

## BERT SELTER

### The Untiring Pen: Avienus' Construction of a Voice<sup>1\*</sup>

#### 1. Introduction: framing the text

Just as anyone who wants to succeed in any real-life act of communication has to make sure that there are no misunderstandings about the discourse situation (*e.g.* about who is speaking, with what intentions, *etc.*), so establishing who is telling a story plays an important part in how we evaluate it. For, through the magic that is text, real communication becomes transferred to the written page: enclosed in texts are miniature communicative situations and just as in real life the voice of the narrator is a crucial part of these new worlds. Often we'll even find that these new worlds are in turn populated by yet other narrators. Still, despite the sheer endless possibilities of such matrioshka-ing narrative instances, the split between a discourse and a text world means that there is always a platform from which each act of narrating can be surveyed and commented upon. There is always the potentiality of a level on which the narrator can talk of 'I' and 'my story'. Always a frame to put around the painting. And all of this is there for the writer to use or not.

In this paper, I would like to have a look at the way the fourth-century poet Avienus makes use of these possibilities in his *Descriptio Orbis Terrae*, a Latin hexametric translation of a Greek original, Dionysius of Alexandria's *Periegesis*, dated under Hadrian<sup>2</sup>. Three reasons prompt me to do so.

First, there is the general tendency of much late antique poetry towards symbolism. It has often been remarked that the horizontal cohesion of narrative is steadily abandoned in growing favor of vertical, symbolical relations. As complex as the variety of causes (the influence of Christianity, of pagan philosophy, *etc.*) is the variety of manifestations of this symbolism: from the playful hiding of the truth in Symphosius' collection of *Aenigmata* (a text «che vuole suggerire e nascondere un oggetto»), over the complexities of form and content in Optatianus' figurative poems, to the illusionary waterworld of Ausonius' *Mosella*, but also the strangely

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<sup>1\*</sup> I would like to thank Lucio Cristante, along with the participants and organisers of the Trieste conference, for introducing me to the thriving and invigorating world of late-antique poetic studies on the coffee-soaked Italian scene. I suspect the latter might have something to do with the first. Many thanks also to the anonymous referee for some much valued criticisms and suggestions.

<sup>2</sup> Scholarship for Avienus is few and far between. For an introductory and general bibliography, I would refer to the forthcoming B.Selter, *Through the looking-glass of memory: reading Avienus*, «QUCC» XCIV/2 (2010). The reference text edition, used here for citation, still is Van de Woestijne 1961.

pictorial narratives of Claudianus or even Ammianus' prose. Often a *ueritas inuoluta* is lurking in the shadows between the lines<sup>3</sup>. This *ueritas* is a vain creature, however: the writerly effort of creating distinct layers of meaning wants to pay off and so, before going into hiding, our *ueritas* often leaves a trail of footprints for future readers. These traces of how to read are perforce left in meta-soil. In other words, there is a remarkable amount of meta-discourse to be found. Quite often this is craftily woven into the text, but just as often it features on the level of the frame drawn around the poetry. Not only does the tradition of companion pieces and introductory texts to occasional poetry and published collections remain very much alive, but proems become highly elaborate pieces framing the text: they often do more than the traditional announcing of subject matter or the providing of generic and imitative parameters. They can, e.g., offer room for reflection on one's poetic activity or be used as a dressing room for the narrator: Juvenecus changing into priestly robes in his proem, for example, draws a marked frame around the gospel paraphrase<sup>4</sup>.

Second, the roughly 1400 hexameters of Avienus' *Descriptio* constitute a didactic poem and in didactic poetry the narrator plays an all-important part. At its most basic level, a didactic poem presents the reader with an intratextual 'classroom drama': a

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<sup>3</sup> For Lactantius' idea of a *ueritas inuoluta* (*Diu. inst., praefatio*), see Hose 2007. For the general idea of an abstract or symbolical plane of coherence behind late-antique poetry, see among others Roberts 1989 (along with various others studies of Roberts) and Gualandri 1994. Studies on Christian authors such as Paulinus (e.g. Conybeare 2000) are prominent in this particular field. For Symphosius see Bergamin 2005, Bergamin 2004b and Bergamin 2004a (from where the quotation was drawn, p.153). Optatianus: Levitan 1985, Okáčová 2006, Okáčová 2007 or Bruhat 2008. Illusion in the *Mosella*: Roberts 1984, but mostly Taylor 2009. On Claudianus see, with further bibliography, Charlet 2000 and the recent volume Ehlers 2004. A valuable starting point on Ammianus' strange world remains the compelling chapter, *Die Verhaltung des Petrus Valvomeres*, in Auerbach 1946.

<sup>4</sup> The subject of both prefaces, narrative instances and metapoetry - and often the combination of them - in late-antique poetry has been enjoying a remarkable boom recently. The remark of Cox Miller 1998, 134 on prologues as «giving the reader hints about how to participate in constructing their meaning» could be taken as the idea behind this boom. For Ausonius see Burnier 2009 and Knight 2006. The most rewarding of late-antique poets in this respect must be Claudianus. His proems have been the subject of Felgentreu 1999 (also see the forthcoming, L.Cristante, *La praefatio (carm. 16) del panegirico di Claudiano per il consolato di Mallio Teodoro tra retorica e ideologia*, «QUCC» XCIV/2 [2010]). Metapoetical readings of the *carmina minora* are quite a few now: Cristante 2003, Cristante 2004, Guipponi-Gineste 2009 and Harich-Schwarzbauer 2009. Also see Wheeler 1995 on the beginning of the *De Raptu Proserpinae* containing hints for a 'symbolical' interpretation. For the preface of Juvenecus: Quadlbauer 1974, Carrubba 1993, Green 2004 and Hecquet-Noti 2009. The idea of the priestly robes is from the forthcoming K.Smolak, *Der Dichter 'in Verkleidung': Ein Streifzug durch christliche Dichtung der lateinischen Spätantike*, «QUCC» XCIV/2 (2010). A wealth of contemporary texts invite a similar approach, including Proba's *cento*, Nemesianus, Reposianus and other texts from the *Anthologia Latina*. The preface of Martianus Capella has recently been probed by Schievenin 2006. In a sense, these instances are similar to the manual-like reading instructions contained in the prefaces of authors like Macrobius or Tiberius Claudius Donatus.

