

THE MOSELLA OF AUSONIUS: AN INTERPRETATION*

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In a famous letter (*Ep.* 1.14 Seeck) Symmachus complains to Ausonius that he has not received from the poet a copy of the *Mosella*, which is now in wide circulation.¹ But he has contrived to see the poem and, despite his legitimate grievance, cannot suppress his admiration.² Symmachus' letter is bantering and ironic in tone,³ but his response to the poem is typical of many. He admires a particular passage for its variety and vividness of detail, the catalogue of fish—modern readers are more likely to select passages of natural description—and identifies the general subject of the poem as praise of the Moselle.⁴ For many subsequent readers the attraction of the *Mosella* has resided in the detail of individual scenes; although they have recognized the strongly epideictic (laudatory/hymnic) theme of the poem,⁵ the impression made by a few, especially appealing passages has been at the expense of a sense of coherent plan to the poem as a whole. Under these circumstances it is hardly surprising that modern scholarship has been extensively concerned with questions of structure. Marx's incautious view that the apparent disproportion in structure was due to a lack of final polish to the poem⁶ has been amply disproved. In fact, Ausonius'

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¹ "Volitat tuus Mosella per manus sinusque multorum," *Ep.* 1.14.2 (10.2 Seeck).

² "Admiratio scriptorum sensum frangit iniuriae," *Ep.* 1.14.3 (10.7–8 Seeck).

³ This is not to suggest that Symmachus' admiration is feigned. The gentle irony is an elegant compliment to Ausonius, implying mutual understanding.

⁴ *Ep.* 1.14.3–4 (10.8–15 Seeck).

⁵ C. Hosius, "Die literarische Stellung von Ausons Mosellied," *Philologus* 81 (1926) 195–99, emphasizes the panegyric elements in the poem. Friedrich Marx, "Ausonius' Lied von der Mosel," *RhM* 80 (1931) 388–90, and Jacques Fontaine, "Unité et diversité du mélange des genres et des tons chez quelques écrivains latins de la fin du IV^e siècle: Ausone, Ambroise, Ammien," in *Christianisme et formes littéraires de l'antiquité tardive en occident*, Entretiens sur l'antiquité classique 23 (Vandoeuvres 1976) 439, describe the *Mosella* as a hymn.

⁶ Marx (above, note 5) 386–88; cf. Carl Hosius, *Die Moselgedichte des Decimus Magnus Ausonius und des Venantius Fortunatus* (Marburg i. H. 1909²) 37 (on verses 77ff.).

transitions are carefully worked (at least formally, although the organic connection between successive passages can still seem slight); the poem reveals a quite complex system of internal cross-references and a surprising regularity of structure.⁷ It would be a mistake to underestimate the poetic craftsmanship involved. Ausonius evidently was in control of his medium and there is no reason to suppose that the qualities sometimes criticized by modern readers were anything but intentional.

This is not to deny the validity of many readers' initial perception of the *Mosella*, that concern with the elaboration of individual passages predominates over the symmetry of the whole. The "eye" of the reader is intended to be dazzled by the brilliance of particular detail.⁸ Like much of the poetry of late antiquity,⁹ the *Mosella* does not conform to classical canons of unity and proportion. It makes different demands on the reader; it presupposes a different aesthetic. The visual arts of the period show the same inclination to elaborate detail at the expense of composition and proportion.¹⁰ In the *Mosella* the poet adopts a variety of stances to view his subject: at one moment he imagines himself viewing the river from the bank, at another viewing the bank from the river.¹¹ The reader of late antique poetry, like the observer of late antique art, was accustomed to such apparent discontinuity in juxtaposed images. In both thematic coherence is preferred to chronological or spatial continuity, creating what Grabar calls "a thematic iconographic ensemble."¹² Unity in these

⁷ See Ludwig Deubner, "Zum Moselgedicht des Ausonius," *Philologus* 89 (1934) 253–58; Walther John, "Zur Gliederung der Mosella des Ausonius," *Hermes* 78 (1943) 97–105; and Dietmar Korzeniewski, "Aufbau und Struktur der Mosella des Ausonius," *RhM* 106 (1963) 80–95. The regularity is purely formal and does not entirely compensate for the apparent lack of causal connection between sections of the poem.

