



Apocalypses and the Sage. Different Endings of the World in Seneca

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Abstract. This paper deals with apocalypse, intended as a revelation or prediction related to the end of the world, in Seneca's prose work. The descriptions and readings of this event appear to be quite different from each other. My analysis will follow two main directions. Firstly, I will show the human side of the question, focussing on the condition of the sage facing the universal ruin in the context of the macroscopic narrative structure of most passages, and on the differences between the Epicurean and the Stoic view on this point. Secondly, I will turn to the descriptions of the end of the world which we can find in the *Naturales Quaestiones*. I will argue that Seneca's choice of flood or conflagration as representations for the apocalypse are not haphazard, but may be motivated by a subtle political narrative, and thus linked to the Stoic struggle for taking part in the governing of the state. In particular, the end of book three represents a flood which probably alludes to Tiber's floods.

Keywords: Seneca; Final flood; *ekpyrosis*; End of the world; Fire of Rome; Tiber's flood.

[esp] El sabio y los apocalipsis. Diferentes fines del mundo en Séneca

Resumen. Este artículo trata del apocalipsis, entendido como una revelación o predicción relacionada con el fin del mundo, en las obras en prosa de Séneca. Las descripciones y lecturas de este evento parecen ser bastante diferentes entre sí. Mi análisis seguirá dos direcciones principales. En primer lugar, mostraré el lado humano de la cuestión, centrándome en la condición del sabio frente a la ruina universal en el contexto de la estructura narrativa macroscópica de la mayoría de los pasajes, y en las diferencias entre el punto de vista epicúreo y el estoico en este punto. En segundo lugar, me referiré a las descripciones del fin del mundo que podemos encontrar en las *Naturales Quaestiones*. Argumentaré que la elección de Séneca de las representaciones de inundación o conflagración para el apocalipsis no es fortuita, sino que puede estar motivada por una sutil narrativa política y, por lo tanto, vinculada a la lucha estoica por tomar parte en el gobierno del Estado. En particular, el final del tercer libro representa una inundación que probablemente alude a las inundaciones del Tíber.

Palabras clave: Séneca; inundación final; *ekpyrosis*; fin del mundo; incendio de Roma; inundación del Tíber.

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“It’s the End of the World as We Know It (and I Feel Fine)”
 (R.E.M., *It’s the End of the World*)
 “A che ora è la fine del mondo? Che ora è?”
 (L. Ligabue, *A che ora è la fine del mondo*)

1. Introduction²

This paper deals with apocalypse, intended as a revelation or prediction related to the end of the world, in Seneca’s prose work.³ This is a topic of which we find several examples, often alluding to Lucretius’ Epicurean poem, with which Seneca shares the interest for apocalyptic themes and the struggle against human fear of death, with some differences due to his Stoic view.⁴ Some of these passages, such as the end of *QN* 3, are well known, while some others are rarely quoted. The descriptions and readings of this event appear to be quite different from each other. My analysis will follow two main directions. Firstly, I will show the human side of the question, focussing on the condition of the sage facing the universal ruin in the context of the macroscopic narrative structure of most passages, and on the differences between the Epicurean and the Stoic view on this point. Secondly, I will turn to a cosmic viewpoint, and especially to the descriptions of the end of the world which we can find in the *Naturales Quaestiones*. I will argue that Seneca’s choice of flood or conflagration qua representations for the apocalypse are not haphazard, but may be motivated by a subtle political narrative, and thus linked to the Stoic struggle for taking part on the govern of the state.

2. Apocalypse and the sage

Most passages regarding the end of the world present a similar structure: on the one side, the collapsing universe; on the other, the heroic sage standing alone. An interesting passage at this regard is the one at *Ep.* 9.16-18:

‘Qualis tamen futura est vita sapientis, si sine amicis relinquatur in custodiam coniectus vel in aliqua gente aliena destitutus...?’ *Qualis est Iovis, cum resolutu mundo et dis in unum confusus paulisper cessante natura adquiescit sibi cogitationibus suis traditus. Tale quiddam sapiens facit: in se reconditur; secum est... 18 Stilbon... enim capta patria, amissis liberis, amissa uxore, cum ex incendio publico solus et tamen beatus exiret, interroganti Demetrio... num quid perdidisset, ‘omnia’ inquit ‘bona mea mecum sunt’.*

‘But what sort of existence will the wise man have, if he be left friendless when thrown into prison, or when stranded in some foreign nation...?’ His life will be

² This paper was presented at Cambridge for the 2017 Craven Seminar. I would like to thank Tommaso Gazzarri and Matthew Leigh for editing my English, and Santiago Montero for his advices on the Tiber.

³ I will offer only few references to tragedies, on which see Rosenmeyer 1989, 136-159; Volk 2006; Mazzoli 2016, 417-430.

⁴ These affinities were recognised by scholars since Lana 1955, 11-14; see now Williams 2012, 7-10, 154-155, and 246-247.

like that of Jupiter, who, amid the dissolution of the world, when the gods are confounded together and Nature rests for a space from her work, can retire into himself and give himself over his own thoughts. In some such way as this the sage will act; he will retreat into himself, and live within himself... 18. For Stilbo, after his country was captured and his children and his wife lost, as he emerged from the general desolation alone and yet happy, spoke as follows to Demetrius... in answer the question whether he had lost anything: 'I have all my goods with me.'⁵

This passage contains a peculiar portrait of sage. Everything has been destroyed, and the wise man retires in himself, like Jupiter at the end of the world, when boundaries do not exist anymore and everything is confused in an undifferentiated matter (*in unum confusis*, "confounded together").⁶ We can maybe find in this image some Epicurean elements. The god is described in a somewhat Epicurean way, as an entity separate from the rest of the universe and merged into his supreme tranquillity.⁷ Also the expression *resoluto mundo* ("amid the dissolution of the world") may possibly allude to the first book of Lucretius' *De rerum natura*, where the poet utilizes the verb *resolvo* for his first great end-of-the-world fresco:⁸

*Nam tibi de summa caeli ratioque deumque
dissere incipiam et rerum primordia pandam,
unde omnis natura creet res auctet alatque
quove eadem rursus natura perempta resolvat*⁹

For I shall begin to discourse to you upon the most high system of heaven and of the god, and I shall disclose the first-beginnings of things –how from these nature makes all things and increases and nourishes them, and into these the same nature again reduces them when dissolved.¹⁰

Apart from the factual description of the end of the world, it is evident that in this passage Seneca's sage can be indifferent to the apocalypse, showing an attitude which may be considered 'Epicurean', as we will see below. This statement is supported by the historical example of Stilpo of Megara, the head of the Megaric school. In Seneca's revised version of this anecdote, the tyrant Demetrius destroyed his town, and Stilpo lost all his properties together with his family. Yet, Stilpo declares: "I have lost nothing: I have all that is mine with me".¹¹ Other historical sources, such as Diogenes Laertius,¹² transmit a version in which Demetrius, informed of Stilpo's celebrity, gave him back everything (and this would be the reason for asking what he had lost). Seneca revises this tradition, and takes heed of the models of Diogenes and Alexander the Great, thus transforming Stilpo in a sort of lonely hero facing the tyrant, and interested in nothing but his soul. This twist of the tradition endows him with an Olympian serenity, in spite

⁵ Trans. Gummere 1962.

⁶ *Confusio* and related terms express the Greek concept of *chaos*. See Degl'Innocenti Pierini 1999, 13-14, with special focus on the opening of *Ad Polybium*.

