



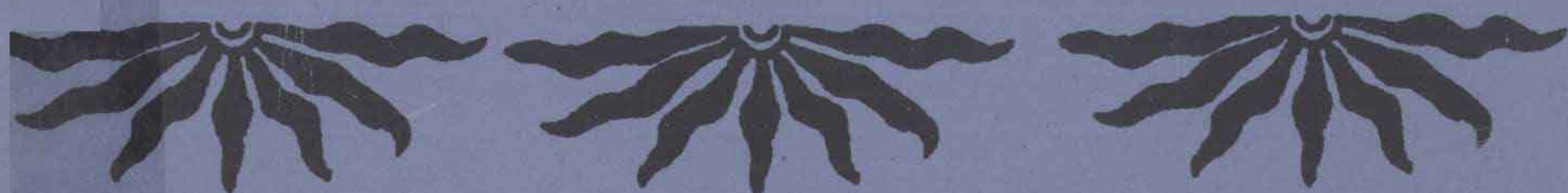
U M B E R T O E C O

*The Aesthetics of
Chaosmos*

*The Middle Ages
of James Joyce*

Translated by Ellen Esrock

Note to the 1989 Edition by David Robey



The Aesthetics of Chaosmos

The Middle Ages
of James Joyce

By Umberto Eco

Translated from the Italian by Ellen Esrock

Harvard University Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts

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Note to the 1989 Edition

Eco's essay on Joyce originally appeared as the final chapter of the first edition (1962) of *Opera Aperta*, most of which is now translated into English as *The Open Work* (Harvard University Press, 1989); it was then removed from subsequent editions and published separately. This separation must have been dictated purely by considerations of size, since the argument of this essay is integrally connected to the themes of *Opera Aperta*, for which Joyce's work is a constant point of reference. For Eco, Joyce is the exemplary modern, or modernist, writer. His work is the most powerful, radical, and influential embodiment of tendencies that dominate the literature and art of our time—tendencies formulated by Eco in the concept of the "open" work. *Finnegans Wake* in particular is for Eco the "open" work *par excellence*.

The Aesthetics of Chaosmos is thus a contribution to a discussion which has remained topical in a great deal of modern literary theory—a relatively early contribution that predates the explosion of literary theory in the mid-sixties, and anticipates much subsequent work. It is distinguished by a number of features that reflect Eco's particular concerns at the time he wrote it, though these concerns have also in various ways remained part of his thinking. The conception of works of art as "epistemological metaphors," which plays a major role in *Opera Aperta*, is applied with special force to Joyce, in whose evolution as a writer Eco finds an embodiment of what he considers the major development in the history of Western thought: the transition from models of rational order, expressed most fully in the *summae* of medieval Scholasticism, to the sense of chaos and crisis that dominates the modern experience of the world. Along with, and even more than, other modern "open" works, *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* give form to this experience of the world, and thereby constitute in their own way a kind of knowledge, a bringing to consciousness of the nature of the modern condition. Such knowledge, Eco argues in *Opera Aperta*, is also a basis for political action; consciousness of the modern condition enables one to act upon the world to change it for the better.

There is, too, an engagingly personal aspect to Eco's discussion of

Joyce. Not only does Joyce's evolution, from Catholic, Thomist interests to a disordered vision of life, mirror Eco's; the coexistence of models of order and disorder that Eco finds in *Ulysses* has also characterized most of his own work, including *The Name of the Rose*, which so strikingly juxtaposes the harmonious, rational medieval intellectual system with the worldview expressed by William of Baskerville: a distinctively modern sense of chaos and crisis.

David Robey

Translator's Foreword

The Aesthetics of Chaosmos is a translation of Umberto Eco's Italian text *Le Poetiche di Joyce* (Milano: Bompiani, 1966), first published as a part of *Opera Aperta* (Milano: Bompiani, 1962). For the present edition, Eco has introduced one new section, "The Medieval Model," which incorporates parts of a lecture given in 1969 at Tulsa University, and he has substantially expanded one existing section, "The Poetics of the Pun." Also, as explained in the author's note, certain scholarly references have been eliminated.

