

THE MOSELLA OF AUSONIUS

Translated by Christopher Kelk

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The misty Nava, which flowed speedily,
I had traversed, gazing admiringly
At Vincus' new-built walls, where once Cannae
By Gaul was flattened and now corpses lie,
Unwept, upon the fields. Alone I tread
Through desert groves and look at regions fed
By no agronomy, then on every side
Dummissa's lands which have been wholly dried,
Well-watered inns and fields but recently
Garnered by Sauromatian husbandry; 10
Then finally to the Belgae's shores I come –
My first impression of Noiomagum,
Constantine's famous camp; the atmosphere
Is purer than upon the plains, and here
Bright Phoebus shows Olympus flaming red;
The branches, with their foliage thickly spread,
Shut out the sky; the liberal air, so bright,
Displays to all a clear and liquid light.
It brought to mind Bordeaux, my fatherland,
For every view reminded me how grand 20
It is: the roofs of villas could be seen
To perch above the riverbanks; hills, green
With vines, beneath them, flowing noiselessly,
The fair Moselle. River, accept from me
These greetings – for your fields you've earned ovations,
And those who till them too; your fortifications
Match Rome's. You flow beneath the scrutiny
Of vine-filled ridges. Ah, what verdancy!
How grassy are your banks! Like seas you're strong
In ships, like brooks your wavelets dash along. 30

Your depths like glass. In your swift babbling
You match all other rivers, furnishing
Fresh drink which rivals what cool fountains slake
Men's thirsts with. You alone have all a lake,
A spring, a brook, a streamlet and a sea,
Which duly ebbs and flows alternately,
Possess. You gently glide without a care
For murmuring winds or boulders in their lair
Beneath your waves: no boiling shallows stay
Your course as rapidly you make your way. 40
No islands loom to check you or to break
Your tributaries in two and thereby take
Your eminence away. Downstream you flow
So easily that it's a gentle row
For oarsmen, although sailors have to tie
A tow-rope to their mules that they might try
To carry them upstream. You often gaze
Upon your eddies, thinking that you laze,
And yet no muddy sedge can hinder you
And with no filthy slime do you bedew 50
Your banks, our footsteps dry. And therefore go
And decorate with Phrygian stucco
Your smooth floors and with marble stone augment
Your panelled halls! Myself, though, I resent
What wealth affords – my grandchildren's bequest
I will not spurge and have them dispossessed.
It's nature I admire. Hard-packed, wet sand
Is strewn upon your banks, and when I stand
Upon that sand no imprint will appear.
One can see one's reflection in that sheer 60

And glassy face: there is no mystery
In you, for it is just as if I see
Through air, whose gentle breezes will not spare
My eyes your riches, so, if I should stare
But steadily, far, far below I see
Your inmost parts, which stand out openly,
And as your shallows onward gently flow,
Shapes, radiated with blue light, you show;
Your sand is ridged, since quivering water-plants lean,
Moved by the waves, and make your bed seem green. 70
In natural springs the grass shakes constantly;
A pebble shines then hides alternately;
It all resembles Scotland, where seaweed,
Red coral and white berries, sea-shells' seed,
Which please mankind, are open to our eyes;
And gems that match what our craftsmen devise
Are underneath your teeming waters shown,
While mottled plants uncover many a stone
Beneath your placid waves; but as we gaze,
A swarm of slippery fish wanders and plays, 80
Taxing our eyes. It's not permitted me
To say how many species there might be,
Their slantwise swimming nor their names: I may
Not tell of their descendants, nor must say
Whose care's a lucky share and whose concern
Is for the trident. Thus to you I turn,
Sea-nymph Naïs – tell of the scaly throng
That in the sky-blue channel swims along
The waves. Among the grassy sand there swims
The shining chub, which has such tender limbs, 90

Although it's packed with bones: accordingly
In six hours serve it up. Now look and see
That trout with purple spots, and over there
A roach which has no pointy spines to tear
Your flesh: a speedy grayling flees our view;
Now you, barbel, who had to struggle through
The Saar's six foaming rocky mouths and came
Into a river with a greater name
And swam more freely, and, as you progressed
In time, of every creature you were blessed 100
The most in old age. I'll not pass you by,
Rust-red salmon, whose broad tail whips you high
Up to the placid surface. Though your face
Is smooth, your brow is scaly: if your place
At table is delayed, you will not mind
The waiting, for the company will find
You edible still: your belly bobs around,
A massive abdomen. The lamprey's found
In Illyricum as it goes swimming through
The foamy waves of Hister, which boasts two 110
Names, and at last it comes into our ken
Lest the Moselle of such a denizen
Of note is cheated. Such a natural hue
You have! A yellow rainbow circles you,
Your upper back displays black marks, below
You're sky-blue: in your centre, though, you grow
To a much larger size, while at your rear
The flesh upon your tail is rough and sear.
I'll speak of you too, perch, a tasty dish,
Much closer than all other river-fish 120

