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Rivers as rhetorical tropes in Pliny the Younger's *Panegyric*

Rios como tropos retóricos no Panegírico de Plínio o Jovem

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Abstract

In Pliny the Younger's *Panegyric*, delivered at the Roman Senate in 100 CE and later revised into its written version, rivers are employed as rhetorical tropes (metonymy, metaphor, personification, and hyperbole). In addition, the mention of a river can intertextually evoke the precedent representations of that river and points to political actions related to the regions and peoples connected to such river. Thus, all mentions of rivers in the *Panegyric* are replete with political and aesthetical motivations. In oratory, rivers also convey a metarhetorical reflection, such as the connotation of the orator's declarations of style or techniques. Throughout the *Panegyric*, rivers are much more than mere courses of water —they bespeak eloquently about Trajan and politics and about Pliny and oratory—.

Key words: Pliny the Younger; *Panegyric*; epideictic speech; rhetorical tropes; rivers

Resumo

No *Panegírico* de Plínio, o Jovem, proferido diante do Senado romano em 100 EC, os rios são empregados como tropos retóricos (metonímia, metáfora, personificação e hipérbole). Além disso, a menção a um rio evoca intertextualmente as representações precedentes daquele rio, e aponta para ações políticas em relação às regiões e povos ligados a ele. Assim, as menções a rios no *Panegírico* são repletas de motivações políticas e estéticas. Os rios na oratória também transmitem uma reflexão metarretórica, como conotações sobre o entendimento, por parte do orador, acerca do estilo ou técnicas oratórias. Ao longo do *Panegírico*, os rios são mais do que meros cursos de água: eles falam eloquentemente sobre Trajano e política, mas também sobre Plínio e a oratória.

Palavras chave: Plínio o Jovem; *Panegírico*; discurso epidítico; tropos retóricos; rios.

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In 100 CE, Pliny the Younger delivered an epideictic speech in the Roman Senate in honor of Trajan, which he called *gratiarum actio*, "thanksgiving" in his letters.[1] This speech was later amended to a better-written and finished version, thus establishing its name, in accordance with tradition, as *Panegyricus* (Fantham 226. It is the only remaining oratory text from Pliny. Despite the general criticism that prevailed during the 20th century on its style and adulatory character, it has recently received more and more attention from scholars who have demonstrated the rhetorical qualities and the artfulness of the speech, as well as its historical relevance and the extensive influence of panegyric tradition.[2]

Aiming a contribution to the understanding and description of Pliny's rhetorical techniques, I intend to explore the occurrences of rivers in the *Panegyric* and to highlight the way in which they are employed as rhetorical tropes (metonymy, metaphor, personification, and hyperbole) rather than as geographical allusions and this function is in accordance with the general effect of the text. Therefore, I have collected and analyzed all passages referring to rivers throughout the speech —be it by using the name of the river— (such as the Nile, the Rhine or the Danube) or by the common terms *flumen*, *amnis* and *ripa*.[3] On the one hand, this research expands the inaugural work of Prudence Jones on the relevance of rivers in Latin literature and, on the other, it is an attempt to complement the study of Eleni Manolaraki on the rhetorical use of seascapes in Pliny's speech.

Rivers have always played an important role in all literary genres. In poetry and oratory, they are usually much more than a mere locations, apart from their didactic and geographical descriptions (such as Strabo's). Sometimes as characters, other times as scenery and still others as narratological markers or as symbols; rivers convey a sum of cultural, ideological, aesthetical and traditional package in their literary representations:

> Rivers provide a means of translating abstract ideas about the physical, metaphysical, and temporal structure of the world into a concrete and comprehensible framework. In both Greek and Roman societies, rivers were important in myth and rituals and thus, their symbolic value has deep cultural roots. For this reason, the river lends itself well to being a literary motif. (...) [Hellenistic and Roman poets] employ rivers in developing a kind of textual geography that enables them to draw attention to the text as well as its subject (Jones 3).

[1] For an overall introduction to Pliny's *Panegyric*, see Radice and Bondioli. Unless otherwise marked, all citations refer to the *Panegyric*.

