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Icarus Returned: The Falling Man and the Survival of Antiquity

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They could be flying. The law of gravity no longer holds. There is a sense of a world on hold, a painful absence of sound. What we see is silence, the silence of something gone awfully wrong with the human world in which we are all, God included, holding our breath, which is probably what happens when you fall a long, long way.

—Michael Taussig, “The Language of Flowers”¹

The photograph was taken at 9:41 am EST on September 11, 2001, or to be more precise, at fifteen seconds past 9:41 am] (Plate 11). The identity of the person is unknown. He is one of the anonymous victims of the event known as 9/11. Richard Drew, a professional photographer with the Associated Press, took the photograph. This image is one of 12 that Drew captured of the man as he hurtled toward the ground at a velocity of roughly 150 miles per hour.

The photograph was published in *The New York Times* and hundreds of other newspapers around the globe on September 12, 2001. But like the man himself, the image quickly dropped out of sight, to be replaced by more redemptive pictures and stories in the weeks that followed. Drew’s photograph probably would have been lost to the annals of history had Tom Junod, a journalist working for *Esquire* magazine, not made it his mission to discover the man’s identity. It is Junod who dubbed the figure “The Falling Man.” In a moving article from 2003, the journalist discloses that people began jumping not long after the first plane hit the North Tower and kept jumping until the tower fell: “For more than an hour and a half, they *streamed* from the building, one after another, consecutively rather than en masse, as if each individual required the sight of another individual before mustering the courage to jump himself or herself.”² It is estimated that some 200 people jumped.³ Those watching from the ground were overwhelmed by what they witnessed.

Yet the American public was not prepared to acknowledge this aspect of the disaster. When Junod called the New York coroner’s office to try to find out

more information, he was told that no one jumped, that there were no jumpers. Resistance to the knowledge of these terrible deaths began with a resistance to the images. American networks began censoring their coverage on the morning of September 11 once it was understood what was being broadcast. When Drew's photograph was published the next day, letters poured into editorial offices around the country protesting against its publication. At the time, there was an overwhelming unified chorus: to exhibit such pictures constituted an indecency.

There is little I can add to this narrative. Tom Junod's article plumbs the depths of affect surrounding the photograph's reception. In his journey to discover the falling man's identity, one could even say that he even provides an avenue of "working through" the trauma of 9/11. By attempting to discern what is visible in the blurry photograph, Junod moves closer to a sense of what is legible. That is, with the skill of an erudite art historian, the journalist brings the discrete, visible elements of the photograph into signification, transforming these discernable features into signs, which do not merely establish the falling figure's identity. Junod's attempt to discover the man's identity became, at some point, a larger project of symbology. The journalist transforms the photograph into a monument to the Unknown Soldier for a war that has yet to see an end. The photograph becomes a cenotaph, commemorating all of those who fell that day. His moving article closes with a quiet dedication: "like the monuments dedicated to the memory of unknown soldiers everywhere, it asks that we look at it, and make one simple acknowledgement. That we have known who the Falling Man is all along."⁴

The purpose of such monuments is to provide a resting place for history's ghosts. Without proper tombstones, the dead threaten to haunt the living. By transforming Richard Drew's photograph into a memorial, Junod attempts the equivalent of an exorcism. His quest to drive out the unacknowledged ghosts from the underbelly of American culture ends with an effort to confine them to this newly minted memorial he has dubbed "The Falling Man." Junod's interpretation is not without valor, but viewed from a certain vantage, the dedication at the conclusion of the article can be seen as an emphatic closure. That is, the transformation of the photograph into a monument to the Unknown Soldier is profound substitution that aims to create a protective layer of signification. The shift is designed to weaken or perhaps wear out the dreadful force of this vertiginous image. Building a memorial in the place of the photograph seeks to arrest the endless fall, to make tranquil that painful silence of something gone awfully wrong with the human world. In short, Junod's memorial attempts to erect a buffer zone to guard against the emotional and conceptual unravelling that can occur when one looks—or indeed when one *loses* one's gaze—by looking upon this image. Interpretation is called upon to redress the very conditions of knowledge and human comprehension that exploded with the towers that day.

But I do not think these ghosts will go gentle into the night.

Despite Junod's eloquence, one cannot so easily contain the extraordinary force this image tenders, a force which can only be gestured toward as a kind of non-knowledge. This force is, in fact, double. On one hand, it involves the fragile experience of the gaze, our gaze, which can be shattered by the explosive power of this image. As the numerous letters protesting against the photograph's printing attest, this image set in motion a kind of crisis, a visual encounter that was initially felt to be unbearable. There is something about the photograph that cannot be acknowledged, except in the form of a disavowal. The second part of this non-knowledge involves the way this picture involuntarily references other, forgotten images from the past, most explicitly perhaps, the fall of Icarus. Such images may not be directly evident, but are nevertheless registered in the photograph's unconscious, iconographic traces. Junod's substitution, of one figure for another—Unknown Soldier for Falling Man—points to this haunting, to the strange multiplicity of images that appear to be bound up with this photograph. The rest of this chapter attempts to put into words the peculiar force of this non-knowledge. I endeavour to bring into view the mysterious, surviving images to which this photograph involuntarily refers, as well as to articulate the blow it renders to our gaze. My overarching aim is to begin to carve out that archive of human experience to which the falling man testifies.

