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THE ANTI-BUCOLIC WORLD OF NICANDER'S *THERIACA**

I. INTRODUCTION

The last decades have shown that Nicander's *Theriaca* (second century B.C.E.), a didactic hexameter poem of 958 lines on snakes, scorpions, spiders, and the proper treatment of the wounds they inflict, is a markedly more playful work than most readers thought.[1] Rather than considering the poem as a vehicle of authentic learning,[2] literary approaches to the nature of Nicander's strange poetic world have focussed on his eye for Alexandrian aesthetics, intertextuality, linguistic innovation, and awareness of the didactic tradition that started with Hesiod's *Works and Days*,[3] but also on his predilection for horror, voyeuristic sensationalism, and gory details.[4] Although literary-minded readers have found it hard to disprove convincingly that Nicander may have had *some* professional knowledge of his subject matter, a glance at his arcane language is enough to convince any reader that the *Theriaca* cannot be concerned *solely* with its explicit subject.[5] In this article I will make some additional observations on the way in which Nicander has turned the *Theriaca* into a work of literature, focussing on some of the choices that he has made with regard to his less than veracious depiction of snakes and animals. While Spatafora rightly points to Nicander's eye for detail when portraying floral beauty, I will argue that the poet's play with the *topos* of the *locus amoenus* has a darker side.[6] Rather than creating an epic world of beauty, Nicander shows his talent for taking the reader along an unpleasant path of apprehension and negative feelings, portraying a

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[1] For a modern introduction to Nicander's poetry and the different approaches it has evoked, see E. Magnelli, 'Nicander', in J.J. Clauss and M. Cuypers (edd.), *A Companion to Hellenistic Literature* (Chichester and Malden, MA, 2010), 211–23.

[2] This approach is taken by J.M. Jacques, *Nicandre: Oeuvres, tome II: Les Thériaques* (Paris, 2002), xvi–xx, according to whom Nicander may have been a real doctor, sharing his interest in venomous animals with his audience, which probably consisted of fellow experts. While certainly allowing for the literary character of the poem, Jacques is convinced that Nicander was as much a medical expert as a poet, a view repeated in J.M. Jacques, 'Situation de Nicandre de Colophon', *REA* 109 (2007), 99–121, at 100.

[3] B. Effe, 'Der Aufbau von Nikanders *Theriaka* und *Alexipharmaka*', *RhM* 117 (1974), 53–66, at 54–62; B. Effe, *Dichtung und Lehre: Untersuchungen zur Typologie des antiken Lehrgedichts* (Munich, 1977), 64. For the idea that the poem's structure is not suited to practical needs, see also H. Schneider, *Vergleichende Untersuchungen zur sprachlichen Struktur der beiden erhaltenen Lehrgedichte des Nikander von Kolophon* (Wiesbaden, 1962). See also J.J. Claus, '*Theriaca*: Nicander's poem of the earth', *SIFC* 4 (2006), 160–82.

[4] P. Toohey, *Epic Lessons: An Introduction to Ancient Didactic Poetry* (London and New York, 1996), 67–9; F. Overduin, 'The fearsome shrewmouse: pseudo-science in Nicander's *Theriaca*?' in M.A. Harder, R.F. Regtuit, G.C. Wakker, and A. Ambühl (edd.), *Nature and Science in Hellenistic Poetry* (Leuven, 2009), 79–94, at 80–90.

[5] See M. Hatzimichali, 'Poetry, science and scholarship: the rise and fall of Nicander of Colophon', in Harder et al. (n. 4), 19–40, at 38–9.

[6] G. Spatafora, 'Riflessioni sull'arte poetica di Nicandro', *GIF* 57.2 (2005), 231–62.

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choice selection of afflictions. Not only does he have many ways of giving his quasi-scientific account a markedly negative atmosphere, but his world may well be a deliberate reversal of that other well-known Hellenistic portrayal of the natural world, Theocritus' bucolics.

II. THE WORLD ACCORDING TO NICANDER

As readers of Nicander have observed, despite the rather dry appearance of the *Theriaca* it is by no means a mere versification of a learned prose treatise.[7] His elaborate use of literary devices reflects aesthetics that are clearly reminiscent of the poetry of Apollonius, Callimachus, Aratus, and other Alexandrian poets.[8] These literary elements strongly suggest that the *Theriaca* should not be read as a work in the vein of the biological works of Aristotle or Theophrastus. Nicander's focus on poisonous animals is not as arbitrary as it appears at first sight. The poet's presentation is central to the way in which he wants us to see our place within the realm of nature. By employing various techniques he subtly controls our perception of the animals described and the world in which they live. The sum of his descriptions does not result in a catalogue of individual traits but in the depiction of a gloomy world of danger, slowly and gradually built up.

This world differs from the more straightforward natural world of Hesiod's *Works and Days*. Whereas in that world life can be harsh indeed, Hesiod's presentation of the natural world does not strike one as abnormal, even though his farming techniques may. His depiction of nature is not gloomy or threatening in itself, and there is no sense of general apprehension with regard to the natural world. It is a world in which hard work is necessary, but also potentially rewarding, and in which a knowledgeable farmer can benefit from what nature has to offer. The balance between negative elements (hard work, tough weather conditions, threat of poverty) and positive ones (potential prosperity, reaping the rewards of the land), combined with an absence of fear or imminent natural danger, yields a reasonably realistic natural world.

Nicander's nature also differs significantly from the pastoral world of Theocritus, who offered a new and markedly positive presentation of the natural world. This new way of depicting life in nature, moreover, created a new frame of reference for a Hellenistic audience. Considering the impact and influence of Theocritus' innovations, Nicander's second-century literary-minded readers can be expected to compare his poetry to that of his 'natural' forebears Hesiod and Theocritus. I will discuss four different ways in which Nicander succeeds in colouring his world negatively. First I will point out the opposition to the natural world as portrayed in bucolic poetry, secondly the evil nature of certain types of animals, thirdly the exaggeration of their features, and finally the use of Iliadic military vocabulary.

[7] For an analysis of the differences between the *Theriaca* and its hypothetical prose predecessor, see Schneider (n. 3). See also C. De Stefani, 'La poesia didascalica di Nicandro: un modello prosastico?' in L. Cristante (ed.), *Incontri triestini di filologia classica V 2005–2006* (Trieste, 2006), 55–72, who traces the differences between Nicander's modes of expression and medical prose sources.

[8] Effe (n. 3 [1974]); N. Hopkinson, *A Hellenistic Anthology* (Cambridge, 1988), 230; J.J. O'Hara, *True Names: Vergil and the Alexandrian Tradition of Etymological Wordplay* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1996); Jacques (n. 2 [2002]), lxv–cxxiii; E. Magnelli, 'Nicander's chronology: a literary approach', in M.A. Harder, R.F. Regtuit, and G.C. Wakker (edd.), *Beyond the Canon* (Leuven, 2006), 185–204, at 187–91.

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1. Depiction of the natural world

The world painted in the *Theriaca* is a world both familiar and off-putting, dangerous despite looking agreeable on the surface. At first sight it reminds us primarily of two types of landscape known from earlier poetry: the natural world of Hesiod's *Works and Days*, a poem to which, of course, the *Theriaca* is closely related in terms of genre, and the generally positive bucolic world of Theocritus. To start with the former: Nicander's nature has several elements in common with the depiction of farm life in the *Works and Days*.[9] It is a world in which labour is central, with little opportunity for idleness (cf. *Op*. 582–96) and certainly not for song and piping. Toiling is unavoidable, as Zeus has hidden βίος ('livelihood') for men of our era (*Op*. 42), and has put sweat on the steep road we have to climb (*Op*. 289–92). It is essentially a hard world, but this applies mainly to the circumstances of our livelihood, not so much to the natural world itself. The depiction of that natural world is not unrealistic. Seasonal weather conditions may frustrate the toil of the farmer (*Op*. 504–35, 584), but they do not scare him, nor do they surprise him. Life may be hard, but it is not a world of lurking danger, in which man is surrounded by evil creatures. Although Hesiod's technicalities may confuse those actually engaged in farming, the overall picture is plausible and therefore not coloured either positively or negatively with regard to a dark and gloomy nature.[10] As such, Hesiod's world is markedly different in its depiction from Nicander's.[11]

It is not only Hesiod's natural world, however, which comes to mind when contextualizing Nicander's, since it is not unlike the natural world painted in the bucolic and rural idylls of Theocritus either.[12] When viewed from Nicander's second-century B.C.E. perspective, this Theocritean world had been introduced relatively recently, in the heyday of Alexandrian poetry. It made a lasting impression that changed thoughts on the presentation of landscape, because of Theocritus' original approach in creating a self-contained fictional natural world.[13] This resulted in the illusion of a generally pleasant and mild nature, often, as in *Idyll* 1, very much in harmony with its inhabitants, contrary to Hesiod's, where man has to struggle with nature to subsist. Moreover, Theocritus showed how a poet can put to use his poetic craft emphatically to control the perception of the natural world as the dominant stage of one's poetry. After Theocritus, thinking of herds or countrymen in a natural setting within poetry instantly triggered images of his bucolics, and a Nicandrean reader can hardly *not* have been thinking of Theocritean pastoral. It is particularly in the wake of this third-century notion that Nicander could respond in his own way. Whereas in earlier times his depiction would have been primarily connected to Hesiod's, after Theocritus' invention of the

[9] Nicander's awareness of Hesiod here is indisputable, if only because Hesiod is mentioned at the poem's outset (*Ther*. 12). There, however, his presence is connected to his status as a didactic or catalogue poet, not as a knowledgeable authority with regard to the natural world.

