

The Anecdotal  
Narration and  
Encyclopedic Thought  
of Pliny the Elder's  
*Naturalis Historia*



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By

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## PREFACE

Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis Historia*, with its varied content, enables and expects us to employ a complex interpretative technique. Pliny's language is doubly difficult. On the one hand, its language is incredibly condensed, sometimes even to the point of inscrutability. On the other hand, it is not a literary text, but a scientific one. The text's varied nature, its *varietas*, is due not only to the subject of the encyclopedia but also its structure and Pliny's diction since he never limited himself to a solely scientific, objective presentation of things. Besides giving a neutral account of facts, he often goes into moralizing digressions, and we frequently encounter vehement exclamations that also have a moral purpose, as well as fairytale-like and anecdotal narration. Another aspect of Pliny's diction is that he often interrupts the discussions of topics with these digressions and begins to address something that seemingly has nothing to do with the subject or which is only loosely connected to it. This is a peculiarity of the narrative of *Naturalis Historia* which cannot be found to such a degree in any other piece of scientific prose written in Latin.

My hypothesis was that these digressions that occur in different places and in great number throughout the text of *Naturalis Historia* should not be regarded as mistakes fragmenting the structure of the text, and thus as evidence for a mismatch between Pliny's rhetoric and theme. This aspect of my research has grown out of a paragraph from the *praefatio* (*praef.* 12), which is usually disregarded in criticism. This part clearly points out that Pliny saw the limits conferred by the subject and genre of *Natural History*. He was perfectly aware that the description of nature is a dry topic (*sterilis materia*) which gives no opportunity for digressions from the topic (*excessus*), rhetorical speeches (*orationes*), pleasant chatting or presenting certain thoughts (*sermones*), nor the description of miraculous occurrences (*casus mirabiles*) and adventurous events (*eventus varii*). As we know, all these aspects appear in the text. From this we must conclude that Pliny did not intend these digressions as departures from the subject matter. In his words, these should not be regarded as *excessuses* but form a part of the topic.

Most of these digressions are, or seem like, anecdotes. We cannot regard the anecdotes and anecdotal digressions as inorganic parts of the

text, whose function is only to illustrate, to ease the dryness of the topic and to make the text more colorful. We cannot be satisfied with merely comparing these stories with different versions appearing in other texts. Noting different versions is necessary, but only with the purpose of explaining why Pliny chose that specific variant of the story. We only have a chance to answer this question if—after comparing them with other versions—we reinstate the anecdotes in their original context and also ask what role the anecdotes have in the structure of the text. Furthermore, we should evaluate the anecdotes' textual genres in that specific context.

Researching the etiological anecdotes, the anecdotes about the life of animals, those about famous persons from political or intellectual life, and the anecdotes about the most important Greek painters and sculptors requires the application of different perspectives. If there are texts written with literary claims that could only be understood within the cultural constellation they were written in, then *Natural History* is one of them. The reception of this text is only possible if we find the contexts of contemporary cultural-medial relations, which enable such an understanding to take place.

Pliny wanted to write a useful work (*praef.* 16: *utilitatem iuvandi*). For this purpose, he adjusted not only the content and the structure but also, I believe, the textual genres of the encyclopedia as well. If we approach the anecdotal digressions of *Naturalis Historia* with the proper methods, we can open up the cultural, ideological and moral implications of the work's structure and different textual genres. This approach is hard to apply for all the thirty-seven volumes of the work. However, we can draw relevant conclusions about the whole text from the analysis of certain narrative units and thematic groups. The thematic and narratological examinations of anecdotes yield such results that show that the anecdotes and anecdotal digressions—contrary to the common critical view—were not placed in the text due to a lack of narratorial self-control, to ease the dryness of the topics or as entertaining pieces. When we approach anecdotes from the perspective of narrative techniques, the role of the stories as *exempla* becomes clearer, and its further aspects can be spotted. This research also draws attention to Pliny the writer, an aspect of the text that has been contested until very recently; from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century on, many critics formulated a need to point out the literary qualities of the work, but they failed to give a proper account of the theme.

The ten chapters presented here focus on the anecdotic narration of *Naturalis Historia*. These essays have been published in English, German and Hungarian, and were slightly reworked and bibliographically updated for this volume. The original places of publication are the following:

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VI. Darab, Ágnes. “Ialysus: the Lack of Description.” *Acta Classica Universitatis Scientiarum Debreceniensis* 48 (2012): 75–89.

VII. Darab, Ágnes. “Natura, Ars, Historia. Anecdotic History of Art in Pliny the Elder’s *Naturalis Historia*. Part I: Natura and Ars: the Place of Art History in the *Naturalis Historia*.” *Hermes* 142, no. 2 (2014): 206–224.

VIII. Darab, Ágnes. “Natura, Ars, Historia. Anecdotic History of Art in Pliny the Elder’s *Naturalis Historia*. Part II.” *Hermes* 142, no. 3 (2014): 279–297.

IX. Darab, Ágnes. “*Corinthium Aes*. Entstehung und Metamorphose einer Anekdote.” *Wiener Studien* 128 (2015): 69–82.

X. Darab, Ágnes. “*Corinthium Aes* versus *Electrum*. The Anecdote as an Expression of Roman Identity in Pliny the Elder’s *Naturalis Historia*.” *Hermes* 140, no. 2 (2012): 149–159.

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# I.

## THE DEATH OF THE ACTOR: MARCUS OFILIUS HILARIUS PLIN. *NH* 7. 184–185

The narrative of Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis Historia* has received diverse evaluations in the past century and especially in recent decades. Its earliest assessment comes from Pliny the Younger, who characterized his uncle's encyclopedia with three epithets: *Naturae historiarum triginta septem, opus diffusum, eruditum nec minus varium quam ipsa natura*.<sup>1</sup> He gives the meaning of *varium* himself: this *opus*—that is, the text itself, too, is as varied as its subject, nature. *Eruditum* obviously refers to the scholarly or scientific modality of *Naturalis Historia*. The most pertinent adjective is the third epithet, *diffusum*, which condenses different meanings: the text is *lengthy*, its theme is *diverse* and—even though Pliny the Younger might not have had this in mind—the narrative technique itself is *diffuse* as well. This is something more than *varietas*, which characterized not only *Naturalis Historia* but became an ambitious literary role declared and put into practice by Roman compilers.<sup>2</sup>

If we consider the adjective *diffuse* only in a narrow sense, as a certain characteristic of the narrative, we find in it the most 'Plinian' trait of the text: the narrative technique, the similar application of which cannot be

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<sup>1</sup> Plin. *Ep.* 3. 5. 6.

