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The Icarus Complex: The Influence of the Greek Myth of Icarus and Daedalus in 20th Century Literature

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Abstract:

The Greek myth of Icarus and Daedalus has influenced some of the greatest writers of the 20th century, and continues to serve as a source of inspiration. In order to see the influence of the myth in modern literature, the following will compare and contrast three novels, while also using the Icarus Complex of psychoanalysis as a study for each protagonist: James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) (with a comparison to the short story "An Old Man with Very Enormous Wings" by Gabriel Garcia Marquez), Iris Murdoch's 1978 Booker Prize winner *The Sea, the Sea*, and Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977). Although the classical interpretation of the Greek myth of Icarus and Daedalus is a warning against over-ambition, there are other ways to interpret the meaning. A broader way to view it is as a description of the potential of the human condition: the want to rise, the possibility to fall, and what may happen in consequence. Death, although in the myth, is not always the case.

Keywords: comparative literature, psychoanalysis, mythology, novel

"Allie reflected on the dangers of attempting to fly; what flaming falls, what macabre hells were reserved for such Icarus types!" – *The Satanic Verses*

The Greek myth of Icarus and Daedalus has influenced some of the greatest writers of the 20th century, and continues to serve as a source of inspiration. The myth of Icarus involves Daedalus, master craftsman and designer of the minotaur-containing labyrinth, and his son Icarus, who have been imprisoned in a tower by Minos, the king of Crete. To escape, Daedalus fashions wings out of feathers and wax, warning his son not to fly too low, to avoid the sea's dampness, and not to fly too high, to avoid the sun's heat, both of which would affect the functionality of the wings. Despite his father's warning, Icarus flies too high and the sun melts the wax in his wings, causing him to fall to his death. The myth is classically interpreted as a warning against over-ambition (Nyenhuis).

The Icarus myth also tells us something more universal about the human condition. The Icarus Complex is a term in psychology first described by Henry A. Murray, and includes an attention- or admiration-seeking narcissism, the idea that no goal is off limits while at the same time fearing some foreboding failure, a fetish for fire, and other qualities (Sperber). As human beings, we have an urge to rise, and we are prone to falling, how we react to that determines our character, and vice versa. In *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* by Salman Rushdie—which is an update and interpretation of the

Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, where both characters are rock stars—it is said that “mythology is the family album or storehouse of a culture’s childhood, containing that society’s future, codified as tales that are both poems and oracles” (83). This might be one reason the myth and its classical interpretation has been so timeless. Nevertheless, there are various modern novels that have been influenced and have interpreted the myth in ways other than a simple update or change of scenery. In order to see the influence of the myth in modern literature, the following will compare and contrast three novels, while also using the Icarus Complex as a study for each protagonist: James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) (with a comparison to the short story “An Old Man with Very Enormous Wings” by Gabriel Garcia Marquez), Iris Murdoch’s 1978 Booker Prize winner *The Sea, the Sea*, and Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* (1977).

And He Turned His Mind to Unknown Arts: Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist*

James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist* tells the coming-of-age tale of Stephen Dedalus. As a child in early 20th century Ireland, he is growing up amid many an influencing tension, or, as Peter Harness explains in the afterword, “four cultural traps that life—specifically, life in Ireland at the beginning of the twentieth century—lays for the budding artist” (Joyce 296). These so-called traps are outlined by a matured (both physically and intellectually) Stephen who tells his friend Davin that

‘The soul is born,’ he said vaguely, ‘first in those moments I told you of. It has a slow and dark birth, more mysterious than the birth of the body. When the soul of a man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets.’ (Joyce 235)

Birth is, as the afterword states, a physical one at odds with a later spiritual or intellectual one. It is worth reflecting on the Lacanian psychoanalytic notion of the ideal I, which is perpetually at odds with the actual I. The life goal of every individual is to make themselves closer to their ideal self (Lucente). This could be one deeper explanation for the rift in Stephen’s psyche, and his development through it. But he knows that a kind of ‘flying’ is the answer to his escape. Nationality, language, and religion are more obvious in how they create borders and limits within the mind; they tend to be the stuff of willful ignorance or tribalism. Over the course of his growing up, he releases himself of each of those entrapments and decides that the life of an artist is a life for him, and would involve freedom without constraint. This decision is only natural, considering even as a boy “the ambition which he felt astir at times in the darkness of his soul sought no outlet” (Joyce 72).

