

**University of Canberra**

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**Thinking about Icarus**

Abstract:

Icarus has long been a trope in literary and visual art. This work adds to the long history of the Icarus tale, and attempts to investigate its relevance for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Particularly, it attempts to use the story of Icarus and his father Daedalus to think through relationships of intimacy: between people and the planet, between husbands and wives, and between suicide bombers and their mentors, in an effort to explore the ethical conundrums of cohabitation.

Biographical note:

Professor Jen Webb is professor of creative practice at the University of Canberra, and Associate Dean of Research in the Faculty of Arts and Design. Co-editor (with Nigel Krauth) of the journal *TEXT*, and with Tony Schirato of the Sage book series *Understanding Contemporary Culture*, her research incorporates both the field of creative writing, and the politics of representation. Her most recent book is *Understanding Representation* (Sage 2009).

Keywords:

Icarus – myth – terrorism – being

1. It's the silence that wakes you: the dropped plate of a dream, a smudged cry; a boy is falling from the sky.

Or maybe it's still a dream. You try to pinch the flesh of your upper arm, and can't be sure whether you felt it or not. The air is full of feathers and the scent of hot wax. You think you hear something heavy careening through the air.

You think you are probably still asleep.

2. She is high in the air, flying the middle course,<sup>1</sup> inside an amazing machine. He is in the belly of the plane; she is seated beside a wing, just above and ahead of him. She has nearly 24 hours to fill before she's home; and to cope, as they say, she is inventing a different world. She knows the shape and texture and taste of the world as it is, its scents and its pain. She has chosen to redraft it: she is sketching out a map.

It is the kind known as a T-O, an *orbis terrarum*. The O, *orbis*, the great disc of the earth, describes the world she looks down on from 30,000 feet. The T, *terrarum*, the cross of Christ, divides that world into discrete sections. Excludes the whole of the new world, including her home. She has provided no space for herself on this new world she is designing.

At the top of the page she places the left hand of Asia, and below it she squiggles in the Nile. Below that again she draws the bulge of Africa and, between, the Mediterranean Sea to carry the eye across to an impressionistic Europe. She sketches boats, little waves, an aeroplane shattered into pieces and floating on the surface of the sea. That's where they found him: floating on the surface of the sea. Jerusalem above him on the map, and Rome below. He should have stayed in Rome. *Lucem orbis terrarum*, Cicero said, Rome, *the light of the world, the refuge of all its people*.<sup>2</sup> He should have stayed at home. He could have stayed in Rome. But no: off he had to go, chasing some rainbow, so taken with the pleasure of his wings.<sup>3</sup>

He is spread now across the O of the world, stretched out against the T. Well he was always as much cartography as man. Rivers are etched in blue on his skin, there's a crevasse here, a hillock there. She knows the desert across his shoulders, the tropics of armpit and crotch. She knows that he has become uncharted land, he is somewhere now her feet will never fall.

\* \* \*

At the morgue, an attendant folded back the sheet to show her the remains. The remains. The bits left over. Broken bits, patched together. She looked at his face, unmarked, his still-damp hair feathers across his forehead; and she could see under the sheet the shape of something so amazing; of someone fallen from the sky.<sup>4</sup>

Well, life goes on. For some.<sup>5</sup> He has metamorphosed, his flight and fall have remapped her world. She is going home, beyond the T and the O, beyond the *light of the world* to the unforgiving sun. Below her is the great dish of the sea, the water grey and blue, and the shadow of the plane a tiny T creeping across its surface. In a few hours she will be flying over sun-heavy water streaked with coral, blue with turquoise threads. She looks down through the porthole to that great dish below.

As he must have done. Sitting in a window seat, watching the sky, and then hearing the crew shout, ‘Heads down! Stay down!’ When the first call came he would have assumed the brace position, she thinks, leaning his arms on the back of the seat ahead, cradling his head in his arms. And as he lowered his head—*heads down! stay down!*—surely the world outside the window changed to a *mappa mundi*: the shadow of the plane as it dived, nose down, forming the T; the circle of the O formed by the great grey plate of the globe; and then like a medieval Christ he became the T against the O. Spread out against the sea.

He flew, and fell into the plate glass sea. But he is below her feet now, going home. She will not let him fall.

3. The boys appear in the late morning, scratching their shoulders, stretching the muscles they’d pushed just a bit too far in yesterday’s rehearsal. They expect to redesign the world. They believe they are the future.

The fathers wait behind closed doors, their artist hands completing the wings. Bent wands, hot wax, feathers: they will redesign the world through these amazing machines—feathers, wax, and a boy.

You know better—you’ve heard this story before. It’s a game of make-believe where wax is steel and fathers kiss their sons, strap on their belts, and send them to the air.<sup>6</sup>

You wake, roused by the phone that didn’t ring. You hear the cries as the feathered boys leap delighted into unsafe air. You move too late to block their flight, they’re gone. Heading toward the sun.