<sup>2</sup> Trevor Murphy, *Pliny the Elder's Natural History: The Empire in the Encyclopedia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 38–40; Thorsten Fögen, *Wissen, Kommunikation und Selbstdarstellung. Zur Struktur und Charakteristik römischer Fachtexte der frühen Kaiserzeit* (München: C. H. Beck, 2009), 24–25. The variety in content, structure and narrative can be interpreted metaphorically as well: this variety is like the most popular type of mass entertainment, the spectacles of circuses and amphitheaters. See Mario Vegetti, "Zoologia e antropologia in Plinio," in *Plinio il Vecchio sotto il profilo storico e letterario*. Atti del convegno di Como 5-6-7 ottobre 1979 (Como: 1982), 121–124.

found in any other examples of Latin scientific prose.<sup>3</sup> This specificity can be found in the digressive nature of the storytelling, which leads Pliny to diverge from his subject to other, seemingly unrelated topics, events he has seen, heard or read, and anecdotes or observations. Ever since *Naturalis Historia* lost its scientific value but its merits have been pointed out by literary criticism, this is the most important trait that fulfills a central role in the evaluation of the encyclopedia. And the evaluation ranges from labeling the book a compilation without concept and balance,<sup>4</sup> to regarding the author as a person unable to resist the urge to “tell everything” and emphasizing his inability to create coherent texts,<sup>5</sup> to adjectives like “digressive”,<sup>6</sup> “associative”<sup>7</sup> and “anecdotic”.<sup>8</sup> The question is not about how we characterize them but about their function: do these *excursuses* have any role, and if yes, what kind of role do they play in the text of the encyclopedia?

The story of the title character of the essay can be read in book 7 of *Naturalis Historia*, the so-called anthropological book, which reviews all knowledge about humankind. The story draws our attention not only because of the information above, but also because it is the only text from the literature of the antiquity which tells us about the event of the death of the actor whose name we cannot find anywhere else but in the encyclopedia. Pliny relates the story in the following way:

*Operiosissima tamen securitas mortis in M. Ofilio Hilario ab antiquis traditur. Comoediarum histrio is, cum populo admodum placuisset natalis die suo conuiuiumque haberet, edita cena calidam potionem in pultario poposcit, simulque personam eius diei acceptam intuens coronam e capite*

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<sup>3</sup> Thorsten Fögen, “Pliny the Elder’s Animals: Some Remarks on the Narrative Structure of *Nat. Hist.* 8–11,” *Hermes* 135, no. 2 (2007): 192–196.

<sup>4</sup> Martin Schanz–Carl Hosius, *Geschichte der Römischen Literatur bis zum Gesetzgebungswerk des Kaisers Justinian*, vol. 2: Die Zeit der Monarchie bis auf Hadrian (München: C. H. Beck, 1959), 775.

<sup>5</sup> Eduard Norden, *Antike Kunstprosa* (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1923), 314; Francis Richard David Goodyear, “Pliny the Elder,” in *The Cambridge History of Classical Literature*, vol. II: Latin Literature, ed. E. J. Kenney, W. V. Clausen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 174–175.

<sup>6</sup> Murphy, *Pliny the Elder’s Natural History*, 29–32.

<sup>7</sup> Fögen, “Pliny the Elder’s Animals,” 193.

<sup>8</sup> See in this volume “Natura, Ars, Historia: Anecdotic History of Art in Pliny the Elder’s *Naturalis Historia*, Part II.”

*suo in eam transtulit, tali habitu rigens nullo sentiente, donec ad cubantium proximus tepescere potionem admoneret. (NH 7. 184–185)<sup>9</sup>*

A most artistically contrived tableau of serenity in death, involving M. Ofilius Hilarius, is recorded by the ancient sources. This comic actor, who had always enjoyed popular success, held a banquet on his birthday. When the meal had been served, he called for a hot drink and, gazing at the mask he had been wearing that day, transferred to it the wreath on his head. In this attitude he grew stiff without anyone noticing, until the diner next to him warned him that his drink was getting cold.<sup>10</sup>

Hilarius's death is as scenical as his theatrical art. The phrase *operiosissima securitas* introducing the anecdote condenses different meanings. The joyful banquet is organized by Hilarius, who, because of his art, is very good at throwing parties; even his name—which derives from the adjective *hilaris*, “joyful”—predestines him to such a role. The laurel wreaths were not only worn at the *conviviums*; they also refer to funeral feasts, which Romans attended with wreaths on their heads. The figure of the *kline*—the couches which Romans lay on during funeral as well as other festival feasts—can also be interpreted as a similarly double allusion. Hilarius's body lying on the *kline* evokes both situations: his living, then inert, body condenses the sight of the *conviviums* and the posture of the statues found on Etruscan-Roman sarcophaguses and urns, which represent the deceased. In this sense the joyful banquet becomes the prefiguration of a funeral feast, and the scenical gesture of the laurel wreath placed on the mask becomes Hilarius's stylish farewell from his life.

The elaborate nature of the short story is shown not only by the consistent duplication of the meanings and references but also by the pun used in the narrative. The *calidam—rigens—tepescere* effectively sums up the whole story: the drink is not even cold when Hilarius passes away. Even though the narrative is short, it has a big arch: it ranges from birth to death. This is the only way the remark in the story—that the feast was occasioned not only because Hilarius had a spectacular success in the theater but also because it was his birthday—can make sense.

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<sup>9</sup> I quote the text of book 7 according to the Budé edition: Pline L' Ancien, *Histoire Naturelle, Livre VII*, texte établi, traduit et commenté par Robert Schilling (Paris: Les Belles Lettres), 2003.

<sup>10</sup> I quote the English translation of book 7 according to the newest edition: Mary Beagon, *The Elder Pliny on the Human Animal: Natural History, Book 7* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005).

Pliny's narration obviously pays much attention to the presentation and the wording of this uncommon event, with all its allusions and the vivid spectacle it offers, even though this is an insignificant case given the serious subject of book 7 of the encyclopedia. In other words, the story evidences the pictorial potential of language and its ability to visualize events, which in rhetoric we call *enargeia*, *illustratio* or *evidentia*.<sup>11</sup> This is precisely the contrast—between the insignificance of the actor and the rhetorical polish of the narrative—that requires further explanation. Pliny himself gives the most useful guideline in dealing with this situation, as well as all the digressions and seemingly irrelevant remarks found in *Naturalis Historia*: *nec quaerenda ratio in ulla parte naturae, sed uoluntas*.<sup>12</sup> Pliny gives the theoretical foundation of this method, as well as his view of nature, in book 7. 7: *Naturae uerum rerum uis atque maiestas in omnibus momentis fide caret, si quis modo partes eius ac non totam complectatur animo*.<sup>13</sup> We can only understand the overarching narrative about nature and the *excursuses* if we examine and interpret it as a part of a narrative and ideological whole.

The story is not only about the end of Hilarius's life, but it concludes one of the distinct narrative units of *Naturalis Historia*: an enumeration of sudden—and in Pliny's regard, fortunate—deaths. This five-chapter-long text (*NH* 7. 180–185) recites twenty-nine cases when life ends in an instant, without any previous warning, and many of these stories belong to the genre of *mirabilia* literature. A common motif between all these events is that the title characters are snatched away by death at the height of their careers. The author's enumeration ranges from Chilo of Sparta (*NH* 7. 180), who was one of the Seven Wise Men, to Pliny's own age (*NH* 7. 184), culminating in Ofilius's story (*NH* 7. 184–185). The death of the actor at the top of his career is at once the rhetorical climax of the series

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<sup>11</sup> For more on the meaning of the three expressions in rhetorical terminology, see Quint. *Inst.* 6. 2. 29–32. For a more extensive treatment of the *ekphrasis* of poetical texts and rhetorical *enargeia*, see Gottfried Boehm, “Bildbeschreibung. Über die Grenzen von Bild und Sprache,” in *Beschreibungskunst—Kunstbeschreibung. Die Ekphrasis von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart*, eds. Gottfried Boehm and Helmut Pfotenhauer (Frankfurt am Main: Wilhelm Fink, 1995), 23–40; Simon Goldhill, “What is Ekphrasis for?” *Classical Philology* 102, no. 1 (2007): 1–19; Ruth Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 13–39.