[2] For discussion on the *Panegyric*'s criticism, see Fedeli and Morford. For the influence of Pliny's *Panegyric* in the tradition of the genre, see the special volume of *Arethusa* 46 (2013).

[3] The entries *rivus* and *rivulus* do not appear in the *Panegyric*.

Rivers are not only important to literature, but also to politics. Rivers are natural borders, vast sources of fresh water and different kinds of minerals, navigable routes for military and commercial purposes, natural providers of land fertility and ecosystem riches, as well as cultural and historical elements of social and ethnic identification. It is always beneficial and profitable to have control of a river for to have power over rivers means holding political power. Much of the growth in Roman power is based on the conquest and exploitation of rivers (Campbell). This relation of river and power is also evidenced in numismatics —coinage from Trajan's period shows the Danube and the Euphrates as elements of the Empire—, whereas the Rhine was used in the same way by Domitian (Hutchinson 130, n. 9). Therefore, in a clearly political text such as Pliny's *Panegyric*, the political function of rivers is merged with its literary functions. At the same time, the mention of a river can intertextually evoke the precedent representations of that river and can point to contemporary political actions related to the region and peoples who inhabit or depend on said river. As we shall see, all mentions of rivers in the *Panegyric* are replete with political and aesthetical motivations.

In her study on rhetorical seascapes, Manolaraki argues, "Pliny puts marine imagery to work for both his political and his literary agenda" (374). We could add 'marine' to the 'fluvial' imagery as well. Whenever rivers are mentioned in the *Panegyric*, they convey a rhetorical trope of emphasis, exaggeration and enlargement of Trajan's excellence as an emperor. Seas and immense rivers such as the Nile or the Danube are immediate symbols of greatness and abundance, the qualities shown by the Princeps and pursued by Pliny in his style: "While the use of aquatic motifs aims at vesting the *Panegyricus* with naturalism and informality, here Pliny reveals that such imagery is not the product of a spontaneous and thoughtless composition, but of his diligently crafted rhetoric" (Manolaraki 387).

Moreover, in the same way that rivers in poetry have a metapoetic value —as a metaphor for the textual flow or tropes of genres—, in oratory, they can convey a metarhetorical reflection, such as connoting the orator's declarations of style, technique or theoretical issues. In sum, throughout the *Panegyric*, rivers are much more than mere courses of water. Rivers bespeak eloquently about Trajan and politics, but also about Pliny and oratory.

1. The Ovidian frozen Danube

The first river to appear in the *Panegyric* is the Danube, which together with the Rhine, is the most alluded to river throughout the speech. In 12, the military qualities of Trajan were demonstrated

using the argument that the emperor had the audacity to camp against the barbarian peoples who lived across the Danube. This camping did not occur during times of peace, but in winter when it was possible for the "enemies of Rome" to go across the river with their cavalry because the Danube was frozen:

> *An audeant, qui sciant, te adsedisse ferocissimis populis eo ipso tempore, quod amicissimum illis, difficillimum nobis: quum Danubius ripas gelu iungit, duratusque glacie ingentia tergo bella transportat: quum ferae gentes non telis magis, quam suo coelo, suo sidere armantur?*
>
> Shall they dare, who knows, to besiege the fiercest peoples at the very moment that is friendliest to them and most difficult for us: when the banks of the Danube are filled with frost and hardened with ice, carrying huge armies behind them: when the savage nations are armed with no weapons but their own sky, their star?
>
> May they dare threaten you, those who know that you have camped against savage people during times that is most favorable for them and most difficult for us —When the Danube seals its banks with ice and, frozen, wages mighty wars in its icy back—. When these hostile people are armed not only with weapons, but also with their climate and their ambience?[4]

Here, the river plays the role of the geopolitical frontier between the Roman and the non-Roman world, but the description of its freezing as the propitious time for the barbaric invasions is derived from Ovid's *Tristia*, especially from 3.10.7-10. In his exilic elegy, Ovid states that the liquid waters of the Danube work as a natural defense for Tomis, but when winter comes, the river freezes over and the barbarians can cross over it without any concern:

> *Dum tamen aura tepet, medio defendimur Histro:*
> *ille suis liquidis bella repellit aquis.*
> *At cum tristis hiems squalentia protulit ora,*
> *terraque marmoreo est candida facta gelu (...)*

4 All translations are mine, except when otherwise noted.

> While the wind is still warm, we are defended by the Danube.
> It repels wars with his liquid waters.
> But when the sad winter freezes forth the arid shores
> And the land turns white with marbled ice (...)
>
> But while the air is warm, we are defended by the Danube:
> it prevents invasions with its liquid waters.
> But when the sorrow winter freezes its arid shores,
> and the land turns white with marble ice (...)

The reference to the Ovidian passage emphasizes the danger of the "liquid" Danube and therefore enhances the bravery displayed by Trajan. Here, Pliny manages to insert a subtle intertextual word-play to enhance his hyperbolic demonstration. The reader, supposedly familiarized with Ovid, may think not only of Trajan facing actual trans-Danubian enemies, but also of facing the Scythians and Getae that had tormented Ovid so harshly, thus "Romanizing" the Pontic region with his eminent presence.

In 16, the Danube is again evoked in a declaration about the certitude of victory if Trajan should cross the river:

> *Magnum est, Imperator Auguste, magnum est stare*
> *in Danubii ripa, si transeas, certum triumphi.*
>
> How great it is, August Emperor, how great it is to
> stand by the shores of the Danube, sure of triumph
> if you should cross it.

This passage moves the Ovidian Danube of 12 CE a step further: Trajan is not only camped against but standing by the river, ready to attack and conquer his enemies. The emphatic anaphora of *magnum est*, joined with the vocative *Imperator Auguste*, provide a twist to the Ovidian horror in face of the barbaric hordes and of the Augustan edict of relegation, transforming it into a confident and daring boast that only Trajan may provide to Rome. At the same time, the expression playfully alludes to the Lucretian topos *suave est* (2.1-4), which recaptures the peace of the viewer that stands separate from danger. Here, however, such separateness, in fact, is related to the facing of danger.

Trajan is not an off-screen philosopher as Lucretius is, but an active controller of the danger in the world. The "incapacity" of Augustus to tame the Getae in the Pontic region, as witnessed by Ovid in his exilic poems, is implicitly alluded to when contrasted with the capacity of Trajan who, In Pliny's view, is the actual "august".

In spite of the certitude of triumph in the event of the crossing, the verb *stare* reminds us that Trajan in fact did not cross the river and stood on this (Roman) side of the Danube. In other words, he could get this glorious endeavor, but refused to, due to his contention and, as Hutchinson (2011: 133) argues, his sublimity. The *magnum est* also has this implication: Trajan is *magnus*, "sublime", in his attitude of self-control despite his absolute control of the river.

2. The rivers shall dry out

Soon after the mention of the controlled Danube in 16, there takes place an adynaton —the figure that catalogues things whose occurrence in nature is impossible—:

> *Quod si quis barbarus rex eo insolentiae furorisque processerit, ut iram tuam indignationemque mereatur: nae ille, sive interfuso mari, seu fluminibus immensis, seu praecipiti monte defenditur, omnia haec tam prona, tamque cedentia virtutibus tuis sentiet, ut subsedisse montes, flumina exaruisse, interceptum mare, illatasque non classes nostras, sed terras ipsas arbitretur.*
>
> If some barbarian king should advance with insolence and furor, he would deserve your anger and indignation. Even if he were defended by vast seas, or by large rivers, or by craggy mountains, he would then realize that all of this would be insignificant. He would yield to your courage; and the mountains would become plains, the rivers would go dry, the seas would become narrow and he would think that not only our fleet, but also the land itself had been offended.