Around the dinner table with his family as a young boy, he witnesses heated conversations about Catholic faith and Irish nationality, such as strongly held opinions about the death of Irish political leader Charles Stewart Parnell, which is demonstrated in an extended scene during Christmas dinner where his aunt and his father butt heads. His aunt is a proponent of Catholic theocracy while his father is a supporter of the separation of church and state. This scene is dialogue heavy, compared to the near dialogue-less scenes of most of the novel, demonstrating the influence that these dinner table conversations have on Stephen. Near the end of the novel, once Stephen’s intellectual

birth is more than crowning, the dialogue between him and his university classmates is carefully constructed. But before that, Stephen attends Clongowes Wood College, a strict Catholic boarding school, similar in sadomasochism to the British kind described in George Orwell's *Such, Such Were the Joys*. The novel's prose evolves from beginning to end, showing the minute development of Stephen's consciousness, from simple observations to complex thoughts. The myth of Icarus is realized in this way as a psychological complex within his mind as it expands and develops throughout the novel. As Fagnoli and Gillespie point out, each chapter begins and ends with a height or depth of ambiguity available to interpretation, acting as a textual or aesthetic mimicry of Icarus's flight and subsequent fall (Joyce 136-137).

During his time at the prestigious Belvedere in Dublin, Stephen grows as an actor in the theater and also as a composer of poems. At his school, they attend perfunctory and compulsory religious services, and during a religious retreat lasting three days, a priest goes on for pages and pages about the content of hell and all the multitudinous sufferings that abound in it. As Orwell explains in his essay "Can Socialists be Happy?", "many a revivalist minister, many a Jesuit priest [...] has frightened his congregation almost out of their skins with his word-pictures of hell." Indeed, the word-pictures cause Stephen profound psychological fear, for he still has a deep faith, even though he had been ignoring it for some time, relishing in lascivious thought, masturbation, and prostitutes (his first sexual experience being with a young Dublin harlot). Notice the subtle hysterics of this foreboding passage:

The snares of the world were its ways of sin. He would fall. He had not yet fallen but he would fall silently, in an instant. Not to fall was too hard, too hard; and he felt the silent lapse of his soul, as it would be at some instant to come, falling, falling, but not yet fallen, still unfallen, but about to fall. (Joyce 188)

In the Catholic context one thinks also of the fall of Lucifer, whose revolt against supernatural and tyrannical oppression proved futile. In Stephen's consciousness, he knows that he *will* fall, it's only a matter of when—such is clearly a mark of the Icarus Complex mentioned earlier, where a vague and defeating failure is expected. In order to escape the four nets of birth, nationality, language, and religion, falling might very well be a necessity. But before that happens, Stephen dedicates himself to his faith with even more fervor, attending service and constantly praying, so much so that the school director inquires to him about becoming a priest, but after cogitating on the prospect, Stephen is convinced that the celibate life of a priest does not stop at the loins, it also includes the mind, and such a life is not to be led by an artist, a poet, an actor.

Growing, Stephen goes for a walk on the beach to relax his nerves after having applied to a university. First he sees the clouds as "a host of nomads on the march... The Europe they had come from lay out there beyond the Irish Sea, Europe of strange tongues and valleyed and woodbegirt and citadelled and of entrenched and marshalled races" (Joyce 194). While he fantasizes about those distant races and cultures in Europe, "a voice from beyond the world was calling" (Joyce 194). And then we are presented with the novel's only Greek dialogue, where Stephen's name is turned into the dream-like language: "Hello, Stephanos!" "Stephanos Dedalos! Bous Stephanoumenos! Bous

Stephaneforos!" (Joyce 194-195). The names come from the phonetically spelled Greek for Stephen (Στέφανος), the latter two meaning crown-wearer and the name itself meaning "crown, wreath, garland, chaplet; crown of victory," according to the *Online Etymology Dictionary*. Or even halo, relating to someone divine, like a winged angel. Stephen realizes, standing there and taking in the language, "his strange name seemed to him a prophecy" (Joyce 195). The use of Greek demonstrates a subconscious yearning for emigration, for exploration of foreign lands and tongues, brought on by his fantasy of the traveling clouds. And how appropriate to demonstrate that yearning through the language of Greece, whose mythology supplies the literary analogy of Stephen's dilemma? The voice or voices turns out to be his friends swimming naked in the sea, teasing him as they always had, but this time in (imagined) Greek. The mention of the name of the "fabulous artificer" sends a climactic ripple through Stephen's brain, to where he hallucinates

a winged form flying above the waves and slowly climbing the air. What did it mean? Was it a quaint device opening a page of some medieval book of prophecies and symbols, a hawk-like man flying sunward above the sea, a prophecy of the end had been born to serve and had been hollowing through the mists of childhood and boyhood, a symbol of the artist forging anew his workshop out of the sluggish matter of the earth a new soaring impalpable imperishable being? (Joyce 195-196)