first person narrator, who is the teacher, instructs a second person, the student, in a particular subject matter. The identity of the narrating teacher has its significance, then, for the embedded didactic speech: is he a competent and skillful teacher or rather a questionable creature? Yet, as Don Fowler pointed out, there is in 'the didactic plot' an inherent tension between didactic and poetry. A tension that can also be discerned in the voice of the narrator, who is presented wearing the Janus mask of both a teacher and a poet. Within the fictional performance the narrator is a teacher and acts as such, commenting on the didactic constellation, the progress of the student, etc. At the same time this didactic performance blends with a poetic performance: the narrator explicitly highlights the status of the text as poetry and creates a feeling of poetic simultaneity, whereby the poem seems to take shape in front of the reader's eyes. Such a blending of didactic and poetic worlds may well have its roots in the double nature of the text: it is both an imitation of an oral performance and *de facto* a written poem. However, there might be other factors contributing to this blending. The poet's divine inspiration, for example, warranting his authority and truthfulness, can bridge into the teacher's realm: Μνημοσύνη, the mother of the Muses, and ἀλήθεια, 'truth', are after all practically synonyms. And if we accept that the greatest virtue of the poet is to make his audience see and experience, doesn't that make him eminently suited as a teacher? "*Enseigner, c'est faire voir*"<sup>5</sup>.

Third and last, Avienus' practice as a translator is quite revealing in this respect, too. His *Descriptio* is a poetic paraphrase of Dionysius of Alexandria's *Periegesis*, which is not only some 200 years older but also some 200 verses shorter than Avienus' version. Dionysius' *Periegesis* has been attributed with the literary and generic sophistication of Callimachean poetry and this sophistication peaks in both the proem and epilogue: Onofrio Vox has stressed the importance of these "*corni-*

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<sup>5</sup> Quotation from Luccioni 2006, 261. On the didactic plot or drama, see for example Fowler 2000, Volk 2002 (who specifically deals with the notions of 'poetic self-consciousness' and 'poetic simultaneity') and recently and most stimulating Citroni 2009. More traditional 'pigeonholing': Effe 1977 and Toohey 1996. On a rather entertaining note, related to Luccioni's observation: traveling to Trieste I bought a small travel guide of the region, part of the Dutch series «*Capitool Reisdidsen*». These are basically translations of the British *Dorling Kindersley* travel guides - i.e. a mainstream type of guide - well-known for their prolific use of both photographic and handdrawn illustrations. Their catchphrase is the boasting assertion that they are the only guides «that *show* you what others merely *write* about» (the DK guides are called 'eyewitness' guides). Not only does this inform us about the supposed ideal preparation that a guide offers - i.e. to show the future visitor around and instill in his mind a visual image of the place he will be visiting: as if he's already been there - but it also provokes one to think about how this is to be achieved: should we believe the rhetoric of the *Capitool/DK* guides or is it unmasked by the growing popularity of alternative guides (the likes of *The Rough Guide*, *Lonely Planet* or the old *Guide du Routard*), which conversely emphasize text, up-to-date information, documentation, self-discovery and, mostly, little visual aids?

*ci*” in setting out the parameters of the poem<sup>6</sup>. Precisely these *cornici*, along with other meta-episodes, are among those that are subjected to the highest reworking in Avienus’ translation. The fact that both of his other extant didactic poems feature highly elaborate proems as well<sup>7</sup>, undeniable serving to frame the ensuing didactic speech, is an invitation to have a look at who’s talking in Avienus’ *Descriptio*. Which is exactly what this text will be doing: having a (rather brief) look at the preface to see which questions it raises and what it reveals about Avienus’ poetics.

## 2. *The untiring pen: introducing the introduction*

Dionysius’ proem (vv.1-3) can hardly be called a proem. Yet spanning only two and a half verses, it manages to cram in both its theme (γαῖαν, πόντον, ποταμούς and φύλα) and its agenda (influence of Apollonius, Aratus, etc.), while at the same time blending in perfectly with the didactic drama: the hymnic performance staged in ἀρχόμενος αἰεῖδεν runs up smoothly to μνήσομαι<sup>8</sup>.

Ἀρχόμενος γαῖαν τε καὶ εὐρέα πόντον αἰεῖδεν,  
καὶ ποταμούς πόλιός τε καὶ ἀνδρῶν ἄκριτα φύλα,  
μνήσομαι Ὠκεανοῖο βαθυρῥόου

Avienus’ paraphrase opens with the marked insertion of a ‘real’ ten-verse proem (vv. 1-10)<sup>9</sup>.

Qua protenta iacent uastae diuortia terrae,  
et qua praecipiti uoluntur prona meatu  
flumina per terras, qua priscis inclita muris  
oppida nituntur, genus hoc procul omne animantum  
qua colit, Aonii perget stilus impiger oris.

