

Man and Nature in Ausonius' *Moselle*

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Ausonius' *Moselle* is a remarkable poem, and fully deserves its position among the most read and most debated poems of the post-classical era.¹ A conscious masterpiece, of stylistic elevation and elaborate design, it is outstanding for its *inventio*, *eruditio* and *concinnatio*. It is the only poem of any length from antiquity which takes a river as its theme; the river is not, as is usual elsewhere, a purple patch (Hor. *AP* 17 f.) or a *digressio* (Quint. 4. 3. 12), but is the focus of attention throughout almost 500 lines, within which various aspects are vividly and minutely depicted. Though formally speaking it may be called an encomium, for the river is praised as well as described, it owes little to rhetorical prescription. It is significant that the Greek rhetorician Menander says nothing about the praise of rivers, though he too recommends it as part of a larger whole; even if he had dealt with it, it is clear from the general tenor of his prescriptions that he would

¹ There have been many important discussions of the *Moselle* in recent years, most of them relevant to this paper. These are, in chronological order: W. Görler, "Vergilzitate in Ausonius' *Mosella*," *Hermes* 97 (1969) 94–114; Ch.-M. Temes, "Paysage Réel et Coulisse Idyllique dans la 'Mosella' d'Ausone," *REL* 48 (1970) 376–97; D. Gagliardi, "La Poetica dell' 'Ecphrasis' e Ausonio," in his *Aspetti della Poesia Latina Tardoantica* (Palermo 1972) 65–89; H. Tränkle, "Zur Textkritik und Erklärung von Ausonius' *Mosella*," *MH* 31 (1974) 155–68; J. 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* (Fondation Hardt, Entretiens 23, Geneva 1977) 425–72; E. J. Kenney, "The *Mosella* of Ausonius," *GR* 31 (1984) 190–202, drawing on the brief remarks of Z. Pavlovskis, *Man in an Artificial Landscape. The Marvels of Civilization in Imperial Roman Literature* (Leiden 1973) 33–39; M. Roberts, "The *Mosella* of Ausonius: An Interpretation," *TAPA* 114 (1984) 343–53; R. Martin, "La *Moselle* d'Ausone est-elle un poème politique?," *REL* 63 (1985) 237–53; D. Stutzinger, "... ambiguis fruitor veri falsique figuris. Maritime Landschaften in der spätantiken Kunst," *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum* 30 (1987) 99–117. The article of Carole Newlands, "*Naturae Mirabor Opus: Ausonius' Challenge to Statius in the Mosella*," *TAPA* 118 (1988) 403–19, appeared after this article was completed. There are helpful brief commentaries by C. Hosius (Marburg 1894, reprinted 1967); W. John (Trier 1932, reprinted 1980) and Ch.-M. Temes (Paris 1972); Pastorino's commentary on the whole of Ausonius (Turin 1971) is fuller on the *Moselle* than it is on most other poems. My own edition and commentary of the works of Ausonius will appear shortly. An earlier version of this paper was given to the Liverpool Latin Seminar in 1977, but not published.

have advised speakers or writers to use such a work as a vehicle for the celebration of human beings. Ausonius' poem is not of course immune from the influence of rhetoric—there are, for example, many flattering comparisons and laudatory addresses—but the conception of the poem is unique. The often-quoted article² in which Hosius accumulated traces of rhetorical topics in the *Moselle* might appear to point in another direction, but the various parallels, which he did not interpret in terms of context and poetic purpose, can in fact be shown to confirm a different interpretation. In political terms, too, the poem is noteworthy. In 1931 Marx put forward the thesis, still influential, that Ausonius wrote under the stern eye of Valentinian and had to submit every line to him; anything unsuitable might have cost him his life.³ In fact, given the political circumstances, the work is surprisingly free of political allusion and propaganda. The vision of the *Moselle* is markedly independent, as pointed out by Blakeney;⁴ it is typical of Ausonius to write about an original topic in a form of his own choosing. One of the poem's most striking features is the way in which the natural world (a term which will be defined more closely) takes precedence over the human, and man is subordinated to the landscape in which he lives and works; this is the subject of the present paper.

