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**THE DEATH OF THE ACTOR: MARCUS OFILIUS HILARIUS
PLIN., NAT. VII 184–185.**

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Abstract: The name of Marcus Ofilius Hilarius occurs in no other source besides book VII of Pliny's encyclopaedia. With this in mind, the narrative giving an extensive account of the death of the actor needs further explanation. The present paper takes a look at the narrower and broader context of this detail, which lends the story a meaning and a structuring function within the *Naturalis Historia*. This inquiry enables us to draw certain conclusions not only about book VII, but the whole encyclopedia as well.

Keywords: Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, the structure of book VII in the *Naturalis Historia*, narratology, *exemplum*, *excessus*.

The narrative of Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis Historia* has received diverse evaluations in the past century and especially in the last decades. Its earliest assessment comes from Pliny the Younger, who characterized his uncle's encyclopaedia with three epithets: *Naturae historiarum triginta septem, opus diffusum, eruditum nec minus varium quam ipsa natura*.¹ 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 more than *varietas*, which characterized not only *Naturalis Historia*, but became an ambitious literary role declared and put into practice by Roman compilers.²

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

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¹ Plin., *Ep.* III 5-6.

² Murphy 2004, 38-40; Fögen 2009, 24-25. The variety in content, structure and narrative, *varietas*, can be interpreted metaphorically as well: this variety is like the most popular type of mass entertainment, the spectacles of *circuses* and *amphitheatrums*. See Vegetti 1982, 121-124.

narrative technique, the similar application of which cannot be found in any other examples of Latin scientific prose.³ 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, 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 fulfils a central role in the evaluation of the encyclopaedia. And the evaluation ranges from labelling the book a compilation without concept and balance,⁴ regarding the author as a person unable to resist the urge to ‘tell everything’ and emphasizing his inability to create coherent texts,⁵ to adjectives like digressive,⁶ associative⁷ and anecdotic.⁸ The question is not about how we call them, but their function: do these *excessuses* have any role, and if yes, what kind of role in the text of the encyclopaedia?

The story of the title character of the essay can be read in book VII of *Naturalis Historia*, the so-called anthropological book, which reviews all knowledge about man. 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 encyclopaedia. Pliny relates the story in the following way:

*Operosissima 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 suo in eam transtulit, tali habitu rigens nullo sentiente, donec adcubantium proximus tepescere potionem admoneret.*⁹

Hilarius’s death is as scenical as his theatrical art. The phrase *operiosissima securitas* introducing the anecdote condenses different meanings. The joyful

³ Fögen 2007, 192-196.

⁴ Schanz, Hosius 1959, 775.

⁵ Goodyear 1983, 174-175.

⁶ Murphy 2004, 29-32.

⁷ Fögen 2007, 193.

⁸ Darab 2014 /a; 2014/b, especially 190-195.

⁹ Plin., *Nat.* VII 184-185: “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.” I quote the translation of book VII according to the newest edition: Beagon 2005.

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*, but it also refers to funeral feasts, which Romans attended with wreaths on their heads. The figure of the *kline* – the couches which Romans lay on funeral as well as other festival feasts – can also be interpreted as a similarly double allusion. Hilarius’s body lying on the *kline* visualizes 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 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 theatre, but also that it was his birthday – can make sense.

Pliny’s narration obviously pays much attention to the presentation, 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 VII of the encyclopaedia. In other words the story evidences the pictorial potential of language, its ability to visualize events, which in rhetoric we call *enargeia*, *illustratio* or *evidentia*.¹⁰ 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 voluntas*.¹¹ Pliny gives the theoretical foundation of this method, as well as his view of nature in book VII: *Naturae verum rerum vis atque maiestas in omnibus momentis fide caret, si quis modo partes eius ac non totam complectatu animo*.¹² We can only understand the overarching narrative about

¹⁰ About the meaning of the three expressions in rhetorical terminology, see Quint. *Inst.* VI 2, 29-32. For a more extensive treatment of the *ekphrasis* of poetical texts and rhetorical *enargeia*, see Boehm 1995, 35; Goldhill 2007, 3-6. And for a summary of this topic, see Darab 2012/a., 75-78.

¹¹ Plin., *Nat.* XXXVII 60.

¹² Plin., *Nat.* VII 7: “Indeed, the power and might of nature lacks credibility at every point unless we comprehend her as a whole rather than piecemeal.”

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.¹³ This five chapter long text 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 Chilon of Sparta, who was one of the Seven Wise Men, to Pliny's own age,¹⁴ culminating in Ofilius's story. The death of the actor at the top of his career is at once the rhetorical climax of the series, and it gives an effective contrast to the next, less fortunate deaths: suicides committed because of banal reasons.¹⁵

These chapters are part of a bigger narrative unit, the stories of which – in one way or another – are all connected to the theme of death. The textual unit that comprises of twenty two chapters¹⁶ 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 is there something beyond, an afterlife. This bigger narrative unit seamlessly fits into the whole structure and argumentation of book VII, which is the following:

1. Moralizing introduction to man's place in nature, 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, lifespan (153-167); death (168-190)
4. A catalogue of mankind's most significant inventions (191-209).

¹³ Plin., *Nat.* VII 180-185.

¹⁴ Plin., *Nat.* VII 184: *et, quos nostra adnotavit aetas, duo equestris ordinis* = So did two members of the equestrian order, who caused a recent scandal.

¹⁵ Plin., *Nat.* VII 186: *Haec felicia exempla, at contra miseriarum innumera.* = These are happy deaths, but there are countless instances of unhappy ones.

