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Seneca's Platonism Revisited: Myth and the Sublime in Plato, Ovid, and Seneca (*Q. Nat. 3*).[1]

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Abstract – While there has been much discussion about the nature of Seneca's reception of Plato mainly with regard to his *Epistles*,[2] in this paper I focus on Seneca's *Natural Questions*, a treatise in association with which the question of Seneca's Platonic echoes re-emerges. In what follows I intend to focus on the study of *Natural Questions* 3, in which the philosopher investigates the nature and

[1] This is a revised version of the paper presented at the workshop entitled "Plato in Roman Philosophy" which was organized by Peter Osorio at the University of Toronto in June 2023. I would like to thank Peter for his generous invitation and the stimulus to work on "Plato Latinus" as well as the audience of the workshop. I am grateful to Chiara Graf who diligently read my paper after the workshop and offered valuable criticism. I would also like to thank Peter Kelly who sent me parts of his forthcoming book, which I quote with his permission, and discussed with me ideas that we came up with independently of each other. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their detailed and informative suggestions and comments. I am also deeply grateful to Gretchen Reydams-Schils for initiating me to the study of Plato in the Roman context and for supporting me in various ways. There are not enough words to thank Margaret Graver for her warm encouragement, her professionalism and her insightful comments which enabled me to clarify my thoughts.

[2] See especially *Ep*. 41, 58, 65, 79, 102. Sedley (2005) 131-132 discusses what he calls "a rapprochement between Platonism and Stoicism". Limburg (2007) 393 claims that "Seneca's interest in the Platonic philosophy is in accordance with Chrysippus' statement [*SVF* 3.474]: it serves a moral aim." Reydams-Schils (2010) 201 argues that "Seneca and others use Plato as a kind of propaedeutic device to underscore an essentially Stoic scale of values." For echoes of both Plato's *Timaeus* and *Phaedo* in *Ep*. 65 see Boys-Stones (2013); to Plato's *Cratylus* in Sen. *Ep*. 58 see Berno (2018) who offers a thorough discussion of multiple Platonic allusions in Seneca's Letters. For further discussion of *Ep.* 58 and 65 see also Scarpat (1965), Chaumartin (1993), Inwood (2007)a. For Platonic immortality in Sen. *Ep*. 102 see Wildberger (2010). For Platonic echoes in Seneca *Helv.* see Motta (2018); in Seneca *Marc.* 23.1-2 see Tutrone (2022) 241-246. Cf. also Dillon (1977) 135-139, Setaioli (1988) 117-140.

causes of terrestrial waters. Since this book is commonly considered to be the first in the treatise, it bears programmatic value regarding Seneca's natural philosophical project as a whole, in terms of his reply to the previous poetic natural philosophical tradition.[3] In my discussion, I am building on my previous work, in which I explore the fact that Seneca's *Natural Questions* 3 is heavily imbued with intertextual references to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.[4] On the basis of Seneca's intense intertextual relationship with Ovid as well as Ovid's conceivable direct engagement with Plato in his *Metamorphoses*, I will consider an alternative way in which Seneca reaches back to Plato's ideas, i.e. also through the Ovidian filter. In my argument, although I don't downplay the fact that the reception of Plato in Rome was a particularly meandering process,[5] I rather emphasize a supplementary intertextual aspect, which so far has remained unnoticed. Our narrow focus and connecting thread are going to be the notion of the conflagration and the myth of Phaethon. My discussion aspires to enrich our reading of *Natural Questions* 3, regarding Seneca's ideas about the function of myth within a treatise on natural philosophy, the notion of the sublime and the intersection between poetry and prose as an integral part of his ethical project. Seneca replies not only to Ennius, Lucretius, Vergil and Ovid -as I have argued so far-, but also to Plato, claiming for himself a place within the literary chain of philosophical or philosophizing authors writing on natural science with poetic credentials.

Ovid in Seneca's *Natural Quaestions* 3

In *Natural Questions* 3, there are two clusters of Ovidian quotations. In the first instance, while Seneca explores the variety of properties and tastes in water as well as their different effects, he incorporates

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[3] For the arguments about this ordering of the *Q. Nat.* see Codoñer Merino (1979) 1, xii-xxi; Hine (1996) xxiv. For acceptance of the ordering 3, 4a, 4b, 5, 6, 7, 1, and 2, see Parroni (2002) xlix; Gauly (2004) esp. 65-67.

[4] For the purposes of the present discussion, I will intentionally keep detailed references to Lucretius in the backstage as much as possible.

[5] Kelly (2021) 741 draws our attention to the fact that by the time of Ovid's poem, Plato's speaker, Timaeus, was identified as a Pythagorean and the *Timaeus* was perceived as a Pythagorean text. Cicero dedicated his translation of the *Timaeus* to Nigidius Figulus, who was associated with the revival of Pythagoreanism in Rome. For Cicero and the *Timaeus* see Sedley (2003). About Stoic and Platonic readings of Plato's *Timaeus* see Reydams-Schils (1999), Hoenig (2018). Reydams-Schils (2010) 199 points also out that "a Socratic legacy which the Stoics had already made their own in the earlier era."

four quotations from Pythagoras' speech that we read in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 15 (cf. *Q. Nat.* 3.20 with Ov. *Met*. 15.313-314, 15.320-321, 15.329-331; *Q. Nat*. 26.3-4 with Ov. *Met*. 15.273-276). In the first part of this speech, which is addressed to Numa, the second king of Rome, so as to teach him the laws of nature, Pythagoras attacks meat-eating and sacrifice (*Met*. 15.75-142) and explicates his doctrine of metempsychosis (*Met*. 15.158-172). Then, by means of various examples he expounds the principle of cosmic transformation (*Met*. 15.176-459). Within this framework, Pythagoras introduces a paradoxographical list of natural wonders, the first part of which is devoted to various *mirabilia aquarum*, concerning mainly rivers and springs (*Met*. 15.270-336). Given the fact that Ovid keeps both mythical and scientific explanations into play and constantly encourages amazement at the marvels of nature, Seneca highlights the philosophical aspects of Ovid's mythological epic and considers it as a significant source of examples, which, despite their paradoxographical provenance, may hold a certain scientific value. At the same time, as I have shown elsewhere in detail, he challenges Ovid's account, either by omitting or by correcting specific examples. In other words, although Seneca endorses the reception of gods into the Ovidian universe, since they are closely associated with the Stoic divine providence, he criticizes the Ovidian world of mythical transformation; in reply, he *rationalizes* Ovid's paradoxographical examples and offers *coherent scientific explanations*.[6]

In connection with Ovid's speech of Pythagoras, it is significant for the discussion that follows to briefly draw our attention to Peter Kelly's convincing argument, according to which Pythagoras' metaphors of wax by means of which he describes how the soul remains the same during consecutive transmigrations (*Met*. 15.169-172), as well as that of flux to describe the flow of time (*Met*. 15.177-184), allude to Plato's *Theaetetus*.[7] Most prominently, Kelly discusses comprehensively Ovid's cosmogony in the beginning of the *Metamorphoses* and establishes -contrary to other scholars who advocate Ovid's eclectic stance- that Ovid's conception of a divine *fabricator* and the parallel between craftsman god and demiurgic poet look back to Plato's *Timaeus* and his creationist perspective (*Ti*. 30a2-6). Kelly's argument is part of his general claim that rather than reading *only* Cicero's translation of the

[6] Garani (2020)b.

[7] Kelly (2019). For the idea that Ovid's cosmogony is eclectic see e.g., Galinsky (1997).

Timaeus (*Ti*. 27d-47b about the idea of δημιουργός, world-soul, origin of the cosmos), Ovid establishes a *direct* intertextual dialogue with Platonic ideas.

Provided that we endorse the validity of Kelly's claim, as I do, we now turn to the second group of the Ovidian quotations that we glean from Seneca's *Q. Nat.* 3. Seneca culminates the book with an account of the cosmic deluge and explains how our world will ultimately come to an end (*Q. Nat.* 3.27-30). In connection with this epilogue, scholars have posed various questions regarding Seneca's Stoic orthodox stance in relation to his belief that a cataclysm will bring about the end of the world instead of the more common Stoic idea of a final *conflagration*. They also point out that this physical process is not regulated only by the Stoic natural law, conceptualized as fortune which brings about sudden changes, but is triggered by divine intervention as a punishment instigated by human sin.[8]

In the course of this eschatological narration, Seneca turns to the beginning of the *Metamorphoses* to quote five passages from the Ovidian story of the cataclysm and the myth of Deucalion (*Met*. 1.262-312: 1.292, 1.304, 1.285, 1.290, 1.272-273), which he approaches as a "proto-scientific" text.[9] In his turn, Seneca puts together a flood narrative that runs parallel to the mythical exposition which he employs intertextually for antagonistic purposes. In a way similar to his reply to Pythagoras' paradoxographical list, in this case as well Seneca systematically demythologizes the Ovidian tale. He then turns both mythical and historical events into integral parts of his cosmic narrative, in order to formulate an effective Stoic *praemeditatio futurorum malorum*, that is, the best means of assisting Lucilius in conceiving of and preparing himself for the imminent catastrophe. In other words, Seneca employs Ovid's mythical flood with heuristic value, in order to create what we could call a "diachronic analogy" and so to make a valid projection for the future.

