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Bridging the Gulf of Isolation in Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts"

In arguing for his conception of writing as a functional art, W. H. Auden identifies the feeling of detachment and isolation among human beings as a critical source of instability within human society, and establishes the task of correcting this instability as a central objective of writing and a basis on which writing may be judged. Writing is produced fundamentally within a spatial and temporal context, Auden argues; writers, therefore, have a profound responsibility to produce works that engage the reader within the writer's particular context. While Auden's poem "Musée des Beaux Arts" looks to classical mythology and Renaissance-era paintings for inspiration, the poem itself remains deeply rooted within a contemporary context (in this case, the poet's visit to a museum in Brussels). Good writing, Auden claims, must "bridge the gulf between one person and another." (*The English Auden*, p. 312) In "Musée des Beaux Arts," Auden not only forms a bridge between himself and the reader, but, within the poem, bridges together the disparate characters of the paintings he studies as well.

The spatial context of Auden's poem is made immediately visible to the reader by the poem's title, "Musée des Beaux Arts," which alludes to a specific museum in Brussels, Belgium, where Breughel's painting is housed. Auden writes, "A book is the product of somebody living in a particular place at a particular time," (p. 311) Although Auden mentions only "Breughel's *Icarus*" ("Musée des Beaux Arts," l. 15) by name, he appears to reference at least two other works created by artists whom he collectively calls "the Old Masters." (l. 2) The first painting

depicts a “miraculous birth,” (l. 7) while the second painting, delineated by the line, “They never forgot,” (l. 10) with “they” functioning as a reference to “the Old Masters,” depicts a “dreadful martyrdom.” (l. 11) By specifying the museum in which these paintings can be found, Auden’s “particular place” becomes concrete and tangible to the reader; the reader could conceivably stroll through the museum with Auden’s poem in hand, studying these three paintings.

Had Auden chosen to veil the name of the museum and the identity of the third painting, the impact of the poem would have been largely the same; however, Auden’s spatial context would have become a secret to the reader. According to Auden, it is a mistake to believe that a poem more broadly applicable in content is necessarily superior in quality: the difference between poetry and prose, Auden writes, is that prose “goes from the general to the particular,” whereas poetry “goes from the particular to the general.” (p. 309) Poetry, by its very nature, should not shy away from details. “The poet uses words with their particular meanings and puts them together to give a general effect,” (p. 309) Auden writes. The reader himself intuitively understands that all writing originates from a person “living in a particular place at a particular time.” By obscuring his time and place in an effort to allow his writing to transcend these boundaries, an author risks distancing himself from the reader, something that Auden warns vigorously against. Writing “fails when we can’t understand or feel with what we read … [because of] obscurity in the writing,” (p. 311) The author must put the contemporary reader’s ability to engage fully with his work above his own desire to one day become “timeless.”

For Auden, the writer’s primary responsibility is to communicate information. “Words are a bridge between a speaker and a listener,” (p. 304) Auden writes, stating his highly utilitarian position on writing. While Auden appreciates the aesthetic qualities of language, he is much more concerned about the content of the writer’s ideas. “Good soil is more important than

good gardening," (p. 310) Auden asserts, using "soil" and "gardening" as metaphors for substance and technique, respectively. Similarly, in "Musée des Beaux Arts," Auden is uninterested in the aesthetic quality of the paintings. "The Old Masters" are revered for their ability to understand "[suffering's] human position." (l. 3) Auden makes no mention of their use of color or brushwork; their technical abilities, in fact, are completely ignored. "About suffering they were never wrong," (l. 1) is the famous opening line of the poem. Auden is commending the content of the artists' ideas; the medium of communication in this case is not words on paper, but paint on canvas.

The writer's ultimate responsibility, however, is to "bridge over the [gulfs]" (p. 303) that are created by radical individualization. Auden is deeply troubled by society's disintegration into parts of a whole, like a "cancer growth in the body," where each part begins to stand, defiantly and insistently, on its own. "The whole cannot exist without the part, nor the part without the whole; and each whole is more than just the sum of its parts; it is a new thing," (p. 303) Auden writes. "Whenever society breaks up into classes, sects, townspeople and peasants, rich and poor, literature suffer…. If it were only a question of writing it wouldn't matter, but it is an index of our health." (p. 312)

In "Musée des Beaux Arts," Auden predictably chooses to highlight paintings that juxtapose dissimilar groups of people. He first isolates those who are "suffering" (l. 1) from those who are "eating or opening a window or just walking dully along." (ll. 4-5) Though their level of engagement with the world increases with each successive action, the latter group is still trapped within themselves and cannot bring themselves to care about the "suffering." Auden then isolates the "aged" (l. 6) from the "children," (l. 7) emphasizing the two groups' dissimilar concerns amidst a "miraculous birth;" (l. 7) presumably, the birth of Christ. Auden goes on to

describe a painting that depicts a "dreadful martyrdom," (l. 11) but curiously chooses to focus on a group of animals instead: "…the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse scratches its innocent behind on a tree." (ll. 13-14) The effect of the juvenile language ("their doggy life," "its innocent behind") on the reader is significant; the reader, like the aforementioned "children," overlooks the "martyrdom" and begins to consider the lines devoted to an arbitrary (and humorously-depicted) group of animals instead.

In the second stanza, Auden shifts the reader's attention to his immediate spatial context by colloquially instructing the reader to examine one final painting: "In Breughel's *Icarus*, for instance." (l. 15) Auden refers to what happens in the painting as a "disaster" (l. 16) and "an important failure," (l. 18) aligning the reader's sympathies with Icarus. Auden then points out how "the ploughman may have heard the splash, the forsaken cry" (ll. 16-17) and how "the delicate ship … must have seen something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky," (ll. 20-21) but both are depicted by Breughel as doing nothing to help. The crisis addressed in the poem is the same as the crisis addressed in the essay: "There is no whole but the self." (p. 303)

Human beings are growing increasingly disconnected and isolated from each other, and bad literature is only a symptom of the problem. Writers must address this crisis by producing relevant works that inspire and elevate their readers, and that help their readers "to live fuller and more satisfactory lives," (p. 311) instead of only serving to further isolate them. With "Musée des Beaux Arts," Auden addresses the problem of societal apathy and human isolation much like Breughel did centuries before him: he painted a (verbal) picture.