[10] For the contrast between practicality and Hesiod's dramatic enactment of farming, see S. Nelson, 'The drama of Hesiod's farm', *CPh* 91 (1996), 45–53.

[11] Although Zeus is depicted in a somewhat negative way (particularly as opposed to the positive Zeus painted by Aratus in the *Phaenomena* as the counterpart of Hesiod's Zeus), this does not count for the general depiction of life in the natural, agricultural world of Hesiod.

[12] For this purpose I count Theocritus' *Idylls* 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 11 as bucolic. Though *Idyll* 10 is not bucolic, I do include it here as one of his rural poems, as it provides a relevant background for comparison to the *Theriaca*.

[13] For the techniques used by Theocritus to create this fictionality, see M. Payne, *Theocritus and the Invention of Fiction* (Cambridge, 2007), 24–48, and *passim.*

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literary bucolic landscape, Nicander's audience had been provided with a new frame of reference, against which Nicander's depiction can be considered a reaction.

In the poem's opening lines (1–7), Nicander makes clear that his knowledge is particularly useful to countrymen:

> Ῥεῖά κέ τοι μορφάς τε σίνη τ' ὀλοφώϊα θηρῶν
> ἀπροϊδῆ τύψαντα λύσιν θ' ἑτεραλκέα κήδευς,
> φίλ' Ἑρμησιάναξ, πολέων κυδίστατε παῶν,
> ἔμπεδα φωνήσαιμι· σὲ δ' ἂν πολύεργος ἀροτρεύς
> βουκαῖός τ' ἀλέγοι καὶ ὀροιτύπος, εὖτε καθ' ὕλην 5
> ἢ καὶ ἀροτρεύοντι βάλῃ ἔπι λοιγὸν ὀδόντα,
> τοῖα περιφρασθέντος ἀλεξητήρια νούσων.

Readily, dear Hermesianax, most honoured of my many kinsmen, and in due order will I expound the forms of savage creatures and their deadly injuries which smite one unforeseen, and the countering remedy for the harm. And the toiling ploughman, the herdsman, and the woodcutter, whenever in the forest or at the plough one of them fastens its deadly fang upon him, shall respect you for your learning in such means for averting sickness.[14]

As the poet-teacher spells out in this proem, his knowledge is particularly applicable to those working in the country, be it in the field or in the forest: the ploughman (ἀροτρεύς, 4; ἀροτρεύοντι, 6), the herdsman (βουκαῖος, 5), and the woodcutter (ὀροιτύπος, 5).[15] These types of rustics are not only found in the proem but make many reappearances throughout the *Theriaca*.[16] As such, Nicander's world as depicted in the *Theriaca*, though partly modelled on the *Works and Days*, is not at all dissimilar to the bucolic world of Theocritus' pastoral idylls either, a natural world remote from the town, in which plants, animals, and countrydwellers are central, as are the surroundings (plants, greenery, water) and other natural props (shade, a cool breeze).[17]

But, whereas in Theocritus' world the countrymen are glad to find some relief from their worries, in the *Theriaca*'s proem one immediately learns that these countrymen are exposed to grave danger. They are not pictured as particularly experienced in country life, or at one with the natural world. Instead they are presented as strangers to wildlife, for whom the dangers of nature pose as great a threat as for urban dwellers. Instead of these countrymen offering succour from danger to Hermesianax, it is – through his addressee – the learned poet (and only he) who can aid the afflicted. The animals concerned are after all ἀπροϊδῆ τύψαντα ('striking unforeseen', 2), an addition by which Nicander succeeds in conveying a sense of omnipresent danger to his audience right from the outset. The subsequent λύσιν θ' ἑτεραλκέα κήδευς ('a remedy having the

[14] Translations of Nicander are borrowed from A.S.F. Gow and A.F. Scholfield, *Nicander: The Poems and Poetical Fragments* (Cambridge, 1953).

[15] See H. Bernsdorff, *Hirten in der nicht-bukolischen Dichtung des Hellenismus* (Stuttgart, 2001), 187.

[16] Herdsmen are found in *Ther*. 5, 48, 49, 74, 473, 554, 898. The woodcutter appears in 5, 48–9, 74, 473, 554, 898. The ploughman does not reappear after the proem, but instead harvesters (752), beekeepers (808), fishermen (704, 793, 823), and threshers (29, 114) are presented by the poet, all as rural representatives. Urban, or at least less evidently rural, representatives occasionally occur as well: tanners (423), a spearmaker (170), and perfumers (103).

[17] It is, of course, true that the *Theriaca* does not present herdsmen as key figures, as other rural types feature as well. But this is also true of, e.g., *Idyll* 10, which deals with harvesters, but can still be considered to be of a nature type. Fishermen appear, indirectly, in Theoc. *Id.* 1.39–44 and 3.26. A woodcutter (δρύτομος) is found in Theoc. *Id.* 5.64.

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strength to turn around the [source of] grief') is significant as well: in Homer the adjective ἑτεραλκής is usually connected to battle, indicating that victory is 'inclining to the other side'.[18] The adjective thus strengthens, right from the poem's opening lines, the opposition between man and venomous animal as a battle, with the animals as our enemies.

The *Theriaca*'s proem is followed by a mythological transition (8–20), after which the poet, speaking as a didactic-epic teacher, explains to his addressee and pupil, Hermesianax (who was mentioned in line 3), the relevance of his teachings (*Ther.* 21–34):

Ἀλλὰ σύ γε σταθμοῦ τε καὶ αὐλίου ἑρπετὰ φύγδην
ῥηϊδίως ἐκ πάντα διώξεαι, ἢ ἀπ' ἐρίπνης,
ἠὲ καὶ αὐτοπόνοιο χαμευνάδος, ἦμος ἀν' ἀγρούς
φεύγων αὐαλέου θέρεος πνιγόεσσαν ἀϋτμήν
αἴθριος ἐν καλάμῃ στορέσας ἀκρέσπερος εὕδῃς, 25
ἢ καὶ ἀνυδρήεντα παρὲκ λόφον, ἢ ἐνὶ βήσσῃς,
ἐσχατίην ὅθι πλεῖστα κινώπετα βόσκεται ὕλην,
δρυμοὺς καὶ λασιῶνας ἀμορβαίους τε χαράδρας,
καί τε παρὲξ λιστρωτὸν ἅλω δρόμον, ἠδ' ἵνα ποίη
πρῶτα κυϊσκομένη χλοάειςκιάοντας ἰάμνους, 30
τῆμος ὅτ' ἀζαλέων φολίδων ἀπεδύσατο γῆρας
μῶλυς ἐπιστείβων, ὅτε φωλεὸν εἴαρι φεύγων
ὄμμασιν ἀμβλώσσει, μαράθου δέ ἑ νήχυτος ὅρπηξ
βοσκηθεὶς ὠκύν τε καὶ αὐγήεντα τίθησι.

31 ἀζαλέων Gow ἀζαλέον Jacques

You for your part will easily chase and dispel all creeping things from farmstead and cottage, or from steep bank, or from couch of natural herbage, in the hour when, to shun parching summer's fiery breath, beneath the sky you make your bed on straw at nightfall in the fields and sleep, or else beside some unwooded hill or on the edge of a glen, where poisonous creatures feed in multitudes upon the forest, the thickets, overgrowth and ravines – frequented by shepherds – or beside the levelled perimeter of the threshing floor, and where the grass at its first burgeoning brings bloom to the shady water-meadows, at the time when snakes slough the withered scales of age, moving feebly forward, when in spring he leaves his den, and his sight is dim; but a meal of the fennel's sappy shoots makes him swift and bright of eye.

