

Textuality

W. H. Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts"

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No critical approach can be relevant without being centered on what constitutes the literariness of literature. Analysts must first make sure that the literary work of art under study exhibits features common to all literary phenomena—the universals of literature. Secondly, they must gear their analyses to these universals, using them to put together in logical and interpretable form the accumulation of data known as reader response.

But when they attempt to differentiate between the ordinary day-to-day use of language and its manipulation into a verbal work of art, by simply listing special generic or stylistic features such as tropes and figures, they soon recognize that any device empirically felt to be literary can be found occasionally in common usage and in nonliterary texts. Such devices therefore define literary discourse only, and it remains to be shown what makes sequences of literary discourse into actual works of art. Only one universal of literariness, it seems to me, can provide the answer, namely textuality. By textuality I mean the complex of formal and semantic factors that characterize a self-sufficient, coherent, unified text and legitimize its forms, however aberrant they may be, by removing any hint of the gratuitous. These factors are the idiolect, that is, the special rules of grammar and lexical distribution valid only for the text; closure; and an all-encompassing significance that supersedes the discrete meanings of the successive parts or components of the text.¹ None of these can be defined except by opposition to its homologue in the free-floating universe of potential linguistic expression. Idiolect is inseparable from the sociolect (language not just as grammar and lexicon but as the repository of society's myths and commonplace representation of reality) that it challenges. Closure as a physical fact and as a limitation to the number of possible interpretive strategies the text allows is inseparable from the open-endedness of the verbal associations it puts an end to. And significance is the product of the relation between the text and its intertext. To put it otherwise, significance (the semiotic face of textuality) results from intertextuality.

This much abused term designates the relation that connects the work of art with other works.² It is not to be confused with the link a learned critic may perceive

between a work and its source, nor should the term be used as a synonym for literary influence, or for thematic or generic kinship. Intertextuality is that form of reference experienced when the reader finds that a text presupposes another and that the latter provides the former with the means of interpreting it and of justifying its formal and semantic peculiarities. This is not to say the intertext glosses or paraphrases the text, clarifying and making explicit what may be obscure or implicit in it. Rather the intertext is another text, or a corpus of other texts (or textlike segments of the sociolect), that shares its lexicon and its structures with the one we are reading. This intertext represents a model on which the text builds its own variations. It is a kind of *ad hoc* norm (*ad hoc* in the sense that it is valid only within the bipolar twinning of the two texts, as opposed to a linguistic norm from which a given literary utterance may depart). Consequently a departure from usage may define an instance of literary discourse, whereas a departure from a text defines, and brings to the reader's consciousness, the textuality of a finite verbal sequence, whether or not it is also characterized by traits of literary discourse. To the reader's eye the text's variations on the intertext tend to appear as disconcerting, obscure, unmotivated, or downright ungrammatical because their referents are elsewhere, and they remain so as long as we fail to connect them with their intertextual model. They thus make for the text's originality, its uniqueness, and quite literally (not just in the commonplace sense of the term) for its difference. Even as it is challenged this norm still stands as the referent and as the authority against which the text now makes its claim. The implicit presence of that authority, the frame of that reference, once perceived or actualized by the reader's recognition of them, save the text's idiolectic deviance from any appearance of gratuitousness.

Intertextuality is therefore the reader's awareness of the structural variants—namely, the text's deviant versions of their homologues in the intertext.

Textual deviances from the intertext run the gamut from reversals of the model's meanings (i.e., stating contraries) or its markers (i.e., changing connotations from positive to negative) to mere translations of the model into a different and generally incompatible lexical code or stylistic register (i.e., parody).

At first, readers perceive anomalies or peculiarities in the text—precisely the kind that, more often than not, they alternately frown on as gratuitous or tolerate as “poetic license” (a revealing phrase). In a second step, they make the connection with the intertext's models, the “grammatical” versions of the text's ungrammaticalities. Thus, while intertextuality is an operation of readers' minds, it is an obligatory one: the readers' unavoidable realization that their grasp of what the text means is incomplete and frustrated so long as they do not go through the detour of the intertext. Textuality in short is the fact that a literary piece owes its significance to its complementary or contradictory intertextual homologue.

