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Katz Contest Winner

Horace's Use of the Myth of Icarus in the *Odes*

BENJAMIN CLAESSENS

In his *Odes*, Horace expresses his awareness of the potential for artistic failure that is inherent in taking on an ambitious poetic project such as his *Odes* and Vergil's *Aeneid*. Horace enlists a complex program of metaphor and imagery throughout the text which revolves around wax and feathers, the materials Daedalus used to craft the ill-fated wings of Icarus. My discussion of these themes will be based around Horace's three allusions to the myth of Icarus in his *Odes*.

The earliest surviving extended account of the myth of Icarus is from Ovid, who was active several decades after Horace and seems to have been especially influenced by him, for Ovid includes three metamorphoses into swans in his most famous work which were likely inspired by Ode 2.20.¹ Ovid tells this story in both the *Ars Amatoria* and the *Metamorphoses*. My discussion will focus on his more detailed and famous account in the *Metamorphoses*. Briefly, the story is that the master craftsman, Daedalus, and his son, Icarus, are imprisoned together, so Daedalus makes wings out of feathers and wax for both Icarus and himself so that they can escape by flight. He warns Icarus to fly neither too low, for the sea could destroy the wings, nor too high, for the sun could also destroy them. In fact, Daedalus closes his warning with the words *carpe viam* (8.208). These words are clearly an allusion to Horace's metrically identical phrase in the famous last line of Ode 1.11: *carpe diem* (8). Icarus, however, in the midst of their escape, foolishly disobeys his father's command and flies too close to the sun, which melts the wax on his wings, causing him to fall to his death and to become an emblem of immoderation. The sea into which he falls is then named after him.

Ode 1.3 introduces several of the themes I want to discuss. This ode is a propempticon, a farewell poem addressed to someone about to go on a voyage, which was a solemn occasion in the Ancient Mediterranean since there was always a reasonable chance one might die at sea. The poem, although ostensibly addressed to the ship, is really meant for Vergil, who was in the midst of writing the *Aeneid* and was Horace's dear friend. Horace begins by praying to various gods, asking them to keep Vergil's ship safe. But the poem quickly becomes a diatribe against the folly of human cleverness by lamenting the invention of sailing. While demonstrating the many dangers of sailing, Horace also outlines Vergil's proposed voyage, which follows the same route as Aeneas' Mediterranean voyage in the *Aeneid*,² suggesting that this voyage of which Horace is writing really refers to Vergil's attempt to write the story of Aeneas' travels: the first half of the *Aeneid*, to which Horace was likely privy since Vergil was his poetic colleague. Near the middle of Ode 1.3, at the typical pivot of the Horatian Ode, where the poem takes some sort of unexpected turn, Horace says that the gods' creation of boundaries was pointless "if people leap across seas one ought not to touch upon impious rafts" (23-24).³ Two lines later, Horace goes so far as to call sailing *vetitum nefas*, forbidden sin (26). This stanza therefore establishes that the crossing of divine boundaries, such as seas, using human craft, like ships, is impious. Horace then goes on to explain how Prometheus' crossing of divine boundaries by stealing fire, which is the gift that allowed mankind to become craftsmen, brought immense suffering to mankind. In the following lines he then writes, "Daedalus essayed the empty air on feathers not given to humans" (34-35). The relevance of these details is twofold.

¹ 2.367 ff., 7.371 ff., & 12.64 ff.

² Hornbeck 2014 p. 148.

³ All translations throughout the essay are my own.

First, Horace clearly states that Daedalus transgressed the divine boundary of the air through his craft of making wings, just as Prometheus transgressed through his craft of trickery, and just as Vergil might also do through his craft of poetry. Horace reiterates this point by repeating the word *audax* at the emphatic position of the beginning of the first and third line of the second to last stanza (25, 27). This impiety, then, is of overreaching or immoderation—not knowing one’s place. Vergil is attempting to do something that is beyond human limits. If he succeeds, he proves himself to be divine; if he fails, he is immoderate. Horace thereby establishes a correspondence between writing poetry, flying, and sailing while simultaneously claiming that all three are potentially immoderate.

Secondly, through these aforementioned elements of the ode, Horace sets up an important relationship between two Ancient Greek ideas: *τεχνη*, which means “craft” and has to do with human craftiness and cunning, that which separates mankind from beasts, and *φύσις*, a Greek concept meaning something like “growth” or “nature.” Both the Greeks and the Romans (including Horace) were very concerned with that which is according to nature. In the case of Ode 1.3, sailing is clearly not according to *φύσις*, because it is using *τεχνη* to cross natural boundaries not meant to be touched: *non tangenda [...] vada* (1.3.24).

