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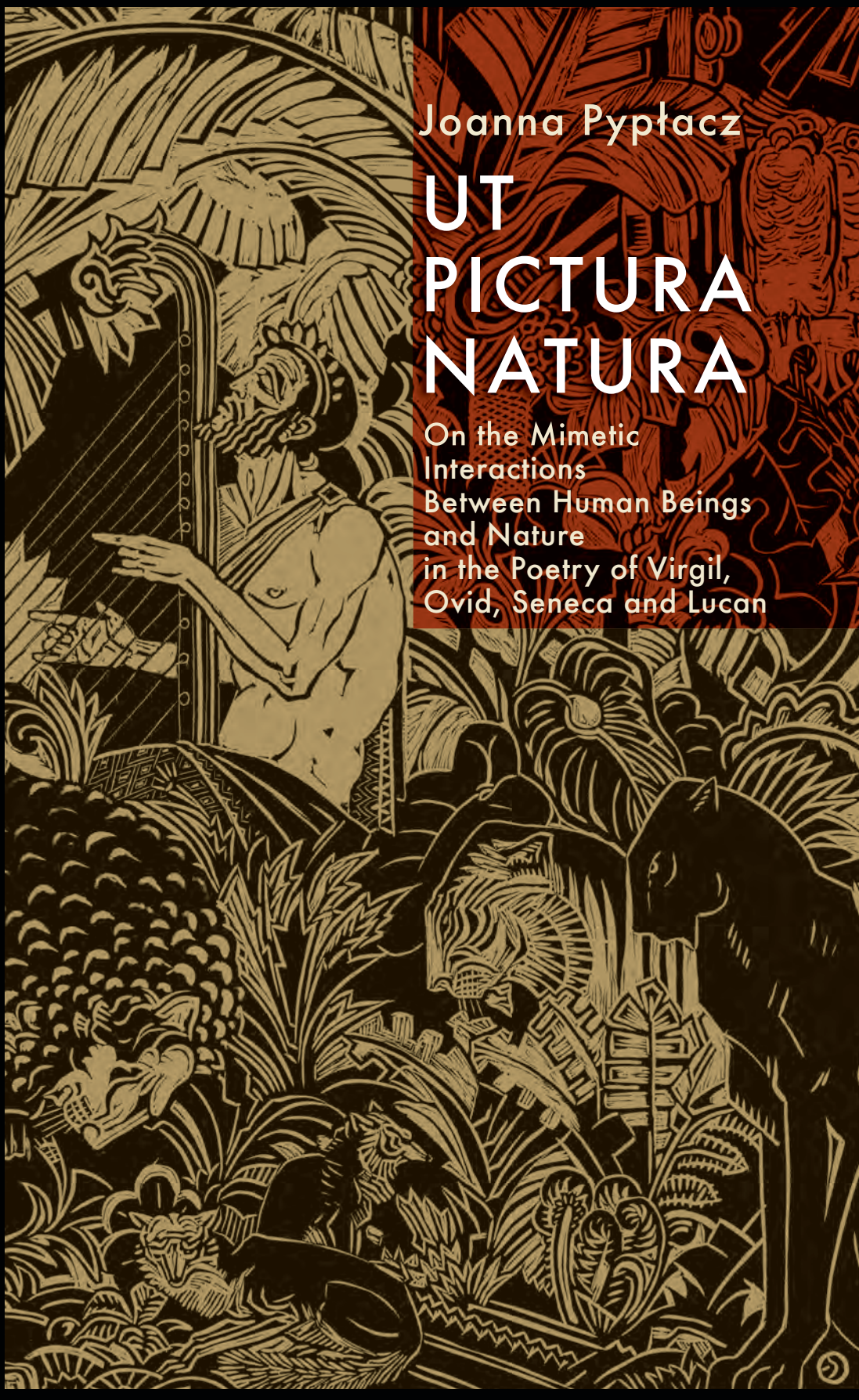

Joanna Pypłacz

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On the Mimetic Interactions Between Human Beings and Nature in the Poetry of Virgil, Ovid, Seneca and Lucan