Significance comes from constant features, when a sense of the formal and semantic consistency compels the reader's attention, although nothing seems to detract from the variety of the details or the multiple meanings suggested in the course of the narrative. This consistency stems from the realization that while the minutiae adds various details and the narrative progresses to new elements, these additions never

theless repeat the same thing. For, whether content or form, they are also variants of an invariant, of a structure that constitutes the poem's overall significance. Now perceived as variants they contribute to textuality by providing this unity or tautology within the changing successivity of narrative and mimesis. The structure that generates them is the matrix of the text,³ from which the variants are derived sequentially, to the very clausula that visibly represents the conclusive apex of the tautological paradigm. So far as empirical observation can tell, the matrix owes its power to a departure, to the shock, scandal, or mere novelty violating a structure well established in the sociolect, such as the shock created when an equivalency is changed into an opposition. As for the derivation itself, its lexical “stuff”—the words that actualize the matricial variants—is supplied by the intertext.

I shall use these concepts for the analysis of the following poem by W. H. Auden:

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;
5 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
10 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 Breughel's *Icarus*, for instance: how everything turns away
15 Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman 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
20 Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

December 1938
(*Collected Poems* 146–47)

The poem's significance is hardly in doubt. It is in fact because the piece makes its point quite directly in the first part (lines 1–13) that I chose it, the better to show what verbal mechanisms are at work here.

The poem is about the true horror of evil, that is, its very banality and ordinariness. As Edward Mendelson puts it, this banality entails, in the poem as it did in the Old Masters, the “inversion of the principle [of classical rhetoric] that the most important subjects require the highest style” (363).

The normalcy of evil is stated directly and indirectly. Its direct expression is in

the first "stanza," which speaks of the world's equanimity toward evil. Evil is taken as a matter of fact, greeted with indifference. The indirect statement of significance is more hidden than obvious in the poem's second part, which describes the painting, in art-criticism fashion.

The poem is built on two intertexts, the painting and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (which is also Breughel's intertext). In the former, intertextuality may seem a straightforward case of ekphrasis. But the perception of a textual constant changes ekphrasis from objective representation to representation in which the emphasis on the genre itself, on the ekphrastic trope, makes it a hypersign⁴ for the poem's significance rather than a representation whose effectiveness only depends on reproducing Breughel so faithfully that the reader surmises what the painter was trying to achieve. Needless to say, even if the ekphrasis were not thus oriented it would not exhaust the painting's text. Auden selects, and underlines by selecting, those elements of the picture that may buttress his own interpretation, his rewrite, of Breughel. As for intertextuality with Ovid, it provides Auden with the textual constant mentioned above.

As I said before, Ovid initially serves as an intertext to Breughel. But Auden bypasses Breughel and makes straight for book 8 of the *Metamorphoses*, in order to underscore the pathos of the event. Merely reporting Icarus's headlong plunge as Breughel paints it could otherwise easily suggest an almost comical demise. The "splash" (16), for instance, may be inferred from Breughel, less so the "forsaken cry" (16). Ovid does echo the child's piteous cry for help, vainly uttered: "Oraque cærulea patrum clamantia nomen / Exciuntur aqua" (8.229; trans. mine). Suppose his father's name when the azure water drowns it' (8.229; trans. mine). Suppose we may credit Auden with enough imagination to think of a death scream by himself. The fact remains that nothing in Breughel would lead to the specific half line "a boy falling out of the sky," for the painting shows only one leg sticking out of the water; no viewer could tell it is a teenager's, and there is nothing in the legend, save that Icarus was Dædalus's son, to make his age worth mentioning. Whereas Ovid insists on the victim's tender years ("teneram prolem" [8.214]) and childish, irresponsible playfulness, details that become relevant if one's subject is the suffering of the innocent.

But the Ovid intertext fulfills a more important function. The representation of indifference among the witnesses of evil owes its impact not to the mere accuracy or expressiveness in the portrayal of these bystanders so callously turning away from the disaster but to an intertextual reversal of a depiction of the opposite of indifference. Indeed, this indifference is not just a question of physical representation, a choice made by Breughel and approved by Auden, a narrative proairesis⁵ from two equally possible attitudes (interest and lack of interest) and two equally possible narrative developments from the given: Icarus's fall. The impact of this indifference is that it cancels out and challenges Ovid's original version of the story, an intertext of rapt attention. In Ovid, Icarus's flight was made into a poetic experience, a *mirabile*, a *thauma*, by the amazement of these same characters. For the characters in Breughel's picture, and in Auden's reproduction, are all of them in Ovid, where

they are gaping, admiring spectators ("vidit et obstipuit" 'he saw and remained dumbfounded' [8.219]) who conclude that Icarus and Daedalus are gods winging skywards. Their gazing faces define the miracle; they are the literary means of pointing to an exemplum. Now their backs, suddenly turned, intertextually define not just a disaster but the reverse of a positive miracle.⁶ They are the sign of its opposite, of a negative exemplum.

