

*Chapter One*

## PERFORMING PRIVATELY

HERE, more or less, are the facts, according to the unusually reliable *Vita* that has come down to us. Persius was born in Volaterrae (modern Volterra) in northwest Etruria on 4 December A.D. 34. He died of a stomach ailment on 24 November A.D. 62, shortly before his twenty-eighth birthday. A Roman knight with blood ties to senatorial families, he came from a rich old Etruscan family and received a first-class education in literature and rhetoric in Rome from two distinguished teachers, Remmius Palaemon and Verginius Flavus. Persius's father died when he was around six and his stepfather died not long afterwards. He was, says the *Vita*, "a person of gentlest ways, of virginal modesty, handsome repute, and exemplary devotion (*pietatis . . . exemplo sufficientis*) to his mother, his sister, and his aunt." He was related to the younger Arria, whose parents were forced to commit suicide under the emperor Claudius after a failed conspiracy, and from the age of ten he enjoyed a close friendship with her husband, Thrasea Paetus, the best-known Stoic dissident under Nero. Persius's friends also included the poet Caesius Bassus and some older men who served as foster-fathers and mentors: Servilius Nonianus, a man of affairs; two philosopher-doctors from Greece and Asia; and most important, the learned Annaeus Cornutus, a freedman and scholar who wrote Greek treatises on theology and literature—the Stoic role model par excellence of Persius's *Satire 5*.

Although orientation in time and place is useful, I might better have let Persius speak for himself from the start. Biographical criticism in his case is always so tempting, and so misleading: partly, because we still know so little about his life and work; and partly, because that little has all too often produced a distorted, itself easily satirized image of a sheltered poet with little experience of the world, surrounded by philosophical treatises and adoring female relatives. The modernist reaction, as said earlier, redirected us to the safely bounded space of the text, the postmodernist to the unbounded vagaries of readers' imaginations. But now, I wonder: has the time come round to pay renewed attention to the author? Not just the "implied author" safely embedded in the text, but the person behind the text who lived and died; who fought hard, as it seems, for his integrity and moral

freedom; and who, amid his many duties and concerns (to which I shall return in chapter 4), wrote *Satires*.

But why did he write satire? He was well-born, rich, and independent, with no need to secure a patron or consolidate his position in society. His own version in *Satire 1* develops traditional lines of defense: he writes because he must; because truth will out; because if he doesn't cry out against the world's follies, he will simply burst. On closer inspection, it seems likely that Persius regarded his writings at once as playful self-indulgence, as a competitive bid for mastery in the field of Roman satire, and as a means of unusually intense self-scrutiny and self-debate, freely conducted but ultimately reinforcing the aim of living honestly and well. His satire attacks vice and folly, to be sure, and with greater urgency than ever; but it also affords a special kind of emotional self-recognizance, giving voice to powerfully distracting thoughts and feelings that require, even as they resist, Stoic reorganization and control—which will never in his lifetime be quite complete. In turn, I suggest, Persius felt enabled to compete with Lucilius and Horace, his predecessors, the “scourger of vice” and the master-ironist, not least because his satire had something new and exciting to discover, and to proclaim.

My first chapter focuses on *Satire 1* and the theme of performance. In earlier Roman tradition, satire was usually performed at elite dinner-parties for a sympathetic audience of friends and allies before it was circulated and/or published. Against this background, and confronted now with bad performances of epic and tragedy, and also criticism, in a world increasingly hostile to free and honest speech, Persius gives his own very private non-performance or metaperformance of satire, speaking his passionate findings into the as yet secret “hole” of his little book.

