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IMAGES OF NATURE AND ENVIRONMENT IN LATIN POETRY**Folorunso Taiwo, PhD**

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Abstract

‘The land was to the Romans the chief field of their industry and the original source of their wealth’, so that in every of their endeavour, they strove to preserve, protect and stay close to Nature as much as possible. Evidence of this is most conspicuous in the works of poets such as Virgil, Ovid, Horace etc. And Virgil more than any other poet, presents that aspect of nature in the proper perception of the Romans. This paper seeks to highlight the aesthetics of nature and the environment as appreciated by both Roman poets and citizenry. This would show that even in antiquity there was awareness and concern for the environment, even though there were exceptions, as is the case today.

...the farmers of old, a sturdy folk. With simple wealth; when after harvesting the grain ;they sought relief at holiday time for the body as well as for the soul ;which bore its tails in hope of the end together with slaves and faithful wife ;partners of their labors ;used to propitiate. Earth with swine Silvanus with milk and ;with flowers and wine (Hor. Epist II 1 139-155)

The poet and satirist; Horatius Flaccus; here paints an image of the Roman ideal life style, that of the rustic country side, close to nature herself. Nature, and indeed the *rustica*, with its concomitant effect on man occupy a sizeable chunk of the subject matter or theme of Latin poetry/poets and other writers alike. This intense passion for nature, traverse the different literary genres.

As far back as history goes, we know that the ancients were always fascinated by nature. This fascination was what moulded the primitive fancies of Greek mythology into legend; poetry and art. Down the ages the satisfaction of this impulse has stimulated curiosity and the imaginative emotion which accompany it, giving birth to literature that expounded the phenomenon of nature, especially in the Homeric epic, Aratus, Callimachus. which eventually provided material

for Roman writers such as Virgil in the *Georgics*; Ovid in the *Metamorphosis* among others.

II

This love of nature in the satires and Epistles was more conspicuously presented in the work of the Alexandrian poets. These were poets or writers whose works show an imaginative longing for a return to an earlier state of nature, enjoyed by an older generation. They longed to escape from the heat and confinement of Alexandria, to the fresh sight and free air of woods and mountains. This promoted such sentiment in Alexandrian poets who had left their homes on the shores and the island of the Aegean for the dusty streets of Alexandria.

Scholars, like Sellar [1976] have attributed this passion for nature among Latin poets to the waning of the polytheistic fancies of early philosophy, which had laid bare the remoteness of these gods and the inadequacy of the explanation about the origin of natural phenomena; such as the weather, the source of life the nature of things among many others. Hence they changed their subject matter to something that was more concrete and held the interest of their readers.

The great affluence and luxury of Rome during the late Republic and early Principate; a period known in Latin literature as the Augustan period, was one that had great impact on the life, imagination and thoughts of poets. From the works of Augustan writers and poets like Virgil and Horace we learn of the passion for beautifying villas and fish ponds among other interests on the environment. Emperor Augustus as a matter of state policy embarked early in his reign on restoring temples of the gods in their artistic beauty, in order not only to beautify Rome, but also to make his countrymen proud. The impact of such passion for the environment, in the preservation of temples, theatres and other monument of the previous age, can be seen in the works of these two great poets, Virgil and Horace. Virgil's two great works are a celebration of such labours of the Augustan age and Horace's the pleasures of inspiration among the Sabine Hills or the cool mountain air of *praeneste* amidst the gardens and streams of *Tibur* or by the bright shores of *Baiae*:

*Vester; Camenae; vester in arduos
tollor Sabinos ; seu Tibur seu mihi frigidum
Praeneste; seu Tibur supinum
Seu liquidae placuere baeiae (Od. III.4.21-24)*

*I belong to you o Muses, I belong to you,
whether I climb by own steep slopes or
Pass time
In hill-perched Tibur or cool-aired
Praeneste or Baeiae's cloudless bay*

This sentiment engendered by nature itself can be appreciated in the flow of their thought and unimpaired freshness of their genius in their art,

producing a distinctly charming poetry. This appreciation of nature by the Roman poets sets them apart from poets of any other age. The same passionate and truly representative of the feelings of a lover of nature/environment as is evident in the following lines from Horace .

