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IPSAQUE MORTE PEIOR EST MORTIS LOCUS
THE UNDERWORLD IN SENECA'S *HERCULES FURENS*

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SUMMARY: The present paper analyses the episode of Hercules' journey to the underworld in Seneca's *Hercules furens*. The starting point is the contemporary psychoanalysis school of object relations; the research method combines psychoanalytic interpretive methods with a philological text analysis. The underworld passage, showing Hercules' weakness and *superbia*, can be treated as the key to understanding the entire play.

INTRODUCTION

In the middle of Seneca's *Hercules furens* there is a long scene in which Theseus describes to Hercules' family the underworld (645-828). This extended *ekphrasis* is interesting for various reasons, but it seems that it has not drawn deserved attention of the critics. It is a central point of the play, but the scene seems to be quite irrelevant, despite of the fact that it slows down the development of the play. As T.S. Eliot observed in his essay about Seneca's tragedies: "While Hercules is thus engaged in a duel on the result of which everybody's life depends, the family sit down calmly and listen to a long description by Theseus of the Tartarean regions. This account is not a straight monologue, as Amphitryon from time to time puts leading questions about

the fauna, and the administration and system of justice, of the world below.”¹ For Eliot, the situation seems to be odd and he explains that by embracing the hypothesis that Seneca’s tragedies were not meant to be staged, but to be read: they are not dramatic, even though they have literary beauty.² It seems that a question about the role of the underworld narrative in the whole play cannot be answered in a satisfying manner by a reference to the debatable dramatic or theatrical values of Seneca’s tragedies. Therefore, some prominent scholars writing about *Hercules furens* focused on showing the importance of the underworld section for the rest of the play. I will use here the article of Henry and Walker,³ a chapter of Shelton’s book⁴ and brief, but very illuminating remarks of Fitch in the introduction to his critical edition of the play.⁵

Henry and Walker point out that the language of this section of the play is different from an abstract, often generalizing style used by Roman poets for such scenes. On the contrary, it is “precise and effective”⁶. Henry and Walker note four significant aspects of the *ekphrasis*: (1) the absence of almost any reference to Hercules (until the end of the scene), (2) the portrayal of desolation and grayness of hell, (3) impartial justice of the judges, (4) inevitability of death.⁷ The second aspect, according to the authors, is expressed in terms of a negation of the two phenomena associated with life on earth: light and land’s fertility. Seneca uses adjectives which nullify the impact of five different nouns designating “light” (*lux, nitor, fulgor, sol, and lumen*) and describes the “absence of living process”, “actual nothingness”,⁸ and “the deadness is felt in its annihilation or reversal of natural phenomena and life”⁹. Henry and Walker also observe that, nonetheless, there are

¹ Eliot 1966: 69.

² Eliot 1966: 68.

³ Henry, Walker 1965. There is also a study of this scene by O. Regenbogen: “Schmerz und Tod in den Tragödien Senecas”, *Vortr. Bibl. Warburg* 7 (1927-28), 167-218 (*non vidi*).

⁴ Shelton 1978.

⁵ Fitch 1987.

⁶ Henry, Walker 1965: 12.

⁷ Henry, Walker 1965: 13-15.

⁸ Henry, Walker 1965: 14.

⁹ Henry, Walker 1965: 15.

certain laws in hell and “just as Pluto in a way mirrors Jupiter, so Hell mirrors Jupiter’s kingdom of heaven”.¹⁰

The authors wonder about the meaning of this scene in the context of the whole play and notice that the characters that speak about Hercules’ journey to the underworld describe it in terms of a preparation for another journey, to heaven. The ascent to heaven is suggested to be its completion.¹¹ And yet, Hercules’ aspirations are depicted by Seneca as futile. The authors comment: “It is rather that Seneca here reaches a level of truth and meaning untouched by any of the events, ideas, emotions of the play. The aspirations, exertions, and posturings of Hercules are irrelevant to this truth of Death’s omnipotence. The irrelevance is stressed throughout”.¹² They suggest that the true meaning of the play is connected to the underworld scene and the theme of death, and not to Hercules’ unending activity which is described in a caricaturish way. They conclude by saying that Seneca’s purpose is “to lead up to the statement of death’s immutable power and the helplessness of men... Life is a preparation for death, and all observation and interpretation of human experience is made with this overriding knowledge. This is true of all Seneca’s plays, but in none of them is the statement of the tragic theme more powerful than in the *Hercules furens*”.¹³

Jo-Ann Shelton interprets the underworld section as giving a psychological insight into Hercules’ mind.¹⁴ According to her, Seneca is depicting here a conflict between the bravery and glory of Hercules on the one hand, and his weakness and madness resulting from his “mad delusions about his own power and his immortal nature”,¹⁵ on the other. Shelton points out that he does that by showing us, first, the setting for Hercules’ deeds and then the deeds themselves. An important contrast in the underworld narrative is created between the extremely frightening nature of the place and Hercules’ strength, bravery and glory. Shelton recognizes in the section also “a rhetorical showpiece to

¹⁰ Henry, Walker 1965: 14

¹¹ Henry, Walker 1965: 16.

¹² Henry, Walker 1965: 21.

¹³ Henry, Walker 1965: 22.

¹⁴ Shelton 1978: 51f.

¹⁵ Shelton 1978: 57.

display Seneca's literary talents", an opportunity "to exhibit his skill at 'descriptions'"'.¹⁶

John Fitch notes that such ephrastic elements as the underworld narrative are used also in other tragedies by Seneca and that they are rooted in Hellenistic literature. Even though they "have a considerable degree of independence from the body of the play, and offer an opportunity for display of rhetorical-poetic technique... It would be a mistake to underestimate their relevance to the rest of the play".¹⁷ He points out that "the underworld is seen largely as a world of evil, in two senses. On the one hand, there is the negative evil constituted by the absence of all that accompanies life in the upper world... But there is also the positive, active evil of the hellish forces, harbored by the underworld".¹⁸ Fitch notices that the underworld narrative expresses both the motifs of Hercules as the *mortis victor* as well as his hubristic qualities, but also that the hero's victory over the death's realm is not complete: "we are constantly reminded that the underworld has other powers, less easily defeated".¹⁹ Eventually, Hercules "will and does become the agent, not the master, of the underworld: he does the work of its hellish forces and brings death to those around him. As Juno predicted (90f.), he has not fully escaped the *infern*".²⁰

In the article I would like to follow the line of study started by Henry and Walker, Shelton and Fitch, by focusing on the significance of the underworld narrative. I would like, however, to do it by applying a different methodological perspective than the critics mentioned above. The method that will be used in this article is inspired by the contemporary psychoanalysis school of object relations and the method combines some psychoanalytic interpretive methods with a philological method of text analysis. I will use some psychoanalytic strategies developed by Otto F. Kernberg which I will attempt to modify and adjust to a treatment of literary material which is, obviously, quite different

¹⁶ Shelton 1978: 50.

¹⁷ Fitch 1987: 275.

¹⁸ Fitch 1987: 33f.

¹⁹ Fitch 1987: 34.