I have intentionally glossed over the fact that instead of drawing all his quotations from the corresponding account of the Ovidian flood, Seneca unexpectedly draws one from Ovid's Phaethon story and the conflagration (*Met*. 1.747-2.400).[10] According to the myth, the hero

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[8] For thorough discussion see Garani (2021)a and (2021)b with further bibliography.

[9] For a thorough discussion of the Ovidian quotations in Seneca's flood and further bibliography see Garani (2022).

[10] Garani (2022) 146-148.

ascended to the heavens in his search for the truth about his father, Helios; despite his father's instructions to the contrary, he embarks upon a catastrophic ride, thanks to which the world would have been incinerated, but for Jupiter's intervention, while Phaethon himself is eventually killed by Jupiter's thunderbolt. In fact, this is the first Ovidian quotation of Seneca's flood narrative (Seneca *Q. Nat.* 3.27.13; cf. Ovid *Met*. 2.264):

> *ergo insularum modo eminent*
> *montes et sparsas Cycladas augent,*
> *ut ait ille poetarum ingeniosissimus egregie*.
>
> So "the mountains" stick out like islands "and add to the number of the scattered Cyclades," as that most inventive of poets says, in splendid fashion. (Trans. Hine)

In this context, Ovid describes how the Cyclades increase in number when due to the conflagration submerged mountains were revealed (cf. Ovid *Met*. 2.262-269). Critics have been puzzled about this supposed Senecan mix-up, eventually reaching the consensus that in drawing on the Phaethon episode Seneca points to the fact that deluge and conflagration are *parallel factors* of destruction, as he claims thrice in his book (3.28.7; Cf. *Q. Nat*. 3 *praef*. 5, 3.29.1):[11]

> *At illo tempore solutus legibus sine modo fertur. "Qua ratione?" inquis. Eadem qua* conflagratio *futura est. Utrumque fit, cum deo visum ordiri meliora, vetera finiri. Aqua et ignis terrenis dominantur; ex his ortus, ex his interitus est. Ergo, quandoque placuere res novae mundo, sic in nos mare emittitur desuper,* ut fervor ignisque *cum aliud genus exitii placuit.*
>
> But on that occasion the tide is not bound by laws, and its advance is unlimited. "How?" you ask. In the same way as the *conflagration* will occur. Both events occur when god has decided to inaugurate a better world and to end the old. Water and fire lord it over terrestrial things; they bring about creation, they bring about destruction. So whenever the world has decided on revolution, the sea is sent crashing down over us, *just as heat and fire* are when another form of extinction is approved. (Trans. Hine)

Seneca perceives that this intratextual interconnection between the two Ovidian passages is already inherent in the Ovidian poem. In *Metamorphoses* 1 Jupiter hesitates as to which punishment to inflict upon

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[11] Morgan (2003) 69-72, Williams (2012) 129, Berno (2012) 93 n. 103.

humans, that is, fire or deluge. He recalls, however, that the world is fated to be destroyed by fire, a prospect that textually anticipates the forthcoming Phaethon episode (*Met*. 1.253-261). Hence Jupiter refrains from destroying humanity with his thunderbolt and finally chooses *flumina* (*Met*. 1.280, 285) over *fulmina* (*Met*. 1.253), a wordplay that itself implies that destruction by fire closely resembles that by water.[12]

Plato's Phaethon and the movement of the planets in Ovid and Seneca

In the beginning of his narration about the flood, Seneca offers multiple explanations, underscoring the role of the morphology of the Earth, the rising of the outer sea, heavy rains, rivers and springs, winter, and water that falls from the heaven, and concludes that all these principles work together to destroy the human race (*Q. Nat.* 3.27.1). In the course of his narration, Seneca resumes his claim about multiple causes and reports that the Babylonian Berosus associated universal conflagrations and deluges with the movement of the planets (*Q. Nat.* 29.1):[13]

> *Berosos, qui Belum interpretatus est, ait ista cursu siderum fieri. Adeo quidem affirmat ut conflagrationi atque diluvio tempus assignet. Arsura enim terrena contendit, quandoque omnia sidera quae nunc diversos agunt cursus in Cancrum convenerint, sic sub eodem posita vestigio ut recta linea exire per orbes omnium possit; inundationem futuram, cum eadem siderum turba in Capricornum convenerit. Illic solstitium, hic bruma conficitur; magnae potentiae signa, quando in ipsa mutatione anni momenta sunt.*
>
> Berosos, who translated Belus, says that the movement of the stars is the cause of all this. He is so confident in his assertion that he gives a date for both the conflagration and the flood. He maintains that the earth will burn whenever all the stars that now have different courses converge in Cancer and are positioned beneath the same point, so that a vertical line can pass through all their spheres; a flood will occur when the same group of stars converges in Capricorn. The summer solstice occurs in the former constellation, the winter solstice in the latter; these are very powerful zodiac signs, since they are the most important turning points in the annual cycle. (Trans. Hine)

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12 For the periodic victories of fire and water in the war of the elements Seneca looks also back to Lucretius' *DRN* 5.380-415, (conflagration: *DRN* 5.395-410; flood: *DRN* 5.411-415).

13 For a discussion see Gee (2020) 177-179.

Berosus' theory that every occurrence of the same planetary conjunctions would cause a conflagration was taken up by the early Stoics. As we read in Nemesius (*On the Nature of Man* 38 p. 111.14-25 Morani = *SVF* 2.625), *ekpyrosis* (world conflagration) occurs when the planets return to the same position that they occupied at the beginning of cosmogony.[14]

> Οἱ δὲ Στωικοί φασιν *ἀποκαθισταμένους τοὺς πλανήτας εἰς τὸ αὐτὸ σημεῖον* κατά τε μῆκος καὶ πλάτος, ἔνθα τὴν ἀρχὴν ἕκαστος ἦν, ὅτε τὸ πρῶτον ὁ κόσμος συνέστη, *ἐν ῥηταῖς χρόνων περιόδοις ἐκπύρωσιν καὶ φθορὰν τῶν ὄντων ἀπεργάζεσθαι* καὶ πάλιν ἐξ ὑπαρχῆς εἰς τὸ αὐτὸ τὸν κόσμον ἀποκαθίστασθαι, *καὶ τῶν ἀστέρων ὁμοίως πάλιν φερομένων* ἕκαστον <τῶν> ἐν τῇ προτέρᾳ περιόδῳ γενομένων ἀπαραλλάκτως ἀποτελεῖσθαι· ἔσεσθαι γὰρ πάλιν Σωκράτην καὶ Πλάτωνα καὶ ἕκαστον τῶν ἀνθρώπων σὺν τοῖς αὐτοῖς καὶ φίλοις καὶ πολίταις, καὶ τὰ αὐτὰ πείσεσθαι καὶ τοῖς αὐτοῖς συντεύξεσθαι καὶ τὰ αὐτὰ μεταχειριεῖσθαι καὶ πᾶσαν πόλιν καὶ κώμην καὶ ἀγρὸν ὁμοίως ἀποκαθίστασθαι· γίνεσθαι δὲ τὴν ἀποκατάστασιν τοῦ παντὸς οὐχ ἅπαξ, ἀλλὰ πολλάκις, μᾶλλον δὲ εἰς ἄπειρον καὶ ἀτελευτήτως τὰ αὐτὰ ἀποκαθίστασθαι.
>
> The Stoics say that the *planets are established again into the same sign* according to magnitude and longitude in which each was in the beginning when the universe first was formed, and *at set revolutions of time they bring about the conflagration and destruction of what exists* and again establish the universe anew in the same state, and, *as the stars travel once again in the same way*, each of the things that came to be in the previous cycle is brought to be unchanged. For Socrates and Plato will exist again, and each person with the same friends and fellow-citizens, and they will have the same experiences, meet with the same events and undertake the same activities, and every city and village and field will be reconstituted as before. The reconstitution of the universe occurs not once but many times, or, rather, to infinity, and (25) the same things will be re-established without end. (Trans. Sharples and van der Eijk)

What is significant for our discussion is that Berosus' explanation looks back to Plato's *Timaeus*; in fact, this explanation combines the myth of Phaethon (*Ti.* 22b-d) and the idea of the Great Year, which is completed when the sun, moon, and five planets return to the same relative po-

[14] Cf. Stoic Heraclitus *Hom. alleg.* 53. Long (2006) 129-130.

sition (*Ti*. 39c-e), two ideas that in fact were not associated in the Platonic intertext. Let us now focus on the beginning of Plato' *Timaeus* (22b-d):[15]