<sup>12</sup> Plin. *NH* 37. 60.

<sup>13</sup> Plin. *NH* 7. 7: “Indeed, the power and might of nature lacks credibility at every point unless we comprehend her as a whole rather than piecemeal.”

and it gives an effective contrast to the next, less fortunate deaths: suicides committed because of banal reasons.<sup>14</sup>

These chapters are part of a bigger narrative unit, the stories which—in one way or another—are all connected to the theme of death. The textual unit that comprises twenty-two chapters (*NH* 7. 168–190) poses this question in connection with the notion of *felicitas*: it asks how long someone can live, then goes on to summarize the knowledge about old age, terminal illnesses, death and afterlife. Pliny also gives a brief summary of funeral customs, then—as a logical conclusion to the topic—goes on to ask whether death really is the end of life, or whether there is something beyond, an afterlife. This bigger narrative unit seamlessly fits into the whole structure and argumentation of book 7, which is the following:

1. A moralizing introduction to man's place in nature and the relationship between man and nature (1–5).
2. Nations with special characteristics (6–32).
3. Life from birth to death (33–190):
  - a.) conception, pregnancy, birth, infancy, inheritance (33–77).
  - b.) significant physical and intellectual capabilities (78–99).
  - c.) significant virtues (100–122).
  - d.) significant accomplishments in science and art (123–129).
  - e.) *felicitas* and *fortuna* (130–152).
  - f.) the unpredictability of fate and lifespan (153–167); death (168–190).
4. A catalog of mankind's most significant inventions (191–209).
5. *Consensus* between the people of the world: writing, shaving and the concept of time (210–215).

The shift from extreme to everyday, from miracles to average events, from barbarity to civilization and culture, from periphery to center is one of the structuring principles of book 7; the other principle that determines the order of the units is man's life from birth to death. The chapters ranging from 33 to 190 follow, just like the whole book does, the most basic process in man's life: they describe conception, birth, growing up and death (everyday events as well as incidents belonging to the category of *mirabilia*). And what is between growing up and dying: the fulfillment of human life. This is what the *exemplums* are about, which all feature great Roman figures exemplifying rationality (*ratio*), morality (*mos*) and

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<sup>14</sup> *NH*.7. 186: *Haec felicia exempla, at contra miseriarum innumera.*

virtues (*virtus*). The reader of book 7 must be surprised to see how Pliny, who adores the perfection of nature, introduces death with the following sentence: “*Natura uero nihil hominibus breuitate uitae praestitit melius.*”<sup>15</sup> Then he goes on to enumerate fortunate<sup>16</sup> and unfortunate<sup>17</sup> cases of death, and he calls sudden death *summa uitae felicitas*,<sup>18</sup> the biggest luck in life. He calls the teachings about the transmigration of souls, or life after death, madness and self-delusion.<sup>19</sup> He concludes—rhetorically as well—this argumentation with which he started: sudden death being the biggest good, “*praecipuum naturae bonum*”,<sup>20</sup>

When dealing with the questions of death and the transmigration of souls, Pliny—whose thinking had primarily been influenced by stoic philosophy—seemingly takes sides with the epicureans. However, we find the closest parallel with his thinking in Seneca: *Mors est non esse. Id quale sit iam scio: hoc erit post me quod ante me fuit.*<sup>21</sup> Just like how Seneca equated death with the state preceding birth when no perception exists, Pliny states that *Omnibus a supremo die eadem quae ante primum; nec magis a morte sensus ullus aut corpori aut animae quam ante natalem.*<sup>22</sup> Pliny’s statement could be interpreted from the perspective that he attributed divine power—without which immortality cannot be imagined—only to nature.<sup>23</sup> This interpretation would stand if Pliny devoted himself consistently to the stoic or any other philosophical schools. However,

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<sup>15</sup> NH 7. 168: “The truth is that nature has given man no better gift than shortness of life.”

<sup>16</sup> NH 7. 180–185.

<sup>17</sup> NH 7. 186.

<sup>18</sup> NH 7. 180: *In primis autem miraculo sunt atque frequentes mortes repentinae — hoc est summa uitae felicitas — quas esse naturales docebimus.* = “Among the most marvelous and frequent occurrences, which I shall show are natural, are sudden death, life’s greatest happiness.”

<sup>19</sup> NH 7. 188–190.

<sup>20</sup> NH 7. 190: *Perdit profecto ista dulcedo credulitasque praecipuum naturae bonum, mortem.* = “Such seductive delusions in reality destroy nature’s supreme gift, death.”

<sup>21</sup> Sen. *Ep.* 54. 4: “Death is non-existence, and I know already what that means. What was before me will happen again after me.” (Transl. by Richard M. Gummere).

<sup>22</sup> NH 7. 188: “After our last day, we are all in the same state as we were before our first; body and soul have no more sensation after death than they had before birth.”

<sup>23</sup> Mary Beagon, *Roman Nature: The Thought of Pliny the Elder* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 92–102.

Pliny was no theoretician, he was practical minded in everything he did.<sup>24</sup> So the answer should be sought not in philosophical principles but within the text of *Naturalis Historia*.

If we take a look at the examples of sudden death, one common motif stands out: they are all about active and strong men who have just started to attend some public duties, or they have just completed these duties. Death comes for them before old age or illness; they live Pliny's own ideal type of life, which he summarizes in the *praefatio* as *uita uigilia est*.<sup>25</sup> "Living means being awake," that is, being active for the community, for the state, just like the examples—including Pliny's own<sup>26</sup>—demonstrate. In contrast, unfortunate deaths are the pathetic results of suicide, divorce or even the sorrow felt over a favorite charioteer. If we evoke one of the most important themes of book 7, the Plinian evaluation of *memoria*,<sup>27</sup> which is the most significant of mental capabilities, even the text's rhetoric helps us find the solution. Death is the greatest good man can get from nature: *praecipuum naturae bonum, mortem*.<sup>28</sup> Memory is the most needed good in life: *Memoria necessarium maxime uitae bonum*.<sup>29</sup>

In this sense, life is only good while we retain our memory and intellectual capabilities, which enable us to act, to be useful persons, to fulfill the ideal of *uita uigilia est*. Thus the most needed and greatest good is *memoria*, and the prime examples of its use are Kyros, L. Scipio,

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<sup>24</sup> In Pliny's thinking, there is no sharp boundary between official religion (*religio*), superstitions (*superstitio*) and natural philosophy (for example, the teaching about the principle of *sympatheia-antipatheia* behind all the events of nature); see Thomas Köves-Zulau, "Plinius der Ältere und die Römische Religion," in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt*, vol. II. 16. 1, hrsg. Hildegard Temporini und Wolfgang Haase (Berlin, New York: De Gruyter, 1978), 197–198.

<sup>25</sup> *NH* praef. 19.

<sup>26</sup> For a good summary of Pliny's military and public roles, his activities as writer and his life in general, see John F. Healy, *Pliny the Elder on Science and Technology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1–35; for a shorter version, see Beagon, *The Elder Pliny*, 1–5.

