell, but it “Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.” These responses would appear to be an indictment of human indifference to tragedy, but for the inclusion of the sun among the spectators. The sun shines “As it had to,” perhaps just as the plowman must labor in keeping with the seasons, and the ship is pulled along by the winds and its objective.

The poem does not make a clear ethical judgment and instead allows an ambiguity that is underscored by the many perspectives voiced in the poem and the distance among them. Readers cannot assume that the narrator speaks with the voice of Auden, the poet. The narrator purports to speak for the Old Masters, as if he were rendering their visual ideas into words, but readers must rely on his accuracy in both descriptions and interpretations. The paintings portray suffering in the midst of human life, but they do so through the specific rendering of the artist. In the case of *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, Bruegel has significantly reinterpreted the myth of Icarus: in the version handed down by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses* (AD 8), the onlookers are attentive and even awestruck by the falling boy. If readers detect a cold, even inhuman detachment in the poem, where, or with whom, does the fault lie? Is it a fault when the suffering portrayed in art—either in the background, as in Bruegel’s painting, or as its primary subject—becomes merely a subject for intellectu-

al musings? Raising these questions without providing an answer, the poem permits even the viewers of art to identify with the plowman, as they pass on to the next painting in the Musée, or turn the page.

## CRITICAL RECEPTION

One of the central topics in scholarly discussions of “Musée des Beaux Arts” is Auden’s use of his sources, both visual and verbal. Although Auden makes clear that he is referring to a specific Bruegel painting in his second stanza, the first stanza is less direct, and the reference to a plural Old Masters at least raises the possibility that Auden was thinking of more than one artist as he wrote. Max Bluestone (1961) added Bruegel’s *Adoration of the Magi* and *Road to Calvary* as other possible sources, both of which would underscore the Christian elements of the poem. Arthur F. Kinney (1963) noted that many of Bruegel’s paintings with Christian themes would have been hung with *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* in the Brussels museum. However, Nathan Cervo (1983) rejected Bluestone’s interpretation, instead putting forward as inspirations *The Return of the Hunters*, another painting by Bruegel, as well as works by Auden’s contemporaries, such as Pieter Aertsen’s painting *The Meat Stall* and Joris-Karl Huysmans’s biography *St. Lydwine of Schiedam* (1901). Essays by Joyce D. Rosa and Jeanne K. Welcher (1986) and Michael Riffaterre (1986) also considered Auden’s use of Ovid as a source, while Peter Edgerly Firchow (2002) proposed William Shakespeare, Charles Baudelaire, and Aldous Huxley as potential influences.

Critics have disagreed about the poem’s perspective on suffering. Robert F. Willson, Jr., (1976) considered the narrator’s cold, almost clinical tone pompous, as if it were a caricature of an art critic or museum guide. However, Willson and Peter Verdonk (1987) each argued that the narrator must be interpreted as a persona, rather than as representative either of Auden or even of the poem itself. Maurice Charney (1960) suggested that poem’s use of irony creates a humorous tone, though Bluestone strongly objected to Charney’s reading, contending that the allusions to Bruegel’s paintings—as well as their resonance with contemporary world politics—render the irony of the poem tragic. Harold Schweizer (1997) and Firchow each emphasized the inevitability of both suffering and indifference in the moral universe of the poem. Firchow maintained that, by the time of writing the poem, Auden had come to see suffering as an unpreventable condition of humanity rather than a political or ethical problem to be solved, while Schweizer observed that the poem appears to recognize the unbridgeable separateness of the victim and the witness.

Modern readers have also considered “Musée des Beaux Arts” an example of the relationship between verbal and visual forms of expression. As Krystyna Mazur (1998; see



Further Reading) remarked, the visual arts have often provided poets with a means for considering both representation and interpretation. Though paintings and poems may portray identical subject matter, each has distinct strengths and constraints. In Mazur's analysis, Auden's poem calls attention to those differences, illustrating, in particular, the moral capacity of verbal language, absent in a painting. The Old Masters can never be "wrong," in this reading, because a strictly visual image does not convey inaptness, she contends. Both Stephen E. Severn (2006) and Jarkko Toikkanen (2012) have analyzed the poem as an example of ekphrasis and its potential as a modern form of art criticism.

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\*Includes "Musée des Beaux Arts," first published in the spring 1939 issue of *New Writing* as "Palais des Beaux Arts."

