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Icarus extended paper 2

Critical and creative tendencies: about Naucrate

Abstract:

Critically creative and creatively critical interventions on traditional myths provide a way to think about story, representation, and what Nietzsche calls the ‘violent opposition’ between those ‘strange bedfellows’, the Dionysian and Apollonian tendencies. This paper constitutes a textual intervention on the story of Icarus, imagining and incorporating the character of his mother, Naucrate (who is almost unknown in the literature). It also attempts to find points of analogical connection between the chaos and order involved in the world of the original myth, and the chaos and order involved in the process of making creative work (as) research work.

Biographical note:

Jen Webb is professor of creative practice at the University of Canberra, and Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Design. She has published widely in poetry, short fiction, and scholarly works. Her most recent book is *Understanding Representation* (Sage, 2009). Jen is co-editor of the Sage book series, *Understanding Contemporary Culture*. Her current research investigates representations of critical global events, and the use of research in and through creative practice to generate new knowledge about human rights.

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The child of the greatest artist of the ancient world, Icarus flew too close to the sun, and fell to earth. His death has informed artists, poets and philosophers over the past 2,000 years or so, and the critical and creative interventions they have produced are fertile ground for a discussion of what August and Friedrich Schlegel named the Apollonian/Dionysian opposition.

This concept was expanded and developed by Friedrich Nietzsche, who explains the two sides of the opposition as ‘tendencies’. The Apollonian tendency is about order, clarity, and a controlling gaze, and it manifests as ‘peaceful stillness’ and ‘cognitive form’ (Nietzsche 1993: 16). The Dionysian tendency is about adventure, risk and surprise, and manifests as ‘blissful ecstasy’, as ‘a paroxysm of intoxication’ (Nietzsche 1993: 17-18). These tendencies are often seen as incompatible, and artists viewed as having to make a choice between ‘ardor and structure’ (Derrida 2001: 34).

Nietzsche, however, makes it clear that there is no necessary division between the two, and in this he is supported by 20th-century science, which indicates that what looks like Dionysian chaos is in fact a particular kind of organization; what looks like Apollonian order is in fact merely a narrative dropped over the chaos. Biologists Maturana and Varela (1980: 9), for instance, indicate that cognition emerges from a mix of circularity and complexity on the part of systems, and that life therefore requires the interaction of apparently discrete or even antipathetic elements. Neuroscience shows that the sense of self arises out of the interrelationship between the brain and its body, the melding of cognitive stillness with ecstatic paroxysms (Damasio 1995: 243); and quantum physics demonstrates the order that is implicit in chaos (Hayles 1991; Slethaug 2000).

What did Icarus remember about his mother? Nothing at all. He was maybe three years old when she disappeared. Sure, for weeks he shattered the sleeping air in the little house beside the workshop, shrieking in night terrors while the housekeeper rocked him and soothed him. But small children have short memories and within only a few months he had ceased to soil his clothes in babyish incontinence; and yes there was a rift in the fabric of his self, one that would return to bite him if he lived into adulthood, but for now the resilience of childhood bounced him over loss and into each new morning.

Bereaved children, especially those who have lost a mother, suffer most of all from the absence of tender nurturing, the everyday hands-on parenting that makes us what we are. This wasn’t really Icarus’ problem; his mother Naucrate had been so busy, had spent so much time up at the palace with Minos, that it was the household servants more often than she who teased and tickled him, wiped his nose, washed and dressed and fed him, and tucked him into bed each evening, and this did not change. No, the gap in his life was more ephemeral: an ebbing in the air about him of the presence that made and matched his own, a weakening of the magnetic pull of shared genetic matter.

This research is instructive for any writer considering interventions on the old myths, because it is clear that chaos and order are woven throughout the universe, the environment, and the inside of any human being's head. What Nietzsche calls the 'violent opposition' (1993: 14) between the Dionysian and Apollonian forces not only informs many of the myths, but can also provide a framework for a kind of creative practice where the ecstatic energy of production is mixed with the cool eye of the critic to result in a creative work that is also a critical contribution.