²⁰ Fitch 1987: 35.

from clinical material provided by a therapeutic or analytic relationship.²¹ The method proposed here is the identification of self-object units with its affective content, which are present in the text through various textual expressions. I will speak about “the self” with regard to a representation of the subject in relationship to “the object” as a representation of the other. The first way in which self-object units are present in the text are interactions between the characters. The second way is the use of metaphors and similes which also reveal self and object images in a symbolic way. After the most important patterns of self and object images will have been identified, the interplay between those patterns will be discussed. The result of such an analysis may be a different way of seeing the meaning of the underworld section of the play.

The underworld narrative in the play seems to function in a way that could be compared to a dream in a psychoanalytic context. It seems to be loosely connected to the events that occur “on-stage”, and yet its main subject are past events that are relevant to what is happening. Theseus’s narrative can be seen as being similar to an account of a dream by someone who has woken up: the content is an entirely different world, a world that is subject to its own rules and distant from the experience of the characters. Actually, Theseus and Amphitryon seem to refer to the *ekphrasis* as if it was a nightmare. Amphitryon asks the hero to tell the story, but he is reluctant, since he does not want to remember. Theseus is similar here to someone who woke up from a horrible dream and does not want to relive the experience by telling about it (650-651).²² He assures himself that he is in the land of the living, that he breathes air and sees the light of the day, as if he was still between sleeping and waking (651-653).

It is also the “otherness” of the underworld that encourages the reader to dismiss it as “a mere story” with little relevance to what is going on in the play (Hercules killing Lycus), as someone who woke

²¹ For the concept of self-object units and the interpretive strategies based on it see Kernberg 1979; Kernberg 1980; Kernberg 1988; as well as Caligor, Clarkin, Kernberg 2007.

²² It is a strategy used by Seneca quite often (about this *praemunitio dinosis* see Fitch 1987: 289), but here the dream-like quality is especially intense. This quality is also a characteristic of the narrative itself. As Fitch points out, it is “often impressionistic and evocative rather than specific” (Fitch 1987: 293).

up from a horrible dream may try to convince himself that it was “just a dream” and that its content has nothing to do with reality. But, at the same time, it is after all a story about Hercules, about his descent into the underworld, so it must be somehow linked to the central theme of the tragedy. The absence of Hercules during the scene, emphasized by Henry and Walker, can also be seen as meaningful: it is as if he was still present, but in a different way, a more dream-like way, as if the Theseus narrative was touching something important about Hercules and through him – about the entire world of the play. Shelton proposes to look at the underworld scene as an insight into “psychological development”, as opposed to “plot development”, an insight deepening “our understanding of Hercules’ character and the importance of his deeds”.²³

GREED, ENVY AND HUNGER

Theseus starts with a description of the entrance into the underworld. Seneca uses here an image of a wide open mouth which eventually “swallows” all people (662-667).²⁴ The house of Pluto is called *invisus* by Seneca, “envious” or “hateful”,²⁵ and the whole image is permeated by fear of being sucked into a bottomless abyss. Seneca’s narrative contains allusions to the 6th book of the *Aeneid*, but I will try to show that he elaborates the motifs in a different way, for a different purpose. Both *hiatus* and *fauces* are used by Vergil (*Aen.* VI 237 and 241) in his description of the entrance to the underworld, but in the *Aeneid* there is no image of sucking in, but rather of emitting (*effundens*, VI 241) foul air. The fear is intensified by the sense of inevitability, of helplessness of the situation and by Seneca’s insistence that *omnes populi* must enter the abyss (667). No matter what one does or who they are, they still are going to be devoured by the underworld’s

²³ Shelton 1978: 24.

²⁴ “hic ora solvit Ditis invisus domus / hiatque rupes alta et immenso specu / ingens vorago faucibus vastis patet / latumque pandit omnibus populis iter.” All textual references to *Hercules* are according to Fitch’s critical edition (Fitch 1987), translations of sentences and longer expressions are from: Fitch 2002.

²⁵ It is a traditional epithet, e.g. in Horace, *Carm.* I 34.10f. (“invisi horrida Taenari / sedes”) and II 14.23 (“invisas cupressos”), and Vergil, *Aen.* VIII 245 (“dis invisus”).

jaws. In Vergil the description of the entrance is personal and concrete (Sybil and Aeneas are trying to enter and Sybil is, to a certain extent, in control, thanks to her wisdom and power), whereas in Seneca it is impersonal, universal and there is no mention of any control or activity on the part of those who enter the underworld. We can understand this description as a symbolic expression of relationship between a frightened, helpless self and some powerful, hungry or greedy, devouring object that cannot be escaped. Greed, envy and aggression are only subtly suggested in those verses, but they seem to be present.²⁶

Envy and greed are primitive affective states linked by Klein to the early self images, since in an infant-mother relationship it is obviously the object that possesses everything that the self (the infant) needs. But in Seneca's image of *Ditis inuisi domus* envy and greed are ascribed to the object representation, not to the self. It is the underworld (or Dis, as its personification) that is greedy, not the self (those who enter it), since the mouth of Dis is wide open as if it were hungry, insatiable, desiring to devour everyone.²⁷ Also envy and hate (those two are possible interpretations of the adjective *inuisus*) are ascribed to the object who is aggressive, eager to destroy life, which is symbolically expressed by the threatening *fauces*.

The next image is the one of light. In the context of the whole play it might be suggested that darkness stands for madness, insanity, while light for sanity.²⁸ Thus, entering the underworld means immersion into a world entirely different from the world of rationality and

²⁶ I think that a definition of envy and greed by a British psychoanalyst, Melanie Klein, can be used here: "A distinction should be drawn between envy, jealousy, and greed. Envy is the angry feeling that another person possesses and enjoys something desirable – the envious impulse being to take it away or to spoil it. Moreover, envy implies the subject's relation to one person only and goes back to the earliest exclusive relation with the mother. Jealousy is based on envy, but involves a relation to at least two people; it is mainly concerned with love that the subject feels is his due and has been taken away, or is in danger of being taken away, from him by his rival. In the everyday conception of jealousy, a man or a woman feels deprived of the loved person by somebody else. Greed is an impetuous and insatiable craving, exceeding what the subject needs and what the object is able and willing to give" (Klein 1975: 181).

²⁷ The image of greedy death is a traditional one. See e.g. Callim. *Epigr.* II 5f. (ὀπάντων/ἀρπακτῆς Αἰδης) and Tib. I 3.4 ("avidas... [scil. mortis] manus").