### “Who’ll Read This Stuff?” (*Satire 1*)

The beginning of *Satire 1* plunges us into intense dialogue between undefined voices:

**O curas hominum! o quantum est in rebus inane!**

“*quis leget haec?*” *min tu* istud ais? nemo hercule. “*nemo?*”

vel duo vel nemo. “*turpe et miserabile.*” quare?

ne mihi *Polydamas et Troiades* Labeonem

praetulerint? nugae. non, si quid turbida Roma

elevet, accedas examenve improbum in illa

castiges trutina, nec te quaesiveris extra.

nam Romae quis non—a, si fas dicere—sed fas

tum cum ad canitiem et nostrum istud vivere triste

aspexi ac nucibus facimus quaecumque relictis,  
cum sapimus patruos. tunc tunc—ignoscite (nolo,  
quid faciam?) sed sum petulanti splene—cachinno. (1–12)

**O cares of men! O how much emptiness  
there is in things!** “*Who’ll read this stuff?*”

*You’re* asking *me* that? No one, by Hercules.

“*No one?*” Maybe two people, maybe no one.

“*Shameful and pathetic.*” Why? Afraid

*Polydamas and the Trojan Women* might prefer

Labeo to me? Nonsense. If muddled Rome

makes light of something, you shouldn’t join in;

you shouldn’t blame the faulty tongue of the scale

or look outside yourself. For at Rome, who

[is? or does?] not—ah, if it’s right to speak—

but of course it’s right, when I look at those gray hairs

and the grim, “grown-up” front we display, though living

in any way whatsoever—it’s then, it’s then

(sorry, can’t help it, my spleen compels me), I have

to roar with laughter.

Editors help, and commentators, going back to Persius’s own time. Wendell Clausen’s careful punctuation reflects his own interpretive efforts and, in turn, shapes mine, which I convey through different fonts on my Macintosh. The old scholiasts tell us that Persius quotes Lucilius in line 1—or is it line 2?—but we don’t have the context, or much of Lucilius, for that matter.<sup>1</sup> We learn that Labeo wrote a Latin *Iliad* (apparently, an overliteral translation): how is this relevant? We must recreate for ourselves the conventions of Prologue Satire that Persius inherited from Lucilius and Horace, the expectations of the audience for whom he refuses to write. Still more, we must recreate for ourselves from reading and rereading Persius the tone and rhythm of this passage: the quick, passionate exchanges; the scornful rejection of contemporary Roman criticism, wonderfully represented by “*Polydamas and the Trojan women*” out of the *Iliad*, once Homer’s, now the wretched Labeo’s; the great, dangerous Question that desperately wants to be posed but can’t be, yet; and the renewed, now doubly intense build-up of scornful indignation, with its premature climax (so to speak) of wild, helpless laughter.

In the usual reading of these lines, Persius announces his great satiric theme of human folly (in a line probably taken from his satiric grandfather Lucilius and enriched with Lucretian resonances of “the void in things”; the result is something like the opening of *Ecclesiastes*, where the Preacher proclaims, “Vanity of Vanities, all is vanity” [or “vapor”]);<sup>2</sup> but he is interrupted by an interlocutor, perhaps a concerned friend. “*Who’ll read this*

*stuff?* ” A good, practical question, then as now. It also hints at a warning that will be made explicit later in the satire, one that was well established in satiric tradition and in readers’ expectations, and that acquires new urgency under Nero: “Why offend tender little ears with the biting truth? Be careful, or important people’s doors will freeze you out.” Satire is offensive, and the satirist will pay.

“Who am I? In what genre am I writing, and why, and for whom?” A Prologue Satire usually answers these questions, however ironically or obliquely; Lucilius started the trend of conveying the answers rhetorically as a response, whether to kindly warnings, importunate suggestions, or outright attacks. (In other genres, too, real or imagined attacks provide an excellent excuse for the writer’s *apologia*, a reasoned account of his life and work.) Fragments of Lucilius’s satires, scattered lines or groups of lines, show him debating with adversaries. “You are malicious,” they say, “You like to hurt people. And you’ll be sorry.” They want him to keep quiet, perhaps only “mutter,” if he must, under his breath. To which he answers that he is a good, honest man who speaks from the heart, unlike flatterers and hypocrites, and who must speak out: it is his way, and it benefits society.<sup>3</sup> Differently, a respected older friend advises and warns Lucilius: writing satire is dangerous; wouldn’t it be better, say, to write historical epic? That would “bear fruit” (*fructum*, implying usefulness, money, success). In response, Lucilius presumably explains why he writes, and for whom. We have the second part. He writes, not for just anybody, but for an educated minority, neither philistines nor pedants, who will appreciate what he has to say.<sup>4</sup>