καί τινα εἰπεῖν τῶν ἱερέων εὖ μάλα παλαιόν· Ὦ Σόλων, Σόλων, Ἕλληνες ἀεὶ παῖδές ἐστε, γέρων δὲ Ἕλλην οὐκ ἔστιν. Ἀκούσας οὖν, Πῶς τί τοῦτο λέγεις; φάναι. Νέοι ἐστέ, εἰπεῖν, τὰς ψυχὰς πάντες· οὐδεμίαν γὰρ ἐν αὐταῖς ἔχετε δι᾽ ἀρχαίαν ἀκοὴν παλαιὰν δόξαν οὐδὲ μάθημα χρόνῳ πολιὸν οὐδέν. τὸ δὲ τούτων αἴτιον τόδε. πολλαὶ καὶ κατὰ πολλὰ φθοραὶ γεγόνασιν ἀνθρώπων καὶ ἔσονται, *πυρὶ μὲν καὶ ὕδατι μέγισται*, μυρίοις δὲ ἄλλοις ἕτεραι βραχύτεραι. τὸ γὰρ οὖν καὶ παρ᾽ ὑμῖν λεγόμενον, ὥς ποτε Φαέθων Ἡλίου παῖς τὸ τοῦ πατρὸς ἅρμα ζεύξας διὰ τὸ μὴ δυνατὸς εἶναι κατὰ τὴν τοῦ πατρὸς ὁδὸν ἐλαύνειν τά τ᾽ ἐπὶ γῆς ξυνέκαυσε καὶ αὐτὸς κεραυνωθεὶς διεφθάρη, *τοῦτο μύθου μὲν σχῆμα ἔχον λέγεται, τὸ δ᾽ ἀληθές ἐστι τῶν περὶ γῆν καὶ κατ᾽ οὐρανὸν ἰόντων παράλλαξις καὶ διὰ μακρῶν χρόνων γιγνομένη τῶν ἐπὶ γῆς πυρὶ πολλῷ φθορά*. τότε οὖν ὅσοι κατ᾽ ὄρη καὶ ἐν ὑψηλοῖς τόποις καὶ ἐν ξηροῖς οἰκοῦσι, μᾶλλον διόλλυνται τῶν ποταμοῖς καὶ θαλάττῃ προσοικούντων· ἡμῖν δὲ ὁ Νεῖλος εἴς τε τὰ ἄλλα σωτὴρ καὶ τότε ἐκ ταύτης τῆς ἀπορίας σώζει αὐξόμενος. *ὅταν δ᾽ αὖ οἱ θεοὶ τὴν γῆν ὕδασι καθαίροντες κατακλύζωσιν*, οἱ μὲν ἐν τοῖς ὄρεσι διασώζονται βουκόλοι νομεῖς τε, οἱ δ᾽ ἐν ταῖς παρ᾽ ὑμῖν πόλεσιν εἰς τὴν θάλατταν ὑπὸ τῶν ποταμῶν φέρονται·

Whereupon one of the priests, a prodigiously old man, said, "O Solon, Solon, you Greeks are always children: there is not such a thing as an old Greek." And on hearing this he asked, "What mean you by this saying?" And the priest replied, "You are young in soul, every one of you. For therein you possess not a single belief that is ancient and derived from old tradition, nor yet one science that is hoary with age. And this is the cause thereof: There have been and there will be many and divers destructions of mankind, of which *the greatest are by fire and water*, and lesser ones by countless other means. For in truth the story that is told in your country as well as ours, how once upon a time Phaethon, son of Helios, yoked his father's chariot, and, because he was unable to drive it along the course taken by his father, burnt up all that was upon the earth and himself perished by a thunderbolt,—*that story, as it is told, has the fashion of a legend, but the truth of it lies in the occurrence of a shifting of the bodies in the heavens which move round the earth, and a destruction of the things on the earth by fierce fire, which recurs at long intervals.* At such times all they that dwell on the mountains and in high and dry places suffer destruction more than those who dwell near to rivers or the sea;

[15] Van der Sluijs (2006), especially 58-60. See also Long (2006) 263-264.

> and in our case the Nile, our Saviour in other ways, saves us also at such times from this calamity by rising high. And when, on the other hand, *the Gods purge the earth with a flood of waters*, all the herdsmen and shepherds that are in the mountains are saved, but those in the cities of your land are swept into the sea by the streams; (Trans. Bury)

Plato's relative, Critias reports -via his grandfather- the testimony of Solon's journey to Egypt and the knowledge he obtained from the Egyptian high priest of the city of Sais regarding the history of the world and mankind (*Ti.* 22b-d). In reply to Solon's reference to Deucalion's flood, the priest claims that the world history is far older than the Greeks realize and that both the myths of Deucalion's flood and Phaethon's fall encrypt actual historical catastrophic events. The priest, then, rationalizes the Phaethon myth and suggests that conflagration on earth is caused due to a shift in celestial movements over long intervals. The Egyptian priest claims that the story of Phaethon retains the "shape" of the myth (22c μύθου σχῆμα ἔχον); in other words, the myth encloses a kernel of truth about the history of the universe and the cyclical destruction of the world, which otherwise would have been lost or forgotten. One could readily associate the Platonic myth of Phaethon with the broader thorny Platonic notion of εἰκὼς μῦθος. In Kellys's words:[16]

> "The opening of the *Timaeus* undercuts the basis for Timaeus' grand cosmogonic exposition, even before he has begun. The myth of Phaethon at once represents the ability of myth to circumvent the necessity of exact knowledge, while equally questioning the purpose and function of such an endeavour. The *Timaeus* in its own claim to be an εἰκὼς μῦθος, a 'likely myth' implicitly compares itself to the myth of Phaethon. It provides a means of accessing truth, through a process of recollection, which counteracts the natural limitations of providing an exact explanation by deliberately constructing itself as a myth or story."

Nonetheless, an overall discussion of Plato's approach to myth in the *Timaeus* would fall far beyond the scope of my paper.[17] I would like to draw our attention to the fact that Plato does not dismiss the Phaethon myth altogether; he rather considers it as a valuable tool to gain access to truth, even if this is of limited scope. Still, it turns out

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[16] Kelly, forthcoming contribution: 54-55.

[17] Betegh (2010). See also Reydams-Schils (2011), Brisson (2012), Grasso (2012).

that in Plato's treatise there is a *bidirectional process* in action: both of *demythologizing* (as in the case of Phaethon) and *re-mythologizing* physical processes that were previously rationally explained by the Presocratics (such as the creation of the world by a demiurge).[18]

At this point, we should bring in our discussion Kelly's significant remark regarding the Ovidian narration of Phaethon, that since the conflagration was due to the deviation of heavenly bodies from their orbit around the earth (*Met*. 2.201-213), it directly alludes to Plato's *Timaeus*.[19] Kelly claims that "the clearest evidence that Ovid's Phaethon myth at least partially cloaks a philosophical representation of the deviation of heavenly bodies can be seen in Helios' warning to Phaethon before he begins his journey (2.70-73)".[20] As he concludes, "the *Timaeus* provides a philosophical model for Ovid's *criss-crossing* [my emphasis] between myth and natural philosophy".[21]

If we follow the path from Plato to Seneca, with Lucretius' rationalization (*DRN* 5.380-415) and Ovid's remythologizing acting as important intertextual intermediaries in Seneca's appropriation of the Pla-

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18 Campbell (2000) 164: "Plato remythologizes cosmology previously appropriated from myth by the Presocratics. Ovid in the *Metamorphoses* achieves the same end by the use of scientific terminology applied to mythological cosmology and aetiology."

19 Kelly, forthcoming contribution 54: "Ovid spends considerable length describing how, as Phaethon loses control, the chariot veers off course in different directions (2.201-13), causing the earth to be cracked and scorched: upon seeing the constellation Scorpio, Phaethon drops the reins and the horses wander from their course dragging the chariot through unfamiliar regions of the sky." Gildenhard/Zissos (1999) 34 discuss the fact that the violation of the temporal mechanics of the cosmos in Ovid's depiction of Phaethon's chariot losing control may look back to Plato's *Ti.* 22c-23b. For Phaethon in Ovid and Manilius see Glauthier (2017) and (2021), Kyriakidis (2018).

20 Kelly forthcoming contribution, 56. *Id*. 57: "Sol's description of his struggle to drive his chariot, contrariwise to the overall motion of the heavens is a remarkably similar image, albeit that the contrary force in the *Metamorphoses* is a feature of the sun rather than the earth. This could easily be read as a slight modification of *Timaeus'* theory. We might even state that Sol deliberately misreads the *Timaeus* to elevate his own status, as the sole stellar object capable of resisting this motion, despite the obvious flaw in his argument, that the moon and the planets would have to be capable of a similar resistive force."