²⁸ Pyplacz 2010: 71f.

consciousness. It is a world of dream and of the unconscious, revealing those object relations that are hidden in the play. The image of light that is negated (since the light is rather twilight – dim, obscure, and yet, not utter darkness: *tenuis nitor* and *fulgor dubius*, 669-670) seems to be the first in a series of features that are used by Roman poets to describe the Golden Age.²⁹ The image of twilight seems to be taken from Vergil (*Aen.* VI 268-272), but, as Fitch notes, Seneca is original in creating a climate of increasing gloom.³⁰

I would like to suggest that, apart from the *Aeneid*, Seneca alludes here to traditional poetic narratives describing the Golden Age and he will do it also later in this section, to achieve a specific purpose. From poetic visions of the Golden Age, which I want to draw a comparison to, I will refer to the *Fourth Eclogue* of Vergil, to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (I 89-112), but also to the beginning of Lucretius' poem (I 1-23), since it describes a maternal figure of Venus-Nature quite coherent with later Golden Age descriptions. I suggest that those poetic visions of the Golden Age seem to have served as a prototype for this *ekphrasis*. They evoke a state of harmony with Nature, which is precisely what is negated here by Seneca. The symbol of light which I will discuss first is most clearly elaborated in Lucretius' hymn to Venus. He writes that thanks to the goddess all living beings can see the rising sun, because she dispells dark clouds and makes the sky clear (I 1. 5-6).³¹ It is for Venus that the peaceful sky shines with light (I 9, 22-23).³² In Seneca's underworld light becomes *tenuis nitor* (669), *fulgor dubius solis affecti* (670) and *nocte sic mixta... / lumen* (671-672).

The next image is the image of a void. Theseus speaks about vast, empty spaces of the underworld, in which people seem to vanish (673-674). In the *Aeneid* we found a similar image of *domos Ditis vacuas et inania regna* (VI 269), but in Seneca the theme of emptiness is much more emphasized by the series of five words which suggest a void:

²⁹ "Non caeca tenebris incipit primo via; / tenuis relictæ lucis a tergo nitor / fulgorque dubius solis affecti cadit / et ludit aciem; nocte sic mixta solet / præbere lumen primus aut serus dies" (668-672).

³⁰ Fitch 1987: 295.

³¹ "visitque exortum lumina solis... / te fugiunt... nubila caeli."

³² "placatumque nitet diffuso lumine caelum... / nec sine te quicquam dias in luminis oras exoritur."

ampla vacuis spatia laxantur locis (673). Another difference is that this emptiness is immediately associated with the vanishing of the entire human race in it (*in quae omne mersum pergat humanum genus*, 674), whereas in Vergil the empty abodes of Dis are just a space through which Sybil and Aeneas travel, having a specific goal ahead of them. They do not disappear, they explore.

Furthermore, the empty spaces of the underworld are described by Seneca as a greedy abyss (*avidum chaos*) that does not permit anyone to go back (677-679). The motif of greed is repeated here, evoking an image of an object that wants to swallow a helpless, terrified self. A corresponding, positive image of the object can be found in the Golden Age narratives, where there is a blissful sense of being protected from evil and of being safely held by a loving, omnipotent object (Mother Nature or, in Lucretius, Mother Venus). The image of a loving embrace of maternal force is transformed by Seneca into a frightening image of a maternal object that controls and imprisons the self. It is rendered by images of inevitability, of inability to go back or escape from Dis' mouth. The human race is plunged into the vast spaces of hell (674) and it is drawn down into it by an impersonal force. The following phrase (*nec ire labor est; ipsa deducit via*, 675) is in this context quite ironic, if we compare it to a traditional motif of the Golden Age, which is the lack of work and toil. Seneca alludes here to the *Aeneid* (VI 125-129), where Sybil warns Aeneas that it is easy to descend to the underworld, but very hard to go back, but Seneca gives this a new meaning.³³ The pleasant effortlessness of a Golden Age self that is nurtured by a loving object is transformed into a frightful lack of control. The self is being "drawn down" or "sucked into" the greedy object's open mouth. The self image is extremely passive, helpless, whereas in the *Aeneid*, even though the part of the vocabulary is the same (*labor*, VI 129 and *revocare gradum*, VI 128), there is no such frightening lack of control. Moreover, this initial description by Sybil is later modified by a passage in which she and Aeneas enter the underworld. Their entrance is

³³ "sic pronus aer urget atque avidum chaos, / gradumque retro flectere haud umquam sinunt / umbrae tenaces." Cf. *Aen.* VI 126f.: "facilis descensus Averno: / ...sed revocare gradum superasque evadere ad auras, hoc opus, hic labor est."

depicted as very active, courageous and nothing like the Senecan image of being passively sucked into the abyss (VI 259-263).

What is more, Seneca amplifies the sense of helplessness by developing a simile of a sea storm and a ship (676-677). It is hardly a secure, comfortable situation, when a raging sea swallows and destroys ships which are *invitae*, unwilling, forced by a more powerful agent, and here there is an aggressive impulse ascribed to the image of the object. Earlier, the impulse of greedy sucking was vaguely present in the picture of open jaws, but here Seneca uses an active verb (*rapit*) to suggest that the object wants to devour the self. Fitch points out that “Similes from seafaring are common in contexts of ‘being swept away out of control’”.³⁴ Seneca again refers to the Golden Age descriptions in a negative way. In the Golden Age ships do not travel across the sea and, of course, there are no storms or dangerous winds, so the situation of a storm at the sea is impossible there.

In Seneca the violent wind is drawing the shadows of men into the open jaws, as if someone literally was sucking the air in, and this greedy chasm does not let anyone escape or make even one step backwards. This violent wind stands in contrast to the traditional descriptions of the gentle breeze of the Golden Age (*placidique tepentibus auris / mulcebant zephyri natos sine semine flores*, Ovid. *Met.* I 107-108 and *reserata viget genitabilis aura favoni*, Lucr. I 11). In the passage there is a great number of words suggesting compulsion or force that is exerted upon an unwilling (*invitus*) self by a powerful, frightening object: *rapit, urget, haud umquam sinunt, tenaces*. In this context the epithet *pronus*, describing the air, seems quite ironic too. In the sentence the meaning of *pronus* is most probably “pressing/pulling downwards”, given the whole image of a chasm in the earth that swallows the dead.³⁵ But *pronus* often tends to mean an inclination of will towards something, often

³⁴ He also suggests that the image is influenced by Verg. *Georg.* I 201f. (Fitch 1987: 296). Vergil uses, indeed, “rapit” and “pronus” there, but he describes a river, not the sea, and the image is more active.

³⁵ See Fitch 1987: 296.

something desirable, but morally evil.³⁶ It seems to be an antithesis of the Golden Age's *lenus Zephyrus*, gentle breeze, associated with peace and easiness of the life of pleasure. Here it is indeed "easy" to enter the greedy jaws of Dis and the people are "inclined" to it, but it is a caricature of blissful effortlessness, since in this image the self would like to avoid at all costs entering the underworld, but it is controlled, unable to move on its own, carried away by something more powerful. Vergil does not use the wind imagery, apart from one place where the crowd of the shadows is compared, as in Homer, to leaves which fall from trees (VI 309-310). There is a sense of helplessness and passivity, but it is not dominant, since the shadows are still active, they *ruebat* and *glomerantur* like birds (VI 305 and 311).

