

## AUSONIUS, *MOSELLA*: A TRIP TO BURDIGALA

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**Abstract.** Our paper focuses on one of the most valuable writings of Late Latin literature—the poem “Mosella” by Decimus Magnus Ausonius. The voyage figures prominently in ancient classical literature. From Homer’s *Odyssey*, through Vergil’s *Eneid*, to Ovid’s *Tristia*, or Apuleius’ *Golden Ass*, it gained multiple meanings as initiation, travel back in time, union with nature, entertainment, or as expiation, etc. In his poem, Ausonius describes his voyage down the Mosella river to Burdigala (now Bordeaux), his birthplace. It gives the poet the chance of an incursion into the past, of evoking battles, heroic moments in the history of these lands in south Gaul, conquered by the Romans. Ausonius also shows a strong interest in the beasts that people the aquatic space, and creates interesting portraits of the creatures from the depths of the river with an artist’s eye, and at the same time, with the precision of a scientist.

The travel theme is very old in the Greek and Latin literatures. *Ulysses* has become, for a long time, a true symbol of sea travel. The travel signifies, for *Ulysses*, adventure, but, at the same time, knowledge and recovery of the lost fatherland, Ithaca. It also means a return in time and a recovery of personal identity. In the Greek ancient culture, for such famous writers as Herodotus or Strabo, the travel also denote, as with Homer, knowledge of foreign regions and peoples.

In the Roman national epic *Aeneis*, written by the great poet Publius Vergilius Maro, the main character – Aeneas – sails the seas together with his fellow-travelers, after the fall of Troja, in order to found a new citadel and a new people on the shores of Italy. For Aeneas, the travel does not involve pleasure, but duty and historical mission. His descent into the Inferno’s depths, into the world of shadows, is a true initiatory travel, with deep religious and transcendental meanings.

A special travel’s form is the forced travel, or travel as punishment. This form is exemplified by Ovid’s work. It is “*tenerorum lusor amorum*” (the singer of the sweet loves) travel towards Tomis, the place of his exile.

Another kind of travel is illustrated by *The Golden Donkey* or *Metamorphoses*, a second century Roman novel written by Apuleius. The long peregrination of Lucius through the Greek land is a good occasion for the author to describe and to satirize the customs of contemporary society. This travel has, at the

same time, an initiatory character, because the protagonist, Lucius, after long adventures and pains, is eventually purified and regains his human face.

A quiet, serene travel, dominated by *otium* (respite), is the trip from Ausonius's poem "Mosella".

Characterized by Eugen Cizek as "an important representative of the third classicism's poetry" (Cizek 1994: 713) and by Pierre Grimal as "a great verse maker, virtuoso of words" (Grimal 1997: 418), Decimus Magnus Ausonius lived and developed his literary activity in the fourth century post Christum. As very prolific poet, he wrote epigrams, idylls, circumstantial poems, in which he extols his professors and his schoolmates from Burdigala University, he describes some famous cities, and in other short poems he evokes the heroes who died in the war of Troja. The principal Ausonius's works are: *Epigrammata* (*Epigrams*), *Aidyllia* (*Idylls*), *Commemoratio professorum Burdigaliensium* (*The Commemoration of the Professors from Burdigala University*), *Parentalia* (*Commemorative Poems for the dead Parents*), *Ordo nobilium urbium* (*The Succession of the famous Cities*), *Epitaphia heroum qui bello Troico interfuerunt* (*The Epitaphs of the Heroes dead in the Trojan War*). The most achieved are the *Idylls* (*Aidyllia*), in which the Latin poet extols, as Vergilius, the purity and the simplicity of living in nature, in a rustic scenery, his little house (*villula*), inherited from his ancestors. Ausonius' most famous idylls are the *Poem of the Roses* (*Rosarum Poema*) and "Mosella".

"Mosella" is a "hydrological" poem, dedicated to a river, considered – in accordance with the conception of the ancients – a true divinity. The poet describes a short trip on the river, "painting in happy colours the envioning nature" (*History* 460). But we must emphasize that Ausonius had not the travel vocation and he was more "a cabinet writer", therefore this poem is singular in his so much complex creation. It seems that the poem has been composed at the urge of the emperor Valentinianus.

We remark that, at Ausonius, the nature feeling is combined with a strong patriotic sentiment, with the pride to be a roman citizen (*civis Romanus*). The poet is strongly attached to his birthplace, as it results from these verses:

In speciem tum me patriae cultumque nitentis  
Burdigalae blando pepulerunt omnia visu.

