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## WHEN ELEPHANTS WEEP\*

PLIN., NAT. VIII 20-21.

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*Abstract:* The literature of classical antiquity has lost much of its attraction, and the circle of its possible readers has been narrowed significantly. Even in literary criticism that reaches beyond classical philology, its position has dwindled to a source of motifs, topics, archetypes, and we clearly lack such interpretations as would present ancient literature from an angle that would appeal to the readers of our age.

This paper is devoted to an analysis of the 20<sup>th</sup> and the 21<sup>st</sup> chapters of the zoological part (book 8) of Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis Historia*. Through a comparative interpretation that is attentive to the cultural-medial aspects of the textual locus, the essay provides a paradigm for uncovering the meaning – which would appeal to readers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – in ancient texts with the help of different methodological perspectives, in this case the simultaneous application of narratological and comparative approaches.

*Keywords:* Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, ancient zoology, elephants, spectacles, Caesar, Pompeius Magnus, narratology

Every time we talk about comparative literature, we usually think of the study of the relationship between the literatures of two or more nations, or the research of motifs and themes unfolding through the ages and in different art forms.<sup>1</sup> In this interpretative process the art of the antiquity acts as the point of origin, or the archetype. This position at least makes the mentioning of ancient 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 the antiquity, as a point of origin and a point of reference, made possible once and for all the application of the comparative method, and 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 (*aretai*): being clear and being appropriate. When Theophrastus in

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\*The title of the article echoes a part of the title of Masson, McCarthy 1995.

<sup>1</sup> Wellek – Warren 1949, 38-41.

his treatise *On Lexis* supplemented these two with grammatical purity and the norm of ornamentation, then with the help of these four virtues (clarity, appropriate, 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 antiquity. Theophrastus's theory was adapted for Roman literature by Cicero – though his immediate source could have been Posidonius. He also added another important aspect to the comparison of achievements: the comparison of Roman and Greek, the evaluation of the achievement of Roman literature compared to Greek literature. The earliest and most vivid example of this we can find in Cicero's works connected to the theory of rhetoric, first and foremost in *Brutus*, where comparative literary theory and history receives its first conceptualization.<sup>3</sup> Cicero compares Roman and Greek rhetorical achievements, then he compares the examples of older and newer generations of Roman rhetoric, and within the generations, he distinguishes between the representatives of more ornamented and simpler styles. He does this in a rhetorical history that is based on evolution, which he blends with visual analogy of a Hellenistic origin.<sup>4</sup>

It is evident that in *Brutus* the comparative perspective is not only a method, but a certain view of the world brought about by the competition with, or *aemulatio* of, Greek artists, his contemporaries, or Romans in general. This is the very same frame of reference within which the literatures of smaller nations interpret themselves when they compare and evaluate their achievements with the generic and poetical assumptions of "world literature". What makes this case special is that Greece, although subdued in a military and political sense, represented "world literature", and the Roman Empire, which became the ruler of the world in a military and political sense, exemplified the cultural situation of smaller nations. This was not limited to rhetoric only, but it was expanded to all literary genres, as shown by Quintilian's Greek-Roman literary history, which is generally regarded as the first example of comparative literature.<sup>5</sup>

The insights found in Aristotle's *Rhetorica* pertain to comparative literature not only in the sense that they laid the foundations of a method for the evaluation of a distinct literary achievement. Aristotle's formulated such a view of rhetoric that could serve as a basis for the comparative study of all ages and genres (*Rh.* 1355b2):

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<sup>2</sup> Kennedy 1999<sup>5</sup>, 190-196.

<sup>3</sup> Fantham 1999<sup>5</sup>, 235-237.

<sup>4</sup> Pollitt 1974, 61-62; Fantham 1999<sup>5</sup>, 236.

<sup>5</sup> Quint. *Inst.* X 1, 46-131.

