

There's Something About Bruegel

T. J. Clark on Bruegel, **T. J. Clark**, Thames & Hudson, 2024, pp. 80, £12.99

T. J. Clark on Bruegel – the latest title to appear in Thames & Hudson's handsome Pocket Perspectives series – begins with an unusual picture, 'The closest Bruegel ever came', writes Clark, 'to painting the afterlife'. The picture is a landscape of a hillside and a slice of coastline, a city fading in the distance. Around a central tree trunk – ringed with a tilting, disc-like table – lie three men in a kind of stupour, sprawled on the ground: two appear to be asleep, a knight and a peasant, while a third – apparently a man of letters, lying on a long plush coat – reclines on his back, legs widely splayed, eyes open and unfocused. The painting is Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *Land of Cockaigne* (1567), depicting an environment beyond the world of hardship, scarcity and physical labour, 'A realm of eternal youth and limitless food, drink, and sex,' writes critic J. L. Koerner, 'where roasted birds fly happily to the table and drunkards are kings'. This sense of abundance is clear in the painting, not least via the slumping postures of Bruegel's three amigos, sleeping off their latest session. At the same time, the supernatural qualities of Cockaigne are everywhere to be seen, from the roof covered in pies and pastry to the fence woven from sausages, the strange cactus of loaves of bread, a fat pig brandishing its own knife to be butchered with. Two more figures are present, each suggesting something of Cockaigne's superabundance: a second knight, his mouth agape, waiting for a pigeon (removed by accident during the picture's restoration) to fly directly in, and elsewhere – in the top-right corner – a man clutching a spoon collapsing headfirst from a mass of porridge having eaten his way, triumphantly, from one side to the other.

Clark contextualises Bruegel's painting, exploring the history of Cockaigne as it appears in the literature and folklore of the sixteenth century. 'The Dutch word for the place was Luye-leckerlandt,' he notes, 'the hereafter as imagined by lazybones and gluttons', drawing our attention to

a woodblock print of the German *Schlaraffenland*, an 'alternative world map' from which Bruegel lifts a number of specific details (including the knife-wielding pig). As with the location of the Garden of Eden, several late-medieval manuscripts imply Cockaigne to be a visitable place, 'an actual, if faraway or inaccessible locality', adds Koerner, 'where expected natural, legal, and customary restrictions dramatically do not apply.' Indeed, Bruegel's figures seem to have come here from a recognisable reality, still wearing their everyday clothes; the city in the distance appears to link Cockaigne, topographically at least, to civilization. At the same time, the painting is frequently regarded not only as a fantastical illustration of heaven – a daydream of non-work and effortless plenty – but a proverbial warning against laziness and gluttony, a relative of Bruegel's allegorical series of the Seven Deadly Sins engraved by Pieter van der Heyden.

One of the curiosities of *Cockaigne*, writes Clark, is that 'as with many a proverb, its tone is hard to catch.' On the one hand, the picture seems comic, a parody of heavenliness, an attempt, Clark argues, 'to show us a world [...] that is absurd and wonderful at the same time: unbelievable and irresistible.' On the other hand, there is something dark about the picture, disturbing and a little hellish. Bruegel's two sleepers are out for the count, seeming drugged or even dead. Meanwhile, the man of letters seems far from ecstatic, his glassy eyes communicating something close to fear or paralysis, as though his racing mind were trapped within a sluggish, unresponsive body. However we might long to set foot in Cockaigne, to experience its rest and bounty, the scene Bruegel presents has more than a hint of entrapment about it; as in a fairytale, it's easy to imagine that these figures have been lured here under false pretenses, unknowingly endangered. There's something of the Lotos-Eaters episode of the *Odyssey* here, in which a number of Odysseus's men fall into a narcotic daze after eating from a mysterious plant, 'deep-asleep [...] yet all awake,' writes Tennyson in his retelling of the story. (It's worth noticing the similarity between Bruegel's sleepers and the two unconscious bodies in William Heath Robinson's illustration of the Lotos-Eaters; Robinson's figures seem similarly (concerningly?) incapable, sprawling heavily across the grass.) In the foreground, Bruegel's painting throws up a peculiar hybrid, a cracked egg walking on humanoid legs, dripping a single tear of yolk,

a knife protruding from its body. It's a detail plucked from the freakish not-quite world of Hieronymus Bosch, a disturbing mixture of reality and imagination, grotesque and miraculous; while there are plenty of egg-like forms in Bosch, the upright creature in *Cockaigne* resembles most the reptilian hatchling at the base of *The Last Judgment* (c.1482), appearing in the central panel between Eden and a monstrous hellscape.