Pictures and Images

It is difficult to say what, precisely, is unbearable about Richard Drew's photograph. Its force cannot be fully explained by a formal analysis of the photograph. Nor would it be enough to analyze its avenues of circulation and censorship. Such analyses would fail to satisfy because it is not the formal qualities of the picture that disturb. Nor does its disconcerting force emerge solely from photography's seemingly unique capacity to visually re-present its referent. Drew's picture is certainly mesmerizing—the calm, arrow-straight position of the figure's body, the uniformity of the background, the overwhelming sense of negative space. But the perturbation one feels when gazing upon the photograph comes from elsewhere. And it is considerably harder to speak of this perturbation than it is to speak of the picture's formal properties. It is harder to speak about the force of the *image*.

In a recent essay, W.J.T. Mitchell underscores the important distinction to be made between images and pictures. To make the distinction immediately evident, he offers up a vernacular: "you can hang a picture, but you can't hang an image."⁵ Within this logic, a picture is a material object while an image is the immaterial representation that takes shape within a picture. The image is what "survives" the picture's destruction; it "transcends media."⁶ Mitchell offers the venerable Biblical example of the golden calf, which first appeared as a sculpture, then became an object of description in a narrative, and has continued to survive through any number of illustrations. Even though many

of these material iterations have been destroyed, the fantasmatic entity can still be brought to mind simply by uttering its name.

Mitchell's image-picture distinction rends the fabric of representation into two distinct parts. This important division can be seen as an echo of Sigmund Freud's own distinction between external reality, filled with pictures, and the internal world, animated by images. In psychoanalytic parlance, the internal world refers to those aspects of the psychical realm that take the force of reality for the subject. This force does not follow the laws of material reality; it cannot be empirically observed through traditional methods of scientific investigation. Yet the inner world is as much a place as the external one. Indeed, from the time of Sigmund Freud's earliest treatments, analysts have consistently found that unconscious fantasies—even if those not based on real events—exert a decisive effect on a subject's life. Dreams are one of our most common forays into this other world. One can wake up frightened or angry or anguished about a nocturnal experience that has no basis in external reality. But this does not mean the force of dream-life is any less meaningful or potent. Indeed, the dream may be the ideal model for thinking about the force of images. Is it not something like a dream—or perhaps a nightmare—that we enter when we gaze upon Richard Drew's photograph? How else can we describe the character of this emotional encounter? What is the source of the spectator's first, quick intake of breath, the shudder, or slight sense of vertigo? And when we finally look away, is it not akin to an awakening, to a rejoining of external reality? The picture's image belongs to the geography of psychical reality, to the world of imagination that is infinite in phenomenological possibility.

According to Jacques Derrida, the force of images finds a particularly potent expression in mourning, which is itself a unique organization of space and visibility. The work of mourning is a strange labor that does not involve any physical action. Rather, the emotional work consists of the painful recognition of the fact that the other no longer exists except as an image *in us*.

[T]he friend can no longer be but *in us*, and whatever we may believe about the after-life, about living-on, according to all the possible forms of faith, it is *in us* that these movements might appear.... When we say "*in us*," when we speak so easily and so painfully of inside and outside, we are naming space, we are speaking of a visibility of the body, a geometry of gazes, an orientation of perspectives. *We are speaking of images.*⁷

All that remains of the other who has passed away or disappeared is images, or rather, memories that consist of visible scenes that are no longer anything but images. The other is no more. He is no longer. He is whom we can see only in recollection, as an image, whose material form finds temporary residence in a picture. The particular force of a photograph such as Richard Drew's concerns the pain of being exposed to the other who is no longer except as an image *in us*. This man is no longer and yet here he is. I think this is what Derrida means when he says: "The image looks at us."⁸ This is what it means to be in "the face" of such a picture. The material picture haunts because it

presents the other who no longer exists *except* as an image who gazes upon us from *in us*.

