DEATH, THE MAIDEN, AND THE MIRROR: AUSONIUS'S WATER WORLD[1]

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Despite his eminence among his literary peers, Ausonius has never drawn much attention from modern critics. Many who have commented on the *Mosella,* his most renowned poem, composed around A.D. 375,[2] either have judged it a pale pastiche or have been satisfied to mine its rich store of textual allusions to classical Latin literature; few have gone so far as to interpret it as an autonomous work of art.[3] Despite its unusual subject matter and its resistance to easy classification, the poem is steeped in Latin literature and conveys a point of view that, though expressed in unexampled form, is consistent with mainstream Roman attitudes. Its nonlinear structure places it squarely in the traditions of late antiquity, yet it consciously seeks to emulate the masters of earlier centuries in its complex intertextuality and ambitious layering of meaning.

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1 I am very grateful to Kathleen Coleman, who read and corrected two versions of this manuscript, and to two anonymous readers, who offered many valuable comments on the argument and points of fact. To the extent that this article is philologically and intellectually sound, I have them to thank. To the extent that it is not, I have only myself to blame. The edition used here is Green 1991; translations are my own, except where otherwise indicated.

2 On the date of composition, see Drinkwater 1999, Sivan 1990. The poem is unique in form; see Green 1989. Its subject matter, the praise of a river, does not appear in the classical canon, but reappears in the fragmentary poem entitled *Amnis* by Tiberian. See Fuoco 1993.337–38.

3 Politico-military context of the poem: Martin 1985, Ternes 1970, Marx 1931. Structure: Korzeniewski 1963, Walther 1943, Deubner 1934, Marx 1931. Intertextuality or analysis of the poem's language: Sosin 1999, Fuoco 1993, Kenney 1984, Görler 1969, Posani 1962, Principato 1961. A few have ventured substantive interpretations: Green 1989, Newlands 1988, Roberts 1984.

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Michael Roberts was perhaps the first scholar to observe a unifying theme in Ausonius's strange and sometimes awkward poem. This was "the relationship between super- and subaqueous realms," an opposition with strong metaphorical potential. Roberts sees the poem as an indictment of the infringement of boundaries: creatures must stick to their own realm and avoid the temptation to exploit the other. He astutely notes that while the poem has no "classical" unity, it nevertheless maintains the theme of trespass and violation throughout its substantial length. In the first 348 lines, the boundaries are natural, separating marine and terrestrial creatures; while the final 135 lines, consisting mainly of a panegyric to the river, carry the theme into the geopolitical dimension. To Roberts' mind, the river is a metaphor for the lines of decency: just as its surface divides terrestrial beings from the subaqueous realm, just as its banks constitute a political boundary between peoples, the Moselle should serve as a brake to Roman aggression.

Roberts is surely right to recognize that the penetration of species into alien territories constitutes a nearly obsessive refrain in the *Mosella.* But where he sees disapproval of such infringement, I see the opposite, particularly in the well-known section in which the Moselle's fish are promenaded in gastronomic review. Even the aggressive language Ausonius projects upon the river's villa landscape (318–48: *vindicat, usurpat, minans, irrumpit*) is an appeal to the sheer power of the human will to improve nature by curbing it and an expression of the pride that a good Roman has in any useful conquest. For example, one villa, which "looming with lofty roof invades the sky" ("sublimi . . . minans irrumpit in aethera tecto"), is compared in the next line to the Pharos lighthouse in Alexandria ("ostentans altam, Pharos ut Memphitica, turrim," 329–30). A towering beacon in the night, one of the Seven Wonders, and rife with salvific connotations, the Pharos denotes the same imperial glory as these country seats of the provincial elite.

Ausonius is too much the Roman to oppose political or moral hegemony. I would submit that the theme at hand is more psychological and personal than overtly moral, more concerned with the crossing of thresholds in one's inner life than with the long reach of empire. The poem intentionally mimics its principal subject, the waters of the Moselle River. For while the forms reflected on its surface reveal one thing, the intertext—glinting from the depths—often pleads a rather different case, inviting the attentive reader to reconcile the two modes of signification. In Ausonius's imagery, forms and colors below and above the water mingle into rich arabesques of

allusion on the river's surface, which is partly reflective and partly transparent. Meanings, too, wavering between declaration and innuendo, dance on the poem's surface, confounding easy resolution.

This article will examine Ausonius's recurrent use of the visual and aural properties of the river's water and its surrounding countryside as metaphors for illusion and understanding. It will argue that the *Mosella* advances two principal ideas. First, truth and illusion correspond respectively to the river's crystalline depths and its surface reflections. The river's surface appeal embodies the false knowledge of the unenlightened, who, like the prisoners in Plato's cave, mistake dancing shadows on the wall for unmediated reality; but clarity of vision through the watery medium is accessible to those who seek it. Second, the poem can be taken to embody its theme: it *is* the Moselle River, to the extent that it, too, offers two alternate epistemologies. Its surface brilliance—acknowledged by no less a critic than the poet's friend and correspondent Symmachus (*Ep.* 1.14)—overlies a watery world of latent knowledge. The extent to which the poem reveals its subtext, to which the latent becomes patent, depends entirely on the reader.

In its dualism, Ausonius's shimmering river resurrects an ancient topos of the mirror as both a source of easy deception and a receptacle of occult knowledge according to the skill and wisdom of the person who beholds it (Macchioro 1930, Delatte 1932). Reward and risk both awaited the priests and mediums who consulted mirrors and bowls of liquid for divination. One risk was the mirror's proximity to the dead, who, according to ancient Greek and Italiote traditions, communed with the living through reflections; in this sense they were not unlike Homer's shades of the dead, who appeared to Odysseus and his men in a pool of sacrificial blood (Cassimatis 1998). In the *Mosella,* I will ultimately contend, reflections and refractions come to be not mere facsimiles of events, but ghostly imprints of death upon the world of the living. Ausonius does not beat us over the head with these messages; they emerge only with careful and informed contemplation of the text. Here I confine my attention to the episodic spectacles and landscape tableaux that contain the richest possibilities for multivalence.