⁸ Sidonius Apollinaris describes (C. 2.420–21) the reaction of an observer to the brilliance of the temple of Aurora: "one thing after another seizes your attention; such is the mastery of the craftsman that whatever you look at seems best." A sense of unity is lost in the brilliant individual impressions that force themselves on the observer. The effect is similar in reading much late antique poetry. The elaborate detail of individual passages seizes the attention and distracts from the overall scheme.

⁹ Claudian, for instance, is criticized by Alan Cameron, *Claudian: Poetry and Propaganda at the Court of Honorius* (Oxford 1970) 272, for paying scant attention to the linking of scenes.

¹⁰ A. Grabar, "Plotin et les origines de l'esthétique médiévale," *Cahiers archéologiques* 1 (1945) 19 and 26; Ramsay MacMullen, "Some Pictures in Ammianus Marcellinus," *Art Bulletin* 46 (1964) 441.

¹¹ Verses 152–68 describe the banks as viewed from the river, 200–239 the river viewed from the bank. Hosius, "Die literarische Stellung" (above, note 5) 200, remarks that Ausonius' description is not tied to a particular locality; "we do not know at what point of the stream we stand and watch."

¹² André Grabar, *Christian Iconography: A Study of its Origins*, Bollingen Series XXXV.10 (Princeton 1968) 46. Friedrich Mehmel, *Virgil und Apollonius Rhodius: Untersuchungen über die Zeitvorstellung in der antiken epischen Erzählung* (Hamburg 1940)

circumstances is to be found at the conceptual level, at a higher level of abstraction than the literal, historical plane. It is this kind of thematic unity that we should look for in the *Mosella*.

Evidently, on one level the poem is united by its theme of praise of the Moselle. Symmachus had already identified this as the subject of the poem.¹³ But such a broad theme hardly does justice to the variety of impressions the poem conveys. Recent studies have emphasized the subtlety of Ausonius' practice of poetic imitation,¹⁴ as well as the complexity of the formal structure of the poem. Perhaps we should look for corresponding subtlety at the conceptual level. What follows is an attempt to interpret the poem in accordance with these criteria.

After an introduction cast in the form of a *hodoeporikon* (1–22), Ausonius' poem falls into three main sections: 23–151, the waters of the Moselle; 152–348, the sights of the Moselle; and 349–483, the people of the Moselle and its fellow rivers. Roughly in the middle of the poem is a description of a dying fish (250–69). It is not a passage that contributes much to the ostensible purpose of the poem, praise of the river. In fact, as has often been noted, in the blow-by-blow account of the fish's death our sympathies are very much on the side of the fish.¹⁵ Ausonius establishes in the first few verses of the passage that the catch is a sentient being: *ignara doli* (250), *senserunt vulnera* (252), *trepidant* (253).¹⁶ The identification is completed by the antithesis of *sub amne suo: aere nostro* (261). Underwater is presented as a separate but equal realm with the world of the air.¹⁷ As man inhabits the upper realm, so fish inhabit the lower. The poetic periphrases for fish, *vaga turba natantum* (250), and in the catalogue *numerosae stirpis alumnos* (79), *fluitantes . . . catervas* (84), *flumineas . . . cohortes* (131), *caerulea turba natantum* (141) and *lubrica . . . / agmina multiplicesque . . . catervas* (150–51), contribute further to their

99–132, draws a parallel between the miniatures of the Virgil manuscript Vaticanus Latinus 3225 (c. A.D. 400) and the techniques of contemporary poetry in just this respect.

¹³ *Ep.* 1.14.3 (10.8–12 Seeck).

¹⁴ Maria Rosa Posani, "Reminiscenze di poeti latini nella 'Mosella' di Ausonio," *SIFC* 34 (1962) 31–69 and Woldemar Görler, "Vergilzitate in Ausonius' Mosella," *Hermes* 97 (1969) 94–114.

¹⁵ For example, Posani (above, note 14) 49, who speaks of "l'ostilità del poeta per la pesca, attività che non è mai vista molto di buon occhio nella *Mosella*; infatti in questa, che è presentata come una lotta tra il pescatore e il pesce, il poeta parteggia invariabilmente per il pesce."

¹⁶ I quote the *Mosella* from the edition of Charles-Marie Ternes, *D. Magnus Ausonius, Mosella*, Collection Érasme (Paris 1972).