These fourteen lines form one overwhelming single sentence, which reads as a realistic depiction of the countryside. Apart from instilling a sense of usefulness, the poet takes the opportunity to paint the general scenery of his poem verbally, using a rich palette of contrasts: heat/coolness (the stifling heat in 24, versus the shady water-meadows in 30), dryness/water (the dry summer heat in 24, the waterless hill in 26, versus the water-meadows in 30), terrain (crags in 22, hills in 24, vales in 26, and gullies in 28, versus plain in 23), cultivation (fields in 23, threshing floors in 29, versus woods in 27), vegetation (forest in 27, thickets in 28, straw in 25, fresh grass in 29), seasons (spring in 29–30 and 32, versus summer in 24) and time (daytime in 24, versus nightfall in 25). Moreover, 21–9 function as an interesting parallel to lines 4–6 of the proem, in which the three different types of rustic workmen are summed up, each named as a person. In 21–9 complementary descriptions of the territory of these different rustics are

[18] See the revised interpretation of the adjective in the *Lexicon des frühgriechischen Epos*: 'der die anderen, d.h. die Gegner, abwehrt' (*LfgrE*, s.v. ἑτεραλκής).

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given: farms/stables (21), fields for cultivation (23), woods (27–8), grazing land (28), and a threshing floor (29). Herdsmen and rustics do not merely act as props in the poet's vistas of everyday life. They are part of a larger evocation of nature, and of the natural world that constitutes the poem's stage. As such, the world depicted in the *Theriaca* shares many features with Theocritus' bucolic poems. The *Theriaca*'s countryside, featuring shepherds and animals, is markedly natural, as opposed to life in the city, which so prominently sets the stage in many of Theocritus' non-bucolic poems.

Although Theocritus' bucolic poems generally convey a positive atmosphere, with ample occasion for song, piping, merrymaking, leisure, and *eros*, this does not mean that negative elements are absent altogether. Among them, the bucolic *Idylls* present us with different sorts of settings, in which the natural world itself is predominantly pleasant, but in which one also finds less positive elements. The sorrows and death of Daphnis in the first *Idyll* (lines 64–141), though not detracting from the positive portrayal of nature itself, do, of course, strike a sombre note. The same can be said of the third *Idyll*, where the positive natural surroundings cannot remedy the love-ache or prevent the grotesque flirtation with suicide of the first-person goatherd (*Id.* 3.24–7 and 52–4). Other *Idylls*, too, portray problems impeding happiness, yet it is usually nature's inhabitants, not the natural world itself, that detract from a generally positive portrayal of nature.[19]

Whereas in Theocritus' bucolic poems a natural world is depicted that is generally positive, though not for each of the characters that tread its stage, Nicander succeeds in painting nature's essentially negative aspects. Despite the presence of a pleasant countryside, with water, shade, and places to rest in the open, his scenery is far from the Theocritean world, varied though that may be. This is not simply due to the lack of the song of the cicadas, or references to Pan and the nymphs.[20] Natural danger, largely absent in Theocritus' bucolic poems – despite the presence of other dangers – is the *Theriaca*'s prime concern. In fact, in most descriptions of nature Nicander seems to have consciously pictured an anti-bucolic world, subverting the image of the *locus amoenus*. In the proem (5–7) it is already evident that the forest is no safe place for a cowherd. Sleeping out in the open in the countryside is equally ill-advised (21–7). Ravines (χαράδρας, 28), explicitly called places for shepherds (ἀμορβαίους, which according to the *scholia* means βουκολικὰς ἢ ποιμενικάς, ὅπου οἱ βουκόλοι περιπατοῦσι ('[places of] cowherds or shepherds, where herdsmen go'), are mentioned among places where snakes can be found in particular (27),[21] and not even one's dwelling (σταθμοῖο καὶ αὐλίου, 1) is safe unless methodically cleared of dangerous animals.[22]

[19] E.g. the interpersonal and love-related issues in *Id.* 5.41–2 and 5.116–17, and Theoc. *Id.* 6 and 11 in general, or petty inconveniences such as stepping on a thorn (4.57), or getting butted by a goat (3.5).

[20] See G. Schönbeck, 'Der Locus Amoenus von Homer biz Horaz' (Diss., Heidelberg, 1962), 18–60; W. Elliger, 'Die Darstellung der Landschaft in der griechischen Dichtung' (Berlin and New York, 1975), 318–64; R. Hunter, *Theocritus: A Selection. Idylls 1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 10, 11 and 13*, (Cambridge, 1999), 12–14.

[21] Alternatively, the scholia ad *Ther*. 28a explain this Nicandrean hapax as 'dark' (σκοτεινώδεις); see A. Crugnola, *Scholia in Nicandri Theriaca* (Milan, 1971), 45–6.

[22] With this in mind, the depiction of the plane tree in *Ther*. 584 as θερειλεχέος (a *hapax legomenon*: 'good for sleeping under') acquires a bitter taste: the spot just beneath the tree may be ideal as a seat for Theocritean herds, but in the world of the *Theriaca* sleeping under a tree unprepared is very unwise.

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Lines 469–73 display a similar inversion of Theocritus' bucolic model:

> Ἤτοι ὅτ' ἠελίοιο θερειτάτη ἵσταται ἀκτίς,
> οὔρεα μαιμώσσων ἐπινίσεται ὀκριόεντα 470
> αἵματος ἰσχανόων καὶ ἐπὶ κτίλα μῆλα δοκεύων,
> ἢ Σάου ἠὲ Μοσύχλου ὅτ' ἀμφ' ἐλάτῃσι μακεδναῖς
> ἄγραυλοι ψύχωσι, λελοιπότες ἔργα νομήων.

At the hour when the sun's rays are at their hottest this snake eagerly resorts to rugged mountains, athirst for blood and on the watch for the gentle sheep, while beneath the tall pines of Saüs or Mosychlus the shepherds cool themselves, forsaking the tasks of herdsmen.

In the proem (5–7) we saw that the forest is no safe place for cowherds, and a little further on that sleeping out in the open – at least without the precautions expounded by the teacher – is very unwise (21–7). Here the poet gives a clear picture of herds in their natural surroundings: the shepherds in the tall pine forests (472–3), who cool themselves during a welcome break from work in the scorching heat of midday, an image both bucolic and reminiscent of the *locus amoenus*. And here too the shepherds should beware of snakes, particularly as they are lusting for sheep.

The correspondences to Theocritus' bucolics are manifest:[23] the heat of summer (ὅτ' ἠελίοιο θερειτάτη ἵσταται ἀκτίς, 470),[24] combined with midday,[25] a spot beneath tall and therefore shady trees (ἐλάτῃσι μακεδναῖς, 472),[26] shepherds seeking to cool themselves[27] and temporarily forsaking their tasks as herdsmen.[28] All these are found in Theocritus' pastorals, underlining the correspondences to the natural world painted by Nicander and the rural settings of Theocritus. The reference to danger at noontide is interesting, moreover, as it corresponds to the mention of Pan at Theoc. *Id.* 1.15–16. Although the slightly naive herdsmen in the first *Idyll* may genuinely fear waking Pan, Nicander's audience can of course distinguish that type of apprehension from the more tangible dangers at noon described in the *Theriaca*. I do not, of course, contend that Nicander has individual bucolic poems or particular lines in mind. To put it in

[23] Translations are borrowed from A.S.F. Gow, *Theocritus. Vol. 1* (Cambridge, 1952[2]).

[24] For summer's heat, cf. Theoc. *Id.* 6.4 (θέρεος, 'in summer'), 9.12 (θέρευς φρύγοντος, 'when summer scorches'), 10.51 (ἐλινῦσαι δὲ τὸ καῦμα, 'rest out the heat'), 12.9 (ἠελίου φρύγοντος, 'when the sun is scorching'). By comparison, in *Ther*. 121 summer in particular is the season of danger: ἀλλ' ἤτοι θέρεος βλαβερὸν δάκος ἐξαλέασθαι ('But chiefly in summer must you be on your guard against harmful snakes').

[25] For noontide as the resting hour for herdsman, cf. Theoc. *Id.* 1.15 (τὸ μεσαμβρινόν, 'at noontide'), and 6.4 (μέσῳ ἄματι, 'at noonday'). Theoc. *Id.* 10.48 is a special case, as threshers are advised *not* to rest at noon, as herds (and most other people) would.

[26] For large and shady trees as topical of the locus *amoenus*, cf. Theoc. *Id.* 1.1 (ἁδύ τι τὸ ψιθύρισμα καὶ ἁ πίτυς, αἰπόλε, τήνα, 'sweet is the whispered music of yonder pinetree'), 5.32 (τεῖδ' ὑπὸ τὰν κότινον καὶ τἄλσεα ταῦτα κιτίξας, 'here beneath the wild olive and these trees'), 5.45 (τουτεὶ δρύες, ὧδε κύπειρος, 'Here are oaks and galingale'), 7.135–6 (πολλαὶ δ' ἄμμιν ὕπερθε κατὰ κρατὸς δονέοντο | αἴγειροι πτελέαι τε, 'many a poplar and elm murmured above our heads').