The act of the same nonwitnesses, who avert their gaze from Icarus's plight, is made into a symbolic act, therefore a literary structure of the poem, by the fact that the witnesses who had lifted their gaze towards the flight of Icarus are here turned inside out. Just imagine a reverse variant of the Passion, in which the witnesses whose mourning draws the lesson of the Crucifixion in so many paintings were suddenly shown with their backs to the cross.

As for Breughel's initial motive in upsetting the Ovidian cart, it must not be connected directly with an individual pessimism, with a cynical view of the ways of the world. This would not necessarily strike a chord in all viewers. What does is that Breughel's motivation has the authority of the sociolect. It is to be found in yet another intertext. The artist's moral stance expresses itself through the mediation of another sign system. This mediating intertext, the third component in any semiotic operation, is the interpretant⁷ that links the sign and its object and constitutes the interpreter's reaction to perceiving the link. This interpretant is for Breughel the German proverb "No plough is stopped for the sake of a dying man" (Strechow 55; cf. Praz 75 and n. 25). In Auden's case, the other paintings, the ones alluded to in the first thirteen lines of the poem, provide the "indifference" motif and are the interpretant to his verbal rewording of Breughel's subversion of Ovid.

The matrix generating this reversal may be drawn from the very semantic configuration of the word *witness*. If a dictionary definition of a witness is a tautological derivation, someone who saw something and can or must testify about it, then a witness who refuses to see or hear produces a powerful oxymoron, or, in structural terms, a function canceling itself out. The poem does nothing more than translate this oxymoron into visual terms and human shapes.

Thus the unified significance of the text comes into being. Thus the mimesis—detail by detail, character by character, sentence by sentence—is replaced with the constant common to all these details, a constant verified in every sentence. Separately, these are indicators of verisimilitude. Recognized as components of a text, as the cumulative, repetitive variants of one invariant, this factor—their common function, their textuality—transforms their status, valorizes them, makes them into one semiotic system; because of this systematic integration, the mimesis becomes exemplary, and the exemplary becomes symbolic.

That such is indeed the working of the Ovid intertext can be verified by comparing Auden and two other poems for which Breughel is the only intertext. In both instances significance issues from ekphrasis only, objective or "pure," but still selective, still manipulative in its selectiveness.

One objective ekphrasis is William Carlos Williams's "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus":⁸

According to Brueghel
when Icarus fell
it was spring

5 a farmer was ploughing
his field
the whole pageantry

of the year was
awake tingling
near

10 the edge of the sea
concerned
with itself

sweating in the sun
that melted
15 the wings' wax

insignificantly
off the coast
there was

20 a splash quite unnoticed
this was
Icarus drowning

No trace here of the witnesses: the farmer is represented all by himself, as if Brueghel's painting had been empty except for him and the falling man. Furthermore, the sentence does not relate the farmer to Icarus, not even negatively, as would be the case if his attention were said to be elsewhere. Four stanzas isolate him from the fall, and Icarus is not even visible but is introduced as the narrator's explanation for the splash, as a footnote to the tableau rather than as a character in it.

Indifference to the tragedy is expressed by objective ekphrasis, simply by focusing on the landscape, with a lyrical, paeanlike salute to a glorious spring ("the whole pageantry / of the year was / awake"), and by contrasting this luminous glimpse with a dreary repetitious series of abstract prosaic statements of unconcern ("concerned / with itself," "insignificantly," "quite unnoticed"). The witnesses' apathy is erased, displaced by the monotonous voice of the art critic reading the picture.⁹

The second objective ekphrasis is in a prose poem by Philippe Jaccottet:¹⁰

J'ai pensé . . . à ce *Paysage avec la Chute d'Icare*, de Brueghel, où le laboureur est si proche, et le héros presque indiscernable; et j'ai cru voir commencer maintenant une nouvelle ère du regard, où nos travaux quotidiens et nos rêves les plus banals

ne seraient plus, sur l'écran du monde, que vagues de labours, chute d'une larve lumineuse et sillons dans les eaux tombales.