21 Kelly (2021) 735 quoting Sedley (2008) 129. *Id*. 744 "Ovid, like Plato, is constantly crossing and recrossing familiar generic boundaries, with the ultimate effect of calling into question the epistemological status of his own text and its relationship to the mutability of the material world. The primary connection between the *Timaeus* and the *Metamorphoses* does not lie therefore in their representations of creationist cosmogony but rather in how both texts develop the analogy between the creation of the text and the universe."

tonic myth of Phaethon, a certain *oscillatory scheme* emerges regarding the dynamics between myth and scientific discourse.

We can identify some specific points of contact between Plato's and Seneca's narration. Only the uneducated and uncultivated do survive the Platonic catastrophes and only *one* myth is what remains after the catastrophe, which is equated with a *children's tale* (*Ti.* 23b):

> τὰ γοῦν νῦν δὴ γενεαλογηθέντα, ὦ Σόλων, περὶ τῶν παρ᾽ ὑμῖν ἃ διῆλθες, *παίδων βραχύ τι διαφέρει μύθων*, οἳ πρῶτον μὲν ἕνα γῆς κατακλυσμὸν μέμνησθε πολλῶν ἔμπροσθεν γεγονότων
>
> Certainly the genealogies which you related just now, Solon, concerning the people of your country, are *little better than children's tales*; for, in the first place, you remember but one deluge, though many had occurred previously." (Trans. Bury)

Despite the fact that Seneca calls Ovid "the most inventive of poets" (*poetarum ingeniosissimus egregie*), in a way reminiscent of the way in which Plato's Egyptian priest responds to Solon, Seneca harshly criticizes Ovid's flood narrative, since he states that his predecessor's mythological account is childish (*Q. Nat*. 3.27.13-14; cf. Ovid *Met*. 1.304):

> *ni tantum impetum ingenii et materiae ad pueriles ineptias reduxisset:*
> *Nat lupus inter oves, fulvos vehit unda leones.*
> *Non est res satis sobria lascivire devorato orbe terrarum.*
>
> If only he had not reduced the momentum of his inventiveness and subject-matter to childish silliness with "A wolf swims among sheep, and the waves support tawny lions." Frivolity when the earth is swallowed up shows a lack of serious-mindedness. (Trans. Hine)

On the grounds that Ovid -at least as Seneca reads it- describes a wolf swimming among sheep at the very moment when the whole world has been swallowed up, Seneca considers this image to be symptomatic of Ovid's childish silliness (*pueriles inteptiae*) and playfulness, a judgment that is then summarized in the verb *lascivire*. Scholars generally limit their discussion of Seneca's Ovidian criticism to the concept of *decorum*: according to this claim, since Ovid parodies the motif of peace between predator and prey that is associated with the return of golden age, Ovid does not describe an epic subject accordingly and thus clearly violates the generic rules of epic poetry. In his intertextual

reading of Ovid's flood, Seneca's derogatory comment appears to ignore the key point that Ovid's Golden age is already burdened with negative Vergilian and Lucretian implications derived from their respective plague narratives. But Seneca's misreading of the Ovidian passage is a long and convoluted intertextual play about which I will not go into details.[22]

Whatever the case may be regarding Seneca's harsh criticism of Ovid, we should emphasize both the similarity and the dissonance between Plato's and Seneca's approach to the implications of the myth and the way in which they both integrate the mythical past into their cosmic time. In reply to the survival of Plato's *one* children's tale, in Seneca the destruction is *total*: the eschatological flood will swallow up *every* human being along with *all* the myths associated with Scylla and Charybdis (*Q. Nat*. 3.29.7):

> *Nihil erunt Adria, nihil Siculi aequoris fauces, nihil Charybdis, nihil Scylla; omnes novum mare fabulas obruet et hic qui terras cingit oceanus extrema sortitus veniet in medium.*
>
> The Adriatic will be no more, nor the straits of the Sicilian sea, nor Charybdis, nor Scylla. The new sea will overwhelm all those *myths*, and the ocean that now encircles the land, assigned to its outer edges, will reach the center. (Trans. Hine)

We could pinpoint further parallels in between the narrations of Plato and Seneca, that in my view could possibly suggest direct intertextual engagement. In both texts the flood is presented as a *catharsis* imposed by the gods.[23] While in Plato the plural that the priest employs implies that it is not the creator the one who instigates a universal catastrophe, but lesser gods (οἱ θεοὶ τὴν γῆν ὕδασι καθαίροντες κατακλύζωσιν), Seneca clearly implies that the imminent flood that he describes is also caused by divine intervention as a punishment originating in human sin (*Q. Nat.* 29.5, 30.8):

> 29.5: *Ergo, quandoque erit terminus rebus humanis, cum partes eius interire debuerint abolerive funditus totae ut de integro totae rudes innoxiaeque generentur nec supersit in deteriora praeceptor, plus umoris quam semper fuit fiet.*

[22] Garani (2022).

[23] For a discussion of the medical imagery in Seneca's flood in association with Ovid see Garani (2021)a.

> So whenever the end of human history arrives, when the earth's parts have to perish and all be utterly destroyed, in order that primitive, innocent people may be created afresh and no teacher of worse behavior may survive, then more liquid will be produced than there has ever been before. (Trans. Hine)

> 30.8: *Omne ex integro animal generabitur dabiturque terris homo inscius scelerum et melioribus auspiciis natus. Sed illis quoque innocentia non durabit, nisi dum novi sunt. Cito nequitia subrepit. Virtus difficilis inventu est, rectorem ducemque desiderat; etiam sine magistro vitia discuntur.*

> Every living creature will be created anew and the earth will be given men ignorant of sin, and born under better auspices. But their innocence, too, will not last, except as long as they are new. Vice quickly creeps in. Virtue is difficult to find; it needs a director and guide. Vices can be learned even without a teacher. (Trans. Hine)

That is why the Senecan God sends the flood to purge the body of the world and cleanse it from the sin (*Q. Nat.* 30.4):

> *Quemadmodum corpora nostra ad egestum venter exhaurit, quemadmodum in sudorem eunt vires, ita tellus liquefiet et aliis causis quiescentibus intra se quo mergatur inveniet. Sed magis omnia coitura crediderim.*

> Just as our stomach drains the body through diarrhea, just as our energy turns into sweat, so the earth will be liquefied, and, even when other causes come to a halt, it will find within itself the resources to be drowned. But I should prefer to believe that every cause will combine. (Trans. Hine)

In this passage, the flood is equated with some sort of bodily cleansing with a view to renewal. Thanks to the literal fluidity of the physical earth, Seneca emphasizes the purgatory force of the flood, which is described as a process of literal purification.

Last but not least, in both Plato and Seneca both the conflagration and the flood are compared to a recurring *plague* (*Ti.* 23a):

> τὰ δὲ παρ᾽ ὑμῖν καὶ τοῖς ἄλλοις ἄρτι κατεσκευασμένα ἑκάστοτε τυγχάνει γράμμασι καὶ ἅπασιν ὁπόσων πόλεις δέονται, καὶ πάλιν δι᾽ εἰωθότων ἐτῶν *ὥσπερ νόσημα* ἥκει φερόμενον αὐτοῖς ῥεῦμα οὐράνιον καὶ τοὺς ἀγραμμάτους τε καὶ ἀμούσους ἔλιπεν ὑμῶν, ὥστε πάλιν ἐξ ἀρχῆς οἷον νέοι γίγνεσθε, οὐδὲν εἰδότες οὔτε τῶν τῇδε οὔτε τῶν παρ᾽ ὑμῖν, ὅσα ἦν ἐν τοῖς παλαιοῖς χρόνοις.

whereas your people and the others are but newly equipped, every time, with letters and all such arts as civilized States require; and when, after the usual interval of years, *like a plague*, the flood from heaven comes sweeping down afresh upon your people, it leaves none of you but the unlettered and uncultured, so that you become young as ever, with no knowledge of all that happened in old times in this land or in your own." (Trans. Bury)

And then again in Seneca's flood (*Q. Nat.* 29.6-7):

Vide ergo ne terra debeat minui, ut validiori infirma succumbat. Incipiet ergo putrescere, dehinc laxata ire in umorem et assidua tabe defluere. Tunc exilient sub montibus flumina ipsosque impetu quatient; inde aura tacta manabunt; solum omne aquas reddet, summi scaturient montes. Quemadmodum in morbum transeunt sana et ulceri vicina consentiunt, ut quaeque proxima terris fluentibus fuerint, ipsa eluentur stillabuntque, deinde current et, hiante pluribus locis saxo, [per] fretum saliet et maria inter se componet.

