

## Myth of Icarus

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Human experience of flight provides a unique vantage point from which to deepen our understanding of the Earth. That such ideas have had a profound influence on those who fly is not in doubt. Poetry and prose attest to the richness of the human experience of flying, and more recently astronauts have acknowledged powerful, in some cases traumatic, emotional experiences after their return from space. This essay explores the interaction of the self and the natural world through flight from three perspectives. The first is an exploration of the human yearning to fly expressed in dreams, myth and literature; the second is a discussion of my own experience of flying as an aviator by exploring the experiential significance of some of my most vivid recollections of natural scenery; and the third is an attempt to articulate the way in which airplanes have, on rare occasions, acted as a mediator between my own inner space and the world outside, culminating in a feeling of higher consciousness. I do not speak for all pilots; indeed my views are highly subjective, but in presenting these ideas I am endorsing J.K. Wright's plea for students of geography to explore the Earth from all points of view by acknowledging that the experience of every specialist is worthy of reflection.

One of my most vivid recollections of flying was in a dream. Soaring above the ground, I was conscious of the wind in my face and I was struck by the greenness of everything beneath me. I was unable to explain what was holding me up, but the feeling of fear at not knowing quickly dissolved into exhilaration as I ceased to rationalize the experience and simply began to enjoy it. It dawned on me after I awoke that REM sleep was probably one of the first ways early hominids experienced flying and that my experience was not unique. Does the human experience of flying have atavistic roots? Jungian psychology certainly speaks to us of a collective unconscious, suggesting that a deep well of subconscious ideas occasionally swells up within us, and sometimes crystallises into memorable dreams. Early hominids must have experienced such dreams, but those dreams may well have been triggered by watching birds, and the occasional ascent of mountains, the dream, perhaps, being a subconscious desire to self-actualize these experiences.

There is powerful evidence of the human yearning to capture this experience in mythology. On their stone pyramids, the Maya embellished serpents with feathers, making Quetzalcoatl a god; North American native Indians venerated the Thunderbird, the beating of whose wings represented thunder; and, in ancient Egypt, the Pharaohs believed that after death their souls rose from their bodies and migrated into the afterlife in the form of ba. Flying has always been associated with myth and the supernatural, but it is also found in more traditional

religions. There is a reference to a fiery chariot descending to Earth in Ezekiel, for example; in the Gospels, Jesus ascends to Heaven after his resurrection; and in the Koran, Muhammad is said to have risen from the site of the Temple of the Mount on a winged horse. In Greek mythology the winged horse is Pegasus. Legend also tells us how Daedalus made wings of feathers united by wax; and this brings me back to my dream. Of all these ancient allusions to flying, it is Icarus who best exemplifies the freedom I felt while asleep.

One summer afternoon I found myself piloting an aircraft over Northern Ontario. The Canadian Shield is a region of ancient rock, bristling with trees and festooned with innumerable lakes of all shapes and sizes. The weather had been unstable for several days, but the air was unusually calm that afternoon, almost serene. As I flew north towards my destination under a pregnant layer of stratocumulus, I became conscious of shafts of sunlight bursting through the holes in the cloud above; I was suddenly surrounded by vertical flutes of light, like ancient stone columns capped with a vaulted ceiling of clouds, which gave me the impression I was flying down the nave of a gothic cathedral. This experience persisted for the better part of an hour that afternoon. The verisimilitude of the wilderness and sacred space is a popular metaphor today, but that afternoon, nature had created a scene that had, for me, become a place of worship without the need for metaphors. I never saw this apparition again, but years later, when I visited Ely Cathedral in Cambridgeshire, the illusion reversed itself. When I walked down the centre of the nave and looked upwards to the vaulted ceiling I felt as if I were flying again.

Nowhere is nature's grandeur more visible than along the giant tectonic plate that begins in Alaska and snakes its way down the spine of two great continents to Tierra del Fuego at the southern tip of South America. As I crossed the Rocky Mountains on my way to the Yukon one Spring morning, I studied them carefully in the brilliant sunshine. Wending my way between the tallest peaks in the smooth, rarefied air nearly two miles above the valley floor, I could see that they were blanketed in deep snow, and soon I was immersed among them as if I were surfing a sea of waves, flying effortlessly from one crest to the next. These rocks seemed to have burst upwards angrily from the earth's crust like huge claws; in places the snow had fallen away to expose a grey limb, whose twisted features revealed the immense pressures that had created it. Older than the last dinosaurs, these peaks would outlive everything; beautiful, powerful and majestic, I was surrounded by an infinity of time in a limitless space, and I was painfully conscious of my own mortality. Perhaps that was what George Leigh Mallory was reacting to when he said that he wanted to climb Everest "because it is there!" There is a reality in such a scene that transforms the person who contemplates it. Yet the technology that enabled me to contemplate the mountains that morning has in a way conquered them. If you look carefully you can see it at work deep down in these valleys. Roads thread through narrow canyons where once only rivers ran; railways burrow through hillsides; bridges span raging torrents; villages nestle against the sides of mountains; and, as you

fly across the border into British Columbia, a patchwork quilt of logging activity can be seen from the valley floor to the timberline, stigmata that betray the all-too-human impact of technology on nature.