⁷ But we find a similar passage in Arr. *Epict.* 3.18.4-7. Cf. Richardson-Hay 2006, 309-310 *ad l.*

⁸ We find *analyo* at this regard in *SVF* 2.603 and 609, but it is referred to the reduction to fire.

⁹ *Lucr.* 1.54-57. Cf. 1.415; 628-629.

¹⁰ Trans. Rouse 1959.

¹¹ *Sen. Ep.* 9.18.

¹² *D.L.* 2.115.

of having lost not only his material goods, but also his loved ones and his fatherland. In this passage, the destruction of someone's fatherland (*ex incendio publico*, "from the general conflagration") is explicitly compared to that of the universe (*resoluto mundo*, "amid the dissolution of the world").

In the *Natural Questions*, we find an image of the sage facing the end of the world which can be compared to that of Stilpo:¹³

*Pusilla res est hominis anima, sed ingens res contemptus animae: hanc qui contempsit securus videbit maria turbari, etiamsi illa omnes excitaverint venti, etiamsi aestus aliqua perturbatione mundi totum in terras vertet oceanum; securus aspiciet fulminantis caeli trucem atque horridam faciem, frangatur licet caelum et ignes suos in exitium omnium, in primis suum, misceat; securus aspiciet ruptis compagibus dehiscens solum, ipsa licet inferorum regna retegantur. Stabit super illam voraginem intrepidus et fortasse quo debet cadere desiliet.*¹⁴

A person's soul is a trivial thing, but contempt for one's soul is a tremendous thing. Anyone who treats it with contempt will watch the seas in turmoil without anxiety, even if all the winds have whipped them up, even if through some disturbance to the world the tide is diverting the entire ocean onto the land. He will look without anxiety at the cruel, dreadful sight of the sky flashing with lightning, even if the sky is fractured and is concocting fires that will destroy everything, starting with itself. He will look without anxiety at the ground gaping open as its structures shatters, even if the kingdoms of the underworld were to be revealed. He will stand above that abyss unflinching, and perhaps will leap in where he will have to fall.¹⁵

Here, we have a list of all possible ends of the world: namely caused by water (*maria*, "seas"), fire (*ignes*, "fires") or earth (*dehiscens solum*, "ground gaping open"). Throughout these cataclysms, the sage remains a serene spectator. Philosophy gives us the strength to calmly contemplate any event. The sage, detached from any kind of trouble, including the end of the world, appears as a sort of hyperbolic version of the Lucretian one, as portrayed in the famous *incipit* of book 2: *Suave mari magno...* ("Pleasant it is, when over a great sea..."): ¹⁶ defended by the solid walls of philosophy, the philosopher can look with contempt upon human life and its struggles.¹⁷ Nevertheless, the passage from *QN* presents significant differences from the Epicurean model: firstly, it contains a list of different elements, and, secondly, Seneca insists on terms related to the idea of wholeness (*omnes, totum, exitium omnium*) which endow these images with a cosmic and apocalyptic tone. Furthermore, the passage ends in a completely different way: *fortasse quo debet cadere desiliet* ("he ... perhaps will leap in where he will have to fall"). Seneca's sage refuses to be a distant observer, rather he wants to engage in the apocalypse. This image, which clearly purports to be an apology for suicide, exhibits the difference between the Epicurean motto *lathe biosas*¹⁸ ("live unnoticed") and the Stoic struggle for

¹³ Williams 2012, 254-255.

¹⁴ *QN* 6.32.4.

¹⁵ Trans. Hine 2010.

¹⁶ Trans. Rouse 1959.

¹⁷ *Lucr.* 2.7-13; cf. 2.323-332; De Lacy 1964.

¹⁸ On which see Roskam 2007, 83-101 (on Lucretius) and 86 (on *QN*); Colman 2012.

participating in political life. In this regard, another passage from *De Constantia Sapientis* presents relevant similarities. Here, the protagonist is Cato, idealized as a hero and thus resembling the Stoic sage:¹⁹

*Catonem autem certius exemplar sapientis viri nobis deos immortalis dedisse quam Ulixem et Herculem prioribus saeculis. Hos enim Stoici nostri sapientes pronuntiaverunt... 2. Cato non cum feris manus contulit... nec in ea tempora incidit quibus credi posset caelo umeris unius inniti... cum ambitu congressus, multiformi malo, et cum potentiae immensa cupiditate... adversus vitia civitatis degenerantis et pessum sua mole sidentis stetit solus et cadentem rem publicam, quantum modo una retrahi manu poterat, tenuit, donec abstractus comitem se diu sustentatae ruinae dedit simulque extincta sunt quae nefas erat dividi: neque enim Cato post libertatem vixit nec libertas post Catonem.*²⁰

I then replied that... the immortal gods had given us in Cato a more assured example of the wise man than Ulysses and Hercules in former ages. For we Stoics have proclaimed that these were wise men... Cato did not fight with wild beasts... nor did he happen to live in those times when people could believe the sky was supported on one man's shoulders... he clashed with ambition, that evil of many shapes, and with enormous greed for power... Against the crimes of a degenerate country, sinking to ruin under its own weight, he stood alone and held up the falling republic, so far as one's man hand could retrieve it, until carried off himself he shared the ruin he had for so long delayed, and those perished together whom it would have been sacrilege to separate. For Cato did not survive freedom, nor freedom survive Cato.²¹

In the *De Constantia*, Cato is described as a lonely hero, who singlehandedly (*una... manu*, "one's man hand") holds up the collapsing Republic, until he is thrown away (*abstractus*, "carried off"), thus crumbling with the world itself in a cosmic destruction. He is clearly described as the true Atlas, living in a time when no one believed anymore in the myth of the Titan holding up the world on his shoulders. Here, and more conspicuously in Lucan's *Pharsalia*, the civil war is tantamount to the end of the world, and Cato is therefore a Titan destined to fail. In a way, he is the counterpart of the heroic Epicurus fighting against the vice of superstition, as described by Lucretius (with the difference that the latter wins and celebrates his triumph).²²

The image of Cato fighting alone against the apocalypse recalls that of Ajax Oileus battling against the storm in Seneca's *Agamemnon* (another *variatio* on the apocalyptic theme, where the author insists on the participation of all four elements in the destruction of the Greek fleet).²³ After managing to win over the elements united against him, the rock on which he was hung was hit by Neptune's trident, and in the end, he lies defeated by a coalition of earth, fire and sea:

¹⁹ Cf. also *Prov.* 2.9-13 (2.9: *stantem nihilominus inter ruinas publicas rectum*; "nevertheless standing upright amid public ruin"; trans. Ker 2014); *Ep.* 95.71: *inter publicas ruinas non labans* ("who did not totter when the whole state was in ruin"; trans. Gummere 1962). As for Cato's idealization see Goar 1987, 35-41 on Seneca; as for the absolute rarity of the Stoic sage, Brouwer 2014, 97-112.

²⁰ *Const.* 2.1-2.

²¹ Trans. Costa 1994.

²² See *Lucretius* 1.62-79.

²³ Rosenmeyer 1989, 148-159.