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For my parents

Introduction

When we talk about imitation in poetry, the first thing that crosses our minds is the classical idea of a poet imitating the real world with the aid of the various tools that are offered to him (or her) by the particular language in which he (or she) happens to be writing — and this on various levels, ranging from phonetics to complex figures of speech or even clever devices that have a bearing on the entire structure of a poem, as can be seen in works as old as the *Odyssey*.[1]

The title of the present study alludes to Horace's famous *Ars poetica*, in which he observes that poetry — like painting — is an art that imitates the real world and — like painting — can be perceived and interpreted in various ways (notwithstanding the many different ways in which this particular observation has itself been the subject of interpretation):[2]

Ut pictura poesis; erit quae, si propius stes,
te capiat magis, et quaedam, si longius abstes.
Haec amat obscurum, volet haec sub luce videri,
iudicis argutum quae non formidat acumen;
haec placuit semel, haec deciens repetita placebit.
(*Ars.* 361-365)

But what if Nature — i.e. the man-made 'nature' within a piece of poetry — itself imitated the actions of human beings or somehow related to them — and what if this could in turn be seen from various perspectives, following certain hints that would enable or even trigger perceptions desired by the author? The present study will attempt to find an answer to this question.

One partial answer is offered by the theory of 'correspondences' put forward by the French symbolist poet Charles Baudelaire in his famous sonnet entitled *Correspondances*:

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[1] Cf. E. Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, with an introd. by E. Said, transl. by W. R. Trask, Princeton 2003, p. 7.

[2] Cf. N. Rudd (ed. with a comm.), *Horace, Epistles, Book II and Epistle to the Pisones ('Ars Poetica')*, Cambridge–New York–Port Chester–Melbourne–Sydney 1989, p. 209.

La Nature est un temple où de vivants piliers
Laissent parfois sortir de confuses paroles;
L'homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles
Qui l'observent avec des regards familiers.

Comme de longs échos qui de loin se confondent
Dans une ténébreuse et profonde unité,
Vaste comme la nuit et comme la clarté,
Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent.

Il est des parfums frais comme des chairs d'enfants,
Doux comme les hautbois, verts comme les prairies,
— Et d'autres, corrompus, riches et triomphants,

Ayant l'expansion des choses infinies,
Comme l'ambre, le musc, le benjoin et l'encens,
Qui chantent les transports de l'esprit et des sens.[3]

In this sonnet, Baudelaire depicts Nature as an ancient-style living temple whose pillars are trees (La Nature est un temple où de vivants piliers …). Nature communicates with us through an infinite number of symbols (smells, sounds, colours etc.) which — carried by the wind — are perceptible to a sensitive human mind, i.e. to the mind of a poet (*L'homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles* / *Qui l'observent avec des regards familiers.*).[4]

The famous theory forged by M.H. Abrams on the solid foundation of Plato's philosophy — especially Plato's theory of ideas[5] and the concept of *mimesis* (imitation)[6] explained in the third and tenth books of *The Republic*[7] — also reminds us that — according to Plato — poetry belongs to the category of *versatile imitation*,[8] which — unlike *imitation with knowledge*[9] — has no practical use but merely aims to provide pleasure.

Abrams' theory of literature was inspired by Plato's metaphor of the mirror,[10] according to which art is based on metaphors and analogies reflecting the mechanisms

[3] Cf. Ch. Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal Et Autres Poems*, Paris 1981, pp. 39-40.

[4] Cf. W. K. Wimsatt Jr. and C. Brooks, *Literary Criticism: A Short History*, London 1957, p. 591; R. Wellek, "The Term and Concept of Symbolism in Literary History", *New Literary History*, 1(2), 1970, pp. 249-270.

[5] Cf. M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*, London–Oxford–New York, 1971, p. 30.

[6] For the theory of imitation see: *Rep.* 3.3935-6. Cf. M. H. Abrams, *op. cit.*

[7] Cf. For the detailed analysis of this theory see: E. Belfiore, "A Theory of Imitation in Plato's Republic", *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, 114, 1984, pp. 121-146.

[8] Cf. *ibidem*, p. 124.