To sea-creatures: alone you easily
Rival red mullets; you're so savoury;
Your solid flesh by bones is separated;
Here, too, we find the pike, both feared and hated
By frogs – it lives in swampland, laughingly
Called lucius from its locality
Of mud: in smoky shops it's cooked and stored,
So you will find it at no groaning board –
It stinks! Of the green tench who's not aware,
The poor man's cheer, and the bleak, which schoolboys snare 130
With hooks, and the shad which sizzles in the flame
(The *plebs* eat it with bread) or that whose name
Is nether trout nor salmon but between
The two of them – the sario – is seen?
Gudgeon, well-known among the fishy bands,
You're very small, the size of just two hands
(Minus the thumbs), although you are well-fed:
You're soft and in your womb fish-eggs are bred,
And like the bearded barbel you've a crest
Upon your head. Sheat-fish, you'll now be blessed 140
With honour: Attic olive oil must gleam
Upon your back, I think, as through the stream
You hugely glide while barely can you ease
Your massive self through shallow passages
Or sedge, and as you make your tranquil way
Upstream, the sky-blue bands of fish display
Their awe, as do the banks of verdant green,
The river, too. A rolling flood is seen
To split the waters and, on either side,
The waves run on, as on the Atlantic tide

A whale by driving winds and its own motion
Is dashed against the shore out of the ocean.
The sea, displaced, pours forth, the great waves swell,
Seeming to daunt the mountain-tops which dwell
Close to the shore; but *this* whale is benign,
Bringing no ill, and makes our river shine
Still more with honour. A sufficiency
We've had of each piscine variety
And streams, so let's turn to another show –
The gifts of Bacchus which in vineyards grow 160
In long lines and attract one's wandering eye
On rocks and sunny ridges way up high.
Such a dramatic sight! The Gauran crest
And Rhodope are luminously dressed,
And Mount Pangaea's bright with her own wine,
While Mount Ismarus boasts a verdant shine
Above the Thracian Sea – thus one may see
The golden Garonne painted similarly
By my vineyards, and from the river's verge
Vines grow as to the highest peak they surge. 170
Blithe folk and busy farmers dash up high,
Then down again as they all roughly vie
With roars. One on the towpath travelling
And a boatman rowing down the stream both sing
Lewd songs to those who prune late in the day.
The rocks, the trembling woods, the stream all pay
Respect to them with echoes. And this sight
Provides not only humans with delight,
But rustic Satyrs, too, I would surmise,
As well as Naiads with their grey-hued eyes 180

Run to the banks: goat-footed Pans cavort
And leap into the water and resort
To making all their sisters terrified
By splashing about. Many times on the hillside
While stealing grapes, the nymph called Panope
Among her river intimates will flee
The wanton pagan Fauns and when, all gold,
The sun stands high up in the sky we're told
The Satyrs and their glass-green sisters sing
Their songs together, since the hot days bring 190
Them solitude, since humans can't abide
Excessive heat: The Nymphs leap in the tide
And play about and easily emerge
Out of the Satyrs' grasps and they submerge
Those Satyrs since they swim abominably,
Discovering that Nymphs are slippery,
And therefore it's not bodies that they find
They grab but water. Settings of this kind
Have not been seen, and therefore let me speak
For my own part, and may we never seek 200
To know more than we do. Let us revere
The secrets that the river's keeping here.
But let us openly enjoy this scene
As all the waters turn a leafy green
And young vine-shoots are planted in the tide,
The bright waves echoed on the mountainside.
What colours! See the shadows from the West,
The verdant mountain's image now impressed
Upon our river. All the ridges sail
Aquiver in the waves, the vine-leaves trail 210