The poem begins with an exordium in which the poet recounts, in the first person, the westward journey that took him from Bingen overland to Neumagen on the Moselle (1–22). Following a hymn of praise to the river (23–47), Ausonius lays claim to the virtues of simplicity and restraint (45–54):

> tu neque limigenis ripam praetexeris ulvis
> nec piger immundo perfundis litora caeno;
> sicca in primores pergunt vestigia lymphas.
> 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.
> hic solidae sternunt umentia litora harenae,
> nec retinent memores vestigia pressa figuras.
>
> [To the river:] . . . Your banks are not fringed with mud-born sedge, and you do not lazily flood the shore with filthy mire; footprints stay dry to the water's edge. [To anyone who objects to this humble approach:] Go now, strew your polished floors with Phrygian veneers: run a plain of marble through your coffered halls. But I despise what reputation and money have conferred. I shall marvel at nature's work, not at a life where the spendthrift's costly poverty, rejoicing in waste, luxuriates. Here hard sands pave the watery banks; the footprint leaves no forms to stir the memory.

Memory and fame are conceived as a human imprint in the landscape. The river and its hilly banks, the poet promises, will be his only architecture: fine buildings are clad in the mirror-polished surfaces of colored stone, but the simple poet intent upon his task will tread the dull opacity of hard river sand, leaving no footprints for posterity to remember him by. One is easily seduced by Ausonius's rhetorical rejection of architectural splendor in favor of the simplicity of nature and his own obscure, unremarked place in it (e.g., Newlands 1988). His modesty may be no more authentic than the shimmering reflections he soon will celebrate; like Cicero affecting to despise "marble pavements and coffered ceilings" ("pavimenta marmorea et laqueata tecta"),[4] or even Vergil proclaiming his poetry a "humble pastime"

4 ". . . magnificasque villas et pavimenta marmorea et laqueata tecta contemno. ductus vero aquarum, quos isti nilos et euripos vocant, quis non, cum haec videat, irriserit?" *Leg.* 2.1.2. See also 2.2.93 and Sen. *Ep.* 90.9, 25; 114.9; *NatQ* 1 praef. 8.

(*ignobile otium*) in *Eclogue* 1, the author is pleading obscurity to achieve its opposite. This very poem, intended and destined for fame, will project its own memorability upon a mirrored floor of sorts, the shimmering Moselle itself. But the poem's greatest worth, he suggests, lies not in the easy aestheticism of surface appearances but in the *opus naturae,* all that does *not* shimmer and reflect. This literary aspiration must be taken seriously.

Having professed his intent, Ausonius immediately spirits away any visual obstructions from the river's surface and lays bare the hidden depths, concentrating first on its inanimate charms (55–74).

> spectaris vitreo per levia terga profundo,
> secreti nihil amnis habens; utque almus aperto
> panditur intuitu liquidis obtutibus aer
> nec placidi prohibent oculos per inania venti,
> sic demersa procul durante per intima visu
> cernimus arcanique patet penetrale profundi,
> cum vada lene meant liquidarum et lapsus aquarum
> prodit caerulea dispersas luce figuras,
> qua[5] sulcata levi crispatur harena meatu,
> inclinata tremunt viridi qua gramina fundo;
> usque sub ingenuis agitatae fontibus herbae
> vibrantes patiuntur aquas lucetque latetque
> calculus et viridem distinguit glarea muscum.
> nota Caledoniis talis pictura Britannis,
> cum virides algas et rubra corallia nudat
> aestus et albentes, concharum germina, bacas,
> delicias hominum, locupletibus atque sub undis
> assimulant nostros imitata monilia cultus;
> haud aliter placidae subter vada laeta Mosellae
> detegit admixtos non concolor herba lapillos.
>
> Through a glossy back you are watched in your glassy depths; no part of the river is hidden. And just as the nourishing air in its transparency admits a direct view, and gentle breezes clear the eye's path through the void, so

5 63−64: *qua . . . qua* Green; *quod . . . quod* codd. Green does not emend as such in the text, but makes this suggestion in his commentary (1991.471).

> with enduring gaze through the innermost deep we descry things submerged far below; and the inner sanctum of the mysterious deep is thrown open as the lapping waves gently pass and the gliding waters disclose forms scattered with azure light where the furrowed sand is rippled by their gentle passage, where the bowed grasses tremble on the green river bottom. Continuously in the limpid current, quivering grasses acquiesce to the pulsing waters; each pebble flashes, then vanishes, and the gravel punctuates the verdant moss. Such a picture is known to Caledonians and Britons, when the tide lays bare green algae, ruddy corals—and seashell-seeds, white pearls: human delights all. Under the wealthy swell, counterfeit necklaces imitate our own adornments. No differently does the contrasting grass under the happy depths of placid Moselle uncover mingled pebbles.

Ausonius spurns the opulence of man-made surfaces in favor of another kind of rich abundance, artificially enhanced through the barrier of water separating it from the viewer. Here the imagery is so vivid that the reader may scarcely heed the words that give it form. Ausonius's language, which extols the river's charms with an almost religious intensity (Fuoco 1993.336–39), carries a strong undercurrent of sensuality. The diction of this passage, largely familiar from erotic verse and Ovid's many forays into oblique sexual suggestion, evokes the rhythms of desire and fulfillment.[6]

Delectable secrets (*secreti, intima, arcani penetrale profundi*) are brought to light before the reader's eyes (*aperto panditur intuitu, nec prohibent oculos, patet, prodit, nudat, detegit*). More specifically, the subaqueous domain is a ripe and ready female, a bejeweled thing who welcomes her imminent infringement. Her advantages are "human delights," *deliciae hominum,* a phrase intentionally evoking the apostrophe of Juvenal's infamous sixth satire on insatiable women—and introducing a slight

6 Structurally and thematically, this passage does not borrow heavily from classical Latin literature; see Green 1991.471. However, "albentes, concharum germina, bacas" is a Vergilian construction; see Solodow 1986. Ausonius uses it often, as in lines 177 and 227. *Haud aliter* is a standard introduction for a simile. I am grateful to Kathleen Coleman for these observations.