... *solus invictus malis*
luctatur Ajax...
superasse nunc se pelagus atque ignes iuvat,
Vicisse caelum, Palladen, fulmen, mare...
Neptunus imis erexens undis caput
solvitque montem: quem cadens secum tulit
*terraque et igne victus et pelago iacens.*²⁴

Ajax alone was still struggling, unconquered by disaster. ... 'I glory in having overcome flood and fire, in having conquered heaven, Pallas, lightning, sea'. ... father Neptune raised his head from the depths of the waves, struck and dislodged the rock with his trident ... He carried it with him in his fall, and lies conquered by earth and fire and sea.²⁵

Ajax is an example of *hybris*, who is promptly punished for having challenged the whole world. On the contrary, the titanic attitude shown by Cato is praised, because he is not trying to win out over the general ruin: he certainly tries to avoid it, but he then accepts it and takes part in it, by committing suicide. Moreover, his struggle is a moral battle: the only one worth fighting.

Ep. 71.11-16, once again dealing with Cato of Utica and his electoral and political defeats, offers another example of this Titanic attitude:

'Victus est tamen'. Et hoc numera inter repulsas Catonis... eodem loco habuit praetura et vita excidere; omnia quae acciderent ferenda esse persuaserat sibi. 12. *Quidni ille mutationem rei publicae forti et aequo pateretur animo? Quid enim mutationis periculo exceptum? Non terra, non caelum, non totus hic rerum omnium contextus, quamvis deo agente ducatur: non semper tenebit hunc ordinem, sed illum ex hoc cursu aliquis dies deiciet.* 13... *quidquid est non erit, nec peribit sed resolvetur.* 14. *Nobis solvi perire est, proxima enim intuemur, ad ulteriora non prospicit mens hebes et quae se corpora addixerit; alioqui fortes finem sui suorumque pateretur, si speraret, ut omnia illa, sic vitam mortemque per vices ire et composita dissolvi, dissoluta componi, in hoc opere aeternam artem cuncta temperantis dei verti.*²⁶ 15. *Itaque M. Cato, cum aevum animo percucurrerit, dicet: 'omne humanum genus, quodque est quodque erit, morte damnatum est; omnes quae usquam rerum potiuntur urbes quaeque alienorum imperiorum magna sunt decora, ubi fuerint aliquando quaeretur et vario exitii genere tollentur... Omnes hos fertiles campos repentini maris inundatio abscondet aut in subitam cavernam considentis soli lapsus abducat. Quid est ergo quare indignetur aut doleam, si exiguo momento publica fata praecedo?'* 16. *Magnus animus Deo pareat et quidquid lex universi iubet sine cunctatione patiatur:*

'He was conquered in spite of it all!' Well, you may include this among Cato's failures... He regarded in the same light both the loss of his praetorship and the loss of his life; he had convinced himself that he ought to endure anything which might happen. 12. Why should he not suffer, bravely and calmly, a change in the

²⁴ *Ag.* 532-533; 545-546; 553-556.

²⁵ Trans. Fitch 2004.

²⁶ Cf. Sen. *Ep.* 108.20.

government? For what is free from the risk of change? Neither earth, nor sky, nor the whole fabric of our universe, though it be controlled by the hand of God. It will not always preserve its present order: it will be thrown from its course in days to come. 13... Whatever is will cease to be, and yet it will not perish, but will be resolved into its elements. 14. To our minds, this process means perishing, for we behold only that which is nearest; our sluggish mind, under allegiance to the body, does not penetrate to bournes beyond. Were it not so, the mind would endure with greater courage its own ending and that of its possessions, if only it could hope that life and death, like the whole universe about us, go by turns, that whatever has been put together is broken up again, that whatever has been broken up is put together again, and that the eternal craftsmanship of God, who controls all things, is working at this task. 15. Therefore the wise man will say just what a Marcus Cato would say, after reviewing his past life: ‘The whole race of men, both that which is and which is to be, is condemned to die. Of all the cities that at any time have held sway over the world, and of all that have been the splendid ornaments of empires not their own, men shall some day ask where they were, and they shall be swept away by destructions of various kinds ... All these fertile plains shall be buried out of sight by a sudden overflowing of the sea, or a slipping of the soil, as it settles to lower levels, shall draw them suddenly into a yawning chasm. Why should I be angry or feel sorrow, if I precede the general destruction by a tiny interval of time?’ 16. Let great souls comply with God’s wishes, and suffer unhesitatingly whatever fate the law of the universe ordains.²⁷

In this letter, Cato compares his fate, the fate of a loser in any field, to that of the whole universe, which is destined to dissolve and then come back again. On the one hand, this is a consolatory argument, only reshaped into a sort of self-consolatory speech which, following another topos of the genre, alludes to the possibility of a spiritual life after death. On the other hand, given the well-known equivalence between Rome and the cosmos,²⁸ Cato’s speech is not a sheer abstraction, rather he is describing the actual end of the world, which coincides with and is ignited by the devastation of the civil wars ending the Republic. So, again, an accumulation of all possible military and political disgraces afflicts a lonely hero facing the Apocalypse. Unlike the instance at *De Constantia*, Cato does not pose any resistance to it, but simply accepts the tragic course of the events,²⁹ and takes part in them.

In this long passage about the transience of the universe, two aspects are of particular interest: firstly, the possible presence of a Lucretian touch, signalled by various elements: (a) The expression *aliquis dies deiciet*³⁰ which recalls the famous expression *una dies dabit exitio*;³¹ (b) the use of the verb *resolvere* “to dissolve”, which, as we have seen, is present also in Lucretius’ first book. On the other hand, (c) the significant presence of a rational god³² as the ruler on whom the end of the

²⁷ Trans. Gummere 1962.

²⁸ Hine 2006, with special focus on *Natural Questions*.

²⁹ Sen. *Ep.* 71.11: *omnia quae acciderent ferenda esse persuaserat sibi*, “he had convinced himself that he ought to endure anything which might happen”.

³⁰ Sen. *Ep.* 71.12.

³¹ Lucr. 5.95: “a single day will bring to destruction” (trans. Gale 2009). Cf. Sen. *QN* 3.29.9: *unus humanum genus condet dies* (“a single day will bury the human race”; trans. Hine 2010).

³² Sen. *Ep.* 71.14: *temperans deus*, “God, who controls all things”.

world depends, and (d) the conclusion, with the exhortation to obey to God without trying to rebel against fate, this attitude being a mark sign of sagehood,³³ are quintessentially Stoic.

The second element I would like to stress pertains the mechanics of the apocalypse in Cato's speech: he does not focus on conflagration; rather he speaks of a flood³⁴ and of earthquakes:³⁵ a very specific choice requiring an equally specific analysis.

3. Flood vs Conflagration: Is Nero the Apocalypse?

We have seen the sage facing different tragic events representing in a more or less great scale the end of the world. Now, it is time to turn to the very end of the world: the one which Seneca describes in detail as a necessary step towards the regeneration, since being a Stoic he believed in a cyclic destruction of the universe followed by a renewal.³⁶ The only passage in which he explicitly deals with this Stoic tenet is the end of *Natural Questions* book 3 (chapters 27 to 30), but here the end comes by a flood, and not by an *ekpyrosis*, which was the properly Stoic mode of cosmic destruction.³⁷ Indeed, even if with some exceptions,³⁸ the Stoics generally agreed on the *ekpyrosis* as the doctrinally-sound end of the world. Significant as this variety of positions might be, one cannot ignore that the Stoic preference for an end via fire is well documented, and so is the importance of fire as the element 'par excellence' for Stoic physics.

