

THE KITE

A Symbol in Nineteenth-Century Literature

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Introduction: The Successful Prometheus

*Eripuit caelo fulmen,
sceptrumque tyrannis*

—Turgot

Undoubtedly the best-known legend involving a kite is that of Benjamin Franklin, who conducted the famous kite experiment that sought to prove the similarity of lightning and electricity. Franklin flew his kite in June 1752, and wishing to keep the aim of his excursion concealed, he was accompanied by his son, who was a small boy at the time, as some sources suggest.¹ Some also suggest that Franklin actually “drew the lightning from the clouds.”² Although a few Franklin critics are doubtful whether the famous experiment was actually carried out,³ it is beyond doubt that Franklin’s son would have been a little over twenty years old by the time Franklin flew his electrical kite,⁴ and the suggestion that the kite was struck by lightning is completely absurd: Franklin would not have lived to tell the tale. Some of the quibbles over the

¹ This error is made in “Lightning,” *All the Year Round* 20.488 (1868): 275, but much more frequently in artistic renditions of the experiment, such as Henry S. Sadd, *The Philosopher and His Kite*, 184-, Library of Congress. Web. 9 April 2012, <<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2006691772/>>. O. L. Holley, *The Life of Benjamin Franklin* (New York: Cooledge, 1848) contains a frontispiece that depicts Franklin’s son as a young youth. Franklin is described as a “strange little boy” at the time in “A Child’s Toy,” *Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal* 17.418 (1852): 1-3, 1.

² “Sketch of the Character of Doctor Franklin,” *Town and Country Magazine* 9 (1777): 451-53, 453. Other sources use a slight variation of words: “Reviews,” *The Athenaeum* 1420 (1855): 39; “Lightning” 275.

³ A popular recent work arguing that Franklin never conducted his kite experiment is Tom Tucker, *Bolt of Fate: Benjamin Franklin and His Electric Kite Hoax* (Gloucester: Sutton Publishing limited, 2004). A much earlier skeptic is Marcus W. Jernegan, “Benjamin Franklin’s ‘Electrical Kite’ and Lightning Rod,” *The New England Quarterly* 1.2 (1928): 180-96.

⁴ Boyd Stanley Schlenker, “Franklin, William (1730/31–1813),” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004, Web, 20 Apr. 2012.

authenticity of Franklin's experiment arise from his neglect to write a detailed account of the proceedings, the only known account of what precisely Franklin did that day only being put to paper by Joseph Priestly some fifteen years later, in 1767.⁵ It thus appears that Franklin's experiment took on a life of its own, with some embellishments and alterations in the process. Whether Franklin actually flew his kite is beside the point, however, because later retellings of the legend show that the famous experiment, and the kite at its core, had a strong appeal for nineteenth-century writers: even more than a century after Franklin wrote a few short lines on how to replicate his experiment, Victorian periodicals were still lauding Franklin's daring, and his fame had risen to such heights that any mention of the kite would almost invariably invoke a reference to Franklin flying his kite in a thunderstorm.

Where did this nineteenth-century interest in Franklin's experiment come from? No doubt the experiment came to convey an air of foolishness, or dangerous stubbornness at the very least, from the dangers of electrocution that it brought with it, but Turgot's description of Franklin as one who had "snatched the lightning from the sky, and the sceptre from tyrants"⁶ clearly reveals the admiration felt for Franklin's daring, and the link that was wrought between his important discovery and his contribution to the American fight for independence shows that his audacity in both causes was greatly appreciated. The legend was fertile ground for all kinds of allusions as well. The resemblance to the myth of Prometheus, who stole fire from the gods and gave it to the human race, was probably the most ubiquitous, and it was mainly in the form of a short evocation of Franklin as a modern Prometheus that the story appeared in nineteenth-century periodicals.

⁵ Joseph Priestley, *The History and Present State of Electricity With Original Experiments* (London: J. Dodson, 1767), 180-81.

⁶ Carl van Doren, *Benjamin Franklin* (New York: Penguin, 1995), 606.

The Kite in Context

Much has already been written about the human desire to fly and the long history of the development of aviation, but the kite as an historical artefact in its own right has only received some minor attention. Of course, books on how to build and fly kites abound, but texts that deal with the history of the Western kite are more difficult to find. The best-known academic work on this topic is probably Clive Hart's *Kites: An Historical Survey*,⁷ a rich text that cites a great variety of sources, but as the title suggests, it is a broad historical work that only looks briefly at several chapters in kite history without really delving into their significance. With regard to the nineteenth century, he examines the meteorological kite and the man-lifter, but both chapters move quickly to the late nineteenth, early twentieth century, when these applications began to take off in earnest. Hart takes up the task of analysing early perspectives on flight in his excellent *The Dream of Flight: Aeronautics from Classical Times to the Renaissance*,⁸ in which he focuses on very early human interest in flight, discussing wind banners, rockets, helicopters, and kites. Although it is a thorough investigation into attitudes surrounding flight, he only discusses the kite in a single chapter that stops, like the rest of the work, at the early seventeenth century. Other notable kite books that contain some mention of kite history invariably touch upon only the highlights of pre-1900 kite developments, and begin their real in-depth explorations around the 1890s at the very earliest. Walter Diem and Werner Schmidt's *Drachen mit Geschichte*⁹ (Kites with History) and Diem's *Drachen-Literatur*¹⁰ (Kite Literature) are interesting pieces of research in themselves, but they

⁷ Clive Hart, *Kites: An Historical Survey*, 1967, (New York: Paul P. Appel, 1982).

⁸ Clive Hart, *The Dream of Flight: Aeronautics from Classical Times to the Renaissance* (New York: Winchester Press, 1972).

⁹ Walter Diem and Werner Schmidt, *Drachen Mit Geschichte: Historische Modelle zum Selberbauen* (Norderstedt: Books on Demand, 2005).

¹⁰ Diem, *Drachen-Literatur* (Hamburg: Walter Diem, 2005).

do not convincingly cross the 1890s barrier that heralds the birth of the cellular and meteorological kite, and which seems to divide kite history. The same is true for Will Yolen's *The Complete Book of Kites and Kite Flying*,¹¹ and James Wagenvoord's *Flying Kites in Fun, Art and War*,¹² even though both are very decent treatises on the kite as a cultural artefact in addition to a plaything. Finally, Maxwell Eden's *The Magnificent Book of Kites* features two pages on Benjamin Franklin and "How a Kite Won the American Revolution,"¹³ but the next historical highlight leaps far ahead to Hargrave and his kites, thus skipping all but the last decade of the nineteenth century.

It becomes clear, then, that the nineteenth-century kite has been largely glossed over in favour of the earlier electric kite fervour (building on Franklin's experiment), and the later developments in cellular kites starting around the 1880s, which were an integral part of the invention of the airplane. Perhaps scholars believe that the nineteenth century did not produce any achievements as remarkable as those before and after the period to warrant their attention, but careful scrutiny reveals that many innovative designs were proposed and built throughout the century. Although the history of the Romantic and Victorian kite has received some minor attention, its literary significance has been ignored almost entirely. In addition, as the nineteenth-century fascination with Franklin's kite experiment shows, the kite was not only a subject for technological scrutiny, it also garnered attention in literature. It seems appropriate, then, that the nineteenth-century literary kite receive some in-depth scholarly research, in order to bridge the gap that has riven early and modern historical interest in the kite. In this context, my discussion will start around fifty years earlier, from roughly the middle of the eighteenth century onwards, to see how the myth around Franklin's kite percolated into later representations, but the

¹¹ Will Yolen, *The Complete Book of Kites and Kite Flying* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976).

¹² James Wagenvoord, *Flying Kites in Fun, Art and War* (Toronto: Collier, 1969).

¹³ Maxwell Eden, *The Magnificent Book of Kites* (New York: Sterling, 2002), 132.

nineteenth century in itself always remains the focus, and the main aim of this thesis is to explore how the kite functioned as a symbol in nineteenth-century literature.

Theorising the Kite

It is difficult to position an analysis of this subject in current debates because so little has been written about it. However, to be able to have a fruitful interaction with the sources, a general theoretical model can be extended from other areas concerning flight to cover the realm of the kite as well. Fortunately, a rich body of research on the history of aviation is available for this purpose. The best resources in this field are probably those written by the late Charles Harvard Gibbs-Smith, whose legacy becomes apparent in the many books he published on the subject, and to whom many subsequent scholars show their indebtedness. His *Aviation: An Historical Survey from Its Origins to the End of World War II*¹⁴ provides an excellent insight into what fascinated the nineteenth-century mind about taking to the sky, along with the seminal *The Invention of the Aeroplane 1799–1909*,¹⁵ although this volume focuses more on the aspects that made the invention of the airplane possible. Richard P. Hallion has recently written an expertly researched treatise on the development of flight: *Taking Flight: Inventing the Aerial Age from Antiquity Through the First World War*,¹⁶ which deals with some popular misconceptions about the development of human flight, as well as providing an incredibly detailed history of pre-1900 aviation. All in all, these writers sketch a vision of the nineteenth century as an era in which manned flight had become a reality, and in which hope and possibility for future developments, such as the manoeuvrability of aircraft, were often mixed with

¹⁴ Charles Harvard Gibbs-Smith, *Aviation: An Historical Survey from Its Origins to the End of World War II* (London: HMSO, 1985).

¹⁵ Charles Harvard Gibbs-Smith, *The Invention of the Aeroplane 1799–1909* (London: Faber & Faber, 1966).

¹⁶ Richard P. Hallion, *Taking Flight: Inventing the Aerial Age from Antiquity Through the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003).

frustration and defeat. A rich soil for literary interpretations indeed. Against this backdrop of expectations and fears surrounding flight, the symbolism of the kite in nineteenth-century literature will be explored.

It is not sufficient, however, merely to apply the theoretical model surrounding flight, and the balloon in particular, to the case of the kite. A broader understanding of how science and technology interact with literature is needed to provide an insightful analysis of the kite as a symbol. Colin Russell's *Science and Social Change: 1700-1900*¹⁷ offers a broad perspective on this interaction between scientific developments and the social and cultural sphere. It starts from the premise that science does not only influence, but is also influenced by, social matters, a thought that will prove useful in the analysis of kite symbolism and which will be explored in chapter two in particular. Another important work is *Victorian Science and Victorian Values: Literary Perspectives*,¹⁸ which looks at several debates in Victorian science and literature, and examines how these fields interacted with each other. These two volumes provide some useful insight into how ideas percolated from science into literature, and vice versa, but other theorists will be used as well. In this context it is important to realise that scientific and technological developments did not only shape their literary and cultural expressions, but that cultural and literary notions on these topics also influenced the discourse of the scientific texts. As I will show, this is the case when authors writing on the scientific uses of the kite battle popular conceptions of the kite, or support their arguments by invoking classical myths involving flight.

In order to understand how literary and scientific texts featuring the kite were adopted for various different uses, Ann Rigney's concept of the afterlives of texts and Hayden White's notion of narrativity are useful when analysing certain aspects of the

¹⁷ Colin Russell, *Science and Social Change: 1700-1900* (London: Macmillan, 1983).

¹⁸ *Victorian Science and Victorian Values: Literary Perspectives*, eds. James Paradis and Thomas Postlewait, 2nd ed. (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1981).

literary kite's reception. The latter is interesting because it explains how historical accounts are always imbued with a certain element of narrative, as they try to impose order and meaning onto historical events. This concept works well in an analysis of the representation of Franklin's experiment. The notion of the afterlife is productive in this context because it provides a model with which to analyse the dissemination of the experiment. Both are important aspects for an understanding of how the kite as a symbol came into its own. I will focus mainly on control, which is why Franklin's share in the early articulation of the kite as a symbol is so important: it links the kite with the myth of Prometheus, and the human desire for power over the elements.

Furthermore, it is important to define the ways in which the kite acts as a symbol. As Hallion points out, the balloon "quickly became symbol, simile, and metaphor."¹⁹ I will argue that a similar development occurred in the case of the kite. Scholars working on metaphor, such as the influential George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, whose work I will engage with in more detail in chapter three, often use the term *metaphor* to discuss the related tropes of simile, metonymy, analogy, and others as well.²⁰ I will follow their lead but will indicate what particular kind of metaphorical language is used when the specific nature of the trope is of importance to the argument. I will thus explore the symbol by using this broader sense of metaphor, together with an investigation of the associations the kite evokes in the narratives under discussion. Although this might appear to be a selective view on the symbol as a literary trope, it serves well to demarcate a clear domain for research while allowing for the multiple symbolic aspects of the kite to be examined. In terms of secondary material, I will be drawing mainly from Lakoff and Johnson, in addition to *Symbolism*

¹⁹ Hallion 58.

²⁰ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

in *Religion and Literature*,²¹ which offers some interesting readings of the various uses that symbols are put to. Zoltán Kövecses's *Metaphor: A Practical Introduction* is useful as well because it explores how metaphors are associated with specific types of texts, and how they feature in these.²² These works will be used to examine how the kite interacts with concepts such as metaphor, analogy, and symbolism.

Approach

Although I am aware of the difference between metaphor and symbol, I contend that analysing metaphor in the broad sense is a productive way of establishing how the kite functions as a symbol. I will engage with this distinction in the conclusion of chapter three, and show that symbol and metaphor are problematic entities to differentiate between in the texts that I am discussing here. In analysing the kite as a symbol, I will pay attention to both the historical context of the kite and its literary representations (scientific as well as poetic). Literature is meant here in a broad sense. Although my focus will be on nineteenth-century poems, stories and the like, I nevertheless incorporate scientific texts into this definition of literature as well, because, as I will show, they often display a cross-fertilisation with literature in the traditional sense. In this light, I understand that the terms *scientific* and *literary* kite might seem constructed. The latter term I use purely to discern between the kite in literature and the kite as a physical object. The term *scientific kite*, on the other hand, is rooted in the notion that Franklin's experiment brought the kite to prominence in the eighteenth century, and represents an initial stage in its development as a symbol.

The fields of research mentioned above offer a theoretical model to answer the question of how the kite functioned as a symbol in nineteenth-century literature. They

²¹ *Symbolism in Religion and Literature*, ed. Rollo May (New York: George Braziller, 1960).

²² Zoltán Kövecses, *Metaphor: A Practical Introduction*, 2nd ed., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 66-67.

are also a solid basis for a reflection on how this symbolism was created, what its larger significance in contemporary debates on flight was, and how the different connotations of the kite merged into one-another in texts featuring the kite. An examination of these issues aims to fill a gap that has curiously remained within the otherwise very thoroughly researched history of flight. Although the kite as a symbol has timidly entered literary scholarship recently with the publication of *The Kite Runner*,²³ this research obviously focuses on a very recent work, and a proper analysis of the kite in nineteenth-century literature still seems in order. To limit the scope of such a broad field, however, only the Western kite in English literature will be examined, with the occasional foray into a foreign text if it had an impact on English literature. Visual media will also be explored occasionally, as the etchings and engravings that often accompany kite stories also offer valuable information about its reception, but this will be kept to a minimum. To establish the corpus outlined here, I have done extensive research in online databases that digitise nineteenth-century periodicals, as well as additional investigations in the British Library. By these means, I have gathered a large number of sources that unfortunately exceeds the scope of this thesis. Therefore, I have added an appendix so that future researchers might benefit from these finds.

In the following chapters, I will examine and analyse the above-mentioned themes in nineteenth-century kite writing. The aim of this thesis is to give an overview of how the kite functioned as a symbol as well as reflecting on how this symbolism was effected in scientific as well as literary texts. First, a broader historical and theoretical background of the kite will be established, which will serve as a general introduction to the wide variety of aspects that were important for kite

²³ Jian-Rong Wang, "The Kite Runner: An Image Study," *Beijing Jiaotong University Journal (Social Sciences Edition)* 8.2 (2009): 91-93.

literature. This first chapter also focuses on the balloon, how its theoretical reception proves to be useful for an analysis of the kite, and how the notion of control runs through early accounts and histories of flight. The second chapter will link aviation history to Franklin's kite experiment, and the latter will serve as a guiding element throughout chapters two and three. Chapter two analyses the scientific kite, and I will engage with the symbol of the kite through the concept of control, as well as discussing how Franklin's experiment became a myth, enjoying a long afterlife. The third and last chapter will then focus on the literary kite, exploring its reception in the main elements of these stories, poems, songs, and essays. This chapter will draw heavily on the previous chapters, showing how the various aspects of control returned in kite texts peppered with moral and religious messages. In this chapter, I will focus mainly on how the kite acted as a symbol in these texts, and how the nature of symbols and metaphors bears on the representations of the kite and the interpretations of these texts. In the conclusion, I will reflect on the importance of the above-mentioned discussions, outlining what the kite might mean for modern studies on visions of flight, as well as offering some further angles for research into the literary kite.

CHAPTER 1

Visions of Flight

Although the nineteenth-century (literary) kite has been left virtually unexplored in debates surrounding flight and aerial culture, aviation history has nevertheless produced an incredible wealth of information about flight in general, impressive both in scope and detail. Even though the kite holds an underrepresented place in this history, it is important to establish its historical context so that certain common themes concerning the kite may be placed in the light of contemporary developments. This approach is useful for a discussion of Franklin and the scientific kite in particular, because his work had such a profound impact on nineteenth-century science and imagination. Indeed, the drive for control over natural forces is extremely important in this respect and is often linked to the myth of Prometheus.

The frequent references to Prometheus immediately bring to mind the myth of Daedalus and Icarus. Just like Prometheus was punished for penetrating the heavens and stealing fire by having his liver eaten out by vultures every morning, Icarus was punished for flying too high: the wax that held the feathers melted, and he fell to an untimely death in the sea. Another mythical figure who is sometimes mentioned in nineteenth-century kite stories is Phaeton, the son of Helios. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Phaeton tries to drive his father's sun-chariot, but is unable to control the fiery winged horses and is killed by Jupiter to prevent the earth from

burning.²⁴ Judging from these mythical examples, it seems that entering the airy regions of the earth was to be met with (divine) punishment, which is perhaps why the image of Franklin as a *successful* modern Prometheus was so appealing. This is plausible especially because Franklin not only harnessed a great power, he also permeated the skies with his kite, and what was formerly seen as just a boys' plaything thus became a prominent element in the legend.

