

LITERARY ANALYSIS & TRANSLATION

PALIMPSES

by Johann de Lange

An in-depth study of structural rebirth, the cycle of destruction and re-creation,
and the transformation of nature into artistic expression.

WHAT IS A PALIMPSEST?

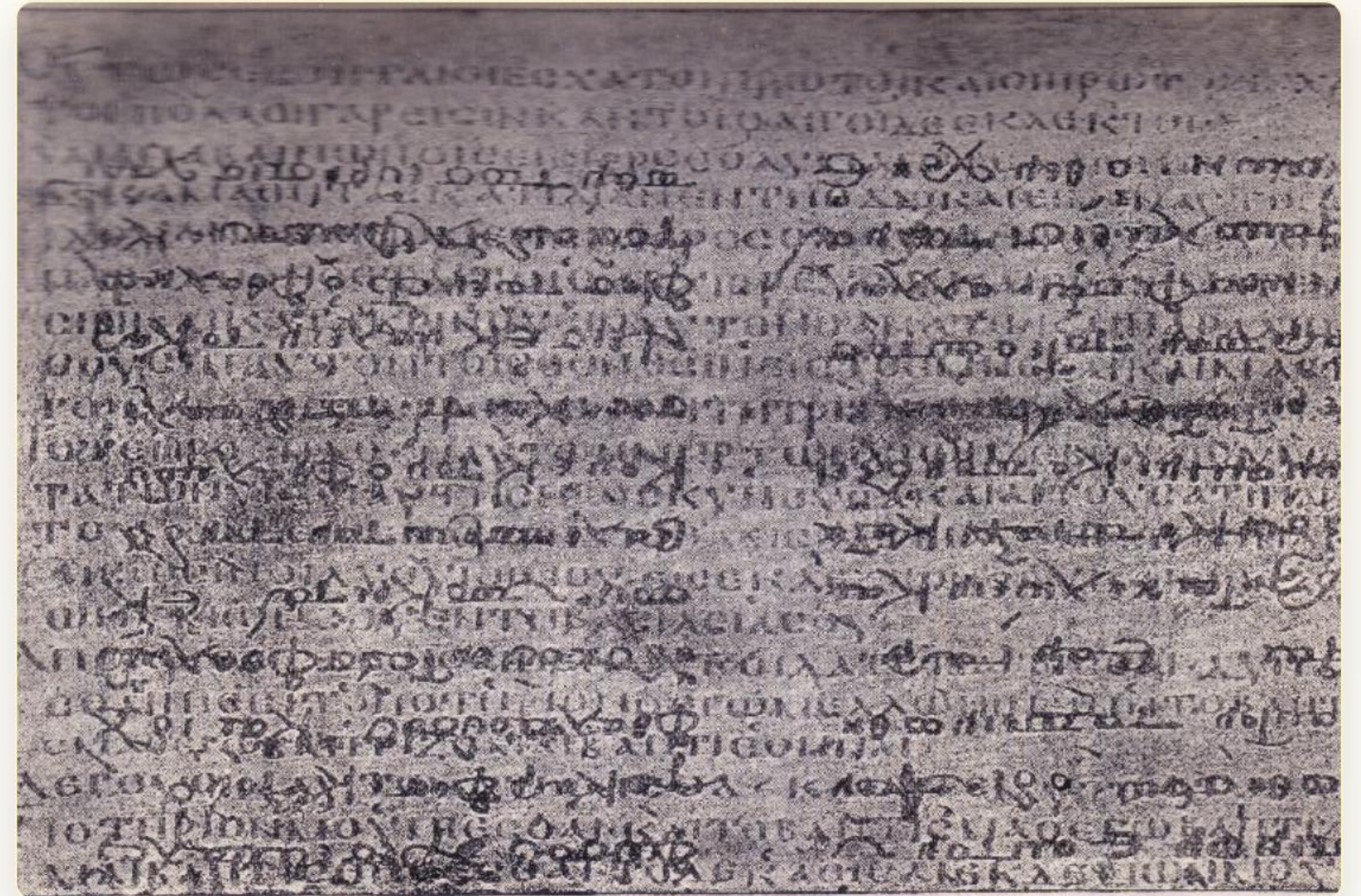
TITLE DEFINITION & CONTEXT

LITERAL MEANING

A manuscript or piece of parchment on which the original writing has been scraped off or washed away to make room for another text.

KEY CHARACTERISTICS

- **Layered History:** Even after scraping, traces of the previous text remain visible underneath.
- **Metaphor for Memory:** Represents how new experiences and art build directly upon past destruction.
- **Poetic Relevance:** In De Lange's poem, nature (the tree) is scraped away, yet its "grain" lives on beneath the poet's new words.



