

OVERLOOKING LAKE VADIMON:
PLINY ON TOURISM (*EPIST.* 8. 20)

A feature of Pliny's art that goes largely unexplored is his use of topography to express ideas. Often his deftly done descriptions of places are not only that but serve to express an idea or state of mind in a way that a direct statement cannot.¹ Though often enough noted purely as a showpiece of Pliny's skill in describing places, the picture of Lake Vadimon is also one of these spiritual landscapes if one looks closely.²

The letter begins with a complaint about tourists, and the complaint is important to Pliny. Fully the first third of the letter is given to his observation that travelers will journey to foreign lands in order to see things no more marvelous than can be seen at home, if only they were willing to look. This happens because marvels in foreign lands are advertized, so to speak. Remote in places that are storehouses of marvels and that seem to recommend themselves as such, they get read about and talked about. Yet this also happens because of something peculiar in human nature which makes us incurious about places nearby, a kind of obliviousness which reinforces itself by the very proximity of things. Pliny then gives as illustration of his point the description of Lake Vadimon whose marvelous features he discovered for only the effort of looking. His discovery of the lake converted him to taking the nearer viewpoint and revealed to him the obliviousness of most travelers.

The first suggestion that the lake may illustrate Pliny's complaint in a more profound way, however, is a distinct connection between the travelers and the cattle found at Lake Vadimon, namely, obliviousness. Pliny has stressed that we miss things *sub oculis* (1), repeating the word *oculis* in 2. In fact, 1, 2, and 3 are loaded with words of seeing and perceiving: *noscenda* (virtually the first word of the letter), "incuriosi . . . visuri . . . videre . . . cernere . . . novimus," the tricolon, *audita perlecta lustrata*, followed by "audieram . . . videram, audiui . . . vidi." All go to stress the lack of perception which leads us to cross land and sea in pursuit of the kind of things we have overlooked at home. Now, in the part of the letter describing the lake, the lack of perception is answered by lack of perception in the cattle which are carried across the lake when in pursuit of grass and oblivious to everything else they board floating islands unawares: ". . . pecora herbas secuta sic in insulas illas ut in extremam ripam procedere solere, nec prius intellegere mobile solum . . ." (8).³ The cattle are so oblivious that they do not

1. See, e.g., the very few articles on such metaphor noted by P. V. Cova, "Sette anni di studi su Plinio il Giovane (1966-1973)," *B. Stud. Lat.* 4 (1974): 280-81. References in this essay are to the text of R. A. B. Mynors, *C. Plini Secundi "Epistularum" libri decem* (Oxford, 1963). I am indebted to one of the journal's anonymous referees for certain improvements throughout.

2. As description of place, A. N. Sherwin-White, *The Letters of Pliny: A Historical and Social Commentary* (Oxford, 1966), p. 473; B. Radice, "The Letters of Pliny," *Empire and Aftermath: Silver Latin II*, ed. T. A. Dorey (London and Boston, 1975), p. 134, and "A Fresh Approach to Pliny's Letters," *G&R* 9 (1962): 163, 166. The letter is also cited for Pliny's attitude to the country. Cf. H.-P. Büttler, *Die geistige Welt des jüngeren Plinius: Studien zur Thematik seiner Briefe* (Heidelberg, 1970), pp. 131-32.

3. G. Dennis, *Cities and Cemeteries of Etruria*, vol. 1 (London, 1883), pp. 142-44 and n. 8, explains the nature of these islands in discussing the site of Lake Vadimon. Reeds and grasses are bound together at the roots by the petrifying quality of the water, and the islands grow from these lumps when detached from shore. Dennis notes that other ancient authors mention Lake Vadimon's islands and that such floating islands are known elsewhere in ancient and modern times.

even know when they get on or off the islands (with emphatic repetition of *sentio*): “. . . non magis se descendisse sentire, quam senserint ascendisse” (8).

It is also significant for the connection of the unseeing tourists and cattle that Pliny uses the same two verbs, *solere* and *sequi*, to describe the travel of both: “. . . transmittere mare solemus . . . longinqua sectemur . . .” (1), “. . . pecora herbas secuta . . . in extremam ripam procedere solere . . .” (8).