The concept of man's scientific dominion over nature is crucial to Enlightenment thinking, as will be discussed in a later section of this chapter, and this dominance would become an integral aspect of later visions of science as well. The question of human control over natural forces, however, was obviously also inherent to any speculation about mechanical flight, especially manned flight, and this theme is prevalent in many histories of early aviation. A few elements of aviation history will be discussed here to set up a theoretical background for some of the most popular and common historical attitudes towards flight. Of course, the scope of this chapter does not allow for too many details, but I will summarise the developments that are deemed most important both culturally and imaginatively by experts in the field of flight.

Hart, Hallion, and Gibbs-Smith all mention early Western attempts at flying by the so-called "tower-jumpers"²⁵: men with self-made wings or sails who jumped to their deaths or mutilation from towers and other elevations. Their painful lack of success might very well have proven the impossibility of flight to their more fortunate earth-bound contemporaries. Still, the authors list quite a few of these attempts, occurring mainly before the eighteenth century, which suggests that the often fatal outcomes did not impede future jumpers as much as would have been desirable, and it

²⁴ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. A. D. Melville, ed. E. J. Kenney (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986), 25-34.

²⁵ *Aviation* 12.

suggests many men still cherished the hope of conquering the skies. It is fortunate for history that Leonardo da Vinci, who obsessed over human flight his entire life,²⁶ did not attempt to test his contraptions in a similar manner. Eilmer of Malmesbury deserves special mention here as his near-fatal glide inspired a lasting legend,²⁷ and although regarded as brave, these endeavours generally established a doubtfulness as to “the legitimacy of human attempts to fly.”²⁸ Indeed, human flight was considered to be almost blasphemous, because man’s tendency to fall to the ground was linked to his fallen state.²⁹ Hart also points out that in many of these narratives, a certain pattern can be recognised: a brief period in the air is irrevocably followed by a hurtful fall, and the breaking of legs is seen as a punishment of too much movement in the air, because it restricts movement in man’s proper sphere, the ground.³⁰ Still, the attempts reflect an ardent desire and hope for control over the air, while simultaneously demonstrating and reinforcing the notion of its practical impossibility at the time.

As suggested by the tale of Eilmer and other such tower jumpers, the possibility of control over the skies had long fascinated mankind, which is evinced by the many retellings and the survival of these historical accounts to this day. One may wonder how many more of these attempts were made, the written reports of which were simply lost or destroyed. Similarly, the Greek myths of the hubris of Icarus, Phaeton and Prometheus are examples of this fascination with control in a broader sense as well, although it seems that they stress the aspect of hubris more than the idea that man can harness the elements. After all, in the myth of Icarus, taking to the skies was not the problem; his father, Daedalus, was a skilled enough inventor to accomplish this feat relatively easily. It was Icarus’ arrogance of flying too high that

²⁶ *Aviation* 8.

²⁷ *Hallion* 18.

²⁸ *Dream of Flight* 30.

²⁹ *Dream of Flight* 20.

³⁰ *Dream of Flight* 30.

brought about his tragic end, and although Daedalus was punished indirectly by losing his son, his flight actually brought him to safety. However, it becomes clear that the concepts of control and hubris are only divided by a very fine line in these narratives. As the Oxford English Dictionary points out, hubris was not limited to “presumption [...] towards the gods” alone: it later came to mean “pride, excessive self-confidence”³¹ as well. The notion of hubris can also be applied to the tower-jumpers, then, both because their acts are charged with a presumption towards God (flight was blasphemous because of man’s fallen state) and because they show an excessive self-confidence (their often tragic ends suggest that no-one actually succeeded). On the other hand, Hart asserts that at the beginning of the seventeenth century, scientific influence on the popular attitudes towards flight was beginning to be felt, when F. H. Flayder declared in his Tübingen oration in 1617 that there was no presumption in the human endeavour to fly, because it was just another use of man’s God-given wit.³² Thus, attitudes towards the human quest for flight were not as simple as the connotation with hubris might suggest. Nevertheless, this link between arrogance (or hubris) and flight was wrought very early on, in classical mythology as well as in Christian tradition, and will prove to be extremely important for my argument later.

In 1783, human flight finally became a reality with the invention of the balloon. The Montgolfier brothers flew their hot-air balloon over Paris in October, and in December, Jacques Charles manned his own hydrogen balloon.³³ The year 1783 effectively opened the human mind to the air, establishing *air-mindedness* and serious speculation on the further possibilities of flight.³⁴ Of course, this interest remained with lighter-than-air flight at first, but again, limitations quickly surfaced:

³¹ "hubris, n." *OED Online*. June 2012. Oxford University Press. 22 June 2012.

³² *Dream of Flight* 139.

³³ Hallion 53-55.

³⁴ *Aviation* 17.

when the balloon's lack of control and dangerously fickle characteristics were becoming more keenly felt, inventors increasingly began to look into the possibilities of heavier-than-air craft. In addition, after the initial frenzy about the balloon's aerial applications, it became a popular symbol, appearing in all sorts of texts and images and on all kinds of items. Its uselessness in the air was thus compensated by its utility as a symbol. The aspects of fickleness and danger attributed to the balloon are an important aspect of a craft that seems so peaceful at first sight, and one that resurfaces in its afterlife as a cultural artefact. The idea of a steerable balloon turned out to be an illusion (at least until the end of the nineteenth century), and Kate Turner draws on this when she asserts that "for all the attempts to control the balloon as a potential signifier, the vehicle remained resolutely fickle, serving many causes, but faithful to none. The potentially dangerous and ultimately unmanageable nature of the balloon as a symbol was soon to emerge."³⁵ As control seemed to be unattainable, the idea of heavier-than-air flight again became popular.

Discussions regarding flight normally distinguish between lighter-than-air craft, or *aerostats*, such as the hot-air balloon and the gas balloon, and heavier-than-air craft, or *aerodynes*, such as airplanes and kites. Note here how the concept of movement –and in a certain sense also control– determines the etymology of the words: static and dynamic are the distinctive characteristics of the terms. Although actual successes in heavier-than-air manned flight failed to materialise until after the turn of the century, visions of flight dominated the nineteenth century. It is important to note, however, that manned aerodyne flight only became a "proper subject of investigation" in the UK with the founding of the Aeronautical Society of Great

³⁵ Kate Turner, "The Spectacle of Democracy in the Balloon Plays of the Revolutionary Period," *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 39.3 (2003): 241-53, 242.

Britain in 1866.³⁶ The airplane, however, had already entered the popular imagination before this date, and long before it actually became a reality. The vehicle mainly responsible for this development was Henson's Aerial Steam Carriage. Although the machine would have been incapable of practical flight, an 1843 drawing of it zooming over a crowd of people was the first image of a flying airplane people had ever seen, and it presented a vision of controllable and sustainable flight.³⁷ This image also conveyed the crucial difference between aerostatic and aerodyne flight: whereas flight in a balloon was marked by lack of control and a slow floating on the wind, the airplane conveyed dizzying speeds and manoeuvrability. The realisation of human control of the air, however, would not be achieved until the invention of the *dirigibles* and the airplane around the turn of the century.

Even before the invention of the first aerostat, or balloon, a basic principle of aerodyne flight had already been discovered and could be successfully built: the kite. However, what impeded the invention of the airplane most of all was the lack of a suitable prime mover: the initial source of energy that would set the machine moving. This is also the reason why the brilliant inventor George Cayley, operating around the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century, had to restrict himself to building untethered kites, or gliders: the technology to produce an adequately lightweight engine to power such a device was unavailable until the early years of the twentieth century.³⁸ Despite the kite's long presence in Western history and its importance for the ultimate invention of the airplane,³⁹ it never gained the fame or notoriety of the balloon. The balloon's immense popularity and cultural significance explain to some extent why it is so much better represented in scholarly criticism than

³⁶ *Aviation* 38-39.

³⁷ Jay Spenser, *The Airplane: How Ideas Gave Us Wings* (New York: Harpercollins, 2008), 13.

³⁸ Hallion 115.

³⁹ *Kites* 114.

the kite and I will go into this popularity in a later section. However, this lack of interest does not mean the kite was culturally irrelevant; it clearly sparked the interest of nineteenth-century thinkers, and the way in which it was represented in scientific and literary writing deserves critical attention.

One notable exception to this impasse in the history of human aerial navigation is George Pocock, who invented a carriage that was drawn by kites instead of horses. Published in 1827, *A Treatise on the Aeropleustic Art, or Navigation in the Air, by Means of Kites, or Buoyant Sails* featured the *charvolant*, as he called the kite-powered vehicle, which could outstrip a horse-drawn carriage and travel at right angles to the wind.⁴⁰ On one occasion, such a *charvolant* overtook the Duke of Gloucester's carriage whose horses were at full gallop, and in order to redeem the breach of etiquette, the *charvolant* paused to let the Duke pass.⁴¹ To be able to accomplish such feats, Pocock invented a kite that could be manoeuvred, a feature that eluded balloonists, much to their chagrin. The *charvolant*'s reception was lukewarm, to say the least, although the progressive journal *The Kaleidoscope* published abundantly and favourably on the subject.⁴² Many critics pointed out the impracticalities of Pocock's design. The main objection was the chariot's dependence on the power of the wind, which was considered too fickle to yield adequate propulsion.⁴³ Indeed, Pocock's invention suffered from quite a few snags, and so the *charvolant* never⁴⁴ replaced the horse-drawn carriage as a mode of transport. Pocock was aware of these objections and defended his invention with some interesting

⁴⁰ George Pocock, *A Treatise on the Aeropleustic Art, or Navigation in the Air, by Means of Kites, or Buoyant Sails* (London: W. Wilson, 1827), 24.

⁴¹ Pocock 15-16.

⁴² "Mr. Pocock's Kites Again," 431 (1828): 108; "The Kaleidoscope," 421 (1828): 24; "Scientific Notices," 408 (1828), 249; and at least nine others in 1828 alone.

⁴³ "Wonders of Locomotion," *The Mirror* 867 (1837): 389-91, 390.

⁴⁴ Incidentally, buggies being powered by large steerable kites are now a common scene on windy beaches; Pocock's invention seems to have been eerily prophetic.

arguments that I will explore in chapter two. Sceptics were thus eager to abuse Pocock's concept of using flying machines to power his chariot, whereas they did not mind boats using a similar manner of propulsion in the form of sails. This inconsistency *The Kaleidoscope* was quick to point out to them: "Kites are certainly useless when there is no wind; so are sails. Kites cannot draw a vessel in the teeth of the wind; neither can sails."⁴⁵ It seems, then, that the critics objected to the attempt at controlling an aerial device, and not so much the harnessing of the wind. Control over the air evidently remained a sensitive matter.

Theories of Flight

As Gibbs-Smith points out, the airplane had many different disciplines to thank for its existence.⁴⁶ The automobile industry, the field of aerodynamics (then seen as unrelated), and engine development, to name but a few, were all vital components in its invention. However, during the nineteenth century, some faulty scientific laws still governed, which predicted that human heavier-than-air flight would be highly unpractical, or overly practical, as we shall see. With the work of Isaac Newton, universal laws of physics had gained widespread currency, and had become so important that they could actually *hinder* the invention of heavier-than-air flight. One law and one figure are notorious in this respect: Newton's sine-squared law, and Smeaton's coefficient. The sine-squared law, derived from Newton's *Principia Mathematica*, predicted that a colossal wing surface would be needed to lift a human being.⁴⁷ In his extensive investigations into aeronautics, Cayley also analysed this law and published his findings in 1809.⁴⁸ He rightly judged that without

⁴⁵ "Mr. Pocock's Kites Again" 108.

⁴⁶ *Aviation* 93.

⁴⁷ Hallion 102.

⁴⁸ George Cayley, "On Aerial Navigation," *Journal of Natural Philosophy, Chemistry and the Arts* 24 (1809): 164-74. 169.

squaring the sine, the correct lifting surface could be calculated, which yielded a much lower amount of drag and made aerodyne human flight a real possibility.⁴⁹ Hallion doubts whether this erroneous law had really retarded work on flight, but he points out that the law did much damage from outside the field, as it was an excellent theory for critics of heavier-than-air flight to refer to in their attacks.⁵⁰ *The Mirror*, for example, uses the derivation to prove that Henson's Aerial Steam Carriage was incapable of flight in an 1843 issue.⁵¹ Incidentally, the enormous amount of lift that was sometimes created by large kites (such as Pockock's) would have already been an indication that something about the law was incorrect, which again underlines the neglect the kite was subjected to. The more harmful, however, is probably Smeaton's coefficient, which yielded overly optimistic predictions about the lift generated by airplane wings.⁵² The Wright brothers, for example, found that their flyer, which had been designed to lift a man, could barely lift itself, causing them to doubt the accuracy of the coefficient, and they duly adjusted it.⁵³ Again, Cayley had already adjusted Smeaton's figure around a hundred years earlier, in 1809,⁵⁴ but this had received little attention at the time.⁵⁵ Thus, the erroneous figure continued to hinder progress into the twentieth century because it predicted the successful flight of craft that simply could not generate enough lift for the purpose.

The importance and far-reaching consequences of the discovery of universal laws, however, are also felt in another way. In the nineteenth century, symbolical meaning could no longer be read into creation in the same manner as it had been

⁴⁹ Hallion 108.

⁵⁰ Hallion 108-9.

⁵¹ "Aerial Steam Carriage," *The Mirror* 1.14 (1843): 217-19.

⁵² Hallion 102.

⁵³ Tom Benson, "Smeaton Coefficient," *NASA*, Glenn Research Center, 29 Mar. 2010, Web, 30 April 2012.

⁵⁴ Cayley 168-69.

⁵⁵ Hallion 109.

before, because scientific insights had shown that many natural phenomena were very different from what they had (mythically and religiously) been imagined to be.

Thomas A. Zaniello points out, for example, that the knowledge of rainbows being produced by light reflected in water droplets had changed the way in which the phenomenon was described in poetry, but he adds that while its laws were being established, moralists were still concerned with the divine symbolism of the rainbow.⁵⁶ Zaniello's suggestion, then, does not imply that the rainbow could no longer be seen as an act of God's mercy, for example, but the way in which the phenomenon was linked to this divine providence had to change because its immediate natural cause had been established.

Edgar Allan Poe put this sobering development acutely into words when he composed his "Sonnet to Science" in 1829, which describes how science has robbed the poet of imagination by exposing dull realities. "Science!" the narrator exclaims, "[h]ast thou not dragged Diana from her car? / And driven the Hamadryad from the wood [...] Hast thou not torn the Naiad from her flood, / The Elfin from the green grass."⁵⁷ Poe, however, may have been too rash in his eulogy because new myths had been created from scientific experiments themselves, and the mythical figures of Prometheus, Icarus, Daedalus and Phaeton would be invoked often in reference to the kite and human flight. Indeed, the scientific domain was slowly displacing religion with its myth of progress: Prometheus was just one example of such a new saint of science to be honoured in relation to Franklin, and attacked in the form of Victor Frankenstein, a connection I will explore in the second chapter. It is curious that Franklin would thus be hailed as a modern Prometheus, a dubious title to share with

⁵⁶ Thomas A. Zaniello, "The Spectacular English Sunsets of the 1880s," In *Paradis and Postlewait*: 247-67, 256.

⁵⁷ Edgar Allan Poe, "Sonnet to Science," *The Portable Edgar Allan Poe* (London: Penguin, 2006), 402.

Frankenstein, but fortunately for Franklin, this was not a condemning epithet. From these remarks, it becomes clear that science and literature were closely interwoven. These thoughts are extremely important, as they suggest that although laws governing flight had been discovered or were becoming increasingly clear, aerial devices could still be carriers of symbolic meaning, a thought that lies at the base of the discussion of the kite as a symbol.

The Balloon Reception

Although kites had long demonstrated to inventors that aerodyne flight was a reality, the first manned flight was accomplished in the form of the aerostat when the Montgolfier brothers flew their hot-air balloon in 1783. Hence, the balloon became the first real image of successful flight, and it quickly became a cultural and literary artefact. This thesis is not concerned with making a detailed comparison between the balloon and the kite. Nevertheless, an analysis of how the balloon was appropriated can shed some light on the function of the kite in nineteenth-century literature. As I will show in chapter three, the kite and the balloon were regularly compared in literary texts. A vast number of books have been written on the history of the balloon and its cultural significance. Gibbs-Smith touched on the topic in his *Ballooning*⁵⁸ and he edited a volume on balloon prints that shows the impact of the balloon on visual art.⁵⁹ Hallion precisely describes the development of the balloon from its infancy to the early twentieth century and comments on the effect it had on Romantic and Victorian visions of flight. Richard Holmes, in his highly enjoyable *The Age of Wonder*, devotes a chapter to ballooning, which describes in great detail how the balloon became a “communal expression of hope and wonder, of courage and

⁵⁸ Charles Harvard Gibbs-Smith, *Ballooning* (London: Penguin, 1948).

⁵⁹ *Balloons*, ed. Charles Harvard Gibbs-Smith (London: Ariel, 1956).

comedy,” a view which he points out would later be espoused not only by men of science, but by poets and writers in particular.⁶⁰

However, it would be wrong to paint a picture of the reception surrounding the balloon as purely positive. As Turner points out in her essay on the interaction between the scientific, cultural and literary representations of the balloon, it turned into a symbol of hope but also of fickleness.⁶¹ She focuses mainly on the literary representations of the balloon, and concludes that it constituted “an important vehicle for revolutionary political and social ideas.”⁶² Turner’s approach is valuable because its focus does not rest primarily with a historical view of the balloon, but it stresses how the balloon was received in literary texts, and in turn, how this reception helped form the symbolism of the balloon. In an approach that fits well with New Historicism, she shows how the social energy of the balloon circulated, basing her arguments on the concept that literature reflects as well as shapes history. Discussions on the literary significance of the aerostat also emerge in a field not primarily engaged with flight: Elaine Freedgood’s *Victorian Writing about Risk* contains an interesting chapter on the balloon and its significance as a trope for escape.⁶³ However, she glosses over the more dangerous aspects of the balloon in her focus on the escapist and Freudian regressive qualities of balloon flight. Holmes becomes similarly side-tracked in his discussion, as he mainly construes the balloon as a symbol of “hope and liberation,” and “a collective gasp of hope and longing.”⁶⁴ Of course, these aspects are essential to a full understanding of the symbolism of the balloon, but as Turner shows

⁶⁰ Richard Holmes, “Balloonists in Heaven,” *The Age of Wonder: How the Romantic Generation Discovered the Beauty and Terror of Science* (London: Harper, 2009), 125-62.

⁶¹ Turner 241-42.

⁶² Turner 242.