The strange otherness of images is perhaps even more evident in Freud's "History of an Infantile Neurosis" which was published in 1918. The patient at the center of the case—a Russian aristocrat from Odessa—suffered from several severe symptoms that brought him to Dr Freud, most famously a childhood phobia of wolves. During the course of the analysis, the patient recounted that when he was a young child, his elder sister tormented him by purposely leaving a book of fairytales lying open to a page that pictured a large wolf standing on its hind legs about to take a step forward. Freud reports: "Whenever he caught sight of this picture he began to scream like a lunatic that he was afraid of the wolf coming and eating him up."⁹ The patient also recounts a powerful anxiety-dream from the same period that also involves wolves. In the dream he is lying in bed. His bedroom window suddenly opens to reveal a big walnut tree. Six or seven white wolves are sitting in the tree staring intensely at him. During the course of analysis, the patient transforms this dream-image into a picture. Here is another instance of the other who gazes at us from *in us*. For the young Russian, the wolves (as with all phobias in Freud's oeuvre) represent a father-substitute. The anxiety-dream and the young boy's terror of the storybook illustration reveal his childhood fear of his father. Or put more precisely, his relationship to the pictures reveals a fear of the *image* of the father who is *in him*. The boy is frightened of those pictures through which he feels exposed to the other who gazes intensely at him. Even though in external reality the picture only portrays a wolf, the young Russian is utterly transfixed by the immaterial image that transcends the picture—in this case, the phantasmatic visage of his father.¹⁰

From this vantage point, one is tempted to add to W.J.T. Mitchell's image-picture distinction: our encounters with pictures are interminably peopled by images. Pictures are overflowing with these other-images that somehow manage to capture us with their gaze without ever quite being recognized. One wonders, in turn, what kinds of image-apparitions haunt Richard Drew's picture. Tom Junod has already recorded his entry, a memorial to the Unknown Soldier he names "the Falling Man." But can we identify other images, other histories bound up with this one?

The Then and the Now

Some 90 years before 9/11, on March 25, 1911, another urban disaster shook New York City. On that spring afternoon, a fire broke out in a building on the corner of Washington Place and Greene Street, just before the end of the workday. In total, 146 people were killed in the blaze, most of them immigrant workers, most of them young women between the ages of 16 and 23. All the victims were employees of the Triangle Waist Company whose textile workshops occupied the building. The high death toll was blamed on locked

exit doors, one of the management's artful measures to curb employee theft. Prior to 9/11, the Triangle Factory Fire was considered the worst urban disaster to have ever afflicted New York City. The two events are drastically different, of course, both in their causes and in the sheer scope of their devastation. Yet some details of this earlier fire bear such an uncanny resemblance to 9/11, it makes one ... dream.

The Triangle Factory Fire began on the eighth floor in a workshop that was so crowded with machines and trimmings that there was hardly room for the women workers, let alone space for an aisle between them. This created such a fierce intensity to the fire that the women began to leap from the eighth-floor windows before the firemen could arrive. The horrific sight preoccupied New Yorkers for weeks afterwards, prompting massive rallies and eventually a grand jury trial. On the day following the fire, the front page of the *Times* reported: "The firemen had trouble bringing their apparatus into position because of the bodies which strewed the pavement and sidewalks. While more bodies crashed down among them they worked with desperation."¹¹ The remarkable article records, in a quasi-testimonial form, the scene and its effects on bystanders:

One fireman, running ahead of a hose wagon, which halted to avoid running over a body, spread a fire net and two more seized hold of it. A girl's body coming end over end struck the side of it, and there was hope for an instant that she would be the first one of the score who had already jumped to be saved.