## CRITICISM

### Maurice Charney (essay date 1960)

SOURCE: Charney, Maurice. "Sir Lewis Namier and Auden's 'Musée des Beaux Arts.'" *Philological Quarterly* 39.4 (1960): 129-31. Print.

[In the following essay, Charney compares Auden's description of Pieter Bruegel the Elder's painting with that of British historian Sir Lewis Namier. Charney suggests that Namier's characterization of the painting as an example of "historical comedy" suggests the ironic humor of Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts" and its theme of interpreting human events with the proper perspective.]

A passage in Sir Lewis Namier's *England in the Age of the American Revolution* (London, 1930) offers a striking parallel to Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts" (in *Another Time*, New York, 1940),<sup>1</sup> and may help us to interpret that poem. The similarity is specifically seen in the allusion to Breughel's *Icarus*. Towards the end of a speculation on historical comedy, Namier writes:

Similarly, in Brueghel's [*sic*] "Fall of Icarus" the true humour of the tragedy is not so much the pair of naked legs sticking out of the water, as the complete unconcern of all the potential onlookers; not even the fisherman who sits on the shore notices what has happened.

(p. 149)

Auden uses Breughel to illustrate his theme that "About suffering they were never wrong, / The Old Masters":

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.

(p. 34)

The parallel here is not one of exact wording but of the use to which Breughel is put. For this purpose, let us look more closely at the context of the passage in Namier. He is writing about the "structure of politics at the accession of George III" in 1760—more particularly, about the conflict between Bute and Newcastle, which provides such fine material "for an exquisite comedy" (p. 147). This type of "historical comedy" demands a searching ironic insight from its author, who "would have to ascertain and recognise the deeper irrelevancies and incoherence of human actions, which are not so much directed by reason, as invested by it *ex post facto* with the appearances of logic and rationality" (p. 147). Thus, historic events only "acquire some sense" if taken in perspective, "at an astronomical distance . . ."; "at close quarters, the actions of men are in no way correlated in weight and value to the results they produce" (p. 148). This line of reasoning leads Namier to his conclusion: "History is made up of juggernauts, revolting to human feeling in their blindness; supremely humorous in their stupidity" (p. 148). The examples from art, one from Goya and one from Breughel, are used to support this conclusion. The Goya, which Namier calls "the highest level of historical humour" (p. 148), is a picture of a military execution of Spanish rebels:

A bundle of feeling, suffering humanity is huddled together in the last stages of agony, despair, or defiance, and facing them stands a row of the most perfectly trained Napoleonic soldiers, with their hats and rifles all cocked at the same angle. One knows that the next moment the rebels will be at peace, inanimate matter, and the firing squad will dissolve into a number of very ordinary, dull human beings.

(pp. 148-149)

The "Similarly" of the next sentence relates Breughel's *Fall of Icarus* to the picture by Goya: both are examples of "historical comedy."

The theme of this long passage from Namier is clearly reflected in Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts," although Auden uses the term "suffering" for what Namier thinks of, more generally, as the workings of history. Both writers set forth an ironic and "practical" view of human events, with emphasis on "the deeper irrelevancies and incoherence of human actions" (Namier, p. 147). Thus, the "torturer's horse / Scratches its innocent behind on a tree," and "even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course" (Auden, p. 34). In this sense of the importunate demands of daily life, Breughel's *Icarus* becomes an example of ironic humor. As Namier puts it, "the true humour of the tragedy . . . [is] the complete unconcern of all the potential onlookers . . ." (p. 149). To the ploughman, "it was not an important failure," and "the expensive delicate ship"

continued "calmly on"; it "Had somewhere to get to" (Auden, p. 34) and could not tarry for mere symbolic or mythological purposes. It is only at the "astronomical distance" (Namier, p. 148) of art that these events are seen in their true perspective.

#### Note

1. First published in *New Writing*, Spring, 1939, as "Palais des Beaux Arts" (Joseph Warren Beach, *The Making of the Auden Canon*, University of Minnesota Press, 1957, p. 287).

#### Max Bluestone (essay date 1961)

SOURCE: Bluestone, Max. "The Iconographic Sources of Auden's 'Musée des Beaux Arts.'" *Modern Language Notes* 76.4 (1961): 331-36. Print.