crosscurrent of danger.[7] Her *demersa intima* ("submerged secrets") invite the scrutiny of a *durans visus* ("enduring gaze"). She reclines in her watery diorama undressed down to her *concharum germina* ("seashell-seeds," i.e., pearls) and *sulcata harena* ("furrowed sand"). Such language exudes both sexuality and fertility: *sulca* referencing either a plowed furrow or (more obliquely) a vulva, an image strengthened by the pearl-implanted seashell. The "quivering grasses" receive the "pulsing waters" by way of the conventional verb for sexual compliance (*pati*). *Aestus,* nominally the ebb and flow of the tide, is standard poetic language for erotic arousal. It is this impulse that lays bare the algae, the coral, the pearls of Britain;[8] and therein runs the connotative undertow of this passage. Ausonius's male fantasy invites the reader to look through the surface of his poem to embrace its comely subtext below: "Under the wealthy swell, counterfeit necklaces imitate our own adornments." Upon the introduction of the simile of British shores, the reader is no longer compelled to enjoy from afar; the *aestus* of his desire, like the receding tide, offers direct acquaintance with the object. The atmospheric barrier of water is temporarily at bay. The "counterfeit necklaces" beneath the "wealthy swell," accoutrements of *noster cultus,* call to mind a nobler *cultus*: not simply personal adornment, but education, the means by which we grow intellectually and learn to know ourselves and the world.[9] The *aestus,* then, might be interpreted as the desire for such *cultus*; by consorting with the ravishing water-woman, the careful and informed reader becomes the master of meanings.[10] The language of abundance and germination applies just as well to the mind as to the body. From here onward, one is on alert for the poetic undertow just below the words.

The benefits of transgressing the water's surface continue in the

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7 Juv. 6.47: *delicias hominis;* cited in Green 1991.472 without comment. This passage perfectly fits Ausonius's pattern of Juvenalian allusion; see Sosin 1999.

8 British pearls had been famous since the time of Julius Caesar, who displayed a corselet made of them in the Forum Iulium (Pliny *H.N.* 9.116).

9 Kenney 1984.195 identifies *cultus,* in the sense of civilization, domestication, or cultivation (as opposed to *luxus)*, as the core concept of the poem. Contra, see Green 1989.

10 For another example: although there is no overtly specular imagery here, the passage begins with echoes of Lucretius's inquiry into the nature of mirrors, which fling open the doors of vision to allow "a direct view through" to the outside ("ianua cum per se transpectum praebet apertum, / multa facitque foris ex aedibus ut videantur," Lucr. 4.272–73). The waters of the Moselle, and their British equivalent, are rather more interior than Lucretius's specular world, but nevertheless reveal their pied beauty to everyone across the surface threshold.

following passage (75–149). But now the imagery swings between the visual and the gastronomic. Perhaps inspired by the ubiquitous mosaics of aquatic creatures decorating homes and villas around the Roman world, as well as an extensive ancient literature on ichthyology,[11] Ausonius praises the fish of the Moselle—both for their beauty and their flavor—as if they were passing before him in a military review.[12]

Though it will not detain us here, this well-known passage may be seen as a pendent and preface to the later description of fishing, but also as a natural sequel to the preceding passage. It is the first in a series of spectacle entertainments (to be followed by two theatrical scenes and a *naumachia* episode), and it is the second phase of a progressive animation of the river that is really quite methodical, even painterly, in its approach. Having begun with a "background" enumerating the inanimate beauties of the deep (albeit a charged one), Ausonius has proceeded to paint in its animal denizens; now he will people the topside of his watery idyll with humans. At each stage of progression a new kind of complexity will emerge, culminating in the two most "transgressive" passages, a frenzy of demigods at play and the fishing scene. But first, to the humans (152–56, 161–68):

> inducant aliam spectacula vitea pompam,
> sollicitentque vagos Baccheia munera visus,
> qua sublimis apex longo super ardua tractu
> et rupes et aprica iugi flexusque sinusque
> vitibus assurgunt naturalique theatro.
> . . .
> summis quippe iugis tendentis in ultima clivi
> conseritur viridi fluvialis margo Lyaeo.
> laeta operum plebes festinantesque coloni
> vertice nunc summo properant, nunc deiuge dorso,
> certantes stolidis clamoribus. inde viator
> riparum subiecta terens, hinc navita labens,
> probra canunt seris cultoribus; astrepit ollis
> et rupes et silva tremens et concavus amnis.

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11 Green 1989.314, Green 1991.473 and bibliography. He notes that none of these sources, except perhaps Apuleius, seems to have had a direct influence on Ausonius's ekphrasis.

12 The vocabulary of triumph occasionally crops up here, most notably in the term *ferculum,* a litter on which the spoils of victory are carried during the procession. Here it refers facetiously to the plate on which a fish will be served.

> Let vine-clad spectacles introduce another procession, and let Bacchic entertainments startle the wandering gaze where the highest peak rises steeply above the limitless prospect, where crags and sunny ridges, swells and hollows rise up with the vines like a natural theater . . . Indeed, to the upper ridges of the high-reaching slope, the river's edge is sown with Lyaean green. Delighting in the work, peasants and hurrying farmers scramble, some on the highest peak, some on its sloping back, quarreling and jabbering foolishly. The traveler, treading the shoreline on one side, the sailor gliding along on the other, hurl insults at the dawdling farmers; the crags, the quivering greenery, the sunken river answer with applause.

The literary trope of a natural theater was well established in the Roman tradition before Ausonius,[13] but nowhere else is it so elaborately realized (Fuoco 1993.339–52). The river is the stage; the roads or towpaths along its bank, the orchestra. The hillsides evoke both the *cavea,* where the audience sits, and—with their "swells and hollows" (*flexusque sinusque*)—the undulating Roman *scaenae frons,* which typically was punctuated by three large recesses for the entrances divided by projecting tiers of columns. It faced the *cavea* and served not only as a monumental backdrop for the stage but as an acoustic panel to deflect sound toward the audience. The episode begins with a *pompa,* this time not a military parade but a kind of Dionysiac procession to honor the god of the vine and the theater. The entertainment is billed as a satyr play ("Bacchic entertainments"). Rustic laborers, "delighting in the work" (*laeta operum*)[14]—both their own toils and the *opera* being performed—bustle and tussle in the "*cavea*." Boatmen and wayfarers below berate latecomers in the audience, and applause reverberates about the countryside.

