

Locus Suspectus: Landscape and the Uncanny in Ovid's Metamorphoses

The *locus amoenus*, 'pleasant place', has been recognized as a *topos* of Roman poetry since at least the time of Quintilian (*Inst.* 3.7.28). Vivid and beautiful, the description of a natural paradise arrests the action of a story and reorients readers, as they adjust to a new scene or to a change in tone. Ovid's subversive use of the *locus amoenus* has been well documented, as his apparently sublime spaces tend to warp suddenly into scenes of violence (Hinds 2002; Parry 1964). In the *Metamorphoses*, what at first seems pleasant and familiar becomes disturbingly alien.

In this paper, I aim to supplement the work on Ovid's use of the *locus amoenus topos* by examining another landscape found throughout the *Metamorphoses*: the *locus suspectus*. This landscape is in some ways the inverse of the former; at first strange and unwelcoming, a sense of eeriness arises when we realize the landscape is all too familiar, for our very emotions and experiences live there. The dwelling places of Envy (2.761-764), Hunger (8.788-791), and Sleep (11.592-615) each present a distinctly uncanny setting, whose blend of familiar and unfamiliar produces an unusually eerie moment in the epic poem.

In his essay, "The Uncanny," Freud discusses literature which arouses a sense of unease in its readers (Freud 2003). He offers as a Latin translation of the title, *locus suspectus*, 'suspicious place'. Although Freud does not discuss literary landscapes in this context, the concept of the uncanny and the term *locus suspectus* nevertheless suit the scenes under consideration. This is especially apparent when we consider Freud's definition of the uncanny as, "everything that was intended to remain secret, hidden away, and has come into the open." For each of these stories focuses on an externalized depiction of what normally remains within,

whether a feeling like Envy, a physical sensation like Hunger, or a solitary experience like Sleep. As Freud formulates, the uncovering of what usually remains hidden results in a pervasive eerie tone throughout each of these stories.

Taking previous work on the *locus amoenus* as a starting point, I examine this series of landscapes in the *Metamorphoses* in order to isolate the distinctive aspects that evoke the feeling of the uncanny. In addition to a lack of sunlight and an abundance of cold and mist, vivid beings inhabit these desolate places: the Fury-like personifications Envy and Hunger and the somewhat more benign Sleep. It has been argued that the physical characteristics of these personifications correspond to their effects on people (Lowe 2007). I suggest that this correspondence extends as well to the landscapes they inhabit. For example, after a girl is infected with envy, she comes to resemble Envy's cold and dry terrain. In a series of epic similes she is likened to ice and dry thorns (2.808-811). A similar symbiosis between landscape and action has been observed in the *locus amoenus* scenes (Segal 1969). As each of these landscapes connects metonymically to its associated personification, the notion of something personal or private being laid bare compels us to confront the familiarity of these desolate and unsettling spaces.

As I consider the details specific to each *locus suspectus*, I take into account intertexts with other Roman poets, which add depth and nuance to each scene. For example, the house of Sleep is described as, *longo spelunca recessu*, "a cave in a long recess" (11.592). This line bears a striking resemblance to Evander's description of Cacus' cave at *Aeneid* 8.159: *hic spelunca fuit, vasto summota recessu*, "here there was a cave, made distant by a vast recess." The intertext brings to mind the monstrous Cacus and his epic quarrel with Hercules, priming the reader to meet another monster within Ovid's cave. This intertext demonstrates how Ovid uses the

landscape to evoke the feeling of the uncanny, as the reminiscence of the cannibal Cacus contributes to a frightening atmosphere.

Over the course of this exploration, I observe how Ovid uses vivid description, metonymic connection to personifications and their effects, and intertextual references to develop this series of eerie landscapes in such a way that produces a tone of what Freud recognized as “the uncanny.”

Bibliography

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