However Seneca, who often elightens the moral aim of scientific investigation,³⁹ chooses the flood. He offers the readers five different versions of this event: a first, generic assertion of its necessity;⁴⁰ Fabianus' theory, focussed on rains as a start factor;⁴¹ a second theory based on the role of the sea;⁴² a third hypothesis grounded on earthquakes, and a fourth on astronomical influences;⁴³ then he concludes affirming that such a thing will be caused by a sum of various factors.⁴⁴ The following book, 4a, presents the flood of the Nile as an example of *palygenesis*.⁴⁵ What are the

³³ *Ep.* 71.16: *magnus animus Deo pareat*, "Let great souls comply with God's wishes".

³⁴ *Ep.* 71.15: *repentini maris inundatio*, "a sudden overflowing of the sea".

³⁵ *Ep.* 71.15: *considentis soli lapsus*, "a slipping of the soil, as it settles to lower levels".

³⁶ Cf. Long-Sedley 1987, vol. I, 274-313; vol. II, 271-309.

³⁷ *SVF* 1.98; 105 (Zeno); 1.510-1 (Cleanthes); 512 (Zeno, Cleanthes, Chrysippus); 2.585 and 594; 596- 618; 630 (Stoics).

³⁸ Apparently, the only exception was Panaetius: Cic. *Nat. Deor.* 2. 118 = Panaet. Fr. A 54 Vimercati: *ex quo eventurum nostri [sc. Stoici] putant id de quo Panaetium addubitare dicebant, ut ad extremum omnis mundus ignesceret...* ("as a consequence of this, so our school believe, though it used to be said that Panaetius questioned the doctrine, there will ultimately occur a conflagration of the whole world"; trans. Rackham 1972). Cf. Panaet. Fr. A 58 = Stob I 20 p. 171, 5-7; A 59 = Phil. *Aet. Mundi* 76; D.L. 7.142; Annaeus Cornutus seems to put both ends on the same level (*Theol. Gr.* 17). On the difference between Cleanthes' and Chrysippus' conflagrations see Salles 2005 and 2009. About the flood in Stoic thought, Armisen-Marchetti 2006 lists these passages, which she considers the result of a conflation of different sources: Heracl. *Alleg.* 25, 2-5; DChr 36.39-61; Orig. *Contra Cels.* 4. 12. 6-14; 4. 64 = *SVF* 2.628 and 1174; Firm. Mat. *Math.* 3.1.9; Schol. Luc 7.813 Bern = 252 Us.

³⁹ See e.g. *QN* 3.pr.18; 4b.3.1; 6.3.6; 6.32.1; Parroni 2002, XIII-XXII; Berno 2003, 15-29; Williams 2012, 17-53.

⁴⁰ *QN* 3.27.1-3.

⁴¹ *QN* 3.27.4-14.

⁴² *QN* 3.28.1-7.

⁴³ *QN* 3.29.1.

⁴⁴ *QN* 3.29.2-30.6.

⁴⁵ Berno 2003, 137-139; Williams 2012, 110-135. See also Waiblinger 1977, 49-53; Maurach 1987, 305-322.

reasons for this choice? This is indeed a *vexata quaestio*.⁴⁶ Seneca presents the description of the flood as a suggestion come from the observations about the way in which the sea “purifies itself” (*purgatur*):⁴⁷ nevertheless, the idea of purification is by far less pervasive than that of the end of the world as following the laws of nature,⁴⁸ and the sea plays an important but not crucial role at this regard; moreover, the expression *sed monet me locus* with which Seneca introduces the subject signals a somewhat digressive reasoning more than the developing of a logical argumentation.⁴⁹

Admittedly, Seneca considers both types of cataclysm on the same level, and presents the flood only as one possible example among others:⁵⁰ the overlap goes so far that, while citing verses from Ovid’s account of the flood, Seneca inserts a quotation from Phaethon’s episode.⁵¹ Furthermore, Seneca himself describes the end of the world in terms of a *conflagratio* elsewhere, as it is the case with *Ep.* 9.⁵² Let us start from these descriptions, and then turn again to the end of *QN* book 3.

The most famous instance is likely the final section of the *Consolatio ad Marciam*, addressed to the daughter of a famous historical writer who was forced to death by Tiberius in 25 A.C., and with the official aim of consoling her for the additional death of her young son. In a sort of rewriting of the Ciceronian dream of Scipio at the end of *De republica*,⁵³ Seneca imagines Cremutius Cordo, Marcia’s father, describing the celestial pageant of illustrious deceased Romans. The end of the world is here construed as a shared destiny, common to each and every being:

Nam si tibi potest solacio esse desiderii tui commune fatum, nihil, quo stat loco, stabit, omnia sternet abducatque secum vetustas; nec hominibus solum... sed locis, sed regionibus, sed mundi partibus ludet... totos supprimet montes... maria sorbebit, flumina avertet... alibi hiatibus vastis subducet urbes, tremoribus quatiet, et ex infimo pestilentiae halitus mittet et inundationibus quidquid habitatur obducat necabitque omne animal orbe submerso et ignibus vastis torrebit incendetque mortalia. Et cum tempus advenerit quo se mundus renovaturus extinguat, viribus ista se suis cadent et sidera sideribus incurrent et omni flagrante materia uno igni quidquid nunc ex disposito lucet ardebit. 7. Nos quoque... in antiqua elementa vertemur.⁵⁴

⁴⁶ Mader 1983; Gauly 2004, 235-267; Armisen-Marchetti 2006; Mazzoli 2005, 172-173.

⁴⁷ *QN* 3.26.8.

⁴⁸ Even if there is a passage in which Seneca refers to the end of the world as depending on God’s decision (3.28.7: *cum deo visum ordiri meliora*), much more frequent is the presentation of this event as following a predetermined law of nature, from the very start of the section: *fatalis dies* (3.27.1; cf. 3.27.3; 3.28.4; 3.29.2-3; 3.29.5; 3.30.1; Inwood 2005, 170-174).

⁴⁹ *QN* 3.27.1; cf. *Ep.* 118.10; Cic. *Top.* 51; *Leg.* 3.47.

⁵⁰ *QN* 3.pr.5; 3.28.7: *Qua ratione? Inquis. Eadem qua conflagratio futura est*, “How? You ask. In the same way as the conflagration will occur” (trans. Hine 2010); 3.29.1-2; 3.30.6. Cf. Volk 2006, 191-192.

⁵¹ Seneca, as it is well known, chooses to explicitly deal with his predecessor, by inserting a chapter of aesthetical considerations in book 3, and by playing a fine and complex game of intertextuality with Ovid within the whole book. The verse regarding Phaethon’s fall is *Met.* 2.264 in *QN* 3.27.13. Cf. Degl’Innocenti Pierini 1990a; Morgan 2003, 69-73; Berno 2003, 93-102, and 2012, 64-66.

⁵² Above, 76-77.

⁵³ Armisen-Marchetti 2006, 328, quotes Cic. *Rep.* 6.23 = *Somn.* 7.1: *propter eluviones exustionesque terrarum, quas accidere tempore certo necesse est, non modo aeternam, sed ne diuturnam quidem gloriam adsequi possumus* (“floods and conflagrations, which necessarily happen on the earth at stated intervals, would prevent us from gaining a glory which could even be long-during, much less eternal”; trans. Walker Keyes 1961).

⁵⁴ *Marc.* 26.6-7.