<sup>6</sup> For a general introduction to Dionysius and the *Periegesis*, Jacob 1990 provides a good starting point. He and Patrick Counillon provided quite a few publications on Dionysius in the eighties of the previous century, yet a real revival seems to have occurred at the turn of the century, with the aforementioned Vox 2002, but also Coccaro Andreou 2002 and a complete thematic issue of the «Revue des études anciennes» 106 (2004), 1, with contributions from Bowie, Counillon, Cusset, Hunter, Khan and Oudot. Also see Hunter 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Avienus’ translation of Aratus features a 76-verse proem (compared to 18 in Aratus). His original *Ora Maritima* opens with 79 introductory verses.

<sup>8</sup> Greek quotation from Müller’s old edition of the *Geographi Graeci Minores* (Paris 1882, reprint Hildesheim 1965). The modern edition of Isabella O.Tsavari (Διονυσίου Ἀλεξανδρέως Οἰκουμένης Περιήγησις, Κριτική ἔκδοσις, Ioannina 1990) replaces πόλιός with πόλιός.

<sup>9</sup> To my knowledge, the only extensive treatment of Avienus’ preface is Santini 1992. Recently, though, Raschieri 2010, 25-27 has some interesting observations on Avienus’ *stilus*.

ardua res, Musae. deus, en deus intrat Apollo  
 pectora, fatidicae quatiens penetralia Cirrhae.  
 Pierides, toto celeres Helicone uenite,  
 concinat et Phoebos uester chorus; Oceanumque,  
 carminis auspicium, primum memorate, Camenae.

The proem is constructed with the rather trite building blocks of stock imagery. This immediately identifies it as a proem, but at the same evokes a certain readerly negligence, obscuring to some degree the situation that is presented. We have to read «*langsam*», as Nietzsche advised. For one thing, the hymnic tone is abandoned for a didactic one. Already the first word, *qua*, reminds one of the opening lines of Vergil's *Georgics*, where the subject is announced through a catalogue of questions. Whereas Vergil's five questions were elegantly varied, Avienus has only four and, basically, they all amount to one: «where?» Avienus takes up the fourfold subject matter of Dionysius again, but because *qua* is repeated four times, it produces an odd feeling of repetition: it has neither the variety of Vergil, nor quite the coherent unity of Dionysius; just a lot of locating things. Avienus *does* make a change in the subject matter, however: Dionysius' *πόντον* is replaced with *oppida*. Thus, Dionysius' whole is replaced with a more progressive sequence, zooming in on mankind: first a wide panorama of the outstretched earth<sup>10</sup>, then the rivers cutting through the soil, then the cities (in the *Descriptio*, as in reality, always connected to rivers), where, finally, people dwell—*colere*, expressing human culture, is used and produces a stark contrast with the rough and desolate *iacere* opening the questions series<sup>11</sup>. Moreover, as Carlo Santini remarked, the pr-alliterations (*protenta, praecipiti, prona, priscis, procul*) tie together the four scenes<sup>12</sup>. The final question, about the people, is phrased with the Lucretian *genus omne animantum* (I 4, and *passim*<sup>13</sup>), smacking, again, of didactic<sup>14</sup>. The dynamic character of Avienus' translation of these verses is rehearsed, finally –

<sup>10</sup> Santini 1992, 952-953 on the double hyperbaton *protenta... diuortia* and *uastae... terrae*.

<sup>11</sup> The climactic sequence also seems reflected in (or supported by) the sequence of verbs, moving from idleness to activity: *iacent, uoluuntur, nituntur* and *colit*.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 953. Where Santini saw it as an image of the riverrun, I would (similarly, but not quite) see it as reinforcing the coherence of the newly constructed sequence - which may also be connected to the image of a river running through the landscape.

<sup>13</sup> I 1033; II 920; II 1063; V 431 and numerous other instances of *animans*, as 'living being'.

<sup>14</sup> On the zooming sequence: it is remarkable that in Avienus' epilogue only the final question is rehearsed: *has tantum gentes commendat fama per orbem* [...] (line 1385). Cf. *infra* section 4. On the idea of didactic questions as generic markers, a double gloss seems apt: (1) the use of such questions does not necessarily direct the reader exclusively to Vergil (though he would seem first choice), but rather to a broader landscape of 'didactic poetry' where this practice is well-attested; (2) as the anonymous referee pointed out, Avienus' repetitive phrasing might also be a broader, late-antique characteristic: Marcellus Empiricus' *De medicamentis*, for example, opens with a sixfold *quod* (*quod... quod... quod... quod... quodque... quod... hoc liber iste tenet*).

and reinforced – by the choice of the verb that governs these questions: *perget stilus impiger*. Avienus' pen will not only address these questions, it will actually set out and travel through (*per-*) this scenery: there is most definitely a play here with the double nature of *pergere*, i.e. with both its metaphorical and its purely physical sense of setting out and pursuing something. When read like this, the four instances of *qua* become signposts indicating the pen's route over the earth: rather than a static «where?», they can be a dynamic «by what way?» or «where along?». At this point already, very early on in the poem, a metaphor is being developed which will be central to the poem's working: the metaphor of both reading and writing as traveling, related to the broader metaphor of the text as a world<sup>15</sup>. This pen is not only untiring, it is also impatient; this pen, like the narrator and the reader, is a traveler, all packed and ready to go!