Rhetoric then may be defined as the faculty of discovering the possible means of persuasion in reference to any subject whatever. This is the function of no other of the arts, each of which is able to instruct and persuade in its own special subject; thus, medicine deals with health and sickness, geometry with the properties of magnitudes, arithmetic with number, and similarly with all the other arts and sciences. But Rhetoric, so to say, appears to be able to discover the means of persuasion in reference to any given subject. That is why we say that as an art its rules are not applied to any particular definite class of things.<sup>6</sup>

Defined in the broad Aristotelian sense, rhetoric means the uncovering of the mode of narration in any subject, that is, in any given text. This interpretation of ancient texts is precisely what in my opinion would be appealing to contemporary readers: the analysis of the narrative strategy, with the help of comparative methods. It is a well known peculiarity of antique literature that mythic or other kinds of texts came down to us in different narratives. This peculiarity thus also points out a very promising way of interpreting ancient texts. Describing and comparing narrative strategies found in the different accounts of a story, or an event can show not only the constitution of meaning, but those characteristics of texts, which could bring ancient literature closer to the aesthetic expectations of today's readers.

My example that will demonstrate the practice of this interpretative strategy, will be a passage taken not from a literary text in the strict sense. Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis Historia* is the encyclopaedic summary of ancient science, which goes from the introduction of the sky (cosmology), the land (geography, anthropology, zoology, botany), and the waters (animals and plants living in water) to the description of the depths of the earth and the metals, minerals found there. The 37 book long text, which acted as Europe's *Encyclopaedia Britannica* from the antiquity to the age of the Enlightenment, is far from being a simple summary of factual information. Apart from giving information and scientific description on different subjects, we find in it the recitation of historical events, marvellous or fantastic events (the so called *mirabilia*), plenty of anecdotes, moralizing digressions, or hymnic praises. There is no type of text which could not be found in the monumental encyclopaedia, and we find these texts either in isolation from each other, or sometimes mixed within the introduction of a certain topic.

This is true for the narrative unit that is found in the opening 34 chapters in book 8 of *Naturalis Historia*'s zoological books (books 8 to 11), which is about the biggest of terrestrial animals, the elephant. Only a small fraction of the 34 chapters imparts scientific information, and even these are linked by numerous

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<sup>6</sup> Freese 1967.

anecdotes, or events that actually happened.<sup>7</sup> One of these actual events is found in chapters 20 and 21 of the text, and the analysis of these passages comprises the topic of this paper.

The case is about a significant event in Roman cultural history: the grand dedication of the city's first stone theatre together with the architectural unit that it belongs. This happened in 55 BC, and the costs of the construction as well as the many days long celebration following the *dedicatio* was paid by Pompeius Magnus, who acted as the consul that year. The celebrations included various spectacles presented in the *Circus Maximus*, for example fights between animals (*venationes*). The event – beside being a significant point in the history of the Roman theatre – was a milestone in the history of circus spectacles, because this was the first time that a lot of wild animals were staged: 600 lions (*Nat.* VIII 53), 400 panthers (*Nat.* VIII 64), lynxes for the first and last time (*Nat.* VIII 70), and many (17 or 20) elephants (*Nat.* VIII 20).<sup>8</sup> Up until the opening of the *Colosseum* this was the biggest animal fight in Roman history, which could not be surpassed neither by Caesar's nor Augustus' spectacles.<sup>9</sup> The incident happened after and amidst such events (*Nat.* VIII 20-21):

*Pompei quoque altero consulatu,<sup>10</sup> dedicatione templi Veneris Victricis,<sup>11</sup> viginti pugnare in circo aut, ut quidam tradunt, XVII, Gaetulis ex adverso iaculantibus, mirabili unius dimicatione, qui pedibus confossis repsit genibus in catervas, abrepta scuta iaciens in sublime, quae decidentia voluptati spectantibus erant, in orbem circumacta, velut arte, non furore beluae iacerentur. Magnum et in altero miraculum fuit, uno ictu occiso; pilum autem sub oculo adactum in vitalia capitis venerat. Universi eruptione temptavere, non sine vexatione populi, circumdatis claustris ferreis. Qua de causa Caesar dictator postea, simile spectaculum editurus,<sup>12</sup> euripis harenam circumdedit, quos Nero princeps sustulit equiti loca addens.<sup>13</sup> Sed Pompeiani, amissa fugae spe, misericordiam vulgi inenarrabili habitu quaerentes supplicavere quadam sese lamentatione con-*

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<sup>7</sup> For the structure and contents of the 34 chapters, see French 1994, 217; Fögen 2007, 185-186.