So consider whether earth does not also need to be diminished, so that the weaker may succumb to the stronger. So, it will begin to decay, then to decompose and turn to liquid, and to dissolve into a steady stream of putrefaction. Then rivers will spring up beneath mountains and make them crumble under the onslaught. Then fields that are affected will become sodden; all the ground will exude water; the mountaintops will bubble over. Just as healthy parts become diseased, and an ulcer spreads to adjacent areas, so the regions closest to land that is already awash will themselves dissolve and form a trickle, then a fast current. (Trans. Hine)

To briefly recapitulate the first part of my paper: while Seneca creates a double-allusion to both Plato's and Ovid's myth of Phaethon, he counter-proposes his own perception about the integration and the manipulation of myth within a philosophical text.

Platonic imagery and the Sublime in the prologue to Seneca's *Natural Questions* 3

Let us now turn to the prologue to Book 3 (*Q. Nat.* 3 *Praef.* 1):

Non praeterit me, Lucili virorum optime, quam magnarum rerum fundamenta ponam senex, qui mundum circuire *constitui et causas secretaque eius eruere atqui aliis noscenda prodere. Quando tam multa consequar, tam sparsa colligam, tam occulta perspiciam?*

> I am not unaware, Lucilius, excellent man, of how great is the enterprise whose foundations I am laying in my old age, now that I have decided *to circumnavigate the universe*, to seek out its causes and secrets, and to present them for others to learn about. When shall I investigate things so numerous, gather together things so scattered, examine things so inaccessible?" (Trans. Hine, slightly modified)

While Seneca announces his intention to survey the universe and unravel its causes and secrets, he presents himself metaphorically as the craftsman of his textual universe and identifies his role of a writer with that of the divine creator, whose cosmic edifice he is about to explore and explain in detail. In doing so, he vividly reminds us of Ovid's creator in the cosmogonic narration in the first book of his *Metamorphoses*, itself looking back to Plato's demiurge in the *Timaeus*. At the same time, Seneca introduces the philosophical topos of **the flight of mind**. He presents his philosophical project as a mental journey through space: he himself is a privileged spectator of the world, a traveler through the universe and explorer of its mysteries. While Seneca offers his Stoic approach to the quest of knowledge, he seems to be transferring from the final book of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* to the beginning of Book 3 and probably of his whole project, the vatic figure of Pythagoras who is said to have approached the gods with his mind (*Met*. 15.63 *mente deos adiit*).[24] In this context, it is significant that Seneca's *mental journey* is proclaimed as *circular* (*mundum circuire*), replicating thus the course of the planets. In the concluding lines of the prologue, we readily trace the ideas of the *emancipation* of the soul from the body and its desire to return to a higher reality (*Q. Nat.* 3 *Praef*. 18):

> *Ad hoc proderit nobis inspicere rerum naturam. Primo discedemus a sordidis. Deinde* animum ipsum*, quo sano magnoque opus est,* seducemus a corpore*. Deinde in occultis exercitata subtilitas non erit in aperta deterior; nihil est autem apertius his salutaribus quae contra nequitiam nostram furoremque discuntur, quae damnamus nec ponimus.*
>
> For these reasons it will be useful for us to investigate nature: first, we shall leave behind what is sordid; next, we shall keep *our mind*, which needs to be elevated and great, *separated from the body*; next, when our critical faculty has been exercised on hidden matters, it will be no worse at dealing with visible ones. And nothing is more visible than these

[24] Torre (2007).

> remedies which are learned in order to counter our wickedness and madness, things we condemn but do not forsake. (Trans. Hine)

Analogous ideas are also identified in the prologue to *Natural Questions* 1, in which Seneca states that the mind, when it is released from the body, may ascend to the heavens and realize from above the smallness of earth. Thanks to this flight, the mind returns to its own divine element (*Q. Nat*. 1 *Praef*. 11-13):[25]

> *Sursum ingentia spatia sunt, in quorum possessionem* animus *admittitur, et ita si* secum minimum ex corpore tulit*, si sordidum omne detersit et expeditus levisque ac contentus modico emicuit. Cum illa tetigit, alitur, crescit ac* velut vinculis liberatus *in originem redit et hoc habet argumentum divinitatis suae quod illum divina delectant, nec ut alienis, sed ut suis interest. Secure spectat occasus siderum atque ortus et tam* diversas concordantium vias*; observat ubi quaeque stella primum terris lumen ostendat, ubi columen eius summumque cursus sit, quousque descendat; curiosus spectator excutit singula et quaerit. Quidni quaerat? Scit illa ad se pertinere.*
>
> Up above there are vast spaces, which *the mind* is allowed to enter and occupy, *provided that it takes scarcely anything of the body with it*, that it wipes away any uncleanness, and that it soars upward unencumbered, nimble, and self-reliant. When it has reached those regions, it finds nourishment, it grows, and, as though *freed from its chains*, it returns to its origin. It has this proof of its own divinity, that it takes delight in the divine and enjoys it not as someone else's possession but as its own. For confidently it watches the settings and risings of the stars, and *their differing but harmonious paths*; it observes where each star first reveals its light to earth, where its zenith [the highest part of its course] is, to what point it descends. As a fascinated spectator, it examines and inquires into each detail. And why should it not inquire? It knows this all relates to itself. (Trans. Hine)

These very ideas of the denigration of the body, the liberation of the soul from the body and its return to its divine origin in the heavens are commonly considered as markers of Seneca's approximation to Platonism.[26] To draw an example from Plato's *Timaeus*, a text with significant intertextual bearing for the discussion of the flood in *Q. Nat.*

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[25] For the image of the detachment of the soul from the body and its desire to return to a higher reality see also Seneca *Ep*. 58.26-27, 65.18, 79.

[26] Limburg (2007) 389-396, Reydams-Schils (2010) especially 200-201 for a comprehensive discussion about the un-Platonic elements in Seneca's view of the soul. Regarding the

3, Seneca' circular journey of the mind conjures up a famous passage that we read towards the end of Plato's dialogue (*Ti*. 90c-d):[27]

> θεραπεία δὲ δὴ παντὶ παντὸς μία, τὰς οἰκείας ἑκάστῳ τροφὰς καὶ κινήσεις ἀποδιδόναι. τῷ δ᾽ ἐν ἡμῖν θείῳ συγγενεῖς εἰσιν κινήσεις αἱ τοῦ παντὸς διανοήσεις καὶ *περιφοραί*: ταύταις δὴ συνεπόμενον ἕκαστον δεῖ, τὰς περὶ τὴν γένεσιν ἐν τῇ κεφαλῇ διεφθαρμένας ἡμῶν περιόδους ἐξορθοῦντα διὰ τὸ καταμανθάνειν τὰς τοῦ παντὸς ἁρμονίας τε καὶ περιφοράς, τῷ κατανοουμένῳ τὸ κατανοοῦν ἐξομοιῶσαι κατὰ τὴν ἀρχαίαν φύσιν, ὁμοιώσαντα δὲ τέλος ἔχειν τοῦ προτεθέντος ἀνθρώποις ὑπὸ θεῶν ἀρίστου βίου πρός τε τὸν παρόντα καὶ τὸν ἔπειτα χρόνον.
>
> "And the way of tendance of every part by every man is one—namely, to supply each with its own congenial food arid motion; and for the divine part within us the congenial motions are the intellections and *revolutions of the Universe*. These each one of us should follow, rectifying the revolutions within our head, which were distorted at our birth, by learning the harmonies and revolutions of the Universe, and thereby making the part that thinks like unto the object of its thought, in accordance with its original nature, and having achieved this likeness attain finally to that goal of life which is set before men by the gods as the most good both for the present and for the time to come." (Trans. Bury)

At this climactic moment of the Platonic narration, we are told that, given the fact that the revolutions of rational souls were driven off course at birth (*Ti.* 43a6-44b1), in order to achieve happiness, one should study the revolutions of the universe. Only in this way, will one successfully realign his soul's revolutions with those of the universe. In other words, the circular motions in the heavens are the model for mankind's ethical aspiration.

Similar imagery of mental flight can be found also in Plato's *Theaetetus*, in association with the "chorus-leader" philosopher (173e-174a):[28]

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question about the nature of god see Limburg (2007) 401-404 (discussion of Sen. *Q Nat*. 1 *praef*. 2.45, 7.30 and further bibliography).

[27] Zeyl and Sattler (2022). For similar imagery see also Plato's *Phaedrus* 246a-247e (see discussion below), *Theaetetus* 173e-174a.