<sup>27</sup> Pliny gives an important role to memory in every respect. For example, it is their good memories that elevate elephants and dogs above all other animals in the wilderness or in the household (*NH* 8. 1 and 146). He attributes portrait sculpture (*NH* 34.16) and painting (*NH* 35. 4. 9–10) the function of remembering and perpetuation of the ancestor's memory.

<sup>28</sup> *NH* 7. 190.

<sup>29</sup> *NH* 7. 88: "Of good memory, the most indispensable of life's advantages, it is difficult to name an outstanding example."

Mithridates, or Iulius Caesar—kings and leading statesmen.<sup>30</sup> If fate is so kind to us as to spare us from the period of old age that destroys body and soul, and sudden death prevents such an inglorious conclusion of life, then this is *summa felicitas*, the greatest luck, or *praecipuum bonum*, the greatest good, given by a life identified with nature. This must also be the reason why Pliny mocks the foolish belief in an afterlife: *Quae, malum, ista dementia est iterari uitam morte? Quaeue genitis quies umquam, si in sublimi sensus animae manet, inter inferos umbrae?*<sup>31</sup>

Pliny concludes book 7 not with the thought of total annihilation but with a catalog of mankind's most significant inventions and inventors.<sup>32</sup> He introduces this twenty-five-chapter-long passage with the claim that this is the proper place for this enumeration (*consentaneum uidetur*), before he leaves the theme of this book, the description of human nature (*priusquam digrediamur a natura hominum*). This is doubly true according to the logic of *Naturalis Historia*. On the one hand, it is connected to the arrangement of knowledge that we find in the encyclopedia. Pliny gives the description of materials and creatures in a tripartite construction: locality / habitat, a short account of the phenomenon / the creature, and its utility / usefulness.<sup>33</sup> If we project this systematic narrative structure onto book 7, Pliny gives the habitat of different people, followed by a description of the people and the physical, intellectual and ethical-moral accounts of their most significant thinkers, concluding with the third narrative unit: the introduction of mankind's most important inventions

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<sup>30</sup> *NH* 7. 88–91.

<sup>31</sup> *NH* 7. 190: “Scoundrel! What is this mad idea that life is renewed in death? What peace will the generations ever find if consciousness is retained by their souls in the upper world and their shades in the underworld?”

<sup>32</sup> *NH* 7. 191–215. For the rhetorical strategy in Pliny's heurematography and the interpretation of it as a teleological narrative, see Marco Mistretta, “Empire and Invention: the Elder Pliny's Heurematography (*NH* 7. 191–215),” *Acta Classica Universitatis Scientiarum Debreceniensis* 54 (2018): 123–135.

<sup>33</sup> For a consistent use of the narrative construction giving the occurrence, description and utilization, see in this volume “*Corinthium aes versus Electrum*: The Anecdote as an Expression of Roman Identity in Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis Historia*.”

For *utilitas* as a central theme in *Naturalis Historia*, see Sandra Citroni Marchetti, “*Iuvare mortalem*. L'ideale programmatico della *Naturalis Historia* di Plinio nei rapporti con il moralismo stoico-diatribico,” *Atene e Roma* 27 (1982): 124–149; Tamás Gesztelyi, “Plinio il Vecchio: il rapporto tra vita pubblica e morale per un intellettuale politico nel primo impero,” in *L'immagine dell'uomo politico: vita pubblica e morale nell' antichità*, a cura di Marta Sordi (Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 1991), 215–226.



which helped in unfolding the possibilities of nature. The people, whose lives book 7 describes from birth to death, fulfill their role ordered by nature by making themselves useful to nature and to life with the *ratio* given to them. *Utilitas* manifests in this context in that man, with the help of various inventions creating the world of science, crafts and art, elevates himself from natural existence.

The other meaning of the catalog of inventions is intimately connected to the above. Man as *inventor* creates civilization and culture with the establishment of *ars* and *disciplina*. This notion is in sharp contrast to the picture opening the book: the defenseless infant, who is only capable of crying, lying on the ground,<sup>34</sup> and the “uncivilized” nature of “barbarous” people from Scythia, Aithiopia and India introduced in the beginning of book 7.<sup>35</sup> It also gives a framework: creative man is the conclusion of the road that Pliny gives such a vivid picture of. He leads the reader through the life of the human being and humanity itself, and concludes by showing man himself: *ecce homo*. This is his anthropology: not biological evolution, but cultural blooming.

We find Ofilius Hilarius’s death, which becomes a vivid image, in a special place within this process that characterizes the whole of book 7. As *sphragis*, it concludes man’s earthly journey and biological existence. It also gives an opportunity for the book to—after the refutation of different theories of afterlife—end with the only undeniable form of existence after death: immortality through scientific and artistic creations, the notion of intellectual immortality, the monuments of creative man. This is preceded by the anecdote which condenses those thoughts about life that the many *exemplums* of book 7 demonstrate. In this we find birth and death, creation and fulfillment, hand in hand with sudden death as *summa felicitas*, or *praecipuum bonum*, and lastly, in Ofilius’s figure as a funeral monument, the notion of memory, *memoria*.

The anecdote about the actor’s death is a typical realization of that narrative technique which Pliny the Younger felt to be a general characteristic of the whole *opus: diffusum*, this diffuse, or, in the light of our interpretation, divergent performance, which—instead of interrupting them—enriches all the themes with digressions. That type of narration which Pliny the Younger—in another letter of his—made a prose poetical principle. At the end of the lengthy descriptions of his villa, he apologetically writes about his own style that touches upon every aspect of

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<sup>34</sup> *NH* 7. 2.

<sup>35</sup> *NH* 7. 9–32.

the topic: *Non enim excursus hic eius, sed opus ipsum est.*<sup>36</sup> “This is not digression, this is the work of art itself”.

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<sup>36</sup> Plin. *Ep.* 5. 6. 43.

## II.

### *DIUI AUGUSTI ADUERSA* PLIN. *NH* 7. 147–150

Pliny the Elder gave the following title—in the table of contents—to chapters 147–150 of book 7 of *Naturalis Historia*, which summarize the life of Rome’s first emperor: *Diui Augusti aduersa*—the misfortunes of the divine Augustus. The four chapters do not contradict this summary of the emperor’s biography: the text recapitulates the private and public life of Augustus, focusing solely on his misfortunes, even when talking about his successes. It is no surprise that Rudolf Till describes these passages as the antithesis of Augustus’s successful life and great deeds.<sup>1</sup> This anti-*Res gestae diui Augusti* is unique in ancient literature in every respect. Not only does the story contradict the seemingly flawless Augustus portraits of earlier authors,<sup>2</sup> but with his dark tones Pliny paints a very one-sided picture of the life of the princeps. Furthermore, it gives such a glimpse into the private life of the emperor that makes it a unique historical source. The life work of Augustus and its memory—verbal memories for now—is usually illustrated by the *Res gestae* as well as the historical pieces of Tacitus, Suetonius and Cassius Dio, which sources are still contributing to the Augustan monument. This cultural memory systematically omits *Naturalis Historia*’s Augustus portrait, which is worth quoting here in detail:

147. *In diuo quoque Augusto, quem uniuersa mortalitas in hac censura nuncupat, si diligenter aestimentur cuncta, magna sortis humanae reperiantur uolumina: repulsa in magisterio equitum apud auunculum et contra petitionem eius praelatus Lepidus, proscriptionis inuidia, collegium in triumuiratu pessimorum ciuium, nec aequa saltem portione, sed*

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<sup>1</sup> Rudolf Till, “Plinius über Augustus (nat. hist. 7, 147–150),” *Würzburger Jahrbücher für Altertumswissenschaft*, N. F. 3 (1977): 137: Überrascht doch der Gesamttenor des Exzerptes, der wie eine Gegendarstellung zu Autobiographie und Tatenbericht des Augustus wirkt.