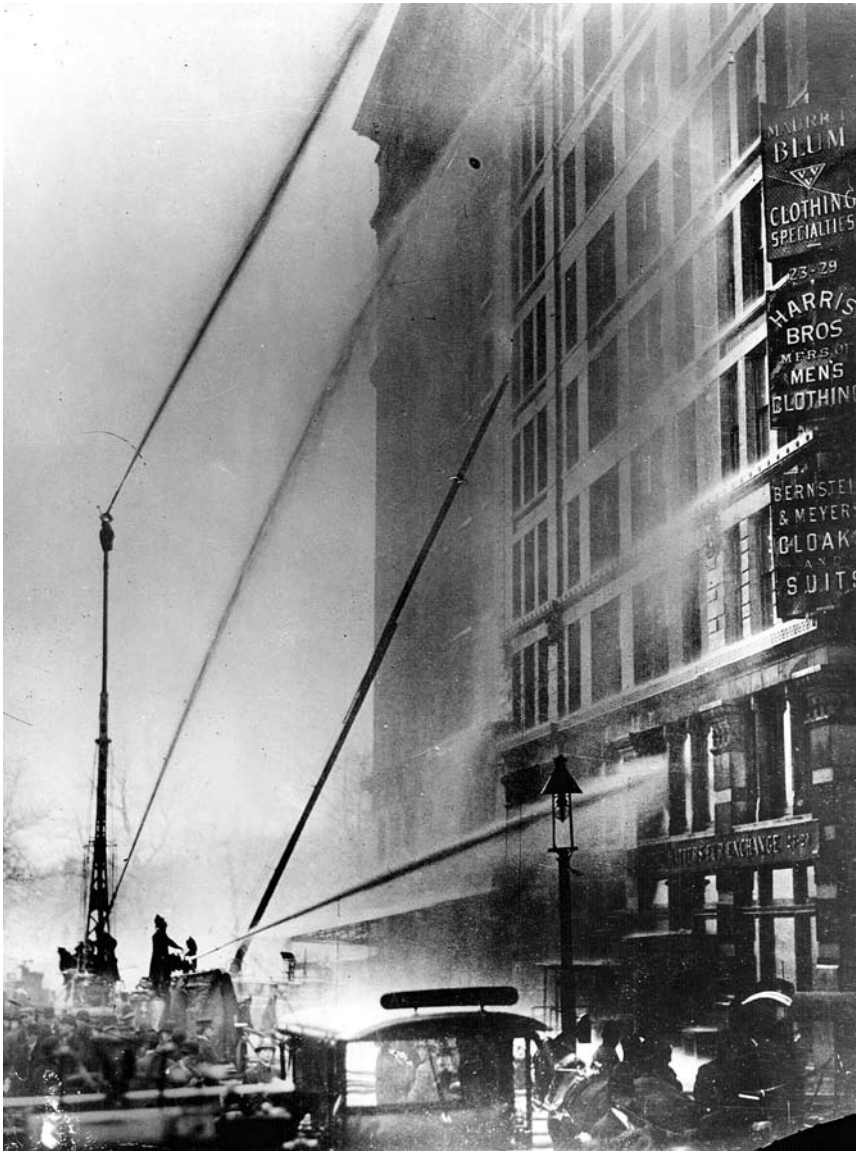
Thousands of people who had rushed in from Broadway and Washington Square and were screaming with horror at what they saw, watched closely the work with the fire net. Three other girls who had leapt for it a moment after the first one, struck it on top of her, and all four rolled out and lay still on the sidewalk.

Five girls who stood together at a window close to the Greene street corner held their places while a fire ladder was worked towards them but which stopped at its full length two stories lower down. They leap together, clinging to each other, with fire streaming back from their hair and dresses. They struck a glass sidewalk cover and crashed through it to the basement

One girl who waved a handkerchief at the crowd leapt from a window adjoining the New York University Building on the westward. Her dress caught on a wire, and the crowd watched her hang there till her dress burned free and she came toppling down.¹²

There is much to be said of these terrifying accounts and their similarity to that other towering inferno which would not occur for almost a century. In that later disaster, too, people stood in shattered window frames at impossible heights, waving, clutching each other, desperate for air, desperate for escape from the heat, smoke, and fire. There, too, many made the impossible decision to jump, and none survived the fall.

This history flits by, but perhaps it can be seized as an image that flashes up at the moment of its recognizability.¹³ Although memory of this earlier



9.1 *Triangle Factory Fire, Brown Brothers.* Courtesy of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library.

disaster may have faded, what remain vivid are the photographs. Like the massive visual archives devoted to 9/11, the photographs depicting the Triangle Factory Fire show a series of common motifs: a burning building and its charred remains, the work of desperate rescuers, crowds of onlookers, and, of course, the victims (Figs. 9.1, 9.2, 9.3). In these distressing pictures, bodies lie strewn in the cobblestone streets. Policemen alternate between attending the fallen figures and standing transfixed, gazing upwards to what we can only imagine as the horrifying scene above. Bystanders with bowler hats also pepper the scene, almost all of whom have their hands shoved deep into their pockets, a gesture which oscillates between an expression of helplessness and



9.2 *Triangle Factory Fire*, Brown Brothers.
Courtesy of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library.



9.3 *Triangle Factory Fire: Pavement Broken by Falling Bodies*, Brown Brothers.
Courtesy of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library.

a posture of indifference. One picture shows a gaping hole in the ground that may be, as the newspaper report attests, where someone crashed through the glass sidewalk to the basement below. More than any of the others, this photograph evokes the force of the jumpers' descent. It looks forward—if a picture were able to do such a thing—to September 11, when the jumpers' bodies will not simply be broken by the force of their fall, but utterly *destroyed*. There is a disturbing lack of words to describe the violence of such a death. To me, the gaping blackness in this old photograph at least offers an indication of this lack. It points to the future, to the time of Now, a time which is still out of joint because this monstrous signified is still without a signifier.