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First published in 2018, the text presented here is reproduced from Clark's *Heaven on Earth: Painting and the Life to Come*, in which he considers what certain artists 'have had to say' about the relationship between the material and metaphysical worlds, although 'I am immediately unhappy with [...] the metaphor of 'having to say',' he suggests, which 'goes contrary to one of the book's main arguments. Painting [by definition] does not have anything to say.' As a standalone essay, *Clark on Bruegel* gives us plenty to be getting on with. And yet, the critic's thinking about Bruegel is illuminated by the other painters he describes, particularly Giotto. At the very least, *Joachim's Dream* (c.1303-05) – one of Giotto's frescoes on display in the Arena Chapel, Padua – offers a striking companion to *Land of Cockaigne*. As Clark puts it, 'Giotto's great subject in *Dream* is the co-presence – the disconnection and trying together – of earth and heaven', a 'meeting of opposites', contained within the squared-off space of the painting's dimensions, the composition split between a rocky landscape and Giotto's deep blue, otherworldly sky.

Clark guides us round Giotto's painting, exploring the hard materiality of the rocks, the shepherds' rhyming pairs of feet and the incredible emergence-into-reality of the angel swooping down into the scene, a manifestation of 'the idea that the world we inhabit might open onto another', writes Clark in his introduction, 'interrupted by it, or called to it, or visited by it and [made sense of by] the visitation.' Clark draws our attention to the strikingly modern passage of painting behind the sleeping Joachim, a black square marking the entrance to a makeshift shelter. This indeterminate space seems to anticipate – by a whopping 600 years – Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square* of 1915, part of the Russian

painter's attempts, as he put it, 'to free art from the dead weight of the real world'. Equally, Giotto's black square comes to stand (within the context of the painting's central act of dreaming) for 'inwardness – the space of uncertainty that will turn out to be modernity's great gift', Clark argues, an interiority 'portrayed as essentially impenetrable, empty, [and] abstract'.

Even when depicting 'an alternative reality', as he does in *Cockaigne*, Bruegel proves too rooted in the physical world for his paintings to have anything particularly meaningful 'to say' about abstraction. 'Bruegel is the monarch of down-to-earthness', writes Clark, later quoting from the German art historian, Max Friedländer: 'Bruegel's heaven is an empty place [...] Only the earth, the here and now, was his proper realm.' Indeed, unlike the black square and the angel's glitching entrance in Giotto's fresco, it's interesting to note that Bruegel's version of *Cockaigne*, however fantastical, is fully grounded in reality, betraying the same 'relish for things, details, textures, contours' that we have come to value in his other paintings: 'Look at the airholes in the cheese!' writes Clark, 'Look at the excellent ironwork on the flail. Or the fine silver clamps on the Bible.' 'Bruegel seems to me a materialist,' he concludes, 'perhaps the deepest and most thoroughgoing to have left us a picture of the world'.

This is the same 'thoroughgoing' materiality that has attracted several poets to Bruegel's paintings, including William Carlos Williams. Book V of *Paterson* (1946-58), the poet's epic of America (by way of Paterson, New Jersey), opens with *Adoration of the Kings* (1564). 'I salute / the man Breughel who painted / what he saw', begins Williams, going on to celebrate the work's fidelity to nature: 'He painted / the bustle of the scene, / the unkempt straggling / hair of the old man in the / middle, his sagging lips', and so on. Of course, when it comes to the events of the Nativity, Bruegel has seen no such thing. What Williams appears to mean, however, is that Bruegel's version of the *Adoration* takes place in a familiar world of 'things, details, textures, contours', Northern Europe in the sixteenth century, recognisable and almost real. The same thing captures Williams's imagination in *Pictures from Brueghel* (1962), which opens with a run of poems responding to the artist's paintings. Again, Williams praises 'Brueghel the painter / concerned with it all', 'no detail extraneous // to the composition', every poem crammed with minute

details and observations, as in the hair of the bride in ‘Peasant Wedding’ (1567), ‘loose at her temples’, or the ‘hound under // the table’, so easily missed. There’s a sense in which Williams is emulating Bruegel’s looking and describing, taking lessons from the master, a form of apprenticeship. ‘Brueghel saw it all’, ends ‘Children’s Games’, the final poem in the sequence, ‘and with his grim // humor faithfully / recorded it’. ‘Twentieth century poets have been drawn to the paintings of Brueghel [...] because his art seems to be grounded in the physical realities [...] of the world’, writes Stephen Cheeke in *Writing for Art: The Aesthetics of Ekphrasis* (2008). Bruegel’s materiality ‘corresponds to a modern poetics that is interested in the capacity for writing to represent the solidity of life, the gravity and tangibility of objects, and the thereness of the physical world’. So goes Williams’s poetic edict: *No ideas but in things*.