When we meet the *stilus impiger* on verse 5, however, we understand that not only the hymnic character has been abandoned, but also the illusion of oral performance. Avienus is not about to sing of these subjects, not about to teach them: his untiring pen is going to write them down. The *stilus impiger* seems (at least to me) to breathe a certain scholarly or antiquarian spirit into the lines: it conjures the image of a poet labouring at his desk, bringing to mind the material circumstances of the poetry (the writing material, the sweat<sup>16</sup>, the effort). It reminds one of the *uates operosus*, who is the narrator of Ovid's *Fasti* and provides a curious bridge between Roman antiquarianism and inspired, vatic poetry: e.g. the apparition of Janus to the poet on New Year's Day «plays on our expectations of inspiration and antiquarianism, first by placing the scene of inspiration in the poet's study, and then by using a god's voice to explore the assumptions of Roman antiquarianism»<sup>17</sup>. Similarly, Avienus' *stilus impiger* functions as a pivot between both halves of the poem: on the one hand it connects back to the didactic questions, which the poet wants to answer in his poem and which are rather antiquarian<sup>18</sup> (the *impiger* is also reminiscent of Lucretius' *impigrae experientia mentis*, V 1452); on the other hand, the notion of poetry is never abandoned and thus it connects to the second half too.

The same applies to the specification *Aonii oris*: the landmark of the Aonian countryside was Mount Helicon and the idea of Aonia often figured as the realm of

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. *infra* section 4. On this poetic metaphor, Höschele 2007 has a wonderful introduction, along with further bibliography and numerous examples. Volk 2002 also devotes considerable attention to it in the context of didactic poetry.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. *sudorisque mei* (v. 261).

<sup>17</sup> Pasco-Pranger 2000, 285. The situation is actually quite parallel to that of Ovid's *uates* and Janus: (a) poet pondering question to be answered in poem, (b) view of poet in material circumstances, (c) difficulty of the question, (d) divine inspiration saves the day.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Santini 1992 on the notes of geography, hydrography and ethnography. *Priscus* (v. 3), e.g., is a typical word (cf. its presence in the *Fasti*).

Hesiod and didactic poetry. Hesiod, brought to mind by Aonia, both looks back to the first half as the father of didactic and, as the prime example of the poet meeting the Muses, ushers in the Heliconian landscape revealed in the second half too. In this half, the poet seems to realize the difficulty of his task and calls upon divine help from Mount Helicon to inspire him: an invocation to the Muses and Apollo is added to Dionysius' text. We'll have a more in-depth look at this section shortly, but I do want to point out that this reference to inspired, vatic poetry again creates the illusion of real-time performance, this time oral performance<sup>19</sup>.

Thematically, then, the pen may be seen to connect both halves, but it does pose other problems: if it were not for the presence of the pen, the narrative situation presented at the outset of the poem would be quite straightforward: the narrative voice announces a didactic theme and dresses it up as a poetic performance taking shape before the eyes of the reader. This focus on composing poetry, rather than teaching, is the kind of poetic self-consciousness and poetic simultaneity that Katharina Volk claims as central characteristics of Latin didactic. The confusion between two kinds of fictional oral performances – didactic and poetic – is manageable: with some imagination, we can picture a teacher addressing his class in poetic speech. The insertion of the pen, however, creates a more complex situation, whereby two separate worlds are intermixed: the fictional oral performance of the text world and the *de facto* textual nature of the discourse world. The result is a strange blend between a didactic performance and communication-by-the-book – a blend that cannot be fully dissolved: at times the narrator is talking (*loquar, expediam, fabor*), at times he is writing (*lector, stilus, uersu*). Whether the actual description is being presented as a speech (from a teacher or a poet) or as a text becomes unclear – but nevertheless, it remains embedded, as the words of this narrator taking shape in real-time<sup>20</sup>.

In a completely different way, the untiring pen of the narrator is interesting, too. For, the narrator's pen is in several ways a *calamo della memoria*, soaked in the ink of memory. First (and of lesser importance), being Avienus' pen, it is molded by his hand and therefore what comes out of it is often distinctly Avienian. The *qua* opening the text, ironically, not only reminds one of Vergil, but anyone who has ever wrestled through Avienus will instantly recognize it is as somewhat annoying part of his idiom<sup>21</sup>. This applies for a lot of his vocabulary (*diuortia, pronus, inclitus,*

<sup>19</sup> Note on the *Aonii oris* of the pen: the 'Greek mouth' of the pen similarly reminds us of the very real act of translation. It is subtly recapped in the second half of the proem: verses 6-7 see the Greek Muses and Greek Apollo entering the poet's chest, only to surface on the other side of the tunnel of paraphrase (v. 8) as the Roman Phoebus and Camenae (v. 9-10).

<sup>20</sup> The future form in *perget*, for example, is quite important: it moves the actual description away from the moment of speaking, into the future. The reader gets the impression that the description does not yet exist at the time of speaking.

<sup>21</sup> The concordance of Wacht 1995 lists it as one of the top occurrences, with 155 hits: first place

etc.) as well as his taste for enjambments. Sometimes material seems to be re-used: the *carminis auspiciū* of verse 10 reminds one of the opening verse of Avienus' *Aratea*: (*carminis incentor mihi Iuppiter: auspice terras*); verse 818 (*totis Helicon adspiret ab antris*) is nearly identical to verse 76 of the *Aratea* (*totis se Helicon inspirat ab antris*)<sup>22</sup>.

In what follows, we will be paying attention to two other kinds of memory, however: first, that of other Latin poetry (the library of Latin literature or the storehouse of *topoi*) and, in a last chapter and more surprising perhaps, the memory of his own *Descriptio* – for, as we will see, there seems to be an awful lot of repetition in the *Descriptio*.

### 3. Constructing a voice

Let us return to the second part of the proem, lines 6-10. Again, Avienus seems to be building his text with the brickwork of commonplace, which tends to distract the modern reader from what is actually being said. The general impression left by these 5 verses is that of inspired, vatic poetry and of the *uates* or prophet. But how is this accomplished? The field of poetic inspiration is a vast repertoire of stock images, *topoi*, allusion, re-use, etc. and Avienus seems to make clever use of this *thesaurus memoriae*.