This symbol of Icarus is the total embodiment of Stephen's dilemma as an artist, and his wish to escape. But not just to escape, to accomplish the feat unscathed, to be "imperishable." Which is the dual idea of immortality and invulnerability (*ascensionism*) coupled with the fear of the fall itself, symptoms of the Icarus Complex. Following the Greek calls, he dips his body into the water and while wading through he sees a young girl swimming in the sea up ahead, who "seemed like one whom magic had changed into the likeness of a strange and beautiful seabird" (Joyce 198). The avian pulchritude of the swimmer in the sea, like some siren, reinforces his idea that the four nets he had tried to fly by were holding him down, and he decides to do away with religion, family, and nation, so that he can fully live the life of an artist, thereby bringing him closer to his ideal self, and escaping the final net of an ego-misaligned birth. To him, it is the only life worth living: "Yes! Yes! Yes! He would create proudly out of the freedom and power of his soul, as the great artificer whose name he bore, a living thing, new and soaring and beautiful, impalpable, imperishable" (Joyce 197).

Entwined in humans the soul is somewhat whimsical. Plato explains the dichotomy of its nature:

when perfect and fully winged she soars upward, and orders the whole world; whereas the imperfect soul, losing her wings and drooping in her flight at last settles on the solid ground-there, finding a home, she receives an earthly frame which appears to be self-moved, but is really moved by her power; and this composition of soul and body is called a living and mortal creature. (*"Phaedrus"*)

Stephen is not alone in this struggle; it is in every human.

Throughout the novel, the sea acts as a kind of *cathexis*, or unhealthy obsession, for Stephen, like the *cathexis* for fire as outlined in the Icarus Complex of psychoanalysis. But the difference is negligible, considering that the sun and sea, fire and water, make up two halves of the myth. Both are deadly. This *cathexis*, too, can be seen as a kind of *thanatos*, a subconscious wish of drowning, which is ultimately the same as being drawn like a moth or fragile bird to the blazing sky, in each case the end is met through an enthrallment. Here are three examples within less than ten pages of each other: “Pride after satisfaction uplifted him like long slow waves” (Joyce 191), “A faint click at his heart, a faint throb in his throat told him once more how his flesh dreaded the cold infrahuman odour of the sea” (Joyce 193), and “He strode, far out over the sands, singing wildly to the sea, crying to greet the advent of life that had cried to him” (Joyce 199). Notice, too, a slight capriciousness in the tone toward that element, which is similar to *The Sea, the Sea* by Iris Murdoch (see the later section on that novel titled “To Love and Fear the Sea”).

In the intellectual-challenging atmosphere of the university, of which he is accepted into, he makes close friends from whom he formulates and sharpens his ideas. In his final act of rebellion, he decides to emigrate from his homeland of Ireland: “And his mind turned to unknown arts.” The quote refers to the epigraph in the novel, which is from Daedalus in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. In turning to those arts, Daedalus fashioned the wings of his and Icarus’s escape, the same thing that Stephen Dedalus (whose surname, as mentioned, is taken from Icarus’s father, the “fabulous artificer”) has done within his mind.

Coda to Joyce: Marquez’s “A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings”

The short story “A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings” by Gabriel Garcia Marquez also explores the theme of Icarus and equates them with the pressures and problems of the artist. The story itself can almost be seen as a magic realist dream that an older Stephen has had after dealing with the loneliness and disappointment that nearly every artist faces. After a persistent spell of rain and a related infestation of crabs, Pelayo is out in the courtyard of his home, attempting to get rid of the troublesome crustaceans, when he spots “an old man, a very old man, lying face down in the mud, who, in spite of his tremendous efforts, couldn’t get up, impeded by his enormous wings” (Marquez 105). Already we have the groundwork of the symbol of wings, which stands for the artist’s creation, and his need to create. What allows an Icarus type to fly also causes one to fall. But because the wings in this story are real, attached to the body, there is also religious symbolism in the idea of an angel, something pure yet fragile, prone to falling, an Icarus in the flesh.

Not knowing what to do with him, Pelayo locks him in a chicken coop with his hens, amid dung and the stench of other filth. The next morning “the whole neighborhood [is] in front of the chicken coop having fun with the angel [...] as if he weren’t a supernatural creature but a circus animal” (Marquez 106).