[9] Cf. *ibidem.*

[10] Cf. *Rep.* 10.595c-598c.

that rule the real world.[11] Whether it is useful or not (not forgetting that Plato disapproves of poetry and excludes poets from his Republic), any kind of imitation resembles a reflection in a mirror: reality is turned into something unreal, yet apparently very similar. Therefore:

1. Poetry reflects all kinds of things that occur in the natural world (Plato).

2. The natural world itself is full of symbols (as things themselves have their own meanings) which are comprehensible to poets (Baudelaire).

3. The (pre-Romantic and Romantic) imagination has an 'aggregative and recreative power' that allows a poet to notice these symbolic elements and work on them.[12]

Ergo:

1. The very presence of symbols in nature allows poets to interpret its behaviour in a symbolic manner.

2. In a represented (i.e. imaginary) world that is mimetically similar to the real world and that exists in a piece of poetry (regardless of the genre), Nature can make it easier for the poet to find the symbolic elements which he (or she) desires by producing them exactly in accordance with the author's needs (i.e. the poet creates an appropriate represented world which is mimetically similar to the real one), as happens in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem *Kubla Khan*.[13] This imaginary nature can thus behave in a manner that is appropriate to the situation in which the human characters of the poem (or some other literary form) find themselves — as will be shown in the course of the present study.

3. Horace's well-known saying *ut pictura poesis* (*Ars.* 361) which — as Władysław Tatarkiewicz has observed — loosely compares the 'workshop' of a poet with that of a painter (mainly in order to hint at the fact that an artist working with words is also a mimetic artist),[14] can also be applied to the *pictura* inside the *poesis*, i.e. the *natura* in the represented world, whose behaviour and reactions mimic — or at least are aesthetically 'appropriate to' or 'consonant with' — those of the human characters.

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[11] Cf. M. H. Abrams, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

[12] Cf. *The Imagination then I consider either as primary, or secondary. The primary Imagination I hold to be the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree, and in the mode of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events, it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially vital, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead. Fancy, on the contrary, has no other counters to play with, but fixities and definites. The fancy is indeed no other than a mode of memory emancipated from the order of time and space; and blended with, and modified by that empirical phaenomenon of the will, which we express by the word choice. But equally with the ordinary memory it must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association.* (S. T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*, ed. with an introd. by G. Watson, London 1980, p.167).

[13] Cf. S. T. Coleridge, "Kubla Khan (Or a Vision in a Dream: A Fragment)", [in:] *Coleridge Poetical Works*, ed. by E. Hartley Coleridge, Oxford 1978, pp. 297-298.

[14] Cf. W. Tatarkiewicz, *History of Aesthetics*, Vol. 1: *Ancient Aesthetics*, ed. by J. Harrell, Warszawa–The Hague–Paris 1970, p. 247.

4. In light of the fact that for the ancient Romans — as for the ancient Greeks[15] — the world of the gods was just as anthropocentric as the world of nature, it would be interesting to examine just how far this anthropocentrism can go in Roman poetry and whether the behaviour of nature itself can become as anthropomorphic as that of the gods.

We shall therefore explore — by means of close reading — an interesting phenomenon of which the author of the present study became aware while reading Ovid's *Tristia*. Noticing the poet's unusual fascination with the theme of water and particularly with that of the sea, the author of the present study found that this theme seemed to gradually transform itself — in the subsequent poems written in exile, belonging both to the *Tristia* and to the *Epistuale ex Ponto* — by reflecting the changes in the situation of the lyrical subject: from water that is stormy and dangerous to (equally dangerous and perhaps even more deadly) water that is calm and composed, being covered with a thick layer of ice.

This observation called for further investigation, especially in view of the fact that several other pieces of Roman poetry — not only poems written by Ovid — also exhibited the phenomenon in question (to a greater or lesser extent). These included the story of Orpheus, which was first told by Virgil before being creatively reworked by Ovid.