It is only to be expected that the poet would pair the conventional image of the natural theater with the topos that proclaims all the world's a

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13 Verg. *Aen.* 7.562, Sen. *Troad.* 1123–25; see also Amm. 27.4.5. Pliny compares the valley in which his Tuscan villa lies to an amphitheater (*Ep.* 5.6.7). The Tiber River running through the middle would seem to correspond to the arena, much as the Moselle is Ausonius's stage.

14 The term also recalls the *naturae opus* of line 51, the river's natural setting itself. Newlands 1988 sees a dialectic between the *opera* of man and of nature, with nature winning out.

stage. Yet the stage itself is the river's liquid surface, the venue of the *opera* in which the country folk delight. The expression *laeta operum* within this natural theater also evokes the words *naturae mirabor opus* in the introduction, thrusting the poet himself in among the rustic throng. The river, the source of performance, has a magnetic attraction for everyone in the vicinity; they are drawn to it as if to their own images in a mirror. Indeed, where there is an echo—the echo of applause, no less—is a Narcissus far to seek? This crowd, *laeta operum plebes,* prefigures the young girl described below in lines 230–39, who will be deceived by her own mirror image into thinking she sees a twin sister: "The happy girl delights in the unfamiliar game" ("laeta ignorato fruitur virguncula ludo," 233). These *opera* are not unlike the joke (*ludus*) that the image in the mirror plays upon the unsuspecting girl. Initially, the roles of the participants in this "natural theater" seem more or less intelligible—until one realizes that neither actors nor audience are ever identified. Shouts, insults, applause glance off the hills and river as latecomers arrive. Who is really performer, and who the audience in this act? Who is the subject of attention, and who the object? Who absorbs the insults, and who garners the plaudits? Gazes are cast about, but by whom?

Viewed below the surface, Ausonius's idle country spectacle reveals a chaotic, but developing, emergence of the performative self and its standing in the presence of others. There is no clear division between performers and audience. The gazes do not seem to be permanently anchored either to a subject or to an object; they are *vagi visus,* of uncertain origin and agency, a far cry from the reader's *durans visus* into the transparent depths of the river described roughly one hundred lines earlier. Viewer and viewed are in flux, as if shuttling back and forth across an imaginary scrim (or scrimmage: such is their competitive haste to participate). We are even treated, in Ausonius's exquisitely oblique way, to vicissitudes of performative *style*. The treading and gliding, respectively, of those on the riverbanks and on the water (*terere, labi*) bring to mind the two surfaces on which the poet may choose to walk: the reflective marbles of fame and the hard sands of oblivion. Is the riverside traveler Ausonius himself, who claims to favor rude versifications on *solidae harenae* over the flash and polish of his colleagues on the water?

This unstable play of identities and uncertainty of roles is a new development in the poem. The preceding verses drew a clear line between the subject and object, the gazer and the sumptuous prey of the gaze, projecting an image of self-fulfillment without self-consciousness. But com-

plexity is to be expected when humans—apart from the omniscient poet and the reader, that is—invade a natural scene. The natural theater introduces the ambiguities of living in a highly performative society.[15] The process by which the *Mosella* develops, as Carole Newlands suggests in a rather different context, is heuristic (Newlands 1988.404). The reader, the actors, the poem itself are all finding their way, gaining awareness of the inconstancy of reality through the chiastic filter—the scrim, if you will—of expression and reception.

Now comes another fascinating shift. Where before everyone was alternately (or simultaneously) actor and audience, the scene is abruptly emptied of these bit players and the stage becomes a venue for actors, but without a script or even an audience—apart from one another and the voyeuristic reader, who is invincibly remote. The actors are satyrs and nymphs: the "Bacchic entertainments" have come alive (169–88).

> nec solos homines delectat scaena locorum:
> hic ego et agrestes Satyros et glauca tuentes
> Naidas extremis credam concurrere ripis,
> capripedes agitat cum laeta protervia Panas
> insultantque vadis trepidasque sub amne sorores
> terrent, indocili pulsantes verbere fluctum.
> saepe etiam mediis furata e collibus uvas
> inter Oreiadas Panope fluvialis amicas
> fugit lascivos, paganica numina, Faunos.
> dicitur et, medio cum sol stetit igneus orbe,
> ad commune fretum Satyros vitreasque sorores
> consortes celebrare choros, cum praebuit horas
> secretas hominum coetu flagrantior aestus;
> tunc insultantes sua per freta ludere Nymphas
> et Satyros mersare vadis rudibusque natandi
> per medias exire manus, dum lubrica falsi
> membra petunt liquidosque fovent pro corpore fluctus.
> sed non haec spectata ulli nec cognita visu
> fas mihi sit pro parte loqui; secreta tegatur
> et commissa suis lateat reverentia rivis.

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15 For an able analysis of the ubiquitous role of performance, and the concomitant need for self-possession, in ordinary Roman society, see Kellum 1999.

> Nor does the setting of this place delight humans alone; here I could imagine satyrs and naiads, mistresses of the green waters, rushing together on distant banks. Heady lust arouses goat-legged Pans, who leap into the shallows and terrorize the trembling sisters under the waves; these thrash the surface with clumsy strokes. Often the riverine Panope steals grapes with her oread friends midway up the slopes, then flees from lascivious fauns, spirits of the countryside. It is also said that when the fiery sun has reached the middle of its circuit, the satyrs and their glassy sisters gather in the depths to form choruses while the burning heat keeps human encounters at bay. Then nymphs leap and frolic in their home waters, dunking satyrs under the waves and slipping from mid-grasp of those inexpert swimmers as they vainly pursue the slippery limbs only to find waves, not bodies, in their embrace. Of these things, unseen by any, unknown to sight, may it be granted me to speak, in part. May Reverence be protected; may she lie hidden deep in her waters.

Elaborating on a trope borrowed from Statius's well-known ekphrasis of a villa at Surrentum,[16] Ausonius stages this disorganized chorus of demigods in the theater of nature. The membrane between two antipodal extensions of reality—water and air—is subjected to a veritable Bacchanal of riotous transgression in which creatures of each domain, *fluvialis* and *paganica,* invade the other—whether with their bodies, their gazes, or merely their desires. The results are mixed. The river nymph Panope steals grapes from the hillsides; the Pans and satyrs swim after the nymphs but come up empty-handed. Such are the risks, rewards, and disappointments of human desire and inquiry, too.