Horace develops similar arguments in his literary satires 1.4 and 1.10, polishing them with wonderfully teasing irony as he turns Lucilian statements against the very critics who would defend their beloved Lucilius, their classic satirist, against this interloper. His satire (he alleges) is not malicious, or dangerous, or even public; he only shows it (unlike Lucilius?) to a few very select readers and critics, men of true discrimination for whom, in the end, he writes. And if he criticizes Lucilius for his stylistic faults and the generally rough carelessness of his satire writing, he is only following the master, who criticized epic and tragic poets in his time, and bringing him up to date. The attacks on Horace, real or imagined or a mixture of both, once again provide the rhetorical impetus for the poet’s full, if ironic, statement of his aesthetic and moral standards and intentions in writing satire. Differently, in *Satires* 2.1, the prologue to Book 2 (and Persius’s chief model), an older friend, the lawyer Trebatius, warns Horace that satire is dangerous: better an epic praising Caesar! Horace replies with wonderful excuses. He writes because he has to; it is his bent, or hobby; a weapon, yes, but only for self-defense, or Lucilian self-revelation—not

antisocial, in the end, but beneficial. The satire ends jokingly, or not so jokingly, with Horace receiving Caesar's seal of approval. So much for law!

When, therefore, Persius's interlocutor asks "*Who'll read this stuff?*" we quickly envision the speaker as a helpful friend concerned with Persius's practical success and, still more, with the riskiness of satire writing. Again, as with Lucilius and Horace, the warning provokes Persius to say why he writes, and for whom. He writes, as we learn later, because he has to—has to voice the truth, somehow, about a society whose moral and aesthetic standards are totally corrupt. But he is silenced, or almost silenced, for the same reason. Unlike Lucilius and Horace, he has virtually no audience left. "Maybe two people, maybe no one." The riddle remains unsolved,<sup>5</sup> but Persius will show us, in this first satire, why he can't write for an audience like Lucilius's or Horace's. Those reasonable, moderately educated people are gone. But the danger is more real than ever, the warning more necessary, the challenge greater. Why, and how, and for whom (ultimately) should one write satire in the age of Nero?

As it turns out, Persius's first question, "*quis leget haec?*" is integrally involved with the second, "*nam Romae quis non . . .*," broken off at line 8 and only completed at 121: "*auriculas asini quis non habet?*" "Who [at Rome, maybe in the whole world] hasn't asses' ears?" The reference is to the Midas story. Asked to judge a musical contest between Apollo and Pan (or, in some versions, the satyr Marsyas), Midas chose Pan and was given asses' ears for his bad taste.<sup>6</sup> He hid them under a cap. His barber learned the secret, could not speak out, but desperately wanted to tell it, so he dug a hole in the ground and whispered the truth into that hole, which he covered up; but reeds grew up, and when a breeze blew, you could hear the reeds saying, "King Midas has asses' ears." So Persius will whisper the truth, the dread secret, into his little satire book. It looks as if some early commentator, meaning to be helpful, wrote in the gloss, "*auriculas asini Mida rex habet*" ("King Midas has asses' ears"), and someone else then probably explained this gloss by means of a new story: evidently, Persius's friend and mentor, the Stoic philosopher Cornutus, had induced him to substitute the generalizing "*quis non habet*" ("who hasn't . . . ?") for the direct mention of Midas, which might strike Nero's ears as too personal.<sup>7</sup> Obviously, the story is foolish. In Nero's world, any reference to Midas's story, however indirect, was quite sufficient to get one exiled or killed (and there was no shortage of informers ready and willing to serve as amateur literary critics).<sup>8</sup> Obviously, too, the punch line, "*auriculas asini quis non habet,*" precisely completes the revelation broken off much earlier, "*nam Romae quis non . . . ?*"