*Te flagrantis atrox hora Caniculae
Nescit tangere; tu frigus amabile
Fessis vomere tauris
Praebes; et pecori Vago (Ode III.13.9-12)*

*Sirius no blazing season
Is able to hold your lovely Freshness
The roaming flocks
And the plough-weary ox*

Besides Horace's moralizing and powerful character delineations, he ranks high among those poets who can with their pen make one feel close to nature. Compare the images the following lines of the *Georgics* conjure in the mind of a reader;

*Rura mihi et rigui placeant in
Vallibus amnes; Flumina amem
Silvasque inglorius. O Ubi campi
Spercheosque; et virginibus bacchata*

Lacaenis Taygeta ... (Virg. Georg. ii.450)

***May my delight be in the fields and the
flowing streams in the dales; unknown to
fame may I love the rivers and the woods.
O to be, where are the plains, and the spercheos,
And the heights, roamed over their revels
By Laconian maidens, the height of Taygetus(.***

Such vivid delineation of Nature by Virgil compares with that of Eighteenth century England, for their instructiveness and morality. Indeed, the opulence of the age, (the Augustan age), had a contrary effect on these poets, who shunned the bustle of the city in preference for nature and the pure and simple style.

Their ideal as indicated earlier in the Epistle of Horace (Ep. II.i.139ff) was more primitive. This contrastive awakening, manifests in the pursuit of purer sources of human happiness, of friendly and intellectual society, of family affection, of the beauty of Nature, and especially the simpler tastes of the country. The familiar beauty of the outward world as it was perceived by the

Romans, was expressed in the Latin word “*amoenum*”. Horace describes his retreat among the Sabine hills, in the following words:

*Hae latebrae dulces,
etiam, si credis, amoenae(Hor.Ep.II*

*These retreats are pleasant, and if you
believe me, beautiful indeed.*

The *amoenum*, of nature, is not only scenic, but as the poet indicates in this lyric ode:

...fronde nova puerum palunbes texere,
Murum quot foret omnibus quicumque celsae
Nidum Acherontiae saltusque Bantinos et
Aruum pingue tenent humilis forenti (Od. III.4.12-19)

*...I lay down and the legendary doves
wove me a blanket of the leaves just fallen
in Bantia's glades, high in the village -
eyrie
of Acherontia
And through Forentum's fertile valleys,
folk marveled at how the bears and black
snakes left me tucked in my coverlet of
bay and myrtle To sleep on, safe, a babe
And unafraid, watched over by the gods.
(Od.3.4.12-19)*

In *Georgics* III 322 – 338, Virgil celebrates the picturesqueness, of the varied pastoral beauty of a long summer day: from the early dawn when the fields are fresh beneath the morning star, through the gathering warmth of the later hours, when the groves are loud with the chirping of the grasshoppers and the herds gather around the deep water-pools, through the burning heat of mid-day, from which the shade of some huge oak or some grove of dark illex provides a shelter, till the coolness of evening tempers the air, and the moon renews with dew the dry forest-glades. This is a beauty quite distinct from the charm of freedom and solitude, but not too remote from our neighbourhood experience of the changing aspects of the sky, and the picturesque environment of hills, rivers and moorland, which abides in the pastoral regions of even our own land. Such scenes as described in the opening lines of the (*Georgics* 1.43);

*Vere novo gelidus canis
Cum montibus umor
Liquitur, et Zephyro putris*

Se glaeba resolvit.