It is possible, of course, simply to read this passage as another in a series of spectacle entertainments staged for the reader's enjoyment. But satyrs and nymphs are never remote from the human experience. The "alien" realm is a feminine one, as it was in the earlier passage on the river's inanimate delights. The Pans and satyrs are drawn to the nymphs'

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16 *Silv.* 2.2.100–106; see Fuoco 1993.354–56, Roberts 1984.348. On the *Mosella*'s debt to Statius, see Newlands 1988, Kenney 1984.

allure but have no idea how to capture them or dwell in their world. As so often in the *Mosella,* Vergil and Ovid lurk behind many of these lines. The celestial mise-en-scène is characteristically Ovidian, conflating two of the poet's favored mythographic effects. His high noon is the time when humans retreat from sight and spirits come out to play; and it is a time of sexual frenzy, violent pursuit, and rape.[17] But the attentive reader will also recall the sun's transit across the meridian as Aeneas lingers with his dead companion Deiphobus in the underworld (*Aen.* 6.535–36). The *Mosella* carries many echoes of Book 6 of the *Aeneid,*[18] but nowhere does the poem resound so richly with the strains of Vergil's nether realm as in this passage. The satyrs' unsuccessful embraces mimic Aeneas's failed attempts to embrace the ghost of his father Anchises in Elysium (*Aen.* 6.695–702). Most striking of all is Ausonius's solemn intonation: "Of these things, unseen by any, unknown to sight, may it be granted me to speak, in part" ("sed non haec spectata ulli nec cognita visu / fas mihi sit pro parte loqui"), plainly modeled on Vergil's invocation to the gods as he prepares to relate Aeneas's underworld journey (*Aen.* 6.264–67):

> Di, quibus imperium est animarum, umbraeque silentes
> et Chaos et Phlegethon, loca nocte tacentia late,
> sit mihi fas audita loqui, sit numine vestro
> pandere res alta terra et caligine mersas.
>
> O gods, whose charge is governance of souls; o silent shades, Chaos, Phlegethon, regions voiceless in the breadth of night: let it be granted me to report what I have heard, to open by your grace things submerged in the deep and gloomy earth!

Concluding such a whimsical episode, Ausonius's tone seems incongruously solemn. "May it be granted me to speak, *in part.*" What is he withholding?

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17 On the so-called *meridianus daemon,* the spirit of noon, see Green 1991.484, Bulloch 1985.179–80, Roscher *LM* s.v. "Meridianus daemon," Ov. *F.* 4.761–62. On rape or attempted rape at noon, see Ov. *Am.* 1.5; *Met.* 1.588–600, 2.417–40, and perhaps 4.347–49. In the epyllion of Vergil's fourth *Georgic,* noon is the only time at which Proteus, and the knowledge he imparts, can be apprehended (4.401–04, 425–27).

18 Görler 1969 examines a few parallel passages, but the narrow scope of his approach limits his conclusions about Ausonius's overall strategy of allusion to the underworld.

A serious purpose beneath the surface frivolity, perhaps? This scene, which in a sense enacts the satyr play promised in the previous episode, is a thoroughly Bacchic one, sown with grapevines and peopled with Pans, satyrs, and nymphs. It is well to remember that Dionysus, patron god of theater, was a liminal deity with dominion over both the living and the dead. In many places in Greece, including Athens, the chthonic Dionysus, lord of the gates to the underworld, dwelt under water. In Elis, Plutarch observes: "Dionysus also they call Hyes since he is lord of the nature of moisture . . . They call him up out of the water by the sound of trumpets, at the same time casting into the depths a lamb as an offering to the Keeper of the Gate."[19] He was a god of fearsome opposites, frolicsome freedom and panic terror. It is important to understand, then, just how strict is the *symbolic* as well as the physical boundary between his two domains, land and water. One nurtures human life, the other promises to the human interloper either agonizing death or dreadful metamorphosis. Like their surrogates in this frivolous scene, the denizens of these two worlds may interact; the spirits of one world may even briefly invade the world of the other, and survive. But their domains remain separate and radically incompatible.

Darkened by the sudden and unexpected Vergilian intonation, Panope's foray suddenly seems more sinister: are those grapes human souls plucked untimely from the vine, like the fruit garlands picked by birds on countless Roman funerary reliefs? Are the Pans and satyrs our surrogates, greedy to embrace the souls of our departed? Ausonius isn't telling; instead, he is determined to allow Reverentia—literally, timidity in the face of grand or terrible things—to prevail over full disclosure. But danger may await anyone venturing into the waters: you may cross the Phlegethon—or the Moselle, for that matter—and never come back. On the other hand, a journey to the underworld represents the ultimate epiphany. To return from this experience—to cross the river twice, so to speak—is granted to only a few, as the Sibyl reminds Aeneas (*Aen.* 6.125–36). Once again, then, Ausonius seems to be nudging the reader, like the playful demigods, to stride across a threshold—if not for fun, at least for profit. The reader's peril is nothing so terrible as death, only ignorance; his profit is understanding.

And there is more to understand: the portals of Aeneas's underworld are the gates of true and false dreams, paths of truth or illusion.

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19 Plut. *Mor.* 364 F (trans. Babbitt). See also Hom. *Il.* 6.130–37, Thuc. 2.15.3–4, Ar. *Frogs* 215–19, Strabo 8.5.1, Ps.-Dem. *in Neaeram* 73–78, Kerényi 1977.291–93.