The poem's opening lines, in which Ausonius imagines himself on a journey from Bingen to Neumagen, give little hint of what is to come. Ausonius begins, certainly, by crossing a river, the murky Nahe, but he then mentions the new fortifications around Bingen, and that leads him to describe the lingering effects of the battle of Bingen three hundred years earlier.⁵ He continues his way along the Roman road through the wooded Hunsrück, passing a few isolated hamlets, and reaches the Moseltal at Neumagen.⁶ This exordium is one of the best known features of the poem, and has in some ways perhaps attracted too much attention. Because of it the poem has been considered a *hodoeporikon*;⁷ Roberts more wisely uses the word of this paragraph only. But even that overstates the case: the journey ends, or rather is allowed to slip from the reader's consciousness, at Neumagen. It would be wrong to imagine that as the poem progresses Ausonius moves from there towards Trier or Conz, where he was living in the imperial entourage. Nor does he take us on a systematic tour of this part of the river. Some of the sections of the poem are spatially or

² C. Hosius, "Die literarische Stellung von Ausons Mosellied," *Philologus* 81 (1926) 192–201.

³ F. Marx, "Ausonius' Lied von der Mosel," *Rhein. Mus.* 80 (1931) 367–92, esp. 376 f.

⁴ E. H. Blakeney, *The Mosella* (London 1933), Introduction, p. xviii.

⁵ Cf. Tac. *H.* 4. 70. The date is often given as 71 A.D.; it is more likely to be 70. The date of the *Moselle* is 371 or thereabouts (R. P. H. Green, "The Éminence Grise of Ausonius' *Moselle*," *Respublica Litterarum* 1 [1978] 89–94).

⁶ As Temes points out (*REL* 48 [1970] 378) Tabernae is not the modern Berncastel, which is on the river.

⁷ Notably by L. Illuminati, *La Satira Odeporica Latina* (Milan 1938).

temporally linked, but for the most part they are presented as independent and discrete impressions. Others have treated the passage as biographical. Ausonius might indeed have made the journey (perhaps after inspecting the frontier, as Marx suggested [376]); if he did, he will have been too tired to have investigated its attractions there and then. But what is the point of presenting the beauties of the place where he lived in terms of a journey? The purpose of this passage, which, as Martin declared (250), there has been little attempt to explain, is in fact to set up a series of contrasts, between darkness (1, 14–15) and light (16 f.), war (2–4) and peace (11), wilderness (5–7) and civilisation (10–22), old and new (2); as Görler has demonstrated, many of these points are developed by means of a pervasive comparison with Vergil's Campania and Elysium. In essence the technique of the opening lines is that of Wordsworth's famous poem *On Daffodils*: "I wandered lonely as a cloud, that floats on high o'er vales and hills, when all at once I saw a crowd, A host, of golden daffodils." A parallel closer to our subject is the poem *de Rosis*, part of the *Appendix Vergiliana* and present in many appendices of Ausonius; he may well be its author.⁸ As Ausonius takes in the Elysian brightness of the scene—an experience also available to today's visitor, in spite of the massive concrete bridge—the panorama, with its villas, vines and quietly gliding river,⁹ reminds him of Bordeaux and the Garonne.

The first paragraph began with the Nahe and ended with the Moselle. The second begins with a wholehearted greeting to the river. Here, as John pointed out, there is a hint of the genre *epibaterion*, a poem or speech of thanksgiving on arriving at one's destination, of which the best extant example is Catullus' poem on Sirmio.¹⁰ The apostrophe is also reminiscent of a hymn, as are certain other features of the poem. It is worth noting what and who praises the river. First, the fields, whether on aesthetic grounds or because it irrigates them when necessary, but does not flood; then the *coloni*, and then, by implication, the Belgae, who owe to it the protection and prestige of the imperial ramparts. The city of Trier is nowhere mentioned as such; indeed the *coloni* and Belgae will only make rare reappearances in the poem. After two lines praising its grassy banks, suitable for vines,¹¹ there is a summary of its general virtues as a watercourse, and its usefulness for communication and commerce; then the poet returns to the banks, which allow easy approach to the water's edge. At this point there is a sudden and remarkable interruption to the even flow of the poem, in the following lines (48–52):

⁸ This was suggested by Aleander in the early sixteenth century. The work is not printed in Prete's edition.

⁹ These correspond to lines 283–348; 152–99; and 23–54 respectively.

¹⁰ See F. Cairns, "Venusta Sirmio: Catullus 31" in *Quality and Pleasure in Latin Poetry*, edd. T. Woodman and D. West (Cambridge 1974) 1–17.

¹¹ The poet alludes to Verg. *G.* 3. 144 and 2. 219.

i nunc et Phrygiis sola levia consere crustis
 tendens marmoreum laqueata per atria campum;
 ast ego despectis quae census opesque dederunt
 naturae mirabor opus, non cara nepotum
 laetaque iacturis ubi luxuriatur egestas.