I propose that Persius's two questions are interdependent. It is a case of "the reciprocal clarification of two unknowns." Let  $x$  stand for Persius's readership and  $y$  for the dangerous, unspoken truth about Rome. Persius teases us by delaying his revelation; he plays games of desire and constraint,

pressure and (self-)censorship, and explosive bursts of uncontrollable laughter; but the delay also gives him time to show us the corruption of taste at Rome, building (when we are ready) to the full revelation of the second question, and clarifying the acute problem of the first.

So far my reading of Persius's opening lines has been fairly traditional. Let me now try a different reading, which I prefer. I suggest that line 1, probably taken from Lucilius, presents human folly as the satire book's general theme; and that the first half of line 2, probably also taken from Lucilius, introduces the specific theme of *Satire* 1. In part, then, it serves as a subtitle. But the old warning given by an opponent or external adviser has now become internalized, a voice from within the poet himself, anxious about his effectiveness.<sup>9</sup> Will his satire be read? Will it make a difference? This is the voice of common sense—a rather Horatian voice, in fact. But a second, stronger voice rejects the very question, with all its implied concerns. It rejects, contemptuously and decisively, any imagined compromise with what will turn out to be a world of flattery, falsehood, and bad taste. “You know better,” it says, “than to take popular opinion seriously, to measure the worth of anything by public standards. Don't look outside yourself.”

From line 2, then, Persius brings himself (and us, with him) into a passionately intense inner dialogue. The words “*min tu istud ais*” (“*You're asking me that?*”) are an inside joke. And the culminating advice, “*nec te quaesiveris extra*,” is grammatically ambiguous: more obviously, it means, “Don't look outside yourself,” but there is an important secondary suggestion: “Don't look for yourself outside.” In his writing, as in his life, Persius is primarily in search of himself. Good writing, for him, requires good self-criticism, which in turn cannot be separated from self-knowledge such as Socrates and the Stoics advocated, or from the pursuit and expression of truth. That is why he begins by shutting out the public—shutting out all of us—so very emphatically. He can't afford to let himself be distracted by all those inane concerns, doubts, warnings, and expectations (including, most emphatically, his own). He has to slam the door: “*vel duo, vel nemo*.” Yet he will explain himself, if we will listen, during the course of *Satire* 1, and by its end, his no will turn to yes, and he will define his satiric aims, after all, and even his wished-for audience, as Lucilius and Horace did before him.

### “In Different Voices”

When I used to teach a passage like *Satire* 1.1–12, I would read it aloud twice: once before working through it in detail and once afterwards, for my main purpose in teaching was to bring my students to read Latin poetry with understanding and enjoyment. The two work reciprocally. Without

understanding—which requires looking up unfamiliar words like *examen* and *trutina* and *cachinno*, and picking up allusions (*Labeonem*) and peculiarities of idiom (*nostrum istud vivere triste*) from translations and commentaries, and trying to sort out these baffling voices and ideas, at least in a preliminary way—you cannot enjoy Persius. But you won't understand Persius, either, unless you enjoy him, even at first, by what might be called poetry's prevenient grace of seduction as you read out those striking phrases and lines. "O curas hominum! o quantum est in rebus inane!" They need, before anything else, to be heard.<sup>10</sup>