The Survival of Antiquity

The mysterious, uncanny echoes between these two historic events change the direction of their interpretation, for now it is a notion of repetition that sits at the center of the hermeneutic project. This is to say, what is called 9/11 can no longer be regarded as a completely unique event. Aspects of the event appear to bear the mark of a repetition of what has come before. Repetition, therefore, becomes one of the principle means of interpretation, both as a means of recognizing what has come before *and* as a means of understanding the present event as a recurrence of the past. However centering interpretation on this migration of images does not mean that 9/11 should simply be regarded as another version of the Triangle Factory Fire. Even if it were possible to access the experience of these individuals, the experiences of those who fell on March 25, 1911 would not be equivalent to the experiences of those who fell on September 11, 2001. Indeed, as Gilles Deleuze makes evident, repetition is a phenomena that is perpetually in relation to its counterpart: difference. In the introduction to his study, *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze writes: "repetition is a necessary and justified conduct only in relation to that which cannot be replaced. Repetition as a conduct and as a point of view only concerns non-exchangeable and non-substitutable singularities."¹⁴ Repetition, in other words, contains a certain paradox: what is repeated is precisely that which is unrepeatable.¹⁵

The visual resonances between 9/11 and the Triangle Factory Fire are not a matter of artistic influence; it would be inappropriate to compare them for their psychology of style. Yet it is imperative to find a mode of interpretation able to take into account this involuntary migration of images between past and present. Such resonances, in other words, call for a method of interpretation that is able to account for the scopic effect of the unconscious. Or to borrow a phrase from the art historian Georges Didi-Huberman, what is required is an investigation into the "unconscious of the visible."¹⁶ Such an investigation does not mean trying to make visible something that is invisible. The unconscious is not an entity that can be seen in any optical sense. The visual resonances are only interpretable *symptomatically*. The symptom is a presentation that cannot

be taken at face value. To put this in terms of the picture-image distinction, the “unconscious of the visible” pursues something that is precisely *not* shown in the picture; it pursues the picture’s *image*, the father hidden in the wolf’s clothing.

There is, of course, another falling figure whose image has haunted human imagination since before Ovid’s time. I am thinking of the Greek myth of Icarus, son of the master-craftsman Daedalus. According to Robert Graves, whose account is culled from a variety of ancient sources, Icarus came to his father’s aid when King Minos imprisoned Daedalus for secretly aiding the King’s wife, Pasiphaë, in her affair with Poseidon’s white bull.¹⁷ Both father and son were locked up in the labyrinth that Daedalus had designed to house the Minotaur (the monstrous offspring of the Queen’s affair). Pasiphaë freed them from this prison, but it was not easy to leave the island of Crete. King Minos had decreed a large reward for Daedalus’s arrest. As means of escape, the craftsman fashioned two pairs of wings made out of large quill feathers threaded together with smaller feathers that were held in place by beeswax. After fastening Icarus in his wings, Daedalus turned to his son with tears in his eyes: “My son, be warned! Neither soar too high, lest the sun melt the wax; nor swoop too low, lest the feathers be wetted by the sea. Take the middle course.” Daedalus then slipped his arms into his own pair of wings, and off they flew. “Follow me closely,” Daedalus cried again, “do not set your own course!” They sped away from the island in a north-easterly direction. The fisherman, shepherds, and farmer’s who gazed upwards mistook them for gods. After passing the islands of Naxos, Delos, and Calymne, Icarus disobeyed his father’s instructions and began to soar to greater and greater heights, rejoicing on the lift of his great wings. When Daedalus next looked over his shoulder, he could no longer see his son, but noticed scattered feathers floating on the waves below. The heat of the sun had melted the wax and Icarus had fallen into the sea and drowned.

Representations of the doomed flight have been found on numerous Greek and Roman artefacts. In some of these painted frescos and vases, Icarus looks less like a young man than a maenad: one of the young women of Dionysius’s cult.¹⁸ The image migrated more widely during the Renaissance period via the circulation of illustrated editions of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. One of the best known of these illustrations is Antonio Tempesta’s expressive woodcut from 1606 (Fig 9.4). In the background of this version, Tempesta includes a tower, referring perhaps to the prison Daedalus and Icarus sought to escape. One of the most striking differences between this woodcut and the various photographs from New York is the visible presence of Icarus’s father as traumatized witness. In Tempesta’s illustration, Daedalus commands the image in both size and position. His long, muscular body stretches over the width of the image. In contrast, Icarus seems frail and vulnerable: a small, beardless boy who has lost control of his body. Yet spectators of this picture once again find themselves witness to a horrifying plunge. Icarus’s face is turned away from us, his



9.4 Antonio Tempesta, *The Fall of Icarus*, 1606.
© Trustees of the British Museum.

robes flap helplessly in the wind, his arms and fingers stretch outwards in that unmistakable gesture of one who is falling a long, long way.