From this point until we encounter the girl with the mirror, the *Mosella* is peppered with language not only of truth and illusion, but of the underworld and its shades. The poem proceeds into a long sequence of conceits (189–203, 208–29):

> illa fruenda palam species, cum glaucus opaco
> respondet colli fluvius, frondere videntur
> fluminei latices et palmite consitus amnis.
> quis color ille vadis, seras cum propulit umbras
> Hesperus et viridi perfundit monte Mosellam!
> tota natant crispis iuga motibus et tremit absens
> pampinus et vitreis vindemia turget in undis.
> annumerat virides derisus navita vites,
> navita caudiceo fluitans super aequora lembo
> per medium, qua sese amni confundit imago
> collis et umbrarum confinia conserit amnis.
> haec quoque quam dulces celebrant spectacula pompas,
> remipedes medio certant cum flumine lembi
> et varios ineunt flexus viridesque per oras
> stringunt attonsis pubentia germina pratis!
> . . .
> tales Cumano despectat in aequore ludos
> Liber, sulphurei cum per iuga consita Gauri
> perque vaporiferi graditur vineta Vesevi,
> cum Venus Actiacis Augusti laeta triumphis
> ludere lascivos fera proelia iussit Amores
> qualia Niliacae classes Latiaeque triremes
> subter Apollineae gesserunt Leucados arces,
> aut Pompeiani Mylasena pericula belli
> Euboicae referunt per Averna sonantia cumbae;
> innocuos ratium pulsus pugnasque iocantes
> naumachiae, Siculo qualis spectata Peloro,
> caeruleus viridi reparat sub imagine pontus.
> non aliam speciem petulantibus addit ephebis
> pubertasque amnisque et picti rostra phaseli.
> hos Hyperionio cum sol perfuderit aestu,
> reddit nautales vitreo sub gurgite formas
> et redigit pandas inversi corporis umbras,
> utque agiles motus dextra laevaque frequentant

et commutatis alternant pondera remis,
unda refert alios, simulacra umentia, nautas.
ipsa suo gaudet simulamine nautica pubes,
fallaces fluvio mirata redire figuras.

The view should be openly enjoyed when the gray-green stream answers the shady hill; the river waters appear leafy and the stream seems to be sown with the vine. What color in those depths, when Hesperus has stretched the evening shadows and bathed the Moselle in the verdant hillside! Whole ridges swim in rippling motions; the absent vine tendril trembles there, and the vintage lies engorged in the glassy waves. A silly boatman counts the green vines; another skims the mid-river current in his dugout pinnace where the hill's reflection is addled in the stream, and the stream entangles the shadows' edges.

What sweet processions these spectacles glorify, too, when oar-footed corsairs vie in mid-river and enter various bends, and along the green shores graze burgeoning vegetation in trimmed meadows! . . . Liber peers down at such games on the Cumaean swell when he walks along the cultivated ridges of sulphurous Gaurus and the vineyards of steaming Vesuvius, and when Venus, glad at Augustus's Actian triumph, orders lascivious Cupids to enact the kind of savage battles the fleets of the Nile and Latian triremes fought beneath the citadels of Apollonian Leucas; or when Euboean skiffs reenact the dangers of Mylae in the war with Pompey across resounding Avernus; or when the sky-blue sea under a verdant sheen reflects the harmless collisions of prows and the jesting battles of a *naumachia* such as was seen at Sicilian Pelorus. [Their own] youthful forms, the river, the pinnaces with painted prows offer no other view to the impudent young men. When the sun has bathed them in Hyperionian heat, it reflects sailor-like forms into the glassy flood and returns crooked shades of their inverted bodies. And when they repeat their nimble movements on the right and left, and alternate their weight on reversed oars, the water reflects other sailors, liquid semblances of themselves. The youth-

> ful boatman delights in his own image, marveling at the mendacious forms returning from the river.

This section has a tripartite structure: from a memorable image of the Moselle and its boatmen in the evening light—an image that Pope admiringly cribs in his *Windsor Forest*[20]—the poet progresses to an analogy. The boatmen and their reflections are likened to spectacle entertainments set in the vicinity of Naples in which are reenacted famous naval engagements of Octavian (Actium, Agrippa's preparations on Lake Avernus for the battle of Naulochus, and the battle of Naulochus itself).[21] Then there is a return to the Moselle and its boatmen, but now at noontime.

This three-part structure comprises an artful progression of reflected views from obtuse angles to direct perpendicular self-regard.[22] In the much-admired first passage, sailors gaze out at their reflected surroundings in the distance. Late afternoon is the best time for these oblique reflections of the shoreline, which are seen at an angle close to the water's surface. Apart from the image, there are four material components of every reflection: viewer, referent, surface, and light source; and here the light source lies behind the viewer and before the confronting referent. Both the sunbeams and the path of the gaze are nearly parallel to the surface. The reflected image of the riverbanks is brilliant in color and opacity, indeed nearly as vivid as the referent itself. As in the catalogue of inanimate delights, this image conveys the simple lucidity of mere subjectivity: the act of pure sensation without awareness of self, of the past, or of time and experience. A creative inversion of language here connotes the simplicity of the scene: the hillside swims in the river, but also bathes (!) the river (*perfundit*) in its liquid verdure. This opaque luminosity functions as a kind of visual armor through which the river itself, and the artefacts of its history buried within (the detritus of

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20 "Oft in her glass the musing shepherd spies / The headlong mountains and the downward skies, / The wat'ry landscape and the pendent woods / And absent trees that tremble in the floods; / In the clear azure gleam the flocks are seen, / And floating forests paint the waves with green" (209−14).

21 The interlude with mock naval battles enacted by *amorini* is often taken as a whimsical fantasy inspired by Roman paintings and mosaics; see Green 1991.488.

22 On the impressionistic or "cinematographic" qualities of this passage and its literary precedents, see Fuoco 1993.342–49, Fontaine 1977.443–44, Principato 1961.416–18. Fontaine finds in line 239, "ambiguis fruitur veri falsique figuris," the key to the entire poem. To his mind, the *Mosella* is preoccupied with the instability of forms and the perpetual metamorphosis of existence.

strife and disaster intimated by the *naumachiae,* perhaps?), cannot be seen or known. In the second phase, constituting the naval reenactments, the reflections seen by the boatmen are not the riverbanks but their own boats; the human object of the mirroring river is coming into focus, but is not quite resolved in these midrange views. Themselves harbingers of history—for they connote battles of old—the boats "graze burgeoning vegetation" from the reflected hills, piercing the armor of oblivion.