¹⁷ The idea of water as a second world receives some support from the passage in the *Iliad* (15.187–195) describing the division of sovereignty among the sons of Cronos. Ausonius apparently has this passage in mind at the beginning of the catalogue. Neptune is described as: "cui cura secundae / sortis et aequorei cessit tutela tridentis" (80–81).

humanization. Old age (*senectus*) is attributed to the barbel (*barbus* 96); the pike even has a good Roman name, Lucius (120–21).¹⁸

The reasons for Ausonius' attitude to fishing become clearer in his treatment of the Glaucus story (276–82). In Ausonius' account Glaucus becomes a new inhabitant of the sea after tasting the deadly herbs of Circe (276–79).¹⁹ Glaucus' fate is described in the following terms:

Ille hamis et rete potens, scrutator operi
Nereos, aequoream solitus converrere Tethyn,
inter captivas fluitavit praedo catervas. (280–82)

Glaucus is the archetypal fisherman, described as “an investigator of secret Nereus and accustomed to ransack watery Tethys.” Fishing is seen as a violent activity; a violation of a secret realm, an act of aggression performed on a sea-goddess.²⁰ Glaucus suffers a well-deserved punishment, which conforms to the *lex talionis*, that the punishment fit the crime: he becomes the prey of those he had previously preyed on. His fate is like that of the fish hooked by the fisherman, doomed to struggle for survival in an alien world. The fisherman's crime is his violation of a second realm, the realm of water; his failure to recognize the boundary formed by the surface of the river, which is crossed only at one's peril.

The theme of the relationship between super- and subaqueous realms is present from virtually the beginning of the poem. At first the waters seem transparent, the adjectives *liquidus* and *vitreus* are frequently used.²¹ The water apparently holds no secrets;²² it is like the clear air of a bright, cloudless day (56–60). Through the water are seen the pebbles on the river bed, brightly colored like so many jewels, and the fish. But this

¹⁸ The commentators note that *Tincas* too (125) is a possible Roman name (cf. Cicero, *Brutus* 46.172). There is an element of humour here (*risus*, 120), but this does not detract from the role the catalogue plays in accustoming the reader to think of fish as analogous to humanity. There is even a degree of social differentiation in the world of fish, though it depends on their culinary status. Compare the perch (*delicias mensarum*, 115) with the pike (*nullos mensarum lectus ad usus*, 123), the tench (*vulgi solacia tincas*, 125) and the shad (*obsonia plebis alausas*, 127).

¹⁹ The variation from Ovid is natural given Circe's association with magic herbs and the role she plays later in the Glaucus story. I doubt whether it has any further significance.

²⁰ *TLL* cites no parallel for *converrere* (281), “sweep clean,” of fishing, but it is a natural word to use. It owes its aggressive connotations to the context. Its object, *Tethyn*, is at one level a poetic metonymy for *mare*. But the reader cannot be unaware of its literal sense, the sea-goddess Tethys. The phrase *operi Nereos*, “hidden Nereus”—I take *operi* as an adjective, not a noun—has accustomed the reader to reconstituting the literal sense of *Nereos* (cf. Lucan 6.514 *Ditis operi* and Silius 13.429 *operto . . . regi*, also of Pluto). He will naturally understand *Tethyn* in similar fashion. The following verse (282) confirms the aggressive nature of Glaucus' action (*converrere Tethyn*) with the words *captivas* and *praedo*.

²¹ *Liquidus*: 16, 30, 57, 61, 83, 142, 150, 185; *vitreus*: 55, 195, 223.

²² “Secreti nihil amnis habens” (56) and “arcanique patet penetrale profundum” (60).

unproblematic transparency is deceptive; transparency soon gives way to reflection: reflection of vine-covered slopes (189–99) and of sailors (222–39) on the surface of the water. This phenomenon, Ausonius insists, is a benign one, something to be enjoyed (189, 228, 233, 239). His attitude is encapsulated in the comparison of the sailors joyfully contemplating their own reflections with a girl admiring herself in a mirror:

- ipsa suo gaudet simulamine nautica pubes,
fallaces fluvio mirata redire figuras.
230 Sic ubi compositos ostentatura capillos
candentem late speculi explorantis honorem
cum primum carae nutrix admovit alumnae,
laeta ignorato fruitur virguncula ludo
germanaeque putat formam spectare puellae:
235 oscula fulgenti dat non referenda metallo
aut fixas praetemptat acus aut frontis ad oram
vibratos captat digitis extendere crines:
talis ad umbrarum ludibria nautica pubes
ambiguus fruitur veri falsique figuris. (228–39)

The proper attitude to such reflections is playful delight (“laeta . . . fruitur . . . ludo,” 233). Though deceptive and false (229, 239), the images remain in one sense true, and it is this very ambiguity, the play of appearance and reality, that is the source of enjoyment (239).²³ The phenomenon of reflection is benign, provided that the observer accepts the appearance and does not attempt to break the surface illusion. In the earlier passage (196) it is only when the sailor attempts to count the vines reflected in the water, a kind of violation, that he finds himself mocked: “Adnumerat virides derisus navita vites.” Reflection serves as a positive antitype to the aggressive violation of boundaries represented by the fisherman.

