Within the careful structure of Book 2 of the *Silvae* poems 3 and 4 form a concentrated Ovidian space, indicative, perhaps, of a literary taste shared with Statius by his patron Atedius Melior. 2.3, offered as a birthday present, a *genethliakon*, to Melior, invents an Ovidian-style narrative of erotic pursuit and quasi-metamorphosis, as an aetiology for a strangely shaped plane tree in the garden of Melior’s house in Rome. *Silvae* 2.4 is a lament for the dead parrot of Melior, an unashamed parroting of Ovid’s dead parrot poem, *Amores* 2.6. The connection between the two poems is reinforced by a punning allusion in the last line of 2.3. Statius’ prayer for a long life for Melior is underwritten by Melior’s own pious immortalization of his dead friend Blaesus through an endowment to the college of scribes, *collegium scribarum*, by which (2.3.76–7) … *te sub teste situm fugitura tacentem / ardua magnanimi reuirescet gloria Blaei*, “by your witness the lofty renown of great-souled Blaesus shall escape silent decay and be green again”.2 The last line of 2.4 also looks forward to a rebirth, that of the parrot, or of the parrot’s glory (36–7) *senio nec fessus inerti / scandet odoratos phoenix felicior ignes*, “unwearied by sluggish age, he shall mount the perfumed pyre, a happier Phoenix”. But the last word of 2.3, the name *Blaesi*, already adumbrates a connection between the two poems. *Tacentem*, “silent, mute”, at the end of the penultimate line triggers the literal sense of Blaesus’ name, “lisping, stammering” (just as the qualification, six lines before, of Melior as *optimus* (70) taps the meaning of the name Melior).3 Ovid had applied

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1 Versions of this paper were delivered at Corpus Christi College, Oxford, and at the 2003 Groningen Colloquium on Flavian Poetry; for their comments I am grateful to the audiences on both occasions, and to the editors of this volume.

2 Translations of the *Silvae* are based more or less closely on Shacketon Bailey 2003.

3 See Pederzani 1995, on 69 and 76; Nisbet 1995, 41. There may also be a pun on *blaesus* at S. 2.1.200–1 *mox ubi delicias et rari pignus amici / sensit et amissi puerum*
blaesus to his dead parrot’s imitation of the human voice (Am. 2.6.24; the first occurrence of the word as an adjective, according to McKeown); and psittace is the first word of Silvae 2.4. The last lines of Silvae 2.3 reveal a Statius already parroting his patron Melior, for the latter’s gift to the college of scribes was for the purpose of founding an annual celebration of Blaesus’ birthday, as we learn from Martial 8.38 (12 ad natalicum diem colendum), just as Silvae 2.3 celebrates the birthday of Melior. But if Silvae 2.3 at its close anticipates the following poem’s trope of parrot-like imitation, its own preferred tropes both of praise and of imitation, are rebirth and reflection.

**Melior’s tree. Metamorphosis and reflections**

In Silvae 2.3 a fast-moving narrative of 55 lines is framed by two passages of static description. The first (1–5) is an ecphrasis of the feature in the contemporary landscape, the curiously shaped plane tree by the pool. The second passage of description (62–77), after offering the poem as a birthday present to Melior, praises the settled and virtuous—but paradoxical—disposition of the honorand. The poem operates with a twofold set of metaphorical equivalences (many of them well analysed in the commentaries of van Dam and Pederzani), constituting the aetiological deposit, as it were, of the mythical narrative. Firstly, the enduring relationship between the tree and the pool in the garden landscape, described in the initial ecphrasis, perpetuates elements of Pan’s pursuit of the nymph. Secondly, the closing description of the character of Melior reflects aspects of the ensemble of tree and pool, and of the narrative thereby memorialised, with the further result that the two framing descriptions, of physical landscape feature and abstract qualities of soul, also reflect each other. This reflection is already signalled in the first line, Stat quae perspicuas nitidi Melioris opacet/arbor aquas, “There stands a tree which shades the clear waters of refined Melior”: the near-equivalent epithets perspicuas, “clear” (of the waters), and nitidi, “refined”, literally “shining” (of

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*solacia Blaesi* for *blaesus of a deliciae* cf. Mart. 5.34.7–8 (the dead Erotion) inter iam meteres ludat lasciua patronos / et nomen blaeso garriat ore meum.

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^4 Am. 2.6.23–4 Non fuit in terris uocum simulantior ales: / reddebas blaeso tam bene uerba sono.