A third feature that connects tourists and cattle is the intimation that the lake is like a sea and its islands like ships sailing upon it, for in this equation the cattle seem like tourists crossing the sea to distant places. The lake like the sea is said to have wind and waves (5). Pliny first mentions ships by pointedly saying that in fact there are no ships on the lake. The denial on the factual level, however, suggests the similarity of lake to sea on the level of imagination, for the holy nature of the lake recalls the numinous quality of the sea, and the commonplace that the sea is inviolate, not to be sailed upon by impious men in ships.⁴ A few lines later Pliny uses the poetic word for ship, *carina*, in noting that the bottoms of the islands are like hulls (6). Next, the islands are said to behave like ships at sea, now borne apart by winds, now the small clinging to the large like small boats (*cumbulae*) to merchant men (*onerariae*), and sometimes even racing one another like yachts (7). The word *imposita*, used of the cattle trapped on the islands when they leave shore, is a nautical term meaning “put on shipboard.” Even in the description of the cattle’s plight as they drift in terror of the surrounding water (8 *paveant*) Pliny seems to have created a playful variation on the stock figure of the hero at sea, an Odysseus, or a *pavidus nauta* familiar from Horace’s *Odes* and elsewhere.⁵

The identification of tourists and cattle opens another dimension to the letter, a letter within a letter, as it were, which is a larger commentary on the kind of tourists Pliny describes at the beginning. The commentary is a metaphorical statement written into the peculiar topography and characteristics of Lake Vadimon: instead of telling the reader in so many words, Pliny lets the details of the description speak for him. The metaphorical statement, moreover, has different depths, or greater and lesser degrees of elaboration.

On the simplest level, the cattle exemplify without any elaboration the obliviousness of the human travelers. The dividing line between shore and floating island represents purely a difference to be noticed. Or, lack of perception can be equated with lack of perception apart from any attempt to interpret the significance of islands, shore, or water in the equation. The animal example does, however, render memorable the lack of perception described. It satirizes the traveler by representing his lack of perception as bovine, visceral, the kind of obliviousness one would expect of an animal intent only on grazing. There was well established in Latin literature the use of animals, especially cattle, to portray

4. For numerous references to this quality of the sea, see P. Shorey and G. J. Laing, *Horace: “Odes” and “Epodes”* (New York, 1919), pp. 152–53.

5. Cf. Hor. *Odes* 1. 1. 14 and the situation in 2. 14. 14, 2. 16. 1–4, 3. 3. 4–5. On heroes and fear of drowning, cf. Hor. *Odes* 1. 3. 18; Hom. *Od.* 5. 299–300; Virg. *Aen.* 1. 93; Ov. *Met.* 11. 539.

the brute, unperceiving character that man could assume. Sallust's introduction to *Catiline* is apropos.⁶

One can, however, take a wider perspective and envision the islands as ships and the lake as the sea following what has already been said about these. Here it is not merely a question of obliviousness about things nearby. The equation now suggests that certain tourists board ships to far-off places oblivious not only to something noteworthy on this shore but to the act of taking ship, sailing, and landing on a new and distant shore. For the animals board like sleepwalkers; in the midst of the marvelous passage their one reaction is terror of the water around them; they debark with no more awareness of arriving in a new place than of leaving the old. To these unseeing travelers, then, all the points on the map to which a ship might take them are the same as where they started. Travel and new places are merely extensions of their home shores, and all form an even, unchanging continuum. A deliberately ambiguous phrase underscores this idea. The words "sic in insulas illas ut in extremam ripam procedere" (8) mean "they go onto the islands as if proceeding onto the edge of the shore." Yet within the allegory of travel the same phrase assumes the meaning, "they go onto the islands as they go onto the farthest shore" (i.e., unseeing), thus stating the interchangeable character of places to these tourists. The ambiguous phrase merely anticipates the idea in "non magis se descendisse sentire, quam senserint ascendisse." The phrase "quo tulerit ventus egressa" in 8 suggests the same idea, for it does not matter to this tourist where the wind carries his ship.

A second perspective exists alongside without cancelling out the first. The islands may be envisioned as what their name most directly implies, that is, islands of the Mediterranean Sea. In this perspective the description suggests that the unseeing tourists go to all the islands in the sea yet visit these islands and return to the mainland with no perception of where they have been. It accords with the logic of the allegory that there is no distinction between the two roles the islands play here, that they are at once islands and ships going to islands. In fact, the dual role appropriately makes island and ship interchangeable, for again home shore, ship, island visited, and shore returned to blend into one in the allegory and, it is implied, in the dull perception of the travelers.

In yet a third perspective there is further elaboration on the mentality of the tourists. Pliny says the islands join, break up, and rejoin in all manner of large configurations on the water. When joined in these configurations, the islands are said to be "like unbroken land," *continenti similes* (6). Now, on the order of other ambiguous phrases that have one meaning to fit the allegory, *continenti* may mean not only "unbroken land" but "mainland" or "continent" without the extra word *terra*. *Continens*, that is, means Achaea, Egypt, or Asia which appear in the first part of the letter as continents to which the unseeing travelers flock. In effect, since the blocks of land can assume every possible shape and size of continent like Egypt or Asia, the lake presents in metaphor all the different continents to which travelers might go. Thus with its various perspectives the

6. Sall. *Cat.* 1 is perhaps after Pl. *Resp.* 9.586A-B5. The oblivious soldier of Plaut. *MG* is called an elephant, pig, and horse (235-36, 1058-60, 1112-13), and the husband who sees nothing in Catull. 17 a mule.

lake presents in metaphor all the possible permutations of travel to far places: journey to other shores, to all the islands imaginable, and to every continent. Pliny's metaphorical model ingeniously compresses distance and makes places move instead of travelers. Each island is a movable unit of land, a *mobile solum*, which goes to make up a geographical kaleidoscope of the tourist's world. Yet at every degree of elaboration, the model restates the attitude of tourists who will see abroad nothing new or different from the very little they were willing to see on their own ground.