While abusing him in various ways, everyone in the town has their theories as to the nature of the old man: an angel come to save Pelayo’s sick child or that he is a demonic impostor or a foreign castaway of a wrecked ship, while some

thought that he should be named mayor of the world. Others of sterner mind felt that he should be promoted to the rank of five-star general in order to win all wars. Some visionaries hoped that he could be put to stud in order to implant on earth a race of winged wise men who could take charge of the universe. (Marquez 107)

The bewilderment and confusion can be understood in the context of a work of art that an artist creates and releases. An artist is unable to control one's audience and their reactions, and ideas in response to that work of art tend to vary immensely. This is most clearly demonstrated when

the few miracles attributed to the angel showed a certain mental disorder, like the blind man who didn't recover his sight but grew three new teeth, or the paralytic who didn't get to walk but almost won the lottery, and the leper whose sores sprouted sunflowers. (Marquez 110)

Indeed, a writer cannot control his readers, and the same goes with any other kind of artist with an audience.

Pelayo's wife comes up with the idea of charging five cents for admission to see the old man and the courtyard turns into a kind of carnival, with other attractions that take away any interest in the old man, "because his wings were not those of an angel but, rather, those of a sidereal bat" (Marquez 108). The use of sidereal, which, according to the Oxford Dictionary means "of or with respect to the distant stars," is puzzling. How could the wings of a cosmic bat be any less interesting than those of a supernatural angel? Even so:

The doctor [...] couldn't resist the temptation to listen to the angel's heart, and he found so much whistling in the heart and so many sounds in his kidneys that it seemed impossible for him to be alive. What surprised him most, however, was the logic of his wings. They seemed so natural on that completely human organism that he couldn't understand why other men didn't have them too. (Marquez 111)

The question remains, why isn't everyone an artist? Well, who all would freely choose to go through the artist's dilemma, which is intimately linked with a kind of Icarus Complex? Of course, most people do have the spark of the artist within them, but they cannot fall like the old man if they do not take flight. Within this tale is a magical, allegorical microcosm of the artist's life, of what may be in store for Joyce's hero. And, as stated in the introduction, what we do after we fall also determines our character, our fortitude or lack thereof. Near the end of the story, the old man with enormous wings drags himself from the chicken coop once it collapses from disuse and decay and exposure to the elements, and after crawling around the house and being shooed away with a broom into one of the harshest winters, "he seemed to improve with the first sunny days" (Marquez 111). After not moving for some days still, as if the light of the sun was not just a source of vitamin D but fuel for the core of his soul, a true *cathexis* for the fire of the sun, he re-grows his wings to their full health and clumsily takes to the sky until he is "but an imaginary dot on the horizon of the sea" (Marquez 112). Icarus lives to fall another day.

To Love and Fear the Sea: Murdoch's *The Sea, the Sea*

Murdoch's egotistical protagonist is Charles Arrowby, an over-the-hill playwright who has enjoyed above-average success. Seeking solitude, he has retired to a quaint and rural home called Shruff End, by the sea and on the edge of a cliff, enveloped by the roar and moan of the waters and almost completely surrounded by rocks. He spends most of his time languidly, cooking, diving and swimming, and exploring the nearby area. He is also attempting to compose something of a memoir, which is what the narrative consists of: his detailed and discursive accounts of his now quotidian reclusion.

The repetition in the title, *The Sea, the Sea*, evokes a wistful nostalgia, an ardor, but at the same time it drips with horror and obsession. The sea possesses multiple meanings for Charles. As if in awe of a growing and learning pet or child: "It is remarkable how quietly firmly powerful my sportive sea can be" (Murdoch 6). A feeling of oneness and belonging: "[the sea] is my natural element" (Murdoch 4) and "How huge [the sea] is, how empty, this great space for which I have been longing all my life" (Murdoch 15). As if it were his lover and muse: "The sea. I could fill a volume simply with my word-pictures of it" (Murdoch 2) and "...into the easeful peace of the drowning sea" (Murdoch 231) and "[the sea is an] image of an inaccessible freedom." (Murdoch 260). Such sentiment is a sure sign of *cathexis* for the sea, similar to Joyce's protagonist.

Aligning with the Icarus Complex, Charles has a sense that something is waiting for him, although he is not sure if it is positive or negative:

Since I started writing this 'book' or whatever it is I have felt as if I were walking about in a dark cavern where there are various 'lights', made perhaps by shafts or apertures, which reach the outside world... There is among those lights one great light towards which I have been half consciously wending my way. It may be a great 'mouth' opening to the daylight, or it may be a hole through which fires emerge from the center of the earth. And am I still unsure what it is, and must I now approach in order to find out? (Murdoch 75)