It's not only writing academics who productively exploit that violent opposition. Nietzsche and Foucault both accommodate the creative potential of writing in their radical philosophy; and perhaps they take this line in an attempt to juggle the competing imperatives of their vast, cool intellects and their wild, passionate energies. After all, what philosopher has been more Dionysian than Nietzsche, than Foucault? But though each has produced a library of writings that are simultaneously Dionysian and Apollonian, and that have had extraordinary impact in the academy, their melding of the two tendencies has not penetrated university structures and research administration. Creative practice remains identified as Dionysian: uncontrolled, lacking in rigour, and carrying an erotic charge. Critical practice remains identified as Apollonian: cool, objective and rigorous. And though critical (literary) studies and creative writing often share space in faculties and schools, typically there is not a good fit between the two. In a sort of sibling rivalry that perhaps mirrors the relationship between Apollo and Dionysus, they position themselves as competitors for students, funding and distinction.

There was not now a face he could look into and see his own reflected there; there was not now somewhere he was entirely at home, where he could curl himself, no chance now for the seas of his body to ebb and flow in harmony with her oceanic force, his mother, the mistress of the seas.

The erratic love of a mother; it had put down few roots in his still-soft brain, and it faded quite quickly from his little-boy mind. If the loss of Naucrate caused him distress, he never said. Daedalus felt her loss; of course he did. We never quite forget those who have shared our bed. Had he loved her? Sometimes, certainly. But now he put her memory to one side, and concentrated on his work, on his queen, on finding new ways to engineer the world. If like Icarus he woke weeping in the grim hours of the night he went through to his workshop, lit the lamps, and sat at his table to sketch out new thoughts, new plans, new designs.

Who else remembered her? Only Apollodorus. Or rather, only he thought to name her in his version of their tale. Not that he says a great deal: only that she was the mother of Icarus, and one of Minos' slaves. We all know the story of her husband and her son, the story of her king and his queen. But she, Naucrate; she remains little more than a womb. You'd think Daedalus was a celibate the way they don't write his sex life.

For those of us working across both modes, it's important to analyse the correspondence between these two gods and their tendencies. They are connected, but are not the same; their connection is not one of *homology* (i.e., they don't have the same origin: Dionysus carries his mother's human genes, Apollo is the Olympian geek), but they are intimately connected *analogically*: i.e., their functions are remarkably similar. Both are concerned with making something that is new, and with deploying their productive force in the creation of knowledge, practice and products.

Creative writing and critical studies are connected by both homology and analogy. They share an origin, in their focus on words, lines and stories, and they have a similar function in their attempt to generate knowledge in those fields. But the writing discipline is concerned largely with the making, and its sibling with the analysis, of all those words and works. As the scholarly journals of each discipline indicate, there is a bifurcation between the two, and a very different orientation: the creative and the critical disciplines are not the same, and cannot be treated as though they are engaged on the same project. Yet many academics are required to perform as though they are the same, and to work with equal skill and enthusiasm across the critical and the creative.

This is tricky: if the Dionysian impulse is indeed associated with the wild, creative side, and if the Apollonian impulse is towards definition and analysis, where does that leave those of us – so many of us – who straddle the two fields? But Nietzsche's intuition that the two tendencies need not be seen as incommensurate suggests it is possible to conceive of the creative and the critical not as diverging, but as touching, and in their touching as capable of generating something new.

You'd think Icarus had emerged into the world through parthenogenesis and not as actually happened through parturition – an initial act of passion, the planting of a seed, the long slow growing in the dark, and then the bursting out into the world of men.

There's more to the story than that. Even the most meek of us has a story, a presence, and everything that drives every human being. Even the most meek has longings. And Naucrate wasn't as meek as the label 'slave woman' may suggest. She was a someone who made things happen. It's not for nothing that she had caught the eye of Daedalus, the sharpest man of that age. Well sure, he needed a wife, someone to cook for him, someone to bear his son, someone to fuck. Someone to grant him respectability, to divert his neighbours' eyes from the visits of the queen.

But not just anyone would do. He chose Naucrate, or he and Pasiphaë chose her, because she was a woman who knew what was what. She could be relied on, she had a brain, she had wit, she would be their cover in an uncovered world, in that small city in which they all lived, in which they were all always on display.