The present study will therefore examine the works of the four most significant Roman poets of the Golden and Silver-Age periods, i.e. Virgil, Ovid and their successors Seneca and Lucan. All these authors are biographically 'intertwined' owing to the fact that they all lived and worked in the environment of the imperial court (not to mention the fact that Ovid might well have met Seneca the Elder through his teacher of rhetoric Aurelius Fuscus).[16] However, they are also closely bound to each other by intertextual links and allusions resulting from the Roman obsession with *idem aliter referre*, which — as Karl Galinsky has pointed out — is very evident in Ovid's treatment of the myths previously used by Virgil.[17] Seneca later reworked his Virgilian and Ovidian hypotexts in a very similar fashion.[18] Practically the same technique can also be observed in Lucan (i.e. his many allusions to Virgil, Ovid, and Seneca's tragedies).[19]

This long chain of intertextual hints and allusions — i.e. creative *aemulatio* — makes it very difficult to discuss the work of these four poets separately, thus leaving aside the aspect of intertextuality — even more so if the subject of the present study is

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[15] Cf. *ibidem*, p. 23.

[16] Cf. W. A. Edward (ed. with a comm.), *Seneca Maior, The Suasoriae of Seneca the Elder*, Cambridge 1928, p. xli.

[17] Cf. *These three techniques – compression, expansion, and changed emphasis – are the same which characterize, for instance, his adaptation of Callimachus in the Erysichthon. They are Ovid's basic literary tools* (K. Galinsky, *Ovid's Metamorphoses: An Introduction to the Basic Aspects*, Berkeley–Los Angeles 1975, p. 220).

[18] Cf. A. Schiesaro, *The Passions in Play: "Thyestes" and the Dynamics of Senecan Drama*, Cambridge 2003, p. 83.

[19] Cf. J. Pypłacz, *When Legends Come Alive: A Reading of Lucan's Pharsalia*, Kraków 2015, *passim*.

something that they have in common, this being their uniquely expressive treatment of both the animate and inanimate elements of the natural environment.

Although the present study was in the first place inspired by a reading Ovid's *Tristia*, for the sake of chronology and a proper examination of intertextuality it begins with a chapter whose first part is devoted to Virgil. As well as tracking intertextual dependences, this will make it easier to examine the behaviour of nature in the works in question and will also make it easier to determine how the role of nature as an active participant in human affairs in the represented world evolved over time — from the Golden Age of Latin literature to the decadent Silver Age and its two fathers: Seneca and Lucan.

The first chapter will therefore examine a very interesting motif that appears in two versions of the story of Orpheus in mourning — by Virgil and Ovid — in which Nature plays the part of comforter and ally (hence the title of this chapter: *The Sympathetic Friend*). The author of the present study will also analyse the reactions of Nature to the death of Daphnis in Virgil's fifth *Eclogue* and then in Ovid's famous tale of Demeter, in which the poet depicts the self-destructive reactions of Nature to her grief.

The second chapter is devoted to Ovid's use of the theme of water, especially in his exile poetry, and will examine how Nature mirrors and / or mimics the states and behaviours of the human mind. This analysis will show whether the initial hypothesis of the author of the present study was valid. Although the relationship between the situation of the lyrical subject and the hostile natural environment is quite harmonious, it would be worthwhile to analyse it in greater detail.

The third and subsequent chapters will focus on Silver-Age poetry, and on Seneca's tragedies and Lucan's *Pharsalia* in particular. Seneca owed much to both Virgil and Ovid — especially to the latter's art of creative *aemulatio*[20] — and was particularly fascinated by the then innovative aesthetics of his poetry, as he indirectly admitted — first through the mouth of the Fury[21] and then through the mouth of Atreus[22] — in his *Thyestes*. Indeed, Seneca — being a real master of the technique of stimulating the audience's imagination by means of very powerful, emotionally charged language that enabled his dark, 'Gothic' imagination to appeal to the feelings of the audience — emulated Ovid's aesthetics in his tragedies.[23]

First, therefore, there will be a discussion of the preliminary description of the *locus horridus* in *Thyestes*. This will be followed by a discussion of the appropriateness of the reactions of Nature to the *scelus* perpetrated by Atreus, including various unexpected *prodigia* that accompany his horrendous rite and which not only complete it, but render it even more frightening. The aim of this part of the present study is to

[20] For a discussion of the importance of Ovid's influence on the Silver-Age poets see: S. M. Wheeler, "Lucan's Reception of Ovid's 'Metamorphoses'", *Arethusa*, 35(3), 2002, pp. 361-380.