Ode 2.20 contains another allusion to Icarus’ fateful flight, wherein Horace undergoes a partial metamorphosis into a swan. In this poem, Horace claims that he will not die but instead will turn into a swan-man creature, which seems to be a hybrid between himself and his poetry since he describes it as *biformis* (2). In this form he will fly over many distant lands and become “more famous than Icarus” (14). By comparing himself to Icarus in this way, Horace recognizes and acknowledges that he is using the very *τεχνη* about which he spoke so harshly in Ode 1.3, but implicitly claims that his craft of poetry will succeed, unlike Daedalus’ craft, which had tragic consequences.

In this poem, Horace also continues to assert that his poetry is in accordance with nature. He uses passive verbs to describe his transformation. He says in line one that he will be borne through the air, not that he will fly, and in line ten that he is being changed into a bird, not that he is changing himself into a bird. This construction draws an important distinction between Horace and Daedalus, who changes himself into a bird through *τεχνη*, whereas to describe the formation of *his* wings, Horace uses the word *nascor*, meaning to be born, to sprout forth, or to grow; this word emphatically connotes *φύσις*.

Ode 4.2 offers Horace’s final allusion to the myth of Icarus in the *Odes*. In this poem, Horace begins by warning a fellow poet that trying to imitate Pindar, the pinnacle of grand lyric poetry, is like relying on feathers smeared with wax by the strength of Daedalus. Horace goes on to call Pindar a swan, which is typical, for Pindar is the origin of this poetic trope, but, at the pivot of the ode, Horace calls himself a bee, which, through great effort, plucks herbs and (abruptly coming out of the metaphor) laboriously forms poems. Thus, Horace continues his campaign of establishing himself as one who lives according to nature, as opposed to others who rely on feathers smeared with wax by Daedalus. In fact, the verb he uses to describe his writing of poems is “*tingo*,” which sometimes means “to form in wax.” So, whereas Daedalus smears wax upon feathers, Horace contrasts himself as a meticulous bee, the very source of wax, laboriously forming his poems until he naturally turns into a swan when he dies, as described in Ode 2.20. Horace uses waxen imagery not only to contrast himself with Daedalus, whose wax didn’t stand up to the test, but also to denote the waxen tablets upon which Romans actually wrote.

Homer’s *Odyssey* sheds further light upon these Horatian themes by providing yet another strong connection between poetry, sailing, and Icarus: feathers. Homer uses the phrase “speaking with winged words” over one hundred times in the *Odyssey* alone.⁴ But James Thomson sensibly notes that this epithet literally translates to “speaking *feathered* words” rather than “*winged* words,” as it is usually translated, and actually compares words

⁴ “ἔπεα πτερόεντα προσηύδων” (*Odyssey* 1.122, 2.269, 3.362, 4.25, etc.).

to arrows, not birds.⁵ Homer also calls a ship's oars "feathered" twice.⁶ This featheredness of both oars and words further solidifies the connection between ships, Icarus, and poetry; all three use feathers through craft to unnaturally cross distances. Birds are naturally meant to fly because they are endowed with wings, but men use birds' feathers to craft arrows to fly across distances and kill men from afar.⁷ Likewise, men also use their craft to build ships, which allow them to fly across the sea by taking on characteristics of fish through a sort of partial metamorphosis, much like Horace's partial metamorphosis into a swan. In the same way, Daedalus uses his craft to construct artificial wings, which then allow Icarus and himself to partially metamorphose into birds and thereby trespass into the realm of Jove.

Horace employs this program of metaphor and imagery in order to highlight the potential danger in writing poetry by demonstrating how humans use feathers and wax, which are Nature's gifts to birds and bees, to do unnatural things through their craft. Mankind imitates birds by using feathers to make arrows that kill men, and imitates fish by building boats to cross natural boundaries. Daedalus imitated birds by using feathers and wax to craft wings to fly across natural boundaries. All these instances of the impious utilization of τέχνη have resulted in death. Therefore, Horace warns, one ought to be careful when using wax to craft lofty poetry. One should be wary of attempting a feat beyond one's capacity. Horace, however, is nevertheless confident in his capabilities, for he boasts in the final ode of book three as follows. "I have completed a monument more lasting than bronze" (3.30.1).

⁵ Thomson 1936

⁶ *Odyssey* 15.527 and 23.272: "ἑρετμά, τὰ τε πτερὰ νηυσὶ πέλονται."

⁷ Sutherland 2001 p. 117

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