

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* VIII.183-235

October 15, 2024

Book 8, lines 183-235 of *Metamorphoses*: The story of Icarus. The overarching theme seems to be about overstepping boundaries. Daedalus tries to escape the walls of the labyrinth and, in a twisted way, pays for it with Icarus's life.

An attempt at a literal translation, not necessarily the best-sounding one. I tried to put the translated lines as close to the original as possible, which results in some weird spacing but is easier to read side-by-side.

Daedalus intereā Crētēn longumque perōsus
exilium tactusque locī nātālis amōre
clausus erat pelagō. 'terrās licet' inquit 'et undās 185
obstruat, at caelum certē patet; ībimus illāc:

omnia possideat, nōn possidet āera Mīnōs. ¹

dīxit et ignōtās animum dimittit in artēs ²
nātūramque novat. nam pōnit in ōrdine pennās

Daedalus, meanwhile, having hated Crete and long exile
and having been touched by love of his birthplace,
had been closed in by the sea. 'It is allowed,'
he said, 'that he [Minos] may block the lands and waves,
but the sky certainly lies open; to there we shall go:
Minos may possess everything, but he possesses not the
airs.

He said and he sends away his soul into unknown arts
and he reknews nature. For he places feathers having
been begun in a row

¹Another example of mortal bounds?

²The arts here are *ignōtās*—unknown. Perhaps Daedalus is dealing with arts that he shouldn't know, usurping divinely power.

ā minimā coeptās, longam breviōre sequentī, 190
ut clīvō crēvisse putēs: sīc rūstica quondam

fistula disparibus paulātim surgit avēnīs;
tum līnō mediās et cērīs alligat īmās
atque ita compositās parvō curvāmine flectit

ut vērās imitētur avēs. Puer Īcarus ūnā 195
stābat et, ignārus sua sē tractāre perīcla ³,

ōre renīdentī modo, quās vaga mōverat aura,
captābat plūmās, flāvam modo pollice cēram

mollībat, lūsūque suō mīrābile patris
impediēbat opus. postquam manus ultima coeptō ⁴ 200
imposita est, geminās opifex librāvit in ālās

ipse suum corpus mōtāque pendit in aurā;
īnstruit et nātum ‘mediō’ que ‘ut limite currās,

from the smallest, the shorter following the long,
that you would think [it] to have grown on a slope: thus
sometimes
the rustic pipe grows from unequal reeds bit by bit;
then he ties the middle and bottom with string and waxes
and thus he bends [them] having been arranged by a
small curve
so that he may imitate real birds. The boy Icarus
was standing alone and, unaware that he handled his
own danger,
with his face shining, now was capturing feathers
which a wandering breeze had moved, now was softening
the golden wax,
and with his own game was hindering
his father’s remarkable work. Afterwards the final touch
was placed on the undertaking, the craftsman himself
balanced his own body
onto twin wings and hung in the air having been moved;
and he instructs his son, and says ‘I advise that you fly

³Ovid isn’t hiding the ending here. Contributes to a sense of inevitability.

⁴Another option is to supply “eō” and make this an ablative absolute.

Īcare,⁵ ait ‘moneō, nē, sī dēmissior ībis,
unda gravet pennās, si celsior, ignis adūrat⁶: 205

inter utrumque volā. nec tē spectāre Booten
aut Helicēn⁷ iubeō strīctumque Ōrionis ēnsem:
mē duce carpe viam!’ pariter praecepta volandī
trādit et ignōtās umerīs accommodat ālās.

inter opus monitūsque genae maduēre⁸ senīlēs⁹, 210

et patriae tremuēre manūs; dedit oscula nātō

nōn iterum repetenda suō, pennīsque levātus
ante volat comitīque timet, velut¹⁰ āles, ab altō

quae¹¹ teneram prōlem prōdūxit in āera nīdō¹²,

in the middle boundary, Icarus, lest, if you go lower,
the waves may weight down the feathers, if higher, fire
may burn [them]:

fly between each. I order that you not look at Boötes
or Helice and the drawn sword of Orion:
me being the leader, seize the way!’ Lessons of flying
he gives equally and fits the unknown wings on his
shoulders.

