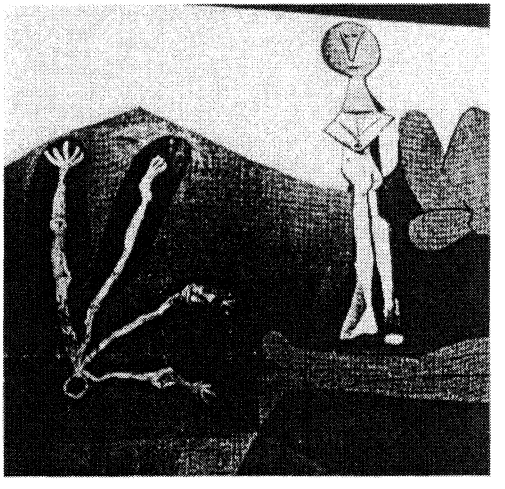
Falling into the Dark Side: Ominous Motifs in the 'Fall of Icarus' Myth

Frances Di Lauro

On the twenty-ninth of March, 1958, in the Vallauris Public School yard in Paris, Pablo Picasso unveiled the largest composition he had ever undertaken. Each panel, painted on the floor, was to be assembled on a wall of one hundred square metres in the main hall (the 'Delegates' Lounge') of the UNESCO building in the heart of the city. Picasso referred to the piece simply as 'the UNESCO painting' and had promised that it would 'depict peaceful humanity turning its gaze toward the happy future'.[1]



Pablo Picasso, *The Fall of Icarus*, mural 1958, Palais de l'UNESCO, Paris (Roger-Viollet). [2]

When unveiled, however, delegates from UNESCO were speechless. Their anxiety could not be assuaged by reassurances from Picasso's

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[1] P. Caban, *Picasso: His Life and Times*, trans. Harold Satenson (New York, 1977) p487.

[2] *Ibid*, p489.

supporters that the painting was a true masterpiece. It was not until Georges Salles, the honorary director of French Museums, dubbed the painting *The Fall of Icarus*, in the inaugural speech, that the image seemed to make 'some kind of sense'.[1]

Although compatible with the questionable architecture of the UNESCO building, the Picasso mural was viewed contentiously and the relevance of its theme failed to convince. Picasso, dejected, did not attend the subsequent Heads of UNESCO dinner for architects and artists, at which 'Georges Salles' *Icarus*' as Caban terms it, dominated the conversation. When the UNESCO Secretary General, Dr Luther Evans, pressured Salles to explain the image, Le Corbusier came to his assistance:

> Picasso's panel is a masterpiece and like all masterpieces it cannot be explained. What does it matter what we think of it today? Its beauty will be apparent ten years from now.[2]

It may be prudent here to revisit the myth concerning Icarus (in several variant forms) in order to identify its inherent power effects and its associations with both the light and the dark.

The Myth

Ovid's account of the Fall of Icarus is probably the best known. He recounts that after building the labyrinth for King Minos, Dædalus, a skilled architect, was imprisoned with his helper and son, Icarus. Dædalus realised that both land and sea were patrolled by Minos, meaning that escape was possible only through the sky. Thus, he set about altering the laws of nature, inventing pairs of wings, using wax, feathers and thread. Meanwhile,

> [h]is son, Icarus, stood beside him and, not knowing that the materials he was handling were to endanger his life, laughingly captured the feathers which blew away in the wind, or softened the

[1] *Ibid*, pp484-8.
[2] *Ibid*, p490.

> yellow wax with his thumb, and by his pranks hindered the marvellous work on which his father was engaged.[1]

Upon finishing his invention and testing out his own wings, Dædalus also prepared his son to fly. Then, overcome with tears as he warned his son to fly precisely 'midway between earth and heaven', he fastened the wings onto Icarus's shoulders. If he flew too high, the sun would scorch and melt the wax; if he flew too low, the water would make the wings heavy. Then, urging Icarus to follow him closely, Dædalus took the lead, poignantly instructing his son 'in the art that was to be his ruin'.