⁶³ Elaine Freedgood, “Groundless Optimism: Regression in the Service of the Ego, England and Empire in Victorian Ballooning Memoirs,” *Victorian Writing about Risk* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000).

⁶⁴ Holmes 161.

in her article, the reciprocity between literature and culture needs to be articulated as well. These are only a few of the resources available on the balloon, but they serve to show that it enjoyed a broad cultural reception.

The work I will be engaging with most thoroughly here, however, is Michael R. Lynn's very recent *The Sublime Invention*.⁶⁵ Lynn establishes that there is a shortcoming in how the balloon has been represented in aviation history. He contends that the balloon deserves an in-depth study that engages more thoroughly with the growing and spreading popularity of the invention. *The Sublime Invention* is an excellent resource because it explores the cult of the balloon from many different angles: Lynn places it in the context of the Enlightenment and Romanticism as well as earlier attempts at flight, after which he proceeds to link the balloon to popular reception, the state effort to control the use of the aerial device, and finally he discusses its capacity for public consumption. Although these aspects are not the focus of my discussion of the kite, Lynn makes some interesting observations about the balloon that will be extremely useful for my discussion of the kite in chapters two and three.

A few characteristic elements are the focus of Lynn's treatment of the balloon. He stresses the balloon's initial promise that soon turned into disappointment, as mankind's victory over the air was not followed by the discovery of how this new aircraft could be steered.⁶⁶ He continues by pointing out that this lack of manoeuvrability was experienced as problematic in Enlightenment thinking: on the one hand, the balloon represented mankind's conquest over natural forces, but on the other it was unclear what its inherent usefulness, a trait of integral value in the

⁶⁵ Michael R. Lynn, *The Sublime Invention: Ballooning in Europe, 1783-1820* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2010).

⁶⁶ Lynn 3.

Enlightenment, would or could be unless a method for steering them was developed.⁶⁷ This tension caused one commentator to remark that it was a shame that balloons were so rashly relegated to “mere childish baubles.”⁶⁸ The notion of control and uselessness are crucial aspects here, and they return throughout Lynn’s argument. However, in Lynn’s approach, the reception of the balloon is the central point of interest, and he duly discusses the various adaptations of the balloon in all sorts of different media. He remarks that the balloon was seen both as divine and satanic, and that the aeronauts were often the objects of laudatory poems and journal articles in which they were linked to mythical figures such as Daedalus, Venus, and Vulcan.⁶⁹ Additionally, the balloon became a powerful tool in literature (Lynn devotes an entire section to this aspect), embodying various metaphors.⁷⁰ Crucial to this thought is the notion that the balloon was a receptacle for many different cultural values, and that this allowed the aerial device to be consumed in various ways, becoming essentially a commodity.⁷¹ In his conclusion, he reflects that the balloon was not so much an example of the Enlightenment, as it was of Romanticism, and that this is reflected in the role of the aeronaut who is presented as an adventurer who battles nature instead of understanding it.⁷² All in all, Lynn keeps his promise of providing a more detailed look at the balloon and he successfully demonstrates the balloon becoming at once “symbol, simile, and metaphor,” as Hallion phrased it.

A short comparison between the kite and the balloon can now be established and is in order here. First of all, fundamental to any understanding of the kite and its paradoxical relationship with control is an examination of the function of the string

⁶⁷ Lynn 34-35.

⁶⁸ Qtd. in Lynn 37.

⁶⁹ Lynn 66, 71, 83.

⁷⁰ Lynn 94-95, 151-162.

⁷¹ Lynn 122-43.

⁷² Lynn 163-64.

acting as a tether. Whereas a balloon can be held down by ropes,⁷³ it is mainly impaired in its natural flight while tethered, whereas the kite paradoxically needs to be grounded or *captive* in order to stay up in the air. As I will show in chapter three, this latter notion is a central one to many literary kite texts, and one that shapes the analysis of how the kite as a symbol transformed from the Enlightenment to the Victorian period. The kite as a symbol for human power over natural forces returns forcefully in chapter two, along with the representation of the kite as a child's toy. Likewise, the kite was associated with Christian imagery as well as classical mythology, and these links will likewise be explored in chapter three.

The aspects of the kite that I propose to study here benefit from Lynn's approach to the balloon, providing a solid basis with which to analyse the kite. Whereas Lynn focuses on the lack of control that could be exercised over the balloon, Turner and Holmes express more interest in the balloon as an ambiguous entity, capable of espousing many different forms and meanings, and lending itself to a kaleidoscope of different appropriations. Both these kinds of fickleness are integral to the balloon, and as we shall see, the kite as well. However, *The Sublime Invention* falls short when it comes to literary representations of the balloon. Although the author devotes an entire chapter to this topic and offers some interesting sources, he does not move beyond enumeration towards interpretation. This is where I take issue with Lynn's approach and where I initiate a departure. Turner adopts a methodology that is much more useful for literary studies, as she interprets balloon narratives to reflect as well as shape popular attitudes towards the balloon. As will become clear in the next two chapters, it is important to place the kite in its historical context, but it is

⁷³ The balloon was utilised frequently in this manner in the military, and was called "moored balloon" or in German, "Fesselballon."

equally essential to keep in mind that the texts under discussion permeated popular thinking instead of merely reflecting contemporary attitudes.

Conclusion

All in all, this chapter has provided a brief historical context and theoretical approach to flight and the balloon in particular. The concept of control returns forcefully throughout the examples given in this chapter. From those early valiant attempts at flying from towers and other elevations to the invention of the aerostat and much later the dirigible and airplane, mankind's desire for mastery over the skies and the subsequent quest for manoeuvrability are instrumental to any thorough understanding of human flight. The human desire for control over all things aerial will therefore be a guiding line throughout the thesis, serving as a concept with which to analyse the various aspects of kite symbolism.

Although control has been the main focus of this chapter, it becomes apparent that the balloon has been investigated from angles that might also benefit a discussion of the kite. In relation to control, utility is also crucial to discussions of flight in general, and the balloon in particular. Moreover, it is strange that the balloon as a cultural artefact has been examined in such great detail, whereas the kite is ignored in these discussions. After all, new insights into the importance of the kite as a medium for cultural expressions might also prove to be influential in current debates on the social and cultural aspects of flight. The way in which these scholars engage with the balloon, linking the technological developments of the balloon to its social and cultural dynamics, will provide a very useful model with which to analyse the nineteenth-century kite. Lynn's notion of the balloonist battling instead of understanding nature also reflects on this issue, and will shed some light on how the kite developed as a symbol from Enlightenment to Victorian thinking. The fickle

nature of the balloon is crucial in this, and will be explored in relation to the kite as well. In addition, the mythical language and imagery (Christian as well as Classical) that was often reserved for objects of flight will be related to the kite in chapter three, which will also contain a more detailed analysis of how the balloon and the kite are contrasted in kite narratives.

Throughout the history of aviation, then, the hope for mastery over natural forces and the desire for control over aerial vehicles was a fundamental driving force behind many developments in aviation, and, as I will show, behind many of the literary (and often religious) representations of the kite. As scientific developments stimulated an increasing understanding of natural phenomena, and as the Western world began to explore and conquer more regions and forces in the world, this grasp was naturally expected to be extended to the air as well. The quest for control is also very closely linked to the concept of hubris, which I will assess in more detail in the next chapter. On the one hand, scientific progress promoted the quest for human flight, while on the other, erroneous sedimentary beliefs that permeated science could hinder progress in the field of aviation. Despite many setbacks and disappointments, attempts at human flight became increasingly successful: the kite, balloon, dirigible, airplane, helicopter, and spacecraft being the most remarkable discoveries in aviation history.

All in all, the human dominion over the air went from being embodied by simple passengers in an unnavigable balloon to highly skilled pilots who were able to control their craft in roll, pitch and yaw. Although control became a decisive factor of human flight, flying always remained a dangerous pursuit, as the many casualties along the way clearly point out. Franklin's kite experiment is the archetypal example of that dangerous extension of control to a new region. His Prometheus epithet

captures this sentiment in its different facets, and will now be examined in more detail.

CHAPTER 2

The Scientific Kite

The discussion now shifts from the culturally most important historical developments of flight to Franklin and the Promethean myth that was constructed around his experiment. In this chapter, I will discuss how the kite was represented in the scientific realm in the nineteenth century. For this, I will look mainly at how the kite was linked to eminent scientists such as Franklin, how it was discussed in scientific texts, and how it was seen as a scientific object. Although Franklin was a famous American rather than just an eminent scientist, for the sake of my argument I will focus mainly on this latter part of his identity in this chapter. However, there is no doubt that Franklin's broader achievements had a great influence on the dissemination of the kite, and I will briefly touch upon Franklin's kite in relation to revolution as well.

Later communities were to appropriate Franklin's experiment and ascribe their own meaning to Franklin's success. As we have seen in the introduction, Eden wrote two pages on "How a Kite Won the American Revolution." Similarly, in a recent attempt to interest American youth for the kite, Bill Thomas asserts that without Franklin and his kite, there probably would not have been a United States of America.⁷⁴ Although these and other claims by the author are highly tenuous (Thomas also propagates the myth that Franklin's son was a small boy at the time of the

⁷⁴ Bill Thomas, *The Complete World of Kites* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1977), 17.

experiment),⁷⁵ Thomas's claim is interesting because it exemplifies the extent of Franklin's influence on the popular reception of the kite. Isaac Asimov took up a similar reading of the experiment in 1963 when writing *The Kite that Won the Revolution*, a biography of Franklin and his achievements, which is aimed at a youthful audience.⁷⁶ No doubt, the thrill and danger surrounding the electrical kite were strong contributors to its lasting fame and appeal, but fundamentally, Franklin's kite appealed to other human interests besides the contemporary obsession over the newly discovered electrical 'fluid.' The long life of this legend is thus crucial for the formation of the kite as a symbol.

Myths and Afterlives

As exemplified by Franklin's kite experiment, and the subsequent entering of that experiment into popular culture, Franklin's kite received an enduring *afterlife*. This notion of the afterlife is crucial for the understanding of how the kite as a symbol came into its own. Ann Rigney has examined this concept in, among others, her essay "The Many Afterlives of Ivanhoe,"⁷⁷ which deals with the mechanisms of how certain texts can take on a life of their own, percolating into the popular imagination and permeating it after a given time. Additionally, her "Portable Monuments: Literature, Cultural Memory, and the Case of Jeanie Deans"⁷⁸ explores the dynamics of literature and cultural memory. Astrid Erll's "The Power of Fiction" is also very useful in this context because of the concepts she utilises: Erll argues that historical accuracy is not

⁷⁵ Thomas 18.

⁷⁶ Isaac Asimov, *The Kite that Won the Revolution* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963).

⁷⁷ Ann Rigney, "The Many Afterlives of Ivanhoe," *Performing the Past: Memory, History, and Identity in Modern Europe*, eds. Karin Tilmans, Frank van Vree and Jay Winter (Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 2010), 207-34.

⁷⁸ Ann Rigney, "Portable Monuments: Literature, Cultural Memory, and the Case of Jeanie Deans," *Poetics Today* 25.2 (2004): 361-96.

the concern of memory making.⁷⁹ Likewise, Rigney stresses that “the content of what is remembered will also change.”⁸⁰ This development is clearly present in the Franklin narrative: later retellings would warp and adapt Franklin’s experiment to the needs of the writer. The transformation of Franklin’s son into a small child is a good example of the historical inaccuracy of the cultural memory linked to the event. This small inaccuracy does not affect the “‘authenticity’ or ‘truthfulness’”⁸¹ of the narrative, however. On the contrary, it fits in well with the popular notion that the son went along as a ruse, thus upholding the modest ambition that was commonly linked to the experiment.

Moreover, both Rigney and Erll stress that texts are interpreted and appropriated according to the needs of the communities in which they circulated. Indeed, the Promethean myth generated around Franklin could only develop by the continuous circulation and transformation of the retellings. According to Erll, this continuous retelling stabilises a narrative, and its circulation and remediation creates a “site of memory.”⁸² The same thing happened for Franklin’s experiment: particular elements of the event found their way into later retellings, thus stabilising the narrative to a certain extent and transforming the experiment into a site of memory. I contend that such a site begins to function as a kind of shorthand: whenever Franklin is invoked in relation to the kite, the undercurrent of the Prometheus theme, as well as associations of ambition and rebellion, immediately surface. Moreover, the myth surrounding Franklin is continually adapted to new interpretations and cultural visions. Asimov’s biography of Franklin, as well as Thomas and Eden’s mention of him, are good examples of this practice. They refer to the stable narrative of Franklin

⁷⁹ Astrid Erll, “The Power of Fiction,” *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008), 388-98, 388.

⁸⁰ “Portable Monuments” 367.

⁸¹ Erll 388.

⁸² Erll 391.

and his kite but they adopt him for different uses: Asimov focuses on Franklin's genius, whereas Thomas and Eden stress the importance of the kite.

Furthermore, Paul Tillich points out that “[t]he attempt to present a historical figure as a symbol raises this figure to the mythical level and gives to the empirically historical a certain figurative character in favor of its transcendent meaning.”⁸³ As we shall see, Franklin's experiment helped elevate him to a mythical status, which is also evinced by the connection drawn between Franklin and Prometheus. Thus the experiment became less a representation of the scientific achievement it originally was, and more a symbol of daring, hubris, revolution and ambition. Hayden White's concepts of narrativity⁸⁴ and emplotment⁸⁵ also play an important role here. White lists four different ways in which emplotment forms written histories.⁸⁶ I will not go into these, but will instead focus on the notion that a historian is forced to emplot his accounts and that this structuring helps create an afterlife for the text. In Priestley's case, his narrativised account of the experiment gave the event a certain structure that would be echoed and re-used in many of the later retellings. That it provided such a firm base is not surprising, as his 1767 account is the first authorised version of the proceedings that was published. In terms of disseminating Franklin's experiment, and the kite with it, I will discuss the richness of Priestley's text later in this chapter. Franklin's experiment undoubtedly entered cultural memory: those who had no personal memory of the event could nevertheless draw on a collective memory of the experiment. This chapter will explore how Franklin's experiment entered cultural memory and how the mechanisms I described in this section helped achieve this.

⁸³ Paul Tillich, “The Religious Symbol,” in *May*, 75-98, 88.

⁸⁴ Hayden White, “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality,” *Critical Inquiry* 7.1 (1980): 5-27.

⁸⁵ Hayden White, *Metahistory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1973), 7-11.

⁸⁶ *Metahistory* 8.

Exploring Franklin's Aerial Legacy

One reason for the long afterlife of Franklin's experiment might be that Franklin's story was one of success in the face of danger and disappointment, whereas others following in his footsteps were not always so lucky; some only received sharp shocks, but the Swedish scholar G. W. Richman was electrocuted when trying to replicate the findings of Franklin's experiment.⁸⁷ Ironically, it had long been known that a few French experimenters had read Franklin's earlier suggestion for proving the electric nature of lightning, and had already conducted separate successful experiments with or without the use of a kite.⁸⁸ The North British review even claimed that Jacques de Romas flew his electric kites to heights of seven hundred feet, surpassing Franklin.⁸⁹ It is thus hard to say why Franklin's experiment in particular enjoyed such a rich afterlife, especially considering that Franklin only published a short paragraph on the experiment,⁹⁰ but it is certain that the story hit a nerve in nineteenth-century writing. Of course, the art of flight had already fascinated mankind for centuries, so the added glamour of Franklin flying a kite instead of relying on a metal spire as a conductor might have benefitted the dissemination of the story.

Although it was an obviously dangerous endeavour, Franklin's electric kite experiment promoted serious scientific interest in the kite, and it effectively heralded an era in which the (electric) kite would come to inhabit scientific culture as well as popular attitudes towards flight. As Hart rightly points out, many would follow in

⁸⁷ Priestley 359. Later descriptions on how to repeat Franklin's experiment began to carry serious warnings about the danger of electricity. The "sensation of a cobweb on [the] face" (Priestley 354) was a popular symptom to be described as a result of proximity to high charges of electricity.

⁸⁸ *The North British Review* names French scientists Dalibard, Delors and Buffon as having successfully determined that lightning resembled electricity before Franklin did: "De La Rive's *Electricity in Theory and Practice*," *North British Review* 30.59 (1859): 166-67.

⁸⁹ "De La Rive's *Electricity in Theory and Practice*" 167.

⁹⁰ Franklin's instructions on how to repeat the experiment were published in *The Pennsylvania Gazette* of 19 October 1752. Benjamin Franklin, *Benjamin Franklin: Autobiography and Other Writings*, ed. Ormond Seavey (New York: Oxford UP, 1998), 261-63.

Franklin's footsteps and use the electric kite for their own experiments,⁹¹ but he fails to mention just how extensive the impact of the kite experiment was on the general reception of the kite. The rising fame of the kite in itself already becomes evident from the dissemination of another feat associated with Franklin: a childhood story of Franklin flying a kite while swimming enjoyed some popularity, and was (and still is) sometimes mentioned in relation to Franklin's later achievement with lightning.⁹² That Franklin mentioned the incident in a letter published in his memoirs, with the frontispiece depicting the scene, no doubt increased its longevity,⁹³ but that it is still known and re-told today indicates that it has an enduring afterlife.

The story, in which Franklin uses a kite to tow him across a lake, was probably a favourite because it indicated his ingenuity at an early age as well as providing a suggestion for healthy boys' amusement. Indeed, Franklin vigorously recommended the sport of swimming as "one of the most healthy and agreeable in the world."⁹⁴ Additionally, it very neatly prefigured Franklin's later achievement with a kite. The idea of combining usefulness with pleasure, the Horatian *utile dulci*, was an important one in the nineteenth century, and a powerful driving force in kite literature, as I shall demonstrate here and in chapter three. More importantly, however, the story extended Franklin's Promethean achievement of snatching lightning from the heavens to also having conquered the power of the wind. Thus, both incidents involving Franklin's clever use of a kite showed that a relatively simple device could be used to harness natural forces. Even though science started to play an ever more important

⁹¹ *Kites* 100.

⁹² "The Life of Benjamin Franklin," *Literary Chronicle* 381 (1826): 551-53, 552; Thomas 17-18, George Pocock, *A Treatise on the Aeropleustic Art, or Navigation in the Air, by Means of Kites, or Buoyant Sails* (London: Longman, Brown, and Co., 1851), 9.

