The Daedalus Complex

A Proposal for a Thesis in Creative Writing

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ד"ר לזר סימקס :מנחה

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Introduction

The Daedalus Complex significantly expands and amends a story from Greco-Roman mythology briefly recorded in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In Ovid's version, Daedalus, an acclaimed Athenian inventor, receives his nephew Perdix as an apprentice in the mechanical arts. Perdix's mother, Daedalus's sister, is unnamed in Ovid; in other versions the nephew's name is Talos and the sister is Perdix, still in others vice versa. In *The Daedalus Complex,* I've named her Anaxias, derived from the Greek word *anax,* meaning lord, suggestive of her commanding, androgynous persona. Perdix proves a formidable inventor himself, one day fashioning the first iron saw, inspired by the shape of a fishbone. He also later invents the compass tool. Daedalus is overcome with jealousy and throws him head first off of the Acropolis. In Ovid, Athena intervenes and turns Perdix into a partridge: "The quickness of his mind was in his wings and feet; he kept his name."

I make a number of significant changes to the Ovidian narrative. The time period of *The Daedalus Complex* is in fifth century Athens, an era that includes the philosophers Heraclitus and Plato, the three chief Athenian playwrights, as well as the emergence of Athenian democracy. In other words, I place Daedalus and his family members in the era that the West has for centuries fetishized as the apex and foundation of our intellectual history. Thus in turn I contradict Daedalus's other appearances in Greco-Roman literature; in general, Ovid's tales evoke a distant past of great men who mingled with the gods, not unlike Hesiod's division of the ages into successive, mostly declining ages that track great heights of heroic achievement that gave way to human misery and toil. In Ovid, Daedalus's tale precedes that misery; in my novel, it is in the midst of it. As in Shakespeare's history plays, I am significantly reappropriating an established narrative to fit new interpretations about the psychologies of its various players.

Aims & General Description

The Daedalus Complex concerns the relationship of the famed Greek inventor and his prodigious nephew, Perdix. The original novel will raise issues including childhood, sexuality, drug addiction, family history, and psychological motivations for political change and upheaval. It takes place in fifth century Athens, though it is not a work of historical fiction since, rather than a depiction of a historical setting populated by characters whose fates relate to the author's point of view about that historical setting, it is instead a psychological, philosophical work with the backdrop of classical Athens. The function of the setting is primarily an aesthetic choice. Stylistically, *The Daedalus Complex* is in step with *fin de siècle* decadence as well as that movement's advocates and espousers among twentieth century literature such as Tennessee Williams and Patrick Modiano. The proposed thesis will be approximately 120 pages.

Conceptual Background

The Daedalus narrative originated in a spontaneous writing exercise in Lazarre Simckes's prose laboratory. The work will draw upon and invoke three literary styles in the thesis: the French *nouveau roman,* symbolism, and symbolism's close relative, aestheticism or decadantism. The *nouveau roman*'s insights will prove to be of great use in setting scenes, especially when introducing (or reintroducing) a character after first positioning them in an architectural or urban setting. Moving through that setting with a careful, photographer's eye inside my mind with the aim of total detachment, an absence of metaphor, and treating objects, even if only for a few pages, as the subjects themselves rather than servicing my point of view about where the plot should lead helps ideas emerge, paradoxically because this style expressly forbids ideas and interpretations in the narrative. Among novels written after the active period of the *nouveau roman,* Ursule Molinaro's *Sounds of a Drunken Summer* has been the most influential to me due to its powerful descriptions and inventive syntax.

Using the *nouveau roman* technique also invites research into the material and social culture of classical Athens, a necessary activity for writing a novel with a historical setting. I have an academic background in classical languages, history, and archaeology. *Nouveau roman*'s prescriptions necessitate an academic's accuracy combined with a novelist's sensitivity to language. Anaxias, one of the major characters in the novella, lives in an aristocratic home inherited from her family. Treating the house not merely as subordinate to the action, as if it were a theatrical set-piece, but instead as in a sense subordinating the plot and character is an aim of mine in certain scenes. Moments in the narrative without dialogue, even without people or plot-advancing action, must have as much life as the scenes that are populated with the narrative's various cast members (Daedalus, Anaxias, Perdix, Pentheus, and Doctor Habalum, to name the most prominent).