The translation of Eco's work proved challenging. In addition to the expected task of recasting stylistic forms, the project required careful balancing. On the one hand, we wished to maintain the original 1960's perspective of the text. We sought, therefore, to avoid terminology that was indigenous to more contemporary models of linguistic analysis (as developed, for example, by Eco in *A Theory of Semantics* [Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1976]). On the other hand, the Italian text was written with an impulse towards the future. Eco's analyses foreshadowed issues that would be more fully developed within the framework of contemporary semiotics. We attempted, then, to recapture its trajectory, as well as its point of origin.

I am greatly indebted to Alice Oxman for a preliminary, partial translation of *Le Poetiche di Joyce*, portions of which have been incorporated into the present text. And I am grateful, of course, to Umberto Eco, for his patience in undertaking this excursion into his Joycean past. In the spirit of translator-editors, I accept responsibility for all errors.

Ellen J. Esrock
New York University, 1979

Author's Note

In publishing my Joycean adventure after twenty years I have not succumbed to the temptation to make substantial changes, even though the long work with Ellen Esrock in making the text more comprehensible has led to many cuts, especially in those parts which functioned at the time to give various items of scholarly information to Italian readers. Joyce was *also* an Italian author, and some of his highest praise came in the very beginning from the Italian literary milieu (Svevo, Benco, Montale. . .). But in 1962 *Ulysses* had been fully translated into Italian for only two years, not to mention the incomplete and tentative translations of *Finnegans Wake*. Thus my text was overloaded with explanations and bibliographical references unnecessary for the current American reader.

I have therefore retained only the parts focusing on the central theme of my research: the permanence of a medieval model, not only in the early writings but also in the later work of James Joyce.

In order to understand my curiosity, some biographical information may be helpful: I began my scholarly career studying medieval aesthetics (*Il Problema Estetico in San Tommaso* [Torino: Edizioni di "Filosofia," 1956]; "Sviluppo dell'estetica Medievale," in *Momenti e Problemi di Storia dell'estetica* [Milano: Marzorati, 1959], both works amalgamated in *Il Problema Estetico in Tommaso d'Aquino* [Milano: Bompiani, 1970]). Immediately after (but following the same interests and curiosity about the problem of structuring vs. deconstructing in communication), I studied the language of contemporary avant-gardes. The study of Joyce was first published as part of my book *Opera Aperta* (Milano: Bompiani, 1962) the first chapter of which the reader can find as the first essay of my recent *The Role of the Reader* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1979).

To me Joyce was the node where the Middle Ages and the avant-garde meet, and the present book is the story and the historical-theoretical foundation of such a paradoxical meeting.

I have therefore chosen to keep the original perspective of my text, even though much important Joycean research has appeared since 1962. Thus I have not taken into account the challenging contributions

of Thomas Staley, Bernard Benstock, Fritz Senn, Robert Scholes, David Haymann, Lulli Paci, Anthony Burgess and others, or, to speak of research more directly connected with my topic, Jacques Aubert and Jan Schoonbroodt. References to the scholarship that inspired my research prior to 1962 are listed at the end of the book, while other works, primarily concerning the Middle Ages, Renaissance philosophy, and modern science are found in the footnotes. I have expanded a paragraph on the medieval model and an analysis of puns in *Finnegans Wake* (the subject of a 1971 essay "Semantics of Metaphor," now published in *The Role of the Reader*).

I have agreed to awaken-again and make my book riverrunning in a vicus of recirculation only because of the missionary fervor of my friends at the James Joyce Foundation and *James Joyce Quarterly*, to whom we owe the fact that Martello Tower is still and again living. My debt to them should be recorded in Finneganian. That, in fact, has been done, but only in secret files lost or hidden in the meandertale connecting the "hauts lieux" of Trieste, Dublin, Paris, Zurich and Tulsa.