<sup>2</sup> Pliny also refers to this with his first sentence (7. 147).

*prae graui Antonio, 148. Philippensi proelio morbi, fuga et triduo in palude aegroti et (ut fatentur Agrippa ac Maecenas) aqua subter cutem fusa turgidi latebra, naufragia Sicula et alia ibi quoque in spelunca occultatio, iam in nauali fuga urgente hostium manu preces Proculeio mortis admotae, cura Perusinae contentionis, sollicitudo Martis Actiaci, Pannonicis bellis ruina e turri, 149. tot seditiones militum, tot anticipes morbi corporis, suspecta Marcelli uota, pudenda Agrippae ablegatio, totiens petita insidiis uita, incusatae liberorum mortes luctusque non tantum orbitate tristis, adulterium filiae et consilia parricidae palam facta, contumeliosus priuigni Neronis secessus, aliud in nepte adulterium; iuncta deinde tot mala: inopia stipendii, rebellio Illyrici, seruitiorum dilectus, iuuentutis penuria, pestilentia urbis, fames Italiae, destinatio expirandi et quadridui inedia maior pars mortis in corpus recepta; 150. iuxta haec Variana clades et maestatis eius foeda suggillatio, abdicatio Postumi Agrippae post adoptionem, desiderium post relegationem, inde suspicio in Fabium arcanorumque prodicionem, hinc uxoris et Tiberii cogitationes, suprema eius cura. In summa deus ille caelumque nescio adeptus magis an meritis herede hostis sui filio excessit.<sup>3</sup>*

**147.** In the case of the deified Augustus, too, whom men unanimously include in their list of happy individuals, a careful investigator of all the facts would find great changes of human fortune. There was his failure to obtain the office of Master of Horse from his uncle, when Lepidus' candidacy was preferred to his; the hatred he incurred as a result of the proscriptions; and his association in the triumvirate with the worst citizens without even an equal share in power, but with Antony predominant. **148.** Then there was his illness at the battle of Philippi, followed by his flight and concealment for three days in a march while swollen with dropsy, according to Agrippa and Maecenas. His shipwreck in Sicily was followed by another period of hiding, this time in a cave. He entreated Proculeius to kill him when they were hard pressed by a detachment of the enemy in a naval rout. There were the pressures of the Perusine war, the anxieties of Actium, and his fall from a tower in the Pannonian wars. **149.** There were all the mutinies in his armies and all his critical illnesses. There were his suspicions of Marcellus' vows, the shameful banishment of Agrippa, and the many conspiracies against his life. There were the accusations of involvement in his children's deaths and the sorrows that were not due solely to his bereavement: his daughter's adultery and the discovery of her plot to kill her father; the insolent retirement of his stepson, Nero; and another adultery, this time his granddaughter's. Then in addition there was a long series of other misfortunes: shortage of money for the army, the revolt in Illyricum, the enlisting of slaves, the shortage of manpower,

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<sup>3</sup> I quote the text of book 7 according to the Budé edition: Pline L' Ancien, *Histoire Naturelle, Livre VII*. Texte établi, traduit et commenté par Robert Schilling (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2003).

plague at Rome, famine in Italy, his determination to kill himself and the four days' fast which brought him to within an inch of death. 150. On top of this was the disaster of Varus and the disgraceful affront to his dignity; and the disowning of Agrippa Postumus after his adoption, followed by a sense of loss after his banishment. Then there were the suspicions with regard to Fabius and the betrayal of secrets, followed by the intrigues of his wife and Tiberius which were plaguing him at the end of his life. In the end, this god (whether deified by machination or merit I cannot tell) died leaving his enemy's son as his heir.<sup>4</sup>

These four chapters summarize Augustus's whole career: the time frame begins with the first political role (*magister equitum*) that the emperor fulfilled and ends with his death—the concluding word is *excessit*—thus it ranges from 44 BC to 14 AD. Or, to be more precise, the biography is framed by the failures of the beginning and the end of the career, which sets the main tone of the whole biography. In 44 BC, Octavianus applied for the office of Master of Horse (147: *magister equitum*), which Caesar gave to Lepidus instead—the biography's first word (147: *repulsa*) refers to the injury of rejection. Augustus could not conclude his reign in a reassuring way because the tragedies in the family prompted him to name Tiberius as his successor, whose father, Tiberius Claudius Nero, fought on the side of Lucius Antonius in the Perusine War and later on the side of Sextus Pompeius, the enemies of Augustus (150: *herede hostis sui filio excessit*).

This framed text is comprised of two parts, the events of which converge around two points in Augustus's career: the rise to power and its transmission.<sup>5</sup> This explains why the biography's events are not perfectly faithful to historical chronology. Chapters 147 and 148 summarize the rise to power; by reading the story we witness how Augustus defeats the Republicans and how he subsequently gets rid of his subjection to the triumvirate, especially Antonius: we arrive from Philippi to Actium (148: *Philippensi proelio ... sollicitudo Martis Actiaci*). The chapters that follow (149 and 150) are devoted to the questions of succession. The enumeration of conspiracies, suspicions, friendships and family relationships gone wrong, and the deaths of his heirs serve the purpose of focusing on the dynastic hardships of Augustus's reign. The pillars of this part are his

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<sup>4</sup> I quote the English translation of book 7 according to the newest edition: Mary Beagon, *The Elder Pliny on the Human Animal: Natural History, Book 7* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> This structural aspect of the text was uncovered by Burkhard Tautz, *Das Bild des Kaisers Augustus in der Naturalis Historia des Plinius* (Trier: WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, 1999), 364–370.

daughter Iulia's marriage to Marcellus, to Agrippa and finally to Tiberius.<sup>6</sup> This narrative feature also lets us get a closer look into the private life of the princeps and demonstrates how all his deeds go wrong. The closing act of the misfortunes is how Augustus needs to transmit his power to Tiberius, the adopted son of his former enemy (150: *suprema eius cura*).

