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*EST LOCUS...*  
THE *GROTTESCHI* OF GIOVANNI BATTISTA PIRANESI  
AND THE ANCIENT TOPOS OF *LOCUS HORRIDUS*

THE LITERARY CONTEXT: THE ROMAN POETS

The motif of a *locus horridus*, i.e. a frightening scenery, was very popular among the Roman poets. Powerful descriptions of such places can be found especially in the works of Virgil (*Aen.* 6. 268–289), Ovid (i.a. *Met.* 8.788–791, 11.592–607)<sup>1</sup>, Seneca (*Oed.* 530–547, *Thy.* 641–682)<sup>2</sup> and Lucan (3. 399–425). In all probability, these descriptions have inspired later poets, such as Statius (cf. *Stat. Theb.* 4. 419–442) and, to some extent, Silius Italicus (*Sil. Pun.* 13. 562–578)<sup>3</sup>.

Most of these poets have used the ancient topos of a *locus horridus* as a means of endowing the actions that take place in them with sublimity. Seneca and Lucan, however, have given these scenes a special status. In their lengthy and elaborate descriptions, the *loci horridi* no longer function as mere tools of creating sublimity, but they find themselves in the centre of the reader's attention, equally with the actions which they 'witness'.

Seneca's two famous *loci horridi* are the scenes of quasi-religious rituals. The rite of necromancy performed by Creon in Seneca's *Oedipus* serves a good purpose, i.e. to solve the mystery of the murder of king Laius, whereas the perverted ceremony performed

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed analysis of Ovid's *loci horridi* see: N. B e r n s t e i n, *Locus Amoenus and Locus Horridus in Ovid's Metamorphoses*, "Wenshan Review of Literature and Culture" 5, 1 (December 2011), pp. 67–98, at 83–90.

<sup>2</sup> For the sources of Seneca's *loci horridi* see: J. J. L. S m o l e n a a r s, *The Literary Tradition of the "Locus Horridus" in Seneca's "Thyestes"*, "Classica Cracoviensia" 2 (1996), pp. 89–108.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. V. T i e t z e L a r s o n, *The Role of Description in Senecan Tragedy*, Frankfurt am Main 1994, p. 88; N. B e r n s t e i n, op.cit., pp. 90–93.

by Atreus in *Thyestes* – quite the opposite – is a sacrilegious human sacrifice. However, the surroundings where these rites take place are very similar from the aesthetic point of view.

On the one hand, they are quite conventional as they consist of constant elements such as old, frightening trees (such as *taxus*, *cupressus* and *ilex*) and dark, slow-moving water<sup>4</sup>. They also, quite clearly, emulate the descriptions of similar places in the works of Virgil and Ovid<sup>5</sup>. On the other hand, however, they contain some innovative elements that have later inspired other poets.

The most significant of these innovations include ghosts<sup>6</sup> and other supernatural beings such as the mysterious *maiora notis monstra* (Sen. *Thy.* 673). The grove in *Thyestes* is a kind of shrine where the Tantalids seek oracle at difficult times<sup>7</sup>. Overcome by a murderous rage, Atreus uses this shrine as a place of sacrifice where he performs his perverse ritual of *immolatio*:

*Iipse est sacerdos, ipse funesta prece  
letale carmen ore violento canit.  
stat ipse ad aras, ipse devotos neci  
contrectat et componit et ferro admovet;  
attendit ipse – nulla pars sacri perit.*  
(Sen. *Thy.* 691–695)

*He does! He acts as a priest, and with sepulchral prayer  
He chants funereal incantations in fanatic tones.  
It's he who at the altar stands, he who grips the children  
Doomed to death, arranges them, and takes the knife in hand,  
He who plays assistant – no segment of the rite is overlooked.*  
(Transl. by Shadi Bartsch)

This scene has served Lucan as the hypotext for his description of the ancient grove at Massilia. Like the shrine of the Tantalids, where the *superstitio inferum* is practised<sup>8</sup>, the druidic grove in the *Pharsalia* contains the images of barbarian gods (*simulacraque maesta deorum*, Luc. *Phars.* 3. 412). However, Caesar's troops also find there the remains of people that have been ritually killed by the savage barbarians.

This element, though apparently new, is in fact the straight continuation of the murder scene in *Thyestes*. In Seneca's tragedy, we can 'witness' the *nefas* committed by Atreus in our imagination, whereas in Lucan's epic we can only 'see' the remains of the human sacrifices performed by the sinister, Massilian priests:

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Sen. *Thy.* 651ff., *Oed.* 530ff. Cf. V. Tietze-Larson, op.cit., pp. 87–89; J. J. L. Smolenaars, op.cit., pp. 93, 98–104.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. V. Tietze-Larson, op.cit., p. 89.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Sen. *Thy.* 668ff.

