

**University of Winchester**

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## **Icarus extended paper 1**

### **Icarus in ellipses ... some thoughts on textual intervention**

Abstract:

This paper traces images of Icarus through a song from Scottish folksinger Karine Polwart, through Icarus's imagined murder by Daedalus and then on to the terrible events on the fateful day now called simply 9/11, through ideas by Baudrillard, Benjamin, Foucault, Freud, Fukuyama and Žižek, before coming back to the song as a finale with a special note for Naucrate, Icarus' absent mother. During the journey, the paper introduces the potential of "textual intervention" as a valid form of imaginative engagement which maintains a critically creative and creatively critical vigilance.

Biographical note:

Andrew Melrose is Professor of Children's Writing at the University of Winchester, UK., he has over 150 film, fiction, non-fiction, research, songs, poems and other writing credits, including The Story Keepers film series, a "textual intervention" on the New Testament, broadcast worldwide, and 28 scholarly or creative books; is the editor of the journal *Writing4Children* and a founding member of the *TEXT: Journal of writing and writing courses* international advisory board and Routledge will publish *Here Comes the Bogeyman: Exploring contemporary issues in writing for children* and *Monsters Under the Bed: Critically investigating early years writing* in 2011.

Keywords:

Textual Intervention—Icarus—9/11—Creatively Critical—Critically Creative Writing

In pursuing traces of the work of the very fine Scottish singer songwriter, Karine Polwart, through Google and You Tube, I came across a live version of her singing her own song, *We're All Leaving* ([http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W59sX-PsGZc&feature=player\\_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W59sX-PsGZc&feature=player_embedded)) as part of a unique folk song and singing collaboration entitled The Darwin Song Project. The project has been described as “A unique collaboration between eight of the world's best contemporary folk music songwriters. Originally created by the Shrewsbury Folk Festival to mark the [life and works of their most famous son, Charles Darwin]...”<sup>1</sup>. Indeed it was a most remarkable creative undertaking and the resulting music is a testimony to its success<sup>2</sup>. It is also a “textual intervention” on the life and works of Charles Darwin, which are interpreted in a number of different ways into song and music. Though while I was researching this material I also came across Karine singing her song, *Beo* ([http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PGxEX-OZQW0&feature=player\\_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PGxEX-OZQW0&feature=player_embedded)) which has nothing to do with the Darwin project, but it has, as I suggested to her, resonances of the story of Icarus, which I had also been working on. She has kindly given me permission to include an extract here:

I'm going home and I'm going home soon  
Beo beo ...

To where a boy at the window  
is opening up his wings to the world  
I'm gonna be there  
when he takes to the air  
I'm gonna watch them unfurl  
Beo beo ....<sup>3</sup>

In correspondence on this idea of resonances as textual intervention and in my hope I could include it here, Karine Polwart said she was, “Surprised and delighted! I love all the "unsaid" stuff and the many possible stories ...”<sup>4</sup> Of course, in some ways the lyrics quoted above reveal that perhaps this song is an unwitting, almost by osmosis, textual intervention on the story of Icarus, the boy who put on wings made by his father and flew, and indeed it is simply my biased reading of her song. Which is an issue made all the more possible because I too write songs and had recently written this first person lyric:

Tonight  
I will be flying 'cross your moon  
Chasing rainbows – around your room<sup>5</sup>

This is an extract from a song with a direct reference to an Icarus theme. But as can be seen, the unsaid possibilities, the many possible stories and the ellipses that live inside Karine's work and indeed any writer's work demonstrates, for me at least, how stories and songs and ideas intertwine and link through the centuries and across the miles and landscapes of storytelling. And this is a theme which my colleagues on this panel have explored further.

When we found ourselves putting an initial proposal together for this panel of four parts we did so from the starting point that writing has always been a critically creative and creatively critical exercise, a process in which an ontological idea is met

with an epistemological enquiry, which in turn reinforces the cyclical idea that better readers – make better thinkers – make better writers – make better readers – make better ... as the endless ellipses extend the underpinning ideas of knowledge. In practical terms, we decided to demonstrate this by intervening in already existing stories and texts – hence the Icarus theme.

But this textual intervening idea is more than just this; it's a means of examining the themes, or characters, or style and symbols, or examples of language – indeed any aspect of the text – by choosing it as a starting point to write imaginatively. This process means engaging with a text actively rather than passively, as a creator rather than as a reader<sup>6</sup>. And re-reading and intervening in the very slight story of Icarus, for example, allows us to speculate on other issues that live outside the narrative we are presented with; those things that remain unspoken in the spaces between the presented narrative, like his mother; his love; his flight; his thoughts; dreams; ideas; philosophy and so on.