Inevitably, Icarus failed to heed his father's warnings: 'drawn on by his eagerness for the open sky', he left Dædalus, soaring closer to the sun until the wax melted. His wings disassembled, he plunged into the deep sea while calling out his father's name. In response, Dædalus,

> a father no longer, cried out: 'Icarus! Icarus! ...Where are you? Where am I to look for you?' ...[But as] he was still calling... he saw the feathers on the water and cursed his inventive skill. He laid his son to rest in a tomb, and the land took its name from that of the boy who was buried there.[2]

Virgil's later account, in his *Æneid*, corresponds with Ovid's version, albeit in a condensed form:

> The train with reverence enter, and behold
> Chaste Trivia's grove, and temple roof'd with gold;
> A structure rais'd by Dædalus, ('tis said)
> When from the Cretan king's revenge he fled.
> On wings to Northern climes he dar'd to soar,
> Through airy ways unknown to man before![3]

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[1] Ovid, 'The Death Of Icarus' in his *Metamorphoses*, Book 8. 175-249, trans. Mary M. Innes (London, 1955) pp184-5.

[2] *Loc cit.*

[3] Virgil, *Æneid*, Book 6, 15-20, in *The Works of Virgil, in Latin and English* trans. Christopher Pitt (London, 1753) p169.

Diodorus Siculus, whilst recording a similar account, demonstrates his skepticism of this version by his concluding remark:

> Dædalus, utterly despairing to get away by shipping, made for himself and his son artificial wings, jointed and compacted in a wonderful manner with wax, and fastened them to his own and his son's body, and with them Dædalus suddenly flew away, and got over the Cretan sea: but Icarus soaring too high (such is the folly of young men) fell down into the sea, the sun melting the wax wherewith the feathers of the wings were joined together. But his father flying low near the surface of the sea, and sprinkling his wings in the water, passed over safe into Sicily. *Though this may seem an absurd fable, yet we judged it not fit to be passed by.*[1]

Instead, Diodorus Siculus prefers the following version:

> Dædalus, being informed of Minos' threats for making of the cow, fearing the rage of the king, by the help of the queen got on shipboard, and secretly escaped out of the island. Icarus, his son, fled away with him, and both arrived at a certain island, situated in the ocean far off from any land, where the young man, being too rash and hasty to land, dropt into the sea, and there perished; from whom it is called the Icarian sea, and the island, Icaria[2]... From hence Dædalus sailed into Sicily, and landed there where Cocalus reigned, who received him very courteously; and upon the account of his great skill, and the fame that went of him; made him his bosom friend.[3]

Graves notes that other skeptics such as Plutarch also have Dædalus and Icarus fleeing Crete in a boat. In Plutarch's account, Minos sets his

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[1] Diodorus Siculus, in *The Historical Library of Diodorus the Sicilian, in Fifteen Books, to which are added the Fragments of Diodorus and Those Published by H. Valesius, I. Rhodomannus, and F. Ursinus*, trans. G. Booth, vol.1, Ch.5 (London, 1814), pp287-8, my italics.

[2] Icaros; Ikaria, 'an eastern Aegean island ... The legendary Icarus, Dædalus' son fell into the sea hereabouts. ' From S. Hornblower and A. Spawforth, editors, *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, Third Edition, (New York, 1996), p745.

[3] Diodorus Siculus, *op cit* pp287-8.

fleet in pursuit of the two escapees, who are driven ashore on the coast of Sicily due to inclement weather conditions.[1] This version has the eager Icarus fall into the sea and drown while trying to disembark in Sicily. An alternative version attributes the invention of sails to Dædalus. In this version, Icarus drowns on account of his careless navigation which makes the boat capsize.[2]

Certain themes can be identified in the various accounts included here. At first glance, the myth may appear to explain and authenticate Greek proprietorship of the Isle of Ikaria[3] and surrounding sea[4]. Now although the myth may well have served this secondary purpose, it appears far more likely that the myth is a fragment of a much larger mythological pool which constructed, validated and perpetuated an enviable and inimitable Greek cultural heritage far greater than simply claiming Ikaria. Early brief references to the 'Fall of Icarus' in Homeric literature[5] suggest that audiences of the seventh century BCE were sufficiently familiar with a myth concerning Icarus to enable instant identification without any need for further elaboration.[6]

Willers notes that over a century of research has failed to recover evidence supporting the historical existence of 'Dædalus'. However, a legendary tradition surrounding him does exist in which Dædalus is portrayed as an exemplary, in fact unprecedented, craftsman, artist and innovator:

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[1] Plutarch of Chæronea: *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romanes,* translated from Greek to French by James Amyot, translated from French to English by Thomas North, Vol. 1, (Stratford-Upon-Avon, 1928) p21.