The passage is not without difficulty;¹² a translation will indicate my interpretation. "Away with you; join up your polished pavements with their Phrygian veneers, and extend a marble plain through your panelled halls. But I, despising the gifts of wealth and riches, will marvel at the work of nature, not the world where the hard-won poverty of spendthrifts, happy in its losses, runs riot." In various respects, this is an extraordinary passage. To begin with, it disrupts the triple address, coming as it does in the last of three sentences beginning with *tu*. The vehemence of the interruption has misled editors into starting a new paragraph, but lines 53/4 return to the point, and a new episode begins in 55.¹³ The phrase *i nunc* is all the more striking here because there has been no hint of a listener to whom the words might be addressed, and it would be absurd to imagine one.¹⁴ This may happen in satire, where the influence of diatribe is still felt, but is surprising indeed in the epic-didactic style of this poem. Then in the middle of an apparently conventional contrast between luxury and simplicity there is the remarkable catachresis of *campus*, paralleled only in the work of Sidonius, an assiduous imitator.¹⁵ The use of *sola* in this way is only a little commoner. The positive part of this outburst lies in the three simple and straightforward words *naturae mirabor opus*. The phrase *naturae . . . opus* is used as in Pliny *NH* 6. 30 and 14. 80;¹⁶ *natura* is so used elsewhere in this poem and in *Ep.* 26. 17 (Prete) *nil mutum natura dedit*. Nature is obviously contrasted with luxury, but the contrast with the wilderness of the Hunsrück (so Pavlovskis 35) must be borne in mind; as often remarked, Ausonius does not like his nature too wild.¹⁷ He was no romantic. Nor was he a primitivist; *natura* is not implicitly contrasted with *cultus*, as in Quint. 9. 4. 3. According to Kenney (195), *cultus* is what the poem is all about; this could be supported by referring to line 6, where no *humani . . . vestigia cultus* are visible in the Hunsrück, and line 18, where the word is used, albeit rather awkwardly, of Bordeaux. As Kenney understands it, the landscape is commended by Ausonius as "the product not of nature but of art—or rather what art, human hands and minds, has made

¹² See Tränkle 157 f. Here I adopt Heinsius' *cara*.

¹³ As demonstrated by R. Mayer, *Agon* 2 (1968) 72.

¹⁴ Examples were gathered by E. B. Lease, *AJP* 19 (1898) 59–69.

¹⁵ *Sid. Ep.* 2. 2. 3 and 2. 10. 4 line 20.

¹⁶ It is not suggested that the phrase is taken from Pliny, although Ausonius knew his work; it was doubtless common.

¹⁷ R. Pichon, *Les Derniers Écrivains Profanes* (Paris 1906) 176; R. Browning in *The Cambridge History of Classical Literature* II, edd. E. J. Kenney and W. V. Clausen (Cambridge 1982) 704.

of nature. This landscape has been ordered, controlled, domesticated, civilized, made fit for man to live in; not merely to exist but to live the good life as it was understood by Ausonius . . ." To this, and to Roberts' reference to the "negative evaluation of the products of culture as opposed to nature . . ." (348) we will return.

That Ausonius fulfills his programme of describing "nature" as opposed to human luxury needs little demonstration. The jewels of line 72 occur within a simile; what the Moselle offers is pebbles wonderfully arranged. So does the mirror of 231, if indeed it is an item of luxury. The fish of 75–149 are often seen from a gastronomic viewpoint, but are not noticeably up-market; only one rivals the famous mullets of yesteryear. The villas will be discussed later; suffice it to say here that apart from their foundations, their positions and their height we hear only of the porticos of one of them, and that in a rhetorical question which serves as an *occulatio* or *praeteritio*.¹⁸ The presentation of nature, and of man within it, is more interesting. In the following analysis—which will not proceed section by section, easy though that would be in the light of the poem's clear structure—I distinguish four techniques, which may be summed up as ignoring humans; distancing humans; overwhelming (in the sense of dumbfounding and dwarfing) humans; and censuring humans.