Here, rivers in general (*flumina*) are evoked as one of the natural elements that shall disobey the laws of nature if some barbarian king decides to advance against Rome. In fact, as we can see, for instance, in Virgil, *Eclogue* 1.56-63, Propertius 3.19.5-10, or in Ovid's *Tristia* 1.8.1-8, rivers are a common *topos* in adynata, regularly evoked as drying out or running backwards from ocean to spring,. In terms of tradition, there is no novelty in employing rivers in adynaton. In the *Panegyric,* however,

rivers compound a hyperbolic[5] sense of Trajan's power. Trajan makes things that are naturally impossible become possible —he can control the measurements and position of rivers— (as in 14, to be seen below), as well as of seas and mountains. Furthermore, adynata are much more common in personal poetry, such as lyric or elegy, but rare in serious genres, such as epic and oratory (Rowe 393). Thus, this passage appears even more appealing, intense, and exaggerated in contrast with its own genre. Anyway, this intensity caused by the adynaton does not distort the general style of the *Panegyric*, where exaggeration and hyperbole are prevalent features.

The absurdity of rivers drying out in the adynaton becomes less absurd and much more real in the episode about the Nile (30-32). Pliny explains that there was never a lack of food and water in Egypt, due to the regular flooding of the Nile, except when the river narrowed down so that it became impossible for crops to be fertilized. In this passage, the river is described in a vivid, personified way: "Haec inopina siccitate usque ad iniuriam sterilitatis exaruit: quia piger Nilus cunctanter alveo sese ac languide extulerat.

When an unexpected drought came, [the river] exhausted itself to the opprobrium of sterility —for the lazy Nile had withdrawn slowly and stubbornly from its channel—.

Since the Egyptians are so confident in the Nile, they did not have any alternative resource and they would starve to death. However, as soon as the emperor heard of their situation, he sent help and Egypt was saved. Thus, Pliny states implicitly that Trajan is more powerful than the Nile. The river is vast and mighty, but it can fail sometimes, whereas Trajan is always present when needed. If the Nile had run dry, Trajan would have come with water and crops. More than controlling or relocating rivers, such as the Rhine and the Euphrates (as in 14), here Trajan replaces the essential function of the Nile. The Egyptians (Pliny argues at the end of the episode) should pray not to the river, but to Trajan because he is the ultimate, unfailing power. The personification[6] of the river is represented by the adjective *piger*, "lazy" and the adverbs *cunctanter* and *languide* are two synonyms that only serve to reiterate the purpose of the adjective. Of course, these qualities are contrasted with their opposite —the readiness and agility of Trajan—, who can immediately solve the problem. Henceforth, Pliny uses a combination of rhetorical tropes —personification and synonymy— only to emphasize the qualities of Trajan once more.

This idea of obedience on the part of the Nile's water flux to Roman power is subsumed in this passage: "*Ita beneficio tuo, nec maligna tellus, et obsequens Nilus Aegypto quidem saepe, sed gloriae nostrae nunquam largior fluxit.*

[5] On the hyperbole or *superlatio*, *Ad Herennium* 4.44 and Quintilian *Institutio* 8.6. On Quintilian's treatment of the trope, see Schmidt.

[6] On personification (*prosopopoeia* or *conformatio*), *Ad Herennium* 4.66.

Therefore, with your [Trajan's] help, the land was never again infertile and the Nile never flowed wider, obedient not only, as usual, to Egypt, but also to our glory" (31).

Again, the river is in the position of a controlled natural ambience, just as the controlled provinces. This is not a mere metonymy (Nile for Egypt), but a hyperbolic idea that even the greatest river of all can be drawn or filled according to Trajan's disposition. Egypt should not rely on the Nile, but on Trajan, for its guaranteed fertility, while the Nile should not rely only on Egypt, but on Trajan, for its course to continue flowing.

Then, at the end of the episode (32), Pliny offers a sympathetic and condescending prayer for the Nile:

> *Sed sive terris divinitas quaedam, sive aliquis amnibus genius, et solum illud et flumen ipsum precor, ut hac principis benignitate contentum, molli gremio semina recondat, multiplicata restituat.*
>
> However, if there is a land divinity, if there is a spirit of the rivers, I pray for Him alone and for the river [Nile] itself, so that, pleased with the Princeps' benignity, He may lay the seeds in his tender womb and devolve them multiplied.