I thought . . . of Brueghel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, in which the ploughman stands so close to us and where the main character can hardly be seen. I thought this was then the beginning of a new way of seeing things, when our daily labors and our boldest dreams alike would appear on the world's screen as no more than the waves of tilled fields, a luminous tear falling, and furrows in the watery grave. (34; trans. mine)

Despite the images at the end, the language and the attitude here are those of an art critic. The gaze itself has become quite conceptual, a way of interpreting a *paysage moralisé* (to parody Auden, parodying didactic landscape poetry)—a setting entirely subservient to the lesson it symbolizes. This lesson depends on the respective sizes of the farmer and of Icarus, the farmer looming large, filling the foreground, Icarus a dot far off center. Finally a kind of descriptive fusion reiterates the message. The tilled furrows that symbolize normal life are used to depict the briny deep where the fall occurred, Icarus's watery grave translated, defused of its drama, by the tillage code into which it is translated ("sillons dans les eaux tombales").¹¹

I shall now discuss Auden's other intertext, the one he shares with Williams and Jaccottet: the relation between his text about life's cruelty and Brueghel's painting. The second part of Auden's poem is different from the first in that, instead of allusions to unnamed works of art ("The Numbering at Bethlehem" and "The Massacre of the Innocents"), instead of allusions that are in fact invisible, for the events described could have been directly drawn from reality, we have an overt description of Brueghel's painting. The poem has shifted from the direct expression of sentiment to a representation of a symbolic representation of sentiment. Auden has moved from an overt form of poetry of the self to a covert form of it, translated as it were into ekphrastic discourse.

But the reader is not immediately aware of this change in the semiotic function of that discourse. The reader's response, the ultimate realization that indeed such a change has taken place, is both delayed and triggered by his perceiving that, besides the fact that it is reoriented by the input from Ovid, this ekphrasis is more than a copy from the original.

To begin with, the title has an aloofness about it that seems to privilege a preoccupation with aesthetics over the pathos that nonetheless remains the poem's obvious center. And then, the specifics—*white* legs, *green* water (18)—seem unrelated to the tragic immediacy of the sketch they complete. In fact, the drowning man undergoes the same objectifying, the same pictorial freezing up, as does William Carlos Williams's wheelbarrow, and through similar tampering with metrical lineation: "a red wheel / barrow . . . beside the white / chickens" (*Spring and All* 21, *Poems* 127). Finally there is the discrepancy between Auden's treatment of the ship as a witness, as a live presence, and his deliberate description of it as a representation of the ship rather than as an actual vessel "expensive delicate" (19): these adjectives suggest more a scale model, a reproduction within its bottle on the mantelpiece,

than a participant in a maritime drama.¹² The reader is first bothered by a gap between two functions, by the fact that the mimesis of a painting and the mimesis of the very drama it depicts do not jibe, and then comes to realize that indifference to suffering is expressed consistently, without harming the poem's unity, through two signifying systems: first, the listing of bystanders united in their refusal to admit that there is anything to see (thus canceling out the most essential semantic feature of the word "martyrdom" (10), an act whereby you bear witness to a truth); second, the ekphrasis that distances the mimesis from the pathos. In other words, the text is generated by the unfolding of two verbal sequences: the indifference sequence that expresses its object plainly and the ekphrastic sequence that expresses it figuratively by making the aesthere's stance entail a denial that suffering should have a special place in the scale of values, or its own scale of ethical values.