There are numerous places in the poem where one would expect a direct reference, however brief, to human agency, where indeed Ausonius might have taken the opportunity to present a pen-picture or give information if he had seriously intended to portray the local inhabitants. But to a large extent humans are, as it were, written out of the script. They are present, and certain processes depend on them, but they are played down or eliminated. If this happened only occasionally, it might be dismissed as a trick of style; but it is frequent. In lines 39–44 Ausonius is describing how the river's flow is convenient for ships. Downstream, it flows quickly enough for oars to strike the water in quick succession: *ut celeres feriant vada concita remi*. The oars strike the water, the rowers are not mentioned. The river also seems to ebb like the sea, because of the vessels that pass upstream and as it were take the river with them; nowhere on the banks does the towrope slacken (41). The men (and perhaps animals) involved in towing are eliminated, with a single exception; sailors (*nautae*) have fixed the ropes to the ships' masts.¹⁹ Five lines below it is pointed out that the river is edged not with rushes and mud but with smooth hard sand: *sicca in primores pergunt vestigia lymphas*. Footsteps, not people. When a gasping fish is later compared to a bellows (267–69), in one of the most notable of a notable series of similes, the operator is only hinted at (in *fabriles*) and the

¹⁸ Cf. (Cicero) *ad Herenn.* 4. 37 and Martianus Capella 5. 523 for the terminology.

¹⁹ See E. M. Wightman, *Trier and the Treveri* (London 1970) Plate 16b (opposite p. 161); L. Casson, *JRS* 55 (1965) 36–39.

lack of a personal subject causes problems in the description.²⁰ The last example comes from a description of the villas that bedeck the stream. Ausonius is here developing a conceit of Statius (*Silv.* 1. 3. 30 f.) and entertains the possibility of conversation and physical contact across the river. Statius used impersonal *datur*, but Ausonius expresses the point in his characteristic way: *blanda salutiferas permiscunt litora voces* (295). Unlike Statius, he prefers to keep the inhabitants of his villas out of sight. The villas themselves are described in a series of unusual verbs, remarked by Gagliardi (77 f.); note also the abstract *speculatio* as subject in 326. The buildings were not unoccupied shells, but we know very little about their inhabitants—with the possible exception of the poet himself, who may have lived in the villa at Conz.²¹

Discussion of the villas can lead into my next category—the “distancing” of humans—of which conspicuous examples are found in part of the section on villas (287–317) and the section devoted to the traffic on the river (200–39). We would like to know something of the builders of these villas, forerunners of medieval castle-builders; but although they receive more attention than the inhabitants, we are none the wiser. Ausonius begins by saying that these edifices would not be despised by the mythical Daedalus, by Philo who designed the arsenal at Athens, or by Ictinus who left his mark on the Parthenon. Then he actually makes the claim that certain architects—probably the remaining four Greek architects from Varro's *Imagines*—actually lived here, and took their inspiration from here. The exaggeration is breathtaking, and in ancient terms highly complimentary to the architects and builders; but they are completely hidden. When Ausonius describes the river traffic, many have taken him to be describing a festival, but references to small boats and sailors who transfer their weight from oar to oar and look over the side suggest ordinary activity rather than elaborate manoeuvres. As he does elsewhere, Ausonius is seeking to elevate a workaday theme. This section is conspicuous for its similes, which take up exactly half of it in the transmitted text. The longer of the two (208–19) concerns us here. The view enjoyed by Bacchus as he walks on Mount Gaurus and on Vesuvius is compared to the view that a wayfarer, or worker—there is a lacuna in the text²²—sees from the slopes of the gorge of the Moselle. Bacchus might see Venus putting on a *naumachia* in Lake Avernus, a representation, perhaps, of Augustus' victories at Actium, Mylae or Naulochus. Apart from the allusion to Augustus—devoid of topical relevance—there is no mention here of humans. In the simile the ships are crewed by amoretti. All that we know of the real crews is that their *alacres . . . magistri* (204) jump about and their youthful crews “wander over the river's surface” (205).

²⁰ See Hosius on line 267.

²¹ Wightman (above, note 19) 167.

²² See Hosius and Pastorino (*nota critica*) ad loc.; the latter is surely correct.

The rest of the paragraph is devoted to the sailors, but they are *nautae* and no more. Indeed, the language is rather repetitious. These sailors are overwhelmed, in the sense that they are reduced to boggling at their reflections in the water when the sun is high. In the second simile they are compared to a young girl seeing a mirror for the first time. The point here is not simply her "playful delight" (Roberts, 347); she does not understand it (*ignorato*). Similarly nature surprises the young sailors. Since Ternes wrote his brief note on it, the phrase *ambiguus fruitur veri falsique figuris* has received much attention, and for reasons far from clear has been called the key to the poem by Fontaine (443). I suggest that Ausonius (who was fond of the Narcissus theme in epigrams) means simply that for his silly sailors the reflections really were "indeterminate," which is what the word means elsewhere.²³ Any doubt should be removed by consideration of the passage that precedes. Into his celebrated evocation of twilight (189–99) the poet placed a solitary sailor bobbing about in a dugout canoe. There is no need to make him a barbarian, as Marx did (381); but he is certainly out of place in his majestic surroundings. He is dwarfed by them, or at least so it seems to the beholder. He too is stupid; this is the meaning of *derisus* here (as in Varro, *Men.* 51 and Prud. *Per.* 10. 249), not "mocked" (Roberts). Perhaps the poet exploits Pliny's famous description of the Clitumnus (*Ep.* 8. 8. 4).