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem 679–682.

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem 678.

*hunc non ruricolae Panes nemorumque potentes  
 Silvani Nymphaeque tenent, sed barbara ritu  
 sacra deum; structae diris altaribus arae  
 omnisque humanis lustrata cruoribus arbor.*  
 (Luc. *Phars.* 3. 402–405)

[...] *No rural Pan dwelt there, no Silvanus, ruler of the woods, no Nymphs; but gods  
 were worshipped there with savage rites, the altars  
 were heaped with hideous offerings, and every tree was sprinkled with human gore.*  
 [...]

(Transl. by J.D. Duff)

The benign forest deities, *Panes*, *Silvani* and *Nymphae*, who are absent from this gloomy place, strongly contrast with the bloodthirsty and demonic gods worshipped by the barbarians. Similarly, their subtlety and beauty differ from the crude ugliness of the images of those savage divinities.

[...] *Tum plurima nigris  
 fontibus unda cadit, simulacraque maesta deorum  
 arte carent caesisque extant informia truncis.*  
 (Luc. *Phars.* 3. 410–412)

[...] *Water, also, fell there in abundance from dark springs. The images of the gods,  
 grim and rude, were uncouth  
 blocks formed of felled tree-trunks. [...]*

(Transl. by J.D. Duff)

The mention of the forest demigods quite clearly echoes the following passage of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*:

*Sunt mihi semidei, sunt, rustica numina, nymphae  
 faunique satyrique et monticolae silvani;  
 quos quoniam caeli nondum dignamur honore,  
 quas dedimus, certe terras habitare sinamus.*  
 (Ovid. *Met.* 1. 192–195)

*There dwells below, a race of demi-gods,  
 Of nymphs in waters, and of fawns in woods:  
 Who, tho' not worthy yet, in Heav'n to live,  
 Let 'em, at least, enjoy that Earth we give.*  
 (Transl. John Dryden)

Interestingly, this passage is part of a longer one, in which Jupiter reveals his plan of destroying the human race. The only creatures he is going to spare are the Nymphs, Fauns, Satyrs and Silvans, while all the rest is condemned to death. Therefore, both Ovid and Lucan confront the environment of a *locus horridus* with that of a *locus amoenus*. In

the *Metamorphoses*, the forest gods are going to be the only ones to survive the future calamity, while in the *Pharsalia*, they are conspicuous by their absence.

Lucan's mention of the peaceful inhabitants of the traditional *locus amoenus* produces a strong contrast between the frightening grove and its opposite, i.e. the Ovidian *loci amoeni*<sup>9</sup>. Such a skilful use of negative poetics renders the description of the grove very powerful. The cult of the barbarian deities becomes much more frightening when contrasted with that of *Panes, Silvani Nymphaeque*, than *per se ipsum*.

Another *locus horridus* finds itself in the sixth book of the *Pharsalia*. Lucan describes Thessaly as the burial place of Pentheus, who died murdered by his own mother, Agave (Luc. *Phars.* 6. 357–359). He also depicts it as the scene of many horrible conflicts such as the war between the Lapites and the Centaurs (Luc. *Phars.* 6. 386–387) and also, as the place of origin of the terrible serpent, Python (Luc. *Phars.* 6. 407–409).

The abode of the Thessalian necromancer Erichtho is a nightmarish realm of death and darkness, abounding with all sorts of poisonous herbs (Luc. *Phars.* 6. 438). It is infested by snakes (Luc. *Phars.* 6. 489–491) and scavenging beasts. The spot where Erichtho drags the dead Pompeian soldier in order to perform her rite resembles the grove at Massilia. It is a dark place, overgrown with yew trees:

*Haud procul a Ditis caecis depressa cavernis  
in praeceps subsedit humus, quam pallida pronis  
urguet silva comis et nullo vertice caelum  
suspiciens Phoebus non pervia taxus opacat.  
Marcentes intus tenebrae pallensque sub antris  
longa nocte situs numquam nisi carmine factum  
lumen habet. [...]  
(Luc. *Phars.* 6. 642–648)*

*There the ground fell in a sheer descent, sinking almost to the depth of the invisible caverns of Pluto. A dim wood with forward-bending trees borders it, and yew-trees shade it – yew-trees that the sun cannot penetrate, and that turn no tops towards the sky. In the caves within dank darkness reigns, and the colourless mould caused by unbroken night; the only light there is due to magic.*

