Oratio Obliqua: Accusative with Infinitive

A common construction in Latin is the indirect statement (oratio obliqua)—reported speech or thought, in contrast to direct quotation (oratio recta). It is expressed by a dependent noun clause whose verb is an infinitive and whose subject is an accusative. This construction is generally translated into English with a subordinate clause beginning that and containing a finite verb, although literary English occasionally uses a similar construction, e.g. Henry James, “Maud-Evelyn”: “as soon as she came in, I saw her to be much excited.” Note that the subordinate conjunction, that, is not expressed in oratio obliqua—it is a feature of English, not Latin. Such clauses are most often used:

1. as the subject of impersonal verbs like constat, ‘it is agreed,’ appare, ‘it is apparent,’ manifestum est, ‘it is evident.’
   a. Constat Romam non sine labore conditam esse. That Rome was not built without labor is agreed.
   b. Apparet fratrem virum validum esse. That (your) brother is a strong man is apparent. It is apparent that (your) brother is a strong man.
   c. Manifestum ignem calidum esse. That fire is hot is evident. It is evident that fire is hot.

2. as the object after active verbs of saying, thinking, knowing, perceiving, etc.
   a. Dixit feminam puerum amare. He said that the girl loved the boy.
   b. Intellectual nautas villam perdidisse. I understand that the sailors destroyed the villa.
   c. Vidimus famam reginae esse magnam. We saw that the queen’s reputation was great.

Tenses of the Infinitive. The tenses of the Latin infinitive do not indicate time absolutely but only in reference to the verb on which they depend. Thus, the present infinitive indicates a contemporaneous action, the perfect infinitive a prior action, and the future infinitive a subsequent action.

1. Nautam in Italia esse dicit. He says that the sailor is in Italy.
2. Nautam in Italia esse dixit. He said that the sailor was in Italy (When?—at the time of his speaking.)
3. Nautam in Italia fuisse dicit. He says that the sailor was (has been) in Italy (When?—before his speaking.)
4. Nautam in Italia fuisse dixit. He said that the sailor had been in Italy (When?—before his speaking.)
5. Nautam in Italia futurum esse dicit. He says that the sailor will be in Italy (When?—subsequent to his speaking.)
6. Nautam in Italia futurum esse dixit. He said that the sailor would be in Italy (When?—subsequent to his speaking.)
7. Nautam in Italia futurum esse dixerat. He had said that the sailor would be in Italy (When?—subsequent to his speaking.)
8. Nautam in Italia futurum fuisse dixit. He said that the sailor would have been in Italy. Note that this last example is somewhat more complicated and less common. It expresses an Unreal Condition, i.e., the sailor would have been in Italy, but he’s not for some reason or other...

Passives of ‘saying’ and ‘perceiving’ Note that Latin uses passive verbs like dicitur personally, not impersonally. For instance, a sentence like, “It is said that the sailor is strong,” is not expressed in Latin with oratio obliqua but with a predicate adjective: Dicitur vir validus esse. “The man is said to be strong (validus is a predicate adjective agreeing in case, number and gender with vir. Dicitur virum validum esse is bad Latin. Likewise, “It seems that the man is a poet,” would be written, Videtur poeta vir esse (vir is a predicate nominative), not Poetam virum esse videtur.