<sup>8</sup> Elephants were first seen in Italy in 282 BC, in the war against king Pyrrhus (Plin., *Nat.* VIII 16), M. Curius Dentatus used elephants in his *triumphus* in Rome, 275 BC (Plin., *Nat.* VIII 16), Claudius Pulcher staged for the first time two elephants against each other in his spectacles held in 99 BC (Plin., *Nat.* VIII 19), Pompeius' *triumphus* in 79 BC was also known for elephants pulling chariots (Plin., *Nat.* VIII 4), Pompeius was the first to use numerous elephants in his *venatio* in 55 BC, either 18 (Seneca, Cassius Dio), or, according to other sources 17, or 20 animals (Pliny). For a detailed analysis of the appearance of elephants in Italy and Rome, see Scullard 1974, 101-119.

<sup>9</sup> Meijer 2004, 106.

<sup>10</sup> 55 BC.

<sup>11</sup> Pompeius regarded Venus as his personal protector goddess. He built the temple of the 'Triumphant Venus' in the Mars field.

<sup>12</sup> About the magnificent spectacles and fights see Suet., *Iul.* 39, 4.

<sup>13</sup> Augustus came up with the idea that the knights should have reserved seats at the circus auditoriums. For Nero's measures mentioned here see Tac., *Ann.* XV 32; Suet., *Ner.* 11, 2.

*plorantes, tanto populi dolore, ut oblitus imperatoris ac munificentiae honori suo exquisitae, flens universus consurgeret dirasque Pompeio, quas ille mox luit, inprecaretur.*<sup>14</sup>

Also in Pompey's second consulship, at the dedication of the Temple of Venus Victrix, twenty, or, as some records, seventeen, fought in the Circus, their opponents being Gaetulians armed with javelins, one of the animals putting up a marvellous fight – its feet being disabled by wounds it crawled against the hordes of the enemy on its knees, snatching their shields from them and throwing them into the air, and these as they fell delighted the spectators by the curves they described, as if they were being thrown by a skilled juggler and not by an infuriated wild animal. There was also a marvellous occurrence in the case of another, which was killed by a single blow, as the javelin striking it under the eye had reached the vital parts of the head. The whole band attempted to burst through the iron palisading by which they were enclosed and caused considerable trouble among the public. Owing to this, when subsequently Caesar in his dictatorship was going to exhibit a similar show he surrounded the arena with channels of water; these the emperor Nero removed, when adding special places for the Knighthood. But Pompey's elephants when they had lost all hope of escape tried to gain the compassion of the crowd by indescribable gestures of entreaty, deploring their fate with a sort of wailing, so much to the distress of the public that they forgot the general and his munificence carefully devised for their honour, and bursting into tears rose in a body and invoked curses on the head of Pompey for which he soon afterwards paid a penalty.<sup>15</sup>

Pliny recites the event by forming it into a coherent story with strong emotional intensity. The three extraordinary events that occurred during the elephant fight is framed by Pompeius' consulship as the top of his career, the building of the temple and unprecedented opulence of the circus spectacle, and his inglorious death foreshadowed at the end of the text. The three episodes are evoked within this biographical frame, which is linked by the occasion as well as the clever rhetoric of the narrator. The dramatic presentation of the three episodes evokes even stronger emotional reactions, even stronger sympathy and compassion in the reader. The emotional effect built up of the three episodes of the elephant fight converts the Roman audience to "pro-elephant" thinking, and their solidarity with the animals culminates – rhetorically and emotionally – in the image of the crying and cursing spectators. This emotional journey is shared by the audience of the auditorium as well as the readers of the narrative, whose compassion is even strengthened by what Pliny sums up in the first chapter of book VIII:

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<sup>14</sup> This is a reference to Pompeius' defeat at Pharsalus (48 BC), his flight to Egypt and his assassination.

<sup>15</sup> Rackham 1983.