The myth of Icarus adds a third, ancient layer to this “international migration of images” from ancient Greece to New York.¹⁹ Indeed, regarding the falling man as an uncanny iteration of Icarus introduces into visual studies the problem of cultural migration but also the *longue durée*. There is only one “science without a name” that could provide precedent for such a treatment, namely, the approach proposed by the German art historian Aby Warburg.²⁰ In the early part of the twentieth century, Warburg shifted the focal point of his art historical research away from the study of styles and toward the study of the transmission of culture. The key slogan for Warburg’s nameless discipline was *Nachleben der Antike*, a phrase that has proved almost impossible to translate accurately into English, the closest interpretation perhaps being “the survival of antiquity.”²¹ The phrase is meant to capture the fundamental problem Warburg’s research addressed: the survival (the continuity or afterlife and metamorphosis) of images and motifs from antiquity in the modern world. Warburg’s innovative project assumed a temporal model that was radically different from any employed in art history at the time. Indeed, the unique counter-rhythm of his method perhaps shares the closest proximity to Freud’s discovery of the unconscious as a preserve of ancient human drama. Just as Freud regarded his patients’ narratives as new editions of very old

tales, Warburg discovered strange anachronisms in the visible world, traces of antiquity in the visual forms and practices of the present. For Warburg, as for Freud, images are not comprehensible until the anachronistic time of the survival they embody and incorporate is elucidated.

In a short paper from 1913, for example, "Airship and Submarine in the Medieval Imagination," Warburg presents a detailed analysis of a fifteenth-century Flemish tapestry.²² The true aim of this paper, however, is to open a window of historical insight onto Warburg's own era, a time marked both by an escalating arms race and the German public's enthrallment with the new technology of airships. The strategy may seem opaque until one considers Warburg's view of the sky. Prior to the invention of the jet aircraft, German airspace was filled with these colossal, awe-inspiring dirigibles. The strange objects dominated the public imagination in part because just prior to Warburg's writing, Ferdinand von Zeppelin had lent his name and his fortune to create a fleet of rigid airships that were used for commercial and passenger transport. Before World War I, some 40,000 passengers had already flown on the first airline in history, Deutsche Luftschiffahrts-AG.

Warburg's interpretation of the Renaissance tapestry is addressed to this climate. Far from simply presenting a static history of art, he seizes upon those motifs that have returned to haunt the present like the symptoms of a repressed conflict clamoring to be heard. The tapestry is read anachronistically, in the context of a contemporary European imagination preoccupied with the invention of flight and the subsequent colonization of airspace. Warburg first encountered the massive work when it was featured in the apartments of the host of the Tenth International Congress on the History of Art, Prince Doria of Rome. Currently hanging in the palace's Green Salon, the tapestry depicts medieval legends about Alexander the Great, although to contemporary eyes, Warburg suggests, it probably looks like "a page from some huge book of fairy tales."²³ Indeed, strange figures swarm the cloth in baffling profusion. But to the educated society of fifteenth-century Europe, the tapestry appeared as an accurate and well-documented portrait of history. Each scene corresponds precisely to facts set out in any number of popular texts on Alexander's life. One scene in the upper left area shows King Alexander sitting inside a lavishly ornamented metal cage that is borne aloft by four griffons (Fig. 9.5). According to one source that Warburg quotes, this scene depicts Alexander's attempt to discover what manner of thing the air was. By using a lance to dangle meat in front of the griffons, he was able to coax them into exploring the atmosphere. His only luggage was several sponges soaked with water that he used to cool both himself and the griffons when they passed from the sphere of pure air into that of fire. Warburg waits until the close of his paper to quietly insert his thesis:

The tapestry in the Palazzo Doria, not previously noticed in the literature, can thus be seen as a revealing document in the evolution of the historical consciousness in the age of the revival of classical antiquity in Western Europe ... It seems to me by no



9.5 Detail of Tournai tapestry, mid-15th century, *Alexander's Journey to the Sky*, Palazzo Doria, Rome. Photograph by Fratelli Alinari, courtesy of the Warburg Institute.

means far-fetched to tell the modern aviator, as he considers the “up-to-the-minute” problem of motor cooling systems, that his intellectual pedigree stretches back in a direct line ... to *le grand Alixandre*.²⁴

The claim appears utterly innocuous: current anxieties and ambitions haunting aviation can be seen as directly descended from Alexander’s scorching exploration of the atmosphere in ancient times. But Warburg publishes this paper on Alexander’s world-conquering exploits in 1913; it would be less than a year before Germany invades Belgium, using its newly built fleet of airships as aerial bombers in its own project of world domination. In 1937, the age of airships will come to an end when the Hindenburg goes up in flames just outside New York.

In one sense, Warburg’s strange little paper offers a material example of Kant’s thesis that prophecy always takes the form of historical report.²⁵ In another, Warburg is attempting to develop a method that can discern the unconscious elements of the visual world. He seeks a means of translating those historical traces that do not register consciously but which nevertheless remain active in an unconscious state. A few years later, in 1915, Freud would pose a question that Warburg himself might have penned: “How are we to arrive at a knowledge of the unconscious?”²⁶ Like Freud, Warburg is wary of the nature of this translation. Perceiving unconscious processes in conscious terms is comparable to the way the outside world is perceived by the senses. Kant warned us not to overlook the fact that our perception is subjectively determined. Our perception should not be regarded as identical to the unknowable thing that is being perceived. Both Freud and Warburg took this warning to heart: the unconscious is not how it appears to us. Pictures are not equivalent to images. What can be *seen* in a tapestry or painting or photograph is not all that is *shown*.²⁷

The Icarus Complex?