Furthermore, Icarus was a risk taker and therefore an ideal subject. Sigmund Freud wrote, 'Life is impoverished ... when the highest stake in the game of living, life itself, may not be risked.'<sup>7</sup> This idea on risk taking does address the whole idea of creativity and being creative. All writing is a form of risk taking. All artists have to take risks by the very nature of art itself. And even when we find ourselves bound by convention and caution (even in youthful folly we know not to stick our hands in the fire) the pull to adventure, the temptation to explore, to travel, to step into the unknown (even of the unconscious) is strong and this is where I feel Icarus' parallels on creativity come to the fore.

But let's turn back to the story. In short, Icarus was the son of Daedalus who made wings of feathers and wax and strapped them onto his son's back so they could both escape the punishment of King Minos, of Crete. But the perceived wisdom of the Daedalus/Icarus<sup>8</sup> story seems to suggest that Icarus was a foolish boy because he failed to heed his father's wise advice to fly the middle way, not too high and not too low, the risk free route. But instead Icarus flew too close to the sun, which melted his wings and saw him fall to his death. One of the most remarkable things about the story and its subsequent translations is that instead of expressing it as a flight for freedom, it has become a fable about living risk free and has been moralised in a finger-wagging exercise of innocence to experience as a story of folly. Icarus, we are told, took so much pleasure in his wings that they become the object of his downfall and that his recklessness should serve as a warning to youth and their foolhardy follies. But let me unfurl something I have been thinking about for a long time here because thinking creatively about the story of Icarus and of Icarus as a creative adventurer it can come to represent so much more.

The story of Icarus (in its many retellings) is indeed a tale of folly; the folly of the boy who didn't listen to his father's advice; advice gleaned from experience long stored as memory. Icarus' folly, as if we needed reminding, was that he flew too close to the sun, from which a lesson can be learned. And the lesson is as much about not getting above your self as it is a warning against reckless behaviour. Yet this troubles me –

especially if we are to establish the moral authority of the story itself – and indeed the moral message it seems to have accumulated through the centuries.

If we think about it seriously, Daedalus was the survivor who witnessed his own son falling into the sea. But a very real question remains; was Daedalus a credible narrator of the event which led to the death of Icarus? Let's raise a couple of questions here. Daedalus, the known murderer of Talus, creator of the *labyrinth hic minotaurus*, the great conjurer who gifted flight to Icarus, only to put a restriction on it: can we believe a word he says?

Moreover, can we subscribe to the proposition of the implied message in Ovid's narrative, that we should all live a humbler life? And, humbler than whom? Humbler than Daedalus is, I suspect, a mere hypothesis but let's consider it. When Icarus was flying he ignored the height warning and, reckless as he may have seemed, he was already represented as experiencing a high his own father never would: thus, Icarus became the knowledgeable one, critically creative and creatively critical in making his own artistic choice.

Having previously relied on the vicarious experience being passed on by his father, Icarus was now the one who knew what it really felt like to be alive. Then when he went into freefall he was gaining a further, heady experience, something else his father never would: the freedom of it, the sheer exhilarating, reckless freedom. Therefore it's easy to suggest that Daedalus may have murdered his son because he just couldn't stand being the inexperienced one – in flying so high (solo) Icarus had surpassed the experience of his father.

But murder, well we have the experience of Talus to compare it with. When the apprenticed Talus had surpassed the master by becoming the better craftsman, inventing the saw and the potter's wheel, Daedalus simply murdered him and indeed he is implicated in a number of shady shenanigans. Although, of course, this is something we all have to live with – the trace of our own reputations being surpassed by those of our successors (our sons, daughters and students). Thus, the question in the ellipsis, in the cracks in the story, in the unwritten and unsaid, is, did Icarus fall, or was he pushed – are we entitled to ask if this was the real story? After all, Icarus is described by his father as: "... a wretched youth... now a dire example... for those who aspire to be supremely great ..." <sup>9</sup> Hardly the words of a grieving father and we need to be reminded that the name Daedalus (Δαίδαλος) actually means "cunning worker". Or is there something else for us to consider? For where in the narrative of life and death can the story of Icarus take us?