*quippe intellectus illis sermonis patrii et imperitorum oboedientia, officiorum quae didicere memoria, amoris et gloriae voluptas, immo vero, quae etiam in homine rara, probitas, prudentia, aequitas,<sup>16</sup> religio quoque siderum, Solisque ac Lunae veneratio.<sup>17</sup>*

It understands the language of its country and obey orders, remembers duties that it has been taught, is pleased by affection and by marks of honour, nay more it possesses virtues rare even in man, honesty, wisdom, justice, also respect for the stars and reverence for the sun and the moon.<sup>18</sup>

According to the narrative of *Naturalis Historia* Pompeius' elephant fight ended up in a failure, because the people pitied the suffering animals which were famous for their intelligence and ethical values, and the public opinion turned against Pompeius, who was responsible for the spectacle. By structuring the text, heightening its emotional depth, and emphasizing the suffering of the animals with the help of his rhetoric, Pliny points out that the cause of the failure was the suffering the animals had to endure. There are a few remarks that are of greater importance than it might seem. One of these is the narrator's evaluation of the behaviour of the Romans: the people were ungrateful, because they did not esteem Pompeius' gift (the unprecedentedly spectacular event), but felt sorry for the animals instead, who seemed to provoke this compassion. The formulation of that sentence about the latter is full of phrases meaning pity, begging and their synonyms: *misericordiam vulgi inenarrabili habitu quaerentes supplicavere quadam sese lamentatione conplorantes*. Such characteristics of the text show the narrator's intent to exonerate Pompeius from the stigmatizing accusation of cruelty. Not without reason, because another occurrence sheds light on the real, more prosaic event and its explanation.

Things went from bad to worse when the elephants – bewildered by the situation – wanted to break through the bars surrounding the stage, thus frightening the people.<sup>19</sup> For this reason (*Qua de causa*) Caesar later surrounded the arena with a moat. So the people's wrath was awakened not because of the mindless slaughter, and the compassion for the animals, like some researchers

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<sup>16</sup> About the intellectual capabilities of elephants and their intelligence, see Arist. *Hist. an.* IX 46, 630b 18 passim and Cic., *Nat. D.* I 97.

<sup>17</sup> The piety of elephants is usually traced back to Juba, king of Mauretania (see Münzer 1897, 414), who Pliny names as his source in the table of contents of book 8. See also Scullard 1974, 208.

<sup>18</sup> Rackham 1983.

<sup>19</sup> These fears were entirely not unfounded because the wild animals were starved before the games, and their reactions to the blinding sunlight of the amphitheatre was incalculable. About this, see Meijer 2004, 97-98.

would have it.<sup>20</sup> With a careful interpretation of Pliny's delusive narration, the reason for the audience's uproar can be found in fear, that is, because Pompeius did not care enough about the safety of the spectators.<sup>21</sup> That Caesar, who sensed public opinion with such sensitivity and reacted to it, would not have organized a *venatio* with twenty elephants and fifty warriors if Pompeius' failure was due to the compassion people felt for the animals.<sup>22</sup> Caesar gained the political upper hand with the failure of Pompeius' games,<sup>23</sup> because with this measure he showed that he finds the safety of the people the most important thing. As opposed to Pompeius, who – obviously with the aim of gaining political profit – regarded the spectacular fight more important than the safety of the audience.

The significance of the event is shown by the fact that its memory was preserved by three texts, and was preserved for 250 years. The first who related the events in the *Circus Maximus* was Cicero, whose letter is a special source, because the author was present at the occurrence and thus writes an eyewitness testimony of Pompeius' elephant fight, or more precisely its atmosphere (*Fam.* VII 1, 3):

*Extremus elephantorum dies fuit: in quo admiratio magna vulgi atque turbae, delectatio nulla exstitit; quin etiam misericordia quaedam consecuta est atque opinio eiusmodi esse quandam illi beluae cum genere humano societatem.*

The last day was for the elephants. The groundlings showed much astonishment thereat, but no enjoyment. There was even an impulse of compassion, a feeling that the monsters had something human about them.<sup>24</sup>

Thus Cicero does not mention the attempt of the breakout, nor the audience's intense emotional reaction. This account, or short sketch is drawn up to illustrate the moralizing thought that educated people can find pleasure in the slaughter of people and animals fighting in the arena (*Fam.* VII 1, 3):

*sed quae potest homini esse politico delectatio, cum aut homo imbecillus a valentissima bestia laniatur aut praeclara bestia venabulo transverberatur?*

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<sup>20</sup> Toynbee 1973, 22-23, and Meijer 2009, 103 interprets the reaction of the audience in such a way.

<sup>21</sup> Similarly to how Roland Auget would have it, although based on a different logic: cf. Auget 1987, 86-88.

<sup>22</sup> Auget 1987, 88.

<sup>23</sup> For a treatise about the visual language of Roman political culture, and the heightened political significance of the *spectacula* from the end of the republican age onwards, see Bell 1997; Flower 2004.