If the universality of fate can be of any comfort to you in your bereavement, realize that nothing will remain standing where it now stands, that old age will topple everything and sweep it away. It will toy not just with human beings... but with places, with countries, with whole sections of the world. It will flatten entire mountains... it will swallow seas, divert rivers... elsewhere it will make cities disappear into huge chasms, shake them with earthquakes, send plague-ridden air from deep blow, cover all habitations with floods, kill every living creature as it drowns the earth, and scorch and burn all that is mortal in huge fires. And when the time comes for the world to extinguish and renew itself, everything will destroy itself by its own strength, stars will collide with stars; and as all matter goes up in flames, the bodies that now shine in an orderly configuration will all burn in a single fire. 7. We also... shall be returned to our original elements.⁵⁵

This passage contains a sort of accumulation of all possible disasters –earthquakes (*alibi hiatibus vastis subducat urbes, tremoribus quatiet*, “elsewhere it will make cities disappear into huge chasms, shake them with earthquakes”), plagues (*pestilentiae halitus*, “plague-ridden air”), floods (*inundationibus*, “floods”; *orbe submerso*, “as it drowns the earth”), and fire (*ignibus vastis*, “huge fires”): but the final destruction is realized by fire (*omni flagrante materia uno igni quidquid...*, “the bodies... will all burn in a single fire”), which is considered the ultimate purifying element: that one opening the way to the “coming back to primordial elements”. So, in this case, the flood is evidently considered as a preparatory event to the definitive end of the world: a conflagration.

The *Ad Marciam* is commonly considered the first work written by Seneca. *Ekpyrosis* is present again at *De Beneficiis*, 6, which dates to after Seneca’s retirement: it was finished within the spring of 64:⁵⁶

*Subita confusione rerum sidera sideribus incurrant... et quae nunc alternis eunt redeuntque opportunis libramentis mundo ex aequo temperantia, repentino concrementur incendio et ex tanta varietate solvantur atque eant in unum omnia; ignis cuncta possideat, quem deinde pigra nox occupet, et profunda vorago tot deos sorbeat.*⁵⁷

Let all those heavenly bodies... desert their post... and, disrupted the universal harmony, divine things slipped in ruin... let the system of swiftest movement fail in midcourse to regulate the sequence promised for so many centuries, and the bodies that now come and go in alternation balancing the world and keeping in equilibrium suddenly be consumed in fire, and let everything in its great variety be dissolved and combine into one; let fire take over everything, which a thick darkness will then claim, and let a deep chasm swallow all those divine beings.⁵⁸

Here the context is completely different: Seneca is talking about the need for being grateful also to distant benefactors, such as the stars and the planets, or the emperor (who can benefit a whole population with a single decision). Then he imagines a potential objection: these are not benefits, because stars and planets are not free-willed. Thence the paradox: does one need the end of the world to be

⁵⁵ Trans. Hine 2014.

⁵⁶ Griffin 2013, 91-96, 300-303 on the context of the quoted passage.

⁵⁷ *Ben.* 6.22.1.

⁵⁸ Trans. Griffin 2011.

convinced of the utility of the sun and the moon? Here, only one element is present: fire; but the reason for it is quite obvious: *ekpyrosis* was unavoidable, since in heaven, given the absence of earth or water, earthquakes and floods are impossible. Conflagration can be the only cause for the destruction of planets. The description of the end of the world, triggered by the lost balance of the main cosmic components, and known as *confusio*,⁵⁹ is analogous to that of *Natural Questions*.⁶⁰ Moreover, *De Beneficiis* contains a parallel between planets and emperors, which generally speaking is quite usual, but which is here justified by the fact that both give benefits from a distance, and that Seneca's interlocutor having to feel the necessary gratitude. The apocalyptic image comes at this point, thus prompting a veiled implication: is Seneca here depicting the devastating consequences of the imperial family's annihilation –in other words– is this passage suggesting or even simply conjuring up the plot for a conspiracy? Even if it is not possible to answer this question, it is evident that this text accounts for another instance of the correspondence between Rome and the universe. In Cato's case, the Republic was the universe; here, the Emperor is the sun and the ruling force of the galaxy.

What emerges from this brief collection of passages is that Seneca considered conflagration as the fittest kind of apocalypse (*Ad Marciam*), and he possibly related it to the emperor (*De Beneficiis*).⁶¹

Let us turn again to *Natural Questions*. Fire has a big place in this work; two books deal with comets and the so-called 'celestial fires'. So, nothing would have prevented Seneca from describing *ekpyrosis* one more time. Moreover, fire provides the perfect mode of purification, which is the necessary means for *palingenesis*, while water is much less effective, because polluted with mud: the result of the earth's relentless dissolution.⁶² Seneca could have utilized multiple passages in the *Natural Questions* to take the start for a similar description, particularly so in book one on the celestial fires, and in book 2 on thunders and bolts. In particular, when tackling falling stars, Seneca explicitly makes a parallel with fires:

*Videmus certe apud nos late incendio pervagante quasdam insulas, quae diu concaluerint, ex se concipere flammam: itaque verisimile est etiam in aere summo...*⁶³

Certainly in our own experience, when a fire spreads far and wide, we see some block of houses heat up over a long period and then catch fire spontaneously; so it is likely that, in the highest levels of the air as well...

This same passage contains an Ovidian allusion, signalled by the extremely rare expression *concipere flammam*. The passage from *Metamorphoses* concerns Jupiter choosing not to burn, but to submerge the earth: *sed timuit ne forte sacer tot ab ignibus aether/ conciperet flammam longusque ardesceret axis*.⁶⁴ Jupiter was afraid that the use of

⁵⁹ Above, n. 6.

⁶⁰ Cf. *QN* 3.29.8: *peribit omne discrimen: confundetur quidquid in suas partes natura digessit*, "all distinctions will disappear; everything that has its own place assigned by nature will be mixed together".

⁶¹ For similar political hints regarding the so-called conflagration in *Thyestes* see Volk 2006.

⁶² Cf. *QN* 3.27.4-6; 29.5-7; 30.4: *quemadmodum corpora nostra ad egestum venter exhaurit... ita tellus liquefiet* ("just as our stomach drains the body... so the earth will be liquefied"; trans. Hine 2010).

⁶³ *QN* 2.14.2.

⁶⁴ *Met.* 1.254-255: "But he stayed his hand in fear lest perchance the sacred heavens should take fire so huge a conflagration, and burn from pole to pole" (trans. Miller 1956).

fire could destroy not only the earth, but also the sky. He therefore decided to submerge humankind with a flood. Ovid alludes here to conflagration as a more effective and less risky means of destruction: an idea which recurs also in Seneca's *Ad Marciam*.⁶⁵

Still in book 3 of *Natural Questions*, Seneca recalls the Stoic theory of conflagration:

*Dicimus enim ignem esse qui occupet mundum et in se cuncta convertat; hunc evanidum languentemque considerare et nihil relinqui aliud in rerum natura igne restincto quam umorem; in hoc futuri mundi spem latere: 2. ita ignis exitus mundi est, umor primordium.*⁶⁶

For we say that it is fire which seizes control of the world and turns everything into itself; then it becomes faint and weak and dies down, and when the fire is extinguished, nothing else is left in nature except moisture. The hope of a future world lies hidden in it. 2. So fire is the end of the world, water is its origin.⁶⁷

Here, the philosopher adheres the traditional Stoic lore of conflagration as the form of the apocalypse, and characterizes water as a general principle of birth (and rebirth),⁶⁸ an idea which will be developed in 3.30 with the description of the *palingenesis*.