[2] Robert Graves, 'Daedalus and Talos ', in *The Greek Myths*, Vol. 1, 92, (Middlesex, 1975), p313.

[3] '**Icaros** (1) (also Ikaria, the modern name), an eastern Aegean island (255 sq km: 98 sq. mi); long, narrow, lacking good harbours, and dominated by its neighbour Samos ... The legendary Icarus, Daedalus' son, fell into the sea hereabouts ... Strabo describes Icaros as nearly uninhabited and used by Samian pastoralists; but Oinoe, at least, flourished under the Principate, when an odeum and baths were built', from A.J. Papalas, *Ancient Icaria*, (British Admiralty) Naval Intelligence Division, Greece 3 (1945), 546-54; RE 9/1 (1914), 978-85, from Hornblower, S. and Spawforth, A., eds., *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, Third Edition, (New York, 1996), p745.

[4] The water he fell into was named the Icarian Sea, Michael Grant, *Myths of the Greeks and Romans*, (London, 1989), p385.

[5] D. Willers, 'Dedalo' 'in Salvatore Settis, (ed) *I Greci: Storia Cultura Arte Societa* a cura di Salvatore Settis, (Torino, 1996/7) p1295.

[6] *Ibid*, pp1295-6.

> [s]o far as quality of woodwork is concerned, even as an inventor of extraordinary works, from the technical and artistic point of view, Dædalus excels.[1]

In the art of sculpture, he is said to have invented the statue. So lifelike were his inventions that his statues did not simply have eyes; they had looks (stares, gapes, gazes, glares and so on). They did not simply have limbs, they had moveable limbs,[2] and so required chaining to prevent their escape.[3] Some sources hold that Dædalus dedicated a statue to Heracles (who, incidentally, was believed to have buried Icarus) which is so realistic that Heracles, mistaking it for a rival, destroyed it.[4] Unlike his celestial counterparts in the field of technical and artistic innovation, such as Athena and Prometheus, Dædalus is a human. Despite occupying a prominent place in the Greek collective imagination, he was never mythically elevated to demigod and always remained an extraordinarily powerful mortal[5].

As such, the inclusion of the image of Dædalus in myths operates as a form of 'cultural currency' which cements the ideal of Greek cultural supremacy and advancement. However, Morris proposes that amidst maritime trading links with Phoenicians during the Late Bronze Age, Greeks adopted many 'Oriental' artistic and cultural features including some which have since been christened 'Dædalian' in style. Interaction began to contract after Babylon's conquests in the Near East. Morris traces a Greek tradition of appropriating foreign 'inventions' and styles as their own. However, when in conflict with the Persians, the Greeks sought to sharply differentiate themselves from their neighbours and the very benefactors from whom they had acquired their arts.[6] The Dædalian mythological package reflects this

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[1] *Loc cit.* My translation of the original Italian: *'In qualità di falegname ... Anche come inventore di opere straordinarie dal punto di vista tecnico e artistico, Dedalo eccelse'.*

[2] Willers, *op cit*, p1296.

[3] Another rationalist tradition holds that Dædalus was the frst sculptor to separate the limbs of his statues; see Grant, *op cit*, p385.

[4] Graves, *op cit*, p313.

[5]Willers, *op cit*, p1296.

[6] S.P. Morris, *Daidalos and the Origins of Greek Tradition*, (New Jersey, 1992) pp101, 148-51, 384-6.

social and intellectual transformation and the underlying the history of appropriation which goes with it by ascribing a Hellenic origin to foreign innovations.