<sup>24</sup> Shackleton Bailey 2001.

But what pleasure can a cultivated man get out of seeing a weak human being torn to pieces by a powerful animal or a splendid animal transfixed by a hunting spear?<sup>25</sup>

Seneca evokes the case (*Brev.* 13, 6-7) in a similarly moralizing tone: he meditates upon the things worth knowing and remembering, and his judgment becomes explicitly dismissive when he realizes that the knowledge gained can act as a harmful example. His most important point of view is not scientific, but ethical: what does not do good to people should not be known, but forgotten, lest it would not find followers. He evokes the case of Pompeius' *venatio*, which first used elephants and created an amusement out of innocent people being trampled upon, as an example for inhumanity. Seneca forms a moral *exemplum* out of the event in the sense that he constructs his narration as a story he closes with Pompeius' assassination: the once almighty general was stabbed by a lowly slave, thus nature made Pompeius' cognomen "*Magnus*" appear in an ironical light, and life's justice was done. Seneca's presentation is similar to Pliny's in the sense that its chronological arch ranges from the top of Pompeius's career to his inglorious death. But in the center of this biographical frame we do not find the elephant fight, and even less the suffering elephants, but Pompeius himself:

*Ille se supra rerum naturam esse tunc credidit, cum tot miserorum hominum catervas sub alio caelo natis beluis obiceret, cum bellum inter tam disparia animalia committeret, cum in conspectum populi Romani multum sanguinis funderet mox plus ipsum fundere coactus; at idem postea Alexandrina perfidia deceptus ultimo mancipio transfodiendum se praebuit, tum demum intellecta inani iactatione cognominis sui.*

When he was casting so many troops of wretched human beings to wild beasts born under a different sky, when he was proclaiming war between creatures so ill matched, when he was shedding so much blood before the eyes of the Roman people, who itself was soon to be forced to shed more, he then believed that he was beyond the power of Nature. But later this same man, betrayed by Alexandrine treachery, offered himself to the dagger of the vilest slave, and then at last discovered what an empty boast his surname was.<sup>26</sup>

The last account of the elephant fight organized by Pompeius is given by Cassius Dio, a significant politician and historian of Septimius Severus' age, in his *Historia Romana*. According to his narrative (XXXIX 38, 2-6) the spectators pitied the few elephants still alive, who walked around wounded in the arena of *Circus Maximus*, and wept with their trunks raised towards the sky, as if they were complaining about the oath made by their drivers. The rumour was that before they were taken away from Libya, the elephants refused to enter the

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<sup>25</sup> Shackleton Bailey 2001.

<sup>26</sup> Basore 1932.



ships until their drivers swore that no harm will come to them. “Whether this is really so or not I do not know”<sup>27</sup> – writes Dio. This remark of the narrator, just like the closure “These things I have heard” that refers to the content of the whole chapter clearly shows that looking back after 250 years, the event is nothing more than a curious case. Just like the other information about elephants, which can be found in Pliny’s enumeration of elephants’ intellectual and ethical-moral values.<sup>28</sup> For Cassius Dio, a Greek person living within the Roman Empire, Pompeius’ failure could have been of no interest not only because of its age, but also because of the Greek identity of the author. In his account Pompeius is barely mentioned, the main characters of the story are the weeping elephants, and the case is no more than an odd narrative, which was preserved by the community’s memory just like those curious things that he enumerates about the animals.

The memory of the case of the weeping elephants goes from Cicero to Cassius Dio, and the authors preserve and continuously reconstruct it. Cicero and Seneca use it as moral *exemplum*, while we can regard Cassius Dio’s version as an example of *mirabilia* he heard about elephants. As for the narrative technique, we can evaluate the stories of Seneca and Pliny as well structured narratives. The latter stands out from the rest of the texts in its detailed account of the event, as well as because of its structure that relies on the rhetorical figure of gradation. Finally this is the only narrative that does not want to make a scapegoat out of Pompeius, and instead lays the emphasis on the emotional intensity of the scenario. Given the genre and the narrative of *Naturalis Historia*, we have to ask why.