4. The canna lilies love the sun. They fairly burgeon with blossoms, and their great pouting lips kiss the air. At night in our dark suburb they are brighter than a torch, they illuminate the uneven stairs that lead past the rockery and down to the front door.

Outside and in, the temperature remains stubbornly high. In a flush of concern for the environment we have turned off the air conditioners, and all through the dense nights of bodies and breathing we lie still. Each at a far edge of the bed. We never touch. We have reached the almost-certain end of a marriage and what holds us together now is the shared flash of joy at something like the sight of a lily filling itself with light.

*What’s joy?* Bill Manhire asked. (Cynically?) *Even a pencil will point to it.*<sup>7</sup>

My pencil is inscribed MADE FROM THE TIMBER OF COMMERCIAL FORESTS 2B. Made from trees born to be stationery. They breathe in our waste, breathe out our air, forcefeed their limbs to make the right quantity of the right density of timber to serve our needs. Cut down young, they are turned into pulp. I point my pencil at the bright young forests, I sense the flickering of an unlikely joy, the trees so taken with the pleasure of the air through their leaves, so taken with the promises to come.

\* \* \*

The world is not all young things. Mephistopheles, speaking well before our time began, said: *The world was waxing old even in my prime.*<sup>8</sup> Even in his prime. And

now centuries later, I am past my own prime, and the world itself is antique. It is forgetting its functions. It ought to be in care.

And we who grow trees to make stationery, we who burn the fossil fuels, we who eat our young: we are flying toward the sun and, like Icarus, are so *taken with the pleasure of our wings* we have forgotten the ground below.

The wax is melting.

And you, my dear, and I: we look ahead, we fly across the globe, we forget that all that flies must fall.

5. My destination last year was Europe, and there I was with 300 others, all of us transformed by the alchemy of airports into fraternal twins. We waited in line for boarding passes, for Customs and clearance, us and our carry-on bags, our comfy pants, our slip-off shoes. The waiting and the nowhere time of travel shift the world into the present tense, so: I *pitch* my tent at the gate lounge, in this nomad village of cooking smells and children's tears and, over it all, *comes* the call of the tannoy, the sanctum bell. The day *shifts* on.

As the hands of the clock jerked ahead through the minutes and hours, the travellers fell into sylvan quiet, focused on their breathing in and out, in and out. All around the air thrummed, and finally the travellers were funnelled on board to soar across space, melting what is left of the ozone layer. Spending hours in the temporary home of Seat 67B, living the battery chicken life of the passenger, answering either/or questions: *fish or lamb? white wine or red?*

The aeroplane flew through dense cloud, through the mist of all the words that fly up like an *escape of angels*<sup>9</sup> from the ground 30,000 feet below. The words that fly: they are prayers to a cold god, confessions of all we have done and all we have failed to do. The words, they fly; they escape like angels, they fly.

\* \* \*

Surely some strange intelligence is at play?

*in·tel·li·gence* [in – tel – i – juh ns]<sup>10</sup>

– noun

1. *capacity for learning, reasoning, understanding, and similar forms of mental activity; aptitude in grasping truths, facts, meanings.*
2. *manifestation of a high mental capacity.*
3. *the faculty of understanding.*
4. *Government:*
  - a. *information about an enemy or a potential enemy.*
  - b. *the evaluated conclusions drawn from such information.*
  - c. *an organization engaged in gathering such information.*
5. *an intelligent being or spirit, esp. an incorporeal one, as an angel.*

*Origin:* 1350–1400; ME < L *intelligentia*. See *intelligent*, *-ence*

*Synonyms:* 1. See *mind*. 2. *discernment, reason, acumen, aptitude, penetration.*

Icarus flew without intelligence—or, to be fair, naïvely, as boys will, full only of juice and joy. But *what's joy? Even a pencil will point to it*. His father, possessed of *capacity for learning, a high mental capacity*, observed the boy's flight, the height, the fall. He took his notes, he measured the trajectory, he adjusted his own wings, and then he took to the sky.

Like Daedalus, angels are given to observation, possessed of *intellects vast and cool and unsympathetic*.<sup>11</sup> Theirs is the intelligence that looks in the mirror and knows what it sees, and names it 'I'; the intelligence that begins, like charity, at home. That begins with the first person singular. That cannot accommodate the plural mode.

\* \* \*

Jacques Derrida said *One can only love oneself*.<sup>12</sup> Well, he said so many things. But this, this narcissism, this is the father's task: to love oneself. The angels, the fathers: they see the sparrow lose height, they measure the trajectory of its flight, the impact of its fall. Daedalus has left his fingerprints all over the known world. Icarus has left only ripples behind.