*“In early spring when chill waters and
streaming from the hoary sides of the hills, and
the clod breaks up and crumbles beneath the
west wind.*

which were familiar to the Roman audience, may not be far removed from our environmental experience. Even when he describes the violent vicissitude to which the climate is especially liable, the “whirling forest in its mad eddies,” and rivers sweeping away all in its part (1.43), the impressive spectacle presented is not strange to us either.

In contemporary times, the desire to escape from the tedium of an artificial life makes one crave for the leisure and peace of Nature. The taste for gardens within great cities developed from this sentiment, as we are told by the writer, Tacitus in the *Annales!* Of a park built in the city of Rome, by Decimus Asiaticus, an ex-consul and it was so beautified at such a lavish expense, that it was coveted by the emperor’s wife – Messalina.

Indeed, the passion for nature played a part in the development of the culture and taste of the age, and the relationship with their physical environment.

The epigrammatist Luxorius, who wrote sometime in the 6th century, in one of his epigrams betray, a sensitive appreciation for nature, when he praised the garden of a certain Eugetus, after a brilliant depiction of gods of the woodland and Nymphs (46:1–7). The senses are excited by a remarkable concentration of pleasing sights, fragrances, and sounds.

Luxorius, further celebrates the occasion of the building of a new amphitheatre, endowing inanimate nature with the feelings of excitement he must have experienced himself:

*amphitheatrales mirantur rura triumphos est
nemus ignotas cernit adesse feras (60, 1,2)*

*The wonders of amphitheatres was the
triumph of life in the country
Separate from obscure pasture lands and the
presence of wild animals*

The new monument, with its diverse entertainment the poet continues, (as if addressing the conservationist lobby) would be environmentally friendly: far from diminishing the amount of fertile land, the amphitheatre has increased it, since the concentration of wild beasts there will ensure that the surrounding land, which is left for farming, will not be ravaged by them.

Ovidus Naso, (43BC) also reflects the influence of the Alexandrine poetry, especially in the *metamorphoses*; where he delightfully paints physical nature

in language that assails the senses. It speaks of the rolling water falls, thick shade of woods and the frolicking Nymphs. It extols the beauty, serenity, and magnificence of nature:

Est nenus Haemoniae, praerupta
Quod undique claudit silva:vocant
Tempe. Per quae Peneus ab imo
Effuses pindo spumosis volvitur
Undis deiectuque gravi tenues
Agitanta fumos nubile conduit
Smmsique adspergine silvis
Inpluit et sonitu plus quam vicina
fatigat (1.568 – 73)

*There is a vale in Thessaly, enclosed with
hanging forests, steep on every side;
Men name it Tempe. Here Peneus rolls
At Towering Pindus' foot his foaming course
And from his mighty fall the swirling clouds
Of mist drift down in rain upon the trees,
And far the waters' wearying roar resounds
(1.568 – 73)*

Attitude towards the Environment

Several scholarly works have established the fact that environmental pollution has a negative effect on both the man and the environment. And classical Rome, was by no means an exception. Juvenal, a prominent poet and satirists, did not hide his indignation at this phenomenon.

His satires are replete with evidence of neglect of the environment and its negative impact on both the environment and the people: in *satire III*, of the first book of satires, Umbricius, the poet's *persona*, is disgusted with living in the city of Rome; "his goods were being loaded on one small wagon". Apparently, Umbricius would value "A barren offshore Island more than Rome's urban heat. Squalor and isolation is preferred to the 'endless nightmare of fires and collapsing houses, the cruel city's myriad of perils.'

Even the activity of man also degrades the environment, the poet laments:

Nunc sacri fontis nemus et delubra locantor
Iudaeis, quorum cophinus faenumque
Supellex (omni enim populo mercedem)(Juv.III.13-14)

*But today Egeria's grove and shrine
and sacred spring are rented to Jewish*

*squatters, their sole possession, a
Sabbath hay box. (The world's aswarm
with beggars).*

Egerias's grove and shrine', was a part of the city which still had the semblance of a natural habitat but has been neglected due to the insensitivity of man. The environment in that part of the city of Rome was once the pride of individuals like Juvenal's persona-lover of nature has now been battered and defaced with the construction of environmentally unfriendly structures and by Jewish squatters whose morality and sense of propriety were bankrupt.