Decadentism too has a unique relationship with objects and, like the *nouveau roman*, privileges them in a way that the conventional novel does not. However, where *nouveau roman* writers sought impartiality, detachment, and to be as value-neutral as possible, decadent writing does the opposite. It is a saturation, almost a *katabasis* of sensory activation where objects and artifice not only eclipse people and the organic world, but in some extreme examples of decadent literature, destroy it. The poems of Baudelaire, for example "A Martyr," illustrate what I want to achieve in certain essential parts of the narrative, particularly scenes involving the sinister Doctor Habalum. Put more simply, this type of writing finds "truth in excess and extravagance," one of the pillars of the symbolist movement as articulated by Jean Moréas. Each character in the Daedalus narrative develops a dependence on a particular drug and in turn their own unique set of symptoms and psychological responses, some conducive to their creativity and others destructive to their health, relationships, and thought processes. Descent into drug addiction is an ideal avenue for decadent and symbolist writing. Chaos and

excess, even if on the one hand destructive, on the other hand eradicates platitudes and banalities that obstruct challenging notions and aesthetic imperatives that could elude the writer out of fear or simply its distance from convention. As the consciousness of the characters alter, the hyper-subjectivity of symbolist style will prove indispensable.

The aesthetic guide for all my writing is Walter Pater, due to his emphasis on the reading experience itself rather than lessons or gleanings after-the-fact that may or may not arrive as a result of that experience. I am attracted to the notion of a novel equally indebted to a style of hyper-objectivity (the *nouveau roman*) and to one of hyper-subjectivity (symbolism and decadentism) since to maintain that contradiction is in step with aestheticism, Pater's critical school and the foundation of my approach to reading and writing. The thesis is my attempt to make a contribution to literature with a reimagining of a Greek story, an artistic tradition in Greek culture itself, continuing through authors as disparate as Geoffrey Chaucer and André Gide. Specifically, I am authoring a work in dialogue with French modernist retellings of and engagements with mythology, such as Gide's *Oedipus* and *Thesus* stories, Raymond Queneau's *Flight of Icarus* and *Saint Glinglin*, Alain Robbe-Grillet's *The Erasers*, and Ursule Molinaro's *Cassandra* and *Power Dreamers*. These modern re-workings of ancient literature share my aim not to draft historical fiction, but instead employ ancient plot and setting in playful stylistic exercise resulting in a thoroughly modern work. A modern novel based in mythology is freed with the understanding that style is a constant work-in-progress not bound to established "schools" or censorship entities such as mass market taste, or arbitrary, chimerical criteria such as whether it "really feels" like Ancient Greece in the style of the dialogue or prose. Though I have committed to drawing upon three stylistic movements in this section, I do not plan or desire to write "a symbolist novel" or any other ideo-

logically-constrained work. These three aesthetic philosophies advocated a break from convention and from tired aesthetic standards, signposts to inventive writing that can remain fresh guides if not formulaically applied.

Shape of the Project

During his son Icarus's adolescence, Daedalus's fame reaches unprecedented heights. His work schedule and productivity are likewise heretofore unmatched. An inheritance from his father permits him to purchase a large studio for his mechanical work, rendering the rest of his life essentially meaningless in his eyes since he has the freedom and space to work all hours of the day with his beloved son Icarus at his side and under his tutelage. Indifferent to the inheritance of his spectacular childhood home, he gives it to his decadent sister, Anaxias.