[28] For the digression in Plato's *Theaetetus* (172c-177c) with particular focus on the quotation from Pindar see Menn (2020) 94ff. and 117-119; p. 95: "This presumably glosses the universality of the activity that Pindar is describing: the interpretive suggestion is that the reason why the thought of Pindar's great-souled person does not look only under the earth or only in the sky, but goes as far as possible in all directions of the cosmos, is to

καὶ ταῦτα πάντ' οὐδ' ὅτι οὐκ οἶδεν, οἶδεν· οὐδὲ γὰρ αὐτῶν ἀπέχεται τοῦ εὐδοκιμεῖν χάριν, ἀλλὰ τῷ ὄντι τὸ σῶμα μόνον ἐν τῇ πόλει κεῖται αὐτοῦ καὶ ἐπιδημεῖ, ἡ δὲ διάνοια, ταῦτα πάντα ἡγησαμένη σμικρὰ καὶ οὐδέν, ἀτιμάσασα *πανταχῇ πέτεται* κατὰ Πίνδαρον «τᾶς τε γᾶς ὑπένερθε» καὶ τὰ ἐπίπεδα γεωμετροῦσα, «*οὐρανοῦ θ' ὕπερ*» ἀστρονομοῦσα, καὶ πᾶσαν πάντῃ φύσιν ἐρευνωμένη τῶν ὄντων ἑκάστου ὅλου, εἰς τῶν ἐγγὺς οὐδὲν αὑτὴν συγκαθιεῖσα.

And he doesn't even know that he doesn't know any of this. It isn't even that he's standing back from it for the sake of a good reputation; rather it's that it is only his body that is truly located in the city and resides in it, because his mind, having concluded that all these things are worth little or nothing, rejects them and *flies off in all directions*, both 'to the deeps of the earth', as Pindar says, and measuring its surfaces, tracking the stars '*in the heights of heaven*' too, and using every sinew to search out a every nature among the things that are, taking each thing as a whole, not lowering itself to any of the things close by. (Trans. Rowe)

In this highly perplexing passage it is striking that, in order to describe the philosopher's flight to the heaven, Plato resorts to an allegorical embracement of a Pindaric quotation and thus engages in a subtle intertextual play with the poetic tradition. We should keep this Platonic precedent in mind, when we read Seneca's Ovidian quotations.

Whereas there is no doubt about the fact that Seneca appropriates Platonic imagery, scholars debate as to whether he suggests that his own ascent of mind is *literally transcendent* or *metaphorical*. Those who embrace the former case argue that the use of such Platonic images undermines Seneca's Stoicism.[29] On the other hand, as Gretchen Reydams-Schils correctly articulates it:[30]

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ensure that it encompasses the whole nature of each thing, grasping its most dispersed parts in a single moment of thought. Plato intends this description to be ambiguous between exploring a physical whole, distributed throughout the cosmos (as, say, any of the Anaxagorean stuffs are), and 'collecting' a dialectical whole, a universal, from its many instances. Both the physicist and the dialectician, in their different ways, try to grasp each thing as a whole because they want to be sure not to miss its nature, and Plato wants the physicist, the dialectician, and the mathematician each to recognize themselves in his description, and to agree that they stand in the chorus of philosophers against the rhetoricians." See also Rue (1993).

[29] Limburg (2007) 390-392. For the Platonic character of the preface to *Q. Nat*. 1 and the representation of the flight see Gauly (2004) 170-176; see also Donini (1979), Setaioli (1988) 505-510 (who replies to Donini).

[30] Reydams-Schils (2010) 201-203. See also Limburg (2007) 392: "The ascent of the mind to its divine origin is primarily known in a Platonic context. However, the

> "The Platonic language and imagery in Seneca is meant to emphasize the importance of the *turn inwards* (*reverti* in Seneca, *De vita beata* 8.4; ἐπιστροφή in Epictetus, *Diss*. 3.16.15) and the focus on one's true self that runs like a red thread through so many later Stoic texts. In other words, Seneca uses the opposition between soul and body to underscore a *genuinely Stoic reorientation in values*. […] What is un-Platonic in Seneca's notion of a return to a higher realm? As stated already, humans have a connection with a divine principle that, as *pneuma*, is fundamentally embedded *in the universe*, and the higher realm to which we are supposed to return consists of the heavens, which are *part of the universe*." (my emphasis)

In order to re-evaluate the way in which Seneca assimilates these Platonic ideas without creating any tension with the basic principles of Stoicism, we should now revisit **the myth of Phaethon**, with which Seneca engages intertextually also in the framework of the prologue. In doing so, we should bear in mind that in his narration of the flood Seneca brings in this very myth, burdened not only with Lucretian and Ovidian, but also with Platonic connotations. As Seneca delineates the difficulties that he faces due to his advanced age in order to fulfil his literary and scientific goals, he quotes two verses which probably derive from the now-lost poem Phaethon of Vagellius, about whom we know nearly nothing (Sen. *Q. Nat.* 3 *praef*. 3; cf. fr. 2 Courtney):

> *Libet igitur mihi exclamare illum poetae incliti versum:*
> *Tollimus ingentes animos et maxima parvo*
> *Tempore molimur.*
> *Hoc dicerem, si puer iuvenisque molirer. Nullum enim non tam magnis rebus tempus angustum est. Nunc vero ad rem seriam, gravem, immensam post meridianas horas accessimus.*
>
> So I want to shout out these lines by the eminent poet:
> We raise our mighty spirits and in a brief time attempt the greatest deeds.
> I would say this if I were embarking on the project as a boy or young man (for any length of time would be too limited for such a great enterprise); but as it is we have started a serious, significant, endless project in our afternoon hours. (Trans. Hine)

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return to a divine origin can also be understood in a Stoic sense, since the mind is of a divine nature."

In *Q. Nat.* 6 Seneca again quotes from Vagellius' poem, in the context of his consolatory argumentation regarding earthquakes. Given the fact that death is inescapable, Seneca claims that to breathe our last due to an earthquake is a more imposing way of dying and should therefore be preferred (*Q. Nat.* 6.2.9). It is now generally accepted that within Seneca's prose works, the myth of Phaethon in its Ovidian version has already acquired specific heroic connotations. For example, in his *De providentia*, Seneca recontextualizes several of the verses that the Ovidian Helios addresses to his offspring (*Prov*. 5.10-11; cf. *Met*. 2.63-69, 2.79-81). While in the original Ovidian context the verses were intended to discourage Phaethon from his pernicious decision, the philosopher argues that the virtuous man willingly accepts his fate and explains that Stoic *virtus* seeks the heights.[31]

Given Seneca's intense intertextual dialogue with Ovid's *Metamorphoses* throughout *Natural Questions* 3 as well as his reception of Ovid's Phaethon in his philosophical treatises, we can claim that in presenting himself as Phaethon in the prologue to Book 3, he clearly intends us to recall the Ovidian narration of the episode of Phaethon in *Metamorphoses* 1-2 (*Met*. 1.747-2.400). What is even more to the point, in Ovid's predecessors the myth of Phaethon is widely perceived to have been heavily burdened with meta-poetic connotations. In his treatise *On the Sublime*, Longinus quotes verses from Euripides' *Phaethon* (fr. 779 N. = 168-177 Diggle) to highlight Phaethon's attempt at sublimity (Longinus *On the Sublime* 15):[32]

> τῷ γοῦν Φαέθοντι παραδιδοὺς τὰς ἡνίας ὁ Ἥλιος
> ἔλα δὲ μήτε Λιβυκὸν αἰθέρ᾽ εἰσβαλών·
> κρᾶσιν γὰρ ὑγρὰν οὐκ ἔχων ἁψῖδα σὴν
> καίων διήσει . . .

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[31] Cf. Seneca *VB* 20.5 in which Seneca quotes an Ovidian verse (*Met*. 2.328) which forms part of Phaethon's epitaph (*Met*. 2.327-328) and introduces the Stoic notion of the magnitude of the soul and of sublimity (achieved thanks to his knowledge of physical phenomena).

[32] Garani (2020)a. See also Delarue (2006), Glauthier (2021) with interesting discussion about Longinus and the idea of failure. For a comprehensive discussion of the idea of the classical sublime see now Glauthier (2023) especially for Ovid's Phaethon 24-25: "Ancient writers are keenly aware that the sublime is a momentary sensation, a thrilling rush that recedes. […] The magnificence of the undertaking redeems Phaethon's failure and excuses the catastrophe he has unleashed. Human beings may be related to the divine and able to transcend momentarily their earthly limits, but we are still fundamentally earth-bound; the sublimity of a fall amid deeds of great daring bears witness to our own limitations and is a source of consolation."

φησίν, εἶθ᾽ ἑξῆς
ἴει δ᾽ ἐφ᾽ ἑπτὰ Πλειάδων ἔχων δρόμον.
τοσαῦτ᾽ ἀκούσας παῖς ἅμαρψεν ἡνίας·
κρούσας δὲ πλευρὰ πτεροφόρων ὀχημάτων
μεθῆκεν, αἱ δ᾽ ἔπταντ᾽ ἐπ᾽ αἰθέρος πτύχας.
πατὴρ δ᾽ ὄπισθε νῶτα σειρίου βεβὼς
ἵππευε παῖδα νουθετῶν· ἐκεῖσ᾽ ἔλα,
τῇδε στρέφ᾽ ἅρμα, τῇδε.