The next image is that of the three rivers of the underworld: Lethe, Meander, and Cocytus, which are accompanied by adjectives such as *quieta* Lethe which *gravem / involvit amnem* (680-682) and *vagus* Meander (683). There is also *palus foeda inertis Cocyti* (686). Such images of the rivers seem to be contrasted with vivid rivers of Golden Age which are full of life and energy. In Lucretius we find *rapidi amnes* (I 16) and *fluvii rapaces* (I 18), and in Ovid – rivers flowing with milk and nectar (*flumina iam lactis, iam flumina nectaris ibant, Met. I 111*). The rivers of the underworld (which in Vergil does not seem to play any significant affective role: VI 295-297 and 323-324) become metaphors for a self-object relationship devoid of life and energy, but they are not entirely motionless. Lethe removes cares (*demit curas*, 680), but it is not a happy, careless state of the Golden Age, but rather a heavy sleep or a semi-trance state between waking and sleeping. The adjectives used here suggest heaviness and inertia (*placido, quieta labitur... vado*, 680, and *gravem / involvit amnem*, 682-3).

Meander is described as hesitant, unpredictable (*incerta unda, vagus, dubius*, 683-685), and even playful (*ludit*, 683).³⁷ Cocytus is the only one that seems to be motionless – *palus, iners, and iacet* (686),

³⁶ See Lewis, Short 1879, s.v. *pronus*, II A. Seneca uses the adjective in *Hercules* earlier, in an aphoristic saying of Amphitryon: *prona est timori semper in peius fides* (316) in the sense "inclines". In post-Augustan Latin *pronus* means also "easy", which adds an ironic quality to this adjective (Lewis, Short 1879, s.v. *pronus*, II B.2).

³⁷ The image comes from Ovid (see Fitch 1987: 298).

in the sense of “lies motionless”.³⁸ Vergil uses such language, but less affectively charged, to describe both Cocytus and Styx: VI 323). The rivers in Seneca seem to express a similar constellation of oral themes, associated with sucking at breast or feeding in general. The activity of eating/drinking in this fantasy is threefold: (1) it brings about a heavy, lifeless sleep (Lethe: cf. the energizing, vital streams of the Golden Age), (2) the food comes and goes in an unpredictable fashion, as if teasing or malignantly playing with the self which is unable to get enough of it (Meander: cf. the abundant, inexhaustible rivers), and (3) the food is denied altogether, because the river is motionless and barely edible (Cocytus: cf. refined, tasty food that calmly flows or drips). We found a striking contrast in poetic descriptions of the Golden Age, where rivers are flowing with milk and nectar (Ovid. *Met.* I 111), goats walk with their udders full of milk (Verg. *Ecl.* IV 21-22) and oaks are dripping with honey (Ovid. *Met.* I 112 and Verg. *Ecl.* IV 30). In Seneca such an oral imagery is linked to aggressive fantasies, infused with negative affects. First, we had rocks of the cliff resembling sharp teeth (*rupes*, 665) and wide open hungry jaws (*fauces vastae*, 666), and then we have the foul rivers, leaving the self with extreme frustration. The affective states that may be linked to that are personified as Sleep (*Sopor*), Hunger (*Fames*), Shame (*Pudor*), Fear (*Metus*), Pain (*Dolor*), Grief (*Luctus*), Disease (*Morbus*), War (*Bella*), and Old Age (*Senectus*) (690-696; cf. *Aen.* VI 273-290).

Then Amphitryon interrupts Theseus and asks if there is any fertile land in the underworld that could bring fruits of Ceres or Bacchus (897). This question is not silly, as Shelton suggests.³⁹ It evokes the central feature of Mother Nature in the Golden Age – its enormous fertility which results in feeding the human race without any effort on their part. In Seneca’s underworld the land is sterile and does not bear any fruit (698-702). It is in a strong contrast to the fertility described by earlier poets. Ovid describes the earth which, untouched by the plough, gives by itself everything that people need (*per se dabat omnia tellus*,

³⁸ Cf. Fitch 1987: 299.

³⁹ Shelton 1978: 51.

Met. I 102; see also: I 101-106 and 109-110⁴⁰). Also in *Eclogue Four* Vergil depicts abundant fertility which is a gift of Nature to people.⁴¹ In Lucretius there are also images of green, growing plants (*tibi suavis daedala tellus / summittit flores*, I 7-8, and *frondiferasque domos avium camposque virentis*, I 18). This is the last, climactic expression of the fantasy of the object which does not feed the self who is starving. Seneca also negates the motif of a gentle breeze, that was previously mentioned, in a new way. Theseus says that there is no *lenis Zephyrus* (699) in the underworld, but, instead, stagnant air (*immutus aer haeret*, 704). Similar images of the Golden Age can be also found in Seneca's *Medea* and *Phaedra* (*Med.* 301-379, *Pha.* 502-539). The sad conclusion of this vision of the barren land is that "everything is rough and blighted, and the place of death is worse than death itself" (705-706).⁴²

I suggest that this initial passage of the underworld narrative is a sort of a "negative *aemulatio*" of Latin Golden Age narratives as much as it is, at the same time, a typical, "positive" *aemulatio* of the *Aeneid* which was recently studied by Pyplacz.⁴³ The fantasy of the Golden Age expresses an idealized self and object relationship in which the object generously gives all sorts of goods to the self ("feeds" it) and the affective content of the relationship consists of absolute peace, har-

⁴⁰ *Met.* I 101-106: "ipsa quoque immunis rastroque intacta nec ullis / saucia vomeribus per se dabat omnia tellus; / contentique cibus nullo cogente creatis / arbuteos fetus montanaque fraga legebant / cornaque et in duris haerentia mora rubetis / et quae deciderant patula Iovis arbore glandes" and I 109-110: "Mox etiam fruges tellur inarata ferebat, / nec renovatus ager gravidis canebat aristis."

⁴¹ *Ecl.* IV 39: "omnis feret omnia tellus." Cf. also *Ecl.* IV 18-20: "nullo munuscula cultu / errantis hederas passim cum baccare tellus / mixtaque ridenti colocasia fundet acantho" and 28-30: "molli paulatim flavescet campus arista, / incultisque rubens pendebit sentibus uva, / et durae quercus sudabunt roscida mella."

⁴² "cuncta marcore horrida, / ipsaque morte peior est mortis locus."

⁴³ Pyplacz focuses on the *Aeneid* and the *Metamorphoses* as the main objects of Seneca's *aemulatio* in his tragedies (Pyplacz 2010: 29-59). Fitch suggests that the negative images of sterility and emptiness are influenced probably by Tibullus (I 10.35f.) who briefly describes the death kingdom: "Non seges est infra, non vinea culta", and Vergil's *Georgics* (III 352f.) in which the poet describes in a similar way the frozen north (Fitch 1987: 302). The hypothesis I try to suggest here and which was not, to my knowledge, proposed so far, is that, in addition to those influences, Seneca develops his description as a negation of the traditional Golden Age descriptions (particularly, Ovid's and Vergil's, but perhaps also Lucretius').

mony, security and happiness. In those poetic visions Mother Nature is depicted as a maternal object which at the beginning of Lucretius' poem is openly identified with a divine, ideal mother of the Romans – Venus. Symbolic images of food, beautiful flowers, meadows or forests, all sorts of animals living in mutual harmony, gentle breeze, sunshine and eternal spring refer to an ideal object which creates an ideal world for the self. Evil is completely absent from that world of happiness and rest – not only there are no natural evils like storms, winters, poisonous herbs or dangerous animals, but there is no hate and violence among the people. The ideal object protects the self from all fear and pain. There is also no need to work, because everything is given to the self without effort to get it or even ask for it.

