

About Bruegel They Were Never Wrong
Seminar 3 – T. J. Clark

[Bruegel's paintings have been the subject of many poems. We might want to ask why. I have selected two groups of 3 poems derived from a particular Bruegel painting – **Landscape with the Fall of Icarus** and **Hunters in the Snow** – and three more poems, by Auden, Williams (on **Haymaking**, but I think also with **The Corn Harvest** in mind) and Szymborska. Questions that have come up in the first two seminars – about how best to make a picture appear in words, about how much or how little to spell out of a picture's meaning (if we think it has one), about how (or whether) the poem should attempt to evoke the painting's *look* – will recur. And questions about which of the poems succeed as poetry, and whether success depends on any of the previous questions.]

Musée des Beaux Arts

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 specially 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 the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

In Brueghel's *Icarus*, for instance: how everything turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the plowman 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.

--W. H. Auden

Landscape with the Fall of Icarus

According to Brueghel
when Icarus fell
it was spring

a farmer was ploughing
his field
the whole pageantry

of the year was
awake tingling
near

the edge of the sea
concerned
with itself

sweating in the sun
that melted
the wings' wax

unsignificantly
off the coast
there was

a splash quite unnoticed
this was
Icarus drowning

--William Carlos Williams

Lines on Brueghel's 'Icarus'

The ploughman ploughs, the fisherman dreams of fish;
Aloft, the sailor, through a world of ropes
Guides tangled meditations, feverish
With memories of girls forsaken, hopes
Of brief reunions, new discoveries,
Past rum consumed, rum promised, rum potential.
Sheep crop the grass, lift up their heads and gaze
Into a sheepish present: the essential,
Illimitable juiciness of things,
Greens, yellows, browns are what they see.
Churlish and slow, the shepherd, hearing wings —
Perhaps an eagle's — gapes uncertainly;

Too late. The worst has happened: lost to man,
The angel, Icarus, for ever failed,
Fallen with melted wings when, near the sun
He scorned the ordering planet, which prevailed
And, jeering, now slinks off, to rise once more.
But he — his damaged purpose drags him down —
Too far from his half-brothers on the shore,
Hardly conceivable, is left to drown.

--Michael Hamburger

Icarus by Mobile

Daddy, Daddy, is that you?
Listen I don't have much time OK.
But I wanted to say, right
It's back to the drawing board Daddy
The whole contraption is a no no.
The wings?
No, the wings worked fine
Couldn't fault the wings in any way
The wings were ace
And your calculations on the stresses
Re wind and feathers
Spot on!
Likewise the pinion tolerances
And remember that flap factor
That gave us such sleepless nights
Let me tell you
Those flaps worked like a dream.
But Daddy
Oh Daddy
How could you forget the sun!
I don't have much time
So listen OK
We're talking equations here
Just let me spell it out for you:
Solar heat + bees wax + ambition =
Total Meltdown and I mean total
Which equals, to put it simply
Your boy Icarus is on collision course
With something called Earth.
Daddy I don't have much time

Let me give the coordinates
For the pick-up
OK stretch of headland and a bay
Visibility good, outlook calm
And hey
Am I lucky
Or am I lucky!
There's a galleon anchored near the shore
Looks like Icarus
Is in for an early pick up this fine morning.
And over there some poor old farmer's
Ploughing through a field of stones
And here's an old boy with a fishing pole and
Listen Daddy
Would you believe
Some guy just out of frame
Is painting the whole thing.
And now I'm waving Daddy, waving
Any minute now they'll look up and
So listen Daddy I don't have much time
I'm going to start screaming soon OK.
Can you still hear me?
I don't have much
Daddy, I just wanted to ask
You know
About my mum
Was she
Listen Daddy
I don't have much time
I

--Gareth Owen

The Hunters in the Snow

The over-all picture is winter
icy mountains
in the background the return

from the hunt it is toward evening
from the left
sturdy hunters lead in

their pack the inn-sign
hanging from a
broken hinge is a stag a crucifix

between his antlers the cold
inn yard is
deserted but for a huge bonfire

the flares wind-driven tended by
women who cluster
about it to the right beyond

the hill is a pattern of skaters
Brueghel the painter
concerned with it all has chosen

a winter-struck bush for his
foreground to
complete the picture . .