The text's clausula confirms that such is indeed the verbal mechanism at work, since the ship sailing by, undererred by a boy's drowning, is the culminating hyperbole, the most exemplary passerby in the indifference sequence (leaving as it were the scene of the accident, an apt image of irresponsibility). And the same ship happens to be the culminating point of the detached aesthetician's sequence. Auden's title was what had, up to now, remained remote. Its validity as a metonymic title was tenuous, consisting in a roundabout way of designating a whole collection in terms so general that they seem irrelevant. The title metonymically designates one picture only from the whole Brussels Royal Collection, a picture whose pictorial, museum-level value has little to do with the significance Auden finds in it, for he uses it as his text, to be sure, but only in the sense that a preacher refers to the text of his sermon. This indirectness or irrelevance that the reader could only interpret as a conceit is now changing in the light of the clausula, the physical, verbal actualization of closure. Seen from the angle of the image that constitutes that clausula, the words "Musée des Beaux Arts" stop referring to a place so designated or to a class among the species of museums. They now function in terms of what the words "Musée" and "Beaux Arts" would have in common if they were just side by side, if instead of being subordinated to each other syntactically so as to form a toponym they were just a fragment of a paradigm of synonyms. For if they were, they would now continue a series beginning with the adjectives that modify "ship" in the final image of the clausula. What "expensive," "delicate," "museum," and "beaux arts" have in common, as we have seen, is that from the viewpoint of representation they are all askew, irrelevant on the plane of factual, discrete bits of information, and that is what now makes them relevant on the higher plane of unified, unified textuality. For as a paradigm, they all refer to a detached aesthetic distance, to a preference for form, to an ideal of beauty, that presupposes elitism and the trappings of social privilege, collecting fine arts, taste, and money lavished on artifacts. They all function as variants of *academism*. They now translate into artistic code the decision to relegate suffering not to a secondary place but to a place in an aesthetic that is not geared toward ethical questions. Art treats evil as one component among others, far from privileging it as morals would; as such, evil is truth and reflects the order of nature.¹³

In technical terms the title now appears to the reader as the prolepsis¹⁴ that anticipated the clausula. Reread in the light of this kinship (the clausula being now the title's analepsis in the process of retroactive, summative, conclusion-drawing reading), the title finalizes the closure and makes the poem a significant self-sufficient system, impervious to the distracting sociolect it has shut out.

The intertextual underpinnings of the poem are thus twofold. The first basic transformation reverses the markers of the Ovidian mimesis, making Ovid's episode (epyllion) stand on its head as it were, forcing it into a representation of the contrary of what it meant in the Latin model. Authority and exemplariness do remain unaltered, however, retaining as they do their power, despite the denotative reversal. The second fundamental transformation modifies the markers of the ekphrasis: instead of symbolizing separately, and each time differently, the precision or realism or interpretive stances entailed by the transfer from one art medium to the other, these markers—now unified as one hypersign—focus on the indifference to pathos and on the detachment from human sympathy that art for art's sake presupposes.

Three points must be emphasized in conclusion. First, the radical nature of semiosis. The transformation we observe in this ekphrasis has the impact of a paradox, for its significance reverses its meaning, without impairing its faithfulness as a description. While for Breughel the landscape belittles Icarus, that the eternal order of things might prevail, Auden's description of the pictorial scheme and figures that achieve this belittling effect, merely spelling out that such is the economy of the painting, magnifies Icarus and the enormity of the notion that suffering should be in the order of things. Pointing to what is hidden in the landscape makes the description of the landscape a pretext to show what it is hiding, a textual periphrasis around the existential core. Auden adheres here to his own poetic principles:

To me Art's subject is the human clay

And landscape but a background to a torso.

("Letter to Lord Byron," pt. 4; *English Auden* 185)

Second point: the agent that controls reader response and ensures the ultimate discovery of the poem's significance is precisely the element in the text that seems to weaken textuality. A baffling discrepancy or apparent lack of unity, a seemingly gratuitous departure from the idiolect's own norms at the very moment the reader becomes conscious of these ad hoc rules—these factors annoy or disturb and keep readers on their toes until they uncover the twist that makes the self-same components the cornerstones of a new sign system. Here Auden's act of injecting the literalness of ekphrasis into a moral allegory appears as an indulgence, the temptation to describe merely for the sake of vying with pictorial art. Such appears to be the case until another reading makes the ekphrastic discourse another variant (in Old Masters code, appropriately) of the world's indifference to suffering. Ekphrasis has hardly fulfilled its surface role as a hyperbole of the mimesis, when its textual function as an agent of semiosis becomes manifest. The whole landscape is now a circuitous, dilatory hule and seek way of pointing to the essential, that is to say, to what jars us in

this panorama of country peace in the autumn, or better, to the one element that is not the landscape: someone's misery. The whole of Breughel and the manipulation of Ovid, which has until now seemed a gratuitous *contrefaits*, are now revealed in their textual function: a vast tortuous periphrasis around the real subject matter. It would be difficult to find a more distracting and therefore exemplary instance of the indirection of meaning, the figurative parti-pris, and the all-pervasive catachresis that characterize literariness.