Seneca gives us images of the self and object which are completely at odds with those idealized ones. The object here is depicted as devoid of the goods that are needed – there is no food, no pleasure, no happiness, no peace in this world. The land of the underworld stands for an object that does not feed, because it is sterile, does not protect from evil, so the relationship with it is filled with all sorts of negative experiences, personified as Hunger, Fear, Pain etc. If the most important affective aspect of the traditional Golden Age vision is complete satisfaction without need to work, in Seneca it is frustration (hunger) – the opposite of satisfaction – and the lack of control which is ironically described as something “easy”, without *labor*. Any productive work would be futile and pointless in such a world, provided it were possible at all.

In such a self-object unit the expected affective states in the self would be envy and/or greed. Enormous, frustrated hunger that is hinted at here would imply aggressive desire to greedily possess the object's implicit goodness (food which symbolizes satisfaction, pleasure, happiness, security, love etc.) by force and feed on it as well as a desire to spoil or destroy the object's goodness in order to remove the source of envy. But in Seneca, interestingly, both greed and envy are projected onto the object and virtually absent from the self. At the beginning of the scene, the object is described metonymically as envious (664) and metaphorically as greedy (666 and 677). It seems there is a projection here, since the suggested relationship between the hungry, greedy,

envious self and the wealthy, but un-giving object is replaced by a relationship between a frightened self and a hungry, greedy and envious object who wants to devour and destroy all people. Whereas greed is ascribed to the object, envy is partially satisfied in a fantasy of a barren land. The supposed wealth of Mother Nature is destroyed, because it is easier to live in an empty land than in a situation of Tantalus who lives in a land with plenty of food, but is forbidden to eat. Projection of envy, greed or aggression could be seen as a first and immediate defense against a relationship in which the object is living in the world with no food, life, love and happiness. The painful situation is not completely repressed from the text, since the images of frustration, hunger, greed and envy are still present, but those elements are variously modified and ascribed to different “actors” in the self-object dyad.

The primary self-object unit which appears in the first section of Theseus’ narrative, can be described as a relationship of a helpless, dependent self that is hungry and frustrated with an unloving object that is wealthy, but un-giving, denying the goods to the self and keeping all for itself. The aggression that would be a natural reaction to this frustration is generally projected onto the object which results in a distortion of the object image. The second self-object unit, intimately linked with the first one, is that of an imprisoned and omnipotently controlled self which is afraid of being swallowed by a greedy, envious, and implicitly malignant object that sadistically plays with the self’s hunger, not feeding it enough, but not letting the self die either. Here, again aggression is projected onto the object, with a much more significant distortion as a result, since the object turns into an increasingly aggressive and sadistic one. The second section of the narrative is devoted to a further elaboration of this sadistic object image, which, as I suggest, might be understood as a reaction to a situation that is the negative of the traditional Golden Age motif: extreme hunger and insecurity.

SADISM, TORTURE, AND VIOLENCE

The next section focuses on the description of Dis as a central figure of the underworld (709-727). Seneca depicts his royal abode, in

a dark grove, where he sits on his throne (717-722).⁴⁴ He is majestic, but, implicitly, very dangerous and aggressive (722-725).⁴⁵ The king of the underworld inspires the highest fear (726-727).⁴⁶ The impersonal object image that was pictured earlier, when Seneca was mainly focusing on “natural” elements such as the land, the air, the rivers and so on, is here replaced by a personal object image, but the reader still remembers that Dis is identified with the whole underworld – the entrance to his kingdom was referred to as his own mouth. We might say that, in the context of the whole section, it is the same object which was earlier described as denying food and happiness and whose image was distorted by the projection of greed, envy, and aggression. That is how we can understand the appearance of this openly terrifying version of Jove.

At this point, after the intense fear comes up in the text, Amphitryon asks Theseus about justice in the underworld (731). This justice is at first described as a punishment for the evil souls, not as an “impartial justice”, as Henry and Walker suggested.⁴⁷ There is a fantasy of impartiality later, but at the beginning justice is equated by Seneca with revenge, with cruel punishment. The image is, again, based on anxiety, since Amphitryon suggests that it is a tardy punishment, but it comes eventually on the guilty who forgot about their crimes (727-729).⁴⁸ Here we have an image of a forgetful self which thinks it escaped punishment, but finally it realizes that it cannot escape and that its crimes have been carefully remembered and will be severely punished. Dis is, therefore, not pictured as a violent monster, but as a calm, relentless, punishing object which cannot be cheated or evaded.

In 731-734 the image of Dis is replaced by the images of the three mythic judges: Minos, Radamanthus and Aeacus. Here comes a description of a horrible punishment for those who are evil and guilty of crimes. The justice is of an “eye for eye” kind (735), and described as

⁴⁴ As Henry and Walker observed, Dis is a negative of Jove (Henry, Walker 1965: 14). Fitch reminds that Dis is sometimes called “the infernal Jove” (Fitch 1987: 309). Cf. also *Aen.* VI 548-558.

⁴⁵ “dira maiestas deo ... frons torva... vultus est illi Iovis, / sed fulminantis.”

⁴⁶ “cuius aspectus timet / quidquid timetur.”

⁴⁷ Henry, Walker 1965: 14.

⁴⁸ “verane est fama inferis / tam sera reddi iura et oblitos sui / sceleris nocentes debitas poenas dare?”

a crushing (*premitur*, 736) of the guilty ones. There are two vivid images of revenge: bloodstained leaders are imprisoned (737) and a helpless tyrant's back is flayed by the hands of the mob (738-739). Those images appeared before: the first is the fantasy of being imprisoned and the second the fantasy of being tortured and destroyed by vengeful objects. We could also see here the already mentioned self images: the helpless self omnipotently controlled by a sadistic object, and then, tortured and destroyed, as a punishment for its evil. I suggested that the projection of greed and envy on the object can be seen as a defense in the narrative and now it seems that Seneca expresses more clearly what it defends against. The hungry self is full of hate and envy, full of destructive impulses against an un-giving object, but there is a fear in the self that those aggressive impulses are evil and that they will be punished by the object. The projection of aggression is intended to free the self from evil and from a fear of punishment, but it hardly succeeds, since the object becomes distorted, even more sadistic, and it threatens with punishment nonetheless. The fear of being punished for aggressive impulses in the self must be further defended against – the defense is formed by a fantasy of an impartial justice that tortures and destroys the evil, but rewards the good. The whole sequence could be described, for example, in such a fictitious monologue: “I hate and envy the un-giving other, because I am hungry. But the hate and envy are not only in me – the other is a sadistic tyrant, he hates me and envies me too: I must protect myself from his hatred. But if the other realizes how much I hate him, he will cruelly punish me for it. Perhaps, if I will behave in a non-aggressive way, I will be safe, perhaps, the other does not love me, but he is just and will reward me, if I somehow get rid of all the aggression that is in me.”