It is surprising, at first, to find that Williams is absent from Clark’s treatment of Bruegel, not least as *Heaven on Earth* returns, at several points, to the question of visual art’s relationship with poetry. In his chapter on Giotto, discussing Joachim’s enfolding cloak, Clark quotes from Dante’s *Paradiso*, a scene in which the poet, ‘looking for a way to explain why his language has to admit defeat in the face of heaven’s utter strangeness, reaches for a metaphor from painting: ‘Because our speech, not to say our imagination, has no colors / To match folds like these.’ A poet himself, Clark’s interest in the capabilities (or not) of language to respond to works of art remains an ongoing concern. *Heaven on Earth* opens with an epigraph from Ruskin’s *Diaries*, proclaiming ‘the entire superiority of Painting to Literature as a test, expression, and record of human intellect’. ‘I felt assured,’ writes Ruskin, recalling a painting by Veronese, ‘that more of Man [...] went into the making of that picture than of a thousand poems.’ When it comes to representing the complicated pleats and folds of human experience, painting seems to have the upper hand.

Detailed critical discussions of the history of poetry’s relationship with painting are readily available; there isn’t space, in this essay, to wade into the weeds with Horace and the Sister Arts. ‘I shall dispense with the battery of quotations,’ writes Clark on the contested history of *Cockaigne* as an allegory for Gluttony, a move I’m tempted to repeat, other than perhaps to shed some light on *ekphrasis*, ‘the verbal representation of a

visual representation', in James Heffernan's useful phrase. A word fusing the Greek *ek* (out) and *phrassein* (to tell, to speak), ekphrasis refers to the attempt to reproduce, engage with or respond to works of art in language, particularly poetry, 'a literary showpiece', writes academic Rachel Eisendrath, 'where a poem, in describing an object in an emphatically aesthetic way, raises questions about the nature of art and artmaking.' Murray Krieger asks a number of these questions towards the start of his important study, *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign* (1992), which gets the ball rolling:

What, in apparently pictorial poetry, do words, can words, represent? Conversely, how can words in a poem be picturable? Or do they somehow manage, instead, to represent the unrepresentable, or at least the 'un-picturable'?

As far as Ruskin is concerned, poetry is fighting a losing battle. As Clark puts it himself in 'What is the burglar after?', a recent essay on ekphrasis for the *London Review of Books*, 'Surely painters are bent on communicating things – ideas, experiences – that words will never touch?' ('Words can "cite," but never "sight" their objects', offers W. J. T. Mitchell.) 'But precisely that fact is the spur to poetry,' Clark continues, a way of thinking through the things that poetry can – and maybe *can't* – perform when picturing reality (or painting's version of reality). 'The world has an established place for poems about paintings', writes Clark, so much so that 'sometimes you wonder if there was ever a poet who didn't write one.' More than this, it is curious that so many poets seem to turn to Bruegel, in particular. From William Carlos Williams and W. H. Auden – whose 'Musée des Beaux Arts' is the best-known example – to poems by John Berryman, Walter de la Mere, Anne Stevenson, Wisława Szymborska, Howard Nemerov, Joseph Langland, Sylvia Plath and likely many others, it seems there's something about Bruegel's work that poets have been drawn to.

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It's worth reiterating, at this point, that Bruegel is a master seer, a painter of acutely skilful observation and attentiveness, the kind of careful looking and abundant noticing that occupies the minds of many poets – and the pages of much poetry. After all, Clark writes in *The Sight of Death* (2006), 'astonishing things happen if one gives oneself over to the process of seeing again and again'. Even during his lifetime, Bruegel was known for the accuracy of his natural landscapes. Writing in 1604, Karel van Mander – Bruegel's first biographer – describes the painter's travels across Europe:

Pieter painted many pictures from life on his journey, so that it was said of him, that while he visited the Alps, he had swallowed all the mountains and cliffs, and, upon coming home, he had spit them forth upon his canvas and panels; so remarkably was he able to follow these and other works of nature.