--William Carlos Williams

Brueghel's Winter

Jagg'd mountain peaks and skies ice-green
Wall in the wild, cold scene below.
Churches, farms, bare copse, the sea
In freezing quiet of winter show;
Where ink-black shapes on fields in flood
Curling, skating, and sliding go.
To left, a gabled tavern; a blaze;
Peasants; a watching child; and lo,
Muffled, mute--beneath naked trees
In sharp perspective set a-row--
Trudge huntsmen, sinister spears aslant,
Dogs snuffling behind them in the snow;
And arrowlike, lean, athwart the air
Swoops into space a crow.

But flame, nor ice, nor piercing rock,
Nor silence, as of a frozen sea,
Nor that slant inward infinite line
Of signboard, bird, and hill, and tree,
Give more than subtle hint of him
Who squandered here life's mystery.

--Walter de la Mare

Winter Landscape

The three men coming down the winter hill
In brown, with tall poles and a pack of hounds
At heel, through the arrangement of the trees,
Past the five figures at the burning straw,
Returning cold and silent to their town,

Returning to the drifted snow, the rink
Lively with children, to the older men,
The long companions they can never reach,
The blue light, men with ladders, by the church
The sledge and shadow in the twilit street,

Are not aware that in the sandy time
To come, the evil waste of history
Outstretched, they will be seen upon the brow
Of that same hill: when all their company
Will have been irrecoverably lost,

These men, this particular three in brown
Witnessed by birds will keep the scene and say
By their configuration with the trees,
The small bridge, the red houses and the fire,
What place, what time, what morning occasion

Sent them into the wood, a pack of hounds
At heel and the tall poles upon their shoulders,
Thence to return as now we see them and
Ankle-deep in snow down the winter hill
Descend, while three birds watch and the fourth flies.

--John Berryman

Haymaking

The living quality of
the man's mind
stands out

and its covert assertions
for art, art, art!
Painting

that the Renaissance
tried to absorb
but

it remained a wheat field
over which the
wind played

men with scythes tumbling
the wheat in
rows

the gleaners already busy
it was his own –
magpies

the patient horses no one
could take that
from him

--William Carlos Williams

February: The Boy Breughel

The birches stand in their beggar's row:
Each poor tree
Has had its wrists nearly
Torn from the clear sleeves of bone,
These icy trees
Are hanging by their thumbs
Under a sun
That will begin to heal them soon,
Each will climb out
Of its own blue, oval mouth;
The river groans,
Two birds call out from the woods

And a fox crosses through snow
Down a hill; then, he runs,
He has overcome something white
Beside a white bush, he shakes
It twice, and as he turns
For the woods, the blood in the snow

Looks like the red fox,
At a distance, running down the hill:
A white rabbit in his mouth killed
By the fox in snow
Is killed over and over as just
Two colors, now, on a winter hill:

Two colors! Red and white. A barber's bowl!
Two colors like the peppers
In the windows
Of the town below the hill. Smoke comes
From the chimneys. Everything is still.

Ice in the river begins to move,
And a boy in a red shirt who woke
A moment ago
Watches from his window
The street where an ox
Who's broken out of his hut
Stands in the fresh snow
Staring cross-eyed at the boy
Who smiles and looks out
Across the roof to the hill;
And the sun is reaching down
Into the woods

Where the smoky red fox still
Eats his kill. Two colors.
Just two colors!
A sunrise. The snow.

--Norman Dubie

Brueghel's Two Monkeys

This is what I see in my dreams about final exams:
two monkeys, chained to the floor, sit on the windowsill,
the sky behind them flutters,
the sea is taking its bath.

The exam is History of Mankind.
I stammer and hedge.

One monkey stares and listens with mocking disdain,
the other seems to be dreaming away—
but when it's clear I don't know what to say
he prompts me with a gentle
clinking of his chain.

--Wisława Szymborska