Plato's view of analogy, the fleeting connection of different elements, the 'beautiful' bonding that runs throughout the universe, is useful here. His definition of analogy is of practice that can straddle the tendencies, and exploit what Barbara Stafford (1999: 8) calls the 'tensile harmony' between the two in order to get things done in those different but shared worlds. The work of intervening both critically and creatively on significant tropes or stories involves such an orientation, a willingness to think across both modes so that analogy can perform its productive miracle.

This is an approach that, like any creative research practice, requires a considerable commitment to thought. I explored this concept first about a decade ago when, in a fit of naïve enthusiasm, I set my first-year students an assignment that wildly overestimated their capacity. I required them to write an essay that exploited both the critical and the creative aspects, titled 'Why I write', and asked them to reference George Orwell and Joan Didion. These writers each, famously, wrote an essay of that title; and the oeuvre of each consistently finds points of connection between creative and critical modes – analogically and therefore generatively – in a way that casts into relief the work of thinking, observation, imagination and analysis that is involved in the production of their fictional and critical writings.

The sharper and more 'intellectual' of those first year students forced by me to engage in critical and reflective thinking about their creative tendencies came up with thoughtful and often tenderly phrased essays.

So there were three of them involved in that act, and for all of them, desire moved in their bodies like blood, the force that animated their being. Best not to think about it if it happens to you. If you look at it too closely, you'll drive it into hiding. Naucrate, Pasiphaë, Daedalus: they all pretended nothing was going on. Did Minos know? Who knows? He was only interested in Naucrate in those days, not in his wife, nor his architect. Her name explains his attention: Naucrate, 'mistress of the seas'.

Minos needed her, him with his sea kingdom, though she was only a slave woman; and he knew that he needed her. His own fears were held at bay as long as she could guarantee him the rulership of the seas that surrounded his small kingdom. Who else could keep Athens from his door? Only the rough waves, only the secret of the passage between the rocks, only the force of his own ships, only the knowledge that she, Naucrate, brought to his ear. The knowledge and the advantage that Minos lost with her passing, with the loss of his daughter Ariadne and his stepson Asterion the Minotaur, with the loss of his architect Daedalus, with his own descent into rage and revenge, and finally with the loss of his own life at the hands of that cunning artificer.

The others did less well, but though their responses may have been flawed or facile (at least, according to my assessment criteria), they still illuminated something significant about the analogical connection between writing and reading, making and consuming, creation and criticism: and that is that not all practice needs the same kind or degree of reflection, and not all practice is equally committed to both tendencies. The connection between the Apollonian and the Dionysian is one of dynamic tension, and not of balance.

I want to return now to the story of Icarus, though it may not seem sensible to go more than two millennia into the past and recast an ancient story for a contemporary readership. But, as Barbara Stafford asks (1999: 51), how will we find ways of connecting across cultures and epistemes without the skilful telling of stories, the making of texts, and the exploiting of obvious analogies? Myths move so fluidly through cultures and across history that they are a common denominator for story, an easy way in to moral tales and reflection on social necessity.

But myths do more than that. They form subtle, analogical connections with other lines of thought, other ethical frameworks; they show us ways of thinking beyond the expected; at their best, they meld the Dionysian and the Apollonian, requiring us to give ourselves over to the passion of events, while coolly analyzing patterns of narrative, patterns of behaviour, and the vast story of power and its contexts. They are on the one hand fecund and wild, and on the other hand ordered and rigorous: two logics operating in a single sequence of stories.

Did Minos touch her up, his Naucrate? Maybe, but if so it would have been within strict limits. Thanks to the spell cast by his wife, any woman taking him on would end up with snakes and scorpions up her twat, would suffer a quick and unpleasant death.

That wasn't how Naucrate went. She simply disappeared, perhaps into the sea, perhaps into the air. If there was any hanky panky involving her king, it certainly didn't involve his contaminated spunk.

In any event, all the indications are that Naucrate was loyal to her husband. Certainly there is no question but that Icarus was his father's son. Daedalus snatched up the baby, held him high above his head, and said 'My boy, my bird'. He shook the baby hard enough to make him cry and clench his miniature hands. 'Look!' Daedalus said to the queen, his sometime lover: 'My son. *Mine.*' And for some months, at least, he turned his attention to his wife.