⁹³ Benjamin Franklin, *The Works of Benjamin Franklin*, vol. 3 (Philadelphia: William Duane, 1809), 367-68. Franklin's letter to M. Dubourg had been published earlier in "On the Art of Swimming," *The European Magazine, and London Review* 25 (1793): 90-91.

⁹⁴ *The Works of Benjamin Franklin* 367.

role in the way the world was viewed, as Franklin's discovery of the nature of lightning also shows, the kite nevertheless retained a strong symbolism of its own, as I will demonstrate. In the case of Franklin's kite, this entails that it was not regarded as just a meteorological device, but also as a symbol for revolution, daring, ambition, and humble means.

As already mentioned briefly at the beginning of this chapter, Franklin's legend has been pivotal in popularising the kite in the Western world. Another significant reason for the experiment's enduring popularity and nineteenth-century retellings is probably that Priestley wrote a single, definitive account of the proceedings which served as a good template for later dissemination. In this respect, I. Bernard Cohen makes the significant remark that the kite experiment only tended to "dramatize and call attention to" an achievement whose applications had already been confirmed.⁹⁵ However, considering Franklin's reticence with regard to his experiment, I think it is more accurate to say that the written accounts dramatised the event. Priestley does not mention Prometheus in his account, nor does he refer to the myth of Prometheus, but the fundamental elements that also feature in later retellings are all present: Franklin dreads the ridicule that follows an unsuccessful experiment and takes his son with him as a cover for his intentions; he is almost "beginning to despair" when he at last sees the fibres of his string stand on end, indicating the presence of electricity; and finally, he touches a key fastened to the string and receives a shock (Priestley describes it as an "exquisite pleasure") which made his trial successful.⁹⁶ Later accounts often contain all three particulars, whereas the last one would be sufficient to prove Franklin's success. Additionally, many of Priestley's

⁹⁵ Bernard Cohen, *Benjamin Franklin's Experiments*, ed. I. Bernard Cohen (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1941), 77.

⁹⁶ Priestley 180-81. The entire passage is only two pages long, but the elements I have presented here accurately reflect the tone of the account.

creative phrases and word choices re-emerged verbatim in nineteenth-century descriptions of Franklin's feat, thus preserving the core of the story over many retellings. Interestingly, Priestley refers to "a common kite,"⁹⁷ thus linking Franklin's ambition with a simplicity that I will return to later in my argument. Significantly, he ends the passage with the reflection that Franklin flew his kite in "June 1752, a month after the electricians in France had verified the same theory, but before he heard of any thing they had done."⁹⁸ With this phrase, Priestley effectively adds a layer of interpretation to the account that would have been absent from a mere summarising of the facts. The intention of the author to present Franklin as an original thinker is clearly present here.

The account is a good example of White's concept of narrativity, as Priestley adds meaning to the experiment (Franklin triumphs over nature) and makes a story out of real events by adding causality (Franklin brought his son because he was afraid of ridicule). Additionally, the account's literariness is further developed by the use of emplotment: the text is structured in such a way that the reader shares Franklin's anxiety about whether the experiment will succeed, and Franklin's motives and knowledge are made explicit (he tested his experiment without knowing of the French successes). Additionally, Franklin's experiment is already placed in a larger narrative by Priestley because it is a part of his work *The History and Present State of Electricity With Original Experiments*, which thus presents Franklin as important enough to be a part of the history of electricity, and which implies that his experiment is also an "original" one, even though this is not strictly true, as we saw in the discussion of the French scholars like de Romas. Similarly, in later retellings, Franklin's experiment would become a part of other narratives. This is the case when

⁹⁷ Priestley 180.

⁹⁸ Priestley 181.

Franklin's kite receives agency in a narrative that positions it as the "kite that won the revolution." I will now go deeper into these larger narratives that appropriated the experiment.

The likening of Franklin to Prometheus had been established before Priestley penned down his version of the experiment. Immanuel Kant called Franklin the "Prometheus of modern times" in 1756,⁹⁹ a very likely origin for the epithet, and Turgot's praise of Franklin as a snatcher of lightning certainly helped popularise the appellation. Regardless who the inventor of the fortuitous concept was, the idea behind it is clear: Prometheus stole the forbidden fire from the gods for the benefit of mankind, just like Franklin used a kite to rob the heavens of their lightning to protect and illumine his fellow men. The consequences of Prometheus' daring, however, are not extended to Franklin's feat. Franklin's achievement did not beget him any punishment, and certainly not that of having a vulture eating out his (regrown) liver each morning. Indeed, Franklin was a *successful* Prometheus, a very important detail in the comparison. Nineteenth-century writers managed to convey this analogy in a variety of different ways. The reviews section of a 1855 *Athenaeum*, for example, notes that "Franklin, with his wonderful kite, realized the poetic fable of Prometheus: – he stole the fire from heaven. But, greater than Prometheus, he subdued the Spirit of the storm."¹⁰⁰ Franklin is seen as greater here because, contrary to Prometheus, he did not only steal lightning, he also managed to control the storm that carried it. Another reviewer felt the need to soften the Prometheus reference somewhat: "Franklin was the first who fully established the fact [that lightning and electricity are the same], and

⁹⁹ Qtd in J. A. Leo Lemay, "Franklin, Benjamin (1706–1790)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004, Oct 2007, Web, 3 May 2012.

¹⁰⁰ "Reviews," *The Athenaeum* 1420 (1855): 39.

thus in some degree realized the fable of Prometheus.”¹⁰¹ Richard Carlyle, on the other hand, expressed the fable very strongly when he asserted that “[w]hen electricity began to be unfolded, Jupiter Tonans¹⁰² vanished. The paper kite of Franklin annihilated the god.”¹⁰³ Carlyle here invokes the image of Prometheus as a bringer of enlightenment, and he applies this to Franklin, who dispels ignorance with his kite in this rendition of the experiment. Again memory is slightly transformed: the kite was made out of silk, which Franklin states expressly in his directions for repeating the experiment.¹⁰⁴ Incidentally, the furthering of scientific knowledge as a destruction of superstition here prefigures Poe’s invocation of science, albeit in a positive way.

Robert Hunt envisions a Franklin in command of the natural forces: “Franklin rose his kite into the air, and the spirit of the storm, answering to his call, revealed the secret to man.”¹⁰⁵ Another account stresses Franklin’s cunning when he “robbed the thunder-cloud of its lighting by means of a kite,”¹⁰⁶ which somewhat resembles Turgot’s depiction of Franklin as a lightning-snatcher. It not only becomes clear that the link between Prometheus and Franklin was a popular one; these examples also show how the application of the myth leads to various different results. Each author focused on a different aspect of a single stable narrative, and in this way was able to stress particular aspects of Franklin’s experiment.

Another meaning attached to the Prometheus appellation becomes clear as well: the aerial realm was forbidden to mankind, but Franklin had managed to sneak into it. He had won a seemingly lost battle against the heavens, just like he had helped

¹⁰¹ “Dr. Millar’s Lectures on Electricity and Galvanism at Edinburgh,” *Tradesman* 7.40 (1811): 272-74, 272.

¹⁰² Thundering Jupiter.

¹⁰³ Richard Carlyle, “To William Allen,” *The Republican* 14.8 (1826): 225-46, 227.

¹⁰⁴ The exact direction is: “Make a small Cross of two light Strips of Cedar, the Arms so long as to reach to the four Corners of a large thin Silk Handkerchief when extended.” *Benjamin Franklin: Autobiography and Other Writings* 262.

¹⁰⁵ Robert Hunt, “The Applications of Improved Machinery and Materials to Art-Manufacture,” *The Art-Journal* 26 (1857): 63.

¹⁰⁶ “Varieties,” *Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine* 7 (1861): 1024-27, 1025.

gain what seemed hopeless independence from British colonial rule. However, there is also a strong link between the forbidden fire of Prometheus and flight declared as impossible by a derivation of Newton's laws. Perhaps the link to Prometheus held such a strong appeal because it also indirectly confirmed the notion that human flight was a transgression against suprahuman laws. Tim Fulford et al. point out another reason for the experiment's enduring popularity: it linked the success of the War for Independence to electricity, making it a symbol for the cultural superiority of American simplicity over British hierarchy.¹⁰⁷ Electricity was thus also seen as revolutionary, and Franklin became the idol of French radicals.¹⁰⁸ However, this revolutionary aspect was considered dangerous by the British, and that it continued to be a sore topic for quite some time is evinced by a review in a *North British Review* of 1859, which stated that Turgot's phrase is "a questionable one" to be added to Franklin's general merit.¹⁰⁹ Although the discussion of the kite as an agent in the American Revolution is an interesting one to engage with, it has been explored relatively well by others, and will therefore be abandoned in favour of other, more obscure, aspects of Franklin's kite.¹¹⁰

Of course, the link between revolution and electricity ties in well with the implications of Turgot's phrase, but the kite was also fundamental in another important literary representation of the newfound powers of electricity. Fulford et al. comment on the function of electricity in Mary Shelley's 1818 *Frankenstein: Or the Modern Prometheus*. They build on the assumption that Victor Frankenstein "is a

¹⁰⁷ Tim Fulford, Debbie Lee and Peter J. Kitson, *Literature, Science and Exploration in the Romantic Era: Bodies of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004), 179.

¹⁰⁸ Fulford et al. 181-82.

¹⁰⁹ "Art. VII.-A Treatise on Electricity in Theory and Practice," *North British Review* 30.59 (1859): 160-201, 167.

¹¹⁰ Many biographies on Franklin discuss his part in the American Revolution far better than I have room for here, and Fulford even links Franklin, electricity, and the Revolution. Similarly, Thomas, Eden and Asimov have written on the kite in relation to Franklin and the American Revolution.

hero made, in part, in the electrochemist's image."¹¹¹ The notion that science was becoming the new religion is again very apparent; the early scientist was the hero (or god) of the day. The afterlife of Franklin's kite resurfaces again, because Victor becomes intimately acquainted with electricity through the electric kite his father constructs for him. The original experiment conducted by father and son is thus recreated in the text, and its importance to the youth is made very clear: "This last stroke [the kite experiment] completed the overthrow of Cornelius Agrippa, Albertus Magnus, and Paracelsus, who had so long reigned the lords of my imagination."¹¹² Victor thus comes into contact with a new system of science through the electric kite. Like Franklin, Victor goes in search of forbidden knowledge, but he turns into an essentially tragic Prometheus, who is duly punished for his hubris. All in all, the Prometheus theme ensured a rich literary afterlife for Franklin's kite, but as I shall show in the next chapter, the Promethean struggle for control over forbidden powers would come to play a significant role as well in later moral and religious narratives featuring the kite.

The later retellings of Franklin's experiment are all appropriations that focus on different aspects of the event. Although Priestley wrote the first real narrative of the event in 1767, it is difficult to name Priestley's account as the original because the news of the discovery had already travelled widely before that date. The notion of appropriation is crucial to the discussion of cultural memory, and Rigney points out that for *Ivanhoe*, a selective appropriation took place over the years, during which the novel was adopted for various different causes.¹¹³ As I have demonstrated here, this was also the case for the kite experiment. Slowly, the retellings began to contain more

¹¹¹ Fulford et al. 196.

¹¹² Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein: Or the Modern Prometheus*, ed. J. Paul Hunter (New York: Norton, 1996), 23.

¹¹³ "Afterlives of *Ivanhoe*" 222.

moral themes and messages as the memory of the experiment began to be focused on some points whereas others were obscured and new elements were added. The depiction of Franklin's son as a small child at the time of the experiment, for example, points to such a case of changing memory, and the Prometheus appellation is an indication that new elements were affixed to the original story at a later stage. The comparison that was made so frequently between Franklin and Prometheus is an excellent example of this *transformative* tendency of cultural memory, and interpretation plays a central role here: French radicals appropriated Franklin for their revolutionary ideas, finding a focus in Turgot's phrase, whereas the American reception generally lauded the simplicity of the experiment, which reflected the idealism of the newly independent colony.

Scientific Representations of the Kite

As we have seen, Franklin's kite came to represent much more than the meteorological use it was originally put to. It is not surprising, then, that the kite began to represent a general vision of science. The kite was seen as a scientific device worthy of great thinkers, which becomes evident from an anecdote –likely apocryphal– about Newton's childhood endeavours and accomplishments. William Stukeley mentioned Newton's surprising use of kites in his 1752 *Memoirs of Sir Isaac Newton's Life*,¹¹⁴ one of the earliest biographies of the famous scholar, and perhaps significantly, published in the year of Franklin's experiment. Allegedly, Newton invented the flying of paper lanterns from the tail of a kite (the paper lantern he had supposedly invented as well) and he used this artificial light to guide him on his way to school, which scared the locals.¹¹⁵ In his 1860 biography of Newton, David

¹¹⁴ William Stukeley, *Memoirs of Sir Isaac Newton's Life*, 1752, *The Newton Project*, 2012, University of Sussex, Web, 31 May 2012.

¹¹⁵ Stukeley 38.

Brewster repeats this claim and refers to Stukeley, but he also embellishes it somewhat by adding that Newton “introduced the flying of paper kites” with the improvement of his school-fellows in mind.¹¹⁶ Here, Newton’s achievements with the lantern serve as a dramatic foil to the ignorance of the country people “who took them [the lantern lights] for comets.”¹¹⁷ Newton’s understanding of, and mastery over, natural laws is thus highlighted by his clever use of lanterns and kites, and by the country folk that are left wondering in terror and awe at the young Newton’s inventions. Brewster is somewhat vague about the regions that were introduced to the kite by Newton, but it is safe to assume that either the British Isles or just England is meant.

Although it is possible that Newton invented a particular kind of paper lantern and was the first to fly it from the tail of a kite, he cannot be credited with the introduction of the kite to his home country. He would supposedly have flown these kites some years after his birth in 1643, but the popular lozenge-shaped kite had already appeared in John Bate’s 1634 *The Mysteryes of Nature and Art*,¹¹⁸ and it also featured in the 1635 *Pyrotechnia* by John Babington,¹¹⁹ both books published in London and detailing how to make and fly kites with fireworks attached. This aspect of fire also returns in Stukeley’s account, of course, in the form of the paper lanterns, and the Bate and Babington sources might explain this presence in Stukeley’s biography.¹²⁰ Ironically, Hart mentions the Brewster claim about Newton in relation to Bate and Babington, but he does not comment on the incongruity discussed

¹¹⁶ David Brewster, *Memoirs of the Life, Writings, and Discoveries of Sir Isaac Newton*, 2nd ed, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1860), 9.

¹¹⁷ Brewster 10.

¹¹⁸ John Bate, *The Mysteryes of Nature and Art* (London: Thomas Harper, 1634).

¹¹⁹ John Babington, *Pyrotechnia* (London: Thomas Harper, 1635).

¹²⁰ Paul Chapman, private communication.

above.¹²¹ A review of Brewster's biography in *The Leader* embellishes the legend even more by reinforcing the notion that Newton spent his time usefully in the pursuit of science and philosophy, and that he played with kites instead of engaging in other, more trifling games: "Master Newton was not a boy to play; or if he played it must be scientifically. Thus he introduced the flying of Paper Kites."¹²² Tellingly, the notion of utility resurfaces here, which was so important to Enlightenment thinking. The praise becomes even more remarkable as the review continues: "Think of that, O reader! as the memory travels back into the broad meadows of childhood, when racing through the buttercups you held aloft the tugging aspirant, think of you owing that joy to Master Isaac Newton!"¹²³ Apparently, the original version of the story that detailed how Newton flew paper lanterns from kites grew into the myth that he had actually brought the sport of kite flying to England or the Isles. Additionally, the notion of the kite being a child's toy, albeit a useful one, returns here as well. As we see here, the original short account kindled a lengthy afterlife and was adopted for new uses along the way. Thus, in the nineteenth century, the notion of utility was added to the anecdote, and Newton's grandeur was re-affirmed by the suggestion that because of him, the sport of kite flying crossed the channel.

High praise indeed, but these childhood stories of great thinkers such as Newton and Franklin point to a common malaise: the kite is portrayed as a healthy and educational amusement for boys, not for grown men. This observation ties in with Hart's remark that in the seventeenth century, "the increase in [the kite's] familiarity coincided with its relegation to the status of a toy."¹²⁴ Although Hart has a point, he nevertheless ignores the evidence that the kite still played a very important role

¹²¹ *Kites* 86-92.

¹²² "The Boyhood Of Sir Isaac Newton," *The Leader* 6.273 (1855): 578.

¹²³ "The Boyhood Of Sir Isaac Newton" 578.

¹²⁴ *Dream of Flight* 76-77.

scientifically. Both in the case of Franklin and Newton, the suggestion is made that it was the noble amusement of the kite that inspired these brilliant minds at a young age, as well as their own inherent curiosity and love of learning which made them choose that particular plaything. Indeed, Pocock also describes his childhood fascination with kites as kind of prefiguration for his later scientific work.¹²⁵ Franklin's experiment also showed that the kite did not necessarily have to be a child's toy and could be used to achieve great things. Thus, even though Franklin's son accompanying him as a ruse implies that the common purpose of the kite before the kite experiment was to amuse children, this straightforward view becomes severely problematic when analysing the reception of the kite after 1752.

In terms of discourse, the discussion of the kite in scientific applications is often accompanied by an attempt to distance it from its common reception as a mere toy. Towards the turn of the century, for example, Baden Powell invented a system to lift people using kites, and he speaks about his invention as a turn towards "that simple toy, the kite."¹²⁶ His terminology becomes more scientific, however, when he discusses his own type of kite, which he refers to as an "air-car," "aërial [sic] apparatus" and "machine."¹²⁷ Indeed, this change in discourse also supports his agenda. He strongly stresses the usefulness of his invention, ranging from wartime use to deployment in case of shipwreck, and any distancing of the air-car from the common useless kite strengthens his argument that his type of kite should be put to use. He comments on the matter rather lengthily by saying:

if we look in a dictionary, we find the word 'kite' defined as 'a light frame of wood and paper constructed for flying in the air for the amusement of boys.'

¹²⁵ Pocock, 1851 5.

¹²⁶ Baden Powell, "The Air-Car, or Man-Lifting Kite," *National Review* 26.154 (1895): 494-500, 495.

¹²⁷ Powell 494-96.

Can an apparatus, perhaps composed of steel rods, covered with calico or silk, and which, though doubtless still causing much entertainment to a juvenile audience, is hardly constructed for this purpose, be included under that definition? Then, again, a kite, as we know it, is usually constructed more or less pear-shaped, with a long tail of paper bows or caps, which is supposed to be essential to its proper flight. This then, is very different to the almost square, sail-like, tailless units of the new apparatus.