Thus, for a number of reasons, it would be easier for Seneca to describe an apocalyptic fire. So, again: why did he choose water? In the past, scholars have answered the question by limiting flood to the earth (not the universe). The flood would be a small scale example of the large scale apocalypse, namely the conflagration.⁶⁹ To be sure, Seneca only talks about the earth in this passage, and yet he never speaks about a major, cosmic Apocalypse-to-be. On the contrary, he often holds conflagration and floods in the same consideration.⁷⁰ Moreover, the references to *confusio* of the original elements⁷¹ and to *palingenesis* are typical of the final end; and, even if this is the case, the question remains open: why is Seneca concentrating on a partial apocalypse in a work where fires and stars have their dedicated space? I maintain that, perhaps, Seneca, at that time, could not talk about fire. In fact, there had been a fire which everyone had witnessed, and it was dangerously connected to Nero. This is the fire of Rome in July 64, the responsibility of which all ancient sources, apart from the partial exception of Tacitus, many authors, such as Suetonius⁷² and Cassius Dio,⁷³ attribute to the emperor.⁷⁴ In the pseudo-Senecan *Octavia*, it is Nero himself who wishes the destruction of Rome.⁷⁵

⁶⁵ Above, 83-84.

⁶⁶ *QN* 3.13.1-2.

⁶⁷ Trans. Hine 2010.

⁶⁸ *QN* 3.13.1: *futuri mundi spem*, "the hope of a future world".

⁶⁹ Above, n. 46.

⁷⁰ Above, 83.

⁷¹ Cf. *QN* 3.27.14; 3.29.8.

⁷² Suet. *Nero* 38.1-3.

⁷³ D.C. 62.16.2.

⁷⁴ Tacitus –*Ann.* 15.38 – refers this rumor many times but does not take an explicit position about it: *forte an dolo principis incertum* ("whether due to chance or to the malice of the sovereign is uncertain"; trans. Jackson 1956); cf. 15.39; 40; 44; 67. In 15.42 Tacitus stresses how Nero profited from the fire to build the *domus aurea* in the area of the Oppium hill. See also Plin. *HN* 17.5; Eutr. 7.14.3; Oros. 7.7.4. See Beaujeau 1960, 7-13; Barrett – Fantham – Yardley 2016, 149-170.

⁷⁵ Williams 1994, 188-191; cf. *Oct.* 392-394: *...tunc adest mundo dies/ supremus ille, qui premat genus impium/ caeli ruina...* ("we are now approaching that final day which will crush the sacrilegious race beneath the collapsing sky"; trans. Fitch 2004).

*Mox tecta flammis concidant urbis meis,
ignes ruinae noxium populum premant
turpisque egestas, saeua cum luctu fames.*⁷⁶

Next the city's buildings must fall to flames set by me. Fire, ruined homes, sordid poverty, cruel starvation along with grief must crush this criminal populace.⁷⁷

This is confirmed by Suetonius, who attributes to him a theatrical sentence: *dicente quodam in sermone communi* ἐμοῦ θανάτου γαῖα μειχθήτω πυρί, 'immo', inquit, 'ἐμοῦ ζῶντος', *planeque ita fecit*.⁷⁸ As Cassius Dio reports, "The calamity which the city then experienced has no parallel before or since, except in the Gallic invasion".⁷⁹ This calamity was interpreted as the realization of a prophecy by Tiberius, who had foreseen the end of Rome and of the world: "Thrice three hundred years having run their course of fulfilment, Rome by the strife of her people shall perish".⁸⁰ Scholars generally agree that Seneca purged the letters of this event. In epistle 91 he talks about the fire of Lyon of the subsequent year 65, and he writes *multas enim civitates incendium vexavit*⁸¹ without further specifications.⁸² He talks about Pompeii's earthquake in *Natural Questions* book 6, but spends no words on the fire of Rome. Despite the *Natural Questions* containing only a handful adulatory references to Nero,⁸³ in a significant number of passages Alexander the great is portrayed as a cruel tyrant, an historical persona likely concealing Seneca's disgust for Nero's debauchery.⁸⁴ Perhaps the choice of describing an apocalypse as flood, rather than a conflagration, was due to a self-censoring attitude, with the aim of staving off the emperor's irritation, by avoiding the mention of a calamity whose responsibility the *vox populi* attributed to him.⁸⁵ According to Statius, Lucan wrote a *De incendio urbis*,⁸⁶ where he probably accused Nero of being a *dominus nocens* ("guilty monarch"):

⁷⁶ Oct. 831-833.

⁷⁷ Trans. Fitch 2004.

⁷⁸ Suet. *Nero* 38.1: "in the course of a general conversation, someone quoted the line 'When I am dead, may fire consume the earth,' but Nero said that the first part of the line should read 'while I yet live' and soon converted it into facts" (trans. Graves 2003).

⁷⁹ D.C. 62.18.2: τοιοῦτό μὲν δὴ πάθει τότε ἡ πόλις ἐχρήσατο οἴῳ οὔτε πρότερόν ποτε οὐθ' ὕστερον, πλὴν τοῦ Γαλατικοῦ (trans. Cary 1961).

⁸⁰ D.C. 62.18.3: 'τρὶς δὲ τρηκοσίων περιελλομένων ἐνιαυτῶν Ῥωμαίους ἔμφυλος ὄλεσ' στάσις' (trans. Cary 1961).

⁸¹ *Ep.* 91.1: "fire has damaged many a city" (trans. Gummere 1962).

⁸² It is maybe significant that Seneca insists on the brevity of the fire of Lyon, *una nox* (*Ep.* 91.2), while all sources say that the fire of Rome lasted many days, from six to nine (see e.g. D.C. 63.17.1). He also insists on the limited extension of the city, built on only one hill (*Ep.* 91.10), and on its relatively young age: only a hundred years (*Ep.* 91.14). The reader's mind would have naturally contrasted these features of Lyon with Rome's seven hills and its eight hundred years of history. Moreover epistle 91 and *QN* 3 contain many similar expressions: *Ep.* 91.2: *tot pulcherrima opera... una nox stravit* ("so many beautiful buildings... were covered in one night"; trans. Gummere 1962), cf. *QN* 3.29.9: *unus humanum genus condet dies* ("a single day will bury the human race"; trans. Hine 2010); *Ep.* 91.6: *quiquid longa series... struxit, id unus dies spargit ac dissipat... hora momentumque temporis evertendis imperis sufficit* ("whatever structure has been reared by a long sequence of years... is scattered and dispersed by a single day... an hour, an instant of time, suffices for the overthrow of empires"), cf. *QN* 3.27.2: *urbes constituit aetas, hora dissolvit* ("cities take an age to establish, an hour to dissolve"). On letter 91 see Bedon 1991; Viti 1997; Degl'Innocenti Pierini 2011; Gavoille 2012.

⁸³ *QN* 1.5.6; 6.8.3; 7.17.2; 7.21.3.

⁸⁴ Letta 1999; Gauly 2004, 193-207; Hine 2006, 63-67; below, 91.

⁸⁵ Perhaps the marginalization of Rome as analyzed by Hine 2006, 43-50, also contributes to this picture.

⁸⁶ Degl'Innocenti Pierini 1999; on the literary genre of this work, Gagliardi 1968; McGann 1971. On some possible hints to the fire in the *Pharsalia* see Auchagen 1997.

*Dices culminibus Remi vagantis
infandos domini nocentis ignes*⁸⁷

Thou should tell how the impious fire of the guilty monarch ranged the heights of Remus.⁸⁸

In all probability, the *De incendio urbis* was the pretext and the cause for Nero's ban on Lucan's appearances in the law-courts and upon further recitations.⁸⁹ If this is true, Seneca had a concrete reason for self-censoring himself. We are not sure that Seneca was still working at *Natural Questions* in the late 64,⁹⁰ but there is no decisive argument against it.