Beneath and vineyards in the water seem
To burgeon, while, progressing through the stream,
The boatman tries to count them from his boat;
The image of the hill appears to float
And shadows join the river. O how sweet
A spectacle when all the skiffs compete
Midstream and twist and weave and turn about
And barely graze the seeds that are to sprout
Along the verdant banks! The farmers eye
Their bosses, who, as they go gliding by 220
In larger crafts, cavort, and watch a pack
Of lads who roam upon the river's back,
Heedless of time, preferring play to work,
For new enjoyment causes them to shirk
Old cares. Bacchus looked on such games as these
When he was wandering, taking his ease,
Close to the lake of Cumae all along
Sulphurous Gaurus' ridges and among
Vesuvius' vineyards when the victory
At Actium brought such felicity 230
To Venus that she gave a stern command
That in commemoration the whole band
Of wanton Loves should have fierce battles staged
Such as the ones that on the Nile were waged
Or those where Latian triremes dashed pell-mell
Beneath Phoebus' Leucadian citadel
Or where Euboean vessels came across
The shrill lake of Avernus, threatening loss
To Pompey at Mylae: as Sicily
Looks on, these harmless battles of the sea 240

Are mirrored in the waters' sky-blue sheen;
Audacious youths present a similar scene
On painted ships. Blazing Hyperion
Bathes them with heat, reflecting them upon
The glassy surface as their bodies seem
To twist. They nimbly move across the stream,
Both left and right, and shift their weight as they
Apply the oars. And so the waves display
Others' reflections as they laugh to see
Themselves and wonder at the trickery 250

Of replication. Picture, should you care,
A nurse who shows her ward her well-combed hair
For the first time in her glass: this new plaything
Delights the child, who quits her frolicking
And thinks she sees her twin and plants a kiss
Upon the metal glass but finds that this
Is not returned or checks the pins and tries
To pull the quivering curls down to her eyes:
Thus do the youths enjoy this mockery
Of shadows mixing truth with falsity. 260

Where easy access is afforded by
The bank, a crowd of anglers keenly eye
The depths for helpless fish. One angler trolls
His line and by his knotted snares the shoals
He sweeps are tricked: another in his boat
At some unruffled spot lets his nets float,
Rigged out with corks: another one reclines
Upon the river's rocks as he inclines
His pliant rod, whose hooks he's made secure
With bait, which proves to be a deadly lure; 270

The guileless fish snap at them, but they feel
Their open jaws pierced with the hidden steel
(Too late!). They struggle, and that is the sign
For the rod to shake, responding to the line.
At once the skillful lad rescues his prey
As he obliquely snatches it away,
Making a whistling noise, just as the air
Will rustle when a whip is cracked somewhere.
Upon dry rocks the fish now flops around:
Though vigorous in the water, he has found 280
Our atmosphere has weakened him, while fear
Of the sun has overtaken him, so here
He gasps and pants; a feeble flapping shakes
His body and his tail now undertakes
Some final tremors; his mouth open lies
While he breathes out his last breath to the skies:
In this way, at a blacksmith's smithy's blast,
The woollen valve takes in and then holds fast
The puffs of blowing wind alternately
And sports about each beechen cavity. 290
I have myself seen, at the brink of death,
Some fish who've summoned up a final breath
And leapt headlong into the stream below
And gained the home they'd thought they'd never know
Again. The lad, in anger that his catch
Was gone, would plunge into the stream to snatch
Him up, although he swam inexpertly:
Thus did Glaucus in the Euboean Sea,
Who'd tasted Circe's lethal herb, one day
Take plants from dying fish, then swam away, 300

Another dweller in the Carpathian Sea:
In hooks and nets a master, it was he
Who fished in Nereus' waters, sweeping through
The sea with fellow-captives. Villas, too,
Hang over rocks; the river winds around,
Dividing them, while palaces abound
On either bank. Who's awed by Sestos' sea,
The Hellespont, the home of Nephele?
Or by the straits that brought Leander fame?
Or Chalcedon's shore to which the Great King came 310
To build the bridge to span the straits between
Two continents? Here no fierce waves are seen,
No savage, battling winds. Here conversation
Is recognized, and friendly salutation
Along the pleasant shores is also heard,
And hands are almost gripped with many a word
Of greeting, resonating in midstream.
Who can explain each architectural scheme,
Fashion and style which shaped these villas here?
Not even Daedalus would dare to sneer 320
At them, the man who built the Euboean shrine
(But he, when he attempted to design
In gold his son's sad fall, was crushed with woe
And his paternal pain). Nor would Philo,
Nor he who, lauded by his enemy,
Used his famed skill in war on Sicily
Nor maybe those seven men whom Marcus praised
In his tenth book – such buildings that were raised
By them! And here perhaps Menecrates
Flourished with his renowned abilities, 330