Once again, the Nile is personified, as the orator admonishes it to be grateful to the emperor because this gratefulness is the only guarantee of its fertility. The Nile must behave itself as any other Roman subject would —obedient to Trajan and pleased with his aid and liberality—. Thus, just as the Rhine and the Euphrates are, the Nile too is happily tame under the Princeps' rule.

3. Rivers in the list

Apart from the previously mentioned passages, rivers also employ the function of a metaphorical pinpoint for an obstacle or hindrance that is hard to overcome in the *Panegyric*. In 25, Pliny speaks of the liberal convocation of Trajan (Morford) that does not force people to come:

> *Negotiis aliquis, valetudine alius, hic mari, ille fluminibus distinebatur: exspectatum est provisumque, ne quis aeger, ne quis occupatus, ne quis denique longe fuisset: veniret quisque, quum vellet: veniret quisque, quum posset.*

> Some were detained by their business, some due to health issues, some by the seas and some by the rivers. It was expected and foreseen that anyone who was sick, busy or far away would be absent. Only those who wanted to would come and only those who were able to would come.

Rivers are one element in a list of four acceptable reasons for absence. This sequence of terms that clusters all possible reasons for absence can be seen as a double merism (or *distributio*)[7] that plays the function of a synthetic all-encompassing catalog (West 99-104). In a way, sick and busy men encompass all situations where people could not travel, in as much as the seas and rivers encompass all hydrological hindrances that make such travel difficult. The opposition of the seas and rivers in the merism that follows the opposition of busy and sick men is not accidental since they are wholly controlled and dominated by Trajan. Manolaraki (2008) has noted how the seas are construed rhetorically in the *Panegyric* as a metaphor[8] for both Trajan's control over the estate and Pliny's control over oratory. Above all, we have seen the way that rivers express control over the land and the people by the steady and mighty hands of Trajan. Thus, the combination of the sea with rivers in the figure also reflects the hierarchical combination of the emperor and his subjects. In the same way that the sea remains stable (*aequus*) in spite of the influx of rivers, the emperor remains stable (and busy) in spite of the sickness of the subjects.

In 50, rivers are one of the elements that encompass the list of land property:

> *Non enim exturbatis prioribus dominis, omne stagnum, omnem lacum, omnem etiam saltum, immensa possessione circumvenis: nec unius oculis flumina, fontes, maria deserviunt.*

> You [Trajan] do not enclose within a huge piece of land all the swamps, all lakes, or all groves by stealing them from their previous owners. Rivers, springs and seas are not reserved for the benefit of only one man.

Once again, the liberality of Trajan is lauded in face of the cupidity of previous emperors, particularly that of Domitian (Hutchinson 128). The catalog of natural ambiences is a double tricolon —three natural elements united by the anaphoric *omne*—, and three stages of water flux. *Saltum*, which can be understood as pasture or grove, seems a little detached from the list, for it is the only actual 'landscape', as opposed to 'waterscape'. All the other elements are related to water. *Stagnum* and

[7] *Ad Herennium* 4.47.

[8] On the metaphor as trope (or *translatio*), *Ad Herennium* 4.45.

lacum encompass kinds of slack water, whereas *flumina*, *fontes* and *maria* correspond to kinds of flowing water. Thus, it is possible to imagine that Pliny had in mind something 'static' with the concept of *saltum*. Anyhow, the recurrence of rivers in a joint position with seas, and the craftsmanship of the tricolon —with the alliteration of 'f' and the assonance of 'a'— reinforces its figurative function, which catalogs water formations as a metonymy[9] for all kinds of properties that Trajan could not take away from the people. Water is for everyone, and Trajan's indulgence is for everyone.

In 68, the stability of Trajan's imperial position is opposed to the constant fear that oppressed previous rulers, as exemplified by the list of natural occurrences that they feared: "*Ac si forte aliquos flumina, nives, venti praepedissent, statim hoc illud esse credebant, quod merebantur.*

And if by chance the rivers, snowstorms or winds detained some of them, they immediately believed that this was happening because they deserved it".