We mentioned how *Aonii oris* ushered in the sacred landscape of poetic inspiration and, indeed, (quite fitting for a work of geography) two landmarks of Aonia are mentioned in the second half: Cirrha and Mount Helicon – each connected to a different type of speech: prophetic and poetic.

Verse 6 opens with the narrator's sudden realization of the difficulty of the task he beset himself. *Ardua res, Musae* reminds one of the epic voice that is forced to take a deep breath and call for the help of the Muses before episodes of particular difficulty, learning or pathos – e.g. the *maius opus moueo* of the Vergilian *uates*<sup>23</sup> (*Aen.* VII.45). Another Vergilian passage that comes to mind is *sed me Parnasi deserta per ardua dulcis | raptat amor* (*georg.* III 291-2): though Avienus used *ardua* as an adjective and Vergil as a noun, the echo of a high and difficult mountain ridge may also have lingered in Avienus – the Parnasus neighboring on the Helicon in Aonia. This may be some wishful thinking, though. The rest of lines 6-7 do set the scene in Aonia, however: the narrator is invaded by Apollo bursting forth from the innermost sanctuary of the Delphic oracle, and the Cirrhaean harbour is used to evoke the Delphic setting. The narrator is posing as a divine medium, then, a prophet, a priest.

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among adverbs, eight in general. Also see Santini 1992, 952.

<sup>22</sup> Also compare the rare Avienian coinage of *incentor*, featuring in the *Descriptio* on verse 896 and as the second word of the *Aratea*. The word does not seem to have been attested anywhere before Avienus.

<sup>23</sup> He explicitly calls himself *uates* in the same passus: “*tu uatem, tu, diua, mone*” (*Aen.* VII 41).



He manages to do so in only two lines by drawing heavily on the reader's memory: each line, each word seems to evoke tons of other texts and associations (often no single one in particular<sup>24</sup>), that all share one constant: the presence of a priest of some sort in the immediate context. *Deus, en deus* might be read as the words of the Vergilian Sibyl (*deus ecce deus: Aen. VI 46*), but the words of Ovid's Roman *sacerdos* who recognizes Aesculapius apply just as well: *En, deus est, deus est (met. XV 677)*. The use of *intrare* in the phrasing *deus intrat Apollo* might be derived from Silius Italicus, who uses it twice and who is in general a strong presence in Avienus<sup>25</sup>. In book 3 the Carthaginian Bostar reports back after having consulted a Libyan oracle and describes the actions of the priest, who is called both *sacerdos* and *uates: ecce intrat subitus uatem deus* (III 697); in book 12 the narrator describes a consultation of the Pythian oracle: *Phoebo iam intrata sacerdos* (XII 323)<sup>26</sup>. Even a single word like *fatidicae* carries a lot of weight<sup>27</sup>. Carlo Santini connected the combination *fatidicae Cirrhae* to Seneca's Oedipus swearing by Apollo: *fatidica uatis ora Cirrhaeae mouens (Oed. 269)*. In Vergil, a key occurrence of *fatidicus* is used of the prophetic nymph Carmentis, called *uatis fatidi-*

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Hinds 1998, 34-47 on *topoi*.

<sup>25</sup> Suggested by Santini 1992, 954. On Silius in Avienus: Santini also points to the use of *diuortia* (III 419 and Auien. *Descr.* 1). More substantial and convincing, however, is the way the conversation between Hercules and *Fides* (II 274ff.: Silius paints Hercules and *Fides* looking down upon the besieged Spanish town of Saguntum) seems to have had a particular influence on Avienus' depiction of the constellation *Virgo* (*Ar.* 273-366).

In the same episode, *Fides* is sent down to earth with the words: *Inde seuera leui decurrens aethere uirgo | luctantem fatis petit inflammata Saguntum* (II 513-4), a line that may have influenced Avienus' use of *decurrens* in *incentore canam Phoebo, Musisque magistris | omnia ueridico decurrens carmine pandam* (*Descr.* 896-897). The same stress right after the caesura. The usual association of *decurrere*, so close to *carmen*, with textual progress is indeed more obvious and more likely and would fit in with the idea of poetic simultaneity underlying the text. Yet, I would not exclude the option of a descent to earth: it reverses Dionysius' idea of flying with the Muses as well as the opening verses of the *Aratea* where the poet ascends to the cosmos (cf. Khan (2004) on the compatibility and contrasts between Dionysius and Aratus); it would imply composing the Lucretian 'veridic' poem while or after observing the earth from above, which contrasts nicely with Avienus' mention that he has not physically 'crawled around' the earth. It would, in short, add to the contrast between real and imaginary traveling a related contrast between walking and flying, earth and sky, low and high. If not a thoroughly convincing case, it might be an interesting suggestion, given Avienus' imagery and use of the episode elsewhere. On the episode in Silius, see Vessey 1974.

<sup>26</sup> Compare the immediate context: *Addunt spem miseris dulcem Parnasia Cirrha / portantes responsa uiri. nam laeta ferebant / exaudisse adytis, sacra cum uoce tonaret / antrum et mugiret Phoebo iam intrata sacerdos* (XII 320-3).

<sup>27</sup> Other places of interest: Valerius Flaccus (*Arg.* I 2) has *fatidicam ratem* opening the second line of his *Argonautica* (Apollonius was a huge influence on Dionysius); Claudianus' *carm. min.3 (Ad Aeternalem)*, on his own poetic 'doom': *Quidquid Castalio de gurgite Phoebus anhelat, / quidquid fatidico mugit cortina recessu, / carmina sunt, et uerba negant communia Musae.*

cae (*Aen.* VIII 340)<sup>28</sup>. Lurking behind the words is always the prophet, it seems.