Umberto Eco
Milano, 1981

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I. The Early Joyce

"Steeled in the school of the old Aquinas."
—James Joyce, "The Holy Office"

The term "poetics" has acquired many meanings during the centuries. Aristotle's *Poetics* is an answer to both the questions "What is Art?" and "How does one make a work of art?" The modern philosophical tradition has preferred to define the theoretical answer to the first question as "aesthetics" and to utilize "poetics" in order to describe the program of a single artist or a particular artistic school. In this context, "poetics" addresses the question "How does one make a work of art according to a personal program and an idiosyncratic world view?" The more recent definition by the Prague Linguistic School considers "poetics" as the study of "the *differentia specifica* of verbal behavior."¹ In other words, "poetics" is the study of the structural mechanism of a given text which possesses a self-focusing quality and a capacity for releasing effects of ambiguity and polysemy.

Joyce plays with all these notions of poetics throughout his works; he interweaves questions as to the concept of art, the nature of his personal artistic program, and the structural mechanisms of the texts themselves. In this respect all of Joyce's works might be understood as a continuous discussion of their own artistic procedures.

A Portrait is the story of a young artist who wants to write *A Portrait*; *Ulysses*, a little less explicit, is a book which is a model of itself; *Finnegans Wake* is, above all, a complete treatise on its own nature, a continuous definition of "the Book" as the *Ersatz* of the universe. The reader, therefore, is continually tempted to isolate the poetics proposed by Joyce in order to define, in Joycean terms, the solutions that Joyce has adopted.

Although one can discuss the poetics of Horace, Boileau, or Valéry without referring to their creative works, Joyce's poetics cannot be separated from Joyce's texts. The poetics themselves form an intimate part of the artistic creation and are clarified in the various phases of the development of his opus. The entire Joycean project might thus be seen as the development of a poetics, or rather, as the dialectical

movement of various opposite and complementary poetics—the history of contemporary poetics in a game of oppositions and continuous implications.

Among the numerous cultural influences upon the young Joyce, we note three major lines which appear in all his works. On one count, we find the influence of Aquinas, thrown into crisis but not completely destroyed by the reading of Bruno and, on another, the influence of Ibsen, with a call for closer ties between art and life. Finally, we note the influence of the symbolist poets, with the aesthetic ideal of a life devoted to art and of art as a substitute for life, and with their stimulus to resolve the great problems of the spirit in the laboratory of language.² These contrasting influences from different centuries were assimilated within a framework that grew increasingly concerned with the problems of contemporary culture, from the psychology of the unconscious to the physics of relativity. The staggering quantity of Joyce's reading and the diversity of his interests opened the way to his discovery of new dimensions of the universe.

Approached in this way, our research needs a guiding thread, a line of investigation, an operative hypothesis. We take, therefore, the opposition between a classical conception of form and the need for a more pliable and "open" structure of the work and of the world. This can be identified as a dialectic of order and adventure, a contrast between the world of the medieval *summae* and that of contemporary science and philosophy.

Joyce himself authorizes us to use this dialectical key. The Joycean detachment from the familiar clarity of the schoolmen and his choice of a more modern and uneasy problematic is actually based on the Brunian revelation of a dialectic of contraries, on the acceptance of the *coincidentia oppositorum* of Cusano. Art and life, symbolism and realism, classical world and contemporary world, aesthetic life and daily life, Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom, Shem and Shaun, order and possibility are the continuous terms of a tension that has its roots in this theoretical discovery. In Joyce's works the very crisis of late scholasticism is accelerated and therein a new cosmos is born.

But this dialectic is not perfectly articulated; it does not have the balance of those ideal triadic dances upon which more optimistic philosophies build legends. While Joyce's mind brings this elegant curve of oppositions and mediations to its limits, his unconscious agitates like the unexpressed memory of an ancestral trauma. Joyce departs from the *summa* to arrive at *Finnegans Wake*, from the

ordered cosmos of scholasticism to the verbal image of an expanding universe. But his medieval heritage, from which his movements arise, will never be abandoned. Underneath the game of oppositions and resolutions in which the various cultural influences collide, on the deepest level, is the radical opposition between the medieval man, nostalgic for an ordered world of clear signs and the modern man, seeking a new habitat but unable to find the elusive rules and thus burning continually in the nostalgia of a lost infancy.

