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‘Amazing’, ‘Forsaken’: Allusive Meanings in Auden’s ‘Musée des Beaux Arts’

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[This essay combines revisions of two articles entitled ‘Auden’s “Musee des Beaux Arts”’ in *The Explicator* 49:3 (Spring 1991), 181-3; and 56:3 (Spring 1998), 149-50. Of the first of these the Auden scholar Monroe K. Spears wrote, its ‘interpretation of the Auden ‘Musee’ is the best I’ve seen.’*]

Of the three principal categories of imagination—realism, romance, and myth—Auden’s ‘Musée des Beaux Arts’ seems well within the category of realism. The ‘miraculous birth’ of Christ is the dominant event associated with the first instance of suffering. It is mythic but peripheral to the nonmythic elements of its scriptural narrative context, which are mentioned as the subjects of paintings. The fall of Icarus is essentially romance, but it too is referred to as the subject of a painting.† Being the content of art tames meaning, reducing meaning to themes, which are existentially safe. But we shall see allusions breaking free of this safety, giving the poem archetypal dimensions that transform our perception of the movement, unity, and meaning of the poem. This turns the poem inside out, so that instead of art containing and taming primary reality, that reality in all its rawness contains art and far surpasses it in importance. This reversal begins in a disparity that begs interpretation: the apparent lack of thematic relationship between the birth of Christ and the fall of Icarus.

The rhetorical point of the poem is that the ‘human position’ of suffering, is forsakenness. Such is the case for everyone who suffers. ‘The aged’ feel their mortality in physical decline and are old enough to suffer existential unease and a sense of metaphysical poverty. And so they passionately await the birth of the Redeemer while indifferent children play. The ‘dreadful martyrdom’ of children likewise goes unnoticed—by the dogs and horse who represent ‘innocent’ animal nature, morally innocent but also ignorant. The adjective ‘innocent’ implies a correspondence between animals and the children, who are the Innocents massacred shortly after the birth for which the elders are waiting.

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* Letter to author, August 20, 1991.

† Although it is a Greek myth, the story is not mythic because Icarus is a type rather than an archetype and because his flight and its undoing are unrealistic, the story is romance, which is the genre of most folk tales.

In the final example of suffering, the poem shifts from anonymous plurality ('the aged', 'children') to an individual who now has a name. Recalling the animals of the previous painting, the sun that has melted the wax of the boy's wings in Bruegel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* 'shone / As it had to', with the indifference of natural unconsciousness and necessity. The plowman in the picture may have heard Icarus's cry, but he is indifferent to it, caring only for what affects him personally, such as the 'important failure' of crops. Traditionally symbolic of society, the ship 'must have seen him fall but 'sailed calmly on'. Like the old people and the children-being-massacred, Icarus is alone in his suffering, but his isolation, unlike theirs, is owing largely to the egoism and moral callousness of others.

As the poem moves from plurality to singularity of sufferers and from more- to less-innocent apathy about the suffering of others, it also moves from vagueness to specificity of pictorial reference. 'The aged' who wait in the first painting are probably Simeon and Anna of chapter two of Luke's gospel, yet the precise painting cannot be identified. [*] The second picture resembles Bruegel's *The Massacre of the Innocents* but is not explicitly named. The third painting, along with the person suffering in it, is identified. There is a sense of zeroing in, of achieving focus.

As the pictorial references become more specific, the poem becomes more painterly. Icarus's legs are 'white'. The water is 'green'. The 'expensive' ship is 'delicate'. These details de-emphasize the death by distracting from it—as in the painting, where the plowman and the large fancy ship in the foreground distract attention from the central, though distant, tiny legs and splash of Icarus.

Suffering always has less impact in art than in life. The fate of Lear or Gloucester is terrible, but the terror is diminished by an aesthetic transformation that gives pleasure. In addition to the 'human position' of suffering, therefore, the poem expresses the aesthetic position of suffering as unreal. In this poem, moreover, suffering is twice removed from life inasmuch as it occurs as the subject of paintings that are, in turn, the content of poetry. Here and now for the

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[*] Max Bluesone wrongly interprets 'the aged … passionately waiting' as a reference to Bruegel's *The Adoration of the Magi.* The Magi travel. They do not 'passionately wait', and no children skate in Bruegel's painting. 'The Iconographic Sources of Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts,"' *Modern Language Notes* 76 (1961)m 332-3,'

reader, this double displacement serves as an analogue to indifference to actual suffering. Aesthetic apathy is expressed in the nonchalance of the speaker's tone.