The mythological corpus surrounding Dædalus was transmitted through art and monumental architecture, literature (including poetry[1]) and was later inscribed into the satirical performance tradition. In terms of art, a nomenclature developed to support the 'Dædalian' style. Later Latin literature and Roman art also exploited the power effects of the 'Dædalian' tradition in light of the legendary hero's reported migration to Cumae or Sicily.[2] The myth was also appropriated as currency in a contest of proficiency and supremacy. An example of this is found in Horace's *Odes* where the myth's 'genuine' metamorphosis actually rivals the 'artificial one' of Ovid's doomed Icarus.[3]

Brueghel's Icarus

Grant notes that, with few exceptions, '[t]he impact of neither poetry nor mythology, today, is generally reinforced by visual means'.[4] However, the two exceptions Grant cites are the two we are mainly concerned with: Picasso and Brueghel. Although the Brueghel examples date to the sixteenth century, they demonstrate a variant mode of transmission/storage.

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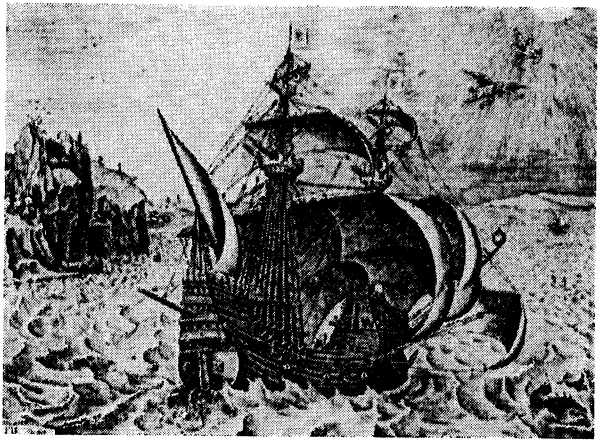
[1] See for example, Horace, *The Odes of Horace*, trans. Helen Rowe Henze, (Oklahoma, 1961) vol. 2, pp20, 112-13.

[2] Morris, *op cit*, pp61-9.

[3] R.W. Carrubba, 'The White Swan and Daedalian Icarus', in *Eranos* 80 (1982) pp146-8.

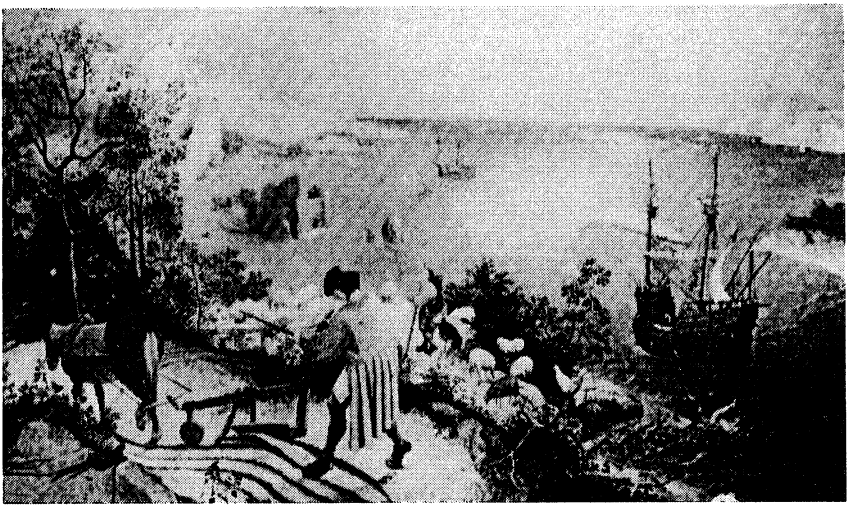
[4] Grant, *op cit*, p320.



Peter Brueghel the Elder, *Man of War Sailing to the Right, with the Fall of Icarus*, Engraving c.1562-64.[1]

Detail of *Man of War Sailing to the Right, with the Fall of Icarus.*

[1] H.A. and M.C Klein, *Peter Bruegel the Elder: Artist of Abundance. An Illustrated Portrait of His Life, Era, and Art*, (New York, 1968) pp66-7.



Peter Brueghel the Elder, *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, oil on wood panel c.1555, later transferred to canvas.[1]

Detail of *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*.

[1] *Ibid*, pp68-9.