The myth of Daedalus and Icarus does not appear on the radar screen of critical theory. As is well known, Freud turned to the Greek cycle of plays by Sophocles—*Oedipus Rex* in particular—to characterize tensions at the heart of humanity. In *Civilization and its Discontents*, he argues that the Oedipus complex provides the historical and emotional foundations for culture, law, civility, and decency. If all goes well, the Oedipal triangle—in which the child demands exclusive access to the parent of the opposite sex—will give rise to feelings of fear, guilt, and reparation. The dynamic calls into being the super-ego, the internalized version of our parents’ union that takes shape as our conscience. We learn that love has necessary limits even as these unconscious fantasies continue to structure our internal life and social relations. This complex dynamic at work in the Oedipal situation has offered much to social thought.²⁸ Could the father-son dynamic of the myth of Daedalus and Icarus

offer something analogous? What does it mean to see Icarus in Richard Drew's photograph from September 11? What does it mean to see Icarus as a young woman, feverish with a Dionysian madness, tumbling out of a ten-story walk-up in 1911? The spectator herself might experience a sense of vertigo from this blurring of multiple pasts. One should not lose sight of the real suffering bodies that have been forced to re-create themselves into the form of an image. And above all, one should not lose sight of the differences and displacements at work in these uncanny repetitions. But the unconscious knows no time; there is no master tableau, no nosological criterion able to guide a diagnosis, no key to symbolic forms provided by the iconographical dictionary. The symptomatic return cannot simply be deciphered—it must be *interpreted*.

Ovid's tale of Icarus, like many of the stories that make up the *Metamorphoses*, is often read as moral instruction: "Follow your Father's command," or, "Always take the middle path." Aristotle might have used the story as evidence for his philosophy of virtue as lying in a mean between excess and defect: Icarus offers an example of why it is important to live a moderate life.²⁹ Indeed, the myth is most often interpreted as a cautionary tale against human hubris: Icarus is swiftly punished for his self-indulgent enjoyment, for his failure to recognize the limitations and precariousness of one's human condition.³⁰ Ovid's account, however, emphasizes the role of the father. In this version, Icarus plays next to Daedalus as the master-craftsman constructs their means of escape. The boy laughs at the down that blows in the passing breeze. He presses his thumbs into the beeswax, not realizing that he is handling things that will endanger him. Icarus's play hinders his father's work and as Daedalus straps the wings on the boy's back, his hands tremble and tears stream down his cheeks.³¹ Ovid does not say so explicitly, but as readers we sense that Icarus is in danger just as we know that Daedalus has begun to mourn the loss of his son before the tragic flight even begins. It is no surprise when the boy slips out of sight for we have been made aware that Icarus's life may be the price of Daedalus's freedom. This is to say, the myth is not simply a tale about Icarus's hubris, but also about his father's. It offers an allegory for "collateral damage;" it provides a story about the short-sightedness of ambition. Icarus does not simply fall—his father drops him. Or at best, Daedalus averts his gaze at the crucial moment. Flying on ahead, he fails to notice when his son begins to flounder.

Perhaps from our vantage point at the edge of the twenty-first century, Richard Drew's photograph can be read as an iteration of Icarus's enigmatic message: *Father don't you see I'm falling?* The photograph provides this utterance, gesturing to a fall that was missed. A traumatic vision, therefore, that must be endlessly repeated. The pictures from New York offer a new cultural transmission of this ancient communiqué: a shattering cry that expresses the psychical toil of witnessing a death, or rather, of our terrible *incapacity* to witness death directly. The myth of Daedalus and Icarus offers testimony to the impossibility of this witnessing, a statement about what it means *not* to be able to register this reality at the time of its unfolding. I think

this is the perturbation one feels when gazing upon Drew's photograph. The picture houses an unbearable dream-thought, an image of that which the spectator—hovering in Daedalus's place—can never see in time: Icarus, frozen in his terrible, silent fall, the unmistakable sign of something gone awfully wrong in the human world.