The main tone of the text is an enumeration devoid of emotions. Pliny recites the events without any subjective opinion or comments. This type of narration is used to evoke the semblance of objectivity. However, this claim to objectivity is refuted by the apparently one-sided narration which concentrates only on the failures, as well as the silences, the only partly narrated stories and the rewritings. The first part of Augustus's biography mentions his failure to gain the office of Master of Horse, yet Pliny never relates that Caesar in 44 BC also appointed Octavianus as the one who would fulfill this role the next year.<sup>7</sup> Pliny's narrative strategy is similar in the case of Philippi. He only writes about Augustus's flight (*fuga*), hiding (*latebra*) and illness (*Philippensi proelio morbi ... triduo in palude morbi*), and never mentions what all the historians relate: his wondrous escape. When Brutus's army took over the camp, Octavianus's tent was found empty because a dream prompted him to leave the camp.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, Augustus had an accident in the Dalmatian conquest, and not in the Pannonian War, and he did not fall from a tower but got injured when a bridge collapsed.<sup>9</sup> This deheroizing way of narrating is unique among ancient sources. Pliny almost comically over-emphasizes Augustus's military failures, and this tendency can be felt if we take into consideration Appianus's—no less tendentious—narrative, which presents Augustus as the example of intrepid bravery worthy of even Heracles. Augustus's otherwise well-known illnesses,<sup>10</sup> which surface many times in Pliny's narrative, as well as Pliny's emphasis on the emperor's weak health, serve the purpose of sketching the portrait of a wretched person.

Just as the Plinian narrative about Augustus's Pannonian accident can be regarded as a fiction, there are other parts in *Naturalis Historia's* narrative which do not appear in any other sources; for example, Octavianus's begging the respected politician and friend Proculeius to kill him (148), his suicide attempt (149) or the claim that he would betray

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<sup>6</sup> Tautz, *Das Bild des Kaisers Augustus*, 369.

<sup>7</sup> Cass. Dio 53. 49. 1; App. *B civ.* 13. 2. 107; 3. 9.

<sup>8</sup> Val. Max. 1.7. 1; Plut. *Vit. Brut.* 41. 4; Suet. *Aug.* 91. 1; App. *B civ.* 16. 4. 463; Cass. Dio 47. 41.

<sup>9</sup> Suet. *Aug.* 20; App. *B civ.* 9. 20; Cass. Dio 49. 35. 2.

<sup>10</sup> Suet. *Aug.* 80–82 gives a very detailed description of Augustus's conditions and illnesses.

emperor Marcellus,<sup>11</sup> whom Augustus adored and who was very popular among the people (149). Historians recorded the names of Roman citizens who planned to assassinate Augustus, but no sources accuse his daughter Iulia of being one of them.<sup>12</sup>

Just as the *Res gestae* formulated the memory of Augustus's reign the way the princeps wanted to represent it, Pliny's one-sided, negative view deliberately paints a somber portrait of Rome's first emperor, one that stands in sharp contrast to the *virtus* of the princeps, as well as the traditional reference to his reign as an *aurea aetas*.<sup>13</sup>

The first cracks in the flawless Augustan monument show in the descriptions of Pliny's elderly contemporary, Seneca, then reappear in the historical works of Tacitus and Suetonius. Even though Suetonius gives a whole list of misfortunes that happened to Augustus,<sup>14</sup> and Tacitus mainly shows the darker side of the emperor's career,<sup>15</sup> on the whole these texts cannot be accused of being one-sided, let alone of painting a biased portrait. Seneca's treatise,<sup>16</sup> which only deals with the hardships of the emperor's public and private life, comes closest to Pliny's portrait of Augustus. Yet Seneca's narrative is not about an endless series of failures but the burdens of every man of great power, including Augustus: how their lives become a series of battles against various kinds of difficulties. When the emperor solved a conflict, another one popped up. Seneca relates the greatest hardships during the princeps's rule in a moralizing context, as an *exemplum* which can be summarized with the help of the following thesis statement: *Potentissimis et in altum sublatis hominibus excidere voces videbis, quibus otium optent, laudent, omnibus bonis suis praeferant*.<sup>17</sup> At the end of the chapter, when Augustus, who always wanted to find peace in his life, yet never found it, sees this Senecan claim justified, he says: *Itaque otium optabat, [...] hoc votum erat eius, qui voti compotes facere poterat*.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Maybe Pliny's obscure reference can be connected to the year 23 BC when Augustus became very ill, which brought up the questions about succession.

<sup>12</sup> One of her lovers, Iullus Antonius, the son of Marcus Antonius, was accused of trying to assassinate Augustus, and subsequently he was sentenced to death.

<sup>13</sup> In particular, the lack of money, the plague and the famine mentioned in chapter 158 stand in sharp contrast to the propaganda of Augustus's reign being a golden age of the Roman Empire.

<sup>14</sup> Suet. *Aug.* 65.

<sup>15</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 1. 1–10.

<sup>16</sup> Sen. *Brev.* 4.

<sup>17</sup> Sen. *Brev.* 4. 1.

<sup>18</sup> Sen. *Brev.* 4. 6.

Seneca evokes the life of Rome's first emperor when pondering the importance of *otium*, and he illustrates with this *exemplum* one of the paradoxes of life. This is his intent when he mentions only the most pressing difficulties of Augustus's life: the civil war, the wars abroad and the assassination attempts, as well as the scandalous life of his daughter Julia. This is indeed a dark picture, and not because Augustus failed in these situations, but because another difficulty arose right after he resolved each conflict.

Pliny's negative portrait of Augustus is unique not only when compared to the narratives of his younger contemporaries but in the context of *Naturalis Historia* as well. The encyclopedia mentions Augustus in different contexts,<sup>19</sup> and on the whole the image we get of the emperor is not entirely negative; sometimes it is even positive,<sup>20</sup> or, rarely, ironic.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, besides the direct references, Pliny's text is full of the praise of such values that formed the ethical basis of Augustus's age and which reappeared in a new Augustus, Vespasianus, who restored peace (*pax*) and concord (*concordia*). Pliny often refers to Vespasianus with a title evoking Augustus (*imperator Augustus*), which he never uses when talking about Tiberius.<sup>22</sup> When book 36 of *Naturalis Historia* praises the *templum Pacis*, which was built by Vespasianus, as Rome's architectural wonder,<sup>23</sup> he evokes Augustus's Rome, and indirectly the emperor's memoir, *Res gestae*.<sup>24</sup>

Critics advocated different explanations to resolve this contradiction that is evident between the 1<sup>st</sup> century auctors and *Naturalis Historia*'s appreciative approach, which in book 7 turns into a devastating portrait of Augustus. Exemplifying critical views fashionable even in the 1970s which claimed that *Naturalis Historia* was entirely dependent in every aspect on suspected or known sources, Rudolph Till explains the negative portrait found in book 7 of *Naturalis Historia* with the fact that Pliny

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<sup>19</sup> *Naturalis Historia* mentions Augustus's name in more than a hundred passages, in various contexts. Burkhard Tautz collected and evaluated all these textual loci in his monograph: Tautz, *Das Bild des Kaisers Augustus*, 131–428.

<sup>20</sup> Till, "Plinius über Augustus," 137; Barry Baldwin, "Roman Emperors in the Elder Pliny," *Scholia* 4 (1995): 62.

<sup>21</sup> One such example is when the inhabitants of the Balearic Islands asked the deified Augustus to use his army to help them control the rabbits who proliferated and destroyed the crops, which resulted in a famine (*NH* 8. 217–218). Barry Baldwin wittily called this "*almost a Monty Python situation*": Baldwin, "Roman Emperors," 63.

<sup>22</sup> Baldwin, "Roman Emperors," 59.

<sup>23</sup> *NH* 36. 102.