Bruegel's Alpine vistas – imposing peaks of jagged rock and magisterial snow – appear in several of his paintings, including two of the surviving panels in his series depicting the months of the year. It's easy to see how a poet like Williams would wish to celebrate this 'mute objectivity', as Cheeke has suggested. 'Williams is a [poet] to whom writing is the grinding of a glass, the polishing of a lens by means of which he hopes to be able to see clearly', wrote Wallace Stevens: 'His delineations are trials. They are rubbings of reality.' 'Williams was drawn to the paintings of Brueghel partly because they seemed to offer an obdurate reproduction of the materiality of the world,' Cheeke continues, 'and in doing so perhaps promised to redeem the mundane and the ordinary from the doom to which all life is consigned.'

'Bruegel made the first monumental paintings of everyday life', writes J.L. Koerner, a comment that seems to chime with Cheeke's sense of the redemptive power of Bruegel's 'objectivity'. 'He did this by raising worldliness to the level of a theme', Koerner explains, 'and by portraying grand subjects from a provocatively ordinary point of view.' Koerner may have the artist's religious compositions in mind, *The Procession to Calvary* (1564), for instance, which renders Christ's carrying of the cross to a scene which, at least at first glance, could be mistaken for the preparations of

a country fair. Koerner's word *provocative*, however, catches the throat. What, exactly, is Bruegel in the business of provoking? What does it mean for someone's world to be 'provocatively ordinary'? The problem we encounter when we look at Bruegel, it seems to me, is that the realism he portrays – the everydayness, the devoted naturalism, his 'mute objectivity' – cannot be fully trusted.

This is not to say that Bruegel is trying to trick us, more to suggest that there is something else at work here than mere verisimilitude. (It's worth reminding ourselves – for all its apparent natural and topographical fidelity – that Bruegel's art is never claiming to present us snapshots of the actual world, at least not in the sense of European landscape painters to come.) A great many of Bruegel's paintings imply a narrative or story that we don't seem to have access to. 'His pictures weren't intended to be looked at,' suggests Kenneth Clark, 'they were intended to be looked *into*, to be read like a novel', albeit a novel missing a number of important pages. Moreover, Bruegel's landscapes never quite shake off the explicitly proverbial or allegorical sheen of his earlier paintings, pictures which 'set out to teach a lesson' – Kenneth Clark again, who draws our attention to *Dulle Griet* (1563), an ambiguous, highly Boschian production whose narrative and meaning both seem slightly out of reach. Put another way, Bruegel's paintings often (always?) provoke us to interpret – their stories, their messages – only for the pictures to refuse to be deciphered. 'Bruegel is playing a kind of game', suggests Svetlana Alpers, 'drawing us in and letting us also feel, simultaneously, that we are separate'.

Two of Bruegel's most 'provocatively ordinary' scenes are his encyclopaedic paintings *Netherlandish Proverbs* (1559) and *Children's Games* (1560), each of which presents a townscape that seems 'ordinary' enough. The provocation of these paintings comes, however, in the mounting strangeness of each scene, in which we discover that a series of proverbs and games is being acted out before us. What appears, at first, to be a slice of naturalistic life – anticipating the humdrum winter crowds of Hendrick Avercamp and L. S. Lowry – turns out to be a highly choreographed enterprise, peculiarly artificial. 'Either this is not human life at all but something alien,' writes Koerner of *Proverbs*, 'or the people are doing something other than living'. We are in the presence

of a fantasy, though one with plausible deniability. ‘Bruegel makes both of these alternatives possible’, continues Koerner, allowing these pictures to present a scene of unreality which comes to ‘visualize a proverb about ordinary reality per se’. It comes as no surprise to find that *Netherlandish Proverbs* is frequently referred to by another title, suggesting something of its uniquely unbelievable believability: *The World Upside Down*. To the left a globe is mounted on the outside of the tavern, defiantly the wrong way up. Bruegel repeats this gag in *Children’s Games*, in which we spot – close to the picture’s center – a young lad in red leggings hanging off a hitching post, completely upside down.