(Transl. by J.D. Duff)

Like the grove in the third book of the epic, Erichtho's 'shrine' is the scenery of a perverted ritual involving human bodies. The witch herself arranges this theatre for the needs of her macabre spectacle. Erichtho's sinister activities reach far beyond her cave, as she intentionally destroys the crops and poisons the air with her breath:

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<sup>9</sup> More about the *topoi* of *locus horridus* and *locus amoenus* in: J. J. L. Smolenaars, op.cit., p. 98; E. Fantham, *Roman Readings. Roman Response to Greek Literature from Plautus to Statius and Quintilian*, Berlin–New York 2011, p. 533.

*Semina fecundae segetis calcata perussit  
et non letiferas spirando perdidit auras.*  
(Luc. *Phars.* 6. 521–522)

[...] *Her tread blights the seeds of the fertile cornfield, and her breath poisons air  
that before was harmless.* [...]   
(Transl. by J.D. Duff)

In this manner, Erichtho manages to transform the landscape of Thessaly into her own, frightening universe<sup>10</sup>. Her carefully arranged, horror-inspiring, microcosm becomes the adequate scenery for the words uttered by the dead soldier. The prophecy is brief and rather vague, yet the message it carries can be reduced to the simple statement that the war will equate the winners with the losers:

[...] *Veniet quae misceat omnis  
hora duces.* [...]   
(Luc. *Phars.* 6. 805–806)

*The hour will soon come that makes all the leaders equal.* [...]   
(Transl. by J.D. Duff)

#### PIRANESI'S *LOCI HORRIDI*

Some etchings of Piranesi, though long proven to remain under the influence of Giovanni Battista Tiepolo<sup>11</sup>, are also quite obviously inspired by the ancient Roman culture. Therefore, they are naturally interesting to a classicist. It is not my intention to forge a hypothesis that Piranesi intentionally alluded to particular pieces of Roman poetry, but to analyse his concretisation of the traditional topos of a *locus horridus* in the context of the verbal depictions of this topos in the works of the ancient poets<sup>12</sup>.

In this article, I will concentrate on several etchings which are so immersed in the Roman tradition that they could very well serve as the illustrations of the passages discussed above. The first of these, entitled *Ara antica sopra la quale si facevano anticamente i sacrifici, con alter ruine all' intorno*, contains the motif of an open book. This might be the author's declaration that the key to understanding the imageries which he invokes lies in the works of the ancient authors [il. 1].

<sup>10</sup> Cf. W. R. Johnson, *Momentary Monsters. Lucan and His Heroes*, New York 1987, pp. 1–33.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. M. Yourcenar, *The Dark Brain of Piranesi*, transl. by R. Howard, New York 1984, p. 104.

<sup>12</sup> Piranesi also departed from the picturesque views of real and imaginary buildings of Rome he illustrated in the 'Piccole vedute', the *Prima parte*, and the 'Antichità Romane de' tempi della Repubblica' to depict themes derived from **literary sources** with a heightened emotional content in the 'Grotteschi' and the 'Carceri'. (M. N. Rosenfeld, *Picturesque to Sublime: Piranesi's Stylistic and Technical Development from 1740 to 1761*, [in:] *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome. Supplementary Volumes*, Vol. 4, *The Serpent and the Stylus: Essays on G.B. Piranesi*, Ann Arbor 2006, pp. 55–91, at 56).



## 1.

However, it is not the book that makes this etching so special, as much as the fact that it depicts a place of sacrifice. Piranesi's vision is very similar to that of Seneca and Lucan. Although the artist does not say what kind of sacrifices used to be performed on this altar, the bones and skulls appear rather disturbing in the context of the picture's title. The intertwined themes of sacrifice and human remains bring about the remembrance of the grove described by Lucan. At the same time, the broken columns and the fragment of a frieze representing Roman soldiers awake associations with the works of poets such as Virgil, Lucan and Silius Italicus.

The second etching also belongs to the cycle of *Grotteschi*. A classicist may find it especially interesting because of the famous 'smiling herm'<sup>13</sup>. The cheerful expression on the face of this statue strongly contrasts with the grotesquely tragic grin of the crowned skull in the lower part of the etching. Like the previous composition, this one also contains the motif of a military relief. Fragments of decaying plants harmonise with the disturbing mask of death.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. *The Academy of Europe: Rome in the 18th Century: Catalogue of Exhibition October 13 – November 21, 1973, the William Benton Museum of Art, the University of Connecticut*, ed. by F. A. Den Broeder, Storrs 1973, p. 152; A. Robinson, *Giovanni Battista Piranesi: The Early Architectural Fantasies: a Guide to the Exhibition*, Washington 1978, pp. 32–33.