[27] For the *topos* of shepherds seeking coolness in Theocritus, cf. *Id.* 5.47–8 (ἔνθ' ὕδατος ψυχρῶ κρᾶναι δύο … | … καὶ ἁ σκιὰ οὐδὲν ὁμοία τᾷ παρὰ τίν, 'here are two springs of cold water … and the shade's beyond comparison'), 6.3–4 (ἐπὶ κράναν δέ τιν' ἄμφω | ἑσδόμενοι, 'and at a spring the pair sat down'), 7.136–7 (τὸ δ' ἐγγύθεν ἱερὸν ὕδωρ | Νυμφᾶν ἐξ ἄντροιο κατειβόμενον κελάρυζε, 'and near at hand the sacred water from the cave of the Nymphs fell splashing'), 9.9 (ἔστι δὲ μοι παρ' ὕδωρ ψυχρὸν στιβάς, 'by the cool stream is my coach').

[28] Forsaking one's goats for a short spell is typical of bucolic poetry: cf. Theoc. *Id.* 1.14. Special cases are Theoc. *Id.* 3.1–2 and 4.1–2, where the care of the flock is given over to someone else for other reasons. In Theoc. *Id.* 10.21–2 it is reapers who put down their work for a while to sing songs.

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Conte's terms: Theocritus is the '*modello-codice*' for bucolic for Nicander, even if he does not have a particular '*modello-esemplare*' in mind.[29] It is the literary bucolic world *per se*, with its typical features of the *locus amoenus*, freedom from care, absence of danger, natural beauty, and so on, against which he is reacting.[30]

Another example, comparable to these bucolic/anti-bucolic depictions, is found in *Ther*. 752–8, a brief evocation of a rustic scene in which field labourers are presented harvesting:

> Χειροδρόποι δ' ἵνα φῶτες ἄτερ δρεπάνοιο λέγονται
> ὄσπρια χέδροπά τ' ἄλλα μεσοχλόου ἐντὸς ἀρούρης,
> ἐνθά δ' ἐπασσύτερα φλογερῇ εἰλυμένα χροιῇ
> εἴκελα κανθαρίδεσσι φαλάγγια τυτθὰ δίενται. 755
> τοῦ μὲν ὅμως ἔμμοχθον ἀεὶ περὶ δάχμα χέονται
> φλύκταιναι, κραδίη δὲ παραπλάζουσα μέμηνε,
> γλῶσσα δ' ἄτακτα λέληκε, παρέστραπται δὲ καὶ ὄσσε.

Where men go plucking with their hands, not using sickles, gathering pulse and other legumes amid the fields while still green, there in swarms, wrapped in fiery colour, and like to blister-beetles, dart small spiders. But for all their size around the troublesome bite of one blisters always rise, and the mind wanders and is crazed; the tongue shrieks disordered words and the eyes squint.

Apart from other interesting elements that mark these lines as poetical rather than prosaic,[31] notice the similarities with Theocritus' tenth *Idyll*, a rural mime in which reapers are presented in dialogue. A certain Milon is addressing one Bucaeus, who fails to reap in orderly fashion in line with his colleagues. It turns out that the latter is hopelessly in love with a girl (8, 10, 15), which distracts him from his manual labour. The girl, whose name is Bombyca (26, 36), is said to have piped the other day for the reapers at work (16). After a brief exchange of remarks, Bucaeus and Milon start singing in turn (24–37, 42–55). A Theocritean reaper's life may be filled with sorrow, but it is the pains of love, not physical danger, which he has to endure. In contrast, Nicander's reapers are not visited by bonny girls making music while they work. Their only visitors are hordes of venomous spiders.

A last example may be found in Nicander's portrayal of fishermen (*Ther*. 822–5):

> Ναὶ μὴν οἶδ' ὅσα πόντος ἁλὸς ῥόχθοισιν ἑλίσσει,
> σμυραίνην δ' ἔκπαγλον· ἐπεὶ μογεροὺς ἁλιῆας
> πολλάκις ἐμπρήσασα κατεπρήνιξεν ἐπάκτρου
> εἰς ἅλα φυζηθέντας ἐχετλίου ἐξαναδῦσα. 825

[29] As summarized in S. Hinds, *Allusion and Intertext: Dynamics of Appropriation in Roman Poetry* (Cambridge, 1998), 41–2.

[30] *Pace* Bernsdorff (n. 15), 187–9, who does not sense any influence from bucolic poetry, only elements too common to have particular significance.

[31] E.g. the poet's choice of φῶτες (752) instead of ἄνδρες, the dual ὄσσε (758), and the remarkable collocation of γλῶσσα and ἄτακτα (758), which, as P. Bing, 'The unruly tongue: Philitas of Cos as scholar and poet', *CPh* 98 (2003), 330–48, at 339 observes, is only found elsewhere in the title of the work Ἄτακτοι γλῶσσαι of the fourth-century B.C.E. grammarian poet Philitas of Cos, a famous collection of glosses. Bing may be right in suggesting that Nicander is playfully alluding to Philitas' work here, considering Nicander's fascination for obscure words (he wrote a work called Γλῶσσαι himself), and Philitas' status as an eminent proto-Hellenistic scholar.

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Furthermore I have knowledge of all the creatures that the sea whirls amid its briny surges, and the horror of the moray, since many a time has it sprung up from the fish-box and striking them with panic has hurled toiling fishermen from their boat to seek refuge in the sea.

Although not in the realm of bucolic, this brief scene does form a poignant contrast to the old fisherman depicted on Thyrsis' wooden cup in the famous *ecphrasis* in Theocritus' first *Idyll* (39–44). There we see a greying man labouring peacefully at his nets, and though he is old, his strength is that of a youth, the poet presenting him as in control. By comparison, Nicander's fishermen are presented as weak. They are not really able to cope with as monstrous a fish as the moray, which startles them, causes panic, throws them off their feet, and even has them jump off their boats into the sea. This is not intended as facetious: the fisherman, venturing as an intruder into the natural world, is subject to fear and danger, as much as any unprotected man is in Nicander's nature.

In terms of natural depiction within the epic genre, Hesiod provided a harsh, yet fairly realistic world. To this world a new kind of nature was added by Theocritus, whose presentation of nature itself is essentially positive as well as less realistic. It is in comparison to these examples that Nicander's depiction strikes us as essentially negative: in its focus on exaggerated danger it is less realistic than Hesiod's natural world, whereas the lighter touch of bucolic is inverted, or rather subverted, to a mood of a dark and dangerous nature.

2. Biological observations versus malicious depiction

There are other techniques used by Nicander to paint the world in his own dark colours, such as the depiction of snakes (in the first part of the poem, dealing with serpents, 157–492) and some other animals (in the poem's second part, dealing with other venomous animals, 715–836) as particularly malignant creatures.[32] In the *Theriaca* snakes do not attack as a natural reaction to danger, or out of mere self-protection, but out of spite – or so Nicander wants his addressee(s) to believe. Their response is not instinctive, although it does result from their evil nature. They do not assault helpless humans because they are cornered, but because they have a natural urge to harm men. A first example is found in *Ther*. 258 when the *cerastes* (horned viper) is introduced: εὖ δ' ἂν καὶ δολόεντα μάθοις ἐπιόντα κεράστην ('you would do well also to learn of the crafty *cerastes*'). The adjective δολόεις ('wily, crafty') is quite rare and stems from early epic. More particularly it is used by Homer, once for Calypso (*Od*. 7.245) and once for Circe (*Od*. 9.32).[33] Later instances (Ap. Rhod. *Argon*. 2.423, of Phineus describing Aphrodite; *Argon*. 3.89, of Hera describing Medea) also make clear that the adjective is not used simply to signify those with inherent evil intent but complex characters, even goddesses, who are capable of good and evil. When they are called δολόεις it is not because they lack the will to choose between good and evil, but precisely because they choose evil when circumstances call for it. When the adjective is applied to snakes, they are therefore not just portrayed in lofty epic diction but also presented as creatures that deliberately choose to assault humans: in Nicander's view, or rather in his presentation, their

[32] For the idea of Nicander's world as a world of horror, see Toohey (n. 4). The latter's focus is, however, on the wounds resulting from snakebites and the macabre display of pain and suffering, rather than the negative depiction of the snakes and other dangerous animals themselves.

[33] A third instance is *Od*. 8.281, where the adjective describes the fine nets spread by Hephaestus above the bed of Aphrodite in order to snare her together with Ares.

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behaviour is not caused by natural or innate responses, but by a conscious choice to inflict pain on their victims.