The reference to Plato's cave is obvious, but rather than remain in the dark, rather than remain ignorant, he decides he will confront the light, whatever it is exactly, and in this way he's very much like a moth to the flame. Could it be the sun? In Plato's *The Allegory of the Cave*, he tells us that

it is the task of the enlightened not only to ascend to learning and to see the good but to be willing to descend again to those prisoners and to share their troubles and their honors, whether they are worth having or not. And this they must do, even with the prospect of death. ("Plato's Allegory of the Cave")

He seems almost to be describing the obligation of an Icarus type, if it were to deal with the attainment of knowledge and the altruistic act of sharing it and putting it to use. But for Charles, this is not the case. As Mary Kinzie explains in an introduction to the novel:

In an important sense Charles Arrowby's is the story of someone who violently and bullheadedly persists in all the wrong directions until time and experience—

both under great pressure—and love from an unexpected quarter partially redeem him. (Murdoch x-xi)

The solace of retirement doesn't last long for Charles, and soon he is visited by friends and ex-mistresses. Eventually, the narrative's obsession undergoes mitosis, with one half still upon the sea, and the other half staring into the still-burning fires of a long-lost childhood love. Affectionately called Hartley, this childhood love is married and by coincidence lives in the same area as Charles. After having promised to marry him, she had left him once she was old enough and totally cut contact with him. He spots her while in town and then they retreat into a church. Although aged considerably, about forty years, he still imagines her youth as a superimposed image on her wrinkled skin. The love itself still burns bright. Even Hartley, with all her timidity, gives some assurance with returned affection, although exaggerated by Charles—the nod or the look in the wet eyes or the lack of recoil from his touch. Kinzie explains, "Hartley is still, for him, a true light-source, whereas his first mistress Clement was only a fire-edged shadow" (Murdoch xvi). Hartley is the center sun, which he had been looking for. Everything else between his childhood and then was simply shadow cast here and there by her image-burning light. Kinzie goes on: "The terms recall Plato's in his condemnation of false art (the shadow thrown by the fire of mediocre art), as contrasted with true art (the light of the sun)" (Murdoch xvi). Looking at it this way, Hartley, as a catalyst for love, art, and inspiration, whether true or not, is a force to be reckoned with. This is the fight, a sort of gravitational pull, which occurs in Charles's mind if nowhere else. Getting too close could prove disastrous. Charles seems to exhibit a secondary symptom of the Icarus Complex, where he uses women as objects for his own personal use and gain: "I had always run to women as to a refuge. What indeed are women *but* refuges" (Murdoch 168). In specific reference to Hartley: "She never knew how robustly her love defended me against some kind of collapse of my pride" (Murdoch 201).

The sheer horror and prospect of destruction comes much earlier as a kind of omen when he sees a sea monster rise from the depths near his home:

At first it looked like a black snake, then a long thickening body with a ridgy spiny back followed the elongated neck. There was something which might have been a flipper or perhaps a fin. [...] I could also see the head with remarkable clarity, a kind of crested snake's head, green-eyed, the mouth opening to show teeth and a pink interior. The head and neck glistened with a blue sheen. (Murdoch 19)

In fear, he dismisses the monster as a relapsed hallucination from the long ago day he had tried LSD. What it really is is a sort of magic realism symbol for his jealousy. A manifestation of which he tries to vanquish, wrongly, as the target of his childhood lover's husband, Ben. Charles believes Ben is a brutal and cruel person with the way Hartley first describes his actions, his jealousy regarding their past and her adopted son, and this idea is reinforced when Charles eavesdrops on them one night, hearing how they yell at each other with such anger and despondency. As he explains on page 199: "I had to rescue Hartley, and 'rescue' was indeed now at last plainly the word, the very word that I had longed for. But, now it came to, *how?*" (Murdoch) He does not realize it is himself he must battle in order to save his love. This is the paradox.

Eventually, Charles is eerily reminded of the sea monster as he gazes upon a Titian painting. The painting depicts the Greek myth where Perseus slays a sea dragon in order to rescue the distressed Andromeda: “The sea dragon did not quite resemble *my* sea monster, but the mouth was very like, and the memory of that hallucination, or whatever it was, was suddenly more disquieting than it had ever been [*italics mine*]” (Murdoch 169). The possessive ‘my’ is ironically telling. He does not realize how much the sea monster really is *his*. In this way he fancies himself a Perseus when he is more like an Icarus, falling, drowning, and perhaps being gobbled up by the sea monster of his own creation, which had grown and feasted upon the jealousy and vanity within him. It is worth mentioning that in the painting by Titian, titled *Perseus and Andromeda*, it looks as if Perseus is descending or falling from the sky.