Exactly the same contrast is present in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (Ovid. *Met.* 1. 192–195) and Lucan's *Pharsalia* (Luc. *Phars.* 3. 402–405), where the carefree cheerfulness of the forest demigods is opposed to the theme of the destruction of human life. As to the aforementioned skull, the rests of the once abundant hair awakes unavoidable associations with Lucan's description of the severed and grotesquely disfigured head of Pompey the Great and his *hirta coma* [il. 2]:



2.

*Inpius ut Magnum nosset puer, illa verenda  
regibus hirta coma et generosa fronte decora  
caesaries compresa manu est, Pharioque veruto,  
dum vivunt voltus atque os in murmura pulsant  
singultus animae, dum lumina nuda rigescunt,  
suffixum caput est, quo numquam bella iubente  
pax fuit; hoc leges Campumque et rostra movebat,  
hac facie, Fortuna, tibi, Romana, placebas.*  
(Luc. *Phars.* 8. 679–686)

*That the sacrilegious boy might recognise Magnus, those manly locks that kings re-  
vered and the hair that graced his noble brow were gripped by the hand; and, while*

*the features still showed life and the sobbing breath drove sound through the lips, and the stark eyes stiffened, the head was stuck on an Egyptian pike – that head, whose call to war ever banished peace; the head, which swayed the Senate, the Campus, and the Rostrum; that was the face which the Fortune of Rome was proud to wear.*

(Transl. by J.D. Duff)

The skull has found itself in the centre of the lower part of the etching. Its grotesque eyeholes stare straight at the viewer with the petrifying force of a Gorgon.

In spite of the fact that the etching is apparently chaotic, Piranesi has been very precise about the details. One of these is the huge flower above the grinning skull. Looked at through a looking glass, or enlarged on a computer screen, it reveals a disturbing secret: surrounded by partly decayed petals, there is a tiny human skull. The shape emerges from the middle of the flower very vaguely, so that, at the first glance, the onlooker is not sure whether it is their imagination playing tricks, or the skull is actually there.

This technique consists in the psychological phenomenon of pareidolia, which involves seeing objects, mostly human faces, on random items. Piranesi's use of pareidolia, however, is deeply rooted in the works of his baroque predecessors, whose favourite themes included decaying bodies, skeletons and ruins<sup>14</sup>. This fascination with the dark, frightening and repulsive is especially visible in his *Carceri*, which, in turn, have strongly inspired Horace Walpole<sup>15</sup> and Francisco Goya<sup>16</sup> [il. 2a].



2a.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. A. Hyatt Mayor, *Piranesi*, "The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin," 33, 12 (Dec., 1938), pp. 279–284, at 280.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. M. Yourcenar, op.cit., p. 125–126; H. Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto*, ed. by M. Gamer, London 2001, p. ix.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. A. Huyssen, op.cit., pp. 13–14.



In baroque art, the motif of a skull often symbolises vanity<sup>17</sup>. Flowers, however, are more difficult to interpret. The macabre, six-petal flower on Piranesi's engraving has a very ambiguous meaning. On the one hand, it is evidently a token of death, but on the other hand, flowers also belong to the environment of a typical Roman *locus amoenus*. For example, they are a constant element of the innumerable depictions of *loci amoeni* in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

The following quotation, which belongs to the account of Narcissus, is especially interesting. The young hunter, who falls in love with his own reflection in water, eventually dies of sorrow because he cannot consummate his passion. Immediately after his death, the body of Narcissus becomes miraculously transformed into a flower:

*Ille caput viridi fessum submisit in herba,  
lumina mors clausit domini mirantia formam:  
tum quoque se, postquam est inferna sede receptus,  
in Stygia spectabat aqua. Planxere sorores  
Naiades et sectos fratri posuere capillos,  
planxerunt Dryades; plangentibus adsonat Echo.  
Iamque rogam quassasque faces feretrumque parabant:  
nusquam corpus erat; croceum pro corpore florem  
inveniunt foliis medium cingentibus albis.*  
(Ovid. *Met.* 3. 502–510)

*'Till death shuts up those self-admiring eyes.  
To the cold shades his flitting ghost retires,  
And in the Stygian waves it self admires.  
For him the Naiads and the Dryads mourn,  
Whom the sad Echo answers in her turn;  
And now the sister-nymphs prepare his urn:  
When, looking for his corps, they only found  
A rising stalk, with yellow blossoms crown'd.*  
(Transl. by John Dryden).