Several further instances of this negative depiction of animals as acting out of spite are found elsewhere in the poem. In *Ther*. 818 the salamander – which modern science regards as harmless to humans – is called a δόλιον δάκος ('treacherous beast'). In *Ther*. 470–1 the *cenchrines*-snake is pictured as eagerly thirsting for blood (μαιμώσσων ἐπινίσεται … | αἵματος ἰσχανόων). The poet's presentation makes us think of these creatures in terms of evil, not as subjected to the natural processes of balance in the food chain, as a biological observer, an Aristotle or a Theophrastus, would.[34] The sea-turtle in *Ther*. 703 is βροτολοιγός ('plague of men'), without any apparent biological reason accounting for its baneful portrayal.[35] On the contrary: its blood is presented by the poet himself as a potent remedy against snake poisoning (700–2):

> Πεύθεο δ' εἰναλίης χέλυος κρατέουσαν ἀρωγήν 700
> δάχματος εἶαρ ἔμεν δολιχῶν ὅσα φῶτας ἀνιγρούς
> ἑρπετὰ σίνονται· τὸ δέ τοι μέγ' ἀλέξιον εἴη.[36]

Learn also that the powerful aid of the sea-turtle is a defence against the bite of all the long, crawling creatures that injure distressful mortals: and may you find it a strong protection.

We would thus expect the sea-turtle to be given a positive epithet, yet, despite its usefulness, Nicander does not allow a positive evaluation of the animal itself.

Elsewhere, too, the audience is constantly reminded of lurking danger: the asp in 158 is pictured as φοινήεις ('bloody, murderous') even when it is merely moving sluggishly. When it throws off dull sleep and takes its action pose – the standard coil in a ring on the ground – Nicander writes: λευγαλέον δ' ἀνὰ μέσσα κάρη πεφρικὸς ἀείρει ('and in the midst it rears its head, bristling in deadly fashion', 162). Again a snake is depicted as a murderous monster, rather than just an animal reacting in defence. Merely talking about the snake makes it λευγαλέος, whether it has attacked or not: an effective means of building up tension, which the poet does well in many of his descriptions.

Even among themselves some animals are shown to harbour vehement wrath. In a short digression (448–51) we learn about the perennial feud between the eagle and the dragon:

> Τῷ μέν τ' ἔκπαγλον κοτέων βασιλήϊος ὄρνις
> αἰετὸς ἐκ παλαχῆς ἐπαέξεται, ἀντία δ' ἐχθρήν
> δῆριν ἄγει γενύεσσιν ὅταν βλώσκοντα καθ' ὕλην 450
> δέρκηται·

[34] See also Overduin (n. 4), 91.

[35] A possible explanation can be found in obscure mythology, e.g. through Call. fr. 296 Pf. (= fr. 59 Hollis) from the *Hecale*; Gow and Scholfield (n. 14), 183. Nicander may be thinking of the murderous sea-turtle at the Scironian cliffs (which are mentioned in *Ther*. 214), which ate its victims when they had been pushed over the cliffs into the sea. It is known from many late sources, e.g. Apollod. *Bibl. Epit*. 1.2; Plut. *Vit. Thes*. 10; Paus. 1.44.8, Hyg. *Fab*. 38; Ov. *Met*. 7.443–7. Diodorus (Diod. Sic. 4.59.4–5) tells us that the villainous Megarian tyrant Sciron, an enemy of Theseus, took pleasure in forcing passers-by to wash his feet near the Scironian cliffs, after which he pushed them over the edge into the 'sea named the Turtle', which is Diodorus' euhemeric solution to the presence of a Χελώνη in the story.

[36] All Greek text is quoted from Jacques (n. 2 [2002]). All translations (with slight adaptations) are taken from Gow and Scholfield (n. 14).

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From his earliest days the King of Birds, the eagle, grows up harbouring fierce wrath against him [the dragon], and against him with his beak he wages a war of hate whenever he espies him moving through the forest.

This depiction exceeds objective biological observation. Instead, the natural world is pictured as a domain in which man has no place, a world of feuds and hatred alien to him. The eagle is not simply said to respond to the actions of a predator, but to have a strong and permanent awareness of the role-division in the animal kingdom. It is not painted as yet another natural phenomenon, but rather as sharing human emotions, described in strong terms reminiscent of man, not beast, such as ἔκπαγλον κοτέων ('violently bearing a grudge', 448) and ἐχθρήν δῆριν ('a war of hate', 449–50).[37] For the reader the result of these descriptions is the uncomfortable feeling of being an intruder in a world which is not his, a gloomy world in which he can only be a weak and vulnerable spectator.

A last instance worth mentioning, though problematic with regard to its proper interpretation, is found in *Ther*. 309–15, which is part of a brief aetiological myth explaining the crooked movement of the snake known as the 'blood-letter':

Εἰ ἔτυμον, Τροίηθέ γ' ἰοῦσ' ἐχαλέψατο φύλοις
Αἰνελένη, ὅτε νῆα πολύστροιβον παρὰ Νεῖλον 310
ἔστησαν βορέαο κακὴν προφυγόντες ὁμοκλήν,
ἦμος ἀποψύχοντα κυβερνητῆρα Κάνωβον
Θώνιος ἐν ψαμάθοις ἀθρήσατο· τύψε γὰρ εὐνῇ
αὐχέν' ἀποθλιφθεῖσα καὶ ἐν βαρὺν ἤρυγεν ἰόν
αἱμοροῒς θήλεια, κακὸν δέ οἱ ἔχραε κοῖτον. 315

If the tale be true, Bane-Helen coming from Troy was angered with this species [viz. the so-called blood-letter] when her company beached their vessel by the tumultuous Nile as they fled before the dread onset of the north wind, what time she beheld Canobus, the helmsman, swooning on the sands of Thonis; for as he slept a female Blood-letter, on which he had pressed, struck him in the neck and belched forth its deadly poison into him, turning his rest to ruin.

This is a passage from one of the few mythological digressions in the *Theriaca*. Although the passage is interesting for several other reasons,[38] what is relevant in this context is the snake's reaction: is it instant or belated? The blood-letter in the story appears to be trampled upon by Canobus, Helen's helmsman. We would expect the snake to react instantly or instinctively, for instance by biting Canobus in the ankle or in the calf. Instead we read, implicitly, that only later on, when Canobus is sleeping (εὐνῇ, 313), does the snake take its revenge by dealing the helmsman a fatal blow in the neck (τύψε γὰρ αὐχέν' … κακὸν δέ οἱ ἔχραε κοῖτον, 313–15). Rather than primitively acting upon its nature, the snake, having designs against the guilty helmsman, has patiently waited for a chance to find Canobus at his weakest before striking. It must be stated here that the text (in particular ἀποθλιφθεῖσα in 314) does not give

[37] Cf. the parallel opposition between deer and vipers in *Ther*. 139–44, showing the same emotions.

[38] E.g. the incorporation of mythical lore from the Trojan saga, the neo-Homeric adaptation of Helen's name (e.g. *Il*. 3.39; *Od*. 19.260), the self-confident use of εἰ ἔτυμον, questioning the credibility of ancient myth, and the *topos* of the death of the helmsman. The multiple aetiology pertains to the crooked movement of the 'blood-letter' snake as a result of the punishment of Helen, and the eponymous Canobic mouth of the Nile. These, however, are beyond the scope of this article.

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much information about the exact circumstances: is the snake trampled on, or squeezed by the helmsman turning in his sleep, in which case the snake happened to find itself very close to the helmsman? To me, however, the situation suggests that the snake was inadvertently maltreated earlier on.[39] In Nicander's world dangerous animals are calculating, planning their strategies like warriors; they are hardly ever simply animals.

Are the species described above exceptions to Nicander's otherwise objective account? The answer is offered early in the poem (8–10), right after the proem:

> Ἀλλ' ἤτοι κακοεργὰ φαλάγγια, σὺν καὶ ἀνιγρούς
> ἑρπηστὰς ἔχιάς τε καὶ ἄχθεα μυρία γαίης
> Τιτήνων ἐνέπουσιν ἀφ' αἵματος. 10

Now I would have you know, men say that noxious spiders, together with the grievous reptiles and vipers and the earth's countless burdens, are of the Titans' blood.

Though uttered somewhat cryptically, the poet's reference here concerns the beheaded Medusa, whose blood was spilt in flight as Perseus flew over Libya.[40] The implication of the reference inserted by Nicander here at the start of the poem is clear: the world of the *Theriaca* is a tainted one, infected by the primeval evil of the chthonic gods, an evil with which humanity will perennially be struggling.

3. Exaggeration in animal depiction

At *Ther*. 811 Nicander introduces the millipede (ἴουλος), a small and comparatively harmless creature, who is nevertheless described in a markedly negative manner by the poet: οἶδά γε μὴν καὶ ἴουλος ἃ μήδεται ('yes, and I know too the devices of the millipede').[41] Nicander's choice of the verb μήδομαι here is a logical exaggeration, as it again shows the poet portraying animals anthropomorphically as having bad intent. The verb μήδομαι means 'plan', but – at least in epic – has a negative undertone,[42] which yields meanings such as 'plot', 'plan cunningly', or 'contrive'.[43] Even a millipede, a perhaps not completely innocuous, yet relatively powerless animal, is thus

[39] Of course, the snake in the story above could be considered a denizen of the realm of myth, and therefore somewhat exceptional. Yet the aetiological story does show a clear continuity from myth to reality: the point is that the 'blood-letter' in this story is the very same as the crookedly moving species still found in Nicander's day and age, and it is not essentially different from other snakes represented in the *Theriaca*.