Daedalus is perhaps the most admired man in all of Greek society, not only in respect to his inventions and technological advancements but also what is perceived as his discipline and dedication to his vocation, as well as his humbleness, honor, and aversion to the spotlight. At the same time, he begins to take advantage of his rising fame by attending the frequent parties in his childhood home, hosted by his sister Anaxias. As a guest at these parties, he experiences regret for expending his entire youth immersed in study. Most of Anaxias's guests are fashionable youths of Athens's artistic and intellectual culture, many of whom are sexually desirable. Icarus accompanies his father to the gatherings and, accustomed to socializing with his father's businesses associates, takes to the environment naturally and is the object of lust all around the room. Daedalus's resentment takes over, and at home he gazes with agonizing envy of his son's maturing body. Eventually it is an easy decision to let him leave for Crete, where he goes to study poetry and the Minoan language.

Fourteen years later, in a storyline that I am still shaping, Anaxias supports a young student named Philip enrolled at Plato's Academy. Gradually, she becomes disappointed in

his academic prowess and his childish conduct when she attempts to introduce him to high society. She perceives him as weak and, though intelligent, conformist and overly bookish with no relationship to pleasure or the physical world. In order to "wake him up," she introduces him to Habalum, a mysterious, Aramaic-speaking physician and another one of her beneficiaries. To both Anaxias and Philip, Habalum prescribes a strange drug that at first leaves them both feeling regenerated. Soon, however, peculiar effects such as insomnia and skewed perceptions of others begin to set in. To Anaxias and Philip there are also unique symptoms, but the effect is the same: an increasing reliance on Habalum's treatment. Meanwhile, Anaxias sends Perdix to study with Daedalus.

In Ksaidomikos, his private residence outside the city, Daedalus's old age is catching up with him. His mind, considered one of the wonders of the world in Greek society, feels foggy at times; when he isn't on a roll in his aristocratic wit, sometimes he must simply sit and stare off into space waiting for clarity to return. When speaking, his syntax gets jumbled and occasionally he uses a word when he means its opposite.

He turns to his neighbor and only friend, Pentheus, for suggestions. Pentheus, though nearly as isolated as Daedalus, has retained a pipeline to Athenian social life. Pentheus hears of a new cutting-edge doctor in Athens, later revealed to be Habalum, who can offer treatment. Daedalus initially refuses but his trust and affection for Pentheus win him over. Pentheus is unaware, at least at the beginning, of the connection to Anaxias.

Daedalus experiences even stronger effects from the drug than Anaxias, a euphoric return to an interest in invention and an obsessive attention to his lessons with Perdix. Upon Perdix's arrival, he immediately detests him and finds fault with even his most incidental mannerisms. After taking the drug, he doesn't grow to care for him, but he finds the rediscovery of his profession sufficiently pleasing that the lessons become bearable. Nonetheless,

Perdix's silence unnerves him, as does his simultaneous indifference but steadily growing aptitude. Daedalus is in the throws of celebrating the return of passion, so Perdix's complete lack of it deeply disturbs him, and he finds it increasingly intolerable. At the same time, the physical jealousy that led to his split from his son starts to present itself in his dynamic with his nephew. Eventually it becomes a consuming side effect of the drug, and his envy will ultimately be the primary motive for the murder.

Perdix's character is elusive and resentful. Like Icarus, he is a natural poet, but lacks his cousin's charm and ability to win others' affection. He has grown up in the shadow of his mother's socialite lifestyle, regularly encountering Athenian elites in his living room, but rather than acclimate to it, the effect was to make him almost anti-social. An alcohol-fueled conversation between Daedalus and Pentheus soon after his arrival reveals that, on one particularly licentious night at Anaxias's, Daedalus and his sister "collaborated" in a sexual encounter with a young Syrian man to whom they were both hopelessly attracted. As a result, Perdix may be half Syrian or Daedalus may be both his uncle and his father. Therein lies the crux of the novel: via a drug addiction shared by his neighbor and relatives, Daedalus reenacts a family drama he thought he had evaded by sending Icarus to Crete. Thus the Daedalus Complex is really a version of the Oedipal situation, only from the father's point of view: by fleeing his sexual jealousy toward his son, a generation later the same situation presents itself, this time with no way out.

The novel is structured with mostly short chapters that go back and forth from the point of view of various characters. Only Daedalus is told in the first person; all others from the third.

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