Third point: textuality as a literary function is a restrictive process that places narrow limitations on the reader's flights of fancy, and more especially on the tendency to use the text as a springboard for open-ended mental associations. This tendency is encouraged by two factors: one, the text's difficulty, or even its obscurity, which impels the reader to grasp at every verbal straw offered by the sociolect that might remotely echo the perplexing verbal sequence. Two, the reader's own culture or linguistic competence, which proffers the straw. That is, every possible meaning that the problem word may have in the dictionary, every possible context that word may have entered in known literary works, will be invoked as an explanation. Which means it will be substituted for the special use of the word in the text. This practice, however, flouts textuality itself by separating the problem word from the textual continuum, whereas this continuum should lead to the significance unique to our poem. This kind of error, the bane of traditional criticism, has affected our text: Richard Johnson, for instance, injects the romantic appropriation of Icarus into Auden, writing "Icarus can be seen as the figure of the aesthete who use[d] his art to try to escape the world of immediacy . . . and ended, pictorially, as a quick stroke of the brush" (41). But textuality does not include the whole dictionary; it manifests itself by eliminating every item but one in the definition and connotations of the name or noun that actualizes the text's matrix (here, Auden's melodramatic focusing on a child's death eliminates the artist symbolism).

Closure expels the sociolect, replaces the commonplaces of language and pre-existent, pertinent (i.e., comparable) texts with the idiolect. The semantic equivalencies that govern rhetorical amplification and indeed any generating of verbal sequences in the sociolect are replaced with new equivalencies that make sense only inasmuch as they presuppose the ones they replace. Closure is thus achieved by an implied reference to what it excludes; this shutting out is realized by creating and integrating into the text the reverse image of what the text is not, by making textuality the other face of intertextuality.

Notes

¹ On the distinction between multiple, successive meanings and one unifying, simultaneously perceived significance, see my *Semiotics*, esp. 11–13, 46, 164–66, and *Text Production*, esp. 43–61, 109–24; cf. de Man, "Hypogram."

² Intertextuality has developed from Bakhtin's dialogism: see Tsvetan Todorov,

Mikhail Bakhtine. For a historical, somewhat biased survey of the evolution of the concept, see Angenot. I have developed a typology of intertextuality in the books quoted in n. 1. See also my "Syllepsis," "La trace," "Intertextualité," and "Interpretation." In the last three, I distinguish between obligatory and aleatory intertextuality. Obligatory intertextuality is necessary to the text's interpretation; even if a reader cannot quite identify the intertext as a literary piece, he will still perceive its presence in the text as a system of presuppositions.

³ On textual matrices, see my *Semiotics*, esp. 19–21: a text results from the transformation of the matrix, a minimal and literal sentence, into a longer and nonliteral periphrasis. The text actualizes an equivalence between this minimal given and the periphrasis. The matrix itself modifies a structure that more often than not corresponds to the semic system and to the presuppositions of one word.

⁴ *Hypersign*, a complex formal unit (such as a compound word, a sentence, or a trope that may generate derivations of variants extending to the full text) that despite its complexity carries one global or overall meaning, or one marking.

⁵ *Proaireis*, the choice between possible actions that reveals the inner self of the character in a narrative. At every point of the narrative sequence such a choice must be made, dictating the reader's understanding of the character's motivations and therefore of the lesson, or "message," symbolized by the character. *Proaireis* is an Aristotelian concept (see Aristotle, *Poetics* 6.50.a.9 and 15.54.a.19); on Roland Barthes's application of it to narrative analysis, see his *S/Z* 25.

⁶ Revealingly, Auden omits two characters, the angler and the shepherd, the latter being in fact looking at the sky even in Breughel, and the former standing on the shore from which he cannot help seeing Icarus. His function as the witness who cannot evade the spectacle is transferred to the ship. The reason for this is that the ship lends itself much better than an angler to the ekphrastic stylization I discuss below.

⁷ *Interpretant*, a concept evolved from C. S. Peirce's (a sign stands for an object, conveys its meaning and gives rise to an idea, the interpretant): a mediating text that contains a model of the equivalences, transferrals, or reversals from the intertext to the text (see my *Semiotics* 81–114).

⁸ The second of his *Pictures from Brueghel* (3). Irene Fairley has demonstrated how the "stylistic isomorphism between poem and painting" (that is, ekphrasis alone) is the organizing principle of significance in this text (68).