At this point, Seneca describes an image of a good (or, we might say, ideal ruler) who is an antithesis of a sadistic tyrant, and who is rewarded by Dis with happiness and bliss of Elysium (740-744). Seneca concludes with a warning: “avoid shedding human blood, all of you who reign: your crimes are assessed with heavier penalties”. An image of the innocent king is an idealization of the self, based on denial of aggression. Seneca uses several adjectives to emphasize this sudden disappearance of violence and guilt: *innocua manus*, *incruentum*

imperium, mitis (740-741). The fact that it is the image of a good king can be, of course, justified in many ways. Interestingly, in Vergil there are no tyrants who are punished in the underworld, it seems to be Seneca's idea (cf. *Aen.* VI 560-627). It is hard to deny that after Dis has been described as a king, we have an image of a cruel tyrant being punished. A more powerful king punishes another, weaker one. And the ideal king image is a clear way out of this threat of punishment, an antithesis of the tyrant.

But it seems also that the idealization of the self as the good king includes a subtle denial of dependence. A hungry beggar and a helpless tyrant of the previous section are now replaced by a good, benevolent lord who is rewarded by a more powerful, just lord (Dis and the three judges). A dependent self-object relationship, expressed from the beginning, which was permeated by so much fear and aggression, is now transformed for a moment into a peaceful relationship between two lords. The self is pictured as if it were dependent (during a trial), but it is not helpless, since it is a king – the expression Seneca uses here is “a lord of life” (*dominus vitae*, 740).⁴⁹ If he is a *dominus vitae*, and Dis is, we might say, *dominus necis*, does it mean that the self is still dependent on the object? Rather, it is suggested, quite subtly, that the self is *better* than the object, since it is linked to life, not to death, and it is benign and mild, while the judges (and Dis) may be impartial, but they are still rather sadistic towards the evil.

The sadistic aspect of the object is elaborated further, when Amphitryon asks Theseus about the fate of the guilty souls and the hero gives an account of the punishments they have to endure. There are Ixion, Sisyphus, Tantalus, Tityos, the Danaides, the Cadmeids and Phineus. Four out of five of these figures suffer from some variation of oral frustration. The most obvious is Tantalus to whom Seneca devotes four lines, while the other six are devoted to other figures. In contrast, in the *Aeneid*, we find two rich descriptions of various suffering

⁴⁹ The full phrase is “*dominus vitae necisque*” and appears at Livy (“*se iudicem, quisque, se dominum vitae necisque inimici factum videbat*”, II 35.2) and Tacitus (“*et omnia in arbitrio eorum quos vitae necisque dominos fecissent*”, *Hist.* IV 62). Cf. Fitch 1987: 312 and his translation which renders the implicit meaning of the phrase: Fitch 2002).

souls (VI 331-547) and punished perpetrators (VI 562-627). In Seneca, Tantalus stands in a stream (752) which is one of the typical Golden Age symbols of oral satisfaction, but his thirst is frustrated. Seneca uses here *fauces siccae* (752) to describe the frustrated desire of Tantalus, the same word that was earlier used to describe the greed of Dis. Another similarity is an image of waves which come close to Tantalus' lips, but they immediately disappear when he tries to drink. Here it is almost as if the stream was malignantly playing with the wretched Tantalus, as earlier in the case of Meander whose waters were unreliable and unpredictable. Tantalus (the self) is in relationship with an object that enjoys frustrating the self and intentionally deceives it, teases with it, and ultimately – tortures it (754-755).⁵⁰

Another oral image is that of a vulture which feeds on Tityos' liver. The vulture also appeared earlier, in the context of the first set of frustration images (687). Here we have an additional irony: Tityos is a subject of a sentence, as if he was actively giving his liver to the vulture (*prae-ebet volucris Tityos aeternas dapes*, 756), while a vulture is an object, receiving the "gift". It is a bitter caricature of an oral relationship of a generous object and a satisfied self, with role reversal, because it is the self that gives and the object that feeds on it. Of course, there is no real giving and receiving: the self is imprisoned and controlled by a predatory object which is aggressive and greedy, devouring the self (again, the image was already hinted at in the beginning of the whole narrative). The Danaids "carry full pitchers to no avail" (*urnasque frustra Danaides plenas gerunt*, 757), which is again a metaphor of trying to satisfy hunger, of filling the self with food that represents also all other goods (pleasure, security, love) that the self desperately needs. The roles are reversed here in a similar way, since it is the suffering self (the Danaids) that tries to fill something in vain, instead of desiring to be filled by the object. There is also Phineus who is hungry and unable to eat, since a greedy bird scares him away from the food. In this line greed is again, consistently, ascribed to the object image (*avida avis*, 759), instead to the self (Phineas) which has every reason to be greedy in the situation.

⁵⁰ "fidemque cum iam saepe decepto dedit, / perit unda in ore, poma destituunt famem."

Three other figures are not orally frustrated: Ixion is imprisoned, controlled and tortured (*rapitur*, 750; it seems to be an echo of *rapit* which was used earlier in reference to a similar loss of control in the presence of a powerful object), Sisyphus is burdened by an enormous rock (751), and the Cadmeids wander in madness (758). But they all symbolize a self that is controlled and tortured by a malignant object which is not openly identified by Seneca with Dis, even though the reader may realize on some level that, since it is his kingdom, he controls whatever happens there. This is how the second section of the narrative ends.

OMNIPOTENT CONTROL AND DEVALUATION

The next section, like the previous ones, starts with Amphitryon's question: he asks Theseus to describe the struggle of Hercules in the underworld. When Hercules comes to the kingdom of Dis, he uses force to overcome any obstacles and dangers that await him there, like in the scene in which he defeats Charon and crosses the Styx. The third section begins in a totally different manner, because a completely different self image appears in the text. The self, represented by Hercules, is no longer helpless, weak and controlled by the object; on the contrary, it is powerful, fearless and manages to control the object (Charon representing his master, Dis). The question of control is already present in Amphitryon's words where he wants to know whether Hercules received Cerberus from Dis as a gift (*patrui volentis munus*) or seized it by force (*spolium*, 761). It is, of course, another variation on the oral theme of giving and receiving, denying and desiring, and indicates a major change that occurs when Hercules arrives to the underworld. The easy victory over Charon suggests that it will not be a relationship of a dependent, needy self that waits until the object gives it something, but an entirely different one: a powerful self that gets what it wants from the object.