This interpretation receives some confirmation from the mythological vignette that precedes the description of the vine-clad slopes reflected in the river. Nymphs and satyrs frolic in a midday idyll, free from the prying eyes of humans. The passage concludes:

²³ Ternes (above, note 16), on verse 229: “Les notions de reflet, de copie (*imago*), de double (*simulamen*) auraient pu amener une digression hautement philosophique sur l’essence et l’apparence. Il est dans la manière d’Ausone de l’avoir éludée au profit d’une charmante scène d’intérieur.” While it is true that Ausonius avoids a philosophical digression, we should not underestimate the sophistication of his response to the phenomenon of reflection. Mirrors and reflections, and in general the play of appearance and reality, are a favorite subject of mannerist poetry. For their use in Statius, and Pompeian wall painting, see Hubert Cancik, *Untersuchungen zur lyrischen Kunst des P. Papinius Statius*, Spudasmata 13 (Hildesheim 1965) 38–48. Ausonius’ view of the unreliability of appearance perhaps has most in common with Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, from whom he borrows the Glaucus story. Fontaine (above, note 5) 443 sees the key to the poem in verse 239: “ambiguus fruitur veri falsique figuris” and detects a continuity with the aesthetic values of the poem in the continual shift of visual phenomena.

tunc instantes sua per freta ludere Nymphas
 et Satyros mersare vadis rudibusque natandi
 per medias exire manus, dum lubrica falsi
 membra petunt liquidosque foveant pro corpore fluctus. (182–85)

Although expressed in mythological language the theme is again the relationship between the worlds of air and water. Satyrs are of the upper world, creatures of the vine and wine, nymphs are of water. The mythological vignette enacts the happy coexistence of the two realms, a situation reenacted by the reflection of the vine-clad slopes on the waters of the Moselle (189–95). The frustrated grasp of the satyrs (cf. especially *falsi*, 184) is paralleled by the sailors' fruitless attempt to number the vines reflected in the water. Such attempts must fail, the boundary between the two realms must remain inviolate, if the joyful idyll is to continue. The poet himself shows a similar reticence about revealing the river's secrets:

secretata tegatur
 et commissa suis lateat reverentia rivis. (187–88)

It is this respect for the stream's secrets (*reverentia*) which is contravened by the fisherman (*scrutator aperti* / *Nereos*, 280–81). The poem moves from unproblematic transparency to a joyful revelling in the ambiguity of reflection to, in the person of the fisherman, an impious violation of underwater secrets.

Fishing for Ausonius is a technology. He devotes seven verses (243–49) to describing the various techniques that may be used. They amount to a form of deception (*doli*, 250) and of violent aggression (*populatrix turba*, 241).²⁴ This negative evaluation of the products of culture as opposed to nature and the life of the country (the cultivation of crops and vines has positive emotional connotations for Ausonius, associated as it is with rural simplicity) is anticipated earlier in the poem. Verses 48–54 and 68–74 both compare human luxury unfavorably with natural beauty (cf. *cultus*, 72; *natura*, 51). It is against this background that we should view the catalogue of architects in verses 298–317. In at least three cases technical skill is capable of an unfavorable interpretation.²⁵ Daedalus' art only brings him grief (300–302);²⁶ Ictinus uses his craft to construct not only the Parthenon, but also a magical mechanical owl which lures birds to their death as the fisherman lures fish (308–10); and Dinocharis, to celebrate the incestuous union of Ptolemy II and his sister

²⁴ Ternes (above, note 16) 68 (on v. 243) cites Plato, *Laws* 823E and Plutarch, *De soll. an.* 9 for the negative evaluation of fishing in antiquity.

²⁵ Ausonius gives eight examples in all. But these three examples occupy 12 of the 18 verses that make up the catalogue, and are elaborated in much greater detail than the other instances cited.

²⁶ As the commentators point out, this passage is an imitation of Virgil, *Aen.* 6.30–33.