⁹ Cf. Caws, "Double Reading," esp. 325–26. Caws admirably emphasizes the importance of a linguistic frame (the series of present participles, from the initial recounting impulse to the hero's fall), which stresses its own reading: the reader, by reading, replays or rewrites the downgrading of the heroic attempt, the "human failure at transcendence" (326). I cannot agree, however, that "the painting reads like a tale of three gazes: the worker's at the soil, his companion's at the sky, and our own, at Icarus" (326). Our own gaze, certainly, that is quite sufficient to uncover the imbalance between "the whole pageantry" and an individual's "drowning"; this keen remark would be just as apposite in the case of the Jaccottet prose discussed

below. But the other two gazes can be inferred only from Breughel: Williams shows the ploughman not looking away or looking at his tillage but simply tilling it, in other words minding his business. Likewise the shepherd looking at the sky (a traditional attribute of literary and pictorial shepherds, by the way, not just Breughel's) is not mentioned.

¹⁰ The title of the collection, *Paysages avec figures absentes*, seems to be meant as an ad hoc commentary on Auden's slanted reading of Breughel. This impression stems from the very ungrammaticality of "landscapes with absent characters," where logic and grammar (in agreement for once) both demand "landscapes without characters," so long as we understand a genre of landscape painting in which figures are an expected and necessary human component. Jaccottet wishes to suggest that certain natural landscapes, especially those fraught with traces of human history, speak for themselves. Whatever interpretation they demand and whatever emotion they elicit are experienced without the help of the mythological figures Renaissance painters found necessary to justify and complete their landscapes. They found they needed such figures "in order to express more explicitly what in fact was quite well expressed by certain light effects" (34). Further proof of the intertextual inversion is that Jaccottet, in the same breath in which he states that these figures were not really necessary, describes them as the key to the pictures, symbolizing as they do the appeal of the landscape ("they were like the eternal symbols of Desire" [33]).

¹¹ The interpretant here is the commonplace that represents the waves of the sea as the furrows of a field and vice versa (see Rimbaud's "Marine," in *Illuminations*).

¹² For a similar transformation of a mimesis of nature into ekphrasis see again Jaccottet: "sur la rive opposée, délimités avec précision par des files de peupliers, il y avait des prés, très verts, . . . et dans ces prés des chevaux, des chars, des faneurs; chaque élément de cette scène aussi net que si l'on avait eu sous les yeux une miniature de Livre d'heures représentant la Fenaïson" "On the opposite shore, there were meadows precisely delimited by ranks of poplars, deep green meadows, . . . and in these there were horses, carts, and haymakers; each element of the spectacle was as clearly delineated as if you had been looking at a Book of Hours picture depicting Haymaking" (127; my trans.). Precise, visual details, exemplary colors, and natural geometry—in short, features meant to represent reality—end up suggesting an artifact and become the picture of a picture of reality.

¹³ This interpretation may seem close to Mary Ann Caws's: "the disaster is not, we are told, really very important, if we compare it with the aesthetic stress of the picture: ship and sea in their splendor, dwarfing the human fate" ("Double Reading" 327–28). That stress is ultimately redeeming in her view, because of the continuity it suggests, "the way the universal may triumph over individual failure, simply by continuing past each human disaster" (a view bolstered by the final "on" of the poem). We differ, however, on a crucial point. Caws finds her reading on the semantic content: accordingly the title is locative, the ship displaces the locus from the drowning boy, telling us where to look, and so on. She thus privileges the painting referred to, its sensory visual message being the authority for any interpret-

tive decision. My reading is on the contrary dictated by the formal or stylistic features, or markers common to certain words; these forms privilege a connotation (aesthetic distance, or rather aestheticism). The title therefore is locative as meaning, but "moral" as significance. Moreover it seems to me the referent authorizing an interpretation is the ekphrasis. Its authority displaces that of the painting: Auden's words focus on the disaster by stressing that the intertext pretends to ignore it.

¹⁴ *Prolepsis*, any component of a narrative that either announces a future event or is perceived ex post facto (when this event has taken place) as having been an allusion to its coming or a verbal anticipation of it. *Analepsis* (not to be confused with *epanalepsis*), the point at which this realization takes place, usually thanks to a repetition of or an allusion to the prolepsis. These definitions are narrower, but perhaps more specific, than the ones first proposed by Gérard Genette (*Figures III* 82–83, 111–12).