Andrew Melrose's notion of critical and creative interventions, and his attention to the narrative and analytical potential of Icarus, captured my attention because of the fecundity of the field. Icarus and his community are rich in story and image. There are repeating motifs of sea and air, bulls and stars; there is the complex network of relationships, drawing in and connecting slave women and kings, gods and snails. There is constant reiteration and constant reversal, narrative fragments scattered across the writers of the ancient world, and rehearsed throughout the history of western scholarship. It is heavily mined material, and yet it does, arguably, have something new to offer a 21st-century readership, something that is capable of an analogical rocking to and fro between the critical and the creative. This does not need to result in the kind of fictocriticism that presents story as the spoonful of sugar that helps the medicine of argument go down, but rather in a writing that is 'about' the art of words, phrases and sentences – that is Dionysian; and yet offers lines of thought or of flight that takes its readers (and indeed its writers) into the domain of Apollo – into what is ordered and rigorous.

Let me finish with Icarus' father, Daedalus. He designed a labyrinth that most people imagine as a terrifyingly confusing arrangement of underground passages, dead ends and walled up avenues: a place where the cream of Athenian youth became Minotaur food. But Homer describes Daedalus' labyrinth not as a walled prison, but as an open dance floor, one designed not for a vengeful king, but for a princess whose sorrows lay well in the future. Foucault too describes the labyrinth, and what it can be for a writer:

Perhaps he fell in love with Naucrate: certainly he spent his energies on her, on her and his son. And certainly he missed her once she was gone. You always miss the person you have fucked repeatedly. It's the habit of sex, the sensation of skin on skin, the kisses you find yourself giving even if you'd determined there'd be no kissing. The rush of blood, the loss of me in you and you in me: like it or not, mean it or not, it always feels like love.

And wherever they started, Daedalus and Naucrate, and for whatever reason, at some point there was love of a sort; there was a child; there was an awakening out of story and into the concrete world.

It didn't last, of course. Naucrate, priestess of the moon, watched the tides swell along the shores of Crete, and observed the ebb and flow of her husband's moods, the shift of his attention, the lift of the blood in his body when Pasiphaë came calling. Naucrate, mistress of the seas, observed the muscles shift along Minos' arm whenever Daedalus appeared. She read the signs, noticing the ebbing of what had been, feeling the chill of sadness that starts down near your ankles, that runs up the shinbones and into the deep muscle of the thighs; that skirts the terrain of the cunt but burrows in at the belly, the chill that spreads to heart and lung and yes why not, soul.

What, do you imagine that I would take so much trouble and so much pleasure in writing, do you think that I would keep so persistently to my task, if I were not preparing – with a rather shaky hand – a labyrinth into which I can venture, in which I can move my discourse, opening up underground passages, forcing it to go far from itself, finding overhangs that reduce and deform its itinerary, in which I can lose myself and appear at last to eyes that I will never have to meet again? (1972: 17)

What writers do in intervening creatively and critically on myths and other traditional texts is precisely this: we construct labyrinths of our own. Some may be Homer's dance floor; others may be Ovid's dark passages. But either way, if well researched, well thought and well written, they provide the opportunity to lose and find ourselves within those opposing tendencies, and in the process to open up new lines of thought.

And the moon waxed and waned, and Daedalus turned his face away from her, and Icarus was up on his feet now, and though she was a slave she kept servants of her own and he, her wee boy, was absorbed in their attention, and what purpose was she serving now in the world, Naucrate, slave of Minos, wife of Daedalus, mother of Icarus? She felt, perhaps, the tug of the tides in her own veins. She knew how to be at home in the sea. And so one spring tide she went there, alone. We must suppose.

Icarus woke one morning and found his mother gone. Daedalus looked up from his workbench and found himself alone. Minos looked north across the sea to Athens. Naucrate went out of their story; she went out of her child's life; she went out of history. And with her going, Crete trembled, and the story of now shifted on its ground, and took a different tack.

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