Virgil at Kitty Hawk

This paper explores an unnoticed piece of Virgilian reception—or intermediality—the monument on the Outer Banks of North Carolina that celebrates the Wright brothers' signal achievement in motorized human flight at Kitty Hawk in 1903. The Virgilian text in question is the opening of *Aeneid*, Book 6 (verses 9–33). The confluence of similar motifs may at first seem accidental. Upon arriving from the sea, Virgil's hero climbs to the citadel at Cumae and beholds the Temple of Apollo, whose back-story the poet unfolds and whose imagined ornamentation he describes: having daringly (*ausus*) escaped by air from Crete, Daedalus dedicated to Cumaean Apollo his *remigium alarum*, his oarlike flying machine, and he erected a huge temple, *immania templa*, to the god. Also not far from the sea, and sitting high atop a hill, the looming granite Wright monument that commemorates successful flight features exterior designs reminiscent of both wings and rays of the sun. What really triggers an intertextual meditation are the Wright structure's double doors at the front engraved with scenes of the history of human attempts at flight before the Wrights. Panels feature a kite, a balloon and other flying machines among the clouds, a propeller, and the Icarus of classical myth, strapped to fabricated wings but tumbling downwards as he flew too close to the sun. After Virgil's Daedalus alit on the Cumaean citadel, he inscribed on the doors of his Apollo shrine friezes of Minoan history that he himself had witnessed—on one side Androgeos' death at Athens and the resultant punishment meted out by Minos; on the door opposite (*contra*), Pasiphae and her monstrous progeny the Minotaur, Daedalus helping Theseus and Ariadne with the thread. In a pathetic apostrophe to Icarus, Virgil pointedly notes that, despite Daedalus' repeated attempts, the father could not bring himself also to include in the great artwork (*opere in tanto*) his son's fall from the sky. The Wright monument

thus completes what the Virgilian Daedalus left unfinished; Icarus, in fact, seems alone to be highlighted in *two* of the monument's panels, both his fall and, just below, a bird seemingly among the remains of the boy's shattered flying machine. It is now unknowable if the architects intended such an allusion to Virgil, the Harvard-educated partners, Alfred Easton Poor and Robert Perry Rodgers. But the quotation from Pindar that they affixed to a wall on the interior (the adyton, if you will) surely peaks the interest of the classically minded visitor, and helps to create an inner dialogue between the literary and the stone monuments to human flight. The Wrights, who succeeded where others failed, are subtextually linked (via Virgil) with the archetypal inventor of classical antiquity who mastered human flight, only to see his son fail when attempting to follow his example. Returning to Virgil's text with this intermedial engagement in mind, readers may acquire a sharpened appreciation of the frame of the passage, which balances Icarus' lamentable fall from the sky against his father's successful flight from Crete, a connection which others have noted (e.g. Pöschl, Otis, Casali) mirrors Aeneas' lingering grief for the recent loss of his father at the moment when he, like Daedalus *fugiens*, finally completes his own fateful flight from Troy to Italy.