Arsinoe (*iussus ob incesti . . . foedus amoris*, 314), suspends a statue of the queen in the roof of a temple by a magnet (311–17). These last two are not entirely reputable exploits. The craftsman cannot in the last resort be distinguished from the practitioner of magic arts.

There is a similar ambiguity in Ausonius' description of the villas of the Moselle which follows the catalogue of architects (318–48). One villa, for instance, is described as "requisitioning the river for itself and making it prisoner" ("captumque sinu sibi vindicat amnem," 323); another "usurps" (*usurpat*) the view (325);²⁷ a third "bursts threateningly into the heavens with its lofty roof" ("sublimique minans irrumpit in aethera tecto," 329), like the Pharos lighthouse. The idea of a tower that impiously threatens heaven has something in common with the biblical story of the tower of Babel (*Gen.* 11.1–9). It is possible that Ausonius was influenced by this story. But classical literature contains similar tales, notably the story of the Aloadae and their assault on heaven. In its morality the passage is akin to certain of the *Odes* of Horace. Both poets criticize human technology as an impious invasion of the heavens (*C.* 1.3.25–40, cf. 28.4–6); both are suspicious of extravagance in building (*C.* 2.18.1–6 and 17–22, 3.1.33–37).²⁸ Ausonius' villas offend in both horizontal and vertical dimension. One violates the boundary between earth and water, the bank, by invading the river; another that between land and sky, by invading the heavens. His ideal is that degree of magnificence and show which attracts without breeding excess.

tantus cultusque nitorque
allicit et nullum parit oblectatio luxum. (347–48)

This ideal equilibrium is symbolized by the bather who, weary from the hot bath, plunges not into the cold pools of the bathhouse, but into the chill waters of the Moselle. Natural amenities complement the works of man. Ausonius' assertion of autopsy here (*vidi ego*, 341) is, of course, a rhetorical ploy of emphasis. But it also draws the reader's attention to the parallels between the sections on fishing (240–82) and villas (283–348). Both conclude with an assertion of autopsy (cf. 270 *vidi egomet*). In the former passage it is the escape of the fish that is introduced in this way, i.e. the reversal of the unsatisfactory situation—the death of the fish—described in the preceding verses. In a similar way the last eight verses of the description of the villas, introduced by *vidi ego* (341), counteract the suggestion of excessive self-aggrandizement present hitherto by proposing a more positive model of the relationship between nature

²⁷ *Usurpo* does not always have a pejorative sense in the *Mosella* (cf. 366), but the present context suggests a certain territorial aggressiveness; cf. *Prof. Burd.* 9.1.

²⁸ I am not prepared to claim that Ausonius has these Horatian passages in mind. Only that he is "Horatian" in the sense that here at least his values are those of the passages cited from the *Odes*.

and human civilization: the plunge of the bather into the waters of the Moselle.

There is, then, a continuous theme in the first 348 verses of the *Mosella*: the violation of boundaries, be they in the vertical or horizontal dimension. But the last 135 lines seem to fit less comfortably into this picture. They are largely panegyric rather than descriptive in subject and contain the bulk of the passages which seem to bear on Valentinian I's activity on the Rhine frontier in 369 and 370.²⁹ But there is a connection with the first part of the poem: the theme of the river as boundary. So far, for the most part, Ausonius has been speaking of a boundary in the vertical dimension. The surface of the river divides the realm of the air from the realm of the water, humans from fishes. Reflection serves as a model of the proper relationship between the two worlds. But a river is also a boundary on the horizontal dimension. It separates two banks and the territory that lies beyond them. And the equivalent of reflection on the horizontal dimension is echo. For it is by echo that the opposing banks are able to communicate: Ausonius compares the Moselle with the Hellespont, which separates the continents of Europe and Asia:

Non hic dira freti rabies, non saeva furentum
proelia caurorum: licet hic commercia linguae
iungere et alterno sermonem texere pulsu.
Blanda salutiferas permiscet litora voces,
et voces et paene manus: resonantia utrimque
verba refert mediis concurrens fluctibus echo. (292–97)

Language apparently bridges the river. But the nature of the communication is somewhat ambiguous, like the nature of reflection. Hosius explains the last line and a half: "In the middle of the stream the echo from the two banks meets."³⁰ The river is a point of meeting, but the boundary it represents remains inviolate. Communication for Ausonius is a disciplined alternation of speech; its power to unite is inherent in the process of interchange, not in the message.³¹ Indeed for Ausonius echo or reflection is an appropriate metaphor for communication (the verbs *respondeo* and *refero* can be used in either context).³² It is used again in a letter written to Paulinus of Nola in 393, complaining of the break in