Up to this point the essay has concentrated on the lack of distinction between shore and islands to the eyes of the cattle as the main thing representing the obliviousness of travelers. Yet, as it is easier to explain now, all the physical characteristics of Lake Vadimon seem selected to express the tourists' limited perspective in which nothing different is perceived. Indeed, the lake with its landscape *is* that perspective, for the most conspicuous feature in Pliny's description of the lake is sameness. On all sides equal and without irregularity, Lake Vadimon resembles a wheel: "Lacus est in similitudinem iacentis rotae circumscriptus et undique aequalis: nullus sinus, obliquitas nulla, omnia dimensa paria, et quasi artificis manu cavata et excisa" (4).

While each island has its own shape and size, they give the general impression of sameness. They are uniform in height and draft, and their shallow bases look the same, both the part above and below water. The words *par* and *pariter* dominate the description of the islands (5-6) and make this part answer the description of the lake's shape. This impression of sameness continues in the description of the movements of the islands, or how they group along the shore or in the center of the lake (6-7). For in this grouping the islands act like so many equal and interchangeable units. Or again, they appear all the same homogeneous whole with no distinct character apart from what they compose, whether central land mass or shore, as they assume different configurations. The description of the lake ends with another last concentration on sameness, for the lake gives rise to a river, but no ordinary river (9). This goes underground, or to the eye ceases temporarily to be but emerges again as itself. Objects thrown into this river emphasize the phenomenon, for they too come back the same after having disappeared for a time. This process, which is added as a cap to the lake's description, is essentially a process of duplication, or reassertion of the same thing through dramatic disappearance and reappearance.

Of all the sameness in the landscape, however, perhaps the most critical feature is grass. The islands and the lakeshore are alike in being covered with grass: ". . . herbidae omnes harundine et iunco, quaeque alia fecundior palus ipsaque illa extremitas lacus effert" (5). Grass is the thing upon which intent the cattle miss the distinction between shore and island. Grass makes the shore, islands, and shore again appear as a homogeneous whole to be wandered over by the cattle oblivious to everything but grass. Thus grass, because it is the thing the cattle see most and respond to, expresses unlike anything else in the landscape the limited viewpoint Pliny criticizes. The animal's concentration on grass, the same on island as on shore, is the allegory's way of suggesting that the tourist's perception of what he goes to see in another place will be the same limited perception he has at home, and indeed the same that leads him abroad in the

first place as if to see what he cannot at home. The deliberate irony in this idea is that Pliny's new ability to perceive marvels nearby like Lake Vadimon is not the myopia of the essay. Rather, nearsightedness is the perspective of the tourist, which seems at first the distant, cosmopolitan outlook, but is really only a fixed gaze on what is put before him by advertizing given distant marvels.

There is another, different feature to this letter which nonetheless belongs to Pliny's technique for conveying his larger commentary on tourism. It has been noted that Pliny sometimes starts letters with certain words, then repeats them at the end but charged with new significance by the letter's contents.⁷ In 8. 20 this is true of the word *natura*, meaning human nature where it appears in the second line of the letter, and *natura* in the last line where in the phrase *naturae opera* (the "works of nature" at Lake Vadimon) it appears to mean only nature at large. Where *natura* occurs first, Pliny is saying that it is somehow our nature ("seu quia ita natura comparatum") to go far away to see things while overlooking them at home. Here Pliny does not discuss further the tendency from human nature but goes on (*seu quod*) to list some other possible reasons that we overlook things without settling on any one (*Quacumque de causa . . .*). But Pliny returns to the tendency in human nature in the lake's description, in the guise, that is, of *naturae opera*, the works of nature at large. Now using the cattle and lake he dramatizes human nature acting with limited perspective, blaming that perspective and suggesting its consequences. Since the works (*opera*) of nature are metaphorically the deeds (also *opera*) of human nature, the *natura* of the conclusion is complex. Pliny rightly says that the *naturae opera*, but meaning human nature as represented in the essay through works of nature, will delight the reader no less than himself.