Here, rivers compound a tricolon with snow and wind, bringing a *variatio* from the previous catalogues. While snowstorms and strong winds are indeed reasonable motivations to prevent a trip, a river, drifty as it may be, seems in principle not so much of a hindrance. Therefore, those emperors that feared the crossing of a river appear here as cowards, and this is even more clearly emphasized if we consider the previous passages where Trajan does not only cross over and navigate the most far-fetched and hostile rivers, but, as a matter of fact, he also controls their currents and flux. What is a fearsome obstacle for those emperors is only a mere game for Trajan.

In the passages where rivers are one element of a list of hindrances or properties, they function both as metaphor for an obstacle and as metonymy for the integrity or totality of the things that Trajan can control, in obvious contrast with those who cannot control them —previous emperors and regular citizens—. In the *Panegyric*, every new occurrence of *flumina* works as a tributary to the immense flux of Trajan's excellence.

4. The edge of the world

In 14, inside an *interrogatio* (rhetorical question),[10] Pliny suggests that both the Rhine and the Euphrates are in awe of Trajan's glory:

[9] On the metonymy as trope, or *denominatio*, *Ad Herennium* 4.43.

[10] *Ad Herennium* 4.22.

> *Nonne (...) Rhenumque et Euphratem admiratiois*
> *tuae fama coniungeres?*
>
> Have you not united the Rhine and the Euphrates under the glory of
> a common admiration of you?

These two rivers represent not only the extremities of the Roman border (in Germania and Parthia), but also the places where Rome had suffered grave defeats in the past —the *Clades Variana* in 9 CE and Crassus' death in 53 BCE—. Here, they are employed as metonymies for their peoples and their lands, in the sense that Parthians and Germanic tribes are pacified and respectful towards Rome due to Trajan's efficacy. However, the verb *coniungere* also brings a visual effect of the rivers being "merged", as if Trajan had the power to move these rivers in any direction he wished, and thus the Rhine and the Euphrates could be joined together as little pieces over the strategy board. In fact, this is the main effect of the paragraph, which implies the uncontested control that Trajan held over the enemies of Rome. Therefore, the rivers are not only metonymies, but they convey a hyperbolic function, in accordance with the general effect of the *Panegyric*.

Then, the Danube paired with the Rhine to set the (controlled) frontiers of the Roman world:

> *O prava et inscia verae maiestatis ambitio, concupiscere honorem, quem dedigneris, dedignari, quem concupieris: quumque ex proximis hortis campum et comitia prospectes, sic ab illis abesse, tanquam Danubio Rhenoque dirimare!*
>
> Oh, foolish and insensate ambition for a true majesty, to desire an honor that you despise, to despise the honor that you desire! When you oversee the field and the troops from the nearby gardens, to be so absent from them as the Danube and the Rhine separated you!

Extolling the attitude of Trajan regarding the consulship, Pliny elaborates the contrast between the Princeps and previous emperors. While they lavished themselves in the office's luxuries, Trajan despised the pomp and remained aloof and indifferent even during the rituals. Here, *campus* refers to the Campus Martius and *comitia* are the soldiers in formation to be checked over, in a customary ritual in deference to the consul (Henderson 167; also Noreña 36 for a similar passage in *Pan*. 77). The two rivers function as metaphor for an enormous amount of distance created by the psychological resolution of the Princeps. However, the metaphor has a hyperbolic nuance, since the

conjunction of both rivers not only represents a great extension, but also the extremities of the Roman world. To have the Danube (the northeastern border) and the Rhine (the northern border) together as a measurement is to have the entirety of Roman provinces condensed into the metaphor. The verb *dirimare* applied to the echoes of the river from Pliny the Elder, *Nat. Hist.* 3.53, where the Tiber (the actual Roman river) is described with the function of dividing the frontiers between different fields. The exchange of the Tiber for the couple Rhine-Danube reflects precisely the hyperbolic architecture of the passage. Pliny does not divide Trajan from the Campus with the domestic Tiber; he needs the far away dangerous and yet tamed rivers to exalt Trajan's grandiosity and extremity of ethical resolution. This extreme distance, expressed by the rivers, points once more to the sublimity of Trajan (Hutchinson 130) and of his dominium over the Empire. At the same time, in a metarhetorical level, the hyperbolized metaphor points to the sublimity of Pliny's speech, to his emulation of his uncle's syntagm and to his absolute control of rivers as figurative constructions that he had as an orator.