[40] In the passage dealing with the death of the Argonaut Mopsus (Ap. Rhod. *Argon.* 4.1502–36), Apollonius Rhodius tells us that Perseus, after beheading the Gorgon, flew across Libya to bring Medusa's head to King Polydectes. Cf. Ov. *Met*. 4.616–20; Lucan 9.697–701. A similar story was told in Apollonius' *Foundation of Alexandria*: Ἀπολλώνιος δὲ ὁ Ῥόδιος ἐν τῇ τῆς Ἀλεξανδρείας κτίσει [φήσιν] ἀπὸ τῶν σταγόνων τοῦ τῆς Γοργόνος αἵματος (fr. 4 in J.U. Powell, *Collectanea Alexandrina* [Oxford, 1925], 5 = scholion ad *Ther*. 12a). There are no verbal echoes from this passage in the *Theriaca*, but Nicander may have had different versions of the creation of snakes in mind in which blood played a role. For the interpretation of 'Titans' here see Gow and Scholfield (n. 14), 171.

[41] The creature is difficult to identify. Gow and Scholfield (n. 14), 83, chose to translate ἴουλος as 'woodlouse'. J. Scarborough, 'Nicander *Theriaca* 811: a note', *CPh* 75 (1980), 138–40, concludes that the ἴουλος must be a millipede, 'probably of the *Spirobolidae*', species that are not poisonous to humans, although they do have defensive chemicals that may stain the skin.

[42] E.g. *Il*. 10.52, 21.19, 21.413: *Od*. 3.303, 11.474.

[43] LSJ s.v. μήδομαι I.2. Cf. *LfgrE*, 'planen, ins Werk setzen', indicating calculation, not instant reaction.

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said to plot against humans, therefore supporting Nicander's depiction of a gloomy world in which every little creature poses a possible threat. Moreover, its brief portrayal shows the poet's technique of attributing powers to tiny animals that are not only typically associated with humans but also evidently exaggerated.[44]

This technique of unobtrusive exaggeration is also found in the description of a snake called the αἱμορρόος (or αἱμορροΐς for the female), the 'blood-letter' already mentioned earlier. By zooming in, the poet creates a detailed but at the same time exaggerated depiction of a particular snake (*Ther*. 282–97):

> Σῆμα δέ τοι δάκεος αἱμορρόου αὖτις ἐνίσπω,
> ὅς τε κατ' ἀμβαθμοὺς πετρώδεας ἐνδυκὲς αὔει,
> τρηχὺν ὑπάρπεζον θαλάμην ὀλιγήρεα τεύχων·
> ἔνθ' εἰλυθμὸν ἔχεσκεν ἐπεί τ' ἐκορέσσατο φορβῆς. 285
> μήκει μὲν ποδὸς ἴχνει ἰσάζεται, αὐτὰρ ἐπ' εὖρος
> τέτρυται μύουρος ἀπὸ φλογέοιο καρήνου,
> ἄλλοτε μὲν χροιῇ ψολόεις, ὁτὲ δ' ἔμπαλιν αἰθός.
> δειρὴν δ' ἐσφήκωται ἅλις, πεδανὴ δέ οἱ οὐρή
> ζαχραὲς θλιφθεῖσα παρομφάλιος τετάνυσται. 290
> τοῦ μὲν ὑπὲρ νιφόεντα κεράατα δοιὰ μετώπῳ
> ἔγκειται πάρνοψι φάη λογάδας τι προσεικεῦς·
> σμερδαλέον δ' ἐπί οἱ λαμυρὸν πέφρικε κάρηνον.
> δοχμὰ δ' ἐπισκάζων ὀλίγον δέμας οἷα κεράστης
> μέσσου ὅ γ' ἐκ νώτου βαιὸν πλόον αἰὲν ὀκέλλει, 295
> γαίῃ ἐπιθλίβων νηδύν, φολίσιν δὲ καὶ οἴμῳ
> παῦρον ὑποψοφέων καλάμης χύσιν οἷα διέρπει.

Next I will tell you what marks the blood-letter, which always sleeps in rocky ascents, making a small, rough lair under a hedge. There it has its lurking-place when it has gorged its fill. It equals a footprint in length, but as to its breadth it dwindles tapering from the fiery head down. At times it is of a sooty hue, or again a reddish brown. It narrows moderately at the neck, and its tail is sharply compressed and stretches flattened from the middle onward. In its forehead beneath its snow-white horns are planted two eyes, of which the irises are somewhat like those of locusts, and on top rises terrible its devouring head. And with an oblique and halting movement it ever steers its little body on its brief journeys from the middle of the back like the Cerastes, scraping its belly over the earth, and with its scaly body it makes a slight rustling as though crawling through a heap of straw.

This snake is dangerous indeed, as marked by its description in lines 298–304. Its bite causes a dark swelling, followed by bleedings from the nostrils, throat, and even ears. The skin becomes slack, the gums are infected, teeth become loose and blood drips from under the fingernails.

If we are to believe Nicander, this is a true monster. If one looks more closely, however, there is something odd about Nicander's depiction. This snake is said to equal a mere footprint in length (μήκει μὲν ποδὸς ἴχνει ἰσάζεται, 286), yet a few lines later the poet describes its head as terrible and devouring (σμερδαλέον δ' ἐπί οἱ λαμυρὸν πέφρικε κάρηνον, 294). As the snake's head cannot be more than 10 or 15 cm above the ground – and therefore hardly visible from the normal viewpoint of a standing man – Nicander is evidently exaggerating the opposition between puny size (ὀλίγον δέμας, 294) and abnormal danger. Through his qualification (σμερδαλέον, 'terrible

[44] For a similar depiction of the 'fearsome' shrewmouse, which appears in *Ther*. 811, see Overduin (n. 4), 90–1.

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to look at') Nicander makes us believe that we are dealing with a beast that is staring us in the face menacingly, whereas it would be difficult at first glance even to tell the snake's head from its tail, let alone be frightened by its terrible maw.[45] The adjective λαμυρός ('gluttonous', 'greedy') implies that the (tiny) snake is lusting for blood, almost as if it wants to devour its human victims, despite its being a mere foot long. And though its bite may be dangerous, the animal can hardly propel itself at an alarming rate, as it only moves slowly (βαιὸν πλόον, 295), or perhaps just not very far. What the reader is presented with here is not a realistic portrayal of this snake's appearance, but a distorted, exaggerated account.

Another case of Nicander's exaggerated portrayal of animals is found in *Ther*. 759–68. It concerns a small but, according to the poet, dreadful animal:[46]

Φράζεο δ' Αἰγύπτοιο τά τε τρέφει οὐλοὸς αἶα
κνώδαλα, φαλλαίνῃ ἐναλίγκια, τὴν περὶ λύχνους 760
ἀκρόνυχος δειπνηστὸς ἐπήλασε παιφάσσουσαν·
στεγνὰ δέ οἱ πτερὰ πάντα καὶ ἔγχνοα, τοῖα κονίης
ἢ καὶ ἀπὸ σπληδοῖο φαείνεται, ὅστις ἐπαύρῃ.
τῷ ἴκελος Περσῆος ὑποτρέφεται πετάλοισι,
τοῦ καὶ σμερδαλέον νεύει κάρη αἰὲν ὑποδράξ 765
ἐσκληκός, νηδὺς δὲ βαρύνεται· αὐτὰρ ὁ κέντρον
αὐχένι τ' ἀκροτάτῳ κεφαλῇ τ' ἐνεμάξατο φωτός,
ῥεῖα δέ κεν θανάτοιο καὶ αὐτίκα μοῖραν ἐφείη.

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Consider now monsters which the grim land of Egypt fosters, like the moth which the evening meal-time brings in to flutter round the lamps. All the wings are dense and are covered with down, even as a man appears who may chance to touch dust or ashes. Such in appearance, it is reared among the leaves of Perseus's tree. Its terrible head nods ever in grim fashion and is hard, and its belly is heavy; its sting it plants in the top of a man's neck or on his head, and it may easily and on the spot bring the doom of death.