The narrative almost disregards one of the most important outcomes of the events, the mentioning of which breaks the momentum of the narration, and thus attracts our attention to itself: that Caesar sometime later – exactly because of what happened – had a moat built between the stage and the auditorium. Pliny could not have written more modestly about this precaution, mentioning it only in the beginning of the narrative, and he did not accentuate this as a logical punch line. We cannot find the reason for this in book VIII of *Naturalis Historia*, but if we step beyond the borders of the book, we find in book VII of the encyclopaedia, which is about anthropology, when Pliny’s summary of the virtues and the deeds of Caesar<sup>29</sup> and Pompeius.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Carey 1969.

<sup>28</sup> Plin., *Nat.* VIII 2-3. Given the correspondences, it is possible that Cassius Dio borrowed these pieces of information from Pliny’s encyclopedia.

<sup>29</sup> Plin., *Nat.* VII 91-94.

<sup>30</sup> Plin., *Nat.* VII 95-99.

In fact Pliny only names two virtues of Caesar, his legendary intellectual capabilities, and his *clementia*. His military victories are not called *triumphuses*, but the slaughter of millions of people, and the spectacles organized for the people are regarded as the reprehensible manifestations of *luxuria*.

However the following chapters (95-99) praise Caesar's political rival, the absolute hero of book VII, Pompeius Magnus, about whom Pliny practically writes a panegyric:

*Verum ad decus imperii Romani, non solum ad viri unius, pertinet victoriarum Pompei Magni titulos omnes triumphosque hoc in loco nuncupari, aequato non modo Alexandri Magni rerum fulgore, sed etiam Herculis prope ac Liberi patris.*<sup>31</sup>

But it concerns the glory of the Roman Empire, and not that of one man, to mention in this place all the records of the victories of Pompey the Great and all his triumphs, which equal the brilliance of the exploits not only the Alexander the Great but even almost of Hercules and Father Liber.<sup>32</sup>

Then he systematically surveys Pompeius' campaigns, which reinforced, and extended Eastwards, Rome's supremacy over the rest of the world. Thus when Pliny compares the two generals, Caesar's greatness does not eclipse Pompeius', quite the opposite is true.

Based on book VII of the encyclopaedia it is doubtless that Pompeius was one of Pliny's ideals. While Caesar's victories were regarded as the slaughter of millions of people (*Nat. VII 92: humani generis iniuriam*), and the spectacles and construction he funded from his own wealth were addressed as the deplorable examples of luxury (*Nat. VII 94: luxuriae faventis est*), Pompeius' grandiose campaigns were seen as the *triumphus* of the *imperium Romanum* over the rest of the world, and the treasures transported to Rome as loot were regarded as gifts to the people of Rome. The text gives a clear, but false explanation for this: Caesar spilled the blood of citizens (*Nat. VII 92*), while Pompeius ended the civil war (*Nat. VII 96*).

In the narrative about the elephant fight, Pliny expects the ungrateful people to acknowledge what he reproached, not Pompeius, but Caesar for: the spectacles and the construction of buildings that made Rome more beautiful. In Caesar's case this is the manifestation of the evil *luxuria*. While in Pompeius' case, it is part of the Roman conquest, because the loot was used to fund the construction of the temple and the theatre. The unprecedented number of wild

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<sup>31</sup> Plin., *Nat. VII 95*. Pompeius' parallel with Heracles and Bacchus not only elevates the tone of the panegyric to godly heights, but it also has a metaphorical meaning. Both gods traveled all over the world, Bacchus spread his worship, that is, his power, while Heracles successfully performed unrivaled deeds, with which he rid humanity of various devastating perils.

<sup>32</sup> Rackham 1989.

animals transported to Rome from the conquered lands and used on the stage was a visualization of the Roman victory over the world.<sup>33</sup> An analogy dating from Pliny's age reinforces this interpretation of the popularity and political function of animal fights. The park next to the *Templum Pacis* in Rome, which was built by Vespasianus, was made up of plants originating from the most distant parts of the *Imperium*. Elisabeth Ann Pollard wittily calls this "botanical imperialism".<sup>34</sup>

It is no wonder why Pliny devotes such attention to the case of the weeping elephants, which fills approximately one third of the six chapters (16-22) about the use of elephants (in wars and in the circus). It is no wonder why the narrative's emphasis is transferred from Pompeius' irresponsibility to the, otherwise nonexistent,<sup>35</sup> compassion that the audience felt for the animals. Pliny surely has his reasons to explain why the ungrateful people are cursing at Pompeius not with the panic after the animals almost broke out of the arena, but with the compassion elicited by the almost begging elephants; and there is a reason why he averts attention from Caesar's later precaution. This serves a single purpose: rhetoric conceived and used in the Aristotelian sense, that is, broadly conceptualized as persuasion. As a result, while Rome's first grandiose elephant fight and its organizer becomes a negative ethical *exemplum* in Seneca's account, Pliny's main character Pompeius – as much as he can – appears in a different light.