Sybil and Aeneas deal with Charon in a strikingly different way (VI 385-416). First, he asks them, showing his authority, what they are doing and what they want in the underworld. It is he who is in control and Sybil treats him with respect, starting her answer with the assurance that they will not attack him (VI 399-400). She honors the forces that protect

Dis' realm, Charon and Cerberus, and asks with respect that Aeneas be allowed to see his father. She evokes Aeneas' famous *pietas*, not force (VI 405). Vergil builds an image of a self that accepts both a dependence on a loving parent and a dependence on a powerful authority, respects it and does not try to control it. Sybil shows Charon the bough, as the last argument, but it also is a striking image of dependence and respect of the authority (VI 405-410). In this scene the bough becomes a symbol of the authority that is external to all of them, to Sybil, Aeneas and Charon. Sybil does not try to control Charon by force, but by appealing to his own sense of respect for the authority, represented by the bough. It is a symbol that psychoanalysts would quickly associate with the phallus as a symbolic representation of paternal power, authority, but also of the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* of love and life. Sybil wields the bough, that is true, and Charon responds with respect, but there is no violence and compulsion here, and certainly there is no denial of dependence, quite the contrary.⁵¹

When we compare this powerful scene from the *Aeneid* with the corresponding scene in Seneca, the differences in self and object images are quite astonishing. First, Charon is described as the one who represents authority and he "controls his craft himself with a long pole" (*regit ipse longo portitor conto ratem*, 768). He wields the phallic symbol of authority, but what is the reaction of Hercules? First, he demands a place on the boat (*poscit viam*, 770), with no sign of respect, and when Charon is showing him his place among other souls, Hercules simply attacks Charon and controls him with his own stick (*ipso coactum navitam conto domat*, 774). Seneca uses the phallic symbol to express the violent way in which Hercules deals with authority. He cannot bear dependence (*non passus... moras*, 773), so he takes away the symbol of power from Charon and uses it to dominate Charon and to devalue him. The image of the old sailor coerced by the younger hero evokes a sense of mockery, a devaluation of authority.

Dis is again called "greedy" or "un-giving", when his abode appears before Hercules (782). There follows a lengthy description of the vanquishing of Cerberus, which ends the *ekphrasis* (782-827). In this

⁵¹ Fitch notices particularly the contrast between the violence of Hercules and the generally peaceful nature of Aeneas (Fitch 1987: 318).

section the image of a terrifying, aggressive object which is completely defeated and controlled by powerful Hercules is further developed. Earlier, it was Charon, now it is Cerberus himself, the most horrible creature in the world, which represents the object controlled by Hercules. In his vivid description of the hound Seneca repeatedly refers to snakes – in the ten lines (785-795) there are five different nouns referring to snakes: *colubrae*, *viperae*, *draco*, *anguis* and *serpens*, which seem to allude to the first “labor” of infant Hercules: strangling horrible snakes sent by Juno to kill him (215-222). The image of the infant hero vanquishing the snakes has exactly the same quality: a little baby in the crib destroys horrifying snakes whose very sight should scare him to death, the snakes that represent the one who sent them – the most powerful goddess, Juno. Amphitryon comments that the snakes could terrify an adult warrior, but little Hercules fearlessly looked into their eyes. His sarcastic comment that it was practicing for the hydra labor takes the form of a mockery and depreciation. Thus, the vanquishing of the snakes becomes a symbolic expression of the depreciation and devaluation of the object.

It seems that the same motif is repeated in the scene with Cerberus. It is the horrible hound which experiences fear when he sees Hercules, not the hero. The creature of nightmare, virtually identified with frightening Dis himself,⁵² fears Hercules. Even though Seneca mentions also the fear of the hero (*uterque timuit*, 793), the whole scene emphasizes mostly the fear of the hound, not of Hercules. The powerful self is almost fearless, the sadistic object trembles with fear. Then Hercules vanquishes the hound almost without an effort (797-804) and the monster becomes obedient, lowering his heads, submitting to the hero (803). In *Aeneid*, on the other hand, there is no devaluation of Cerberus when Sybil gives him a honey-cake with herbs to put him to sleep (VI 417-423). On the contrary, Sybil and Aeneas fear Cerberus and their “trick” looks like a ritualized way to pass the guardian.

The climax of the scene is when Dis and Proserpine are trembling with fear and agree to give Cerberus to Hercules (804-805). Seneca contrasts here *extimuit* with a previous description of Dis (*cuius aspectus*

⁵² As Henry and Walker notice, Hercules “might just as easily have brought back Pluto himself” (Henry, Walker 1965: 15).

times / quidquid timetur, 726-727). The object which was the most frightening of all now is afraid of a mortal man. The image of an omnipotent, fearless self and a fearful, vanquished object is quite ironic here, since Seneca writes that Dis and Proserpine “bade him be led away” (*duci iubet*, 805, as if they had a choice and power to command) and “they granted me – says Theseus – as a gift to Alcides’ request” (*me quoque petenti munus Alcidae dedit*, 806), whereas Hercules did not ask for anything: he took by force what he wanted. The previously elaborated motifs of giving and receiving, of controlling and being controlled, are repeated here, in this caricature of dependence. Hercules is described as someone who pretends to ask, to receive and to depend on Jove’s terrifying brother, but in fact, as the reader clearly sees, he does not need Dis’ permission to take Cerberus – it is not him who is afraid in this situation.⁵³

The climactic scene in which a self gains omnipotent control over the previously frightening object is elaborated further, when Cerberus is described in a caricaturish way. Hercules strokes the horrid heads of Cerberus and leashes him with chains of adamant (807-808). As Henry and Walker point out, Cerberus is pictured as “a faithful pet”⁵⁴ and Hercules as a “circus impresario”.⁵⁵ Cerberus represents a vanquished and controlled object which is impotently enraged and full of hate, but unable to do anything against its master: Hercules and Theseus drag him by force to the light. I would suggest to see this picture as a climactic image of an omnipotent self in relationship to a devalued object (concluding earlier, similar images of Charon and Dis/Proserpine).

The object is being devalued precisely by attribution of these aspects of the self that were previously depicted in the self, but – as painful – were evacuated and projected on the object. Cerberus is terrified by light, just as the dead which represented the self in the first and second section of the *ekphrasis* were terrified by the darkness of the underworld. The beginning of the narrative expresses the image of the

⁵³ Shelton does not mention any of those features in her interpretation of this scene in which, as she argues, we see “Hercules at his bravest” and are impressed by “the magnitude of Hercules’ accomplishment” (Shelton 1978: 55).

⁵⁴ Henry, Walker 1965: 18.

⁵⁵ Henry, Walker 1965: 17.

helpless self being controlled and pulled down by the object, while the end expresses something exactly opposite: the image of a helpless object being controlled and dragged up. When Seneca writes *pronumque retro vexit et movit gradu* (817) it seems to be an allusion to the earlier images of a self that was controlled and dragged against his will into the abyss, since he uses the same three words in both passages: *pronus aer urget atque avidum chaos / gradumque retro flectere haud umquam sinunt* (677-678). Later Seneca repeats also *faciemque retro flexit* (825). Dragging Cerberus out of the underworld becomes a symbolic, defensive reversal of the initial self-object relationship.

Apart from fear and weakness, another devalued aspect of the object, represented here by Cerberus, is his impotent, frustrated, and mad rage (*ira furem et bella temptantem irrita*, 820). Devaluation is achieved not only by the whole context in which the powerful, terrifying hound is an impotent and frightened “pet”, but also by the fact that the hound’s aggression is of no significance whatsoever. The whole frustration, worthlessness, helplessness, fear and suffering that was present in the self in the first section of the narrative is now projected onto the object image (represented here by Cerberus, but he seems to be an metonymical “extension” of Dis himself). Another correspondence is between *Ditis invisus domus* in line 664 transformed here into *diem invisum expulit* (824). The object must suffer what the self suffered before: what was the darkness of the underworld to the self, the daylight of the earth will be to Cerberus. The vast, empty spaces (*ampla vacuis spatia*, 673) which were so frightening to the controlled, helpless self at the beginning now become a torture to Cerberus (*pura nitidi spatia*, 823).