This particular part of the poem is devoted to the monsters of Egypt. Nicander starts the section by referring to the land of Egypt as an οὐλοὸς αἶα, a 'grim land', preparing the audience for horrible creatures, despite the many monstrous snakes already discussed as belonging to Greece earlier in the poem. Egypt is therefore not necessarily any more grim than other regions harbouring dangerous creatures, of which Nicander has given several examples earlier in the poem, such as Thrace in 458–82. What Nicander really tries to convey here is a general sense of gloom. When the actual monster (the fabulous κρανοκολάπτης or κεφαλοκρούστης, 'head-pecker') is discussed in 765 we learn that it looks like a fluttering moth (the kind which one finds flapping about around a lamp in the dark of the evening), which can hardly be said to have a dreadful appearance.[47]

The discrepancy between description and reality is even bolder when Nicander tells us in the same line that the would-be monster grimly nods its terrible head (σμερδαλέον

[45] For the value of the epic adjective σμερδαλέος, see S.H. Lonsdale, 'If looks could kill: παπταίνω and the interpretation of imagery and narrative in Homer', *CJ* 84.4 (1989), 325–33; Spatafora (n. 6), 243–4; A. Karanika, 'Medicine and cure in Posidippus' *Iamatika*', in Harder et al. (n. 4), 41–56, at 44.

[46] *Ther*. 715–836 does not deal with snakes, but with other kinds of venomous animals, such as scorpions, spiders, and the like.

[47] Both the Greek names are mentioned in the scholia ad *Ther*. 763a; Crugnola (n. 21), 275.

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νεύει κάρη αἰὲν ὑποδράξ), sitting amid the leaves of a tree. If one keeps in mind that this is only a small, moth-like creature, it is hard to see how, from a distance, anyone would be frightened by the tiny head of the little animal, hidden between the leaves. The adverb ὑποδράξ, moreover, is a Hellenistic adaptation of Homer's ὑπόδρα, meaning 'looking from under the brows', that is 'looking grim'.[48] The idea of a tiny moth looking evilly or in a threatening manner from under its brows – hardly visible even from a short distance! – is Nicander's typical way of depicting a world of horror, rather than a genuine biological observation. As such it can be considered another case of the poet's literary technique of depicting nature as much more grim than it would be to the impartial observer, both by condemning Egypt as a place of danger and by grotesquely personifying a small animal.

A last example I will add here is found in the description of the so-called 'dragon', a kind of snake which is introduced in *Ther*. 438. Apart from other striking features, such as its yellow beard (νέρθε δὲ πώγων | αἰὲν ὑπ' ἀθερεῶνι χολοίβαφος, 'and lower down beneath his chin there is ever a beard of yellow stain', 443–4) and luminous appearance (ἤτοι ὅγ' ἄγλαυρος μὲν ἐείδεται, 441), this snake boasts three rows of teeth (ἐν δὲ γενείῳ | τρίστοιχοι ἑκάτερθε περιστιχόωσιν ὀδόντες, 'but in his jaw above and below are arrayed three rows of teeth', 441–2). This does not appear to be based on reality; however, even if such snakes were thought to exist, it is striking that the verbal combination of τρίστοιχοι and ὀδόντες is very rare before Nicander. In fact, the only two instances of τρίστοιχοι ὀδόντες refer to Scylla (*Od*. 12.91) and to the Indian manticore, as decribed by Ctesias (*FGrH* 688, F 45d). Frightening man-eating monsters they are indeed, but they also evidently belong to mythology. Through association, particularly in alluding to Homer, Nicander has effectively exaggerated this snake's properties, thus adding to a sense of ubiquitous danger in his natural world.[49]

4. The use of Iliadic military vocabulary

Next to Nicander's exaggerated presentation of the animals' evil nature and grotesque features, another component of his world is his military depiction of animals, which is corroborated by the use of vocabulary reminiscent of the *Iliad*. This idea of functional use of Homeric borrowings with regard to animal presentation has been proposed by Touwaide, who has collected many examples.[50] In his view, the battles painted by Nicander in Homeric colours are those between the poisons and venoms on the one hand, and their human victims on the other. This is not entirely correct. Venoms and poisons may be the weapons of attack that ultimately subdue those inflicted – just as remedies, prophylactics, and antidotes can be considered their parallel counter-weapons – but the battle is between the aggressor and the attacked, between the animal striking and the human being struck. As argued above, the danger does not lie in the potential of a

[48] The adverb is used similarly in *Ther*. 457 for the so-called dragon, which too is said to look ὑποδράξ despite the snake's obvious lack of physiognomic possibilities. For the Alexandrian ὑποδράξ, see Call. *Iamb*. fr. 194.101 Pf.; *Hec*. 374.1 Hollis. For ὑπόδρα ἰδών, see Hom. *Il*. 1.148, 2.245, 4.349, 4.411, 5.251, 5.888, etc. (26 instances); also J.P. Holoka, '"Looking darkly" (ΥΠΟΔΡΑ ΙΔΩΝ): reflections on status and decorum in Homer', *TAPhA* 113 (1983), 1–16.

[49] See similar observations by Magnelli (n. 8), 189–90, who notes an intertextual connection to another mythical monster, the dragon guarding the golden fleece in Ap. Rhod. *Argon.* 4.143–5.

[50] A. Touwaide, 'Nicandre: de la science à la poésie. Contribution à l'exégèse de la poesie médicale grecque', *Aevum* 65 (1991), 65–101, at 70–7.

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poison to take effect, but in the adverse choice of the inimical animal deliberately choosing to act.

This haunting sense of enmity is created through the persistent use of a wide range of negative vocabulary.[51] We find the adjectives κακοεργός ('malicious', 8, 111, 277, 746), κακοφθόρος ('destructive', 795), δόλιος ('treacherous', 818), δολόεις ('wily', 258), βλαβερός ('harmful', 121), ἐπιλωβής ('injurious', 35, 771), οὐλόμενος ('wretched', 100, 277, 357), οὐλοός ('destructive', 352, 759), οὖλος ('baneful', 233, 671), ἀπεχθής ('hateful', 483, 818), κακός ('evil', 15, 116, 352, 436, 623, 629, 775), κακήθης ('malicious', 152, 360), βλοσυρός ('grim', 336, 706), σμερδαλέος ('fearful', 144, 161, 207, 293, 765), σμερδνός ('terrible', 815), and so on. Several words indicate doom, such as κήρ ('death', 35, 411, 540, 699, 813, 862, 920), κηριτρόφος ('death-breeding', 192), ἀκήριος ('harmless', 190), αἶσα ('doom', 120, 281, 335, 800), μοῖρα ('death', 410, 768), θάνατος ('death', 120, 335, 410, 558, 768), ἄτη ('ruin', 100, 244, 304, 352, 436, 798, 865, 934). A sense of lurking and imminent danger is corroborated by the use of the adjective ἀπροϊδής ('unforeseen', 2, 18). In terms of physical violence, the persistent use of the verb τύπτω ('strike'), often used in the *Iliad* to indicate striking with a sword or spear, places the *Theriaca* in an atmosphere of battle as well, with variants such as τύπτω ('strike', 2, 313, 424, 775, 836), τύψις ('blow', 921, 933), τύμμα ('wound' 426, 737, 919, 930), and τυπή ('wound', 129, 358, 673, 784).

We can single out a few examples of Nicander's use of Homeric vocabulary employed in his concomitantly warlike and epic portrayal of animals, typical of the battle itself. Μῶλος, 'the turmoil of war' (201), is reminiscent of μῶλος Ἄρηος.[52] Μόθος, 'battle din' (191, recalling *Il*. 7.117, 7.240, 18.159, 18.537, 21.310), is applied to the fierce battle between the asp and the mongoose, another of the natural enemies of the snake. Nicander's unique δύσδηρις ('hard to fight with', 738) echoes the instances of the same root in the *Iliad* (ἀδήριτος, 17.42; δηριάομαι, 12.421, 16.96, 16.756, 17.158, 17.734, 21.467). In the descriptions of the animals themselves, too, references are made to armaments. The scorpion's stinger is described as a κοπίς (780), which is normally a kind of axe or sword. Another species is said to be κεκορυθμένον (769), literally 'armed' with a stinger, and the pun ἰοδόκος (both 'holding arrows' and 'containing poison', playing on the homonymous ἰός, 184), describing a snake's poisonous fangs, recalls the Homeric epithet for a quiver. Of course, not all battle idiom in the *Theriaca* is Homeric; for example, in *Ther*. 379, the verb σκυλεύω, which is not used in Homer, is used for the stripping of a snake's skin. It has close parallels to the despoiling of a slain enemy, whose arms are taken off after a lost battle. In this way, Nicander manages to bring about a rapport with Homer's depiction of human battle, transported to humans and animals, even without direct reference to the *Iliad*. The descriptions of the symptoms too, since they can be observed on the body, bear many similarities to descriptions of wounds from battle. The body is not merely overcome by an indefinite affliction, but has fallen prey to its natural enemies: those that bring about envenoming.[53]

Far from presenting the reader with a neutral account of the natural behaviour of certain animals, the poet presents a world in which snakes and scorpions do not attack on

[51] See ibid., 86–7.
[52] *Il*. 2.401, 7.147, 16.245, 18.134.
[53] Touwaide (n. 50), 88.