...meneant qui Nigrum in candida vertunt,
Quis facile est aedem conducere flumina
Portus...(Juv.III.29-31)

... let those remain who turn black into
White, to whom it comes easy to take
*contracts for temples, rivers or
harbours...*

These were disreputable individuals, the poet complains that get all the juicy contracts, for the building of temples, swamp-drainage, harbour-works, or River-clearance, unmindful of the effect of their activities on the natural environment.

Juvenal through his persona reels off the travails of life in the city of Rome and a tacit antithesis of life in the country. "I prefer to live where fires and midnight panics are not quite such common events". The endless hazards of city life, and the deplorable outbreaks of fire, take its toll on individuals.

"Insomnia causes more death amongst Rome's invalids, than any other factor. How much sleep can you get, when the noise of wagons thundering past in the narrow twisted streets, the oaths of Draymen caught in a traffic-jam, keep you in a state of permanent wakefulness? (Juv.III.95)

The tirade against life in the city by the poet's *persona*, among others, illustrates a pervasive antithesis of town and country in Latin literature. Against the harshness of the city, the country is seen as a place of refreshments, cool, and pleasant climate, where a man may enjoy relaxation and companionship with a friend (Braund.1989 27).

III

Roman Environmental Management Practice

Evidence garnered from Latin literature; indicate that the ancients had a strong passion for nature which naturally should translate to a proper management of the environment. These efforts to enhance the environment, can still be seen

today. Romans were ranked the great engineers in classical times and considered the greatest Aqueduct builders, of the ancient world. These manmade conduit for carrying water, utilized tunnels tapped into hillsides that brought water for irrigation to the plains below. This elaborate system served the capital of the Roman Empire, for over 500 years – from 312 BC – AD 226. Within this period, a total of eleven aqueducts were built to bring water to Rome from over a distance of 92km or 57 miles. These were underground conduits made mostly of stone and terra cotta pipe, wood, leather and bronze.

The Romans also constructed thousands of miles of wonderful roads, to connect every part of the empire to Rome, the capital. Their roads were so solidly constructed that up till a hundred years ago, engineers made use of their techniques. Indeed some of the techniques are still in use today.

They enjoyed their afternoon at the *thermae* or public bath. The bath had hot and cold pools, towels, steam rooms, saunas e.t.c. The experience begins with the *unctarium* or warm room, where they rubbed oil onto the skin; then to the *tepidarium* or warm room, and lastly to the *Caldarium* or cold room, an invention similar to modern day Turkish baths. The largest bath was that built by Doicletian completed in A.D. 305 and covered an area of 130,000 sq. yard.

At a point, there were as many as 900 public baths in ancient Rome, small ones held about 300 people, while the big held 1,500 or even more. Emperors, Trajan and Septimius Severus built public baths; in 206AD the bath of Caracalla was built by Severus .

IV

From the foregoing, it would appear that the ‘amoenum’ of nature exhibited by the older poets of the late republic and early principate in their works and even in those of their successors, was not shared by Juvenal’s contemporaries. There is no doubt that in Rome and generally in the ancient world, there was a strong passion for nature, as shown in the compositions of the Augustan, and Alexandrine literature and also in the satires. This appreciation was unfortunately only on the pages of their literary works. Next to no attempt was made to preserve the environment, especially in the *urbs*, where all manner of construction works, insensitive to the deprecation of the environment was embarked on; to the detriment of not only the human inhabitants of these *urbes*, but also the environment. And of course the result was migration back to the country, by some who could not compromise their passion for the *rusticae*.

END NOTES

1. Od.III.4.21 – 24
2. Evidence from painting received from Pompeii

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