There is another word, or in this case two forms of the same verb, transformed in this way from first to last, *noscenda*, which virtually begins the letter, and *ignota* near its end. *Noscenda* means things we go abroad to see yet which might be found immediately before us like Lake Vadimon. When the reciprocal word *ignota* appears at the end, it clearly means Lake Vadimon and its various features which were previously overlooked, but this is so only on the surface. As *ignota* is synonymous with *naturae opera*, *ignota* means deeds of human nature which, though commonly not noted, are revealed in the essay. *Noscenda* is thus transformed, or to put it another way, the true *ignotum* and *noscendum* of the essay is human nature, the way it acts in respect to near and far, the whole homily about seeing and not seeing. This is the *noscendum* Pliny claims to have recognized in his inspection of Lake Vadimon, the thing worth recognizing first about himself as observer, but more importantly about human nature in general. Ultimately, as *ignotum* is the observation about human nature concealed in Lake Vadimon, it is also that which the reader is to recognize in the letter, if not as oblivious to Pliny's art as tourists to things nearby. Thus the letter is not least an exercise in looking with perception at a certain kind of Plinian epistle: it is an example of what it discusses.

Finally, there is no intention in this essay to say that Pliny either invented

7. C. F. Saylor, "The Emperor as *Insula*: Pliny *Epist.* 6.31," *CP* 67 (1972): 48-49. The technique is akin to Pliny's recognized habit of closing a letter with the same subject that opened it. Cf. S. Lilja, "On the Nature of Pliny's Letters," *Arctos* 6 (1970): 76, after the original observation of Guillemin.

details of his description or distorted true features to fit the larger significance of the letter. On the contrary, I think that Pliny took real details as he found them, selected well, and arranged them in order to exploit their allegorical possibilities. This seems to be his technique generally, for he seems elsewhere interested in developing an inner line of thought only where the things that can support it are true. *Ne vera minuantur*: he saw poetic truth clearly expressed in the world as it was, but only diminished by distortions made to serve allegory.

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ARE LUCRETIVS' DANAIDS BEAUTIFUL?*

In his comment on *aevo florente puellas* (*De rer. nat.* 3. 1008), E. J. Kenney implies that *aevo florente* essentially means "beautiful": "One of the two women in Polygnotus' picture [in which they are drawing water in broken jars, Paus. 10. 31. 9] was represented as beautiful, ἐν ὡραία τὸ εἶδος, but the detail is not in itself particularly appropriate to the Danaids. Lucretius brings it in to cement the allegory by identifying them with the Seasons, Ὠραι, who were represented as beautiful women: cf. ὡραῖος = 'beautiful.'"¹ The allegory to which Kenney refers is this (3. 1003–10):

deinde animi ingratham naturam pascere semper
atque explere bonis rebus satiareque numquam,
quod faciunt nobis annorum tempora, circum
cum redeunt fetusque ferunt variosque lepores,
nec tamen explemur vitae fructibus umquam,
hoc, ut opinor, id est, aevo florente puellas
quod memorant laticem pertusum congerere in vas,
quod tamen expleri nulla ratione potestur.

* A slightly different version of this paper was presented at the 1980 meeting of CAMWS. All quotations are from C. Bailey's second edition of Lucretius (Oxford, 1922).

Along with most commentators, let us assume that Lucretius means for us to think of the Danaids here (as for why they are not named, see p. 146 and nn. 2 and 6). Pl. *Gorg.* 493 is the first to mention people with leaky jars in Hades. Socrates reports a "clever fellow's" philosophical interpretation of what was presumably an already existing myth; see E. R. Dodds (ed.), "*Gorgias*" (Oxford, 1959), p. 302. However, these allegorized water carriers are not female (see 493B5 οὔτοι ἀθλιώτατοι, etc.). Whoever wrote the *Axiochus* mentioned "the unending water-drawings of the Danaids" in the same breath as Tantalus, Tityos, and Sisyphus (371E6). Other references postdate Lucretius but provide an account of crime and punishment, e.g., Hor. *Odes* 3.11 and Ov. *Her.* 14; see Bernhard on "Danaides" in W. H. Roscher (ed.), *Ausführliches Lexikon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie*, vol. 1 (Leipzig, 1884–90), cols. 949–52. But see J. Cousin, "Lucrèce, les verseuses et la vita stultorum (*de nat. rer.* III 1003sq)," *Mélanges de philologie, de littérature et d'histoire anciennes offerts à Alfred Ernout* (Paris, 1940), pp. 97–106, who believes that the girls indicate not Danaids but "non-initiées," such as those described by Paus. 10. 31. 9 or in the *Gorgias*. E. Keuls, *The Water Carriers in Hades: A Study of Catharsis through Toil in Classical Antiquity* (Leyden, 1974), pp. 106–12, believes that Lucretius' water carriers are modeled on Plato's and that neither group should be identified as Danaids.

1. Lucretius "*De rerum natura*" Book III (Cambridge, 1971), p. 228.