<sup>24</sup> *RGDA* 19–21, as well as Suet. *Aug.* 29.



relied on an unknown source, which was similar to, or was the same text used by Tacitus or Cassius Dio.<sup>25</sup> Burkhard Tautz explains the case with the political context: he believes that the dark tone of the portrait we find in book 7 serves the purpose of emphasizing the greatness of Vespasianus, the most brilliant emperor in *Naturalis Historia*. The failures of Augustus's life function as a point of reference or a dark background against which the successes of the Flavian dynasty shine very brightly.<sup>26</sup> Mary Beagon locates Augustus's Plinian representation in the moralizing tradition that began with Seneca's moral philosophical treatise, and which found echoes in Suetonius's *Augustus-vita* as well.<sup>27</sup>

As we have seen, Seneca turned Augustus's life into an exemplum of the importance of *otium*: the lack of *otium* cannot be compensated for by anything. Suetonius introduces the misfortunes of the princeps's life with the following sentence: *Sed laetum eum atque fidentem et subole et disciplina domus Fortuna destituit*.<sup>28</sup> Pliny's narrative can be inserted into this moralizing tradition as well because he is also pondering the vicissitudes of luck/happiness, *fortuna/felicitas*, when he is introducing that bigger narrative unit that revolves around this topic, the one that contains, among others, the portrait of Augustus. Consequently, this biography cannot be regarded as an anti-*Res gestae*, or a text whose supposed narratorial ambition would emphasize the brilliance of the Flavii. We should interpret the text in the context of the textual unit that organically contains it, and which culminates in it.

With chapter 130, book 7 introduces a new thematic unit: the examples of *fortuna* (the ups and down in luck, namely fate) and *felicitas* (happiness).<sup>29</sup> This new unit is introduced by three moralizing chapters (130–132), in which Pliny—just like when he ponders the ambivalent nature of human life in the introduction to book 7—shows the double nature of luck and happiness: *Felicitas cui praecipua fuerit homini, non est humani iudicii, cum prosperitatem ipsam alius alio modo et suoapte ingenio quisque determinet. Si uerum facere iudicium uolumus ac repudiata omni fortunae ambitione discernere, nemo mortalium est felix* (130). After giving one or two rare examples of lifelong luck (133), he starts to focus

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<sup>25</sup> Till, "Plinius über Augustus," 137.

<sup>26</sup> Tautz, *Das Bild des Kaisers Augustus*, 64, 82–83.

<sup>27</sup> Beagon, *The Elder Pliny*, 345.

<sup>28</sup> Suet. *Aug.* 65.

<sup>29</sup> For a thorough analysis of the religious roots, semantic field and changes of *Fortuna/fortuna* and *felicitas* in Roman culture, see Thomas Köves-Zulau, *Bevezetés a római monda és vallás történetébe* (Introduction to the History of Roman Myth and Religion), (Budapest: Telosz, 1995), 132–138.

on the alternation of fortune and misfortune in human life (134–136) in the three *exemplums* directly preceding the Augustus-*vita* (137–146).

Sulla (137–138), Lucius Metellus (139–141) and Metellus Macedonicus (142–146) are outstanding figures in Roman history both as *consuls* and *imperators*. However, their political and military achievements are not of the same quality. Pliny presents their lives as examples of *fortuna* and *felicitas*, in that *felicitas* gains more emphasis than *infelicitas*. Even though Sulla (whose cognomen was *Felix*—that is, lucky) had countless victories, he gained them in the civil war by attacking his country and shedding the blood of Roman citizens. He did not gain the adjective *Felix* because of public respect; he gave it to himself. He died in pain, admitting he was unhappy.<sup>30</sup> Sulla's life is the *exemplum* of the unhappiness that hides behind surface successes and happiness.

*Fortuna*'s two-faced nature and the ambivalence of human life is best exemplified by the fates of the two Metelli, Lucius (139–141) and Macedonicus (142–146). Their lives are similar in a certain sense: they both had public respect and they both gained the positions of *consul* and *imperator*. Their political and military achievements were widely recognized, and their prestige was also backed up by their happy private lives: they were members of a well-known family, which had many members with successful public careers. Their lives are parallel not only because of the functioning of *fortuna* but also for showing the fragile nature of *felicitas*. The lives of both were ravaged by misfortune. Lucius Metellus lost his eyesight when he brought out the *Palladium* from the burning Vesta sanctuary. Because of this selfless deed the people of Rome graced him with something unprecedented: he was taken to the *Curia* on a chariot. The price of this exceptional esteem, however, was his eyesight. Metellus Macedonicus's life turned out to be more tragic. His brilliant career was broken by a derogatory and unjust event, a tribune nearly ending Metellus's life. He spent the rest of his life in poverty, living on other people's gifts.<sup>31</sup>

In Pliny's narrative, the two Metelli are the prominent *exemplums* of Roman virtues. They embody that Roman aristocratic ideal which is made up of three *virtutes* contributing to an exemplary life: *dignitas* (dignity), a prominent public role fulfilled in military and political life; *auctoritas* (authority) in the eyes of the community brought about by the honesty and

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<sup>30</sup> 7. 138: *hoc tamen nempe felicitati suae defuisse confessus est.*

<sup>31</sup> Pliny's deliberately polarizing narration probably has a say in this: Macedonicus's beggarly poverty is not mentioned in any other sources, and it is very hard to imagine, because—as becomes obvious from Pliny's narrative—he had sons fulfilling important public roles.

wisdom with which they attended to their positions; and lastly, *memoria* (memory), which is the result of the previous two, and whose ethical function is to set an example—the descendants cultivate and emulate the exemplary memory of their ancestors.

Pliny's aim is obvious. The *felicitas* of Lucius Metellus and Metellus Macedonicus, which is broken by unfortunate turns of events, stands in sharp contrast to the absolute *infelicitas* of the Augustus biography. The opposition that is presented here seems to be well thought out, as Pliny in the beginning of book 7 already juxtaposed Augustus and Metellus Macedonicus from the perspective of fertility and potency.<sup>32</sup> The marriage of Augustus and Livia is an example of what we today would call genetic incompatibility: they each had a child from their previous wedlocks, but their marriage remained childless. In contrast, Metellus Macedonicus had six children and eleven grandchildren, but considering his daughters-in-law, sons-in-law and other people calling him “father”, he had twenty-seven relatives.<sup>33</sup> The two families are juxtaposed in terms of childbirth, and this *felix/infelix* opposition is further reinforced by Iulia's scandalous life in the Augustus portrait, her alleged plan of trying to assassinate her royal father, the banishment of the two Iuliae and Postumus Agrippa, and the death of the grandchildren, as opposed to the nearly idyllic picture of the big family surrounding Macedonicus. Even the *divus* nature of Augustus is questioned or represented in an ironic light. If we take a closer look at the life of the princeps (7. 150: *diligenter aestimentur cuncta*), we can conclude (*in summa*) that he is an example of *infelicitas*, which puts his merits (*an meritis*) leading to his apotheosis (*ille deus*) into question (*nescio*).<sup>34</sup>

The double nature of human life, success and unhappiness, gains its most memorable representation in the ambivalent biography of Augustus. Even though the text opens with the widespread notion that Augustus is regarded as a fortunate and happy person, Pliny paints quite a gloomy and oppressive picture of the public and private life of Rome's first emperor. As opposed to the other *exemplums* of book 7, the public and private life of the *princeps* does not exemplify the laws of “ups and downs” but rather the reality of *infelicitas* lurking behind the surface of *felicitas*. Pliny adored Vespasianus and Titus, who both regarded Augustus's peace-

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<sup>32</sup> *NH* 7. 57.