Near the end of the speech, we find another pairing of the rivers Rhine and Danube in a long comparison between Domitian's cowardice and Trajan's bravery when sailing through seas and rivers:

> *Quantum dissimilis illi, qui non Albani lacus otium, Baianique torporem et silentium ferre, non pulsum saltem fragoremque remorum perpeti poterat, quin ad singulos ictus turpi formidine horresceret. Itaque procul ab omni sono inconcussus ipse et immotus, religato revinctoque navigio, non secus ac piaculum aliquod, trahebatur. Foeda facies, quum Populi Romani Imperator alienum cursum, alienumque rectorem, velut capta nave, sequeretur. Nec deformitate ista saltem flumina carebant atque amnes. Danubius ac Rhenus tantum illud nostri decoris vehere gaudebant, non minore cum pudore imperii, quod haec Romanae aquilae, Romana signa, Romana denique ripa, quam quod hostium prospectarent: hostium, quibus moris est, eadem illa nunc rigentia gelu flumina, aut campis superflua, nunc liquida ac deferentia, lustrare navigiis, nandoque superare.*
>
> How different is he from that man who could not stomach the calm of the Alban lake, or the stillness and silence of the lake at Baiae, who could not even bear the push and splash of the oars without shuddering in disgraceful terror at each beat! So, far removed from every sound, unperturbed and motionless, his boat firmly fixed and tied, he was hauled like some sacrificial victim. It was a shameful sight, when the emperor of the Roman people followed another man's course and another captain, as if in a captured ship. Even the rivers did not miss this shameful travesty. The Danube and the Rhine were delighted to transport our disgrace. It was equally offensive to the empire that this

> was seen by Roman eagles, Roman standards and the Roman river bank, and by the other side, the bank of the enemy, the enemy whose habit is to navigate or swim across these same rivers, whether blocked with ice floats or flooding the plains when the ice melts and gives way (82).[11]

The description of Domitian's fear of crossing rivers tends to the ridiculous, and he is not only opposed to Trajan's self-control, but to the barbarians who swim fearlessly across those same rivers. Whereas, for the most part of the passage rivers are the object of crossing or sailing, the Rhine and the Danube, when nominalized, are once again personified since they get the pleasure of transporting such a scared emperor as Domitian (*Danubius ac Rhenus gaudebant*). Obviously, the personification is a reflection of their metonymic function —they represent their peoples—, such as the Germani and the Getae who can actually laugh at the spectacle. Likewise, as Manolaraki notes, "Pliny's specific mention of the two German rivers suggestively compares Domitian's and Trajan's respective military achievements" (376-7). The Rhine and the Danube here represent not only the immense measure or the extreme frontier, but also, as the Nile in 30-32, they are both in the process of transformation from a personalized enemy to a tamed subject. The rivers laughed at Domitian's fear and failures, but Trajan later controlled them through his courage and success.

Therefore, as the sublimity of Trajan forces Pliny to elevate the style of his *Panegyric* (Hutchinson 140), the control of the Princep over the lands and rivers allowed the orator to forcefully insert these rivers into his speech. It allows him to place the Rhine and the Danube in the Campus Martius and to assign to both rivers the role of mocking characters in Domitian's farce.

One last passage is worth mentioning. In 56, the motive for Trajan's ability to pacify his enemies with his mere presence appears again through the image of the emperor standing still in front of hostile rivers:

> imminere minacibus ripis tutum quietumque; quid, spernere barbaros fremitus, hostilemque terrorem non armorum magis, quam togarum, ostentatione compescere?
>
> To threaten, safe and quiet, those threatening shores. What, to repulse the barbarian clamor and to refrain the hostile terror no more with the display of arms, but rather with the toga? (Suggested)

[11] Translated by Manolaraki 376.