ἆρ᾽ οὐκ ἂν εἴποις, ὅτι ἡ ψυχὴ τοῦ γράφοντος συνεπιβαίνει τοῦ ἅρματος καὶ συγκινδυνεύουσα τοῖς ἵπποις συνεπτέρωται; οὐ γὰρ ἄν, εἰ μὴ τοῖς οὐρανίοις ἐκείνοις ἔργοις ἰσοδρομοῦσα ἐφέρετο, τοιαῦτ᾽ ἄν ποτε ἐφαντάσθη.

For instance, when Helios hands over the reins to Phaethon:
"And do not drive into the Libyan sky.
Its torrid air with no damp humour tempered
Will burn your wheel and melt it."
And he goes on,
"But toward the seven Pleiads hold your course."
This heard, young Phaethon caught up the reins,
Slashed at the flanks of his wing-wafted team,
And launched them flying to the cloudy vales.
Behind, his sire, astride the Dog-star's back,
Rode, schooling thus his son. "Now, drive on there,
Now this way wheel your car, this way."

Would you not say that the writer's soul is aboard the car, and takes wing to share the horses' peril? Never could it have visualized such things, had it not run beside those heavenly bodies. (trans. by Fyfe; rev. Russell)

Regarding Ovid, Alessandro Schiesaro rightly remarks: "Phaethon's journey towards the sky should be comprehensively read as a probing comment on Epicurus' metaphoric flight, and by extension on Lucretius' poetic and philosophical project […]. Ovid's commentary on Phaethon's hubristic –and sublime- attempt at reaching a divine level of knowledge should be read as a specific critique of the Lucretian sublime, which is at the same time an *epistemic*, *aesthetic* and *ideological* strategy [my emphasis]."[33] For a detailed discussion of Ovid's

[33] Schiesaro (2014) 75. For inconsistencies in Lucretius' account see Giussani (1897-1898) 4.43, Schiesaro (2014) 95. For a recent discussion of the notion of the sublime in Ovid see Hardie (2022) especially 4: "There is a dual sublimity in the episode:

intertextual references to Lucretius' *DRN* in this "sublime" respect the reader should refer to Schiesaro's paper. What is of significance for the present discussion is the fact that, by introducing Phaethon into his prologue as a pivotal figure, Seneca creates a double intertextual allusion to both Ovid's Phaethon and Lucretius' Epicurus (*DRN* 1.62-79), treating them both as *positive sublimities*, to which he himself aspires. Along these lines, Seneca's quotations from Vagellius' Phaethon suggest the Stoic notions of μεγαλοψυχία (*magnanimitas*) and μεγαλοφροσύνη (*magnitudo ingenii*) which in combination "contribute to the same supreme ethico-aesthetic goal, the sublime".[34]

Andrew Feldherr draws our attention to a further dimension of Ovid's Phaethon, the fact that the Ovidian hero plausibly looks back also to the imagery of the chariot that we read in Socrates' second speech on love in Plato's *Phaedrus*, a passage in which the soul is compared to a team of two winged horses, one obedient and one unruly, driven by a human charioteer.[35] To quote Feldherr:[36]

> "But an intertext looming in the background of the entire episode also points the reader toward such metaphysical questions: Plato's *Phaedrus*. When young Phaethon 'burns with desire' (*Met*. 2.104) for the winged horses of the Sun and rejects his father's advice, it is already all too easy to read the winged chariot, of which he will make himself such an ineffectual part, as a metaphor for his own disordered soul. While the Phaedrus myth offers no one-to-one correspondence with the story that follows, a number of general similarities support the connection. Most importantly, the desire that prompts the soul to grow wings is ultimately a desire to return to its origins, which are in the sky. Specifically, the soul aspires to recapture the glimpses it gained in the divine procession of 'real reality' ('ousia ontos ousa,' Plato, *Phdr*. 247c7)."

Ovid's allusion to *Phaedrus* is particularly meaningful for our interpretation of Seneca's Platonism, since this poetic intertext has already

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first, the sublimity of the Sun, whose dazzle is more than Phaethon's mortal eyes can bear (22-23), framed in the sublime architecture of his palace; and, secondly, the vertiginous sublimity of Phaethon's fall from the sky and the near return of Chaos as a result of his disastrous ride. The sublimities of both order and disorder also shadow forth a Roman imperial sublimity."

34 See Williams (2012) 229 quoting Mazzoli (1970) 48.

35 Ferrari (1987) 185-203. See also Lebeck (1972); Pender (2000), (2007)a and (2007)b, Belfiore (2006), Moore (2014).

36 Feldherr (2016) 29.

embedded the Platonic flight of the soul in the mythological narration of Phaethon.

It turns therefore out that at the beginning of his work Seneca interlaces specific Platonic motifs which have already been assimilated likewise by his other main source-text, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Bearing in mind that the preface to *Q. Nat.* 3 credibly bears Platonic echoes, we could even tentatively identify a possible contradiction that arises, when Seneca combines the imagery of a circular mental journey in the opening lines with the figure of Phaethon, in his endeavor to articulate the idea of the sublime: whereas in the Platonic flight the emphasis is placed on the metaphorical harmonization of the soul with the circular movements of the planets, Seneca in the disguise of Phaethon achieves sublimity, even if he deviates from the ideal celestial circuit. If we take this contradiction into consideration, we are compelled to re-evaluate the implications of Seneca's reception of Plato in association with his own forging and broadening of the concept of the sublime.[37]

In our discussion so far -regarding both Ovid and Seneca-, we have overlooked the fact that Plato was a key-figure in the debate on the definition of the sublime already in the Augustan period, when for example the Greek rhetorician Caecilius of Caleacte wrote a treatise *On the Sublime*, to which Longinus' homonymous work is a refutatory reply.[38] In a seminal article (1981) Donald Russell argues that one major purpose of Longinus *On the Sublime* is the need to defend Plato against the criticism about exces-

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[37] In an attempt to reconcile this contradiction, in private correspondence Chiara Graf interestingly suggests that "When Seneca cites Vagellius in *NQ* book 6, he claims that the happiness to be found in falling from great heights comes from the reminder that the earth, too, is mortal—that is, it comes from the recognition of *the profound sympathy between the human body and the cosmos*, and their shared mortality, which is attributable to *their shared imbrication in divine logos*. So, perhaps for Seneca, falling to the ground and deviating from overt order still represents *an alignment with god*, because god undergirds even the decaying and apparently disordered aspects of the phenomenal world."

[38] Casper de Jonge (2012) draws our attention to the fact that Pompeius Geminus, objected to the negative criticism of Plato that he read in Dionysius of Halicarnassus *On Demosthenes*. This is why Dionysius demonstrated his views on Plato in a separate letter. De Jonge (2012) 295 remarks: "Even if Dionysius' evaluation of Plato differs from the views of both Pompeius and Longinus, he clearly participates in what we might call the *discourse of sublime*. Dionysius himself underlines this, when he attempts to mitigate his judgment on Plato (Dionysius of Halicarnassus *Pomp*. 2.230.16-231.1 Us.-Rad.): 'And I criticize him [Plato] not as an ordinary man, but as a great one who has come near to the divine nature.' […] Even if Dionysius, unlike Longinus, objects to Plato's poetic style, he seems to recognize that *the philosopher is generally regarded as a divine model of sublime writing*." [my emphasis]

sive imagery and elaborate style in general.[39] Since Longinus' text is fragmentarily preserved, there are important gaps that prevent us from forming a comprehensive view of Longinus' full assessment of Plato, whom he meaningfully characterizes as divine (*Subl*. 4.6 ὁ τἆλλα θεῖος Πλάτων). Whatever the case may be, Longinus acknowledges that Plato is one of the most prominent models of the sublime (*Subl*. 13.4, 32.5-8).

In the context of the debate on the function and the value of metaphor as regards its impact on sublime style, Longinus presents us with a mosaic of passages that he draws from Plato's *Timaeus* (*Ti*. 65c-85e), partly paraphrased and partly quoted verbatim (*Subl.* 32.2-7).[40] Obviously, a detailed analysis of the Platonic metaphors falls beyond the scope of the present discussion. Still, the prominent place of this specific Platonic text in the context of the discussion about the notion of sublime should not go unobserved. As Halliwell recently pointed out, "Plato's text is approached from a primarily 'literary' point of view, i.e. without overt or strict interest in the philosophical context or content of the passage in question."[41]

In the beginning of paragraph 13, in order to illustrate the silent flow of Plato's stream of words, Longinus appropriates a Platonic analogy from *Theaetetus* (*Tht*. 144a) in which the silent flow of olive oil is used as an analogy for the character of the young Theaetetus.[42] Longinus then quotes, while adapting, a famous passage from Plato's *Republic* (cf. *Rep*. 9.586a-b):

> 13 [1] Ὅτι μέντοι ὁ Πλάτων ἐπάνειμι γάρ τοιούτῳ τινὶ χεύματι ἀψοφητὶ ῥέων οὐδὲν ἧττον μεγεθύνεται, ἀνεγνωκὼς τὰ ἐν τῇ Πολιτείᾳ τὸν τύπον οὐκ ἀγνοεῖς. οἱ ἄρα φρονήσεως φησὶ καὶ ἀρετῆς ἄπειροι εὐωχίαις δὲ καὶ τοῖς τοιούτοις ἀεὶ συνόντες κάτω ὡς ἔοικε φέρονται καὶ ταύτῃ πλανῶνται διὰ βίου, πρὸς δὲ τὸ ἀληθὲς ἄνω οὔτ' ἀνέβλεψαν πώποτε οὔτ' ἀνηνέχθησαν οὐδὲ βεβαίου τε καὶ καθαρᾶς ἡδονῆς ἐγεύσαντο, ἀλλὰ βοσκημάτων δίκην κάτω ἀεὶ βλέποντες καὶ κεκυφότες εἰς γῆν καὶ εἰς τραπέζας βόσκονται χορταζόμενοι καὶ ὀχεύοντες, καὶ ἕνεκα τῆς τούτων πλεονεξίας λακτίζοντες καὶ κυρίττοντες ἀλλήλους σιδηροῖς κέρασι καὶ ὁπλαῖς ἀποκτιννύουσι δὶ ἀπληστίαν.