On the whole, then, I think we can hardly consider the term ‘kite’ as describing the new machine, and a fresh word altogether must be coined.¹²⁸

Apparently, language and naming plays an important part when discussing this serious invention of the late nineteenth century. The popular association of the kite with boys’ amusements and uselessness seems to have persisted throughout the century (another example will follow in the next paragraph), and invoked the need to combat it. Thus, the cultural image of the kite as a plaything influenced the scientific discourse of the kite. Note here also the indirect snub to the common British kite; it needs a tail to stabilise it, and thus this passage reinforces the notion again that the kite is inherently fickle and needs special treatment and modifications in order to be able to be controlled. Powell also sets himself up as a kind of modern Prometheus here through his claim that he has submitted the natural forces to his command by inventing an inherently stable and controllable kite.

Much earlier, however, in the 1851 edition of Pocock’s *Treatise on the Aeropleustic Art*, Pocock engages with the concept of the kite as a children’s plaything. First of all, he makes a reference to Franklin’s experiment. Under the caption of “Early Uses of the Common Kite,” he remarks that

¹²⁸ Powell 497.

the boys' toy, the paper kite, had suggested several experiments for its application to valuable purposes. A [sic] Franklin was buoyed up and wafted by it in safety over the surface of a pool; at an after period, that ingenious electrician employed it as a vehicle for the lightnings [...]. This sublime use made of the kite, has certainly given it a degree of immortality, being attached to the name of that great philosopher.¹²⁹

Apparently, Pocock was also aware of the kite being seen as a child's toy, and felt the need to offset this prejudice by referring to the accomplishments that had already been achieved by it in Franklin's hands. In these lines, Pocock reinforces what I have shown before, namely that Franklin's fame had also bestowed upon the kite a certain distinction and lasting recognition. With regard to the kite being a child's plaything, he continues:

So invariable has been its general association with puerility, that a general impression has been made of its uselessness; its practical and scientific character, it is hoped, will now redeem this mechanical agent from this unworthy stigma.¹³⁰

Pocock draws the link further, here, and argues that the association of the kite with youthful activities also gives it the stamp of uselessness. It is striking that both the balloon and the kite had an air of uselessness about them, even though this is less justified for the kite, as Pocock suggests, because Franklin made sublime use of the device, and the Newton narrative mentioned here also indicates that kite flying was seen as a useful type of sport. This last thought had evidently struck Pocock as well: he asserts that the charvolant and its kites would be beneficial to the military because “nothing would afford such a zest in recreation, nothing lead to such healthy and

¹²⁹ Pocock, 1851 9.

¹³⁰ Pocock, 1851 9.

hardy exploits as the manoeuvres of traction, fraught and transposition, under this system.”¹³¹ Pocock not only associates kites with healthy exercise, flying kites is also seen as a masculine occupation. He argues that wherever his charvolant would be introduced “manliness would succeed effeminacy, and courage triumph over fear,”¹³² and a few sentences further he implies that kite flying belongs to the “manly sports.”¹³³ All in all, the kite is associated with many things in Pocock’s treatise: he fights the stigma of it being a useless child’s toy, and does this by stressing its utility. He therefore associates the kite with the great scientific achievement by the adult Franklin, and proceeds to link it to manliness and healthy exercise.

In chapter three, this notion of kite flying as a useful and healthy boys’ sport will return in relation to its representation in literary kite narratives. Because the kite has been discussed here mainly in the context of a boys’ plaything or a manly sport, this is also a good opportunity to point out that kites were not solely associated with boys. An odd little rhyme appeared in an 1881 issue of *Young England*:

A family kite
 Is a source of delight,
 And brings as much joy
 To the girl as the boy.
 If Tom does the body,
 And to make it look odd, he
 Pastes on both crescent and star.
 Mary Jane makes the tail,
 Without which, ‘twould not sail,

¹³¹ Pocock, 1851 21.

¹³² Pocock 1851 21-22.

¹³³ Pocock 1851 22.

Nor go in the air very far.¹³⁴

This quaint little rhyme battles the notion that kites are only for boys. Indeed, it represents the kite as a family affair that teaches children the value of working together. Both children contribute essential parts to the kite: without the body, the kite has no lifting surface, but without the tail, it will be unstable and come down again quickly. The gender aspect of this rhyme is interesting (men provide lift, women stabilise), but cannot be explored here.

Of course, on another level the kite's relative simplicity actually held a promise compared to, for example, the balloon, as it fitted in well with the spirit of British science. Britain's scientific community always retained a fondness for amateur endeavours, and although the eventual specialisation and professionalisation in the sciences could not be avoided, amateur interest remained highly valued in areas such as natural history, with societies for such pursuits springing up all over the country between the 1820s and 1830s.¹³⁵ This British amateur inclination found an ally in the accessibility of the kite, which could be made with relatively few means. The relative ease with which kite-related activities could be engaged in becomes apparent when in a 1828 notice discussing the success of Pocock's invention, a Liverpudlian remarks that among the variety of clubs in the neighbourhood, one devoted to kites is still lacking. He proposes to establish one, and mentions that a gentleman in the vicinity has already made a start by ordering one of Pocock's patent kites.¹³⁶ Of course, this does not mean that the club was actually established, but one appreciates how difficult such a scheme would have been for those interested in ballooning. This sentiment is clearly felt in Franklin's experiment, which could easily be repeated with the instructions Franklin had published. The simplicity of the kite also held a general

¹³⁴ "A Family Kite," *Young England* 74 (1881): 480.

¹³⁵ Russell 183-84; 191-94.

¹³⁶ "The Char-Volant, Drawn by Mr. Pocock's Kites," *The Kaleidoscope* 411 (1828): 384.

appeal because it related to its image as a healthy boys' amusement, the promise inherent in the Franklin myth that a simple thing can yield much, and of course the American pride of a simple society that Fulford et al. mention: features which all extend its afterlife.

As has become apparent from the discussion above, the kite enjoyed a mixed scientific reception, with its serious and useful scientific heritage battling the stigma of it being seen as a child's toy. As I shall show, however, one writer managed to combine these serious and puerile aspects successfully in an adventure story aimed at a young audience. Where the imagination of flight in general is concerned, Gibbs-Smith duly mentions Jules Verne, whose fiction proved to be an enduring inspiration for later aviators: his work was important in "firing the imagination, and acclimatising the minds, of Victorian youth throughout the world."¹³⁷ Although Gibbs-Smith remarks that his influence was mainly felt in the field of rocket flight and space exploration,¹³⁸ Verne's novels contain other aerial contraptions that deserve mention. No doubt his 1863 novel, *Five Weeks in a Balloon* (*Cinq semaines en ballon*) already kindled youthful interest in ballooning. In the 1888 *Adrift in the Pacific* (*Deux ans de vacances*), however, Verne has his schoolboy castaways actually build a balloon from the resources aboard their stranded ship. When the balloon does not measure up to their expectations, they decide to build a giant kite instead, and the leader of the group, Briant, is borne aloft by it in a reconnaissance mission.¹³⁹ The story was published in instalments in *The Boy's Own Paper*,¹⁴⁰ much abridged but leaving the giant kite in, thus effectively disseminating the story to a British youthful public. The

¹³⁷ Aviation 41.

¹³⁸ Aviation 41.

¹³⁹ Jules Verne, *Deux ans de vacances* (Paris: J. Hetzel, 1991), 428-29.

¹⁴⁰ *Adrift in the Pacific* was published in instalments from *The Boy's Own Paper* 508 (1888): 3-4 to *The Boy's Own Paper* 543 (1889): 564-65.

hero's idea to build a kite is based on the account of a similar undertaking he read about in an English journal:

Oui! voilà à quoi s'obstinait l'imagination de Briant. Il se rappelait avoir lu dans un journal anglais que, vers la fin du siècle dernier, une femme avait eu l'audace de s'élever dans les airs, suspendues [sic] à un cerf-volant, spécialement fabriqué pour cette périlleuse ascension.¹⁴¹

Incidentally, this passage is accompanied by a footnote in which the narrator first cheekily explains that the incident had in fact occurred in France, and then proceeds to give some dimensions and details of the kite and the load it carried.¹⁴² If such an ascent did indeed take place, current aviation historians are unaware of it, but the meta-textuality of this reference is of most interest here: Verne reinforces the notion that written accounts of aerial adventures can inspire a new generation, and he does this in a text that is an adventure novel itself, thus ensuring that the "Victorian youth" Gibbs-Smith mentions are similarly aroused. Thus, Verne successfully combines the notion that kites are for the young with the idea that they can be used in an adult context to achieve great things.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown a twofold development: firstly, the kite was turned into a key aspect of the scientific myth enveloping Franklin, and secondly, this myth was passed on to new generations, thus disseminating Franklin's kite to a later and broader audience. It can be observed that Franklin's experiment enjoyed a rich afterlife precisely because it found a parallel in the Prometheus myth. This myth helped narrativise and mythologise Franklin's experiment, which allowed it to convey a number of aspects, such as the notions of hubris, revolt and cunning, which were

¹⁴¹ Verne 412.

¹⁴² Verne 412.

less clearly present originally. Franklin was thus elevated to a mythical status, and became a symbol of transcendent meaning. These discussions of the kite span a bridge between the scientific and cultural aspects of the kite, and they illustrate how Franklin's experiment enjoyed a rich afterlife through its many retellings and re-usings. This afterlife aided the experiment's entrance into cultural memory, and as a *site of memory* it helped circulate and disseminate the kite as a symbol in itself.

In the texts discussed in this chapter, references to Franklin recur almost obsessively in accounts that feature the kite, and as we shall see, this also holds true for many of the narratives I will discuss in chapter three. Franklin's experiment was thus linked very strongly to the kite, which underlines how powerfully cultural memory played a role in adaptations of these myths. Furthermore, Erll remarks that even though narratives are continually adapted, remediation nevertheless tends to create a stable narrative.¹⁴³ Again, this trend applies to Franklin's legend as well: despite the continual re-tellings and adaptations, a particular core-version of the event was kept intact and stable. Finally, it is striking that the myth of Prometheus engages with the cultural memory of Franklin, thus lengthening the latter's afterlife. In this manner, multiple afterlives were effectively combined, thus extending the longevity of at least one of them.

It is important to note here that the scientific associations linked to the kite can be vastly different; the kite seems to be at once a symbol for the progress of science and a dispeller of ignorance, but also a confirmation of the common (and scientifically reinforced) assumption that control over the air was impossible. Progress and prohibition thus seem to go hand in hand. Additionally, the kite was also discussed in terms of utility: it was subjected to the oppositions of being associated

¹⁴³ Erll 392.

with child's play as well as serious adult achievement. Finally, it also served as an example of hearty and manly exercise. In terms of control, it seems that the image of the kite as discussed here belongs to Enlightenment thinking: the kite is mainly a symbol of man's power over natural forces, but as I shall show in the next chapter, this vision changed radically in the nineteenth century.

Although the Prometheus theme is an important link between the scientific and literary visions of the nineteenth-century kite, other important aspects have been mentioned as well, and deserve a fuller treatment in the next chapters. It is clear that Franklin's kite legend already contained many of the themes that became important in later kite literature. The examples mentioned in this chapter often trace scientific notions about flight to literary representations of the kite and vice versa. As we have seen, the discourse of the literary kite permeated scientific texts and ideas featuring the kite. Air-mindedness was in the air, so to speak, and the two discourses often met and mixed. The stigmatisation of the kite as a child's toy is a crucial thought in this discussion and will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter. It becomes clear that popular attitudes towards the kite changed from it being regarded as a Franklinian scientific device to a simpler aerial toy, but the symbolism of the kite does not stop there, and the next chapter will explore this kaleidoscope of different connotations more thoroughly.

CHAPTER 3

The Moral and Religious Kite

From the previous chapter it has become clear how Franklin's scientific kite received a long afterlife, which was partly stimulated by the Promethean aspect of his experiment. The Prometheus legend with its search for forbidden powers and ultimate punishment is also very important in an analysis of the moral and religious aspects of kite literature, and the notion of aerial control is crucial to an understanding of the implications of these narratives. Despite Franklin's considerable impact on the kite being seen as a scientific instrument, the device nevertheless continued to be associated with children. Given that this particular image of the kite persisted, it is not surprising that it often appeared in literature intended for the young, although this chapter will not restrict itself to that niche alone. As I will demonstrate, literary texts of all kinds made very creative use of the kite as a trope. As the scope of this chapter does not allow for an extended discussion of all the different elements, I will focus on the main currents that run through the texts. As I have mentioned in my introduction, I propose to discuss the symbol mainly in terms of metaphor, but it is useful here to give a brief definition of what a symbol is. Erich Kahler, in *Symbolism in Religion and Literature*, opines that the symbol is "something concrete and specific that is intended to convey something spiritual or general."¹⁴⁴ Judging from this definition,

¹⁴⁴ Erich Kahler, "The Nature of the Symbol," in *May*, 50-74, 70.

the kite is undoubtedly a symbol because it gives a concrete form (the kite) to abstract thoughts (such as achievement, daring, or revolution). Kahler uses this definition to differentiate the symbol from allegory, which he argues starts from the abstract and clothes it in a concrete body, and metaphor, which elucidates an abstraction with a visualisation in the manner of analogy.¹⁴⁵ Although the observation is valid that symbol, metaphor and analogy are different, it seems somewhat constructed. I will conclude this chapter with the contention that in analysing the symbolic nature of the kite, such a division is unproductive. Of course, an extended analysis of how metaphor functions in these narratives is crucial, and will occupy the main part of this chapter. Such an analysis is especially important because many of the texts discussed here are allegories; extended metaphors linking the kite and abstract human qualities in a diversity of ways. To engage fruitfully with these different aspects of the kite, I will conclude the chapter with a theoretical analysis of the kite as a symbol, and point out some ways in which the kite as a metaphor shapes the thoughts that run through these narratives.

As discussed before, some of the literary aspects just mentioned are already present in Priestley's account of Franklin's experiment, and the later retellings of the event only add to this impressive store of metaphors and associations. Broadly speaking, these aspects can be grouped under the general themes of control, conceit, perseverance, reward, and simplicity, although there are few others that will be discussed here as well. Additionally, some specific elements appear as the kite story comes into its own and develops a more moral nature: being carried off by a kite to what turns out to be a dream country full of useful lessons becomes a common motif, for example, and will be explored in another section of this chapter. The uplifting

¹⁴⁵ Kahler 70-72.

character of these narratives is further borne out by their tendency to moralise over good conduct. Similarly, a boy not heeding his father's advice is another recurring pattern, and a direct link between the kite and a religious message is present in other texts. Furthermore, the character of the kite is almost invariably fickle, giddy, and proud, and whenever the kite becomes personified these traits are produced all the more vividly. These, and many other representations of the kite, yield some interesting insights into popular notions about flight and the kite in particular, and they prove to be excellent resources from which to study nineteenth-century visions of aerial control.

Before I start this discussion of the kite as a symbol in literature, it is useful to come back briefly to the notion of the narrative. White rightfully questions if there is such a thing as narrativising without moralising,¹⁴⁶ and indeed, as these kite stories were retold and remediated, the kite began to represent an ever-increasing number of virtues and vices, and was continuously and creatively adopted for new uses in moral and religious narratives. The analysis of the ways in which Franklin's scientific experiment enjoyed a rich afterlife and how this fostered a growing interest in the kite serves as an excellent platform on which to base a further discussion of the moral and religious kite. Priestley's narration of Franklin's experiment already contained some elements that narrativised the experiment. These narrative features are not strictly necessary to convey the essence of the event, but they serve to add a plot, giving the story a more personal character and allowing the reader to feel the excitement of the protagonist. Although to present-day readers, Priestley's narration may appear non-scientific and overly personal, Charlotte Sleight points out that the distinction between scientific writing and other kinds of writing was rather vague before at least 1800, and

¹⁴⁶ "The Value of Narrativity" 27.

scientific discoveries were frequently described in a very personal manner.¹⁴⁷ Some appealing elements are the control Franklin has over natural forces, his fear of ridicule inducing him to bring his son, and his perseverance in the face of disappointment. As already demonstrated, these components repeatedly make it into later retellings of the experiment whereas other details, such as the strands of the hempen string standing on end or the wet string guiding electricity better, were often left out. However, whereas the trope of the ruse and the worry about derision present in the Franklin narrative do not return in any of the literary kite stories I have been able to find, the concepts of control and perseverance feature prominently in several kite tales. This is not surprising when taking into consideration that many of these narratives were intended to improve children morally, and those writing about notions such as risk and control, as well as failure and perseverance, found a ready audience for these stories. Some stories revolving around the fickleness of the kite teach the child not to take unnecessary risks. A story featuring an unforeseen reward, on the other hand, stresses the virtue of perseverance as it requires the protagonist to persevere in doing what is right in order to be rewarded. Other texts featuring the flying of a kite will contain a spell of bad weather that the sulky child must sit through,¹⁴⁸ or at least several attempts at getting the kite up into the air.¹⁴⁹ All these themes are important in analysing how the kite functioned as a symbol in nineteenth-century kite literature, and will be discussed below.

Narratives of Control

The Promethean theme of control over the natural elements that is so strikingly present in Franklin's experiment would continue to dominate kite literature

¹⁴⁷ Sleigh 9.

¹⁴⁸ Ascott R. Hope, *Ups and Downs; Or, the Life of a Kite* (London: Sheldon Press, 1895), 23.

¹⁴⁹ Charlotte Elizabeth, "Try Again," *Try Again*, 2nd ed. (Dublin: John Porteous, 1831).

throughout the nineteenth century. Many of these narratives present the kite as a toy or device which needs to be battled and overpowered, sometimes leading to dangerous situations. In 1880, the American journal *Harper's Young People* paid homage to Franklin with a story entitled "Sim Vedder's Kite."¹⁵⁰ Just as the adult Sim is flying his kite, which is bigger than those of any of the boys present, a thunderstorm passes over. They all seek shelter under the nearest shed, from which Sim proceeds to fly his kite, thus repeating Franklin's experiment. Sim declares that the kite's "string's wet, and it's making a lightning-rod of itself,"¹⁵¹ but another boy does not believe him, so Sim asks him: "didn't you ever hear of Dr. Franklin? We're doing just what he did."¹⁵² Thus, more than a hundred years later, Sim does not only teach his fellow kite-flier about Franklin, the narrative itself also transmits Franklin's inheritance to another generation of children who are the intended readership for the story. However, just as Sim has finished explaining what lightning conductors are, the wind picks up and the kite drags him from the shed into the fields, the modern Franklin holding on with all his might. The superiorly built kite survives, however, and is safely brought down again. Thus, Sim fights a hard battle with the elements, and like Franklin, he ultimately prevails.