²⁹ For Valentinian I's trans-Rhenane policy see Ch.-M. Ternes, "Paysage réel et coulisse idyllique dans la 'Mosella' d'Ausone," *REL* 48 (1970) 389–94, who cites the relevant passages from Ammianus Marcellinus. The contemporary relevance of the concluding sections of the *Mosella* has long been recognized. Marx, for instance (above, note 5), 390–92, described the poem as a work of propaganda and believed it was written at the request of the emperor.

³⁰ Hosius, *Die Moselgedicht* (above, note 6) 62.

³¹ There is something here of the spirit of late antique correspondence; what Ausonius calls "morem missae acceptaeque salutis" (*Ep.* 28.9 Peiper).

³² *Respondeo* 190; *refero* 216, 227, 235, 297; also *reddo* 223; *redeo* 229; *resono* 296.

their correspondence. Echo is cited as proof of the universality of communication (*Ep.* 29.9–10 Peiper); only Paulinus remains silent.

Rivers unite by blurring the divisions between separate realms. Reflection blends vine-clad slopes with the waters of the Moselle: “sese amni confundit imago / collis et umbrarum confinia conserit amnis” (198–99); echo has a similar confusing effect on speech: “blanda salutiferas *permiscet* litora voces, / et voces et paene manus” (295–96). Statius, *Silv.* 1.3.30–31, has “datur hic *transmittere* visus / et voces et paene manus.” The choice of a different verb by Ausonius suggests he wants to give it special emphasis; *salutiferas permiscere voces* is not just a periphrasis for *salutare*.³³ A metaphor for this process of unification by confusion and assimilation is the blending of tributaries into a single river. The catalogue of tributaries of the Moselle (349–80) presents the ideal: a mutually gratifying, non-aggressive assimilation that is the precondition for the fertility of crops and for the virtue and contentment of men hymned in verses 381–88, and which Ausonius promises to celebrate more fully in a later poem (389–417).

If the tributaries of the Moselle are the model, the confluence of the Moselle and the Rhine is the test case. There successful unification is represented as something still to be achieved, and it is set in the context of the still uncertain outcome of imperial policy on and near the Rhine (421–26).

Dives aquis, dives Nymphis, largitor utrique
 alveus extendet geminis divortia ripis
 communesque vias diversa per ostia fundet.
 Accedent vires quas Francia quasque Chamaves
 Germanique tremant: tunc verus habebere limes!
 Accedet tanto geminum tibi nomen ab amni,
 cumque unus de fonte fluas, dicere bicornis. (431–37)

The achievement of a proper boundary (*verus limes*) is contingent upon maintaining an ambiguous balance between unity and diversity. The Rhine is not to overwhelm the Moselle, but both rivers must maintain their identity (*geminum nomen*, 436). It is on this that the strength of the *limes* depends.³⁴ In political terms gradual assimilation is more likely

³³ It is also relevant that *permiscere manus* is a poetic cliché found in Statius, *Theb.* 12.783. From the point of view of imitation theory Ausonius has contaminated two Statian passages. But this need not militate against my interpretation. The slight catachresis would only draw further attention to the phrase *permiscere voces*. It is typical that Ausonius views communication as a formal interchange of courtesies, analogous to shaking hands.

³⁴ Ternes notes in his commentary (above, note 16) 94 that the adjective *bicornis* refers to the traditional representation of river gods as horned, a symbol of their strength. At the same time, of course, the two horns are meant to represent the Rhine and Moselle. Thus the *vires* of 434 are symbolically represented as a consequence of the union of the two rivers.

to succeed with the non-Romanized tribes of the Rhine frontier than schemes of military conquest. Ausonius, we must suppose, had his reservations about an aggressive trans-Rhenane imperial policy.³⁵ He would see it as a violation of a boundary, akin to the aggression of the fisherman, or the overvaunting villa-builder. In both these cases he uses the language of warfare and territorial acquisitiveness to communicate his disapproval of their activities.³⁶ Ausonius' model for achieving imperial peace and that ideal state of affairs he represents as existing on the Moselle is reflection or echo, phenomena that unify by assimilation, while maintaining respect for the separate (cf. 187–88). Many scholars have observed, however, that Ausonius' optimistic picture of life on the Moselle does not correspond with contemporary reality. Archaeological evidence reveals that the countryside never properly recovered from the Frankish invasion of 276.³⁷ Ausonius, I suspect, was well aware of the true state of affairs on the Moselle. He alerts us to the disparity between his account of the Moselle valley and reality at the beginning of the poem, when he introduces his subject. After travelling through the rough and wooded country of the Hunsrück, he finally emerges into the valley of the Moselle at the town of Neumagen:

- Purior hic campis aer Phoebusque sereno
lumine purpureum reserat iam sudus Olympum;
nec iam consertis per mutua vincula ramis
15 quaeritur exclusum viridi caligine caelum:
sed liquidum iubar et rutilam visentibus aethram
libera perspicui non invidet aura diei.
In speciem tum me patriae cultumque nitentis
Burdigalae blando pepulerunt omnia visu:
20 culmina villarum pendentibus edita ripis
et virides baccho colles et amoena fluenta
subter labentis tacito rumore Mosellae. (12–22)

Ausonius looks at the Moselle valley through the clear and apparently transparent air and sees “the image of the brilliant civilization of my native-land of Bordeaux” (18–19).³⁸ This from a poet so conscious of the fallibility of appearance and communication. As in water, so in air transparency is deceptive. Ausonius sees in the scenery of the Moselle a reflection of his own native Bordeaux. The hint of the unreliability of the

³⁵ Ternes, “Paysage” (above, note 26) 396–97, speculates that Ausonius' heart was not in his praise of Valentinian's achievements on the Rhine frontier. I hope I have suggested further reasons for questioning Ausonius' uncritical support of imperial policy.

³⁶ Notably: *populatrix turba* (241), *male defensos* . . . *pisces* (242), *vulnera ferri* (252), *praedam* (255); “captumque . . . sibi vindicat amnem” (323), *usurpat* . . . *visus* (325), “minans irrumpit in aethera” (329), *captare* (332).

³⁷ I rely here on Ternes' summary of the evidence in “Paysage” (above, note 26) 394–95.

³⁸ For the reminiscences of Virgil's account of the underworld in this passage see Görler (above, note 14) 94–102.

poet's reaction to the scenery of north-eastern Gaul is repeated towards the end of the poem, immediately after the section addressed to the Rhine. Ausonius sets his seal on the poem, beginning "haec ego Vivisca ducens ab origine gentem" (438). It is as though the reminder of the poet's origin is intended to recall the earlier reference to the poet's native land and alert us once more to the fallibility of his impressions. The virtues he claims for the Moselle and foresees for the Rhine frontier are those of his native Aquitaine. And it is appropriate that the last word of the *Mosella* is *Garunnae*. Ausonius looks at the Moselle and sees—the Garonne.

The interpretation I propose has the virtue of attributing to Ausonius some seriousness of thought and subtlety of imagination. Too often his poetry has been dismissed as a "desert of ideas," and attention paid only to the more obvious formal qualities of the verse.³⁹ The *Mosella* at least responds to an approach that is ready to take seriously the controlling themes of the poem, especially the concern with boundaries and their violation. It is a typical product of late antique taste in that it falls into distinct units of composition, which seem to have little necessary connection with each other. But it is also typical of late antiquity that the disparate compositional units are united at a higher level of abstraction. All too frequently the elaboration of particular passages has distracted readers from perceiving the greater conceptual unity that informs the poem as a whole.

³⁹ The phrase "desert of ideas" is applied by Pierre de Labriolle, *Un Episode de la fin de paganisme: la correspondance d'Ausone et de Paulin de Nole* (Paris 1910) 17, to Ausonius' correspondence with Paulinus. My interpretation is more in the spirit of Fontaine (above, note 5) 444, who describes the *Mosella* as "tout autre chose qu'un vain jeu, trouvant en soi sa propre fin. . . . La leçon cachée au coeur de cette esthétique n'est pas creuse ni naïve, et les couplets politiques de la fin du poème ne sont pas un placard de propagande officielle artificiellement plaquée sur un divertissement qui n'aurait aucun rapport avec ce grand dessein."

I should not like to leave the impression of dismissing Ausonius' less substantial poetry. It seems to me that here the notion of "levels of intent," applied by Kenneth Quinn, *The Catullan Revolution* (Cambridge 1969²) 27–43, to the poems of Catullus, could profitably be employed.