

The Little Bird in the Big Picture: Bruegel's Reading of the Daedalus and Icarus Myth

By R. Faber

Most readers are familiar with the famous myth of Daedalus and Icarus. In this story, of which the fullest ancient source is Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (8.183-235), the father and son seek to end their exile on the island of Crete by flying on wings fashioned from feathers, thread, and wax. Warning Icarus not to fly too high lest the heat of the sun melt the wax, nor too low lest the moisture of the waters be absorbed by the feathers and so bring him down, Daedalus instructs his son to fly at a moderate height. While the take-off is successful, Icarus soon is emboldened to ignore his father's warnings and he aims for a higher altitude. In the heat of the sun the wax that holds the wings together melts, and Icarus plunges to his death in the waters that would bear his name, the Icarian sea. A devastated father must retrieve the corpse and provide it proper burial.

This story, with its themes of the golden mean (*mediocritas aurea*), of the limitations of human endeavour, and of punishment resulting from *hubris*, appealed to numerous artists and writers following Ovid. The most famous representation of the myth in fine art is that by the Flemish painter, Pieter Bruegel (the Elder), who produced "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" (c. 1558). This well-known painting may be viewed at any number of websites, including "Artchive" (<http://www.artchive.com>); the painting is displayed at <http://artchive.com/artchive/B/bruegel/icarus.jpg.html>. Readers may wish to have a careful look before reading further, as we shall focus on a detail in it.

Two 20th century poems were inspired by a viewing of Bruegel's masterpiece. One is W.H. Auden's "MusJe des Beaux Arts" (1938), in which it is suggested that Icarus' fall appears to attract little or no attention: "everything turns away / quite leisurely from the disaster" (14-15). The other is William Carlos Williams' "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus", in which the last lines similarly imply that Icarus' fall went unheeded: "there was a splash quite unnoticed". What these poets have overlooked, or chosen to overlook, is the important detail of the bird, perched on a low branch, watching Icarus fall into the waters of the sea. Another, careful examination of the painting reveals a dusky pigeon-like bird located in a tree immediately below the white legs of Icarus. While it may be true that the proverb "no plough is stopped for the sake of the dying man" is conveyed in Bruegel's painting, it would be inaccurate to state that Icarus' death went unnoticed.

In Ovid's *Metamorphoses* the story of the attempted escape from Crete by Daedalus and Icarus is followed by the account of a less well-known legend, namely the metamorphosis of a boy named "Perdix" into a partridge. We read that while Daedalus was burying the body of his son in a grave, a noisy partridge in a low-growing tree clapped its wings for joy (*Met.* 8.236-240). A reading of Ovid's poem, and of other sources for this myth, reveals that as a young boy Perdix had been entrusted to Daedalus, who was to instruct him in the skills of invention. From observing the back of a fish, Perdix discovered the hand-saw (*Met.* 8. 244-245). Apparently the boy was a quick study,

and he soon surpassed his master in the arts of discovery. In a fit of jealousy Daedalus hurled Perdix from the acropolis of Athens, but the goddess Minerva took pity on the lad and in mid-air transformed him into a partridge, or *perdix* in Latin. This was the bird which observed the flight of Daedalus and Icarus.

It will be clear that Bruegel was aware of the association between these stories in Ovid's poem, and that he incorporated it into his painting. This reading of the poem by the painter draws attention to the theme of just retribution for Daedalus' criminal act that would go unnoticed if the link between the myths were not made. For while Icarus suffers on account of his wilful neglect of Daedalus' warning to fly at a modest level, for Daedalus the death of his son is punishment for his attempted murder of Perdix.

Bruegel's painting shows that while the fisherman seems intent upon his task, and the ploughman busy tilling the soil, the bird takes a keen interest in the fall of Icarus. By including Perdix in his painting, Bruegel enhances the meaning of the saying "no plough is stopped for the sake of the dying man" by adding the element of personal interest of those who are involved directly. The moral of maintaining the golden mean is also enhanced by the image of the partridge, for, following Perdix' harrowing experience on Athens' acropolis, the newly formed bird – Ovid tells us (*Met.* 256-260) – avoids heights and prefers to flit along the ground and to build its nests in low trees. Thus while Auden and Williams may have concentrated on the seeming banality of death in Bruegel's masterpiece, the painter himself was well aware of the significance of Icarus' death for Perdix. In short, a careful reading of the famous story in its context of the *Metamorphoses* lends greater appreciation for the viewing of "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus".

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