And he whose work is famed in Ephesus,
And maybe it was here that Ictinus
Labour'd, who built Minerva's shrine, whose owl
Is smeared with magic dye, all kinds of fowl
Lured to her, which she kills with just a glance;
It could have housed Dinocrates perchance,
Who built the palace of King Ptolemy
And the Pyramids which tower loftily
On square cones: bidden to immortalize
Arsinoë, he placed up in the skies 340
Her image, that it be suspended there
Beneath Pharos's temple, in the air.
Upon the mottled roof an agate stone
Is breathing as it draws the maiden, blown
By her iron hair. So we may understand
That they, or others like them, in the land
Called Belgium built fair homes that reached the sky,
Embellishing the rivers gliding by.
One's built on natural rock, another one
Stands on a mole which has been shaped to run 350
Along the bank, another stands apart
And takes the river to its very heart,
One more clings to a hillock, standing tall
And offering delightful views to all
Across tilled fields and barren wilderness,
And looks upon the land with happiness
As though it owned it all, while in wetlands,
Built further down, another villa stands,
Although it has a lofty mountain's shape
And thereby seems to threaten to escape 360

Into the clouds, and flaunts its apogee,
Like Pharos in Memphis: its specialty
Is catching fish in fenced-in streams between
The rocks that dot the sunny fields of green.
One villa looks down from its ridge-filled height,
Obscured with filmy mist. How may I write
Of homes built in the verdant fields which gleam
With countless pillars and, beneath the stream,
The baths that have been built upon a mole,
When Vulcan's breathed-out flames begin to roll 370
Along the hollow walls in his hot lair,
The gathered vapours sent into the air?
I've seen folk sweat from warm baths, tired out –
Both lakes and frigid swimming-baths they'd flout
But relish running water – presently,
Refreshed, they'd swim that water vigorously.
Think of a tourist coming from Cumae –
He'd think this was an alternate Baiae.
It lures with such sparkling urbanity
It leads to no excessive luxury. 380
How can I bring your azure tributaries
To an end, Moselle, so comparable with the seas –
You have so many streams that broadly flow
Into so many of your mouths. Although
They linger, nonetheless they rapidly
Give you their names: the Saur illustriously
With Pruem and Nims makes haste as it flows through
The waves you make, and it rejoices, too,
To join with you, prouder to boast your name
Than if it burst, lacking a hint of fame, 390

Into our Father Pontus, the Black Sea.

The Ruwer, which has earned celebrity
For marble, and the speedy Kyll make haste
To join you with their servant waves to taste
Of you. The Ruwer's fish are splendidous,
While it keeps turning, fast and furious,
The millstone as it grinds the corn and draws
Across the glossy marble shrieking saws:
On either side a constant din is heard.

But of the little Lieser not a word 400

I'll speak nor of the spare Drohn, and I'll shun
The waters of the Salm, since everyone
Dislikes them. But the Saur calls out to me,
And always has, in all its pageantry,
Its sounding waves, its ships: in its fatigue,
When it has travelled many a weary league,
It finishes its journey right below

Augustus' palace ramparts. Even so
The happy Eltz slips through the fertile land
In silence, almost touching crops that stand 410

Upon the banks. A thousand others, too,
Flow here and wish that they belonged to you.
There's so much pull and character that dwell
Within their speedy waves. Divine Moselle,
If Mantua or Smyrna, of great fame,
Had given you their bard to sing your name,
The Simois, known on the Trojan shore,
Would yield to you and Thybris would no more

Dare to prefer her honours. Pardon me,
O mighty Rome, and leave us, Jealousy, 420