Piranesi's sinister flower, tainted with the reflection of death, inevitably brings about the remembrance of this passage. However, in this case, it is the flower itself that acts as a mirror. Even if the artist did not associate this element with the myth of Narcissus on purpose<sup>18</sup>, that famous ancient myth was somewhere at the back of his head.

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. R. Giorgi, *European Art. Of the Seventeenth Century*, Los Angeles 2008, p. 57; L. Cheney, *The Symbolism of Vanitas in the Arts, Literature, and Music: Comparative and Historical Studies*, Lewiston 1992, p. 242.

<sup>18</sup> For Piranesi's poetic license and his consciously liberal use of classical motifs in architecture see: T. Kirk, *Piranesi's Poetic License: His Influence on Modern Italian Architecture*, [in:] *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome. Supplementary Volumes*, Vol. 4, *The Serpent and the Stylus...*, pp. 239–274, at p. 254.

The tiny skull quite undeniably finds itself in the middle of the flower. Its presence is quite naturally explained by the fact that this weird blossom symbolises exaggerated self-love. Therefore, it remains in a close relationship with the grinning skull decorated with laurels.

The smiling Satyrs on the etching also traditionally belong to the environment of a *locus amoenus*. Here, however, they play a very similar role as the Nymphs and Silvanus in Lucan's description of the frightening grove, namely, their cheerfulness contrasts with the gloom of the surrounding scenery. Consequently, it automatically increases the tragic inadequacy of their presence in the *locus horridus*.

This etching is, therefore, a bizarre parody of a pastoral setting<sup>19</sup>. Although it contains elements that are typical of the landscape of a *locus amoenus*, these elements strongly contrast with the rest of the scenery, and particularly with the sublime giants as well as with the reliefs depicting armed soldiers. Moreover, the representatives of the realm of idyll are also distorted themselves. Thus, the flower is tainted by the image of death and the Satyr, disfigured and corroded by mold.

In the world of this *Grottesco*, Piranesi brings together the two realms: that of phantasmagoria (*ante litteram*)<sup>20</sup> and that of idyll<sup>21</sup>. This fusion produces quite paradoxical results. The whole *Gothicscape*<sup>22</sup>, instead of becoming a less hostile place, impacts the Satyrs and the flowers in such a manner that they are transformed into sinister-looking monsters. Therefore, the perverse and innovative character of this etching consists in the reversal of the roles of the traditional motifs.

This reversal is the natural consequence of the hallucinatory character of the *Grotteschi*<sup>23</sup> and their lack of harmonious symmetry<sup>24</sup>. However, this apparently chaotic *rococo potpourri*<sup>25</sup> seems to follow consequently the principle of blurring two opposite words: that of dream and that of nightmare. The *Gothicscape* of the second *Grottesco* functions a bit like a kaleidoscope, in whose eye random elements of a stereotypical *locus amoenus* are awkwardly juxtaposed with those of a stereotypical *locus horridus*.

Another etching that instantly attracts the attention of a classicist is the following, fantastic composition of ancient ruins, tombs and snakes [il. 3]:

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<sup>19</sup> For further characteristics of a typical *locus amoenus* see: Cf. M. Edwards, 'Locus Horridus' and 'Locus Amoenus', [in:] L. M. Whitby, P. Hardie, and M. Whitby (eds.), *Classical Essays for John Bramble*, Bristol 1987, pp. 267–76, at 267.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. L. Mannoni and B. Brewster, *The Phantasmagoria*, [in:] *Film History*, Vol. 8, No. 4, *International Trends in Film Studies* (1996), pp. 390–415.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. D. Henry, B. Walker, *Phantasmagoria and Idyll. An Element of Seneca's 'Phaedra'*, *Greece & Rome*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (Oct., 1966), pp. 223–239.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. V. Mishra, *The Gothic Sublime*, [in:] E. Punter (ed.), *A New Companion to the Gothic*, Cambridge–New York 2012, pp. 288–306, at 292.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. M. Yourcenar, *op.cit.*, p. 105.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. M. Praz, *Mnemosyne. The Parallel between Literature and the Visual Arts*, Princeton 1967, p. 156.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. M. Yourcenar, *op.cit.*, p. 105.



3.