Another story fraught with control, and hubris as well, is also set in America. *Phaeton Rogers: A Novel of Boy Life* details the (mis-)adventures of the boy-inventor Fayette Rogers, who is nicknamed Phaeton after he drives a self-made cart drawn by three large kites. One of Phaeton's friends is quick to point out the similarity with the Greek myth of the son of Helios, Phaeton, and proceeds to tell how Phaeton wanted to drive his father's sun chariot, drawn by fiery aerial steeds, but was unable to control them. Eventually Jupiter struck him down (the narrator mixes Roman and Greek

¹⁵⁰ W. O. Stoddard, "Sim Vedder's Kite," *Harper's Young People* 1.25 (1880): 329-31.

¹⁵¹ Stoddard 330.

¹⁵² Stoddard 330.

names here) and Phaeton fell into the river Eridanus where he drowned.¹⁵³ Like the Greek Phaeton, the American one is unable to manage his three kites and also falls into a river. The similarity between the horses' reigns and the kite strings is evident, as well as the link between the fiery steeds and the uncontrollable kites, which drag the unfortunate driver to his doom. The novel is peppered with such adventures, quite a few of them linked to flight and aerial inventions. When another one of Phaeton's friends manages to fasten a kite to the top of a church spire, Phaeton obligingly climbs up to release the string, risking his own life in the process. This time, however, the adventure ends well. The balloon also plays a small part in Phaeton's adventures. Throughout the novel, Phaeton and his brother Ned think up inventions with which to put out fires. One of these, Phaeton calls the "horizontal balloon-ascension"¹⁵⁴ and consists of a wet blanket lifted over a burning building by a small balloon. The invention is a failure, but the fact that flight enters Phaeton's imagination so prominently suggests that it continued to fascinate writers (and boys, if we are to believe Rossiter) throughout the nineteenth century.

Of course, the question arises whether these American narratives differ essentially from their British counterparts. It is interesting, for example, that the etching that accompanies the Sim Vedder text portrays Sim with the very American six-cornered kite instead of a more British bow- or lozenge-shaped one seen in the background (Fig. 1).

¹⁵³ Rossiter Johnson, *Phaeton Rogers: A Novel of Boy Life* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1881), 116-18.

¹⁵⁴ Johnson 238-39.



Figure 1. Illustration accompanying “Sim Vedder’s Kite” (1880).

Similarly, for his chariot, Phaeton builds “three enormous kites, six feet high. They were not bow-kites—the traditional kite always represented in pictures, but seldom used in our [American] country. They were the far more powerful six-cornered kite.”¹⁵⁵ A note of national competition obviously rings through this remark, which is surprising, as the American Franklin (who features heavily in the first example) used a lozenge-shaped kite. In this sense, one might ask if the electrical (lozenge) kite as

¹⁵⁵ Johnson 94.

used by Franklin received a particular afterlife in these texts. The framework with which Rigney analyses afterlives could very well be used to explore how such specific cultural artefacts like the electrical kite received a textual afterlife. However, my corpus of kite stories is not large enough to warrant a fruitful discussion of the differences in reception of the literary kite in America and Great Britain.

These narratives of struggle, control, and –quite often– defeat, were usually infused with a moral lesson to educate their young readers, and as a consequence, the Promethean efforts in these narratives were often not rewarded but punished. A poem by H. G. Adams, “Kite Flying,” captures this nature of the sport well, as it not only shows a boy struggling against the elements, but also describes his ambition to rise high, as well as his inability to control his kite in the end. The poem starts with Willy straining to hold on to his kite when it begins to rain and storm. The kite takes a “plunge” and a “pitch”¹⁵⁶ and falls to the ground, Willy being unable to control the kite anymore. As he runs home, the narrator muses:

What kites will you fly,
 Willy boy, by and by,
 When peg-tops and marbles are nought in your eye?
 Will they glitter and gleam,
 And like angels’ wings seem?
 Will they fall, or fly off like a vanishing dream?¹⁵⁷

Apparently, the “glitter and gleam” of the kite make it a more fascinating plaything to Willy than his other toys. The kite seems to be a metaphor for Willy’s dreams and hopes, and the impression arises that Willy will never be content with the ordinary toys of life, but he will always ambitiously (and foolishly) strive for higher things. He

¹⁵⁶ H. G. Adams, “Kite Flying,” *Kind Words for Boys & Girls* 37 (1866): 295.

¹⁵⁷ Adams 295.

is not content with ordinary toys; he wants to control the sky. Yet it seems as if this control is only momentary; the kite must either “fall” or “fly off.” Pocock’s favourite notion of kite flying as a healthy and manly sport also resurfaces when the narrator urges Willy to:

Hold on with thy might!

[...]

Steadily stand,

With hand over hand,

And feet planted firmly upon the firm land.¹⁵⁸

The link with Franklin is also implicitly forged, when the kite is described as emitting a “bright outflashing of light.”¹⁵⁹ However, the kite flier does not seem to be a successful Prometheus in this case: the kite falls down in the violence of the thunderstorm, and Willy has to struggle against the natural forces, instead of harnessing and using them for his own ends, as in Franklin’s case. This reflects Lynn’s notion that the post-Enlightenment balloonist battled nature instead of understanding it, and may be part of a larger development from the kite-flier in control of nature to being at the mercy of the elements.

The concept of aerial control is transformed somewhat in “David and His Kite,” in which David fails to heed his father’s advice not to fly his kite over the water.¹⁶⁰ In a narrative turn reminiscent of the fate of Icarus, the kite string suddenly breaks and the kite is lost in the waves. The story concludes with a lecture by David’s father on the foolishness of taking risks: “A little boy, who risks his kite through disregard of his father’s caution, may, when he grows up to be a man, risk his soul

¹⁵⁸ Adams 295.

¹⁵⁹ Adams 295.

¹⁶⁰ Gaius, “David and His Kite,” *The Child’s Companion* 11 (1838): 335-40.

through disregard of the law of God.”¹⁶¹ In this fable, the string breaking is not the real cause of the problem, as the kite is expected to have a fickle nature. Instead, it represents the unpredictable, and the focus rests on avoiding risk. However, the metaphor of the kite as a wayward child still prevails, as the kite’s dive into the water is an analogy with the little boy falling into ruin. It becomes clear that these texts carry the underlying assumption that human control over the air was impossible, going against the grain of the success earlier established by Franklin, and as I shall show later in this chapter, this notion returns forcefully with the figure of the fickle kite and the reckless wind.

The Icarus Complex

Freedom returns powerfully in the fundamental paradox of the flight of a kite: the kite pulls on the line, as if wanting to break free from its captivity, but it cannot stay up without being tethered. Of course, this duality did not escape writers using the kite in their texts, and as a result, this paradox was often used in moral imagery featuring the kite. As we have already observed in the previous section, such texts feature the kite as a representation of a boy or girl who is weary of being told what to do, and the curtailing character of the string represents the child’s necessary obedience to its parents. These stories and poems all contain the lesson that without restraint, a child will plunge (as the kite literally plunges) into bad behaviour and will come to harm. The comparison between kite and wayward child as it is depicted in a poem called “The Kite, a Fable” was a favourite as evinced by its numerous reprints in nineteenth-century periodicals. This peculiar printing history deserves some attention here to understand the lengthy afterlife the text received. The poem seems to make its first anonymous appearance in an issue of the *Gentleman’s Magazine* of

¹⁶¹ Gaius 338.

1771.¹⁶² A year later the *Edinburgh Amusement* reprinted the poem, attributing it to Jonathan Cargot.¹⁶³ In 1774, the same journal again reprinted the poem with the slightly changed title of “The Paper-Kite. A Fable” and this time it was signed with the initials “A. R.”¹⁶⁴ *The Child’s Companion* printed the poem in 1851, omitting the first eight introductory lines and changing the title to “The Kite; Or, Pride Must Have a Fall.”¹⁶⁵ By this time, the real author of the poem had been established for at least some years: the Reverend John Newton.¹⁶⁶ Although its popularity has dwindled by now, the poem was so well loved that it continued to be printed from at least 1771 until 1852.¹⁶⁷ The text itself is as interesting as its history, and contains many of the elements also found in later narratives that deal with a similar subject matter.

“The Kite, a Fable” begins with an image of pride as the personified kite is “giddy with its elevation” and “express’d self-admiration”¹⁶⁸ at the high altitude of its flight. Almost like a real person, the kite yearns for appreciation and wants to display its talents to the crowd of people beneath, but it feels restrained by the string that tethers it:

How would they wonder if they knew
 All that a Kite like me can do.
 Was I but free I’d take a flight,
 And pierce the clouds beyond their sight;

¹⁶² “The Kite, a Fable,” *Gentleman’s Magazine* 41 (1771): 135-36.

¹⁶³ Jonathan Cargot, “The Kite: a Fable,” *Weekly Magazine, or, Edinburgh Amusement* 16 (1772): 337.

¹⁶⁴ A. R., “The Paper-Kite. A Fable,” *Weekly Magazine, or, Edinburgh Amusement* 23 (1774): 242.

¹⁶⁵ John Newton, “The Kite; Or, Pride Must Have a Fall,” *The Child’s Companion* 81 (1851): 273-74.

¹⁶⁶ The poem also appears in a 1839 edition of his complete works: John Newton, *The Works of the Rev. John Newton*, Vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Uriah Hunt, 1839), 207. Additionally, *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* attributes “Amazing Grace” and other spiritual texts to Newton, so the attribution is not at all unlikely. D. Bruce Hindmarsh, “Newton, John (1725–1807),” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004, May 2010, Web, 27 May 2012.

¹⁶⁷ John Newton, “The Paper Kite,” *The Home Friend* 1.6 (1852): 136.

¹⁶⁸ “The Kite, a Fable,” *Gentleman’s Magazine* 41 (1771): 135.

But ah! like a poor pris'ner bound,
 My string confines me near the ground.¹⁶⁹

Thus, the kite is not only vain of the great height at which it is able to fly, it feels it can also do better on its own, without the restraint of earthly fetters that literally hold it down. The kite then breaks the string to gain its freedom, but this turns out to be a bittersweet liberty:

In vain it try'd to soar away,
 Unable its own weight to bear
 It flutter'd downward through the air.
 Unable its own course to guide.
 The winds soon plung'd it in the tide.
 Ah! foolish Kite! thou hadst no wing,
 How could'st thou fly without a string?¹⁷⁰

Restraint, the poem seems to convey, is necessary, even though arrogant minds might think they can do without. Like Icarus, the kite makes its fatal plunge into the water, and is reminded that it does not have wings of its own. A simile is then constructed between the fate of the kite, and that of those weary of restraint:

My heart reply'd, O Lord I see
 How much this kite resembles me:
 Forgetful, that by thee I stand
 Impatient of thy ruling hand:
 How oft I've wish'd to break the lines,
 Thy wisdom for my lot assigns?
 How oft indulg'd a vain desire

¹⁶⁹ "The Kite, a Fable" 135.

¹⁷⁰ "The Kite, a Fable" 135-36.

For something more, or something higher!

And but for grace and love divine,

A fall thus dreadful had been mine.¹⁷¹

The physical restraint is transformed into a religious one: the string becomes a metaphor for the individual's relationship with God, whose authority is portrayed as a good and much-needed part of life. Restraint, the poem seems to convey, is a virtue instead of an annoyance. Furthermore, the kite's fall from heaven resembles Adam and Eve's fall from grace, caused by their disobedience to God's will, and of course, it points to Lucifer, who aspired to be higher than God.¹⁷² On the other hand, Greek mythology creeps in as well through the subtle echo of the watery death of Icarus.

Another virtue associated with the kite experiment is that of Franklin's determination when he thought his experiment was going to fail. The best example of perseverance linked directly to kites is probably the 1831 short story "Try Again" by Charlotte Elizabeth, which is peppered with biblical allusions and references. In this story, an aunt (the narrator) spurs her small niece and nephew to keep trying to raise their kite in the air, giving them fresh advice after each failed ascent and telling them to "try again"¹⁷³ throughout the story. On the fifth attempt, the little boy succeeds, and the kite soars up high over their heads. Of course, the entire day's sport has been intended as a (religious) lesson: "my dear children; I wish to teach you the value of perseverance, even when nothing more depends on it than the flying of a kite."¹⁷⁴ The narrator then draws an extended analogy between the repeated failures and the value of perseverance, in which the ascent of the kite is portrayed as the rise of man's soul

¹⁷¹ "The Kite, a Fable" 136.

¹⁷² The Bible, King James Version, Isa. 14:12.

¹⁷³ Elizabeth 3.

¹⁷⁴ Elizabeth 7-8.

towards heaven.¹⁷⁵ Every failure the children encountered, their aunt relates to a specific fault people may exhibit in life, which hinders them from reaching God. This story is so remarkable because the analogy it draws is so detailed and already contains many of the concepts that feature prominently in many later kite stories.

Even though the “Try Again” narrative focuses on perseverance, control and restraint are important concepts in this story, and religious imagery of man’s trust in God prevails as well. The fallen nature of man is linked to the kite lying on the ground: “We are, by nature, poor grovelling creatures, lying helpless on the earth, as your kite did on the gravel walk.”¹⁷⁶ The kite does not have the ability to fly off by itself, but needs the help of the cousins to rise up, which the narrator explains is also true for the human soul that needs God’s help to rise to heaven. Likewise, the tree that ensnared the kite on the cousins’ third attempt is explained to be a metaphor for the hindrances that are put into the soul’s aspiring way, and must be overcome with perseverance. The analogy also contains a reference to pride, as the fourth attempt failed because the boy stopped running too soon, in admiration of his achievement, causing the kite to flutter down again. The narrator thus warns the children to “beware of pride, and self-righteousness!”¹⁷⁷ However, as becomes a proper analogy, it also points to an inherent difference between the kite and the soul: whereas the kite must always remain tethered and return to earth, the saved soul is free to float up unfettered. At the same time, the brevity of life is stressed when the aunt explains the eternity of the soul to her cousins: “Your kite took but a very short journey, and after floating for a little while over your head, is come down again: but the soul that mounts above the heavens will dwell there for ever.”¹⁷⁸ This line also compares the

¹⁷⁵ Elizabeth 7-16.

¹⁷⁶ Elizabeth 8.

¹⁷⁷ Elizabeth 14.

¹⁷⁸ Elizabeth 15.

short flight of the kite to the short life lived on earth. The sheer amount of metaphors and allusions the author managed to cram into such a brief narrative suggests that some of these metaphors had been circulating already before Elizabeth's text was published, and "The Kite, a Fable" seems to be a likely candidate. The link between the kite and the individual is a powerful one in these narratives and returns frequently. This concept ties in well with the desire for freedom that is so often exhibited in kite literature, and the inevitable lesson of the necessity of restraint that follows.

The metaphor of the string apparently appealed to writers who wrote children's stories with a religious moral tone. The religious monthly periodical *The Quiver* printed a story that focused on the importance of kite string. Asking "what is your kite good for if you have no string?"¹⁷⁹ the narrator points out that a kite needs to be tethered in order to stay up. If the string breaks, it

begins to plunge and reel, crazy it would seem, to enjoy its liberty; but alas! to enjoy it only for a moment, for down, down it comes, and is all torn and broken in a tree top, or soiled and lost in a pool of mud.¹⁸⁰

The liberty the kite seems to enjoy also proves to be its destruction, and again, restraint is seen as necessary. The narrator links the kite's dire fate to that of the naughty child and reminds the youthful readers that restraint "is the string by which they rise, if ever, to places of eminence and usefulness in the world."¹⁸¹ Another narrator remarks that some "think it a fine thing to get our own way, till we wish we had a string to pull us back out of our folly."¹⁸² Here again, self-control is presented as a necessary part of life.

¹⁷⁹ "Kite Strings," *The Quiver* 23 (1862): 473.

¹⁸⁰ "Kite Strings" 473.

¹⁸¹ "Kite Strings" 473.

¹⁸² Hope 39.

In another story, a husband reassures his worrying wife by comparing the future of their son to the flight of his kite:

never fear but what our kite shall fly as high; only, the human soul has stronger instincts to mount upward than a few sheets of paper on a framework of lath. But, observe, that to prevent its being lost in the freedom of space, we must attach it lightly to earth; and, observe again, my dear, that the higher it soars, the more string we must give it.¹⁸³

However, this interpretation is an interesting one, as it does not just repeat the metaphor of the string as restraint, but it also invests the parents with a responsibility not to curb the child's metaphorical flight too much, for fear of inhibiting the child in his spiritual (and worldly) growth. So it becomes clear that the kite was often linked to freedom, serving as a metaphor for a child or adult, while its flight often represented the virtues of restraint, with the string expressing the connection with the family, or a higher power. Almost eighty years after "The Kite, a Fable" was first published, however, we see that the images it utilises are subtly transformed in "The Caxtons: A Family Picture," a sign that the kite as a symbol was coming into its own.

The kite as a metaphor for the individual or the human soul was evidently a popular one, but the personified kite also sheds some interesting light on the way in which the kite was perceived. As becomes clear from "The Kite, a Fable," the personified kite is depicted as a giddy, proud, fickle and conceited toy. This image of the kite is perhaps best appropriated in the 1895 *Ups and Downs; Or, the Life of a Kite*, which tells the story of a kite whose life is full of (literal) ups and downs, and who ultimately meets an untimely death in the sea. The kite's proud nature is immediately established as the book starts with it exclaiming: "Well, I am smart!"