There are further hints, unregistered by Charles, as to the nature of the sea monster: when he wonders why he wrote a letter to his ex-mistress, hinting that she could come stay with him, he says that perhaps it was “some fear of loneliness and death which has come to me out of the sea” (Murdoch 48). This is perhaps a slightly subconscious understanding or guess at what the sea monster might represent, and it’s not far from the mark at all. Another hint occurs when he refers to love between two people, in general, as “the quick probing tentacles that seek in the dark” (Murdoch 52). This portentous and subconscious image is further reinforced later on when he writes to Hartley: “And I love you as I always did, my old love is there, every little fibre and tentacle and tendril of it intact and sensitive and alive” (Murdoch 202). During a visit from a vengeful ex-mistress, he sees her head replaced with the sea monster: “I suddenly then, as I was staring at her, saw a vision: it was if her face vanished, became a *hole*, and through the hole I saw the snake-like head and teeth and pink opening mouth of my sea monster” (Murdoch 102). Notice also the recurrence of the possessive “my.” He sees her as the sea monster because it seems she harbors one too, considering she has vowed to make his life utterly and totally miserable if he decides to marry. The sea monster that dwells within Charles literally squirms through during the former instances quoted above.

When Titus, the adopted son of Hartley, after having run away two years ago, returns not to his adopted parents’ home but to Charles’s, he asks Charles if he is his real father. Charles tells him the truth but still feels attracted to him as if he were his father. Perhaps Charles really sees him as a proxy for Hartley, or as a means to capture and connect with her, although Charles denies such reasons and admits that he has developed a quick kind of love for the boy. After some convincing, Titus decides to stay a while at Charles’s residence and Charles witnesses him swimming. Titus is a strong and agile swimmer. But when Charles walks “across the grass and climbed over the rocks as far as the little cliff in time to see Titus’s long pale legs elevated to heaven as he dived under the green water,” he is reminded of “Breughel’s Icarus. *Absit omen.*” (Murdoch 282). The famous painting, titled *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, depicts Icarus inconspicuously drowning in a corner of a bay, demonstrating the tragedy as really uneventful and, by the people, indifferent. The same idea is rendered into a poem by William Carlos Williams, which is based on and named after the painting:

when Icarus fell

it was spring

[...]

unsignificantly

off the coast

there was

a splash quite unnoticed

this was

Icarus drowning (Williams)

The omen, of course, which Charles had casually shunned, comes to fruition on page 383 when Titus is found to be drowned, taken by “the ruthless unchilding” “teasing and killing sea” (Murdoch 455), as Charles later phrases it. The event of Titus’s drowning does attract a small crowd, composed mostly of Charles’s guests, and does not go as unnoticed and without event as Breughel’s Icarus. But the death does seem a pitiable one, in the service of nothing, in vain. Afterward, Charles confesses, “My responsibility for Titus’s death, which now so largely occupied my mind, amounted to this: I had never warned him about the sea. Why had I not done so? *Out of vanity*... I had wanted to show him that I too was strong and fearless” (Murdoch 398). Later he echoes and confirms this thought: “He died because he trusted me. My vanity destroyed him” (Murdoch 455). The confession holds even when we consider the sea as Charles’s ego and his harbor of jealousy and spite. Such is the sea which turned out to have killed Titus, otherwise Titus would not have stayed with Charles, or even showed up at his doorstep. Taken as is, too, Titus would probably be alive if Charles warned him about the ‘real’ sea’s hostility and danger. Unless, of course, Titus suffered from his own Icarus Complex, which is quite possible, then he would have gone regardless of warning.

The metaphorical climax of Charles’s Icarus Complex occurs during a night of eating and drinking. Charles wanders to the rock-bridge formation near his home, which arcs over a circular cut in the rocks that the sea violently whirlpools in. Charles falls in, or claims he was pushed in, the powerful whirlpool. “Falling,” explains Charles, “what the child fears, what the man dreads, is itself the image of death, of the defencelessness of the body, of its frailty and mortality, its absolute subjection to alien causes” (Murdoch 361) When he comes to he is lying on his back on the rocks: “I opened my eyes and saw a star” (Murdoch 362). How appropriate, to see the metaphorical or celestial cause of one’s downfall, the culprit or killer looking over the body, as it were. The pusher turns out to have been, not Ben, as Charles had imagined, but Peregrine, a guest who had been at his house and the ex-husband of an ex-mistress of Charles. In the past, Charles had broken up their marriage and stolen her but then subsequently left her. An act of jealousy and destruction for its own sake, and an act which echoes its effect to the point where Peregrine, filled with his own hatred, pushes Charles into the whirlpool. Charles brought

this on himself with a long history of 'home-wrecking.' As Peregrine tells Charles: "You took her out of sheer spiteful jealousy. Ok, I can be jealous too" (Murdoch 394).