In light of all these elements, one can reasonably posit that Seneca actually witnessed the fire of Rome, and chose to describe the end of the world, but purposely avoided any references to a recent historical event which surely appeared as an apocalypse to the contemporary Romans, and which many of them ascribed to the emperor.

So, we do not have a fire, maybe in order to avoid references to the fire of Rome, but a flood.

Also this event could be linked to Rome, if we think about the frequent flooding of the Tiber. And yet, there are no references to this river in *QN* 3.27-30. Seneca, in his description of the final flood, devotes some considerable space to rivers, and their potential for overflowing.⁹¹ These considerations are inserted in a section where, as commentators have noticed, the author first deploys an a-chronical present, to then resort to historical tenses,⁹² therefore shifting from the realm of possibility to actual facts. When Seneca moves to the indicative imperfect, it is as if he were describing something that already occurred. Not much later, he alludes to the deluge narrated by Ovid.⁹³ So, the rivers section is the one associated with the mythical version of the

⁸⁷ Statius *Silv.* 2.7.60-61. Newlands 2011, 237-238 *ad l.* The Other source is Vacca's *Vita Lucani*, 336 Hosius.

⁸⁸ Trans. Mozley 1961.

⁸⁹ Ahl 1971, 8. Sources: Tac. *Ann.* 15.49; Vacca 335-336; D.C. 62.29.4.

⁹⁰ The most recent and accurate essay about this is Hine 2006, 68-72. All scholars agree that the *QN* were written after Seneca's retirement from the imperial court in 62. We have evidence for this period because Seneca mentions a comet which appeared in 60, and also the Pompeian earthquake, which dates to the year 63 or, more likely, 62. But the comet which appeared in 64 is not mentioned. This can mean that Seneca was not working on the *QN* (or at least on book 7 on comets) anymore. Yet the comet appeared in the last days of the year 64 (Tac. *Ann.* 15.47: *fine anni*, "at the end of the year"; trans. Jackson 1956). So, there is no factual objection to the hypothesis that Seneca was still working on *QN* in the summer and autumn of that year. We also know that book 3 was probably the opening one, but it is a well-known fact that authors do not always follow strict logical order in composing the various parts of a given work, so book 3 could have been written after other books. Moreover, the final section of book 3 is, from a stylistic point of view, self-standing, this suggesting that it was composed in a peculiar time, independent from the other parts of the book.

⁹¹ *QN* 3.27.8: *Flumina vero suapte natura vasta et tempestatibus rapida alveos reliquerunt. Quid tu esse Rhodanum, quid putas Rhenum atque Danuuuium, quibus torrens etiam in canali suo cursus est, cum superfusi novas sibi fecere ripas ac scissa humo simul excessere alveo?* [This same expression recurs about Tiber's floods in Plin. *Ep.* 8.17.1], "Rivers that are huge by nature and swift-flowing even without storm have burst their banks. What do you think becomes of the Rhone, what do you think become of the Rhine and Danube? Their current is violent even within their own channels: what happens when they have spilled over and made themselves new banks, and have cut through the soil and abandoned their riverbeds?" This passage is inserted in the description attributed to Papirius Fabianus, a famous orator and philosopher linked to the school of Sestii (35 B.C.E. - 25 C.E.) who was one of Seneca's teachers.

⁹² Waiblinger 1977, 49-50; Mazzoli 2005, 175-176.

⁹³ Above, 83.

end of the world. Indeed, this passage is the only one in the Flood section where humans are active; they come back only at the end, as passive objects of the destructive strength of nature.⁹⁴ This is the most pathetic detail from a reader's point of view, who could identify with the protagonists.

This was particularly true for Roman citizens: in fact, they were used to the Tiber's floods which were a real plague for the city, and a well-documented one from 414 B.C.E. to the XXth century.⁹⁵ These historical descriptions are enriched by apocalyptic details, and deploy recurring topical details such as the images of fish on the trees, boats on the streets, death and desperation everywhere, and so on. If we take a general overview of the sources regarding the Tiber's floods, we find some commonplaces already present in Seneca, precisely in the section where he quotes the rivers' floods as concurrent causes of the deluge: *fames*;⁹⁶ houses' walls rotten by water;⁹⁷ buildings' ruin;⁹⁸ survivors taking refuge on high hills;⁹⁹ cattle drowned;¹⁰⁰ lake created by stagnation of the rivers' waters.¹⁰¹ It hardly needs stating that Tiber's floods were interpreted as *omina* of decay and apocalypse, even by 'rationalist' authors such as Tacitus.¹⁰²

From the analysis of the sources, it has been calculated that there was an average of a great flood every 18 years, with minor floods occurring every 5 years.¹⁰³ Thus, this was something which any Roman citizen likely experienced more than once in a lifetime. The great floods attested during Seneca's life in Rome took place in 5, 12, 15, and 36 C.E. The last two were particularly destructive, and in both cases Cassius Dio attests that people went about in boats, and that these floods had been interpreted as bad *omina*.¹⁰⁴ There were no great floods during Nero's reign, and the memory of these events was somewhat removed in the sixties, but nonetheless it was still surely present to the minds of most Romans, together with the constant fear of them happening again. Santiago Montero has interpreted Ovid's description of the flood in *Met.* 1 as the Tiber's flood,¹⁰⁵ and Horace explicitly draws this very connection in *Ode* 1.2.¹⁰⁶ Nothing prevents us from picking up on the same analogy between these historical events and the conclusion of Seneca's *QN* 3.

In the light of all these elements, we can say that, by choosing to describe a water-caused end of the world, Seneca deliberately tried to forgo any reference to a recent historical fact, such as the fire of Rome, which was too compromising for Nero. Yet, given the recurring flooding of the Tiber, Seneca's water-based apocalypse was all-too-familiar to his Roman readers, for whom the river was very much a sword of

⁹⁴ *QN* 3.29.8-9. Humans come back at the end of the rebirth, *QN* 3.30.8.

⁹⁵ Aldrete 2006, 13-33.

⁹⁶ Tac. *Hist.* 1.86; Sen. *QN* 3.27.5.

⁹⁷ Tac. *Hist.* 1.86; D.C. 39.61; Sen. *QN* 3.27.7.

⁹⁸ Suet. *Otho* 8.3; Sen. *QN* 3.27.7.

⁹⁹ D.C. 39.61; Sen. *QN* 3.27.11.

¹⁰⁰ D.C. 39.61; Sen. *QN* 3.27.14.

¹⁰¹ Plin. *Ep.* 8.17.1; Sen. *QN* 3.27.10.

¹⁰² He defines *omen imminetium cladium* the flood of 69 (Tac. *Hist.* 1.86: "an omen of impending disaster"; trans. Moore 1925). Cf. Plin. *HN* 3.55.

¹⁰³ Aldrete 2006, 71-84. A list of all attested floods in Rome from 414 B.C.E. to 1947 at 241-46.

¹⁰⁴ D.C. 57.14.7-8: "When now the river Tiber overflowed a large part of the city, so that people went about in boats, most people regarded this, also, as an omen" (trans. Cary 1961). Montero 2012, 253-300, shows how much these *omina* were related to the ruling power.

¹⁰⁵ Montero 2012, 271.

¹⁰⁶ Aldrete 2006, 21-23.