So fly, if you can. But below is your father taking notes; above are the angels who measure the speed of your descent. And we, so taken with the pleasures of flight, take ourselves unready into unsafe air. The heat of desire melts the wax, and we fall.

6. The night before I left for Europe you went early to bed, and I sat up to watch the late night weather report: *It's drying in Johannesburg, but rain lingers over the rest of the continent, and it's overcast in Algiers. And at home, tomorrow in the capital cities, expect high temperatures*.<sup>13</sup>

Not me, honey, I said out loud: me, I'm strapping on my wings, I'm flying away from always-high-temperatures, from always at the edge of my awareness the scent of smoke, and the sound of a plane scooping water from a rapidly drying dam. I am flying to the grey cool streets at the wrong end of the globe where I will be alien in an alien land, with alien skies above me, and all around me sounds that are not my own. I will shake the wax from my fingers, comb the feathers from my hair, plant my feet in new ground.

You were asleep when I left, the clock still ticking by our bed. I took to the uncertain air; I looked only ahead.

7. Look away, you; it's not your tale. Boys will fly always, always delight in their wings, never consider the fall. Fathers will urge them always to the edge, tie the wings to them, help them to fly.

He fixed the frames, did Daedalus, waxed the wings, kissed his son and watched him fly, the cliff behind him, the great bleached world below. He measured the pattern of the flight, observed the angle of descent; he checked his watch.

Boys will fly, still, and fall, and fathers still will listen to their call.

## Endnotes

1. 'the middle course', from George Sandys' 1632 translation of Ovid's *The metamorphoses* (bk VIII). These are the instructions Daedalus gave his son about safe flight:

*Then instructs his sonne  
Be sure that in the middle course thou run.  
Dank seas will clog the wings that lowly fly:  
The Sun will burne them if thou soar'st too high.  
'Twixt either keepe.*

2. Cicero, *The orations against Catiline* vol 4, VI; *lucem orbis terrarum, atque arcem omnium gentium* (1856: 46)

3. George Sandys' 1632 translation of Ovid's *The metamorphoses* (bk VIII):

*the boy, much tooke  
With pleasure of his wings, his Guide forsooke*

4. From WH Auden's 'Musée des beaux arts' (first published in *New writing*, Spring 1939)

*the expensive delicate ship that must have seen  
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,  
had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on* (lines 19-21; 1991: 179)

5. Doug Anthony All Stars, from 'Waco', at  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ilMEDMwOY4&feature=related> (accessed 1 April 2010)

6. Daedalus was artist and artisan, inventor and conspirator, and condemned killer. See *The Metamorphoses* Book VIII for expressions of his artistic skill, and for the reminder that he murdered his nephew; see Andrew Melrose for the suggestion that he may have deliberately sent Icarus out to die, at [http://fiftyfive-fifty-five.blogspot.com/2009\\_12\\_01\\_archive.html](http://fiftyfive-fifty-five.blogspot.com/2009_12_01_archive.html) (accessed 12 January 2010)

7. Bill Manhire, 'Still life with wind in the trees' (2005: 25)

8. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe *Faust*, Part 1, 'Walpurgis night: The Hartz mountains' (1857: 230)

9. Robert Browning, *Sordello* bk III, lines 577-79 (1888: 84-5)

*songs go up exulting, then dispread  
Dispart, disperse, lingering overhead  
Like an escape of angels.*

10. Extract from 'intelligence', *Dictionary.com* at <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/intelligence> (accessed 14 June 2009)

11. HG Wells (1898) *The war of the worlds*, William Heineman: 1

12. Jacques Derrida (1985: n.p.)

13. Anton Enos, reading the late night weather on SBS, February 2004

## Research statement

### *Research background*

The story of Icarus is referred to in philosophy, art and political theory across history and cultures. My research extends the use of this trope, and is informed by tradition that runs from Bertrand Russell's (1924) anxiety over scientific interventions, through Jean Baudrillard (1983) on the dissolution of history, to Derrida on the search for 'the sun of presence' (1996: 104). This prose work is among the research outputs from a project that investigates the problem of being and suffering with reference to contemporary critical events, and that seeks to engage questions of ethical relationships in a flawed world.

### *Research contribution*

This work contributes to the debate about the responsibility of subjects in and to the natural and social worlds. It draws attention to the problematic role played by the artist Daedalus, and hence to questions of ethics in cultural production. It also makes a contribution to the history of creative and scholarly engagement with the story of Icarus, experimenting with language to create images that might provide tools to think through the problems of being.

### *Research significance*

These short pieces combine creative and scholarly work, contributing to the growing concern in the writing discipline to work across the two fields of practice. They have not yet been published, so their significance is untested, but the project of which they are a part has been widely published in scholarly journals and has informed scholarship into the relationship between creative practice and the socio-political domain by being set on university courses around the globe, and cited widely in publications on art and human rights.

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