[In the following essay, Bluestone explains Auden's references to other paintings by Bruegel in the first part of the poem. Bluestone uses this background information to respond to Maurice Charney (see above), arguing that "Musée des Beaux Arts" should not be interpreted as humorous. In contrast, Bluestone emphasizes the tragic tone of the ironic juxtapositions the speaker describes.]

The last eight lines of W. H. Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts" (*Another Time*, New York, 1940, p. 34) derive from a viewing of Bruegel's *The Fall of Icarus*, a painting in the collection of the Brussels Musée Royaux des Beaux Arts:

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 else to get to and sailed calmly on.

These details instance a generalization with which the poem begins: "About suffering they were never wrong / The Old Masters; how well they understood / Its human position" as an experience commonly occurring in the midst of human indifference. Although he thus speaks of "Old Masters" so off-handedly, the fact is that the persona of the poem takes the graphic materials in the first part of the poem from still other paintings by Bruegel. These paintings specify more precisely other examples of suffering, which thus underlie the bitter ironies masked by the laconic voice of the persona, presumably a visitor to the gallery of the *musée*. Conjoining widely separated historical events, those in the paintings, and implicitly those of the late 1930's, Auden's poem thus re-states in a verbal medium the figural view of history imaged in Bruegel's plastic art. A figural view of history assumes that all human events are related and continuous, and Auden has

recently again expressed his dismay before "the atomization of time—the most terrible thing that is happening in the world today" (in a television broadcast of the program *Open End*, WGBH-TV, Channel 2, Boston, 4 August 1960).

Bruegel's interest in the continuity of human events manifests itself in his anachronistic treatment of historical, usually Biblical, events that are infused with the homely realism of the every-day life of the Netherlands in the sixteenth century. His *Road to Calvary*, for example, looks like a country holiday being enacted before a hill topped by a windmill; a gaily-dressed procession winds across a field and into the right background distance, where crowds of people seem to be engaged in field sports. The painting is full of movement and color that obscure in the midst of the procession the Christ bearing his cross. The crowds in the right background prove to be spectators at Calvary. Here is the first part of Auden's poem:

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 especially 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 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: . . .

Bruegel's *The Census at Bethlehem* (also in the Brussels Museum) is specifically relevant to the material in lines 3 and 4. It shows Joseph and Mary making their way through a crowd of Flemings converged upon a make-shift census bureau in a Flemish village square. Mary is mounted on an ass, and Joseph is pointing towards the office, while, in Auden's words, "someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along." In two versions of *The Adoration of the Magi*, Bruegel's, like Auden's, "aged [have been] . . . reverently, passionately waiting / For the miraculous birth" of Christ. The later and more pertinent version (at Winterthur) looks like a winter landscape crowded with Flemish burghers pressing forward through the delicately falling snow towards the stall of an inn; in the right foreground is one of Auden's "Children who did not especially want it to happen," not, as in the poem, "skating on a pond at the edge of the wood" but sliding on the ice in a circular sled; someone is hauling water just dipped from a hole in the ice, oblivious to the momentous event taking place a step away. Many of the indifferent children appear in *The Census at Bethlehem*. Donning his skates with his back to Mary and Joseph, one child sits at the edge of a frozen pond; other children are whipping tops, skating, and pulling and riding sleds in both the

right foreground and left background. Auden's phrase "the dreadful martyrdom" glances at the Christ story, but it refers specifically to Bruegel's *The Massacre of the Innocents* (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna). There the martyrdom "runs its course" in what at first seems a pretty scene of Flemish winter revelry in a village square full of gaily gesticulating figures. They are painted in bright chromatic colors that contrast strongly with the white snow and with a group of grey, armored, and mounted soldiers in the middle background. On close inspection, the painting reveals its gruesome account of the Herod story in anachronistic terms of a sixteenth-century Spanish persecution of the Flemings. "Anyhow," as Auden's poem reads, "in a corner, some untidy spot / ... dogs go on with their doggy life." One of the dogs in the painting leaps playfully along beside a mother clutching a child to her bosom. She is being pursued by a Spanish soldier with sword in hand, and all three—mother, dog, and soldier—are racing towards the edge of the painting, the corner of the left foreground. "The torturer's horse" of the poem is not scratching "its innocent behind on a tree," but several horses, riderless presumably because their masters are busily slaughtering the townspeople, are tethered to trees near the main force of soldiers, who are stolidly, indifferently, blocking escape and observing the carnage. Indifferent horses and dogs dot the landscape of *The Road to Calvary* also.<sup>1</sup>