We would like to demonstrate that the definitive choice is not made and that the Joycean dialectic, more than a mediation, offers us the development of a continuous polarity between Chaos and Cosmos, between disorder and order, liberty and rules, between the nostalgia of Middle Ages and the attempts to envisage a new order. Our analysis of the poetics of James Joyce will be the analysis of a moment of transition in contemporary culture.

The Catholicism of Joyce

I will tell you what I will do and what I will not do. I will not serve that in which I no longer believe whether it call itself my home, my fatherland or my church: and I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can, using for my defence the only arms I allow myself to use – silence, exile, and cunning (P 247).

With Stephen's confession to Cranly, the young Joyce proposes his own program of exile. The assumptions of Irish tradition and Jesuitical education lose their value as rules. Thus Joyce abandons the faith but not religious obsession. The presence of an orthodox past re-emerges constantly in all of his work under the form of a personal mythology and with a blasphemous fury that reveals its affective permanence. Critics have spoken a great deal of Joyce's "Catholicism." The term appropriately reflects a mentality which rejects dogmatic substance and moral rules yet conserves the exterior forms of a rational edifice and retains its instinctive fascination for rites and liturgical figurations. Evidently, we are dealing with a fascination *à rebours*; speaking about Catholicism in connection with Joyce is a bit like speaking about filial love in connection with Oedipus and Jocasta. When Henry Miller insults Joyce, calling him the descendant of a medieval erudite with "priest's blood" and speaking of his hermit's morality with the onanistic mechanism that such a life comports, he identifies, with paradoxical treachery, a distinctive feature of Joyce.

Similarly, when Valery Larbaud remarks that *A Portrait* is closer to Jesuitical casuistry than to French naturalism, he says nothing that the average reader has not already sensed. But *A Portrait* reflects something more. The narration which is tuned to liturgical time, the taste for sacred oratory and moral introspection convey not only the mimetic instincts of the narrator but also an all-pervasive psychological mood. The style, imitating that of a rejected position, does not succeed as an indictment of Catholicism. It was not by chance that Thomas Merton converted to Catholicism upon reading *A Portrait*, thereby taking a road opposite that of Stephen's. This was possible not because the ways of the Lord are infinite but because the ways of Joycean sensibility are strange and contradictory, with the Catholic thread surviving in a vague, abnormal manner.

Buck Mulligan opens *Ulysses* with his "*Introibo ad altare Dei*," and the Black Mass is placed at the center of the work. The erotic ecstasy of Bloom and his lewd and platonic seduction of Gerty McDowell are in counterpoint with the moments of the Eucharistic ceremony performed in the church near the beach of Reverend Hughes. The macaronic Latin that appears at the end of *Stephen Hero*, which returns in *A Portrait* and appears here and there in *Ulysses*, reflects not only the speech patterns of the medieval *Vagantes* but also the patterns of their conceptual thought. Like those who abandon a discipline but not its cultural baggage, with Joyce there remains the sense of a curse celebrated according to a liturgical ritual. "Come up you, fearful jesuit," Mulligan shouts to Stephen and later clarifies, "Because you have the cursed jesuit strain in you, only it's injected the wrong way. . . ." And in *A Portrait*, Cranly observes the curious fact that Stephen's mind is saturated with the religion that he supposedly rejects.

Similarly, references to the liturgy of the Mass appear in the most unexpected ways at the center of the puns which are woven throughout *Finnegans Wake*:

(enterellbo add all taller Danis) (336.02) Per omnibus secular seekalarum (81.08) meac Coolp, (344.31) . . . meas minimas culpads! (483.35) Crystal elation! Kyrielle elation! (528.09) Sussumcordials (453.26) –Grassy ass ago (252.13) Eat a missal lest (456.18) Bennydict hotfoots onimpudent stayers! (469.23)