On this last verse of Vergil, Servius comments: *bene addidit 'fatidicae': nam uatem et poetam possumus intellegere, unde solum plenum non erat*. The prophetic *uates* was always closely related to the poetic *uates* – just as *uates* Apollo was not only the prophetic deity, but also the *Mousagetes*, the leader of the Muses<sup>29</sup>. In verses 8-10 the camera shifts to a different part of Aonia: the Muses are now invoked as *Pierides*<sup>30</sup>, which has a decided Hesiodic ring to it. We now find ourselves in the enclosed and rural realm of poetry (Vergil uses *Pierides* exclusively in the *Eclogues*), dominated by Mount Helicon rather than the Delphic oracle. In this landscape, then, the narrator is not invaded by a god, but begs the Muses to come down from the mountain. His pose is now that of real poets wandering in the landscape of poetic inspiration<sup>31</sup>. The Constantinian poet of figure poems, Optatianus Porphyrius, provides the closest parallel for lines 8-9: *Nunc mihi iam toto dociles Helicone Camenae | mittite compositas in tempora mitia palmas, | nectite de metris uirtutum carmina et omnes | concinite [...]* (9, 9-11)<sup>32</sup>. It is in this Aonian landscape, round Mount Helicon, that our narrator situates himself: the Helicon where both the Muses dwell and Tiresias gained prophetic vision. It is the perfect setting for dressing up as a *vates*, the Augustan costume combining the priest/prophet and the poet.

In both ways, the narrator takes on the pose of an intermediary figure. The prophet, as a mouthpiece of the divine, does not speak with a mortal voice; whereas the poet *does* speak with his own voice, but the Muses provide him with the means to

<sup>28</sup> In Vergil, too, Apollo appears as the force behind the prophecy of Euander's mother Carmentis that drove her son to Latium (*Aen.* VIII 334-6). Other instances of *fatidicus* are Faunus (VII 82) and (yet another nymph) Manto (X 199). In the latter case, it is the *vates* Vergil who can be seen lurking behind *fatidicus*, dangling at the end of the long chain Manto (*fatidica*) - Ocnus (*Mantuae fundator*) - Mantua - Vergil (*Mantua me genuit*).

<sup>29</sup> On the Augustan appropriation of the *vates* as a poetic figure and the ensuing possibilities of *uates* characters for reflecting on literary activity, see Newman 1967 as a first reference. Also of interest are Winkler 1987, Korenjak 1999, Hardie 2007 (esp. *V. The Muse-invocations in Aeneid 1 and 7*) and Hinds 2006. Mention of Apollo together with the Muses: ps.-Cato (*De musis versus*, 10), Ausonius (*Epist.* 14 White, 8-11), Claudianus (*carm. min.* 3), Horatius (*AP* 407), Juvenalis (7, 36ff.), Optatianus Porphyrius (*Epist.* 3), Propertius (IV 6.11), Valerius Flaccus (V 693), et al.

<sup>30</sup> The Muses are called by three different names in Avienus' proem: *Musae* (6), *Pierides* (8) and *Camenae* (10). On the marked opposition *Musae-Camenae* and the notion of translation, cf. *supra* nt. 16.

<sup>31</sup> See Hunter 2006, 16-28 (*De monte sororum*). Hunter's idea of the Helicon as markedly «not Homer's» (p. 19), is interesting when compared to the observation of Gibson 2004 that Homeric echoes are systematically deleted and/or replaced in Avienus.

<sup>32</sup> See also the spurious letter of Optatianus to Constantine (§3): *In quo mihi pro Heliconii uerticis nemore, pro Castalii fontis haustu uersifico, pro Apollinis lyra et Musarum concinentibus choris ceteris que quae poetis mos est carmen pangentibus inuocare, tui diuini nominis aeterna felicitas et eius multiformis cum sua ueneratione praelatio incentiuum cecinit ad audendum, et ad expediendum pariter ingenium tribuit et effectum*. On poetic speech and the idea of the *uates* in Optatianus, see Bruhat 2008.

succeed in a task that is too difficult for a mere mortal. They are *creators of order* and *as eyewitnesses and chroniclers of all events, they represent truth. Hence derives the authority of the poet*<sup>33</sup>. Their truth is that of memory and therefore the poet asks *memorate, Camenae*. It is my guess that this idea of authority is what the narrator of a didactic poem is aiming for<sup>34</sup>. The poet *is* the perfect teacher of geography: as a mediator between the higher forces inspiring him and his human nature, he combines the best of both worlds<sup>35</sup>. That the teacher character is a poet would also befit the rather anonymous didactic constellation in which the student seems to intermix with the ever-changing *lector*. What is remarkable too, however, is how Avienus achieves this: *i.e.* through the careful mapping out of associations and the clever use of the reader's knowledge to construct this image. The word *uates* is never used by Avienus<sup>36</sup>, yet the whole passage seems to function like a riddle: «*suggerire e nascondere un oggetto*»<sup>37</sup>. The suggestiveness of the riddle is only possible because of the reader's memory.

#### 4. *A voice constructing*

Let us now turn away from Avienus' construction of a voice and have a look at the way this voice lends structure to the entire *Descriptio*. For, the emerging of the narrative voice at regular intervals constitutes something of a refrain throughout the *Descriptio*.

When discussing the first lines of Avienus' *Descriptio*, I pointed out the zooming effect achieved in the sequence earth-water-cities-people. This idea seems to be supported by the fact that in the epilogue (vv. 1385-1393) only the final question is rehearsed: *has tantum gentes commendat fama per orbem* (1385). This is the answer to the fourth question (*genus hoc procul omne animantum qua colit?*) and closes the frame around the description. Moreover, the final verses of the epilogue also repeat a lot of the vocabulary of the proem: *Musis, Phoebe, Camenae, Aonio*, etc.

has tantum gentes commendat fama per orbem:  
uile aliae uulgus, pecorum uice, terga pererrant  
caespitis abiecti. non his aut gloria forti  
parta manu est, aut clara decus peperere metalla

<sup>33</sup> Both quotations from Walde 2010.

