

Icarus (Returned)

A Joycian Portrait of the Ovidian Young Man

Away then it is time to go.
Silence, exile and cunning
In a wax
A game of swans flew there and the water and the shore beneath were
fouled.
Windswept limbs
Rose
Carried away
An ecstasy of flight
Away! Away!
Bird came again
Carried it all away
His soul was soaring in an air beyond the world
Swallows flying through the sea dusk over the flowing water
His soul was in flight
The cry of a hawk
A Hawklike man flying sunward above the sea.

Stars in the sky
Atoms in the air
Soaring sunward
A bird twittered; two birds
Wheeling darting birds and in the pale space of sky
Drops of water
The sea
Feathers upon birds
Scales upon fish
Risings and sinkings
Rose again

Little fiery flakes fell and touched him at all points
Saturated in hot paraffin wax
The bonds of flesh are broken asunder
Uncertain as under sea
Burning ocean
Burned up in an instant like a piece of wax
Terrible fire
Afflict the bodies
Lost soul
The boundless fire raging in its very vitals
Shame covered him wholly like fire glowing
Ashes falling continuously
Blood seethes and boils in the veins
Brains are boiling in the skull
The heart in the breast glowing
His heart like a bird
Sank

The bowels a redhot mass of burning pulp
The tender eyes flowing like molten balls
The sea had fallen
O cripes I'm drownded
Alone amid a waste of wild air and brackish waters
Strange and beautiful seabird
Ended
His heart trembled in an ecstasy of fear
I was not myself as I am now, as I had to become.
The hawklike man whose name he bore
Soaring out of his captivity on osierwoven wings
Symbol of departure or of loneliness
His heart like a bird
What birds were they?

This poem started out as an exercise to explore how profoundly James Joyce had ingested the lexicon of avian exile in Book 8 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. I wanted to see if was possible to reconstruct the story of 'Daedalus and Icarus' entirely from fragmented excerpts of Joyce's novel *Portrait of the artist as a Young Man*. Whether homage, parody or pastiche, the poem follows Joyce's direction of rebuilding a past literary work through borrowed building blocks, creating something new but also redelivering the present to the past. Joyce and the Ancient poet Ovid, united through the experience of exile as well as writing, together mirror the parent/child relationship of Daedalus and Icarus: without the ancient artists, there could be no modern ones, just as there could be no son without a father. In returning Icarus to Ovid through Joyce's words, and making explicit what before was only intended to be implicit, one can attempt to rebuild the ancient through the modern, and in turn create something contemporary. The resulting, fragmented, 'Frankenstein's monster' nature of *Icarus (Returned)* comments both on how the past has undoubtedly influenced the present but also questions how contemporary culture can impact on what has passed, especially since what is 'Modern' is now no longer 'new', and ideas of satire and service are not so divorced from each other. The poem takes fragments of an already fragmentary narrative, and endeavours to reconnect them: not recreating the original whole, the novel, but a new whole, a reworking of Ovid's poem from an existing reworking. The resulting piece is a new fragment, but one that is new and complete in its incompleteness. I like the way that Joyce's doubts, fears and restlessness remain on the page even when his work is stripped of the contexts that originally shaped them, and the inconsistency of tenses gives the suggestion of a fraction of the whole.