Omnipotent control and devaluation of the object is emphasized also in the image of humiliated Cerberus with his heads lowered to the ground (827-828), hidden in the shadow of Hercules (826-827). The shadow can be understood here also as a metaphor: the powerful, but vanquished object becomes a mere shadow of the omnipotent self, while the self receives all the praise and glory (827-829). The aspect of devaluation is an ironic play of words: in the sentence it is the crowd that sings (*canit*) Hercules’ praise, but actually it is the hound (*canis*) that is forced to praise his conqueror by the fact of his humiliation, weakness, helplessness and painful dependence. The ultimate devaluation is

achieved when the frightening, powerful, sadistic object which tortured and tormented the self in the sections one and two, now has to praise the omnipotent self, against his will.⁵⁶

The chorus' song that follows Theseus' narrative recapitulates some of the main themes of the underworld narrative. Eurystheus is called the one who bade (*iusserat*, 831) Hercules to go the underworld, but he can hardly be seen as an object who really controls Hercules. Even though he gives orders, Hercules is more powerful than he is, so there is no dependence here. The chorus describes a great crowd of people who have to enter the kingdom of Dis and pray that they die in old age. All human kind here is depicted as helpless with regard to death that controls everyone. But Hercules is an exception, he is the only one who entered the underworld and returned, by his own power and will. All human kind is, then, described as a helpless self that is dependent on a terrifying Dis-Death, whereas Hercules is described as the one who has conquered Dis, gained control over life and death, and he is being idealized and virtually transformed into a divine being.

The chorus replaces the image of the barren land of the underworld with the image of a fertile land and equally fertile men and women, dancing and rejoicing (878-881). It is another reminder of the Golden Age, of fertility and happiness, which negates the horror of death and death's kingdom. At the same time, it is an expression of a hope for a new Golden Age, associated with Hercules who is praised by the chorus as the giver of all these goods, as an ideal object, overflowing with power, goodness, fertility and joy.⁵⁷ It is as if in Hercules the images of the self and the object were fused together into an idealized self which can feed the whole world, conquer death, overcome dangerous objects, give joy and happiness.

It is emphasized at the end by the chorus who praises Hercules for bringing peace to the whole world (the Golden Age again: 883-885).

⁵⁶ Cf. a completely different interpretation by Shelton. She argues that the scene is not comic, but that Seneca "has reduced Hercules to human size and prevented our full acceptance of the heroic value of the act" (Shelton 1978: 56).

⁵⁷ As Papadopoulou writes, the motif in the play is closely connected with Hercules' labors and his civilizing mission which "takes on cosmic overtones and becomes a pacifying mission in the whole universe" (Papadopoulou 2004: 270). See also Fitch 1987: 27 and 361 (commentary on the prayer).

The hero now possesses the control over the whole earth (886-888) and the underworld – he is depicted as the one who gained control over Dis and returned (890). This omnipotent idealization of the self results in the negation of all potential fear of the object (891). At the end of the chorus' song Seneca intensifies an image that was previously suggested in the second section of the *ekphrasis*. There was a defense there against the fear of a sadistic object which took a form of a *dominus vitae necisque* fantasy, a fantasy of an ideal king who is rewarded with happy life. This king was, as I suggested, superficially dependent on Dis, but, in fact, his dependence was, at the same time, subtly negated through his idealization. Now this image comes again, but fully elaborated: it is Hercules who is the ideal king, the true *dominus vitae necisque*, powerful and strong, but bringing peace and eliminating fear. He stands for the self image that is the ultimate defense against the painful dependence with which the description of the underworld begins.

CONCLUSION

At the level of Seneca's play with the literary tradition, it seems that he builds the description of the underworld in two ways: first, he creates a negative version of the Golden Age vision of earlier poets, and, second, he subtly diverges from Vergil's description of Dis' kingdom in the *Aeneid* VI (even though he uses similar motifs and language). Those two types of literary *aemulatio* express a significant and coherent sequence of self and object images, focused on the theme of dependence and control. These patterns can be summarized as:

- 1) hungry, envious and greedy self – powerful, wealthy, but un-giving object (affect: frustrated rage),
- 2) controlled, helpless self – controlling, envious, and greedy object (affect: fear),
- 3) guilty, tortured self – powerful, sadistic object (affect: fear and pain),
- 4) omnipotent, fearless self – devalued, humiliated, and fearful object (affect: pride, elation, contempt).

Each of those units can be seen as a projective transformation of the previous one, in order to deal with the aggression and/or fear. The last, fourth self-object pattern reflects an ultimate reversal of the painful

situation and a triumphant defense against all pain, fear and aggression connected with being dependent on the object. The dependence is replaced by independence, being controlled into being in control, and pain, aggression and fear are now in the object, not in the triumphant self.

It is beyond the scope of this article to analyze how those patterns are present in the whole play, but it seems that they are central to it. In another paper,⁵⁸ having analysed Hercules' relationships with mother figures in the play, I suggested that hero's madness can be seen as a breakdown of defenses against painful dependence. Here I would like to add that the underworld narrative depicts an analogical structure of dependence and defense against it. The *ekphrasis* described a triumph of the self over the evil object by a means of transformation that goes from the painful dependence of empty, hungry self on the un-loving object. In the scene of madness Hercules is first depicted as excessively, insanely omnipotent, idealized and in control (926-976), and then he becomes a sadistic killer of the guilty ones (in his delusions, of course: 976-1038). In reality, at the same time, the controlled, helpless self (insane Hercules) is omnipotently controlled by the evil object (Juno) who sends madness on him. When Hercules awakes, he is identified with the guilty, tormented self, while Juno is still a sadistic object. At the same time, the whole family is tortured and destroyed by the object (Hercules/Juno). Eventually, at the end of the play, Hercules represents the helpless, empty, metaphorically hungry self, living in a state between life and death, with little hope for happiness. The whole world seems to him to be an un-loving object, nothing can comfort him, no place can welcome him, and even Theseus' hospitality does not seem to change much for Hercules. So, in the end, all defenses are broken and the self returns to the most painful state of painful, frustrated dependence on the un-loving object, the state that was associated with entering the underworld, with dying. Hercules represents in the play defenses against painful dependence, defenses which turn out to be unnatural, inhuman, and – eventually – destructive for everyone.

It seems, that the underworld is the key to the understanding of the whole play and that Jungian association of the underworld with the

⁵⁸ Stróżyński 2013: 126-127.

world of the unconscious seems to be an accurate metaphor for Seneca's *Hercules*. The difference is that, whereas Odysseus and Aeneas entered the underworld (the unconscious) to grow in wisdom and virtue, Hercules seems to have entered it to get rid of the weakness and dependence that are an essential part of human nature. Aeneas, thanks to his *pietas*, received divine gifts from the gods; Hercules, because of his *superbia*, tried to rob the gods of their divinity and was punished.

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