<sup>34</sup> An idea expressed repeatedly in Volk 2002. See especially p. 25-68 for other examples.

<sup>35</sup> On teachers as middlemen in (late) antiquity, see Kaster 1988 on the grammarian as «one of antiquity's great middlemen». Also of interest is the idea of antiquarianism, as in Pernot 2005 on «l'uomo biblioteca».

<sup>36</sup> Once in the *Descriptio* about Aratus (v. 1040) and twice in the *Aratea* about Orpheus (vv. 627 and 630).

<sup>37</sup> Bergamin 2004a, 153.

terrarum uenis: habitant ignota locorum  
 semper inexpertes fama, per inhospita degunt  
 arua procul, nullis sunt dignae denique Musis.  
 at tu, Phoebe pater, uos clari turba, Camenae,  
 nominis, Aonio famam inspirate labori.

Among the most distinguishing characteristics of Avienus' translation are his serious efforts at applying structure to his work, at framing and closing of sections and episodes – typical not only of Avienus, but of late-antique poetics in general, as Michael Roberts has amply demonstrated<sup>38</sup>. Two techniques are significant. First, the use of verbal echoes between the start and end of various descriptions aids in setting them apart as 'chapters': both on a micro- (e.g. *Itala tellus* on ll. 114 and 154) and a macrolevel (the proem and epilogue would provide an example here). Second, the clever use of the coincidence between the world as the actual content of the poem and the poetic metaphor of the text as a world. The size of the continents, for example, is mirrored by the length of the passages describing them: because Asia is twice the size of Europe or Libya, it has their combined amount of verses (560 and 568). The continents, then, are not only slabs of land, but also slabs of text, with square meters equaling verses. This also gives the poetic metaphor of reading and writing as traveling an extra dimension. Now, when one puts both techniques together, one can wonder whether these precisely measured continents are also framed in some way.

It would seem that they are: the proem starting the description of Asia (vv.817-821) is clearly reminiscent of the very first proem. On lines 817-21 we meet the *stilus* again for the first time, as well as the echoing Helicon, the caves, *inclita* and the Muses. The phrase *incute doctam*, / *Phoebe, chelyn* (817-8) is picked up from the proem to Libya (257-8: *incute docto*, / *Phoebe, chelyn plectro*). The Asian proem is a combination of the European and Libyan ones:

carmine nunc Asiam formet stilus. incute doctam,  
 Phoebe, chelyn; totis Helicon adspiret ab antris.  
 maxima pars orbis narrabitur, inclita tellus  
 prometur Musis. terrarum summa duarum  
 unius est limes; [...]

If both halves have a proem, what about the epilogues? It is remarkable that, whereas Avienus usually elaborates, he has cut down Dionysius' epilogue from 21 to 9 verses. He follows the general line of argument, but Dionysius' claim that only a god could name *all* the people is left out – well, not left out, but moved. Avienus has transferred it to the closing section of the western hemisphere (vv.803-816), where

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<sup>38</sup> Part of an influential view, developed over twenty-five years, from Roberts 1984 and Roberts 1988 to Roberts 1989 and recently even Roberts 2009.

it is painted in Vergilian colours: *harum quis ualeat...?* (v. 812ff.) seems built on Vergil's closure of «his review of vines and grapes»<sup>39</sup> (*georg.* II 103ff.).

insulae in Oceani procursibus hae tibi tantum  
 carmine sunt dignae. multas uehit undique pontus  
 praeterea, paruas specie famaue carentis.  
 pars Asiam, Libyam pars adiacet altera ponto,  
 pars uidet Europam; non has tamen aut modus orae,  
 aut interna caui commendat uena metalli.  
 harum aliae duris reserant uix litora nautis,  
 et scaber in multis scrupus riget; undique iniquus  
 subrigitur uertex, et inhospita caespitis ora est.  
 harum quis ualeat numerosa ut nomina fari?  
 si uelit hoc ullus, uelit idem scire quot alto  
 curuentur fluctus pelago, quot sidera caelo  
 elucent flammis, quot robora proferat Ida,  
 quantus harenarum numerus uerratur ab euro.

Such patent lifting and transferring of part of the original epilogue to the 'halfway epilogue' is a striking intervention of the translator. If we look at the entire section, we'll notice that the vocabulary mirrors that of the final epilogue entirely: *hae tibi tantum* (*has tantum gentes*), *carmine sunt dignae* (*dignae denique Musis*), *famaue carentis* (*inexpertes famaue*), *aut... aut* (*aut...aut*), *non has* (*non his*), *interna caui uena metalli* (*metalla terrarum uenis*), *commendat* (*commendat*), *inhospita* (*inhospita*), *caespitis* (*caespitis*). It seems clear that Avienus has constructed this symmetry deliberately: 'cutting and pasting' and using echoes from his own text, he endowed the Euro-Libyan half and the Asian half with resonant proems and epilogues.