Though it should also be said that in drawing attention to this uneven treatment of the characters we run the risk of falling into anachrony, we do not intend to laminate the present and the ancient worlds, but only to use elements of their brief stories to frame and investigate other questions that occur. In fact, the very paucity of their narrative is productive of thought and, potentially, of insights that extend beyond their historical era. Michel Foucault writes about those 'brief lives', those people who enter the record only in the form of 'a few lines or a few pages, nameless misfortunes and adventures, gathered together in a handful of words ..., chanced upon in books and documents' <sup>10</sup> But if we do not embrace them and think about them and the ideas they

can engender we are not critically engaged – and surely critical engagement is crucial. It has been said that the pen is mightier than the sword, a cliché, perhaps, an artist would say the brush, a singer the voice, but if it is mightier than the artist, the writer is there to help to adjust the inner life of a civilisation – providing soul food for the soul miners. Not as a servant at the status quo table but as a critical reflection on values and principles, lest we become overwhelmed by the sheer weight of apathy (or might that be the “c” word – conservatism). Indeed, I was thinking about this idea of critical engagement whilst re-reading the essay, “Bertold Brecht Against György Lukács” and thinking about him writing this:

Even the realistic mode of writing, of which literature provides many very different examples, bears the stamp of the way it was employed, when and by which class, down to its smallest details. With the people struggling and changing reality before our eyes, we must not cling to 'tried' rules of narrative, venerable literary models, eternal aesthetic laws ... Our concept of realism must be wide and political, sovereign over all conventions ... Reality changes; in order to represent it, modes of representation must also change. Nothing comes from nothing; the new comes from the old, but that is why it is new.<sup>11</sup>

An intervention from Icarus is a new from the old, though sometimes the newness in textual interventions are designed to shock, so let’s extend this idea onto an idea of an extremist Icarus.

Francis Fukuyama famously wrote, *The End of History and the Last Man*<sup>12</sup> in which he argued that the progression of human history, as a struggle between ideologies, was at an end, with the world settling on liberal democracy and I have always harboured doubts about this argument – and here is why. What we saw in New York on the fateful day now called simply 9/11 was the role of the artist being taken over by terror. It was a sadistically artistic act and that cannot be denied. For all its horrible consequence, watching the attack on the World Trade Centre unfold had a rare macabre impact, which, because of the media used to record and reproduce it, forced itself into the soul of mankind and it did indeed change the inner life of the culture being targeted; when, as Slavoj Žižek has indicated, via the ultra-right wing US journalist, George Will, the USA awoke from its holiday from history<sup>13</sup>.

That kind of flying terror relied on the Icarus effect. Jihadi boys sent flying by hitherto unnamed imam fathers, high on adrenalin for the audacious act, which would be witnessed, not just by the unstable narrator but all over the world just as it happened; planes crashing into buildings; people throwing themselves out of buildings; buildings and planes and people crashing out of the sky, the big gesture – the combination of the fear, flying and falling all in one contained moment of brutal anarchy. Those boys, whose ‘brief lives’ Foucault writes about, entered the record only in the form of ‘a few lines or a few pages, nameless misfortunes and adventures, gathered together in a handful of words ...’<sup>14</sup> or indeed like the ellipses of a text trying to speak words not yet formed to interrupt the holiday – into which we can read complacency; smugness; lazy thinking; arrogance of thought that suggested liberal democracy faced no dissent – and I will take this idea forward next.

On that fateful 9/11 day, art and terror collided as our gaze followed the images being offered and our immediate reaction was one of *Dialektic im Stillstand* – *dialectics at a standstill*<sup>15</sup> (to paraphrase Walter Benjamin) – because that seems to be the impact of such an event. Historical time became encapsulated in images forming what Tiedemann called a “historical constellation”. Time was no longer past time, but, rather, coagulated in the imagistic configuration of the now; in the immediacy of the actual event as it unfolded. For me this is modernism in action and still saying something new, still denying the claims of its postmodern imposter. Fukuyama couldn’t have been more wrong! At the point of surprise and disbelief we stop to gaze before we can react ... it is the briefest point in the act of creative thought that comes before description; before language, which comes after the realisation and then becomes the story and the story of the story and stories for they are all textual interventions, thereafter ... and *jouissance* well that is part of it too and something else for another time, for its our job to try to analyse and rationalise it. How can there be an end of history? As Brecht said, ‘Nothing comes from nothing; the new comes from the old, but that is why it is new.’<sup>16</sup> Indeed in relation to this, Jean Baudrillard has commented that,

... the secret of philosophy may not be to know oneself, nor to know where one is going, but rather to go where the other is going; not to dream oneself, but rather to dream what others dream; not to believe oneself, but rather to believe in those who do believe ...<sup>17</sup>

