

MODERN AMERICAN POETRY

On "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus"



Bruegel, "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus"

Audrey T. Rodgers

"Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" touches upon the Greek myth of the tragedy of Icarus. As we know, according to Ovid and Appolodorus, Icarus, son of Daedalus, took flight from imprisonment wearing the fragile wings his father had fashioned for him. Heedless of his father's warning to keep a middle course over the sea and avoid closeness with the sun, the soaring boy exultantly flew too close to the burning sun, which melted his wings so that Icarus hurtled to the sea and death. The death of Icarus, the poet tells us "According to Brueghel," took place in spring when the year was emerging in all its pageantry. The irony of the death of Icarus, who has always been an emblem for the poet's upward flight that ends in tragedy, is that his death goes unnoticed in the spring--a mere splash in the sea. The fear of all poets--that their

passing will go "quite unnoticed"--is an old and pervasive theme. That Williams reiterates the theme is significant in the life of a poet who always felt the world had never fully recognized his accomplishments.

From *Virgin and Whore: The Image of Women in the Poetry of William Carlos Williams*. Copyright © 1982 by Audrey T. Rodgers.

David W. Cole

William Carlos Williams ends his poem with these lines:

a splash quite unnoticed this was Icarus drowning

He had begun it with an appeal to his authority, Brueghel, before going on to describe *The Fall of Icarus* in detail: the farmer doing his plowing, the awakening of spring, the self absorption of life at the edge of the sea, and the small detail of Icarus's fast disappearing legs. A crucial aspect of Brueghel's painting is its perspective. The landscape and the action are seen from above-- from the viewpoint, in other words, of Daedalus. The force of the picture is thus, I think, to move the viewer not only to recognize the unconcern for catastrophe inherent in the preoccupation of ongoing life, but also to register a horrified protest that it should be so. Perspective allows the painter to make this protest. How is the poet to do it?

In "Musee des Beaux Arts," Auden does not try, contenting himself with rueful recognition of the world's indifference to individual martyrdom. But Williams achieves a more subtle, more faithful, more deeply felt response to the painting by means of carefully controlled imagery, grammar and diction, punctuation (or rather the absence of any punctuation whatsoever), and order. His method is evident first in the title of the poem. We know the painting simply as *The Fall of Icarus*. Williams's revision of the title grammatically subordinates the tragic event to "Landscape," just as the painting subordinates the image of Icarus to all that surrounds him. Yet the last word in the title, emphatic in its position, is "Icarus." The tension between grammatical subordination and rhetorical emphasis is paralleled and amplified in the stanzas that follow.

Williams does not dwell on the images of the poem, showing us even less than Auden does. The matter-of-fact language, the absence of any punctuation (which I take to indicate an absence of expressive inflection), and of course the explicit assertion of the event's insignificance, all work to understate, if not undercut, the pathos of Icarus's

headlong plunge to death. And yet the last words of the poem are "Icarus drowning." The words resonate, and the splash is not quite unnoticed. The reader is forced to take notice, forced paradoxically not only to see but to feel the painful irony of death in the midst of life. Williams's remarkable, forceful understatement brilliantly captures the protest expressed through the perspective of Brueghel's painting.

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