Here one can discern the pure taste for assonance and parody. In light of this ambivalent relationship with Catholicism, the two sym-

bolic superstructures imposed upon *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* appear clearer. The triangle of Stephen-Bloom-Molly becomes the image of the Trinity; H.C. Earwicker acquires the symbolic role of the scapegoat who assumes within himself the whole of humanity ("Here Comes Everybody"), fallen and saved by a resurrection. Stripped of any precise theological nature, involved in all myths and religions, the symbolic figure of HCE assumes coherence by respect of an ambiguous relationship to a Christ who is deformed by historical awareness and identified with the very process of history (see Robinson, 1959). In the heart of this same evolving cycle of human history, the author feels as victim and logos, "*in honour bound to the cross of your own cruelifiction.*"

But the displays of Joycean Catholicism develop along more than one line. If we find, on one side, this almost unconscious, obsessive ostentation, somewhat *mal tournée*, then on the other we detect a mental attitude that is valuable at the level of operative efficacy. On the one hand, a mythical obsession, on the other, a way of organizing ideas. Here, the deposit of symbols and figures is filtered and brought to play within the framework of another faith; there, a mental habit is placed in the service of a heterodox *Summulae*. This is the second moment of Joycean Catholicism—the moment of medieval scholasticism.

Joyce attributes to Stephen "a genuine predisposition in favour of all but the 'premises of scholasticism'" (SH 77). According to Harry Levin, the tendency for abstraction reminds us continuously that Joyce reaches aesthetics through theology. Joyce loses his faith but remains faithful to the orthodox system. Even in his mature works, Joyce often seems to have remained a realist in the most medieval sense of the word (Levin, 1941, p. 25).

This mental structure is not exclusively a characteristic of the young Joyce who is still close to the Jesuitical influence, for the syllogistic style of reasoning survives even in *Ulysses*, if only as the distinctive mark of a pattern of thinking. As an example, consider the monologue in the third chapter or the discussion in the library. Also in *A Portrait*, though Stephen is joking by speaking in macaronic Latin, it is with maximum seriousness that he asks these kinds of questions: is baptism by mineral water valid? does the theft of a sterling and the acquisition of a fortune from it require one to restore the sterling or the entire fortune? And with greater problematic acuteness, he asks the following: if a man hacking randomly at a block of wood makes the image of a cow, is that image a work of art? These questions are of the

same family as those posed by the scholastic doctors debating the *questiones quodlibetales* (one of these, by Aquinas, asks in what way the human will is most strongly determined—by wine, women, or love of God). And of a more direct scholastic origin, less influenced by counter-reformist casuistry than the preceding, is the question that Stephen asks himself: is the portrait of Mona Lisa good by the fact that I desire to see it?

It is thus necessary to ask how much of the scholasticism of the young Joyce is substantial and how much is only superficial—a mischievous taste for contamination or an attempt to smuggle revolutionary ideas under the cape of Doctor Angelicus (the technique that Stephen frequently utilizes with the college professors).

Stephen confesses to having read “only a garner of slender sentences from Aristotle’s poetics and psychology and a *Synopsis Philosophiae Scholasticae ad mentem divi Thomae*.” The question that must be asked is whether or not Stephen is lying. It is of little help to discuss Joyce’s reading material while he was in Paris. There is the confession to Valery Larbaud that “il passait plusieurs heures chaque soir à la bibliothèque St. Geneviève lisant Aristote et St. Thomas d’Aquin.” But we know the Joycean ability in mystifying his friends. His “Paris Notebook” shows that he studied the Aristotelian definitions of pity and terror, rhythm, and imitation of nature by art. This would suggest that Joyce had probably read excerpts from the *Poetics*. Where St. Thomas is concerned, the quotations in the “Pola Notebook” (“Bonum est in quo tendit appetitum [sic]” and “Pulcera [sic] sunt quae visa placent”) are both misquoted, and the definition of the three conditions of Beauty in *A Portrait* is linguistically correct but abridged. From this we infer that Joyce had probably never read directly from the texts of Aquinas.³

The Medieval Model

What is meant by the affirmation that Joyce remained medievally minded from youth through maturity? In reading all of Joyce it is possible to single out thousands of situations in which he uses terms drawn from the medieval tradition, arguments accorded to a technique from medieval literature and philosophy. At this point, it may be helpful to construct an abstract model of the medieval way of thinking in order to demonstrate how Joyce adapts it point by point.