¹⁸³ "The Caxtons: A Family Picture," *Blackwoods Edinburgh Magazine* 63:390 (1848): 513-24. 524.

when he sees himself in a mirror.¹⁸⁴ A man buys the kite for his grandson's birthday, and when they go out to try the new kite, it is eager "to display itself above the rest."¹⁸⁵ Incidentally, although the kite is referred to as neutral in gender in this instance ("display itself") it is presented as being male throughout the narrative. In the air, he meets several other airborne toys, first a golf ball and then an arrow, to which the kite feels superior. When he meets a homemade newspaper kite in the air, he rebuffs its attempt at conversation, at which the newspaper kite imparts a wise lesson: "Pride may have a fall, and I should like to see how you look after falling into a bramble-bush."¹⁸⁶ The vain kite pays no attention and rises still higher, however, until the string runs out and the kite feels a check in its flight. This also serves as a check in the kite's conceit, as at that moment, a balloon comes floating by and ignores the kite's polite conversation by telling him he is merely "the slave of a string."¹⁸⁷ The kite becomes angry and tugs at the line, breaking it. The notion of excessive freedom thus enters in: "down came the string, and up rushed the Kite, waving his tail for triumph to be free."¹⁸⁸ Metaphors again abound in this short passage. The balloon is accused of giving himself "airs," but of course, balloons consist largely of nothing more than trapped air. The arrogant nature of the balloon is thus reinforced by its physical nature. The kite, on the other hand, has been punished for being "uppish" or conceited; thus the high position that the kite occupies is also a metaphor for its arrogance. As in some of the other stories discussed here, the kite now learns the disadvantages of being free as the wind blows him roughly over the countryside, and after many hardships, the paper kite finally disintegrates in the sea.

¹⁸⁴ Hope 5.

¹⁸⁵ Hope 30.

¹⁸⁶ Hope 33.

¹⁸⁷ Hope 34.

¹⁸⁸ Hope 35.

In “The Japanese Kite” this pattern of hubris and the fall it brings about are presented in almost exactly the same way. A family are offered a Japanese kite as a gift. When the children wonder aloud what the strange form might be, the kite’s pride is soon established; she feels “much offended at the contemptuous way in which the little boy had scorned the idea of her being alive.”¹⁸⁹ The kite is thrown into the air, and thinks it is “a grand thing, indeed, to be a kite,”¹⁹⁰ and she feels “giddy”¹⁹¹ from her wild flight. The flight is only of short duration, however, and she is reeled in, much to her dismay: “she was, so she now understood, simply at the beck and call of that cluster of mortals down below. Humiliating thought!”¹⁹² The next time the kite is flown, she gives in to the wind and breaks free from her string, but similar to the previous story, the kite soon regrets her mistake because the wind treats her too roughly. In these two narratives, the kite is thus portrayed as a proud, conceited, giddy and vain creature, and the wind is portrayed as a rough, unforgiving and cold master, serving as a metaphor for the frailty of the human condition in a world full of hardships.

It appears that the kite served as a rich carrier for all kinds of different associations and was adopted for a variety of different metaphors. The stories discussed here abound with mythical as well as Christian imagery. The notion of the kite’s short-lived flight was linked to man’s short time on earth. The precarious position of the kite is reflected by the lesson that risk-taking is bad, as judgement might come sooner than expected. The string is seen as man’s subjection to the (or God’s) law, and it also demonstrates that one should not aspire to break one’s connection with God. The wind is a dangerous and rough partner to the kite, and

¹⁸⁹ “The Japanese Kite,” *Little Wide Awake*, 267-74.

¹⁹⁰ “The Japanese Kite” 268.

¹⁹¹ “The Japanese Kite” 268.

¹⁹² “The Japanese Kite” 270.

represents the many setbacks an individual finds in his or her life. However, as the Christian imagery has been dealt with elaborately already, further discussion on mythological references is in order here.

What can be gleaned from these narratives is that the kite seems to fall into the water a disproportionate number of times. From the narratives mentioned in the second chapter, even Verne's kite also eventually drifts down with its human load and sinks into a lake.¹⁹³ This striking recurrence brings to mind the myth of Icarus, who fell to his death in the sea, and who also exemplifies the maxim that pride comes before a fall. Of course, these references do not have to be consciously made by the authors, but they are a good example of the cultural afterlife of the myth of Icarus, since not only his name was often given to doomed aerial endeavours: his fatal fall into the water was also transferred to these narratives. Of course, the name of Daedalus was a much more favourable appellation in this regard, as I have shown at the beginning of chapter one. Similarly, Pocock calls his kites "winged Pegasi"¹⁹⁴ and a "celestial equipage."¹⁹⁵ In terms of comparing the kites to horses, the myth of Phaeton obviously comes to mind. Pocock even goes so far in his invocation of Greek mythology that he compares the kite strings to the strings of the Aeolian harp, the instrument associated with the Greek god of the wind, Aeolus.¹⁹⁶ These references allowed for a shorthand connotation to the kite to be applied. Icarus suggests failure, Daedalus ingenious success, Prometheus confers a sneaky daring to the attempt, Phaeton a reckless inexperience, and the Pegasi imbued the kite with a certain grandeur. These connections thus conveyed a sub-layer of meaning to the texts, but these common images were also sometimes transformed by their deployment here. As

¹⁹³ Verne 432.

¹⁹⁴ Pocock, 1851 25.

¹⁹⁵ Pocock, 1851 31.

¹⁹⁶ Pocock, 1851 36.

the example of Franklin makes clear, in his afterlife, Prometheus did not necessarily have to be a tragic hero who was punished for reaching too high in trying to help mankind. It becomes clear that the kite engaged very creatively with mythical figures in these texts.

The Kite Brings a Reward

Although many of the narratives discussed so far stress control and restraint, portraying the kite as rather arrogant and fickle presence, there are also a few examples which place the kite in a more favourable light, and which deserve mention here. Perhaps the most famous rendition of this positive nature of the kite is to be found in Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield*, in which Mr Dick, the companion of David's aunt and guardian, flies one with messages pasted onto its surface.¹⁹⁷ David muses that "it lifted his mind out of its confusion, and bore it (such was my boyish thought) into the skies."¹⁹⁸ Tellingly, a few pages earlier his aunt links Mr Dick's kite flying to Benjamin Franklin, again demonstrating the wide circulation of the experiment. Additionally, in many poems and stories, the kite features in connection with youthfulness and carefreeness.¹⁹⁹ This more positive aspect of kite symbolism will now be discussed in more detail in a few examples.

In 1850, *Chamber's Edinburgh Journal* published an interesting little story called "The Kite"²⁰⁰ in its section for young people. It portrayed the lives of a small family of three, a mother and two sons, the youngest being seriously ill. The only

¹⁹⁷ Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*, 1850, ed. Trevor Blunt (Suffolk: Penguin, 1976), 259.

¹⁹⁸ *David Copperfield* 273.

¹⁹⁹ Henry Skidmore, "The School Boy," *Weekly Entertainer* 46 (1806): 319-29; "The Intelligent Traveller; Or, the Adventures of a Stage Coach," *Lady's Monthly Museum* 3 (1807): 273-80; B. D. "Lines, On the Death of an Old and Faithful Servant, a Companion of the Author's Youth," *Monthly Magazine* 25.168 (1808): 146; "The Oratoriad," *Walker's Hibernian Magazine* (1810): 179-84; "Lines Written by the Hon. Mrs. O'Neill, on Seeing her Sons at Play," *Belfast Monthly Magazine* 8.43 (1812): 130; "Good-Day and Good-Night," *Edinburgh Magazine and Literary Miscellany* 10 (1822): 333-34; Charles, Mackay, "The Philosophy of Sport-Chinese Kite-Flying," *Littell's Living Age* 28.354 (1851): 418.

²⁰⁰ "The Kite," *Chambers's Edinburgh Journal* 344 (1850): 77-79, 79.

bright thing in their shabby one-room apartment is a kite, which belonged to the boys' older brother who has perished at sea. In his fever the little boy entreats his older brother to show him how his dead sibling, Henry, used to fly the kite. At length, he convinces his brother to help him fly the kite out of a broken windowpane. When they are engaged in achieving this feat, a stranger knocks on the door, having recognised the kite in the streets as his own. The lost brother had survived the shipwreck, made a small fortune, and proceeds to save his family from poverty. The story ends with the observation that “the good old kite had done good service.”²⁰¹ Indeed, here the kite is a glimmer of hope and joy in the dismal area they live in, and is the beacon by which their lost brother is able to find them.

Two other interesting adventures serve to highlight the importance of good conduct and honesty. In “Found at Last; The Story of a Kite’s Tail,”²⁰² the narrator is fishing when a little boy loses his kite. When he is entreated by a little girl to run after the kite to see if it can be saved, the narrator grumpily consents. He finds the kite lying half in the river and deems it lost, but after some coaxing, he fishes it out of the water. When he examines the kite, he notices that one of the paper strips attached to the tail is part of a five-pound note, and as a reward for this find, he is given the full five pounds. In “The Tail of a Kite, and What Hung Therefrom,”²⁰³ a very similar story unfolds. The poor Teddy is given a kite by the rich Roy, and when he flies it, he notices a glimmer in its tail and finds a diamond earring lodged in the folds of one of its bows. He immediately thinks of buying a cow with the earring so his family will have milk to drink, but a little voice of conscience nags at him until he decides he does not want to be a thief and he goes to return the earring to Roy. When he presents his find, Roy’s father gives him a reward of fifty dollars, which enables the family to

²⁰¹ “The Kite” 79.

²⁰² “Found at Last; The Story of a Kite’s Tail,” *The Children’s Friend*, 135-36.

²⁰³ Sophie Swett, “The Tail of a Kite, and What Hung Therefrom,” *St. Nicholas* 12 (1881): 932-35.

buy the long-desired cow. The lesson of both these stories is clear: honesty brings a reward, and in these cases, the kite actually brings down a reward from the heavens, implying that with trust in the Almighty and the help of an honest heart, a reward is sure to arrive.

The success of the protagonists is due to their perseverance in doing good and in keeping on trying, and these narratives share many elements with other kite texts that focus on good conduct. Examples abound of this particular strand of narratives. In one story, two friends learn through flying a kite that they have to try to please each other in their play.²⁰⁴ Similarly, in “Charlie’s New Kite,” Charlie is glad that he shared his kite with his friend instead of being selfish.²⁰⁵ In another, a little boy is taught the value of hard work by making a kite himself.²⁰⁶ *The Lost Kite*, a short novel, deals with Sam’s jealousy over Arthur having made a beautiful kite. Sam tries to betray him but is found out and protected by Arthur. This incites him to give up “that foolish habit of sneering and jibing at others which had so nearly ruined him.”²⁰⁷ In a more elaborate version of this type of story, the narrator blames his little brother for breaking his kite, but later finds out that the dog tore the plaything to pieces. The narrator does not forget about his error and some time later, he is able to free another boy from false accusations.²⁰⁸ This kind of lesson that is long remembered by the narrator is also present in “The Torn Kite; Or, My Mother’s Portrait” in which the narrator strikes out at his little brother for tearing his kite. When he sees the portrait of

²⁰⁴ Sarah P. Doughty, “Charlie’s Kite,” *Stories for Little Children* (Boston: Otis Clapp, 1850?), 1-12.

²⁰⁵ “Charlie’s New Kite,” *Our Little Dots*, 56.

²⁰⁶ M. M. “Papa, Will You Buy Me a Big Kite?” *Our Little Dots*, 61-62.

²⁰⁷ Robina F. Hardy, *The Lost Kite* (London: T. Nelson and Sons, 1888).

²⁰⁸ H. A. F. “A Tale of a Kite,” *Chatterbox* 20 (1882): 159.

his deceased mother, the narrator repents of his wicked deed and the lesson stays with him into adulthood.²⁰⁹

Although these stories explicitly focus on an aspect of good conduct, such as being a pleasant playfellow, or making up after a fight, lessons of good conduct permeate most moral stories presented here. It is thus not uncommon to see a story end with the message to the effect that the wrongdoers had “learnt a lesson they remembered all their lives.”²¹⁰ Of course, control is not the central theme in these examples, but instead, the kite is featured as an improving or hopeful presence in the lives of the protagonists. Still, these qualities are important aspects of the kite because they exemplify that the kite is a very two-faced symbol. As we have already seen, the myth of Icarus suggests that there is a very fine line between success and failure: the wings that saved Daedalus brought about the death of his son. Similarly, the kite may just as easily represent pride, fickleness, and failure as it can express hope, joy and providence.

Escaping Reality

From the narratives mentioned so far, one type stands out because of its seemingly fantastical subject matter. In these stories, the kite is an agent in transporting someone to a dream country where an important lesson is learnt. It is usually after this lesson is learnt that the protagonist wakes up and realises that the strange events were actually part of a dream, but for the reader this most often becomes clear earlier in the narrative, especially when familiar with the conventions of this type of story. What is one to make of such narratives? A little comparison with the balloon might be fruitful here. As Lynn explains, the balloon was an excellent

²⁰⁹ A. M. Edmond, “The Torn Kite; Or, My Mother’s Portrait,” *The British Mothers’ Journal* (July 1858): 155-57.

²¹⁰ Arthur E. Copping, “The Kite-Makers,” *The Children’s Friend*, 58-59.

literary vehicle to transport its passengers to foreign lands or planets to “escape their troubles or interact with other people.”²¹¹ Turner opines that such narrative contrivances provide a highly suitable backdrop for a moral commentary.²¹² In the case of the kite stories, they allow the unfortunate subject to view his or misdeeds from an estranging angle, thus bringing them out all the more clearly. Similarly, Kövecses points out that dreams often work and are understood in terms of metaphors.²¹³ He refers to Joseph’s dream interpretation in the Bible, and indeed, it would not be farfetched to assume that a Christian audience would be familiar with the metaphorical nature of dreams from their knowledge of the Bible. Readers will expect such an obvious dream country to be filled with metaphorical meaning, which makes it a very suitable element in a narrative to convey moral lessons. I will discuss five of these narratives to highlight the different aspects of this particular type.

In “Giles and his Kite,” Giles is observing how his kite is flying while lying on his back on the grass. He falls asleep, although this is not made explicit in the narrative, and rides up the kite string in a basket. When he arrives at the kite, he climbs in through the kite’s painted mouth into the land of the kite people. There he is treated as a prince, but he is forbidden to touch a large goldfish on a pole. Giles does so anyway, and as a punishment, he awakes in the village green with his kite still flying high. The narrator then comments that Giles was “*disobedient and greedy*; but it [the adventure] taught him a lesson which he has never forgotten.”²¹⁴ The main ingredients are all here: the protagonist falls asleep near the beginning of the story; in the conclusion of a dramatic climax to the story, the protagonist awakes and this allows the reader to conclude that most of the narrative had been a dream; and the

²¹¹ Lynn 156.

²¹² Turner 246.

²¹³ Kövecses 67.

²¹⁴ “Giles and His Kite,” *Aunt Judy’s Magazine* 13: 254-56, 256.

events in the dream country teach the traveller a valuable lesson. This type of dream narrative is also very effective because it provides a perfect narrative closure. The dream world ceases to exist (because it is not reality) and it serves a set, finite purpose. Curiously, “Jack’s Kite” tells a very similar story:²¹⁵ Jack’s new kite takes him to almost all the planets, and in each he makes mischief and is carried away again by the kite. Of course, the string breaks and Jack falls down, only to wake up having learnt the lesson of being a good boy.

A rather similar pattern unfolds in “Ben’s Kite.” Ben is an obstinate, lazy boy who does not want to do his lessons, but wants to play with his new kite instead. In a fit of sulking, he throws himself on the grass where the dream sequence begins. Ben becomes aware of a strange feeling in his legs and suddenly he hears a voice next to him. An old man tells Ben that he has turned into a kite and that he has reached the moon. Ben is startled by the realisation that he has turned into a kite, but the old man does not seem to notice and takes Ben on his rounds. Ben’s changed shape is useful because he is able to flutter after the old man. The two companions come down to the houses and look into a shabby little room in which a boy of Ben’s age is working at his lessons. The old man tells Ben that the boy’s family are poor, but that the boy always works hard. After this, they visit another house and the old man tells Ben that a lazy boy lives there who is not so good to his mother as the first boy. Ben watches the boy who is supposed to do his lessons, but keeps interrupting them to work on his kite. A woman then comes in whom Ben recognises as his own mother, and he realises that the boy is Ben himself. At that moment, he wakes up, and the story ends with the narrator musing that Ben “did not tell any one his dream, if it was a dream;

²¹⁵ Cousin Virginia, *Jack’s Kite* (Philadelphia: Claxton, Remsen and Haffelfinger, 1871).

but Ben did not forget it.”²¹⁶ Again, this story presents the kite as a vehicle to a distant land: in this case Ben turns into a kite, which allows him to drift up to the moon. The new point of view that the kite (literally) gives enables the protagonist to reflect on his wrongdoings. The journey thus becomes a lesson for the child.

In “The Queen of Fashion,”²¹⁷ Tommy receives a kite on Christmas Eve and falls asleep wishing that it were already light so that he could fly his present. When he goes out the next morning, the wind is so strong that Tommy is carried away by his new toy to a mountain cave. In this cave, he meets the Queen of Fashion, who explains to the boy that she can make her subjects do anything she wants in the name of fashion. After a time, she sends Tommy back by balloon with the remark that “[k]ites are rather antiquated things”²¹⁸ and Tommy muses that it would be good if “Habit resisted more of Fashion’s aggressions.”²¹⁹ Once home, Tommy’s father informs him that the Queen’s subjects are the people on earth, but at that moment, Tommy wakes from his dream with his kite waiting for him. Not only is this a veiled comment on the whims of fashion, it also comments on the perceived value of the balloon over the kite.

This train of events was slightly adapted almost ten years later in “Something like a Séance,” which still features the kite as a medium to reach another world, but in a slightly different manner. The narrator, who is heavily interested in spirits and paranormal activity, works on a way of speaking to the higher-level spirits, as the ones that are normally contacted are so vile. In a jest, he is advised to try a balloon, which makes him hit upon an idea that he feels sure is inspired by Benjamin Franklin. This time, the narrator uses the kite of a nearby boy to communicate with the spirit

²¹⁶ “Ben’s Kite,” *Our Darlings* 110 (1890): 62-63, 63.

²¹⁷ Madame de Chatelain, “The Queen of Fashion,” *The Rose, the Shamrock and the Thistle* 6.33 (1865): 301-6.

²¹⁸ Chatelain 305.

²¹⁹ Chatelain 306.

world. To accomplish this, he attaches pieces of paper to the string that carry messages with them to the top of the kite, and which miraculously come back with answers from the “seventh-sphere spirits”²²⁰ scribbled on them. When the kite is finally reeled in, after a lengthy conversation, the narrator hears a bang and wakes up. He had been reading a book that inspired the story, while accompanying a boy in his kite flying. This story is interesting mainly because it poses Franklin as an inspiration for kite accomplishments, as well as confirming the notion that great things can be achieved with small devices; one does not need a balloon. In terms of comparisons between the balloon and the kite, this is also one of the few in which the kite comes off well, but this will be discussed in more detail later.