Who in the Latin tongue are quite unknown:
Our fathers kept in Rome the regal throne.
Great parent of all crops and men, acclaim
Is yours, Moselle. Your leaders, filled with fame,
Your younger men in arms, your eloquence,
Which rivals our own tongue, with reverence
Salute you. Furthermore, you've naturally
Endowed your children with integrity
And carefree wit. Not only Rome can crow
About such famous people as Cato, 430
And Aristides, who brought Athens fame,
Is not the only man who's earned the name
Of Just. But why, with slackened rein, do I
With love of you wear out your praise? Put by
Your lyre, Muse, and mark my paeon's end
With your last chord. Someday hence I will spend
Old age on humbler things and sit at ease
In sunshine: when I sing the histories
Of Belgian heroes and their deeds of glory,
The Muse will with fine thread spin out each story: 440
My spindles shall have purple, too. Whom, then,
Will I commemorate? Hushed husbandmen,
Wise lawyers, speakers potent and first-rate,
Chief leaders of the senate and the state,
Counsels for the defence and those who came
From schools of rhetoric that brought them fame,
Quintilian's rivals, those who could display,
In cities where they ruled, nontoxic sway
And courtrooms free of blood, those whose right hand
Aided their governors in the Britons' land 450

And Italy, those who ruled Rome, the head
Of cities, who, although they never led
Their citizens, were equal nonetheless
Of those who did – let Fortune, then, redress
The error that she made and finally
Return the chalice tasted formerly
And give to their descendants due acclaim.
But see it's followed through – put off the fame
Of men and let me tell how joyfully
The river through the country's greenery 460
Glides in its happy course, and let me say
Prayers to the Rhine. Your sky-blue bays display,
O Rhine, and open up your glass-green dress
That covers all of them, try to assess
A space for other streams. But what you own
As your reward is not from waves alone –
From Caesar's walls you've seen the victory
Of son and father and our enemy
Crushed at the river Naker and beside
Lupodunum and the spring of Hister's tide, 470
Unknown in our records. But recently
You've heard of this colossal victory.
There will be many more. Therefore press on
And drive the purple sea in unison
With double stream. Don't fear a lack of fame –
A host will feel no envy – for your name,
Fair Rhine, is timeless. So be confident,
Receive your brother, being opulent
In waves, in Nymphs, showing a generous heart
To both; your course will stretch and split apart 480

And spill in common streams. Your strength will swell,
Which Germans north and south, the Franks as well,
Shrink from: Rome's true frontier you will be thought.

A massive flood like this will then have wrought
A double name for you. Now as for me,
I trace my lineage from the Vivisci.

A long-established friendship I can claim
Among the Belgians; I've a Latin name,
For I am called Ausonius, and I

Was born and then grew up between the high 490
Pyrenees and Farthest Gaul, where Aquitaine
Would blithely moderate my native brain.

I'm daring, though my lute is small. It's right
That to the river I should pour a slight
Bardic libation. It's not eulogy

I crave, but pardon. Kind stream, frequently
The Muses' sacred waves were troubled by
Poets while Aganippe was drained dry.

But when Augustus and his sons send me,
Relieved of my responsibility 500

As tutor, to Bordeaux, as far as the vein
Of my poetic talent may remain
(For they're my chiefest care), I'll settle there,

Endowed with consulship and curule chair,
Nestled in my old age, where I'll pursue
More praise of the Moselle; the cities, too,

Beneath the walls of which you quietly flow
As they look down at you as on you go,

I'll praise, and forts that were camps recently
But now are granaries since harmony 510

Has come to Belgium, and those who abide
In happiness as settlers on each side
Of you, and once more I will sing of you
And how you graze your banks while cutting through
The fertile fields and watch the work that's done
By husbandman and ox in unison.
The Loire won't claim first prize, nor the headlong
Aisne, nor will the Marne that flows along
The Gallic and the Belgian boundary;
The Charante won't indulge in rivalry 520
With you, though at Saintongue her flowing tide
Is noted. Down the freezing mountainside
Of Duranus runs a river that will yield
To you and give your waters a clear field,
Although she's lined with gold. Though frantically
The Adour through rolling rocks flows out to sea,
She truly worships you, horned Moselle,
Both first and foremost, since you've earned so well
The right to be respected everywhere,
Not only where springs leap into the air 530
As you your horned, bull-like visage show
And through the curving fields you calmly flow
Or mingle in German harbours with the sea;
Should grace breathe on my humble poetry,
If anyone should think it worth his while
To read this poem, you'll raise a happy smile
And live on people's lips. You will be known
By springs and lakes, and not just these alone
But blue streams, ancient groves, a rural pride,
The Drohn, the Durance, winding far and wide, 540

The Alpine streams, the Rhone, meandering
Throughout the double city, labelling
Both banks, and then my poem will honour you,
Commending you to pools that show the blue
Of Heaven and rivers loudly rushing on
And spreading grandly like my own Garonne.