[21] Cf. *Thracium fiat nefas / maiore numero.* (Sen. *Thy*. 56-57).

[22] Cf. *Vidit infandas domus / Odrysia mensas – fateor, immane est scelus, / sed occupatum; maius hoc aliquid dolor / inveniat*. (Sen. *Thy.* 272-275).

[23] Cf. A. Schiesaro, *The Passions in Play*…, p. 83; J. Pypłacz, *The Aesthetics of Senecan Tragedy*, Kraków 2010.

determine how and to what extent Nature takes part in the plot of Seneca's *Thyestes* — and what its function in the tragedy is.

In the fourth chapter we shall analyse the relationship between the intense passions that blind human beings (i.e. the literary characters) and how they are reflected in the aberrations of nature — hence its title: *Passions and their Children*. The first part — devoted to monstrous vice — deals with an exploration of Seneca's *Phaedra*, in which a terrifying beast emerges from the sea and causes the death of the exiled Hippolytus by scaring the horses that are pulling his chariot. The second part will be devoted to a discussion of the famous episode in the ninth book of Lucan's *Pharsalia*, in which Cato's fanaticism and his misunderstanding of Stoic ideas destroy his virtue to such an extent that he himself becomes a grotesque and deadly monster.

The fifth and penultimate chapter — entitled *The Drowning World* — will be devoted to the recurrent theme of evil waters which can be observed in the *Pharsalia*. Being associated with death and destruction, it is present in various significant passages of the epic, examples being the flood (dirty, muddy water) that destroys Caesar's military camp and the hostile, salty sea that brings Pompey to his pitiful demise as he sails to Egypt. In the last book of his poem, however, Lucan has placed Acoreus' account of the cyclical flooding of the Nile, which is beneficial to mankind. The aim of this part of the present study is to attempt to determine whether there is any pattern or hidden message behind this accumulation of water-related motifs, especially as regards the theme of the flood.

The last chapter of the present study will continue the discussion of Lucan's work and will be devoted to an examination of the disruption of the universal order that takes place in the represented world of the *Pharsalia*. Various *prodigia* that are present in this epic — especially those ominous signs which accompany all the religious ceremonies related by Lucan — suggest that the perversely self-destructive behaviour of nature that is exhibited in these *prodigia* might actually mirror what is happening on the human level.

The overall plan of the present study, therefore, is to investigate the aforementioned works of four selected poets in an endeavour to reveal the literary devices that lie behind their depictions of 'empathetic' nature (both animate and inanimate) — and also to determine how these depictions evolved over time, especially with regard to their role and their importance in the most representative texts of Roman literature, ranging from the time of Augustus to that of Nero.

I would like to thank Prof. Remigiusz Sapa and Prof. Zdzisław Pietrzyk for their continual support during the writing of this book — and, last but not least, I would like to give a special word of thanks to Prof. Elżbieta Wesołowska, whose careful reading of the book has allowed me to improve it by spurring me to do more research in certain areas, thus triggering quite unexpected new findings.

Summary

The aim of this study is to determine how the role of Nature as an active participant in the affairs of human beings (in the represented world) evolved over time in Roman literature from the Golden Age to the decadent Silver Age, with its two fathers: Seneca and Lucan. In order to illustrate Nature's various reactions, the author investigates the devices that were used by Virgil, Ovid and their two Silver-Age successors (and creative emulators) to achieve *mimesis* and thus allow their audiences to experience these reactions to the fullest extent.

Keywords: nature, animate nature, inanimate nature, Virgil, Ovid, Seneca, Lucan, human being, myth, *mimesis*, poetry, response, reaction, represented world, Latin epic poetry, Latin lyrical poetry, Latin tragedy

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"This book is the result of a young researcher's fresh look at the difficult subject of the mutual relationship between Man and the external world — both real and mythical — in the works of four outstanding Roman poets." — from a review by Prof. Elżbieta Wesołowska.

The author of this study has undertaken the difficult task of analysing the reactions of the outside world — both animate and inanimate — to the behaviour of human protagonists and also the various circumstances in which the latter find themselves. By examining the works of four poets — Virgil, Ovid, Seneca and Lucan — she shows how relations between nature and human beings evolved in the course of the development of Roman literature.

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