¹⁶ Plin., *Nat.* VII 168-190.

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 centre is one of the structuring principles of book VII; 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 fulfilment of human life. This is what the *exemplums* are about, which all feature great Roman figures exemplifying rationality (*ratio*), morality (*mos*) and virtues (*virtus*). The reader of book VII must be surprised to see how Pliny, who adores the perfection of nature, introduces death with the following sentence: *Natura vero nihil hominibus brevitae vitae praestitit melius.*¹⁷ Then he goes on to enumerate fortunate¹⁸ and unfortunate¹⁹ cases of death, and he calls sudden death *summa vitae felicitas*,²⁰ the biggest luck in life. He calls the teachings about the transmigration of souls, or life after death, madness and self-delusion.²¹ He concludes – rhetorically as well – the argumentation with what he started with: sudden death being the biggest good, *praecipuum naturae bonum.*²²

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.*²³ 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*

¹⁷ Plin., *Nat.* VII, 168: “The truth is that nature has given man no better gift than shortness of life.”

¹⁸ Plin., *Nat.* VII 180-185.

¹⁹ Plin., *Nat.* VII 186.

²⁰ Plin., *Nat.* VII 180: *In primis autem miraculo sunt atque frequentes mortes repentinae – hoc est summa vitae 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.”

²¹ Plin., *Nat.* VII 188-190.

²² Plin., *Nat.* VII 190: *Perdit profecto ista dulcedo credulitasque praecipuum naturae bonum, mortem.* = “Such seductive delusions in reality destroy nature's supreme gift, death.”

²³ Sen., *Ep.* 54, 4: “Death is non-existence, and I know already what that means. What was before me will happen again after me.” Translated by Richard M. Gummere 1989⁸.

*animae quam ante natalem.*²⁴ Pliny's statement could be interpreted from the perspective that he attributed divine power – without which immortality cannot be imagined – only to Nature.²⁵ This interpretation would stand if Pliny devoted himself consistently to the stoic or any other philosophical schools. However Pliny was no theoretician, he was practical minded in everything he did.²⁶ 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 such lives that was Pliny's own ideal type of life, which he summarizes in the *praefatio* as *vita vigilia est*.²⁷ "Living means being awake," that is, being active for the community, for the state, just like how the examples – including Pliny's own²⁸ – demonstrate. In contrast, unfortunate deaths are the pathetic results of suicide, divorce, or even the sorrow felt over a favourite charioteer. If we evoke one of the most important themes of book VII, the Plinian evaluation of *memoria*,²⁹ 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*.³⁰ Memory is the most needed good in life: *Memoria necessarium maxime vitae bonum*.³¹

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 fulfil the ideal of *vita vigilia est*. Thus the most needed and greatest good is *memoria*, whose prime examples are Cyrus, L. Scipio, Mithridates, or Iulius Caesar – kings and

²⁴ Plin., *Nat.* VII 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."

²⁵ Beagon 1992, 92-102.

²⁶ 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 Köves-Zulauf 1978, 197-198.

²⁷ Plin., *Nat.* praef. 19.

²⁸ For a good summary of Pliny's military and public role, his activities as writer, and all his life, see Healy 2005, 1-35, or, for a shorter version, Beagon 2005, 1-5.

²⁹ 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 (*Nat.* VIII 1 and 146). He attributes portrait sculpture (*Nat.* XXXIV 16) and painting (*Nat.* XXXV 4, 9-10) the function of remembering and perpetuation the memory of ancestors.

³⁰ Plin., *Nat.* VII 190.

³¹ Plin., *Nat.* VII 88: "Of good memory, the most indispensable of life's advantages, it is difficult to name an outstanding example."

leading statesmen.³² If fate is as 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 vitam morte? Quaeve genitis quies umquam, si in sublimi sensus animae manet, inter inferos umbrae?*³³

Pliny concludes book VII not with the thought of total annihilation, but with a catalogue of mankind's most significant inventions and inventors.³⁴ He introduces this twenty five chapter long passage with the claim that this is the proper place for this enumeration (*consentaneum videtur*), 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 encyclopaedia. 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.³⁵ If we project this systematic narrative structure to book VII, Pliny gives the habitat of different people, followed by a description of the people, the physical, intellectual, ethical-moral account of their most significant thinkers, to conclude with the third narrative unit: the introduction of mankind's most important inventions which helped in unfolding the possibilities of nature. The people, whose lives book VII describes from birth to death, fulfil their role ordered by nature by making themselves useful to nature, 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 catalogue 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 defenceless infant, who is only capable of crying, lying on the

³² Plin., *Nat.* VII 88-91.

³³ Plin., *Nat.* VII 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?"

³⁴ Plin., *Nat.* VII 191-215.

³⁵ For a consistent use of the narrative construction giving the occurrence – description – utilization, see Darab 2012/b., 149. About *utilitas* as a central theme in the *Naturalis Historia*, see Citroni Marchetti 1982; Gesztelyi 1991.

ground,³⁶ and the uncivilized nature of barbarous people from Scythia, Aithiopia, and India introduced in the beginning of book VII.³⁷ It also gives a framework, too: 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 VII. 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 way 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 VII demonstrate. In this we find birth and death, creation and fulfilment, 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 – formulated to become 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 the topic: *Non enim excursus hic eius, sed opus ipsum est*.³⁸ This is not digression, this is the work of art itself.

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³⁶ Plin., *Nat.* VII 2.

³⁷ Plin., *Nat.* VII 9-32.

³⁸ Plin., *Ep.* V 6, 43.

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