(*Mosella*, v. 18-19)

[Then, all the things brought into my soul, by a sweet view, the face a  
and the beauty of my brilliant fatherland, Burdigala]

Ausonius is – as Vergilius – a praiser of the past (*laudator temporis acti*),  
because he evokes, nostalgically, the vestiges of the dead ages, mentioning the  
glorious places that he viewed during his short trip on the river Mosella:

Transieram celerem nebuloso flumine Navam,  
Addita miratus veteri nova maenia Vinco,  
Aequavit Latias ubi quondam Gallia Cannas  
Inflataeque iacent inopesque per arva catervae”.  
(Mosella, v. 1-4)

[I had passed over the quick river, with dirty waves, Nava, / and I have admired the  
new defence works of the ancient citadel Vincus, / where the Galls were defeated  
before, as the Romans at Cannae, and a lot of bodies still lying on the plains,  
undeplord and unburied]

Ausonius also evokes “the famous camp of the divine Constantinus” (*divi  
castra inclita Constantini*).

The Latin postclassical poet may be considered, by these verses, a  
forerunner of the romanticism, a romanticist “avant la lettre”, because the ruins’  
poetry is one of the component parts of the european romanticism from the  
beginning of the XIX-e century.

Ausonius has also the nature sentiment, but this one is seen decoratively, as  
a charming and colourful landscape, bathed in a sweet light:

Purior hic campis aer, Phoebusque sereno  
Lumine purpureum reserat iam sudus Olympum.  
Nec iam, consortis per mutua vincula ramis  
Quaeritur exclusum viridi caligine caelum,  
Sed liquidum iubar et rutilam visentibus aethram  
Libera perspicui non invidet aura diei.  
(Mosella, v. 12-17)

[The air is more pure and Phoebus brights more strongly, with a blue  
light it caresses the purple Olympus. Not even now, through the  
thick net, weaved from branches, the sky does not appear, being hidden in clouds of  
verdure. Free, only the gentle breeze of the serene day opens to me a clear way to  
see and an alabaster air.]

Ausonius manifests “expressis verbis” the wish to detach himself, to transcend the daily reality, the world of human passions, taking refuge in a space of natural, eternal beauty:

Ast ego, despectis quae census opesque dederunt,  
Naturae mirabor opus, non cura nepotum  
Laetaque iacturis ubi luxuriatur egestas".

(*Mosella*, v. 50-52)

[But I will scorn all the human wealths and I will glorify only the nature, not the passions of the nephews, not the merry, wasteful poverty].

The Latin poet from the Roman-byzantine period can also be considered a Parnassian "avant la lettre", because, in his poems, we encounter exotic elements, the cult of the pictorial, of the sculptural and of the marbled, the cult of precious stones. Here there are some Parnassian phrases: *purpureus Olympus* (the purple Olympus), *albentes concharum germina bacas* (pearls born between white shells), *nostros imitata monilia cultus* (collars imitating our jewels), *marmoreum laqueata per atria campum* (slim atria of marble rising on fields).

During his trip on the river Mosella, the poet notices "the playful fish, crowds of shining bodies" (*interludentes, examina lubrica, pisces*). He describes "in extenso" the species of fish living in this river, forming true "living portraits" of the scaly beings from the depths. It succeeds in front of his eyes: the chub (*capito*), the trout (*salar*), the eel (*rhedo*), the barbel (*barbus*), the salmon (*salmo*), the perch (*perca*), the groundling (*gobio*) etc. For example, in the following verses, a suggestive portrait of the salmon is revealed to us, to whom the poet admiringly addresses:

Nec te puniceo rutilantem viscere, salmo,  
Transierim latae cuius vaga verbera caudae  
Gurgite de medio summas referentur in undas,  
Occultus placido cum proditur aequore pulsus.  
Tu loricato squamosus pectore frontem  
Lubricus et dubiae facturus fercula cenae,  
Tempora longarum fers incorrupte morarum,  
Praesignis maculis capitis, cui prodiga nutat  
Alvus opimatoque fluens abdomine venter".

(*Mosella*, v. 97-105)

[There's that gleam that identifies you, salmon with your red flesh. I won't pass over you. It was the flick of your broad tail that gave you away, sending turbulence from the depths to the calm surface. You have a scaly breastplate, your head is smooth, and when you are going to form a course at some dinner, you can put up with a long wait without going bad. You stand out with spotted head, and your rich belly moves up and down a fattened abdomen].

The ausonian chromatic universe is very complex, but the warm, bright colours, which give off optimism, serenity, kindness prevail. His work perfectly matches with the famous Horace's principle: *Ut pictura poesis*. Because we can observe at the post-classical Latin poet a real *synesthesia*, which anticipates, many centuries before, the well-known symbolistic "correspondences", when the colours and sounds mutually respond.

### References

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