We come to what I call "censure." The first example has something in common with the stupidity theme already studied, but goes further. Until line 163—a third of the way through the poem²⁴—humans are inconspicuous, and, as has been shown, frequently ignored. Here they become for once obtrusive, more so indeed than the sailors who follow them, who at least know their place and respect the greater majesty and inscrutability of nature. The *plebes* and *coloni* run about on the slopes in pursuit of their tasks "competing with stupid shouts"; a wayfarer below mocks them with cat-calls. The resultant echo is exquisitely reproduced in the verse: *cultoribus* in 167 recalls *clamoribus* two lines earlier, and the pause or bucolic diaeresis after both words intensifies the effect. Noise is very rare in the poem; there is a whip in 257 (a simile) and grating saws (on the Ruwer) in 363, but little else apart from the gentle murmur of the quiet river. Here the noise is emphasised by a deliberate echo of pastoral in line 168: *et rupes et silva tremens et concavus amnis*. *Rupes* is used elsewhere in the poem, but not the unexpected *silva*, because the vegetation consists of vines; the line, and the section, is rounded off by a purposeful adaptation of the conventional epithet *cavus*. By stylising the unwelcome sound in this way the poet draws attention to its disruptiveness.

²³ Cf. *Mos.* 129, *Bissula* 27 (Prete), Manilius 4. 795.

²⁴ The length of the poem, allowing for lacunae, was at least 485 lines, but surely less than 500. In any case the exact mathematics are not important.

In the second example the censure is very clear. The peace of the river, not even broken by the sheat-fish, is invaded by man, indeed a horde of men, with hostile intent. After this opening outburst (241–42), built out of various phrases of Statius, and a description of fishing methods, the focus changes. A single fish takes the bait and is cruelly whisked out of the water and left to expire in agony on the dry rock. In an amusing but significant sequel, a fish manages to propel itself back into the stream, and the silly angler jumps in after it. Though compared to Glaucus of Anthedon, he suffers not drowning or metamorphosis but only ignominy, as he, the plunderer, is left bobbing among his captives. The words *captivas* and *praedo* underline the reversal of the situation, but *praedo* does not imply *praeda*, as declared by Roberts (346). Ausonius' fish are too well-mannered and peace-loving. It is the lad's stupidity and immaturity that are emphasised (*impos damni* and *inconsultus* in 274; *stolido* in 275), though in the last lines (which *pace* Roberts refer back to him after the end of the Glaucus simile), he is described in language which recalls the vehement beginning of this section. He has his just deserts; not revenge (Roberts speaks of *lex talionis*), but reversal; and not "reversal of the unsatisfactory situation—the death of the fish—described in the preceding verses," because the fish did not die. Better perhaps poetic justice.

The passage just discussed is strikingly similar to an episode in 341 ff., which begins with *vidi ego*. Here the individual concerned is not put in a humiliating or invidious light, but is interesting for quite different reasons. Ausonius claims to have seen people dive straight out of the *balnea* of one of the lower villas into the river, disdaining the *frigidarium* in favour of the flowing water (*vivis . . . aquis*) of the cool stream. This is not stupidity; they enjoy it and it does them no harm whatever. This passage follows the impressionistic description of seven imposing villas. For Roberts its function is to "counteract the suggestion of excessive self-aggrandizement present hitherto by proposing a more positive model of the relationship between nature and human civilisation." The divers symbolise "an ideal equilibrium." In keeping with his general thesis that the central theme of the poem is the violation of boundaries, Roberts argues that the villas violate a vertical boundary, appealing to the military imagery of 323–26, which his translation rather exaggerates.²⁵ They do indeed jut out from the bank and rise toweringly into the sky, but do little more, as the poet makes clear, than take advantage of natural positions (*natura sublimis* in 321). The view they command is no more than what could be enjoyed by an energetic walker. There is much to commend Roberts' general thesis, at least in a weaker form, but I suggest that the point is that the villas are seen as equalling nature, as Ausonius implies in 328 *compensat celsi bona naturalia montis*. Man can only equal nature, at best. Other passages are relevant:

²⁵ So *captum* is "requisitioned"; *sinu*, which might tone down the metaphor, is omitted. On the other hand there is a military metaphor in *speculatio* (326).

the use of *campus* in 49, certainly, and perhaps the reference to the theatre in 156, which might recall Pliny's *amphitheatrum . . . quale sola rerum natura possit effingere* (Ep. 5. 6. 7). The jewels of 72 are perhaps not relevant, except in so far as they recall a Cynic motif; what Ausonius says is that "they assume the likeness of necklaces which imitate our own artificial creations" (*adsimulant nostros imitata monilia cultus*).²⁶ Perhaps the reference to *naturae . . . color* in 110 implies a contrast with mosaic, in which fish were often represented.

As has been seen, Kenney takes a very different view of *cultus*. He does not discuss the significance of the bathers but like Pavlovskis treats the passage about the baths as the climax of the descriptive part of the poem, and gives much weight to the concluding lines: *tantus cultorque nitorque allicit et nullum parit oblectatio luxum* (347–48). The presupposition that the section is a climax may be disputed, and likewise the significance of its closing sentence. Ausonius certainly has his own purposes when he lifts something from Statius; but the words just quoted could equally well be taken as a rather off-hand qualification in case there is any question about the reference to Baiae, which, unlike the reference to the Bosphorus with which the section began, might seem morally ambivalent. I say "off-hand" because of the awkwardness of *tantus . . . et nullum . . .*²⁷ and the almost conversational *quod si* which stands out here in such a refined style. It is far from certain that what is implied in the *laus villarum* should be allowed to colour the entire description of the river, though admittedly the villas are the leading element of the panorama at Neumagen. Rather it must be seen in the light of what is said or implied elsewhere about human hands and minds. They are not always so outstanding, and here they can only complement nature. The idea of controlling or dominating it (Stutzinger, with parallels from other descriptions of villas [111–12]) is not prominent in the poem as a whole.

The conclusion of the *Moselle* begins at 349; or at least it is there that the poet starts thinking of a conclusion (*qui tandem finis . . . ?*). According to Roberts' analysis the final third of the poem is devoted to the people of the Moselle and its fellow rivers, but it is not descriptive in the same way as what has preceded. A close analysis of the finale will bring this out, as well as showing important new variations of the theme under examination. After enumerating and briefly describing its eager tributaries, Ausonius declares that the Moselle would outshine even the Simois and Tiber if it had a worthy poet. He then turns, after a quick characterisation of the

²⁶ In this passage, where the thought is not "ganz einwandfrei" (Hosius), it would be tempting to read Helm's *assimulat* and translate "it" (the tide) "copies our own artificial creations, which are imitative jewellery," but the intransitive use of *imitata* would be difficult. It is not clear from the transmitted text that human luxury is here compared unfavourably with natural beauty, as Roberts maintains (348).

²⁷ Mommsen suggested *tantum*.

inhabitants of the area, to thoughts of the poem in which he will one day do justice to them all. He mentions farmers, lawyers, orators, and various magistrates, but the important point is that this passage is a *praeteritio* or indeed *recusatio* (cf. *Ep.* 10. 11 ff. Prete). *Laus virorum* must be deferred so that he can "consecrate" the Moselle to the Rhine. The short section that follows, poetically ambitious and of central importance, has sometimes been misunderstood. It is obviously topical, recalling Valentinian's victory at Solicinium and the associated triumph in Trier, which gives new power to the Moselle. But at the same time the standpoint is pre-historical, or, if the term is not absurd, pre-geological: the poet (here if anywhere a *vates* in the Augustan sense) urges the Rhine to make room for the Moselle (as indeed it does, becoming wider at Koblenz), and predicts that the river will be called *bicornis* and form a true frontier (predictions fulfilled in Vergil and Augustus respectively). The combination of viewpoints is not altogether successful; the aetiology cannot be related so neatly to a point in past time as it is in the *Aeneid*. The significance of this section for our purpose is that man and nature are combined; the union of the two rivers is helped by, and also symbolises, the union of the *Augusti*. There is then a further section about the poet—a formal *sphragis*—and his poetic ambition to describe the towns, buildings and *coloni*; the final section foretells the glory that will come to the Moselle as a result of the present poem. In all this there is a striking concentration on rivers. The poet forecasts that the Moselle's glory will be known and respected by all the rivers of Gaul; man's accolade, dismissed in a single line, will be instrumental in this, but is otherwise unimportant. It is true that Ausonius says more about humans in the finale than anywhere else, but the context of these statements is important. With the aforementioned exceptions of the *Augusti* man is mentioned in sections which are broken off, as if in irrelevant digressions (389 f., 414 f.). Rivers dominate the first, last and central parts of this carefully woven finale.