Then come the reflections at noon and full resolution. Again Ausonius perfectly replicates the behavior of light and shadow on water, but now in very different circumstances. Turning their attention straight down, the sailors are confronted with ghostly, transparent simulacra of themselves, darkened and silhouetted by the sun directly above. With this reemergence of the shades of humanity, the theme of mortality reappears. It is presaged in the recollection of real naval battles whose wreckage and human casualties lie at the bottom of the sea and in the startling image of *naumachiae,* mock naval battles, on Lake Avernus. This lake just off the north shore of the Bay of Naples is invoked as a thematic bridge between history and myth. On the one hand, Agrippa is known to have practiced naval maneuvers on it (Flor. 2.18.6, Vell. 2.79.1); on the other hand, it was the storied entrance to Vergil's underworld. Down a mysterious hole at water's edge, the rivers of the dead are plied by a morbid craft ferrying souls (*Aen.* 6.201–11, 295–304). Ausonius's somewhat forced description of the oarsmanship of the boatmen's shades at port and starboard (*dextra laevaque frequentant*) echoes the shades of the unferried dead in the *Aeneid* who crowd around Aeneas on left and right (*dextra laevaque frequentes*).[23]

The oafish combatants on the Moselle may perceive their own simulacra on the water, but marveling at those "mendacious forms," they do not fully understand what they see. As the surface "returns crooked shades of their inverted bodies," the men's backlit, *transparent* silhouettes—windows on the depths below—emerge as simulacra not only of themselves but of the sailors who died in the battles they simulate. Mere reflections become ghosts led back from the world below. If we fancy for a moment that the boatmen are peering down into a Gallic Avernus, then these waters are Sibylline, intoning the fate of all humankind. They are, in effect, memory in reverse: *vestigia* not only of present or past events, but of what is to befall every mortal. Shimmering counterfeits of the material world—counterfeited again

23 *Aen.* 6.486; cited in Green 1991.489.

on the printed page—are simultaneously concrete and metaphorical.[24] To the wise person, perception of the self is recognition of its evanescence, but the foolish and unschooled mistake this watery world, stocked with their own disembodied surrogates, as a material extension of reality, when, in fact, it is a challenge, unmet, for them to wake from their mental slumbers.

Ausonius proceeds in this vein with an analogy by which he compares the witless sailors to a young maiden looking in a mirror (230–39):

> 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;
> 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
> ambiguis fruitur veri falsique figuris.

> Just as when, seeking to show off her styled coiffure (first the nurse has set the far-shining glory of a probing mirror before her beloved charge), the happy girl delights in the unfamiliar game, thinking she sees the image of a twin sister—when she gives kisses to the gleaming metal, not to be returned; or gropes at the fastened hairpins; or with her fingers she tries to push her wavy locks to the front of her forehead—just so, amid the mockery of shades, does the youthful boatman delight in the wavering shapes of true and false.

Prior interpretations have taken this passage to be value neutral. To Roberts, the reflections are harmless in their appeal because they are of our own world, that above the water: "The phenomenon of reflection is benign, provided that the observer accepts the appearance and does not

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24 Kenney 1984 200 recognizes that Ausonius's "notion of deception" has been stretched here to the point of an "exchange of identities" between referent and reflection, but then, remarkably, abjures any interpretation, satisfied with the observation that "mirror and mirrored merge with each other."

attempt to break the surface illusion" (Roberts 1984.347). Yet, as I suggested above, large parts of the poem have been about the benefits, not merely the dangers, of breaking the surface—whether sensual, gastronomic, or cognitive—and the alternative dullness of dwelling strictly upon a reflection. Here, I suggest, Ausonius's educated reader would immediately have seen through the silly epic simile to the Narcissus myth. Ovid's Narcissus, cherishing a similar delusion, seeks to caress and kiss his own image in the same way.[25] His story is hardly a tale of harmless fun; it tells of a youth who comes to grief precisely because he is unable to look beneath a reflection—or "see through the artifice of the pond," as Philostratus puts it (1.23.3). Socrates and Seneca both urged wise men to know themselves by consulting the mirror.[26] Narcissus, on the other hand, famously fixated upon a reflection because of a lack of self-knowledge.[27] Just as the girl and the boatmen enjoy the "wavering shapes of true and false," Narcissus covets the image of himself, which reflects both a truth (his own face) and a lie: the delusion that his simulacrum is a sentient being who returns his affection. The verisimilitude of the surface deters him from testing the deeper truths about the laws of personal identity.

So in Ausonius's sophisticated world of illusion and allusion, the mirror has the capacity to deceive even while it tells the truth. By extension, of course, the mirror is the Moselle, to which he directly compares it. As for the obtuse boatmen and their reflections, which shape is true, which false? Or does each waver between both? The final words of this excerpt ("wavering shapes of true and false") again darken the limpid waters of the Moselle with intimations of Vergil's underworld and its two portals—one, the gate of true dreams, the other of false (*Aen.* 6.893–98).[28] The river's depths have been presented as a realm of entrapment. Its covert sexual allure and overt gastronomic charm have a magnetic, "female," catoptric force. This gendered concept of the mirror has been proposed by Willard McCarty who,

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25 Strangely, few scholars have recognized this analogy; see Fuoco 1993.352–53, who establishes the textual parallels.

26 Diog. Laert. 2.33, 3.39; Sen. *NatQ* 1.15.7–17.10; Jónsson 1995.

27 For a particularly incisive assessment of the Roman Narcissus in light of gaze theory, with a close reading of the ekphrases of Philostratus and Callistratus, see Elsner 1996.

28 The motif is well known to Ausonius, who satirizes it in *Cupido cruciatus*; see Davis 1994, Vannucci 1989. Jönsson and Roos 1996 argue intriguingly that the lines describing the gates of horn and ivory, and Aeneas's choice of the latter, should be transposed to the place where Aeneas *enters* the underworld, after line 6.284. The authors' principal evidence comes from Aus. *Ephem.* 8.22–26.

in a brief but brilliant survey of reflectivity in Greek literature, perceives polarities between the "male" repulsion and "female" attraction of the mirror. In discussing attractiveness, he suggests (1989.186):

> . . . whether positive or negative, mirroring has affinities with the imagery common to both. Thus, more generally, as an apotropaic device a mirror is by definition concerned with conditional entry; hence mirroring is likely in liminal situations and is potentially associated with boundaries, protected spaces, and rites of passage. Mirroring may, then, easily imply a trial, a *psychomachia* or *agon,* in which some hidden selfhood is realized, either to the detriment or improvement of the initiand.