While the medieval thought process is certainly more complex than the proposed outline, so too is Joyce. The point of this exercise is to summarily indicate the presence of medieval patterns in the mental economy of our author.

The medieval thinker cannot conceive, explain, or manage the world without inserting it into the framework of an Order, an Order whereby, quoting Edgard de Bruyne, "les êtres s'emboitent les uns dans les autres." The young Stephen at Clongowes Wood College conceives of himself as a member of a cosmic whole—"Stephen Dedalus—Class of Elements—Clongowes Wood College—Sallins—County of Kildare—Ireland—Europe—The World—The Universe." *Ulysses* demonstrates this same concept of order by the choice of a Homeric framework and *Finnegans Wake* by the circular schema, borrowed from Vico's cyclical vision of history.

The medieval thinker knows that art is the human way to reproduce, in an artifact, the universal rules of cosmic order. In this sense art reflects the artist's impersonality rather than his personality. Art is an *analogon* of the world. Even if Joyce had discovered the notion of impersonality in more modern authors such as Flaubert, it goes without saying that his enthusiasm for this theory had medieval sources.

This framework of Order provides an unlimited chain of relations between creatures and events. Quoting Alanus ab Insulis:

Omnis mundi creatura
quasi liber et pictura
nobis est in speculum.

Nostrae vitae, nostrae mortis
nostri status, nostrae sortis
fidele signaculum.

It is the mechanism which permits epiphanies, where a thing becomes the living symbol of something else, and creates a continuous web of references. Any person or event is a cypher which refers to another part of the book. This generates the grid of allusions in *Ulysses* and the system of puns in *Finnegans Wake*. Every word embodies every other because language is a self-reflecting world. Language is the dream of history telling itself to itself. Language is a book readable by an ideal reader affected by an ideal insomnia. If you take away the transcendent God from the symbolic world of the Middle Ages, you have the world of Joyce. This operation, however, is performed by the most medieval thinkers of the Renaissance—Giordano

Bruno and Nicola da Cusa, both masters to Joyce. The world is no longer a pyramid composed of continual transcendent displacements but a self-containing circle or spiral.

For the medieval thinker, the objects and events which the universe comprises are numerous. A key, therefore, must be found to help the scholar discover and catalogue them. The first approach to the reality of the universe was of an encyclopedic type. It was the first in the sense that the great popular encyclopedias, *De Imagine Mundi*, *Specula Mundi*, *The Herbarium* or *The Bestiary*, historically preceded the epoch of the great theological arrangements. It was also the first in the sense that it was the most immediate, the most familiar and remains as a mental plan in even the most elaborate philosophical treatments. The encyclopedic approach uses the techniques of the Inventory, the List, the Catalogue or, in classical rhetorical terms, the *Enumeratio*. In order to describe a place or a fact, the early poets of the Latin Middle Ages first provide a list of detailed aspects. This extract from Sidonius Apollinaris is a representative example from a potential list that would compose several volumes:

Est locus Oceani, longiquis proximus
Indis, axe sub Eoo, Nabateum tensus in Eurum;
ver ibi continuum est, interpellata nec
ullis frigoribus pallescit humus, sed
flore perenni picta peregrino ignorant
arva rigores; halant rura rosis,
indiscriptosque per argos fragrat odor;
violam, cytisum, serpylla, ligustrum,
lilia, narcissos, casiam, colocasias,
caltas, costum, malobathrum, myrrhas,
opobalsama, tura parturiunt campi; nec
non pulsante senecta hinc redivia petit
vicinus cinnama Phoenix (*Carmina* 2).

Here is another passage by the same author which describes, like a property map, the city of Narbona with its particular urban qualities:

Salve Narbo, potens salubritate,
urbe et rure simul bonus videri,
muris, civibus, ambitu, tabernis,
portis, porticibus, foro theatro,
delubris, capitoliis, monetis,
thermis, arcubus, horreis, macellis,
pratis, fontibus, insulis, salinis,
stagnis, flumen, merce, ponte, ponto;