He eventually sees Peregrine back with the wife Charles had stolen. They are happy and have decided to reunite. When Charles asks Peregrine if he still thinks him a monster, Peregrine replies, "No... I killed the monster when I pushed you into the sea. I'm glad you survived, really. All's well that ends well" (Murdoch 431). The idea is much like that in *The Odyssey*, where Odysseus loses his ship within the whirlpool upon his return and is washed up, clinging to a tree branch. Afterward, he is symbolically renewed. In the postscript to the 'memoirs,' Charles sounds wiser than before: "The only fault which I can at all measure is my own. I let loose my own demons, not least the sea serpent of jealousy" (Murdoch 486). At last, he realizes that the monster had been something within him all along. The fall served as the necessary antidote to his Icarus Complex.

The Fathers May Soar: Morrison's *Song of Solomon*

Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* is a kind of coming-of-age story involving the oddly named protagonist Milkman Dead. The novel begins with a "little insurance agent's conviction that he could fly," standing atop the cupola of a hospital called Mercy and stretching and flapping his "wide blue silk wings" (Morrison 5). During the scene, Pilate, which is Milkman's estranged sister, sings an African folk-sounding song that describes someone flying home across the sky.

Beforehand, the insurance agent had left a note on the front of his home: "I will take off from Mercy and fly away on my own wings. Please forgive me. I loved you all" (Morrison 1). This is the mindset that resonates throughout the novel. The yearning to fly free with one's own wings, and, just maybe, to go home, wherever home may be. The novel is set around the 1930s and later in 1963. Rightly so, the African American community is unhappy with their situation, living in the echoing suppression of slavery and the very much alive and dream-stifling atmosphere of racism, as demonstrated when it is expressed that "jumping from the roof of Mercy was the most interesting thing [the insurance agent] had done" (Morrison 8-9). And, like Milkman's sister Pilate, they lift their spirits and strengthen their ancestral roots through song and other forms of culture that they can still cling to. During the tumultuous jumping scene, Milkman is born by Ruth Foster Dead, in the same hospital, with the blue-winged man flying downward beyond the window of the room. "Mr. Smith's blue wings must have left their mark, because when [Milkman] discovered, at four, the same thing [the insurance agent] had learned earlier—that only birds and airplanes could fly—he lost all interest in himself. To have to live without that single gift saddened him and left his imagination so bereft" (Morrison 9).

African mythology and folklore says that Africans have the ability of flight, but had lost the knowledge of that ability when they were brought as slaves to America. The specific story that has been told for over 200 years, which is said to have taken place in Ebo Landing in Georgia, explains how a group of African slaves took flight, or turned into vultures, and returned home to Africa (Powell). Without this gift, or the knowledge of it, it is no wonder Milkman is without ambition. As stated, "His life was pointless,

aimless, and it was true that he didn't concern himself an awful lot about other people. There was nothing he wanted bad enough to risk anything for, inconvenience himself for" (Morrison 107). To ameliorate this, Milkman must find his wings; he must become an Icarus.

The novel is divided into two parts: his life in urban Michigan, and then his journey to find a stash of gold his father had told him about. In a way, the coming-of-age of Milkman lasts a lifetime, due to his situation of birth into a community of uprooted African Americans.

During a road trip as a boy with his family, Milkman is forced to sit between his parents in the front of the vehicle, where the only place he can see something is outside the back window over the seat: "So it was only by kneeling on the dove gray seat and looking out the back window that he could see anything other than the laps, feet, and hands of his parents, the dashboard, or the silver winged woman poised at the tip of the Packard. But riding backward made him uneasy. It was like flying blind, and not knowing where he was going [...] troubled him" (Morrison 32). This is a perfect juxtaposition that reveals Milkman's situation. He is forced to look backward, to no avail, as we see: "It was becoming a habit—this concentration on things behind him. Almost as though there was no future to be had" (Morrison 35). But because his past has been obfuscated, his future is too, for how can we make ourselves if we do not know ourselves? As it is in the vehicle, so it is in the journey of his life. He can only see anything if he looks backward first, and, at the age of thirty-two and still living with his parents, he decides to go on a quest that begins as a hunt for the gold his father told him about. But it evolves into a search for his roots, his ancestral history.