Conditional entry is the key. The intended subject of Ausonius's catoptric metaphors is the attentive reader, not the inconsequential and anonymous denizens of the river. The boatmen and the young girl cannot achieve entry into the mirror; they have no Sibyl to guide them, no golden bough to unlock the recesses of the self. But the reader is invited to be a kind of Aeneas, to navigate the psychic netherworld and plumb its depths with profit; still, he must be prepared to endure the initiation of personal transformation or augmentation. Depending on the state of the subject, then, the mirror is either a path to liberation or an enticing snare.

The mirror's role as a literal tool of entrapment was well known in Ausonius's day. Hunters used mirrored disks either to lure or to distract their quarries. Aelian describes the technique in *On the Nature of Animals* (17.25), where it is attributed to Indians who hunt monkeys, but by late antiquity, it was a Roman practice as well. A mosaic from El Alia in Tunisia, now in the Bardo Museum, represents a Nilotic scene in which hunters hold out polished disks to confuse the animals while they strike.[29] Ausonius's contemporaries Claudian and Ambrose refer to the practice of using a mirror to distract a tigress that is attacking the hunter—a practice

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29 Fantar et al. 1994.128–29, where the mirror is called an amulet. Here and in a scene nearby, it is clear that the object is not a shield because of the way in which it is held. This is a late antique *miroir à poignée* type with a strap handle on the back; the Wroxeter mirror at Rowley's House Museum in Shrewsbury is a fine example in silver. In other vignettes of the same mosaic, however, similar disks appear to be strapped to the forearm like shields. Probably the disks served both purposes.

confirmed in the fourth-century Great Hunt Mosaic at Piazza Armerina and a roughly contemporary mosaic from Carthage in which a lioness is diverted into a crate by means of a large disk. According to Ambrose, the tigress is deceived into believing she sees her own cub in the convex mirror, and "wishing to recover her offspring, abandons the chase" ("revocat impetum colligere fetum desiderans").[30]

Ausonius, one of the great literati of his time, a man of taste and discernment who seems to have drawn upon contemporary mosaic themes to inspire several of the images in the *Mosella,*[31] could hardly have been unaware of the hunting mirror conceit or of its metaphorical potential. Once captivated by its own reflection, the quarry is in grave danger of enslavement, confinement, or death. Is that not ultimately the subtext of the mirroring Moselle? The foolish boatmen allow themselves to be imprisoned in the river, or above it, seeing nothing but an enchanting topsy-turvy world that belies their own ontological limitations. The *umbrae* that they see are, in a way, the roles that they play in the satyric farce of their lives—utterly solipsistic, without independent substance. These hapless youths are unable to distinguish their personae from themselves, and gaze fascinated at their own antics.

It is an interesting peculiarity of this poem that its dramatis personae are neither wise nor successful. When its characters observe their own reflections, whether on the river's surface or in a mirror, they see another, not themselves; nor do they gain self-understanding. By not achieving self-awareness, they are denied the necessity of *being seen* as they see. Their consciousness is purely unidirectional and impulsive. Even the satyrs are no better: while they are able to probe the alien domain beyond their own world, they do so without profit. Ausonius's fisherman, whose antics follow upon the simile of the girl with the mirror, is capable of pulling a tasty fish out of the river, but it does not remain his to enjoy. It leaps back into the water, and the dimwitted youth dives in to retrieve it (270–82). Significantly,

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30 Ambros. *Hexaëm*. 6.4.21, Claud. *Rapt. Pros.* 3.263–68. See Balensiefen Kat. 53, 78–79, 82, 83; Ben Khader, de Balanda, and Uribe Echeverría 2003.156.

31 It is no accident that so many of the images in the *Mosella*—a parti-colored catalogue of fish, Dionysiac tableaux, *amorini* competing in mock naval battles, villa landscapes, fishing scenes—are stock motifs of late antique floor mosaics. For visual comparanda Green 1989.314 suggests, in addition to "fish scatters" and *naumachiae,* "the panorama of workers associated with Studius," a famous tastemaker and painter of genre scenes active in the Augustan period. The interlude with mock naval battles enacted by *amorini* is often taken as a whimsical fantasy inspired by Roman paintings and mosaics; see Green 1991.487.

we are not told if the youth ever resurfaces. Not likely: he is no Aeneas. Instead he is compared, in an epic simile, to the mythical Glaucus—who, as Roberts puts it, "suffers a well-deserved punishment . . . he becomes the prey of those he had previously preyed on."[32]

The wise reader, Ausonius hints, has a way out of the trap: literally self-possessed, you understand and control yourself, and comport yourself in the world accordingly. Your knowledge is a collaboration of surface and depth, a synthesis of sensation, of personal experience, of history outside your experience, of life lived in proportion, measured out in the full certainty of death. Beyond the beckoning illusion of narcissism, you will discern the bones of dead warriors rattling far below and, among them, the enticing subaqueous fruits of knowledge. You will reflect upon the many beauties and terrors of the world below; you may see things you wish you had not.

The one who beholds himself, but also sees through the surface, is not annihilated by the sight of his Doppelgänger. Like Aeneas, he may descend and return by another way, his soul filtered and cleansed like the errant spirits of the underworld. Ausonius's brand of speculation likewise is no journey of pure symmetry; one is drawn in easily, but emerges changed and spent from swimming against the current; such is the nature of close reading and hard thought. In pondering the surfaces of things, the reader is led inevitably to contemplate the poem itself, the surface and boundary by which meaning is transmitted. A postmodernist might think of the poem not as a unidirectional phenomenon passing from author to reader, but rather as a roundtrip journey for the reader, a salutary plunge into the Heraclitan river of signification. Whereas the young maiden sees herself in a *speculum explorans,* a probing mirror, the poem is a *speculum explorandum,* a mirror to be probed. It offers a simulacrum of reality—and if we, the readers, are willing and able to follow, it can take us deeper. The depths promise neither redemption nor ruin, but they are capable of leading us into either.

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32 Roberts 1984.346. The lines are: "sic Anthedonius Boeotia per freta Glaucus, / gramina gustatu postquam exitalia Circes / expertus carptas moribundis piscibus herbas / sumpsit, Carpathium subiit novus accola pontum" (276−79).

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