<sup>33</sup> *NH* 7. 59.

<sup>34</sup> His merit is in doubt even though in 90% of the cases when *Naturalis Historia* mentions Augustus's name it uses the adjective *Divus* like an *epitheton ornans*: Francisco de Oliveira, *Les Idées Politiques et Morales de Pline l'Ancien* (Coimbra: Instituto Nacional de Investigação Científica, 1992), 99.

making politics as their role model in their political careers and defined themselves as his successors.<sup>35</sup> That is why it is unjustified to claim that *Naturalis Historia's* Augustus portrait is a distorted point of reference constructed only to emphasize the greatness of the Flavii.

Pliny lived under the reign of nine of Rome's first eleven emperors, including Domitianus and Titus. It is undoubtable that Augustus and Vespasianus are outstanding figures in this series. Their reigns were similarly significant, and there are analogies between their lives as well: they both gained their power during a civil war and created peace for Rome. The most striking difference between the two lives can be seen in the transmission of power. Augustus's misfortunes in this respect are juxtaposed to how his sons stood by Vespasianus, especially Titus, who already acted as co-emperor—not only in life, but in *Naturalis Historia* as well, where the *praefatio* dedicated to Titus calls him Vespasianus Caesar and *imperator*.<sup>36</sup>

Augustus appears in *Naturalis Historia* in a similar historical role as Aeneas does in *Aeneis* and in the whole propaganda of the Augustus age: Aeneas had to struggle and suffer so that Augustus's reign, the new golden age, could come about. The hero of *Aeneis* fulfilled his historical mission, which ensured his personal fame and sustained the continuity of history that goes from a golden age to a new golden age. The price of this was that he had to abandon the desire to have a peaceful private life: Vergilius never calls Aeneas happy.<sup>37</sup> It is no wonder that in the epic's last book, Aeneas says farewell to his son Ascanius in the following way: *disce, puer, virtutem ex me verumque laborem, / fortunam ex aliis*.<sup>38</sup> Aeneas's life is an eternal example of heroic virtue (*virtus*), struggle and self-sacrifice (*labor*). Peace (*otium*) and happiness (*fortuna*)—as Seneca and Pliny make clear—are not part of the fates of heroes fulfilling a historical role.

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<sup>35</sup> Ronald Mellor, "The New Aristocracy of Power," in *Flavian Rome: Culture, Image, Text*, eds. A. J. Boyle, W. J. Dominik (Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2003), 80–84; Beagon, *The Elder Pliny*, 6.

<sup>36</sup> *praef.* 6.

<sup>37</sup> Zsigmond Ritoók, "Terque quaterque beati," *Acta Universitatis de Attila József Nominatae, Acta Antiqua et Archaeologica* 25 (1984): 80–82.

<sup>38</sup> Verg. *Aen.* 12. 432–440. If we interpret this line from *Aeneis* retrospectively from Pliny's Augustus portrait and its *infelicitas* concept, the real meaning of *disce ... fortunam ex aliis* becomes clear. One cannot learn luck/happiness; it is either part of one's life or not. Aeneas's words could refer to the exemplary nature of his life, which is due to his *virtus* and *labor*. But for this he sacrificed his personal happiness (he had to forsake Dido), so he cannot be an example Ascanius could follow.

The *infelicitas* of the life of the first Roman emperor, the *aduersa diui Augusti*—besides the narrower moralizing context—gains its true meaning in this historical frame. It does not function as a contrast to make Vespasianus even greater but lays the foundation for that new golden age to come about. The portraits of the two emperors should not be seen as antitheses, rather as two processes that presuppose each other: beginning and fulfillment. Augustus Caesar acts as an Aeneas to lay the foundation for everything that will be fulfilled and reinforced by Vespasianus Augustus as a new Augustus. The divination in Vergilius's *Aeneis*<sup>39</sup> refers to Augustus as *diui genus*, the divine Caesar's son, the founder of the new golden age, and the one who (together with the Iulius dynasty) will take his place among the gods. *Naturalis Historia* extends this apotheosis to Vespasianus (and his sons, the Flavii); his future deification is beyond doubt: *Deus est mortali iuuare mortalem, et haec ad aeternam gloriam uia. Hac proceres iere Romani, hac nunc caelesti passu cum liberis suis uadit maximus omnis aei rector Vespasianus Augustus fessis rebus subueniens. Hic est uetustissimus referendi bene merentibus gratiam mos, ut tales numinibus adscribant.*<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Verg. *Aen.* 6. 789–793: *hic Caesar et omnis Iuli / progenies, magnum caeli ventura sub axem. / hic vir, hic est, tibi quem promitti saepius audis, / Augustus Caesar, diui genus, aurea condet / saecula qui rursus Latio regnata per arva / Saturno quondam.*

<sup>40</sup> *NH* 2. 18–19. *Iuuare mortalem* and *utilitas* are among the most important values in *Naturalis Historia*. See, for example, Sandra Citroni Marchetti, “*Iuuare mortalem*. L'ideale programmatico della *Naturalis Historia* di Plinio nei rapporti con il moralismo stoico-diatribico,” *Atene e Roma* 27 (1982): 124–149; Tamás Gesztelyi, “Plinio il Vecchio: il rapporto tra vita pubblica e morale per un intellettuale politico nel primo impero,” in *L'immagine dell'uomo politico: vita pubblica e morale nell' antichità*, a cura di Marta Sordi (Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 1991), 215–226.

### III.

## WHEN ELEPHANTS WEEP\* PLIN. *NH* 8. 20–21

When we talk about comparative literature, we usually think of the study of the relationship between the literatures of two or more nations, or the study of motifs and themes unfolding through the ages and in different art forms.<sup>1</sup> In this interpretative process the art of antiquity acts as the point of origin, or the archetype. This position at least makes the mentioning of antique art unavoidable, but it also becomes an obstacle to interpretation. With the gesture of the reference to ancient Greek art, the critic usually moves forward to the ages nearer to our own. However, the artistic achievement of antiquity, as a point of origin and a point of reference, made possible once and for all the application of the comparative method, and it established its theory and practice as well. We could say that “in the beginning there was rhetoric”—that is, Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, the third book of which first proclaimed the two virtues of good style (ἀρεταί): being clear and being appropriate. When Theophrastus in his treatise *On Lexis* supplemented these two with grammatical purity and the norm of ornamentation, then with the help of these four virtues (clarity, appropriateness, grammatical purity and ornamentation) orators could be judged, classified, admired and compared.<sup>2</sup>

The system built up of these four virtues of style had an overarching effect on the evaluation of artistic prose in the antique period. Theophrastus’s theory—though his immediate source could have been Posidonius—was adapted for Roman literature by Cicero. He also added

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\*The title of the article echoes a part of the title of Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson and Susan McCarthy’s *When Elephants Weep: The Emotional Lives of Animals* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1995).

<sup>1</sup> René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1949), 38–41.

<sup>2</sup> George A. Kennedy, “The Evolution of a Theory of Artistic Prose,” in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, vol. I: Classical Criticism, ed. George A. Kennedy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 190–196.