When we read Persius aloud, in the classroom or elsewhere, we reperform his satires. We recreate, that is, the dramatic and rhetorical effects of poems that grew out of a performance genre, even if, as Persius will demonstrate, they cannot be performed now for a general audience. Reading *Satire 1*, we recreate (as best we can) the clash of voices, the tension and excitement of internal dialogue within this powerful dramatic monologue.<sup>11</sup> We recreate the rise and fall of Persius's rhythms: the build-up, with enjambment, to the dismissive "nugae" (3–5); the build-up to a preliminary conclusion, "nec te quaesiveris extra," at 7, followed by the grave, deliberate, monosyllabic and heavily spondaic new beginning at 8 ("nam Romae quis non," each word heavily weighted); then the breaking-off, itself interrupted; the audial representation of slow, hypocritical, senile pretenders to morality, when really (in a quickening rhythm) old men fool around just like children; and then the climax, the unbrakeable slide into wild satiric laughter. An opening of extraordinary variety and power.

Widu-Wolfgang Ehlers has argued that orality is the missing dimension in interpretations of Persius. Many so-called obscurities, he believes, and especially the difficulty of distinguishing different speakers, would have been clarified by the early teachers, the *grammatici*, who used punctuation and other distinguishing marks (*distinctio*) in the texts from which they read aloud and taught. In Ehlers's view, our very difficulties prove the necessity of such illustrative oral readings.<sup>12</sup> I would go further and say that reading aloud not only tests and completes our interpretation of passages like *Satire 1.1–12*: it also reminds us that, despite satire's habitual disclaimers, we are reading poetry. And recreating what was once, if only in the private auditorium of Persius's mind, the pleasure of the performance.

That is why, before reviewing what we know about Lucilius, Horace, and the performance tradition of Roman satire up to Persius's time, I want to suggest the analogy of Eliot's *The Waste Land* with its abruptly introduced voices and scenes, its conflicting levels of style, and its inset dramatic sketches, what one early unappreciative critic called "the mingling of willful obscurity and weak vaudeville." It begins, famously, with incantation and mystery:

April is the cruellest month, breeding  
 Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing  
 Memory and desire, stirring  
 Dull roots with spring rain.  
 Winter kept us warm, covering  
 Earth in forgetful snow, feeding  
 A little life with dried tubers.  
 Summer surprised us, coming over the Sternbergersee  
 With a shower of rain; we stopped in the colonnade,  
 And went on in sunlight, into the Hofgarten,  
 And drank coffee, and talked for an hour.  
 Bin gar keine Russin, stamm' aus Litauen, echt Deutsch.  
 And when we were children, staying at the archduke's,  
 My cousin's, he took me out on a sled,  
 And I was frightened. He said, Marie,  
 Marie, hold on tight. And down we went.  
 In the mountains, there you feel free.  
 I read, much of the night, and go south in the winter.

The uncertain, shifting pronouns (who is the “us”, the “we”, the “you,” the “I”?) surprise us, transporting us all too quickly from the grand, enigmatic and impersonal pronouncements of lines 1–4 to those curious images of European travel and society, those snatches of conversation or recollection. Who is speaking, asks the critic, and when, and with what authority? How are the parts connected in time and space? And why does Eliot borrow a bit of memoir by Marie Larisch, Empress Elizabeth’s niece? Is it that the proud reality of the Austro-Hungarian empire has been reduced by the late war to nostalgic chatter? Or does the child’s vivid experience of excitement and fun set off the jaded pretensions of ordinary grown-up life, with its timid evasions of seasonal reality, terror and passion, the burial of the dead and the renewal of life? In answering these questions, we can build now on eighty-plus years of scholarly annotation and interpretation, increasing knowledge of Eliot’s life and work both before and after *The Waste Land*, and a theoretically informed criticism that not only accepts but positively welcomes connective gaps and celebrates the reader’s role in creating meaning. Yet all this cumulative knowledge and critical sophistication may prove futile, may turn to dust and ashes in the mouth, unless it is balanced by the enjoyment that comes of listening to the poem—which means, reading it aloud and hearing it read by others. Only in this way can we recover, rather than evade, the weirdly mixed feelings of “excitement, bafflement, and terror” that ordinary readers experienced on its first appearance.<sup>13</sup> And, I would especially add, of laughter.