Now I agree this is a big plunge from Karine Polwart into the huge picture of ideological challenges to liberal democracy – even when trying to contextualise it into the broad picture that is life in art and art in life<sup>18</sup>. But for me it serves as something more – the Icarus story is a fable whose bigger story lies in the ellipses, lurks in the unsaid and loiters in the silences as hypothetical postulates that exist in and around the story itself; in and around the story of the other and otherness. And it’s a curious thing to note how often creative people, artists and poets and all kinds of writers come to invoke the possibilities of this Daedalus/Icarus theme as a rejection of conventionality, as a rejection of the middle way, in other words promoting the thrill of the flight for foolish boys; we just have to seek them out to see how obvious they engage and then twist the perceived convention of the fable as a finger-wagging, moralising tale – and its not hard (and of course neither is it gender specific – the laws of probability tell us there are also some foolish girls out there – perhaps even reading this). I will leave Karine to sing us out:

I'm going home...  
 I'm gonna run as fast as I can...  
 Beo beo...  
  
 To where a boy at the window  
 is opening up his heart for the first time  
 I'm gonna be there to keep it from care  
 I'm gonna hold it in mine  
 Beo beo..

I know the song was written for her two year old boy and the narrator is essentially a mother singing about her love of her son, a Naucrate singing about her Icarus – and wouldn't that be a great story? The story of Naucrate who is written out of almost all the accounts we have of Icarus, a story of a mother being there when he opens his wings and takes to the air, a mother being there to catch him if he is let down or falls. But there is a wider reading; without knowing that it is a mother and child song it could be heard as a love prospect seeking out the boy as he opens up his heart for the first time, in preparation for the flight of his life – perhaps? Or even ... but there go those Icarus ellipses again with another story. The song is called *Beo* and the refrain throughout has Karine singing "... *beo beo*..." it's a live story of life... and just for the record, the word *beo*, is the Gaelic word for "life" or "alive" like *bios* the Greek word for "life" which links it to Icarus story even more – although Karine Polwart didn't know this at the time of writing the song nor did I at first time of listening. But this only helps to validate much more of this idea of textual intervention and indeed the stories in songs than she or I could have thought at the time of writing. Stories go on and on in endless ellipses. As a wise man once said, sentences end on a full stop, stories [and songs and poems] do not<sup>19</sup>, they linger to intertwine and link through the centuries and across the miles and landscapes of storytelling...

## Endnotes

1. Details of the Darwin Song Project, at <http://www.darwinsongproject.com/>
2. The Darwin Song Project CD is available to purchase and on iTunes.
3. *Beo* Words & Music: Karine Polwart (Bay Songs Ltd 2006) and it is on the album *This Earthly Spell* (2008). The full text can be seen on her website, at <http://www.karinepolwart.com>
4. In private correspondence dated 25/08/2010
5. *Tonight (I'll be flying)*, Andrew Melrose, 2009
6. *Textual Intervention: Critical and Creative Strategies for Literary Studies*, Pope, R.:1
7. *Thoughts for the Times on War and Death*, Sigmund Freud, 1915
8. Ovid, *Metamorphosis*, Book VIII Trans, A. D. Melville, Oxford: 1986, Book VIII 171-178
9. Ovid, *Metamorphosis*, Book VIII Trans, A. D. Melville, Oxford: 1986, Book VIII 171-178
10. Foucault, Michel 1979 [1977] 'The life of infamous men' in Meaghan Morris and Paul Patton (eds), *Michel Foucault: Power, Truth, Strategy* (trans Paul Foss and Meaghan Morris), Sydney: Feral Publications, 76-91
11. "Bertold Brecht Against György Lukács", *Aesthetics and Politics Debates Between Bloch*, Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin and Adorno, trans Ronald Taylor, Verso, London, 1977
12. *The End of History and the Last Man*, Francis Fukuyama, 1992
13. *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, Slavoj Žižek, 2002
14. Foucault, Michel 1979 [1977] 'The life of infamous men' in Meaghan Morris and Paul Patton (eds), *Michel Foucault: Power, Truth, Strategy* (trans Paul Foss and Meaghan Morris), Sydney: Feral Publications, 76-91
15. "dialectics at a standstill – this is the quintessence of the method" *The Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin, Ed. Rolf Tiedemann. Trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge: Belknap/Harvard UP, 1999: 865.

16. "Bertold Brecht Against György Lukács", *Aesthetics and Politics Debates Between Bloch, Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin and Adorno*, trans Ronald Taylor, Verso, London, 1977
17. *The Transparency of Evil*, Jean Baudrillard, 1990: 187-8
18. *Stories and Meanings*, Rosen, Harold, 1985

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