The most striking elements of this picture are doubtlessly the gigantic serpents lurking from the crevices of the stones. These sinister creatures carry strong associations with the Roman poetry, and not only with the aforementioned *locus horridus* in Thesaly (Luc. *Phars.* 6. 489–491), but also with the nightmarish landscape of the Libyan realm of Medusa, described by Lucan, where Cato's troops meet their painful death (Luc. *Phars.* 9).

The obscure form in the centre of the etching resembles a bizarre cornucopia, which, like Satyrs and flowers, does not fit with the surrounding of a *locus horridus*. Similarly, it is so corroded and overgrown with fungi and weeds that, if it were not for its characteristic shape, it would remain completely beyond any recognition. Here again, Piranesi makes use of *pareidolia*. The fusion of the two motifs – that of the serpents and that of the cornucopia – immediately brings about the remembrance of Propertius' *El.* 8. 4.

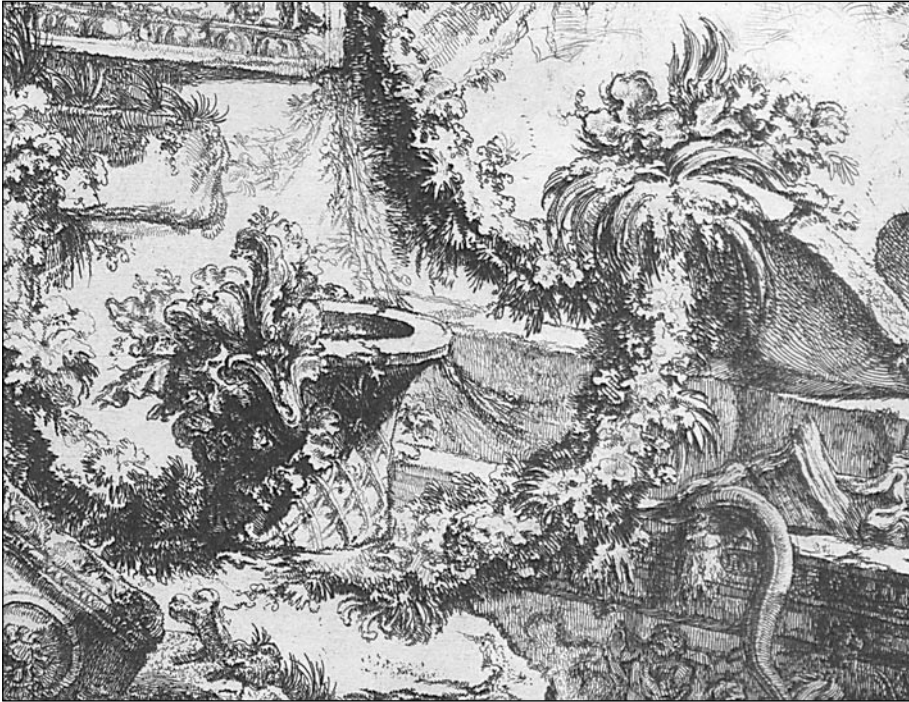
The Roman poet describes an ancient ritual, practised in Lanuvium, during which virgins fed a giant serpent:

*Lanuvium annosi vetus est tutela draconis,  
hic, ubi tam rarae non perit hora morae,  
qua sacer abripitur caeco descensus hiatu,  
qua penetrat (virgo, tale iter omne cave!)*

ieiuni serpentis honos, cum pabula poscit  
 annua et ex ima sibila torquet humo.  
 Talia demissae pallent ad sacra puellae,  
 cum temere anguino creditur ore manus.  
 Ille sibi admotas a virgine corripit escas:  
 Virginis in palmis ipsa canistra tremunt.  
 Si fuerint castae, redeunt in colla parentum,  
 clamantque agricolae “fertilis annus erit.”  
 (Prop. El. 4. 8, 3–8)

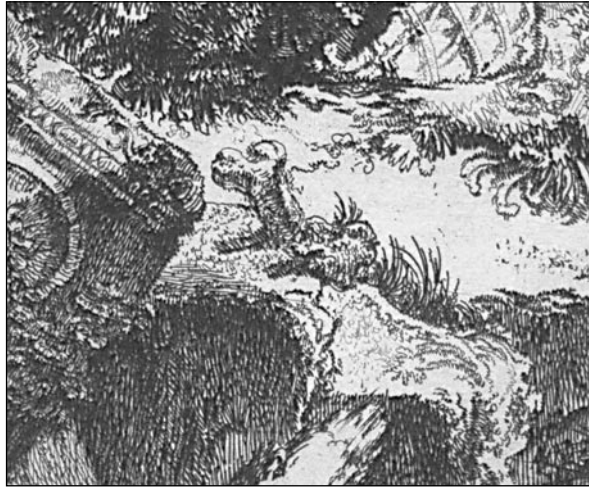
*Lanuvium has enjoyed from the old the protection of an ancient serpent (an hour spent here on so infrequent a visit is well worth wile). Where the sacred slope is reft by a dark chasm, at the point the offering to the hungry serpent makes its way – maiden, beware of all such paths – when he demands his annual tribute and hurls hisses from the depths of earth. He seizes the morsel held out to him by the virgin: the very basket trembles in the virgin’s hands. Maidens sent down to such a rite turn pale when blindly entrusting their hand to the serpent’s lips. If they have been chaste, they return to embrace their parents, and the farmers cry: ‘It will be a fruitful year.’*