Looking back at the poems in *Pictures from Brueghel*, one finds that Williams – for all his praise of Bruegel’s naturalism – is reaching for the language of artifice. The peasants in *The Wedding Dance* (1566) are ‘Disciplined by the artist / to go round / & round’, while the scene presented in *The Harvesters* has been ‘organized / about a young // reaper enjoying his / noonday rest’. This *discipline* and *organization* are at work in Williams’s ‘Haymaking’, the sixth poem in the sequence, which appears to splice together images from two of Bruegel’s paintings, *The Harvesters* – on display in the MET – and *The Hay Harvest* (1565) in Prague. Early drafts of the poem carry the title ‘Composite’, suggesting that the poet is aware of what he’s up to, here. Simon Schama touches on Bruegel’s own composite landscapes in a passage from *Landscape and Memory* (1995). Describing *Dark Day* (1565), in the series of months, Schama notes that the perspective of the painting is ‘impossibly high’, such that we are guided ‘through a whole succession of arbitrarily stitched together, discrete landscapes: Flemish cottages, Mediterranean river mouth, and Alpine needle-peaks.’ Williams is not the only one, it seems, curating his landscapes.

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We have arrived at *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* (c.1560), which appears so famously in Auden’s poem. As with *Dark Day*, we are in the presence of a composite landscape, where the rules of perspective have been subtly warped, as if viewing the scene through a fish-eye lens that

makes things seem both closer and further away than they should be: the ship, the city, the sloping-and-foreshortened horse. The painting's sense of unreality is added to by several doublings and repetitions. The pleats of the ploughman's apron rhyme with the furrows forming at his feet, whose very curvature seems echoed in the billowing sails, to say nothing of the parallel between the splayed legs of the drowning Icarus and those belonging to the ploughman, although the legs protruding from the sea evoke – of course – the boy in *Children's Games*, as if to signal that this landscape, too, belongs to the World Upside Down. Doesn't the sun dropping below the sea in *Icarus* reveal the slightest curve to the horizon? Perhaps this picture takes place on the upturned globe in *Netherlandish Proverbs*. 'Bruegel's paintings are filled with moments like these', writes Koerner, 'ominous proximities of half-related things, [...] Meaningful without ever yielding their significance'.

For the most part, Auden's poem has been interpreted for what it has to say about our relationship to human suffering, a tendency to 'turn away / Quite leisurely from the disaster', ignoring the tragedy, an act of turning mirrored in the confines of the art gallery, in which we turn away from every painting we have finished looking at. There is even a possibility, writes Stephen Cheeke, that 'Brueghel's foregrounding of the ploughman might be taken as illustrating a[nother] Flemish proverb which says as much: 'No plough is stopped for the sake of a dying man.'" (Look closely at the bushes to the left side of the painting to discover, in the undergrowth, the bald head of a human corpse...) While several readers of Auden's poem have disagreed with his conclusions – including Elizabeth Bishop, who wrote to Robert Lowell that 'The ploughman & the people on the boat will rush to see the falling boy any minute, they always do, though maybe not to help' – the consensus seems clear, that 'the ploughman may / Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry, / But for him it was not an important failure', that the ship 'Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.'

Alongside Auden's thinking 'About suffering', however, 'Musée des Beaux Arts' highlights an important aspect of the world of Bruegel's paintings, hinging on that word 'About'. The word, of course, introduces the poem's subject – it is a poem *about* suffering – but it also sets the stage for an aesthetics (an environment) of *turning*, of things slightly off-

balance, askew or aslant, whether the ploughman turning his back on proceedings or the gently tilting, sloping field; the plough's single rotating wheel or the ship curving into a crescent; even the round orb of the setting sun, part of the clockwork of a spinning globe turning its way 'About' the Solar System.

There's something to be said about the depiction of Time in Bruegel's work, how it passes, how it's measured, how it comes to shape human activity. Time is everywhere within the paintings, in the marking of specific occasions, the calendar of agricultural labours, the cycle of seasons, the peasants dancing 'round / & round'. Very often, Bruegel's paintings even seem to have an eye fixed on the future, the present getting ahead of itself, as in *The Blind Leading the Blind* (1568) in which are invited to imagine every figure in the sequence tumbling down into the ditch. The measuring of Time and the recording of the present moment are certainly among the preoccupations of poetry. Here, however, I'm keen to dwell on Bruegel's interest in turning and tilting, which may begin to draw some threads between his painting and the poetry it has generated.