These five texts show that the capability of the kite to ascend to regions unreachable by man was creatively transposed to these dream narratives. In these, the kite offered a new vantage point because it transported the traveller to a distance that enabled him to see things differently. This changed vantage point could very well be derived from the balloon, which also gave people the opportunity of changing their points of view, by looking down on mankind or sailing above the clouds. The distance described here might be another planet, or just a height from which one could look into scenes not accessible before; the important thing is that the kite served as a medium to change points of view, both figuratively and literally.

Kites and Balloons

As we have seen, some of these narratives draw up a comparison between the kite and the balloon, and in this binary opposition, the kite as a symbol is further defined. In “The Queen of Fashion,” the kite is compared unfavourably to the balloon, whereas in “Something like a Séance,” the kite is presented as a finer alternative to its

²²⁰ Maurice C. Davies, “Something Like a Séance,” *Belgravia: a London Magazine* 5 (1874): 350-56, 354.

airy cousin. However, these oppositions are not limited to the dream narratives alone. A short narrative from 1906 describes how kites triumph over military balloons during battle, because the kites can stay up in a storm, thus ensuring the victory of those utilising it and imbuing the kite with a sense of utility.²²¹ Perhaps the most elaborate comparison is featured in *Ups and Downs*, in which the kite comes off rather badly in contrast with the balloon. When the kite is flying higher than all the other kites, he suddenly finds that to his “disgust, nobody was looking at him. All eyes were turned upon a strange thing that came mounting straight up from the earth—nothing less than a Balloon!”²²² Apparently, the kite feels rather jealous by the presence of the balloon, which he evidently admires, and the balloon appears to be quite an eminent and grand figure in the world of toys. The kite muses to himself that the balloon must be a “very superior kind of Kite,”²²³ thus conveying that balloons are better than kites as well as establishing the ignorance of the kite about the precise nature of other flying toys. The poor kite then tries to become acquainted with the balloon by saying that “we ought to know each other, as we appear to belong to the same high family.”²²⁴ Of course, “high” is a pun here on the fact that both the balloon and the kite are toys that fly high, but they also convey the arrogance of the kite in thinking that he belongs to the aristocracy among the toys, as it were, and feels the balloon does as well. However, he receives a snub from the balloon, which he deserves for being rude to a newspaper kite just a moment ago:

‘Not at all; you are the slave of a string!’ said the Balloon [...] and shot upwards, till he seemed no bigger than a marble against the sky. ‘What airs he

²²¹ Luk-Oie Ole, “The Kite,” *Blackwood’s Magazine* 179.1088 (1906): 743-53.

²²² Hope 34.

²²³ Hope 34.

²²⁴ Hope 34.

gives himself!’ murmured the Kite, [...] which [...] only served him right for being so uppish towards that fellow-kite a few minutes before.²²⁵

The key difference between the kite and the balloon is again underlined here: whereas the balloon can rise almost infinitely high, the kite must necessarily be tethered, and this is the reason that the balloon feels superior, because he can rise higher than the kite, and he is not the “slave” of a string.

Another interesting comparison between the balloon and the kite flows from a remark by Turner. She points out that “the (considerable) space occupied by the balloon holds significant message-carrying potential,”²²⁶ and something similar happens for the kite, which could be an excellent means of broadcasting images as well. Many of the kites described or depicted in these texts would have been decorated with a painting of a large face, pictures of dragons and ships, or celestial images such as the sun, moon, and stars. Although these images might not be seen high up in the air (the children in the “Try Again” narrative complain about this²²⁷) they were certainly suitable as an extra canvas in the etchings accompanying the stories to convey additional messages. In this regard, it is interesting that the illustration on the title page of *The Lost Kite* (Fig. 2) features the head of Queen Victoria on the kite that the boys are holding. In this manner, the kite itself also becomes a canvas of symbolism, and in the example mentioned here, an outlet for patriotism.

²²⁵ Hope 34.

²²⁶ Turner 242.

²²⁷ Elizabeth 6.



Figure 2. Illustration on the title page of *The Lost Kite* (1888).

The Play of Metaphor

Up to now, the discussion has mainly centred on how these kite narratives feature the kite as a symbol, but I would like to offer a few concluding remarks here about how metaphor functions in these texts. Lakoff and Johnson argue that metaphor structures thought. They notice that in metaphors, *up* is usually good, whereas *down* is bad.²²⁸ In this respect, two expressions exemplify this general rule: one can say that a person is feeling down and someone's spirits rose. Thus, we think of higher as better,

²²⁸ Lakoff and Johnson 22.

and lower as worse. For the comparison between the balloon and the kite in *Ups and Downs*, this is definitely true: the balloon is better because it can rise higher.

Significantly, even the title of the book is a pun that draws on the metaphorical use of “ups and downs” as positive and negative events, making them literal in the rising and falling of the kite in flight. However, for the kite in itself, things are a little different.

The stubborn kite soon finds out that its fondness for being untethered and going higher comes with a punishment. Up is thus not necessarily better. The expectations that might be formed on the basis of the normal way in which metaphor works do not work for these narratives of restraint. On the contrary, the metaphors give a warning on the level of the imagery, re-affirming that higher is better, but also warning that rising too high can be dangerous. Note here that the metaphor being used for arrogance in the *Ups and Downs* fragment, “being uppish,” draws on the metaphor of *high* status, but in this case, *up* is transformed into something bad. Additionally, in *Ups and Downs*, it is suggested that “pride may have a fall” by the newspaper kite, and this again refers to the notion that down is bad. However, these examples show that pride is seen here in terms of elevation, and that too much elevation causes a (long) fall down. Of course, this echoes the myths of Phaeton and Icarus, who both fell from heaven to a watery death. In this regard, even the metaphors that are used in connection with the kite in these narratives suggest that there is a very fine line between great ambition and hubris.

These metaphors return forcefully in the texts discussed in this chapter. It becomes clear that the metaphor of the kite structures concepts such as the soul or the wayward child. In the “Try Again” narrative, but as we have seen, in others too, a few characteristics of flight (and the kite in particular) return in the conception of the human soul: the soul *rises* and *falls*, terms that also apply to (kite) flight. In this

concept, the first term is privileged over the second: a rise is seen as positive, whereas a fall is negative, which corresponds to the common attitude towards kite flight.

Likewise, the text stresses that the kite starts off lying on the ground helplessly whereas its proper state is flight. The underlying notion is that the proper sphere of the soul and the kite (or any aircraft) is the air. In this manner, the soul is again conceived of in terms of flight because it is supposed to ascend towards the heavens (and God). Moreover, we have seen that the string that tethers the kite to the ground represents the soul's connection with God. This connection is crucial for the soul's well being, just as it crucial in enabling the flight of the kite. Additionally, if the kite string breaks, the kite will fall, just like the soul will fall if it loses its connection with God. The latter metaphor refers to the fallen nature of man, which is also made literal in this example through its connection with the kite and flight in general. Thus it becomes clear that the kite as a metaphor structures the way in which these concepts are thought. A similar set of links exists for the image of the kite as a wayward child and other symbols that are used in the texts I have discussed in this chapter.

In terms of symbolism, it is very difficult to pinpoint when the representation of the kite develops from metaphor to symbol. Instead, it becomes apparent that throughout these narratives: the kite is increasingly linked implicitly to certain values, and the interpretation of the image is left open to interpretation more. However, it is difficult to harbour the kite under either metaphor or symbol. Of course, each narrative discussed in this chapter could be subjected to a close scrutiny to establish whether the kite functions as metaphor or symbol in that particular text, but this would be highly unproductive. Instead, I propose that there are gradations of symbolism and metaphoricity that the kite assumes. In "The Kite, a Fable," several aspects of the kite are explicitly linked to aspects of human life and character, and the

kite is highly metaphorical as it is presented in the simile. In narratives such as the one about Willy Boy, this indeterminacy constitutes a large part of the text, as evinced by the multiple interpretations that it yields, and the kite seems to become a symbol instead of a metaphor. However, it is more accurate to speak of a general trend here than to try and determine for a single text what the kite's precise status is.

Conclusion

Whereas the first association linked to the kite might be one of hope or happiness, this chapter has shown that in many of these narratives, a bleaker image of the device prevails. It seems that the kite carries connotations of arrogance, fickleness, danger, and punishment in addition to its more hopeful characteristics. Although most of the stories discussed in this chapter belong to children's literature, this does not render the observations less valid: after all, what a society feels should be taught to their children, it holds high in opinion. Additionally, the Franklin myth not only disseminated the kite on a scientific level, it also gave it a heritage in terms of control. Of course, the concept of control has been the guiding line throughout these three chapters, as it is such an interesting and productive angle from which to study the kite. The myth of Prometheus (as well as those of Icarus and Phaeton) in connection with Franklin's aerial enterprise imbued the kite with a certain association of hubris, arrogance, control, ambition and success. A selection of these aspects returns in most of the texts discussed here. This is plainly visible when looking at the many kite stories that briefly or elaborately invoke Franklin. In these narratives, the flying of a kite is the central object, not a contemplation of Franklin's feats or electricity in general, yet Franklin is mentioned, as though the kite cannot be thought without Franklin. The site of memory as I have outlined it in chapter two thus resurfaces powerfully in these examples. The aspects of Franklin's experiment then also

permeate later kite narratives, and this connection between Franklin and the kite marks an important step into transforming the kite into a full-fledged symbol.

Moreover, the kite's simplicity that endeared it to many also aided in its obscurity: in reality as in fiction, the kite would always remain the humble cousin of the grand balloon. Thus the kite circulated more covertly, whereas the balloon enjoyed an enormous popularity. Nevertheless, these sources show that the kite was a sophisticated symbol in nineteenth-century literature because of its many different representations, the various metaphors it was used in, and the extended biblical imagery that was associated with it. Interestingly, many narratives mentioned here present the balloon as a grand and majestic object, whereas the kite is seen as its humble cousin. The main aspect of the kite that is foregrounded here is its lack of controllability, which is not strange considering that most of these stories were written in an age in which the balloon proved to be as beautiful as it was uncontrollable. These texts suggest that the kite might even be a strong rival to the balloon in terms of its use in literary symbolism. Still, this is not a comparison between the kite and the balloon, and these texts show how the kite as a metaphor represented and added to things such as religious imagery, in which the kite became a new medium through which to view the human soul.

However, the literary kite also sheds an interesting light on the perception of symbol and metaphor. Kahler argues that the symbol and the metaphor are different, and can be distinguished by the former's specificity and reference to something general, whereas the latter is marked by its attempt to illustrate an abstraction. Although this is a valid point to make, this distinction is severely problematic to uphold when analysing the kite as a symbol. In many of the narratives discussed in this chapter, the kite functions as a symbol and metaphor at once. When the fall of the

kite is linked to a spiritual fall, language becomes metaphorical, but the kite is turned into a symbol. This is only one instance in which the two overlap, and there are many more. These texts show that the kite as a symbol is made up of a web of metaphors and associations. I thus strongly agree with Lakoff and Johnson's approach when they use the concept of metaphor as a broader container for various related tropes. Only through its extended metaphorical use in the allegories and other texts discussed in this chapter, the kite finally becomes a symbol. It is very difficult to say when and where the kite as a symbol originated, and when and how it gained acceptance as a symbol. This is also why a historical approach has worked well; slowly, the kite gains acceptance from its first associations with the Franklin myth (but in other literary uses as well), and is subsequently used more frequently as a shorthand in later literary adaptations, which also transform previous symbolic uses of the kite to convey other messages.

Of course, this is probably the first time that the narratives discussed in this chapter have been subjected to academic scrutiny in relation to the kite. Further research might reveal many more aspects of symbolism and metaphor to be present in these narratives, showing the kite as a symbol to be more complex still. Moreover, this chapter has only dealt with a selection of the texts I found; other interesting angles still wait to be discovered and explored. Nevertheless, this chapter has provided a detailed analysis of how the kite was an important feature of metaphor in the nineteenth century.

Conclusion

Although the kite is commonly regarded as a child's toy, it featured prominently in other guises in adult literature, essays, histories, and scientific texts of the nineteenth century, owing part of its fame to the link wrought between Franklin and his electrical kite. For the Romantics and Victorians, Franklin's experiment was more than just a triumph of science, however: it served to encompass a number of greatly different connotations. It was a symbol of perseverance in the face of failure, a feat of daring or perhaps *hubris*, it was a romantic scene involving a father and son fighting the elements and prevailing, it offered the wisdom that even simple things could yield great results, and it addressed the popular notion of the kite as a child's toy. The kite thus acts as a focal point in Franklin's legend, as most of these themes are directly linked to it. Here it already becomes apparent that the kite could be a vehicle for many different messages, and a symbol for much more than just flight. Franklin's kite experiment already contained many of the themes that would resurface in nineteenth-century stories involving the kite. However, these later stories would often add to these elements the association of the kite with a moral or religious lesson, and whereas Franklin's story was essentially one of success, subsequent kite tales would often end in disaster. In this way, a strand of children's literature emerged that linked all kinds of activities surrounding the kite with a wise lesson to be learnt.

With this discussion, I have made a start in filling in the gap that has so curiously remained within research on aviation history. By asking how the kite

figured in nineteenth-century literary texts, I have offered a survey of the different kinds of symbolism of the kite in the sphere of scientific as well as literary narratives. The concept of aerial control has been a central theme in these discussions: in three chapters, I have linked the notion of control from its very beginnings in antiquity to the famous Franklin kite legend and from there to nineteenth-century literary adaptations of the kite as a symbol. Although more study needs to be done, it seems that the kite rivals the balloon in the complexity of its cultural relevance and offers some fascinating insights not only concerning popular attitudes towards flight, but also on how the kite was used to convey moral and religious lessons about human conduct and values. In this regard, the kite proves to be immensely interesting as it shows metaphors of flight shaping thoughts about such concepts as the human soul, ambition, and arrogance or hubris. Additionally, I have shown how science and literature interacted through Franklin's experiment. On the one hand, the kite as a symbol was given authority because it had been used in a successful scientific experiment, but on the other, its narrativisation imbued it with meaning and made Franklin a modern Prometheus, adding new connotations to what was originally a scientific experiment.

The main symbolism of the kite, as I have discussed it in these chapters, lies in man's search for control, but the kite was appropriated for many other messages as well. The kite thus became a very heterogeneous symbol. Symbols are never unequivocal, of course, but the ease with which the kite was adapted to new uses highlights how volatile and vibrant its nature as a symbol was. The stories discussed in chapter three contain themes ranging from a reward for returning the kite, being borne aloft by a kite to a dream-country, the personified kite disliking being tethered, the notion that one cannot control the kite, the kite represented as a toy, the kite

coming off as inferior to the balloon in a comparison, and its frequent use in narratives of perseverance and unheeded advice. In this regard, the metaphor theory as proposed by Lakoff and Johnson has been extremely useful to inspect how the metaphorical nature of the kite actually carries meaning. The position the kite takes within these metaphors shows that there is always a fine line between ambition and hubris, a thought that recurs powerfully in the classical myths that are often linked to the kite.

Perhaps it is too early to say, especially because the corpus of texts under discussion is limited, but there seems to be a shift in focus from the Enlightenment ideal of the successful Prometheus to the failing Icarus or Phaeton in Victorian texts. It is difficult to say anything definitive about the body of texts written in the Romantic period because pre-1800 texts that are not about Franklin's kite are scarce and those from the early decades of the nineteenth century mostly take on the form of poems about childhood and happiness. Additionally, the majority of the sources date from after the middle of the nineteenth century, with a peak around the 1880s and 1890s, possibly because of the renewed interest in the kite and its role in aviation research in that period. However, the material gives a strong impression that there is an overall development from the Enlightenment to the Victorian texts. The concepts that Lynn applies to the balloon are useful in an analysis of the kite as well: the texts discussed in this thesis originally feature the kite as an embodiment of victory over nature. This soon shifts to the device representing a battle with the elements and, eventually, it signals a lack of control that at the same time exacts the appreciation that man must ultimately submit to (divine) laws.

Writing this thesis has sometimes felt like inventing the wheel because the literary kite as an area of research has remained so unexplored. Because of the lack of

theoretical material on the kite in nineteenth-century literature, I have felt obliged to provide an elaborate historical context so that the kite as a symbol could be grounded in a historical discussion. The tripartite structure of history, science, and literature has worked well to establish how the kite functioned as a symbol. However, future research into this fascinating field might very well focus more on either the scientific or literary aspects of this discussion, and especially the analysis presented in the third chapter would benefit from a more detailed and extended exploration. Especially my discussion of how metaphors of flight work in the texts under discussion could be augmented by research into how such expressions structure our understanding and perception of flight.

Sadly, other areas of interest had to be abandoned for more pressing questions. In my research, I have come across many small issues that I neither had the time nor the space to follow up on. In this regard, a closer inspection of the oriental aspects of the Victorian literary kite might prove to be incredibly valuable to gain a deeper insight into how Victorians perceived and appropriated Eastern culture. Frequent mention is made of China and other oriental nations in Victorian texts on the kite, and the story of “The Japanese Kite,” for example, portrays the oriental kite in quite a new light compared to the British kite. A study of how these eastern kites and their oriental makers feature in Victorian texts could thus provide new insights into how the orient was appropriated. The notion of gender in relation to the kite and kite flying may also be of interest, especially in researches focusing on the perception of nineteenth-century toys and play, and of masculinity and femininity. Finally, the differences between the reception of the kite in the United States and the United Kingdom might be interesting to look at. These are all side-tracks which I was unable to address properly here, but which would certainly merit some scholarly attention. All in all,

there is enough material here to warrant further academic study. For this reason, I have added a large appendix of kite sources to give other researchers an opportunity to further the arguments developed in this thesis.

It becomes clear, then, that a literary approach to the kite yields interesting results and provides new insights that more conventional histories of flight have not been able to give. Whereas the balloon is associated with crowds and mass media, the kite offers a much more covert insight into the popular attitudes towards flight. In terms of metaphoricity, the kite is an exceptionally rich and complex object of study, and it gives a good insight in how religious and moral imagery operated in children's stories and poems. Because of the novelty of this field, it is hard to say what results further research might yield, but I am confident that an extension of the discussion presented here will shed some interesting new light on the areas of cultural memory, narrativity, and the way in which metaphors and symbols of flight were perceived in the nineteenth-century. Summarising all the different aspects of the kite mentioned here, I conclude that the kite was successfully used as a highly creative and adaptable symbol in a variety of nineteenth-century texts.

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