(Transl. by G.P. Goold).



Ryc. 3a.

In Propertius' elegy, the serpent's abode is both a *locus horridus*, as it is dangerous, and a *locus amoenus*, as it is the place of the annual rebirth of prosperity. Moreover, in the Roman art, the cornucopia and the basket frequently appeared together in the depictions of the goddess Ceres, whose attributes they were<sup>26</sup>. Interestingly, on Piranesi's etching, next to the moldy cornucopia, there is a corroded stone basket, and a human bone [il. 3a, 3b].



3b.

Although this etching does not astound the onlooker with piles of skeletons, its subtle horror unfolds gradually, like in the case of the 'skull flower'. In this *Grottesco*, the threatening presence of death manifests itself in a very subtle and sophisticated way, i.e. as the head of a bone stuck between two rocks or as the open stone case, which is most probably an ancient sarcophagus. The power of this etching consists mainly in the artist's skilful use of pareidolia, as well as in the subtle game with classical motifs.

The next *Grottesco* is also a mixture of apparently random motifs belonging to the two opposite worlds, i.e. that of a *locus amoenus* and that of a *locus horridus* [il. 4]. Like the other etchings, this one also contains strongly contrasting elements, such as skulls and musical instruments. On the one hand, the trumpet and the *syrinx* are almost automatically associated with a festive environment, but on the other hand, the skulls obviously belong to a *locus horridus*.

As to the instruments themselves, a few words must be said about their symbolism. The metal trumpet (in the upper part of the etching) symbolises *the yearning of fame and glory*<sup>27</sup>, while the wooden *syrinx* is a traditional element of an idyllic environment, com-

<sup>26</sup> Cf. B. Stanley Spaeth, *The Roman Goddess Ceres*, Austin (Tex.) 1996, p. 25.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. J. E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, Dover 2002, p. 353.

monly associated with shepards and countryside<sup>28</sup>. Therefore, in this etching, Piranesi once again brings together the two worlds: that of phantasmagoria and that of idyll.



4.

The most intriguing element of this etching is, with no doubt, the figure of the ghostly Pegasus in the upper right corner, accompanied by a shield bearing a frightening *Gorgoneion* [il. 4a].

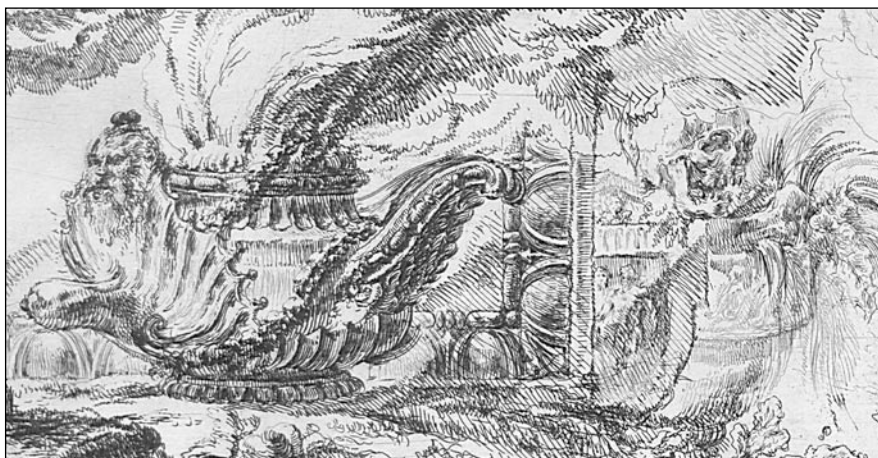


4a.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibidem.

The head of Medusa, however, is not the only element of the landscape strictly connected with Pegasus. The bizarre figure with a human head and the tail of a serpent obviously alludes to the mythical Chimera, who is also connected to the legend of Pegasus. It was with the help of Pegasus that the Greek hero Bellerophon managed to defeat this terrible monster [il. 4b].