Damocles, even if its same recurrency constituted an evidence of their capacity to overcome it. Perhaps it is not by chance that Seneca never explicitly mentions the Tiber.¹⁰⁷ In the *Natural Questions*, despite an entire book being devoted to terrestrial waters, even when discussing many local phenomena such as the peculiar properties of the waters of Lacus Velinus or of Tivoli,¹⁰⁸ or of the ones at Baiiae,¹⁰⁹ Seneca focuses only on Rhine, Danube and Rhône,¹¹⁰ whose floods are compared to the final one at 3.27.8: of course they are huge rivers with devastating floods, but they are also remote and far from the life experience of Seneca's readers. Additionally, book 4a is focussed on the Nile. This is a peculiar example, because the Nile's regular floods were providential and brought renewed life and fertility to Egypt. Seneca, in keeping with his strategy of book three, packages it as a *palingenesis* and insists on what will follow the flood.¹¹¹ Nile's floods are surely a bliss for Egypt: but Egypt was far away from Rome, and the floods to which the Romans were used brought destruction and death.

It is as if Seneca is here geographically removing the event of the flood from Rome and Italy, even though he knows perfectly well how present it was in his readers' thoughts. It is a fact that for a Roman reader a flood was not a legendary scenario, a remote event which only literary imagination could trigger; rather it was something which most people could actually remember in its horrific details, and everyone concretely feared as something which was fated to happen again.

4. Conclusion: Apocalypse Now

Seneca represents his sage, described as a failed politician (Cato of Utica), as taking part to the world's ruin (civil war, the end of the Republic). Moreover, in his more detailed description of the end of the world, he does not talk about *ekpyrosis*, thus distancing himself from a recent and dramatic event: the fire of Rome, which everyone ascribed to Nero's tyrannical *hybris*. On the contrary, the philosopher alludes to a phenomenon which was frequent and devastating for the city: the flood. The end of the world is described as something imminent, even if followed by the renovation of life, the *palingenesis* which he briefly couched in ironical more than consolatory language. Seneca writes: the end will actually happen in a short time: *nec longa erit mora exitii: temptatur divelliturque concordia*.¹¹² He avails himself of a Lucretian word, *exitium*, which is obsessively present in the final section of *QN* book 3¹¹³ and which he elsewhere deploys to characterize Caligula, a tyrannical emperor.¹¹⁴ Moreover, the verb *divello* ("to tear apart") is reminiscent of a similar Lucretian image:

¹⁰⁷ In Seneca's whole oeuvre we find only four references to this river, mostly aimed to locate a place: *Apoc.* 13.1; *Brev.* 16.4; *Pol.* 12.12.7; *Ep.* 83.14.

¹⁰⁸ *QN* 3.20.4.

¹⁰⁹ *QN* 3.24.3.

¹¹⁰ On these rivers: Rhine and Danube, *QN* 3.pr.9; 6.7.1; *Brev.* 4.5; Danube and Nile, *QN* 3.22; 4a.1.1-2; Rhône, Rhine and Danube, *QN* 4a.2.20.

¹¹¹ Berno 2003, 137-141; Williams 2012, 124-135.

¹¹² *QN* 3.30.5: "Destruction will be not long delayed: harmony is being tested and disrupted" (trans. Hine 2010). As for the fixed time for the end of the world, cf. Above, n. 48.

¹¹³ From its very start, *QN* 3.27.1; 27.3; 28.7; 30.5; 30.7.

¹¹⁴ *Pol.* 17.3. See Degl'Innocenti Pierini 1990b; Sen. *Brev.* 18.5; *Clem.* 1.26.5: *multos quidem occidere et indiscretos incendii ac ruinae potentia est* ("but multiple and indiscriminate murder is the power of a conflagration or a collapsing building"; trans. Braund 2009). See also *Ep.* 71.9: *ruina imperii*; *Const.* 2.2, quoted above, 79.

*Omnia saepe gravi tremere et divulsa repente
maxima dissiluisse capacis moenia mundi*¹¹⁵

All things often appear to shake and tremble... and it seems that the great walls of the capacious firmament suddenly torn asunder have left apart.

While Lucretius, if only metaphorically, attaches this verb to a physical object, the *moenia mundi* (“wall of the world”), Seneca attributes it to *concordia* (“harmony”), which was, apart from few philosophical recurrences channelling the Empedoclean concept of *concordia discors* (“inharmonious harmony”),¹¹⁶ a human and political concept, strictly linked to the imperial family and imperial cult. *Concordia* was also a Goddess, with the attendant shrine dedicated by Livia.¹¹⁷ Perhaps this statement, like the ones previously analysed, contains a veiled political allusion, which is corroborated by the fact that, once again, the apocalyptic calamity described by Seneca was something that a Roman reader could immediately relate to: the frequent and quintessentially Roman flood of the Tiber.

Moreover, in the preface of the same book 3, when dealing with Philip and Alexander, two *exempla* of tyranny, with the latter being often suggestive of the emperor Nero,¹¹⁸ Seneca writes that those Macedonian kings were more dangerous for the human race than floods and conflagrations:

*Quanto potius deorum opera celebrare quam Philippi aut Alexandri latrocinia
ceterorumque, qui exitio gentium clari non minores fuere pestes mortalium quam
inundatio qua planum omne perfusum est, quam conflagratio qua magna pars
animantium exarsit!*¹¹⁹

How much more important to praise the works of the gods rather than the robberies of Philip or of Alexander, and of others who became famous by destroying nations and were no lesser disasters to mortals than a flood that has swept over all the plains, or a conflagration in which a large proportion of living things has gone up in flames!

To conclude: Seneca’s sage, a sage who is politically active, is directly involved with the end of the world. Moreover, Seneca’s description of the flood, a deliberate alternative to the Stoic orthodox *ekpyrosis*, possibly hints at Rome’s destiny, and so at the emperor Nero as the cause and symbol of Rome’s imminent destruction. But this hint is not direct as it would have been with a conflagration, given the fire of Rome which most people thought had been deliberately caused by the emperor. It is indirect, but equally clear: it describes a flood, without mentioning the Tiber but leading the reader’s mind towards this event, which had frequently occurred and

¹¹⁵ Lucr. 6.122-123.

¹¹⁶ Hor. *Ep.* 1.12.19; Ov. *Met.* 1.433; Sen. *QN* 7.27.4, with Vottero 1990, 716-717, n. 7, *ad l.* (Lact. *Inst.* 2.9.17).

¹¹⁷ Ov. *Fast.* 6.637-638: *te quoque magnifica, Concordia, dedicat aede/ quam caro praestitit ipsa viro* (“to thee too, Concordia, Livia dedicated a magnificent shrine, which she presented to her dear husband”; trans. Frazer 1989). Cf. *ThIL* IV 83.22- 87.46 s. v. Seneca often speaks about harmony on a social level (*Ben.* 4.18.1; 7.27.3; 6.30.5; *Ep.* 90.26). We find *concordia* also in *Benef.* 6.22.1, quoted above, 84. This key political Roman concept was peculiarly developed by Cicero and in general the late Republic reflections on politics (Akar 2013); imperial ideology was rooted on it (Lobur 2008).

¹¹⁸ Above, n. 84; Williams 2012, 253-254.

¹¹⁹ *QN* 3.pr.5.

interpreted as a sort of end of the world, in connection with the man who actually ruled it: the emperor. And yet the same frequency of the Tiber's floods shows how the Romans are able to overcome them, despite the deaths and destructions which these events involve.

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