In the sky above Greenland one afternoon I saw the Earth as a virgin. “Nothing comes from nothing,” retorts Lear’s fool, yet in that vast emptiness I saw beauty; and beauty is its own excuse for being. Buried under a sheet of ice that is almost two miles deep, the centre of Greenland is actually below sea level. On top of this smooth white sheet, resembling the paint on top of an artist’s pallet, are wisps of cloud draped like gossamer thread from a delicate brush. In summer, the Arctic sun warms the surface twenty-four hours a day, and as the ice melts it gathers in shallow pools of frigid water, turning the frosty white surface turquoise. Near the edge of this vast sheet the ice spills over the steep rocks, cascading into the sea, or plummeting into the valleys in long white serpentine fingers, like a woman’s hand reaching for the open spaces beyond her grasp. But behind this beauty, Greenland has a dark secret. In the Middle Ages, Vikings once colonized these distant shores; then they mysteriously vanished forever. It was only later that scientists learned that climate change had disrupted the colony’s delicate balance with nature. This is an ominous warning for a planet now trapped in its own waste gases. Perhaps Greenland is a metaphor for the Earth; a wise virgin whose emptiness is filled with voices, but only for those who listen.

During much of the time I’ve spent in airplanes I have been a detached observer of the world around me, but there are moments when the aircraft has been an intermediary between my inner self and the outer world, culminating in a profound feeling of contentment. Are such experiences mystic? Devotees have long used quiet contemplation to unite their soul with the divine. The Roman Catholic mystic Thomas Merton even went as far as to assert that the spiritual anguish of human beings could only be overcome with mysticism, an idea echoed by Buddhists, who believe that mysticism alone achieves the serenity of essence necessary to realise Nirvana. But Ramakrishna, the Hindu mystic, was said to have once been transported into spiritual ecstasy simply at the sight of cranes flying across the skyline at dusk. What all of this seems to suggest is that mysticism is not spatially remote, but rather a different level of consciousness; contentment, bliss and spiritual ecstasy appear to be a continuum of experiences within this different order of reality.

Flying over the Atlantic Ocean one summer evening en route from Scotland to Iceland, I experienced a heightened level of consciousness. Two miles above the ocean, I noticed a layer of cloud had been silently drawn across the still waters far below me. Ahead was the setting sun, dying in a brilliant blaze of light, as it scattered its rich colours across the sky, like a dying man giving away his fortune before it slipped from his hands. Looking back toward Europe, I saw a full moon framed in the darkness; and far above, in the infinite canyons of space, the stars had come out, as if to feast on the beauty of the night. I felt as

though I was a participant in a symphony, suspended between the sea and the sky, and the sun and the moon. Yet a drama was unfolding all about me that evening. Darkness seemed to be warring against the Light, as in Zoroastrian tradition in which Ormazd (the Good Lord) quarrels with Ahriman (the Lie). But gradually that evening, it dawned on me that the darkness was losing this titanic struggle. At this latitude I was crossing each meridian of longitude at the same speed as the sun. As long as I followed it around the curvature of the Earth, it would never set. I was surrounded by an infinitude of space, frozen in time; the eternal now had become a release from the temporal order, and I felt a oneness with nature, with people and with all things.

I began this essay by suggesting that flying has deep atavistic roots; dream, myth and literature tend to support this view. In practice, however, the realization of these ancient yearnings is inextricably linked to technology. For me, technology has been a way to explore the experiential significance of scenery in a manner that would otherwise be impossible; occasionally, aircraft have even served as a mediator between my own inner self and the world beyond, eliciting a deep feeling of contentment brought about by a higher state of consciousness. All technology, however, is an extension of ourselves and ultimately each of us is responsible for its use. Icarus' refusal to take the middle road, melting the wax on his wings by flying too close to the sun, reminds us only too well of the disastrous consequences of our own inept use of technology. We ignore Daedalus advice at our peril. Like the myths of ancient Greece, ecosophy speaks to us about the need for greater sensitivity in our relationship with the Earth. In the short term, it is crucial that we improve our understanding of this concept if we are to avoid ecocatastrophe. In the long term, however, the sun will eventually suffer a heat death, and the survival of humankind will require a future generation to leave this planet in search of a new home. By then, the first tentative steps into space this century will seem like the movement of the first reptiles onto the seashore long ago; but by that time we may well have evolved to the point where flying is as effortless as in our dreams.

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