POEM & ENGLISH TRANSLATION

ORIGINAL (AFRIKAANS)

1. Bome skryf teen die blou
2. kreukellose lug dinge
3. wat niemand verstaan nie.
4. Houtkappers kom met byle
5. en vel die bome.
6. Meulens saag en maal
7. en pulp en plet die hout.
8. Stil is die bome;
9. stil, net tot hy kletterend
10. met sy tikmasjien
11. uit selfs die fynste grein
12. die hele gamma van die woord
13. en pyn ring op ring
14. deur die oggend laat dein

ENGLISH TRANSLATION

1. Trees write against the blue
2. crease-free sky things
3. that no one understands.
4. Wood cutters come with axes
5. and cut down the trees.
6. Mills saw and grind
7. and pulp and crush the wood.
8. Silent are the trees;
9. silent, only until he clatters away
10. with his typewriter
11. from even the finest grain
12. the whole gamma of the word
13. and pain ring upon ring
14. swells through the morning

POETIC STRUCTURE & DESIGN



EXTERNAL STRUCTURE

14 Lines Total structured like a modern variation of an English / Shakespearean Sonnet.

Divided into an **Octave** (Stanza 1: 8 lines) and a **Sestet** (Stanza 2: 6 lines).



FORM & TECHNIQUE

Free Verse Sonnet: No traditional end rhyme scheme.

Relies heavily on **enjambment** (run-on lines) and internal rhyme / assonance to create momentum.



INTERNAL PROGRESSION

Stanza 1 (Octave): Focuses on industrial destruction & death of nature.

Stanza 2 (Sestet): Focuses on creative rebirth & artistic resurrection.

CORE THEMATIC DUALISM

2

Interconnected Movements

DESTRUCTION & RE-CREATION

The central theme explores how life is continuous through recycling and transformation. The physical death of trees enables the creation of paper, which becomes the canvas for human emotion and literary art.

- **Nature's Incomprehensible Voice:** Trees write messages in the sky that humans cannot read.
- **Human Transmutation:** Man destroys nature physically, but resurrects its essence through poetry.

STANZA 1: NATURE & FELLING

LINES 1 - 3

"Trees write against the blue crease-free sky..."

Personification: Trees branch out as if writing against a clear, cloudless sky. Nature possesses its own sacred language that humans cannot comprehend.

LINES 4 - 5

"Wood cutters come with axes / and cut down the trees."

Human Intrusion: Introduces brutal destruction. Axes cut down nature's silent dialogue, ending its initial form of existence.



STANZA 1: INDUSTRIAL PROCESSING

LINE 6

ASSONANCE & INTERNAL RHYME

"Meulens saag en maal"

(Mills saw and grind)

The repetition of vowel sounds mirrors the heavy, rhythmic, repetitive grinding motion of industrial sawmills.

LINE 7

ALLITERATION & POLYSYNDETON

"en pulp en plet die hout"

(and pulp and crush the wood)

Alliteration of the 'p' sound combined with repeated **"and"** emphasizes the violent, step-by-step mechanical processing.

LINE 8

INVERSION & EMPHASIS

"Stil is die bome;"

(Silent are the trees;)

Inversion places "Silent" at the start to highlight the absolute stillness and death following destruction. Marked with a semicolon pause.

STANZA 2: REBIRTH THROUGH WRITING

LINES 9 - 10

ONOMATOPOEIA & CONTRAST

"silent, only until he clatters away / with his typewriter"

The word **"kletterend"** (clattering) imitates typewriter keys. It breaks the silence of death, signaling the birth of art upon the newly milled paper.

LINE 11

THE LIVING WOOD GRAIN

"from even the finest grain"

Refers to the wood pulp fiber in paper. The spirit of the tree relives through the fine grain of the paper underneath the writer's touch.



STANZA 2: LANGUAGE, PAIN & ECHOES



LINE 12

SYNECDOCHE ("GAMMA")

"the whole gamma of the word"

Gamma (3rd letter of Greek alphabet) represents the entire range/spectrum of human thought and expression.

LINE 13

GROWTH RINGS & SHARED SUFFERING

"and pain ring upon ring"

Tree rings signify time and growth. Symbolizes both the tree's physical suffering and human emotional pain encoded in words.

LINE 14

FIGURATIVE RIPPLES

"swells through the morning"

The written word ripples outward like waves, spreading the message into the world.

KEY SUMMARY & LITERARY TAKEAWAYS



THE PALIMPSEST METAPHOR

Nature's unreadable script is erased by human technology, but its physical body becomes the palimpsest layer upon which human poetry is inscribed.



SONIC MASTERY

De Lange uses rich auditory contrasts—from the soundless blue sky, to mechanical grinding, to silence, and finally the clattering typewriter key notes.



ENDURING LEGACY

Art transforms destruction into rebirth. While the living tree dies, its spirit echoes indefinitely through the printed word and human emotion.

IMAGE SOURCES



https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/de/Codex_ephremi_%28The_S.S._Teacher%27s_Edition-The_Holy_Bible_-_Plate_XXIV%29.jpg?utm_source=en.wikipedia.org&utm_campaign=index&utm_content=original

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