But the tone seems also to evoke emotional and moral apathy and is therefore disturbing. The reason for this is that the language of the poem reverses, to some degree, the displacement of suffering in pictorial art by referring to the suffering depicted and not merely to the depiction of suffering. Because the poetic imagination verbally brings the paintings to life, the reader, although regarding instances of suffering as the content of art, perceives it also as suffering *per se.* (Though this is in poetry and therefore still within art—aesthesis continues to supply anesthetic.) So in imagination the reader is invited to discover whether he or she can regard apathy toward real suffering with the indifference conveyed by the speaker's tone. Principally this partial breaking through the anesthesia of aesthetics involves two powerfully allusive words: 'amazing' and 'forsaken', which other commentators have not seen as significant.

'A boy falling out of the sky' is 'something amazing'. This word, 'amazing', cannot but evoke the Cretan labyrinth of Minos. It was first noticed as such by Kenneth Mason, Jr., who saw the word merely as recalling the place from which Icarus has flown.[*] But 'amazing' also implies a relationship between that place, the Cretan maze of Minos, and the physical universe, in which Icarus dies. His fall is 'amazing' because the universe is, in this sense a circle maze or labyrinth like that of the Minotaur, from which there is no escape for anyone. In Crete, the centre of the maze is the Minotaur. In the universe—or at least in our microcosm of the universe, the solar system—the centre is the sun, which melts the wax that kept his wings intact. His flight has its analogue earlier in the poem in the 'Children … skating / On a pond' (lines 7-8). Like his flight, skating is liberating motion that has as its enemy the melting heat of the sun. Perhaps mortality is the true Minotaur. No one is exempt, even Jesus, for whose birth 'the aged' home (5) and for which the Innocents are martyred (10). Icarus flees the maze at Crete to die in the larger maze that ultimately kills every father's son.

When made the content of art, suffering ceases being 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, at displaces suffering and generates apathy. This effect has its symbol in the flight of

[*] 'Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts," *Explicator* 48 (1990), 284.

Icarus, which tries to do in time what art does psychologically. The wings Daedalus made for himself and his son both postpone the inevitable and, for Icarus, inadvertently help bring it to pass. So it is with aesthetics. As antidotes to suffering and death, art and the art of Daedalus are limited in effect by anesthetizing us to the suffering of others but not our own. And our own is made present to us by the displacement of the maze from Crete to the entire cosmos.

The other allusive word is 'forsaken', the most powerfully haunting word in the poem, emotionally so highly charged, like 'forlorn' in Keats's 'Nightingale' ode. Moreover, it encapsulates the principal theme. In doing this the word has allusive resonance that must register with most readers, even if not consciously. The word 'forsaken' echoes Jesus's last words: 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me' (Mathew 27:46; Mark 15:34). Like Icarus's 'forsaken cry', which is directed to his father—*patriam clamantia nomen* (Ovid, *Metamorphosis*7, 229)—the cry of Christ is addressed to his Father. Because Jesus is repeating the beginning of Psalm 22, he is praying, but his words have nevertheless been regarded as expressing the anguish of forsakenness. By itself the resonance of a single word would not enable the death of Icarus to evoke the death of Jesus. But the first paintings referred to in the poem are set immediately prior to and after the birth of Jesus. And itself a conventional subject of paintings, the Nativity tends to evoke the Crucifixion because birth and death are linked by association and because Christmas finds liturgical completion in Good Friday.[*] The association might occur to anyone but especially to Auden writing in the year of his religious conversion. And it is an association in which the verbal echo of 'forsaken' is amplified.

The echoing of the last words of Jesus in the dying cry of Icarus emphasizes the mortality that Icarus and Christ have in common, as do all who live and die in the maze of physicality. But although it is historical, the death of Christ (as prelude to his resurrection) is also mythic because he is divine as well as human. Myth is psychologically deeper (i.e., emotionally more strongly felt) than romance, which is deeper than realism. And so, in a way anticipated by the opening

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[*] For this reason and because the poem refers to the 'martyrdom' of the Innocents, Richard Jonson writes, 'The events referred to in the first stanza of the poem—the Christ story—are not as peripheral as the poem's offhand manner might imply. Auden insinuates the continuity not only of events in general but specifically of the events of the birth and martyrdom of Christ. The suggestion is made so deftly that one wants not to overstate the case.' *Man's Place* (Ithaca and London: Cornell,1973), p. 42. Jonson does not hear the allusion later in the poem that would secure his sense of the evocation of Christ's life and death.

evocations of the Nativity, all human suffering, including that of Icarus, has its archetype in the suffering of Jesus. Implicit in his suffering is the metaphysical antidote to the apathy that accounts for so much of the forsakenness of suffering. The theological paradox has its psychological counterpart in a possible effect of the poem—for the expression of the moral and psychological isolation of those who suffer, which has its metaphor in aesthetic apathy, may generate in the reader a compassion that can mitigate that forsakenness.