[39] Russell (1981).

[40] Halliwell (2022) 338-339. Cf. the table in Russell (1964) 153-155.

[41] Halliwell (2022) 339.

[42] Cf. [Longinus] *Subl*. 12.2 in which Plato's writing is compared to a vast open sea or ocean.

> However, to return to Plato, though the stream of his words flows as noiselessly as oil, he none the less attains sublimity. You have read the Republic and you know the sort of thing. "Those who have then no experience," he says, "of wisdom or of goodness, living always amid banquets and other such festivities, are seemingly borne downwards and there they wander all their lives. They have never yet raised their eyes to the truth, never been carried upwards, never tasted true, abiding pleasure. They are like so many cattle; stooping downwards, with their eyes always bent on the earth and on their dinner tables, they feed and fatten and breed, and so greedy are they for these enjoyments that they kick and butt with hooves and horns of iron and kill each other for insatiate desire." (Trans. Fyfe; revised by Russell)

In the original context, Plato draws a clear-cut distinction between those who are addicted to bodily pleasures and look down to the ground like cattle and those who opt for higher pleasures for the mind and look upwards to the truth.[43] Halliwell tellingly points to the fact that this passage is "a kind of philosophical charter for the work's concept of sublimity".[44] Longinus then puts forward Plato as a prime example of how sublimity can be achieved by the "imitation and emulation" of chosen models from the past.[45]

> 13 [2] Ἐνδείκνυταί δ ἡμῖν οὗτος ἀνήρ, εἰ βουλοίμεθα μὴ κατολιγωρεῖν, ὡς καὶ ἄλλη τις παρὰ τὰ εἰρημένα *ὁδὸς ἐπὶ τὰ ὑψηλὰ τείνει*. ποία δὲ καὶ τίς αὕτη; ἡ τῶν ἔμπροσθεν μεγάλων συγγραφέων καὶ ποιητῶν *μίμησίς τε καὶ ζήλωσις*. καί γε τούτου, φίλτατε, ἀπρὶξ ἐχώμεθα τοῦ σκοποῦ. […]
>
> Here is an author who shows us, if we will condescend to see, that there is *another road*, besides those we have mentioned, *which leads to sublimity*. What and what manner of road is this? *Zealous imitation* of the great prose writers and poets of the past. That is the aim, dear friend; let us hold to it with all our might. (Trans. Fyfe; revised by Russell)
>
> 13 [3] […] μόνος Ἡρόδοτος Ὁμηρικώτατος ἐγένετο; Στησίχορος ἔτι πρότερον ὅ τε Ἀρχίλοχος, πάντων δὲ τούτων μάλιστα ὁ *Πλάτων ἀπὸ τοῦ Ὁμηρικοῦ κείνου νάματος εἰς αὑτὸν μυρίας ὅσας παρατροπὰς ἀποχετευσάμενος*. καὶ ἴσως ἡμῖν ἀποδείξεων ἔδει, εἰ μὴ τὰ ἐπ εἴδους

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43 Warren (2014) 41.

44 Halliwell (2022) 268.

45 Halliwell (2022) 268: "Longinus evokes the creative power of *mimesis* in his own imitation of Plato's magnetic chain of inspiration in *Ion* 533d."

καὶ οἱ περὶ Ἀμμώνιον ἐκλέξαντες ἀνέγραψαν. [4] ἔστι δ οὐ κλοπὴ τὸ πρᾶγμα, ἀλλ, ὡς ἀπὸ καλῶν εἰδῶν ἢ πλασμάτων ἢ δημιουργημάτων ἀποτύπωσις. καὶ οὐδ ἂν ἐπακμάσαι μοι δοκεῖ τηλικαῦτά τινα τοῖς τῆς φιλοσοφίας δόγμασι, καὶ εἰς ποιητικὰς ὕλας πολλαχοῦ συνεμβῆναι καὶ φράσεις εἰ μὴ περὶ πρωτείων νὴ Δία παντὶ θυμῷ πρὸς Ὅμηρον, ὡς ἀνταγωνιστὴς νέος πρὸς ἤδη τεθαυμασμένον, ἴσως μὲν φιλονεικότερον καὶ οἱονεὶ διαδορατιζόμενος, οὐκ ἀνωφελῶς δ᾽ ὅμως διηριστεύετο.

Was Herodotus alone Homeric in the highest degree? No, there was Stesichorus at a still earlier date and Archilochus too, and above all others *Plato, who drew off for his own use ten thousand runnels from the great Homeric spring*. We might need to give instances, had not people like Ammonius drawn up a collection. Such borrowing is no theft; it is rather like the reproduction of good character by sculptures or other works of art. So many of these qualities would never have flourished among Plato's philosophic tenets, nor would he have entered so often into the subjects and language of poetry, had he not striven, with heart and soul, to contest the prize with Homer, like a young antagonist with one who had already won his spurs, perhaps in too keen emulation, longing as it were to break a lance, and yet always to good purpose; (Trans. Fyfe; revised by Russell)

Plato is said to have channeled countless streams from Homer's river into his own work. This irrigation metaphor may allude to Plato's own metaphorical imagery of water channels which is used to describe the circulation of blood in the body in the *Timaeus* (*Ti*. 77c; cf. 79a).[46]

Although I would not claim that there is any kind of direct intertextual association between Longinus and Seneca, the way in which Longinus embraces Platonic imagery turns out to be highly indicative of the analogous way in which, following in Ovid's footsteps, Seneca merges opposing Platonic images as *literary tropes*, while discharging them from unorthodox Stoic semantics associated with the Platonic idea of transcendence, in order to convey his own notion of

[46] For references to Plato's Homeric character see Halliwell (2022) 221: Panaetius frr. 56, 83 van Straaten (*apud* Cicero *Tusc*. 1.79, calling Plato 'the Homer of philosophers'), Dionysius of Halicarnassus *Dem*. 41.3, Quintilian 10.1.81. Halliwell remarks that "Plato's relationship to Homer is figured here in imagistic terms which connect with earlier passages of the treatise". For the Hesiodic allusions in Plato's *Timaeus* see the essays in Boys-Stones and Haubold (2010).

the sublime.[47] In doing so, Seneca emulates Plato's sublime credentials on both poetic and philosophical grounds.

Conclusion

In our discussion of Seneca's reception of Plato in the *Natural Questions*, we have used as our starting point the fact that Seneca's dominant poetic intertext, i.e., Ovid's *Metamorphoses* -in particular the myth of Phaethon-, is burdened with multifarious Platonic resonances, which are drawn especially from *Timaeus*, *Phaedrus* and *Theaetetus*. Taking for granted that the way in which Ovid himself responds to his Platonic intertexts sets a precedent for Seneca, the possibility arises that in his turn Seneca engages in a direct intertextual dialogue with a range of Platonic ideas pertaining to the soul, the function of myth and the attainment of sublimity. In reading the Platonic works as "poems in prose",[48] Seneca includes Plato in the intertextual web of cosmological poets, the pinnacle of which he reserves for himself. At the same time, Seneca playfully deceives the reader's expectations about his own endorsement of Platonic philosophical ideas which he eventually uses only as literary tropes, in order to transmit his Stoic truth. In doing so, as I would like to suggest, he heralds the way in which in the paragraphs that follow, while he engages intertextually with Ovid's Callimachean list of *paradoxa* (*Q. Nat*. 3.20-21, 25-26), he explicitly places himself within the Roman tradition of Callimacheanism with its implications of witty generic experimentation and subtle intertextual allusions.[49] If there is any truth in this discussion, this would broaden the complexity of Seneca's multidimensional engagement with Plato and Platonism in the framework of his therapeutic philosophical message.

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47 Innes (2002) 261-269.

48 Hadot (1983).

49 Garani (2020)b 224.

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