Notes

- 1 Michael Taussig, "The Language of Flowers," in *Walter Benjamin's Grave* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), 190–91.
- 2 Tom Junod, "The Falling Man," *Esquire* (September 2003): 178.
- 3 According to estimates given by *USA Today*, cited in *ibid.*, 180.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 199. As Junod points out, this means almost one in six of the victims of the attacks died this way.
- 5 W.J.T. Mitchell, "Visual Literacy or Literary Visualcy," in *Visual Literacy*, ed. James Elkins (Routledge: New York, 2008), 16.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 16–18.
- 7 Jacques Derrida, "By Force of Mourning," trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, *Critical Inquiry* 22, no. 2 (Winter 1996): 188 original emphasis.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 188.
- 9 Sigmund Freud, "From the History of an Infantile Neurosis" (1918 [1914]) In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 17, trans. and ed. by James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–74), 16.
- 10 One senses that Freud's patient is haunted by wolves similar to the way Hamlet is haunted by the ghost of his father. That is, the wolves make their visitation in order to remind the young boy of his tragic legacy and to deliver an injunction. Apart from this father figure, we also learn in the course of Freud's case study that the Russian's sister—the one responsible for tormenting him with the fairytale book and who also seduced him with her precocious sexual play—poisoned herself as a young adult and died far from home. Given the reconstructive nature of analysis, it would seem the wolves do not just hide the father, but are peopled by any number of imagos.
- 11 "141 Men and Girls Die in Waist Factory Fire," *The New York Times* (March 26, 1911).
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," in *Selected Writings 1938–1940*, vol. 4, eds Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press, 2003), 390.
- 14 Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, Trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 1.
- 15 Jean Baudrillard notably points to another sense of repetition built into the symbolic dimension of 9/11, in so far as the event was marked by "a double-ness (or literally twin-ness)." See *The Spirit of Terrorism*, trans. Chris Turner (New York: Verso, 2003), 6.

- 16 Georges Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art*, trans. John Goodman (University Park, Penn.: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), 29. The phrase no doubt strikes resonance with Walter Benjamin's "optical unconscious," a connection Didi-Huberman pursues in *L'image Survivante: Histoire de l'art et temps des phantômes selon Aby Warburg* (Paris: Minuit, 2002).
- 17 Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths: Complete Edition* (London: Penguin, 1992), 312–3. His sources are wide but the myth is most famously recounted in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. It should be noted that this is not a solely Greek tale; Etana, the Babylonian hero, after his sacred marriage at Kish, rode on eagle-back towards Ishtar's heavenly courts, but fell into the sea and was drowned (see Graves, 117).
- 18 J.D. Beazley, "Icarus." *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 47:2 (1927): 228.
- 19 Aby Warburg, "Italian Art and International Astrology in Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara," in *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity: Contributions to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance*, trans. David Britt (Los Angeles: Getty Research Center, 1999), 585.
- 20 Giorgio Agamben calls Warburg's discipline "the nameless science" in "Aby Warburg and the Nameless Science," in *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: The University of Stanford Press, 1999): 89–103.
- 21 See Georges Didi-Huberman, "The Surviving Image: Aby Warburg and Tylorian Anthropology" *Oxford Art Journal*, 25:1 (2002): 59–70, as well as Didi-Huberman's "Artistic Survival: Panofsky vs. Warburg and the Exorcism of Impure Time," *Common Knowledge* 9:2 (2003): 273–85.
- 22 Aby Warburg, "Airship and Submarine in the Medieval Imagination," (1913) in *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity: Contributions to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance* (Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1999): 333–37.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 333.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 337.
- 25 Immanuel Kant, "An Old Question Raised Again: Is the human Race Constantly Progressing?" (1798), in *On History*, ed. Lewis White Beck (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2001), 137–154.
- 26 Sigmund Freud, "The Unconscious" (1915), in *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 14, trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–74), 166.
- 27 In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis (The Seminar Book XI)*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977), 75 Jacques Lacan argues: "In the so-called waking state, there is an elision of the gaze and an elision of the fact that not only does it look, it also shows." The "it" Lacan refers to here is, of course, the *It*, *das Es*, Freud's term for the unconscious. What Lacan suggests is that seeing is complicated by the fact that the unconscious looks and also shows. It shows in dreams—it presents itself in these images, albeit in a disguised form. All this is to say, the notion of the unconscious demands a revision of our classical notion of representation. "It" opens a breach in our gaze. We can no longer simply speak about the formal qualities of a picture. Something else is shown and shows itself in these encounters. Indeed, the unconscious of the visible world presents itself through the picture's image.

- 28 See for instance, George H. Pollock and John M. Ross, *The Oedipus Papers* (Madison: International Universities Press, 1988); Bryn S. Turner, *The Body in Society: Explorations in Social Theory*, 2nd Edition (London: Sage, 1996); Juliet Mitchell, *Mad Men and Medusas: Reclaiming Hysteria and the Effects of Sibling Relationships on the Human Condition* (London: The Penguin Press, 2000).
- 29 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 3.6.1117a, 30–35.
- 30 Douglas L. Cairns notes that “hybris” can be either the committing of acts that intentionally shame or dishonour others or simply occupying a disposition of over-confidence or presumption. In “Hybris, Dishonour, and Thinking Big,” *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 116 (1996): 1–32.
- 31 Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book 8.183–235.