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Many paintings in this essay feature uneven or sloping ground, from *The Blind Leading the Blind* and *Hunters* to *The Harvesters* and *Icarus*. Even when his earth is level, Bruegel has a fondness for depicting humans off-balance, as in his many reeling wedding dancers or the scenes in *Children's Games* of figures running, climbing, dodging, rolling and leapfrogging each other's backs, to say nothing of the diagonal procession of blind men – variously wrong-footed – in the painting previously mentioned or the bowls of porridge being carried (quite precariously) in *Peasant Wedding*, liable to splosh and spill at any moment. For T. J. Clark, these instances are evidence of the struggle between uprightness and gravity: 'Bruegel – to put it briefly – was a connoisseur of bipedalism.' This explains the presence, in the artist's work, of depictions of falling, from Icarus and *The Fall of the Rebel Angels* (1562) to the small figure of Christ collapsed under his cross in *The Procession to Calvary*, a complex, multi-layered illustration of bipedalism if there ever was one: a figure who both can and can't walk

on his own. Clark pauses on *The Cripples* (1568), noting the figures' 'frantic determination to move on', though Bruegel includes countless examples of humans weighed down or restricted in his paintings, like the woman heaving firewood across the bridge in *Hunters in the Snow* or the peasant lugging jugs of water to the picnic in *The Harvesters*. To stick with this painting, we discover another of Bruegel's heavy sleepers, laid out horizontally, taking a break from his bipedal struggle to remain upright; the peasant at the heart of *Harvesters* is more than exhausted, mouth slack and agape, his body heavy on the field.

This figure returns us to *Land of Cockaigne*; he seems to be a precursor for Bruegel's man of letters, both men splayed beneath a tree. '*Cockaigne* is a picture of gravity', writes Clark, 'of the pull of a gravitational field'. At the same time, it is also an example of Bruegel's tilting world, not only in the presence of the sloping hillside – a feature of so many paintings – but the disc-like table round the tree trunk, tilting at an angle we might just as easily encounter in Cézanne. 'Tilting in *Cockaigne*, then [...] carries a special, equivocal ethical charge', Clark continues:

It is disorienting, but not overmuch. Most things stay put on the canting table. The scene is unstable, but not utterly shifting and precipitous. The swell is that of a pillow, not a wave.

This sense of soft disorientation – 'unstable, but not utterly' – is where Bruegel collides with poetry. As Clark's treatment of Bruegel (and Giotto) suggest, there is something at work in these pictures concerning the co-presence of heaven and earth, the materiality of present things, the here-and-now, and the existence, simultaneously, of something far harder to grasp. The figures in *Cockaigne* have not arrived in heaven, as such, but an environment of in-betweens, neither reality nor its opposite, where the materiality of Nature and the not-quite-tangibility of dreams are both available at once. I'm reminded of an observation by the poet Mary Ruefle on the word *sentimental*, a word in which 'You begin to see', she writes, 'the two-fold nature' of experience, composed of 'both thought and feeling'; 'when we hear the word [...] *sentimental*, there's the *sen* of sensuous, the *mental* of mind.' 'Poetry is sentimental to begin with', she concludes. 'To

write a sentimental poem is an act of redundancy.’

Like the sentimental world of Bruegel’s paintings, poetry has something equally to do with picturing reality and aiming beyond it. ‘It is typical of Bruegel that his vision of things transfigured,’ writes Clark of *Cockaigne*, ‘should not be *The World Upside Down*’ so much as ‘the world as it would be if it became more fully itself, with its basic structures unaltered and above all its physicality, its orientation, intact.’ For Clark, *Cockaigne* is neither here nor there, ‘*The World The Same Way Up, Only More So.*’ ‘Tell all the truth but tell it slant’, begins a poem by Emily Dickinson.

Whether this is what poetry manages (or even attempts) – a tilted version of reality, *The Same, Only More So*, rooted in a world of things while gesturing away from them – requires another essay to unpack, as does the question as to whether ekphrastic poems have anything unique ‘to say’ about the matter; I suspect that they do. What Clark helps us to see, in the meantime, is that Bruegel’s provocative ‘alternative reality’ – where the landscape and activity are not as ‘ordinary’ as they seem – provides a model for describing our experience in terms that keep both the sublime and the ridiculous within reach. ‘Paradise may be fantastical in Bruegel,’ Clark concludes, ‘but nothing will convince me it is simply a delusion.’