It is time to look for an explanation of the poet's distinctive stance. He minimises the role of humans not only in the landscape, but also in the reception of his poem. He makes some look silly and puts others in an invidious light. The rhetorical explanation, as we have seen, can be ruled out; this is not what the likes of Hermogenes or Menander envisaged. An explanation in terms of the literary tradition or his literary sources seems no less difficult. The Moseltal is not presented as a *locus amoenus*, a pleasure for exclusive enjoyment of one person or a few—compare the last line of Tiberianus' *amnis ibat*²⁸ which runs *ales amnis aura lucus flos et umbra iuverat*, of which three items at most can be found in Ausonius' poem. Nor does the picture, neat as it often is, anticipate the Gardens of Eden portrayed

²⁸ *Anthologia Latina* (Riese) 809. See also E. R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (Eng. trans., Princeton 1953) 195–200; G. Schönbeck, *Der locus amoenus von Homer bis Horaz* (Heidelberg 1962).

by early Christian poets, or the medieval *hortus conclusus*. Recent attempts to see pattern and purpose in Ausonius' manifold evocations of classical authors have shed much light on the poem—Görler has emphasised Vergil, Kenney Statius, and Fontaine and Martin in rather different ways a variety of classical authors—but their suggestions do not help here. A religious explanation would be no more satisfactory. The poem is by no means devoid of religious reference, but much of it seems incidental or insignificant and less serious in tone than *Ordo* 157–60 (about Bordeaux). There is no deeper significance to the invocation of the Naiad in 82 or the description of the games of Satyrs, Pans and Oreads in 169 ff.; the first episode is serious enough, but the latter, as Professor Walsh has put it, is a sort of playful *entr'acte*. There is a numinous hint in *reverentia* in line 188, but until the very end the Moselle is not seen as a river-god or as the home of one. Notwithstanding these references, a Christian viewpoint would not be inconceivable; there is a hint of the attitude, germinally present in Christianity from the beginning, that “every prospect pleases, and only man is vile”²⁹—Ausonius might in fact say “stupid”—but the poet gives no sign of such motivation.

Political explanations have enjoyed much favour among critics of the *Moselle*, whether in a drastic form as in Mar., or in the much reduced form now presented by Martin. In recent times the dominant theory has been that of Ternes, which is relevant here because if the poem is “idyllic” in his sense and not “real” it would be easier to appreciate Ausonius' point of view. After a study of the poem's topographical references and a thematic analysis of the remainder Ternes concluded that most of the sections are couched in very general terms as part of his externally imposed purpose to draw a veil over the sombre realities of life in this area. Ternes salvages the poet's credit by hurriedly assembling evidence of half-heartedness; this section, along with the topography, need not be pursued here. His picture of an area in manifest decay has been very influential, especially on Fontaine, who pointed to the invasion of 352 when the barbarians are said to have devastated a wide swathe of Roman territory, perhaps as far as Trier.³⁰ But was the Moseltal really as run down as Ternes suggests? The invasions of 276 were indeed severe; Ternes has evidence to show that half the villas of the area show signs of conflagration. This impressive statistic in fact relates to a large area, extending as far as Metz and Arlon. But in order to establish his point one would need to show substantial decay precisely in the area between Neumagen and Conz; Ausonius himself virtually admits the devastation of the Hunsrück. If in this small area, close to the capital, the fortifications were ruinous, the slopes vineless, the villas uninhabited, Ternes' premiss would be established. An examination of the

²⁹ From the hymn of F. Heber, a missionary hymn that referred to the unconverted natives of Ceylon or Java, now often taken out of context.

³⁰ Julian, *ad Athen.* 278D–79B; one suspects exaggeration.

detailed evidence now provided by Wightman and Heinen does not establish it, though there is reason to doubt whether all the fourth-century villas on the modern archaeologist's map were inhabited at this date.³¹ The fact that Trier and the Treveri had seen better days is not relevant; what matters is that they were not in a state of sombre decay. The "idyll" then, is not a literary cover-up; and the generality of the tableaux is at least in part the product of Ternes' own summaries.