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instinct, but go to war. Time and again Nicander shows us animals depicted as warriors, while invoking the mother of all epics, the *Iliad*. Through such battle-like connections to the war poetry of Homer he not only aligns himself with the epic tradition and its master, but also steers away from the idea of a dull handbook on snakebites.

5. Plants and animals

In the previous sections I have dealt with the essentially negative presentation of animals within the natural world. This natural world itself is, however, generally presented in a significantly more positive manner. The aspect of floral beauty, as studied by Spatafora, has already been mentioned. It shows Nicander's aesthetics to pertain to descriptions of natural luxuriousness as well, turning the extensive catalogues of therapeutic plants occasionally into little suggestive *ecphraseis*.[54] This depiction yields a poignant contrast between the ostensible beauty of plants and trees, which owes more to Theocritean landscape than to Hesiod's nature, and the unfortunate presence – at least to humans – of ugly beasts that soil the sense of nature's beauty. If it were not for the animals, nature would be perfect.[55]

But beauty is not nature's only merit. Apart from being the scenic background to Nicander's didactic 'drama', nature also has solutions to offer to the central problem of the poem, as reflected in its title: how to guard ourselves against envenomation.[56] Here nature serves us well, providing us with many a curative herb: dozens of plants are presented as useful in some way or another.[57] For one who knows where to look, everything we need to counter nature's attacks can be found in nature itself – or so Nicander wants us to believe. It is there for us to take, which is expressed quite literally by the serendipitous discovery of Alcibius' herb by its eponymous finder in *Ther*. 541–9:[58]

Ἐσθλὴν δ' Ἀλκιβίου ἔχιος περιφράζεο ῥίζαν.
τῆς καὶ ἀκανθοβόλος μὲν ἀεὶ περιτέτροφε χαίτη,
λείρια δ' ὡς ἴα τοῖα περιστέφει· ἡ δὲ βαθεῖα
καὶ ῥαδινὴ ὑπένερθεν ἀέξεται οὔδεϊ ῥίζα.
τὸν μὲν ἔχις βουβῶνος ὕπερ νεάτοιο χαράξας 545
ἄντλῳ ἐνυπνώοντα χυτῆς παρὰ τέλσον ἅλωος
εἶθαρ ἀνέπνευσεν καμάτου βίῃ· αὐτὰρ ὁ γαίης
ῥίζαν ἐρυσσάμενος τὸ μὲν ἕρκεϊ θρύψεν ὀδόντων
θηλάζων, τὸ δὲ πέσκος ἑῷ περὶ κάββαλεν ἕλκει.

Consider now the excellent root of Alcibius's bugloss: its prickly leaves grow ever thick upon it, and it puts out a coronal of flowers like violets, but beneath them in the soil the root grows deep

[54] Spatafora (n. 6), 240; see also *Ther*. 59–62, 65–9, 503–4, 509–12, 537–8, 630–1, 869–71.
[55] The idea of the loss of our original state of bliss occurs elsewhere in the poem as well: in the proem, the infestation of the unspoiled earth by the appearance of poisonous animals in the age of the Titans (*Ther*. 8–12), and the loss of youth (reminiscent of the 'Golden Age') at least partly due to a snake (*Ther*. 343–58).
[56] I take the title to be elliptical for Θηριακὰ φάρμακα, although the neuter plural allows for interpretations similar to e.g. Ἀργοναυτικά or Ἁλιευτικά as well, which would yield 'matters pertaining to wild animals'.
[57] See ἐσθλὴν … ῥίζαν (541); μάλα δ' ἂν καὶ ἀμάρακος εἴη | χραισμήεις (575–6); πανάκτειόν τε κονίλην (626); ἀλεξιάρης … ῥάμνου (861); σίσυμβρα πέλει μειλίγματα νούσων (896). Next to these plants that are specified as efficacious, *Ther*. 493–714 and 837–956 in general offer dozens of plants that are presented as effective.
[58] Cf. the second Alcibius story in *Ther*. 666–75, which is similarly constructed.

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and slender. Alcibius a male viper wounded above the lowest part of his groin as he lay asleep upon a mound of uncleansed grain by the margin of a piled threshing floor, straightway rousing him by the violence of the pain. Whereat he pulled the root from the ground and first broke it small with his close-set teeth as he sucked it, and then spread the skin upon his wound.

Despite the bleak prospect of our chances of returning from nature unscathed, that same nature offers us the very solutions to our problems. Of course, one needs a guide here, a role not apportioned to Zeus or the Muses, but to Nicander, who presents himself as an infallible teacher throughout the poem.[59] As such, the tone of the poem, though essentially negative owing to gloomy descriptions of danger, pain, and death, has some room for a positive interpretation, in line with the genre of didactic epic.

In order to assess Nicander's take on the depiction of nature, a comparison to his *Alexipharmaca* could shed more light on the poet's views. As the two poems have generally been considered to be very similar, one may ask whether the poet's bleak prospects, though not entirely devoid of hope, extend to the *Alexipharmaca*.[60] Despite the apparent consistency between the two, often seen as complementary, the *Alexipharmaca* appears to give a more problematic view of the natural world. Whereas in the *Theriaca* dangerous animals can be countered by taking the right prophylactics, in the *Alexipharmaca* nature's plants and herbs are much more ambivalent: plants can still cure us, but they are also responsible themselves for poisoning our system, as is reflected by the gruesome descriptions of the effects of aconite (*Alex*. 16–29), hemlock (*Alex.* 186–94), chamaeleon-thistle (*Alex.* 279–92), or coriander (*Alex.* 157–61). This last, paradoxically prescribed as a cure in *Ther*. 874, problematizes the distinction between cure and poison that is so obvious in the *Theriaca*, but less so in the *Alexipharmaca.* Moreover, Nicander's focus in the *Alexipharmaca* is not singly on poisonous plants, but on anything poisonous (bull's blood, white lead, toads, fungi), which blurs the opposition somewhat. As such, a distinct worldview arising from the *Alexipharmaca* is less evidently expressed.

III. CONCLUSION

Nicander's *Theriaca* resonates with literary play on many levels. In this article I have singled out four ways in which the poet has created and carefully built up his own natural stage, a world that shares features both with the realistic world of Hesiod's *Works and Days*, and with the more pleasant and positive world so carefully crafted in Theocritus' bucolics, but is essentially negative. In the subverted world Nicander has created he varies Hesiod's, replacing the toil and sorrows of hard labour with the more outrageous dangers of deadly animals, and at the same time reacts to Theocritus' more positive examples before him. Not only are the animals themselves painted in an exaggeratedly negative, or even warlike manner, but the world of the *Theriaca* as a whole, despite its occasional scenic beauty, is bleak. Structural negative colouring, descriptional exaggeration, warlike depictions of animals, and the subversion of topical bucolic settings all add to the same presentation of the *Theriaca*'s particular world.

[59] E.g. *Ther*. 1–4, 282, 528, 636, 769–70, 825, 811, 829, 837, but *passim*.

[60] Schneider (n. 3), however, signals minor yet relevant differences of structure and approach between the two poems.

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Of course, neither Theocritus' nor Nicander's world is realistic, and where the former has created settings of harmless and picturesque tranquillity, Nicander has created a veristic world of slight but persistent danger, both poets renewing Hesiod's natural world. While a Theocritean herdsman can find rest and peacefulness in the temporary retreat of a *locus amoenus*, Nicander's countrymen can only try to rest with one eye open. Whereas the inhabitants of Theocritus' countryside are at home on their natural stage, Nicander's characters are ultimately intruders in the dangerous world of the animal kingdom, where snakes reign and humanity's vulnerability is brought home time and again. By comparing Nicander's approach to Theocritus' I do not want to suggest that Nicander is pointing at individual passages or even single words. It is the general idea of positively portrayed bucolic life, of which Theocritus is the main exponent, that Nicander is subverting in the *Theriaca*. The result is an interesting case of mirrored projection: the two poets' natural worlds have much in common, but where Theocritus' is a pointedly positive adjustment of normal life (as in the *Works and Days*), Nicander's is pointedly negative, and thus anti-bucolic. All the same, there is reason for a complementary positive reading of the *Theriaca*, which, paradoxically, can be found in that same nature. It is in the use of nature's herbs and plants that salvation can be found. Nicander's worldview is not ultimately gloomy: those – and only those – who heed the poet's wise words can leave their homes confidently.

In this article I have tried to show that there is more to Nicander than meets the superficial eye. What for a long time seemed to be a dull treatise is now turning out to be a poem of significant literary merits, using its own literary dynamics. Nicander's creativity is an unexpected one, working on different levels. Apart from his intertextuality, his alignment to the didactic tradition, his innovative use of the epic language, and his fascination for aetiology, one can add his remarkable depiction of the natural world and the way in which it is adapted to suit his vision, a vision that may be gloomy, but that is none the less fascinating.

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