Brueghel the Elder's first rendering of the *Fall of Icarus* in about 1555 overcodes his interpretation by depicting a 'fisher', 'shepherd' and 'peasant bent over his plough handle' all completely immersed in the realities of their daily lives and oblivious to, if not totally indifferent to Icarus's tragic fall.[1] The depiction satirises the egoism and self-confidence of the mortal craftsman and inverts the prominence assigned in the myth to the humans who would 'be gods'. Brueghel's depiction is an obvious riposte to Ovid's account wherein

> Some fisher, perhaps, plying his quivering rod, some shepherd leaning on his staff, or a peasant bent over his plough handle caught sight of them as they flew and stood stock still in astonishment, believing that these creatures who could fly through the air must be gods.[2]

For Brueghel, the myth evoked a totally different, previously unparalleled interpretation. His re-encoding of the myth engendered 'a framework of indifferent nature – and indifferent human beings, detached and apathetic in their eternally humble lives'[3] thus giving rise to the adage 'no plough stops for a man who dies'.[4] Brueghel's vision is strongly motivated by a sense of Chrsitian humility (represented by the indifferent 'common man': the 'fisher', the 'shepherd', the 'peasant') which is contrasted with a certain Greco-Roman elitism (represented by the reckless fallen Icarus, and the implied hubris of Dædalus). Brueghel does not so much reinterpret the myth as he shifts its emphasis, and it was this that was later to appeal to W. H. Auden, who was moved to comment in his 'Musée des Beaux Arts':

> In Brueghel's *Icarus*, for instance: how everything turns away
> Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
> Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,

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[1] Klein *op cit*, pp67-8. The latter state, indifference, is Bruegel's more likely intention. This is supported by the indifference to human mortality inferred by the presence of a corpse in the bushes, magnified in the detail of the *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* shown in my *Appendix*.

[2] Ovid, *op cit*, pp85.

[3] Grant, *op cit* pp385-6.

[4] *Loc cit*.

But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.[1]

Icarus and the Flight from Tyranny

Yet another more recent interpretation of the *Fall of Icarus* myth concerns itself with righteousness overthrowing evil. This is the sense adopted by Lauro de Bosis, the translator into Italian of both an abridged version of Frazer's *Golden Bough* and several Greek tragedies, and who also held a passion for the evolution of modern science. In 1929, he won the Olympic prize for poetry in Amsterdam for his poetic drama *Icaro* in which we hear that

He fell here, Icarus; these waves received
In their soft lap his bright audacious wings ...
Happy the man who meets with such a fate
And by his death obtains so great a prize!
...And now his name re-echoes far and wide.
Across the sea, thro' a vast element,
Who else has ever had so wide a tomb? ...
And what today is a dream
Through the poet's vision becomes a living, working force:
an earthly thing. [2]

Here, de Bosis reconciles an ideological rift, with science's (Dædalus') quest for knowledge overcoming tyranny's (Minos') pursuit of power. Indeed, in 1931, de Bosis was, ironically, shot down while distributing anti-fascist propaganda in a flight over Rome, as though the episode of his own death were in itself a medium of storage and transmission of the re-encoded myth.

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[1] W. H. Auden, 'Musée des Beaux Arts' in *Collected Shorter Poems: 1927-1957*, (London, 1966) p124.

[2] I. Origo, *A Need to Testify: Portraits of Lauro de Bosis, Ruth Draper, Gaetano Salvemini, Ignazio Silone and an essay on Biography*, (New York, 1984) pp34-7.

Science and Technology: The Contemporary Icarus

The 'Fall of Icarus' myth should, if anything, serve as a warning against the potentially hubristic claims of science and technology. It ought to encourage us to pause for a moment before wholeheartedly embracing the ascent of 'progress'. After all, when it comes to 'technology', we ought to remember that Dædalus is himself something of its founding father: he is the original *technites* (*τεχνιτης*), the 'craftsman' or '*tech*nician', and yet even *his* technical prowess has its disasterous consequences.

So perhaps the greatest irony of all when it comes to the 'Fall of Icarus' myth is how it has so readily inspired scientific exploration and development. In 1949, Baade discovered an asteroid 161,269 thousand kilometres from the sun which he named *1566 Icarus*. The naming of the asteroid *Icarus* extended the scope of adaptation of the *Icarus* image beyond the earth's atmosphere, capturing the ideal of going beyond the threshhold which contains humanity. Yet, the dark irony of it is that, like science in general with its aim of pure objectivity, it does nothing of the sort: it does not *transcend* the limits of humanity and the fallibilities of human subjectivity, rather it simply *extends* the limts of humanity that little bit further, even into outer space, thereby making us more painfully aware of these limtations, just as Dædalus and Icarus attempt to transcend the law of gravity but only strenghten its catastrophic power by doing so.