Before we close, one final observation, which might push the parallelism even further. The final episode, the grand final of the actual description of the world just before the epilogue, is a miniature epic recounting Bacchus' triumph over the Indians (vv. 1359-84). Avienus seems to be closing in style, expanding Dionysius' 14 verses (vv. 1152-65) to 26. This expansion is not exclusively due to Avienus' habitual verbosity and penchant towards repetition, but rather to the insertion of new elements, among which elements borrowed from Vergil to lend vivacity to the description: the Battle of Actium from the shield of Vulcan, the description of Janus' temple and the ensuing rise to arms of the Latins, who change their farming tools for weaponry and Aeneas' vision of Rome's future heroes<sup>40</sup>. If we now turn towards the episode preceding the halfway epilogue (vv. 772-793), we notice something similar:

<sup>39</sup> Gibson 2004, 65

<sup>40</sup> On the Bacchus episode, see the forthcoming B.Selter, *Through the looking-glass of memory: reading Avienus*, «QUCC» XCIV/2 (2010).

contemplator item, ceu se mare <flectat> in austrum,  
 inque notum Oceanus freta ponti caerulea curuet:  
 altaque Coliadis mox hic tibi dorsa patescent  
 rupis, et intenti spectabis caespitis arces.  
 pro quibus ingenti consistens mole per undas  
 insula Taprobane gignit taetros elephantos,  
 et super aestiferi torrentur sidera cancri.  
 haec immensa patet, uastisque extenditur oris  
 undique per pelagus; latus autem protinus olli  
 agmina cetosi pecoris, uaga monstra profundi,  
 adludunt. feruent Erythraei marmora ponti  
 tota feris: haec, ut rigidi iuga maxima montis,  
 nubibus attollunt latus omne et terga tumescunt;  
 instar in his rupis spinae tenor arduus adstat,  
 molibus in celsis scrupus quoque creber inhorret.  
 a! ne quis rapidi subuectus gurgitis unda  
 haec in terga sali lembum contorqueat umquam;  
 a! ne monstrigenis, hostem licet, inferat aestus  
 fluctibus: immodici late patet oris hiatus  
 quippe feris, antro panduntur guttura uasto;  
 protinus haec ipsas absorbent fauce carinas,  
 inuoluuntque simul mox monstra uoracia nautas.

At this point in his poem, Dionysius is describing the island of Sri Lanka at the edge of the world and in an example of *hic sunt leones*, monsters appear in the sea: Dionysius utters the wish for his enemies to fall pray to these creatures, as a punishment provided by the providential deity pervading his poem. Avienus expands the 15 verses to 22 and paints a more pathetic scene, devoting most of his attention to the gigantic monsters (called *agmina cetosi pecoris*, *monstra* and *fera*) looming in the waters before the coasts of the island. Dionysius' wish for punishment is turned into a pathetic cry: not even his enemies should encounter these monsters, whose gaping mouths resemble the underworld opening up! According to Nicolas Lemaire, in the introduction to his 1825 edition of Avienus, this remarkable change in pathos was already noticed by the Spanish bibliographer Nicolás Antonio (1617-1684), who used the episode to support his thesis «Avienum poetam Christianum fuisse, aut Christianorum dogmatum gnarum et amantem»<sup>41</sup>: Avienus' dramatic hyperbole was interpreted as a token of a Christian moral of ethical reciprocity. To read this vignette as Avienus preaching 'love your neighbor as you love yourself', however, now seems a little far-fetched; what strikes *us* is the way Avienus elaborates the episode into a vivid and colorful piece of description, not averse to some drama,

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<sup>41</sup> Lemaire 1825, 10ss. The work from which the quotation was drawn is Antonio's *Bibliotheca Hispana Vetus* (1672), a compendium or literary history of authors writing in (or: *on*) Spain, from the time of Augustus onwards to 1500.

much like he did for the Bacchus episode. Such juxtaposing of these two episodes also brings to the fore other similarities between them, most notably the use of a Vergilian palette to paint this episode of sea monsters. Helenus' prophecy of Scylla and Charybdis (*Aen.* III.420ff.) and the dramatic a! exclamations used in *Eclogue* VI (74ff.) when describing Scylla. The analogies between both episodes are immediately clear: both are vivid descriptions, carefully elaborated *vis-à-vis* the Greek original, both feature as a final highlight right before the epilogue and, thematically, both explore the edge of the world. Yet, so are the contrasts, which tie together both episodes even stronger: whereas Bacchus climbs on high in triumph, the sailors are sunk down into the monstrous abyss; the wondrous people of India contrast with the monstrous creatures of Taprobane; while civilization (in the guise of Bacchus) may be victorious on land, in the nautical realm of the sea the monstrous and irrational holds sway; *etc.* What connects both halves is more than the use of a Vergilian palette.

The result is more than just a clever nod to the reader, but rather an important part of Avienus' reworking of the Greek text: not only is the entire *Descriptio* framed by the game of call-and-answer between the reciprocal proem and epilogue, constituting something of a large ring around the description, but order and symmetry are also created by Avienus' further cutting and pasting, resulting in two further rings or hemispheres, both entirely symmetrical and both contained within the larger ring. This idea of a writer exerting utter control over his work can be found throughout the vast literature of late antiquity: from writers like Ausonius or Claudianus creating distinct layers of meaning and leaving messages to control reception to artists like Optatianus Porphyrius showing his mastery over words, letters and language. The writerly pleasure that Avienus indulges in, the joy of creating a carefully delimited universe in which everything has its unique place, is "the demiurgic pleasure of the cartographer who creates 'abridged universes'"<sup>42</sup>. It is the work of a craftsman, chiseling away with his pen. This is Avienus' untiring pen, his *stilus impiger*, at work. In various ways, as we have tried to illustrate, a *calamo della memoria*, worthy of serious attention.

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<sup>42</sup> Jacob 2006, 317. See also Nils Rucker's splendid «Neulesung» of Ausonius' *Epistulae* 21 and 22 to Paulinus, which ends with the observation that Ausonius uses a number of literary allusions to create a ring composition, tying the letters together into a «Gesamtkunstwerk»: Rucker 2009, 103.

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