Two tentative suggestions may be made; two elements deserve more consideration than they generally receive. The first is pictorial art. We know that Ausonius was greatly impressed by at least one picture in Trier, the wall-painting that he describes in his poem on Cupid.³² The famous "catalogue" of fish, for so long regarded without warrant as a parody of the Homeric catalogue of ships,³³ is surely, as John suggested, based on "fish scatters" in mosaic. Those in the example from Pompeii, the best known of many, are, like most of Ausonius' fish, distinctive and easily identified. Such representations are often unrelated to human beings. Amoretti in boats (cf. 212) are another frequent theme. Ternes has pointed out in his commentary that the scene with young girl, nurse, and mirror in 230-37 resembles one presented in a relief discovered locally. Other things could have been suggested by visual art: the panorama with workers associated with Studius³⁴; the villas without inhabitants (as in the silver dish from Kaiseraugst and various mosaics); perhaps even the *naumachiae*, if triumphal art went that far. Our knowledge of possible themes is of course limited, and our idea of Ausonius' tastes even more so, but artistic representations seem to have played an important role, and some may have suggested scenes or motifs in the *Moselle* or lent themselves to the poet's purposes.

The second element is the personal preferences of the poet. It is of course no simple matter to determine Ausonius' real attitudes, especially since descriptions of nature in his other poems are very rare and short. But a dislike for the madding crowd and a genuine delight in the countryside do seem to emerge from some of his letters (*Epp.* 4. 17 ff. and 23. 90 ff. Prete). Stutzinger notes that "Landleben" as an "aristokratische Lebensform" is very different from the everyday life of those who depended on the land. Hence perhaps social distaste and an attempt by the poet to distance himself from the common population. One can perhaps go further. It has generally been thought that personal observation plays a small role in the *Moselle*. Critics often take their cue from the letter of Symmachus (*Ep.*

³¹ Wightman (above, note 19) 165 ff.; H. Heinen, *Trier und das Trevererland in Römischer Zeit* (Trier 1985) 303 ff.

³² But not the Kormmarkt mosaic, which is much more complex than *Epigram* 66 Prete.

³³ This was suggested by W.-H. Friedrich in *Gnomon* 9 (1933) 617.

³⁴ See R. Ling, "Studius and the Beginnings of Roman Landscape Painting," *JRS* 67 (1977) 1-16.

l. 14) where he asks, in effect, "where did you find all those fish which I never observed on the table?" This has been taken to imply that Ausonius, immersed in his books as usual, is grossly overdoing things; but the answer may in fact lie in his personal observation. Ausonius had been in the region for much longer than his friend, and he had spent his earlier life near a large, unspoilt river. One passage of the poem seems to provide evidence of such naturalistic observation: the description of the barbel revelling in the turbulence around the bridge at Conz (91-94). It seems that Ausonius lived there for at least part of one summer, the summer of 371.³⁵ Most of his other descriptions can be shown to be accurate and precise, and the fact that other fish are often described in borrowed language does not rule out autopsy. The passage describing the fish is preceded by a much admired passage about the transparency of the river; this, like the description of the evening shadows in 189-99, can hardly have been attempted in art, but its exquisite detail may be the direct outcome of personal observation. It is noticeable that Ausonius refers to himself much more frequently in the first third of the poem than in the second, which includes only *mihi* (187), *ego* . . . *credam* (170 f.), which describes something he could not have believed, and *vidi ego (met)* (270, 341) which introduces episodes that he is generally thought to be inventing. An explanation has already been suggested for the attitude to humans mentioned in this second part.

In the final part, as has been seen, man is still kept at arm's length, even Ausonius' high-ranking colleagues and those whom we would call the professional classes. A twofold purpose may be seen in the technique of *recusatio* by which he does this. Ausonius is excusing himself for following his personal aesthetic preference, but also taking the opportunity to obviate offence by postponing the day when he has to choose whom to describe and how to do it. The delicacy of touch in 409 ff., where he seems to refer ambivalently to Petronius Probus,³⁶ may betray just such a problem. It is also possible that he felt similar embarrassment towards Symmachus, who did not see a copy until the poem had already circulated widely (*Ep.* 1. 14). The ruling house could not be so treated; but to their credit they chose not to perform like the censors postulated by Marx but to give a free hand to a remarkable writer, who in the same scholar's rather derogatory words was perhaps after all a "sentimentale Freund der Dichtkunst und der ländlichen Natur."

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³⁵ *Codex Theodosianus* 9. 3. 5, 11. 1. 17.

³⁶ See R. P. H. Green, *Respublica Litterarum* 1 (1978) 89-94.