Early in his journey for the gold, accompanied by his childhood friend Guitar, Milkman spots an ostensibly zoo-escaped peacock, "poised on the roof of a long low building" (Morrison 178). When the bird flies down "Milkman felt again his unrestrained joy at anything that could fly" (Morrison 178). Milkman asks why the peacock cannot fly any better than a chicken, and Guitar answers: "Too much tail. All that jewelry weighs it down. Like vanity. Can't nobody fly with all that shit. Wanna fly, you got to give up the shit that weighs you down" (Morrison 179). This is clearly a warning against, not so much ambition, but vanity and greed, although that is not thing the only limitation that could weigh a person down. Milkman's weight is the ghostly chains of the past, of his ancestors' slavery. When the gold is not found in the spot he had been told it was located, he goes alone to a cave near his father's old Pennsylvanian farm, the original source of the gold.

He takes a plane:

The airplane ride exhilarated him, encouraged illusion and a feeling of invulnerability. High above the clouds, heavy yet light, caught in the stillness of speed [...] sitting in intricate metal become glistening bird, it was not possible to believe he had ever made a mistake, or could. (Morrison 220)

This taste of the capability of flight seems to insert Milkman's brain with a form of the Icarus Complex. His feelings align with the symptom of *ascensionsm*, but without the

anticipation of a foreboding fall, because there is too much hope in him. Similarly, when he sleeps with a woman in Pennsylvania, he has “a warm dreamy sleep all about flying. [...] Part of the flight was over the dark sea, but it didn’t frighten him because he knew he could not fall” (Morrison 298). One worries if the delusion of immortality is not portent of demise. As Guitar tells Milkman, “If things ever got tough, you’d melt. You’re not a serious person, Milkman” (Morrison 104). A subtle reference to the wax wings of Icarus. Milkman doesn’t take the criticism lightly.

Rather than flying from the traps of religion, nationality, birth, and language, as Joyce’s hero does, Milkman attempts flying *to* them, in search of them. And he finds at least a part of it. When Milkman first decides to get the gold his father told him about, he attempts to recruit his friend Guitar who is “smiling at the sun, his eyes closed as though to ready himself for the gold by trying out a little bit of the sun’s” (Morrison 175). This foreshadows Milkman’s lone journey to find the real location of the gold, going to the sun, as it were, and falling/failing along the way until he figures out his past: that his great-grandfather “was one of those flying African children” (Morrison 321), who flew home with a group of other slaves. The knowledge of his ancestors and the reality of flight cause him sheer joy. In consequence, he willingly throws himself into the sea. “I need the sea! The whole goddamn sea! [...] I need the whole entire complete deep blue sea!” (Morrison 326-327). Here he has developed, like both protagonists in the two previous novels, a *cathexis* for the sea. He settles for a lake that is nearby and swims in it.

The catalyst of finding out his history is an old song that he hears the children singing while playing outside. The song, ending with “*Solomon done fly, Solomon done gone/ Solomon cut across the sky, Solomon gone home*” (Morrison 303), is a kind of linguistic riddle that Milkman solves with much concentration. Afterward, his family is reconnected through history. Milkman is later shot at from afar by an angry Guitar who thought Milkman had wanted to steal the gold for himself. Guitar misses and hits his sister Pilate. After Milkman’s sister dies from the wayward bullet, Milkman realizes, holding her in his arms, that “without ever leaving the ground, she could fly” (Morrison 336). She lived her life on her terms and to the fullest that she could with what she was dealt. Rising, Milkman decides to face his fate with Guitar and let him do what he will, “for he now knew what [his great-grandfather] knew: If you surrender to the air, you could *ride* it” (Morrison 337). The ending is left open with that sentence. But one magical possibility is that Milkman used his power of flight to escape, or that after his death it was his soul that flew on the air. Either way, we know that the knowledge of flight became his; the question, then, is of ability.

Habitation of the Gods: A Conclusion

Although the classical interpretation of the Greek myth of Icarus and Daedalus is a warning against over-ambition, there are other ways to interpret the meaning. A broader way to view it is as a description of the potential of the human condition: the want to rise, the possibility to fall, and what may happen in consequence. Death, although in the myth, is not always the case. In Joyce’s and Morrison’s novels the consequence was freedom, although through converse goals: the attainment of or the rejection of nationality, religion, birth, and language, so that an ideal self could be discovered or attained. With Murdoch’s novel the protagonist’s fall acts as a similar renewal, an attainment of much-

needed wisdom. Marquez's old man with wings serves as one of the ultimate allegories for the struggle of a hardened artist in society. All of the characters, as shown, fit in with the psychoanalytic concept of the Icarus Complex in one or more ways. Plato explains in the *Phaedrus* dialogue, "The wing is the corporeal element which is most akin to the divine, and which by nature tends to soar aloft and carry that which gravitates downwards into the upper region, which is the habitation of the gods." To fly is the goal, to fall is the potential. The myth will doubtless continue to inspire and influence art in different ways, and it will continue to inform us about what and how we are.

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