Between the work and warnings, the old man’s cheeks
moisten,
and the father’s hands tremble; he gives kisses to his own
son

not to be repeated again, and having been lifted
he flies before with the feathers and he fears for the
companion, just as a bird, from a high nest,
which led forth fragile offspring into the air,

⁵Indirect command

⁶Future more vivid sī clause

⁷Greek accusatives. References the constellations Boötes and Helice (Ursa Major)

⁸Historical infinitive—use *maduerant*. For *tremuēre* in next line, use *tremuerant*.

⁹Plural form, but singular meaning (refers to Daedalus). Same deal with *patriae* in next line.

¹⁰Know it, love it, hate it—Homeric similes.

¹¹Introduces relative clause. Goes back to *ālēs*.

¹²Huge hyperbaton with *altō* in previous line

hortāturque ¹³ sequi damnōsāsque ¹⁴ ērudīt artēs 215

et movet ipse suās et nātī respicit ālās ¹⁵.

hōs aliquis, tremulā dum captat harundine piscēs,
aut pastor baculō stīvāve innīxus arātor
vīdit et obstipuit, quique aethera carpere possent,

crēdidit esse deōs. et iam Iūnōnia laevā 220
parte Samos ¹⁶ (fuerant Dēlosque Parosque relictæ)

dextra Lebinthos erat fecundaque melle Calymne
cum puer audācī coepit gaudēre volātū
deseruitque ducem, caelīque cupīdine tractus

altius ēgit iter. rapidī vīcīnia sōlis 225
mollit odōrātās, pennārum vincula, cērās;
tābuerant cērae: nūdōs quatit ille lacertōs,

and he encourages [Icarus] to follow and instructs the
damnable arts

and he himself moves his own wings and looks back at
the wings of his son.

while someone seizes these fishes with a trembling rod,
or a shepherd leaning on his staff, a plowman on his plow
saw and stood dumbfounded, and those who could seize
the airs

they believed to be gods. And now Junonian Samos [was]
on the left region (both Delos and Paros had been left
behind),

the right was Lebinthos and sweet fertile Calymne,
when the boy of audacious flying begins to rejoice
and abandoned the leader, and having been led by love
for the sky

drove the path higher. The closeness of the swift sun
softens the fragrant waxes, bonds of feathers;
the waxes had melted: he flaps bare arms,

¹³Deponent, has a passive form but translated actively ("he encourages")

¹⁴"Damnable" arts. Compare with "unknown" arts in line 188.

¹⁵*ālās* is used for both *suās* and *nātī*.

¹⁶Samos is also referenced in the *Aeneid*: *posthabitā coluisse Samō...* (I.16)

rēmigiōque carēns non ūllās percipit aurās,
ōraque ¹⁷ caeruleā patrium clāmantia nōmen
excipiuntur aquā, quae nōmen trāxit ab illō ¹⁸. 230

at pater īnfelīx, nec iam pater, ‘Īcare,’ ¹⁹ dixit,
‘Īcare,’ dīxit ‘ubi es? quā tē regiōne requīram?’

‘Īcare’ dīcēbat. pennās aspēxit in undīs
dēvōvitque suās artēs ²⁰ corupusque sepulcrō
condidit, et tellūs ā nōmine dicta sepultī ²¹. 235

and lacking an oar he does not catch any breezes,
and the mouth shouting the name of his father
are received by the blue-green water, which drew the
name from him.

but the unlucky father, now not a father, said ‘Icarus,’
‘Icarus,’ he cried, ‘where are you? In which region should
I seek you?’

‘Icarus,’ he was saying. He looked at feathers in the waves
and cursed his arts and buried the body in a grave
and the earth was called by the name of the buried one.

¹⁷Poetic plural. Literally “mouths,” though most of us only have one mouth.

¹⁸The Icarian Sea

¹⁹This is repeated multiple times in this section. A sad kind of echo as Daedalus realizes what has happened.

²⁰The story comes full circle as Daedalus curses his arts.

²¹Icaria, an island off to the southwest of Samos.