The relevance of these paintings to a correct interpretation of the poem becomes quite clear if a reading is attempted without knowledge of them. Remarking the indifference to suffering in the poem alone, Mr. Maurice Charney has recently noted that "in this sense of the importunate demands of daily life, Breughel's *Icarus* becomes an example of ironic humor" ("Sir Lewis Namier and Auden's 'Musée des Beaux Arts,'" *PQ*, xxxix [1960], 131). The pathway to this view of the poem as humorous begins with the reductive assumption that Auden's source is Namier's *England in the Age of the American Revolution* (London, 1930, pp. 147-149). Namier is quoted as seeing history "made up of juggernauts, revolting to human feeling in their blindness, supremely humorous in their stupidity" (p. 148); history can therefore be rightly understood only at "an astronomical distance" from the events. "Historical comedy" derives from "a searching insight" into "the deeper irrelevancies and incoherence of human actions, which are not so much directed by reason as invested by it *ex post facto* with the appearance of logic and rationality" (p. 147). Coincidentally Namier illustrates these views by citing Bruegel's *Icarus* as an item of historical comedy, and Mr. Charney alertly detects the similarity between Namier and Auden. But Auden's book *Another Time* is full of a witty awareness of complex time, and even if he had sometime or other seen Namier's work, he seems not to have found it necessary to go to school to Namier for a figural view of history and of its ironies, both comic and tragic. Thus "Spain 1937" (*Another Time*, p. 89) is structured

almost entirely by the ironic conjunction of past and present. "Brussels in Winter" speaks of "a look [that] contains the history of man" (p. 17). "Poem XV" ("The hour glass whispers to the lion's paw") mentions the "many errors that Time has patience for" (p. 23). "In Memory of Sigmund Freud" explores the extension of indifference into hatred by reporting the contemporary view of Freud as a Judas (p. 105). A major theme of "September 1, 1939" is contemporary indifference to suffering; the persona in his dive on Fifty-second Street sees "Faces along the bar / Cling to their average day: / The lights must never go out, / The music must always play" (p. 99). He asserts the need to "suffer all over again" all of history's pain and grief and mismanagement (p. 99). And echoing the reflections on Bruegel's *Icarus* in a different key is "Poem XXX" ("For us like any other fugitive"): "No one has yet believed or liked a lie, / Another time has other lives to live," that is, in the midst of man's inhumanity to man.

Like all these poems, "Musée des Beaux Arts" alludes obliquely to the historical agony of mankind as it was working itself out in the 1930's, a period from which Auden was at no astronomical distance. His poem is ironic but not humorous. It is witty, and its wit lies in the conjunction of events separate in time but similar in quality as instances of martyrdom and suffering. It thus becomes deadly serious, a lasting and powerful example of tragic irony skillfully strung on the deceptive tensions of a lyric poem. Once the Christian paintings of Bruegel are made to supply a suitable context for the *Icarus*, "the forsaken cry" of "the boy falling out of the sky" changes the tone of the poem significantly. We remember that Icarus' "failure," his "splash," begins itself in a story of murder. Dedalus' jealous slaying of Perdix made a refugee of the fabled artificer. Icarus, we might say, is martyred to his own father's anger. Although the partridge in Ovid's account sings a joyful note as Dedalus is burying his son, to Ovid Dedalus is "pater infelix" (*Metamorphoses*, VI. 46). Bruegel, as one art critic has put it, may indeed have been thumbing his nose at Mediterranean art and classical mythology (Thomas Craven, *A Treasury of Art Masterpieces: From the Renaissance to the Present Day*, New York, 1939, p. 222), but Auden's poem belongs to the realm of *saeva indignatio*, masked though it may be in the purposeful indifference of the persona's calm voice.

In the Bruegel paintings, the anachronism and the unemphatic treatment of the events seem clearly suggestive of the theme of Auden's poem. Mr. Charney concludes rightly, if too broadly, that by Auden's lights human indifference to suffering brooks no tarrying "for mere symbolic or mythological purposes" (p. 131). The indifference theme in the poem arises not from some general myth or symbol but from the Christ story, which is then refracted to shed light on the everyday events of Auden's war-torn world of the 1930's. Bruegel's painting of "the dreadful martyrdom" is not comic at all. Through the Herod materials it lays bare the brutal meaning of the Spanish Occupation. It