> To menace safe and quiet those menacing shores. What, to despise the barbarian clamor and to refrain the hostile terror no more with ostentation of arms than of the toga?

Once more rivers are personified with human attitude —to threaten— and this is a consequence of its metonymic sense —the *minacibus ripis* represent the hostile peoples—. However, the singularity of this passage lies on the ingenious sound arrangement. *Imminere minacibus* is a quasi-polyptoton, followed by the repetition of 'tu(m)' in *tutum quietum*. The sound effect resembles that of a heartbeat. Hostile rivers are so peaceful that one can hear the heart beating —but perhaps it is possible to suppose that it alludes to the clop of water as it flows down the river—, while the specular reflection of *imminere* and *minacibus* evokes the two opposite banks of the river that silently threatens the other, one Roman and the other barbarian. Then, the *fremitus* of the enemies is charged with the alliteration of 'r', *speRneRe baRbaRos fRemitus*, which on its turn is pacified by Trajan's presence, muting them with the alliteration of nasal sounds, *hostileMque terroreM NoN arMoruM Magis, quaM togaruM, osteNtatioNe coMpescere*.

Despite its obvious metonymic function, the shores of the rivers in this passage also evoke the other instances where rivers are controlled by the Princeps. Here, the specific names are not mentioned, but from the general context of the speech, we can infer they are the Rhine and the Danube where Trajan's military exploits took place.[12] However, it is specifically the Rhine that is traditionally represented as a noisy or turbulent river (Campbell 281), and Pliny seemed to be playfully joining the *fremitus* of barbarians with the *fremitus* of the river, therefore all this noise is refrained and controlled by Trajan's toga and, most importantly, by Pliny's rhetorical figuration of these peoples and these rivers.

5. Conclusion

In the *Panegyric*, rivers were always employed as rhetorical tropes, and not as a geographical or hydrological description. As I have tried to show, they functioned as metonymies, metaphors, and particularly as hyperboles to emphasize and exaggerate Trajan's power, capacity, and achievements. The immensity of rivers is reduced in comparison to the immensity of Trajan and their fertility and continuity is dimmed when compared to the stability of Trajan's rule. Moreover, Trajan's bravery,

[12] In fact, in his Spanish version, Barreda curiously translates *minacibus ripis* as "las playas amenazadoras Del Rhin y del Danubio", "the menacing shores of the Rhine and the Danube".

diplomacy and military prowess serves to pacify the danger and the threat of the turbulent waters of the rivers and the hostility of the people who inhabit their banks.

Pliny explores the traditional and literary representations of rivers in order to frame them into the political and rhetorical agenda of his speech. The sublimity of Trajan forces him to insert exaggeration and hyperbole into his style.13 As Hutchinson argues,

> Trajan's sublimity is authentic and unsought; it is even more profound than the sublimity of terrible events. The most straightforward element is nature (always mediated through Pliny's art). The Rhine, the Danube and the Nile, all of them standard objects of wonder, are sources of magnificence for Demetrius (*Eloc.* 121), and are connected to the sublime by Longinus (35.4). Cicero uses them when lauding Caesar's deeds (...) These, and the grandeur of distance (Kant's mathematical sublime), are surpassed or undone by Trajan (130).

> However, the *Panegyric* does not only employ rivers to convey rhetorical tropes, but also to place the speech itself in the condition of controlling and managing these rivers. In the same way that Trajan has the power to control the estate, the Empire and its provinces, Pliny, as orator, has the power to control the size, the direction, the location, and the flux of rivers through his speech . Through the power of rhetorical language, the Euphrates is merged with the Rhine; the Danube and the Rhine are placed upon the Campus Martius; the Nile dries out and its noisy, turbulent waters are silenced. The sublime and the grandiose belong, after all, to the speech. The true perennial achievement were not Trajan's endeavors, but Pliny's composition —a vast river of words that shall not dry out—.

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13 Rees adds the "paradoxical" to the definition of Pliny's style.

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