Or, alternately, perhaps the 'Fall of Icarus' myth is a reminder of the price to be paid for scientific and technological development rather than an all-out warning against science and technology *per se*; perhaps this is the reason, at some level, for science's continued use of the myth, despite its darker side. The point then becomes the light *in spite of* the darkness. Icarus' fall is a reminder of the dark side rather than necessarily a fall into the dark side itself, and indeed perhaps it is this 'sailing so close to the edge', this very ambiguity which makes the myth so powerful; as Mihaly Csikzentmihalyi has so succinctly summarized it: '[t]he myth of Icarus... has been long held to be a

parable of the aims – *noble and misguided at the same time* – of civilisation itself'. [1]

In 1971, scientific exploration and discovery intersected with popular culture when astronauts on Apollo 15 – 'Apollo' itself of course being yet another mythological reference – took The Consorts' *Road* album to the moon with them, naming two craters after the songs 'Ghost Beads' and 'Icarus'. This latest incarnation of the myth confirmed its relevance by enshrining it in the contemporary medium of sound recording. The astronauts – literally the contemporary reflections of Dædalus and Icarus – did not name the craters with any deliberate consideration of the traditional myth itself (or at least they did not admit to doing so); or else if they did bear in mind the traditional myth, it certainly was not considered all that important when compared with The Consorts' 'Icarus'. All of this testifies to the myth's power at a subconscious level, thus making it all the more pervasive.

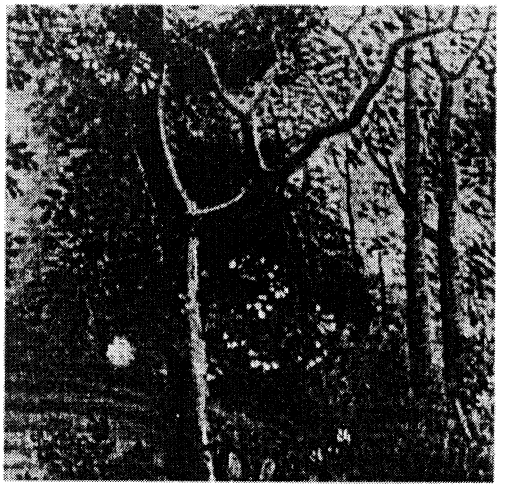
Conclusions

It could be that the association originally forged between Icarus and innovation was what inspired Picasso, just as it had done de Bosis, Baade, Winter and others. Picasso began the preparatory sketches for the 'UNESCO painting' on 6 December 1957. He worked on it constantly for forty-three days until, at Nice Airport, his attention was drawn to the Sputnik which was orbiting overhead. Picasso was filled with excitement at the promise of future space travel and the prospect of extra-terrestrial life. On 18 January 1958, with renewed inspiration, he recommenced his work from scratch. If space travel was a point of interest, he may have had the Icarus myth in mind when completing the mural he referred to simply as 'the UNESCO painting', even though the title *The Fall of Icarus* was given to it by Georges Salles. If this is the case however, then the very dark and ominous nature of the image and tragic outcome of the myth certainly belies Picasso's

[1] Mihaly Csikzentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Happiness*, (London and Sydney, 1992) pp96-7, my italics. Csikzentmihalyi also notes how clinical psychology too has adapted the myth of Icarus with the notion of the 'Icarus complex' characterised by a 'desire to be released from the pull of gravity' (p97).

promise of a depiction of 'peaceful humanity turning its gaze toward the happy future'.[1] Whatever the case, the image certainly also came to represent an ancestry for the discipline of science which eagerly adopted this archaic exemplar, ignoring the myth's dire warning. The power effects provided justification and validation for the scientific movement, most especially in the field of exploration 'through airy ways unknown to man before'.[2]

Appendix:



Detail of Peter Brueghel the elder, *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, oil on wood panel c.1555, later transferred to canvas. [3]

[1] Caban, *op cit*, p487.
[2] Virgil, *op cit*, Book 6, 15-20, p169.
[3] Klein, *op cit*, pp68-9.