*Naturalis Historia* has long lost its scientific value, it preserved only its significance as a history of science. Still, there is a rising interest in its research nowadays thanks to the different approaches to the text. Literary criticism can now unveil new aspects of the encyclopaedia once the scientific interest disappeared. Those meanings that can only be teased out through a careful analysis of the narrative technique and the use of the comparative method. No wonder that in 1982 Italo Calvino in his introduction to the first book of the encyclopaedia called for the continuous, or at least contextual reading of Pliny's text.<sup>36</sup>

If we examine the description of the case analyzed in this essay, we can shed further light on the age that the event took place in, an episode of an important event in cultural history. It can partly be regarded as an illustration for the emotional life of elephants, and it can be inserted into a series of curiosities which Pliny very often recites in books VII and VIII. However if we contextualize the description, and we widen this context to a reading of the rest of the *auctores* as well as the relevant passages of book VII, furthermore if we analyze their nar-

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<sup>33</sup> Meijer 2004, 122.

<sup>34</sup> Pollard 2009.

<sup>35</sup> See Meijer 2004, 106-115.

<sup>36</sup> Calvino 1982, VII.

rative characteristics and interpret them in connection with each other, then suddenly the age when the text was written, and the narrator's intent unfolds. And this is evident in the fact that, although verbally the main characters of the text are the weeping elephants, its real hero is Pompeius. All changes, shifts in emphasis and the structure of the text itself gains meaning with this interpretative technique in mind. As a result of this, the cultural historical curiosity becomes a politically significant event, or rather this is how its significance in political history can be shown.

Moreover such interpretation gives a newer evidence for the fact that the peculiarity of *Naturalis Historia* because of which, up until now,<sup>37</sup> many regarded the encyclopaedia as the worst text from the antique period, has a significant function.<sup>38</sup> These are the *excursuses*, or digressions, that feature of the narrative technique, which diverges from the concrete theme and starts to deal with apparently unrelated narratives, which seem to be only good for amusement. *Non enim excursus hic eius, sed opus ipsum est* – writes Pliny the Younger when he reflects upon his own narrative strategy, excusing himself for describing every minute detail when he talks about his newest villa.<sup>39</sup> If we think about all the details of the elephant fight, Pliny the Younger's sentence is valid for *Naturalis Historia* as well. This is the work of art itself, then, which blurs the boundaries of artistic and scientific prose, and, with all its episodic nature, makes us ponder the idea that it would not even be worth drawing these boundaries, not in the case of ancient texts at least.

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<sup>37</sup> Eduard Norden was the first to formulate such a negative evaluation: Norden 1923, 314: "Sein Werk gehört, stilistisch betrachtet, zu den schlechtesten, die wir haben. ... Plinius hat es einfach nicht besser gekonnt." Norden's evaluation of *Naturalis Historia* has up until now fundamentally determined the literary historical appreciation of the text, see for example Goodyear 1983: "Pliny ... could hardly frame a coherent sentence. ... Instead of adopting the plain and sober style appropriate to his theme, he succumbs to lust for embellishment." Cherchi (1990) IX writes about the inorganic structure of the encyclopaedia: "In the *Naturalis Historia* there is no real concern with the unity of the world nor with the relation among disciplines," a view shared by Arnar 1990, 13: "Pliny's compilation was derivative, but since he did not synthesize facts, each bit of information retained its distinctiveness."

<sup>38</sup> In connection with aitiological and artist anecdotes, see Darab 2012, Darab 2014/ a, and especially Darab 2014/b. Beagon 2005, 34 argues for the organic unity of the text of *Naturalis Historia*: "Pliny was largely successful in producing a coherent text; ... In addition, the *NH* was complex not only technically but also artistically."

<sup>39</sup> *Epist.* I 6, 43

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