4b.

Like the skull in the centre of the flower in the second of the analysed *Grotteschi*, and like the cornucopia in the third one, the figure of Pegasus is very unclear. Here, too, Piranesi is playing with the onlooker's imagination and the phenomenon of pareidolia. Incidentally, the winged horse is generally considered to be the symbol of poetic inspiration. Like the open book in the first etching, it might hint that the artist is drawing his inspiration not only from the visual arts, but also from the treasure house of the Roman literature.

## CONCLUSION

The negative poetics of all the four *Grotteschi* analysed in this article consists in Piranesi's sophisticated game with the onlooker, whose task is to decipher all the mythological and, most probably, literary allusions as well as to understand the relations between particular motifs. However, in order to read these themes, the erudite viewer must first discern all the essential, sometimes diminutive details, that are often disguised in mold and dust or hidden in the jungle of obscure surroundings.

Many motifs that are normally associated with mirth and joy are brutally torn out of their natural context and thrown into the abyss of horror. In this respect, Piranesi's techniques of artistic expression, which he uses in the *Grotteschi*, are very close to the literary workshops of Seneca and Lucan who, incidentally, are both considered to be en-

dowed with a ‘baroque’ imagination<sup>29</sup>. We can even say that these two ancient Romans were baroque, or even Gothic poets *ante litteram*.

The brief analysis of these four etchings has revealed that, surprisingly, the apparently chaotic and obscure settings of Piranesi’s *Grotteschi* are, surprisingly, organised according to two constant patterns, i.e. the principle of bringing together contrasting elements and the phenomena of pareidolia and optical illusion, which are also his paramount tools of awakening terror.

These techniques are, in fact, elements of a major strategy, which consists in rendering the depicted places and objects as obscure as possible, in order to make them terrible. Edmund Burke, who lived in the same time as Piranesi, wrote in his famous treatise about the sublime and beautiful that *to make any thing very terrible, obscurity seems in general to be necessary*<sup>30</sup>.

A little further, he states that *it is one thing to make an idea clear, and another to make it ‘affecting’ to the imagination*<sup>31</sup>. This sentence seems to be the key to understanding Piranesi’s poetics of – as we should call it – ‘apparent chaos’. The ‘apparently chaotic’ *Grotteschi* are, in fact, the fruit of Piranesi’s experiment, or perhaps even a dark-witty joke, which consists in bringing together phantasmagoria and idyll and confining them forever within one and the same picture.

#### EST LOCUS...

#### THE *GROTTESCHI* OF GIOVANNI BATTISTA PIRANESI AND THE ANCIENT TOPOS OF *LOCUS HORRIDUS*

#### SUMMARY

The present article discusses Piranesi’s use of the ancient topos of locus horridus on the example of his four *Grotteschi*. The analysis of particular ingredients of Piranesi’s loci horridi has shown that, in order to understand them, the onlooker must be not only familiar with the Greek and Roman mythology and literature, but also, must have the patience to detect even those details which, despite being too tiny or obscure to be noticed at the first glance, are crucial to the meaning of the whole picture. In his sophisticated game with the onlooker, Piranesi employs optical illusion and pareidolia. The article also reveals that the aesthetics of the *Grotteschi* consists, to a large extent, in bringing together motifs that originally belong to the opposite realms: that

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<sup>29</sup> Cf. Ch. S e g a l, *Senecan Baroque: The Death of Hippolytus in Seneca, Ovid, and Euripides*, Transactions of the American Philological Association (1974–), Vol. 114, No. (1984), pp. 311–325; Ch. T o m m a s i M o r e s c h i n i, *Lucan’s Attitude towards Religion: Stoicism vs. Provincial Cults*, [in:] Ch. W a l d e (ed.), *Lucan im 21. Jahrhundert*, Munich–Leipzig 2005, pp. 13–154, at 145.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. E. B u r k e, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. by D. W o m e r s l e y, London 2004, p. 102.

<sup>31</sup> Ibidem, p. 103.



of a locus horridus and that of a locus amoenus. As a result of such a fusion, the locus horridus becomes even more frightening and hostile, whereas the traditionally 'idyllic' elements acquire a sinister hue.

#### SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:

Piranesi, *locus horridus*, *locus amoenus*, Grotteschi, pareidolia, iluzja optyczna, kontrast

#### KEYWORDS:

Piranesi, *locus horridus*, *locus amoenus*, Grotteschi, pareidolia, optical illusion, contrast.