Originally, the poem was entitled, “He Do the Police in Different Voices,” a title taken from Dickens’s *Our Mutual Friend*. (“You mightn’t think it,” says the old woman, Betty Higden, “but Sloppy is a beautiful reader of a newspaper. He do the Police in different voices.”)<sup>14</sup> An earlier draft of *The Waste Land* begins with a very funny sketch of some drunken gentlemen around town: “First we had a couple of feelers down at Tom’s place . . .” Had Eliot not, by Ezra Pound’s advice, red-penciled through this scene, *The Waste Land* would have been read more as a comic/satiric poem, less mysterious than it later became, and not demanding, or seeming to demand, so much reverence.<sup>15</sup>

Parallels between *The Waste Land* and Persius’s *Satires* are striking. Both poets, to put it simply, are Modernists, reacting with fragmented vision to what they perceive as a fragmented culture, a spiritually bankrupt society.<sup>16</sup> Both ironize that vision, refracting it through “different voices.” Both shift abruptly between different linguistic registers, echoing and parodying high epic, lyric, and tragedy, which evoke lost worlds of belief and value, even as they drop comically into the banal. Both depict a spiritual waste land crying out for redemption. And of course, both question the meaning and value of their own writing in such a broken world.

Other parallels involve the difficulty of the poetry and/or the excitement. Many readers feel frustration with a poet who seems to be trying their patience with deliberate, uncalled-for obscurity. One set of difficulties, wrote E. M. Forster, may be “due to our own incompetence or inattention,” but the other is Eliot’s fault, for he misleads us. From his personal suffering, his wish for stability, come

the attempted impersonality and (if one can use the word here) the inhospitality of his writing. Most writers sound, somewhere or other in their scale, a note of invitation. They ask the reader in, to co-operate or to look. . . . Mr. Eliot does not want us in. He feels we shall increase the barrenness. . . . He is difficult because he has seen something terrible, and . . . has declined to say so plainly.<sup>17</sup>

Contrast Eliot’s own statement in his 1921 essay, “The Metaphysical Poets,” contemporary with *The Waste Land*:

We can only say that it appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be difficult. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning.<sup>18</sup>

Just so, Persius might have responded to frustrated readers who complained, like the witty Scaliger, that he wanted his writings “*legi, non intellegi*” (“to be read, not understood”). Fortunately, others reacted differently. A powerful, lone sentence in the *Vita* describes how Persius’s poetry was first received, after his death: *editum librum continuo mirari homines et deripere coeperunt*. “Straightway, when the book was published, people marveled at it and snatched it up.”<sup>19</sup> It seems unlikely that these first enthusiasts understood the *Satires* very fully—though many references to people, things, and events would have been more immediately familiar to them than to later readers. But they lived in what was still largely an oral/aural environment, where poetry was read aloud and enjoyed. Although they missed the chance to hear their poet recite in person, they had skilled slave readers (*anagnōstai*) to read on demand from crabbedly written, unpunctuated manuscripts. And their children, if they were lucky, had teachers (*grammatici*) who enjoyed and understood Persius’s *Satires* and passed that enjoyment and understanding on to later generations.

The present chapter is largely about “different voices” in performance. Its thesis is that Persius’s satire belongs, after Lucilius and Horace, to a genre of dramatic entertainment in which the pleasure of the performance is essential, even for private readers. The antithesis, introduced by Persius in *Satire* 1, is that good satiric performance—as it involves good, honest criticism—becomes impossible when the ears of society are corrupted and clogged with dirt. What audience is left, and why (if at all) should one write? The synthesis, I shall argue, is *Satire* 1 itself: a satiric and comic metaperformance that both parodies bad literary and social performances and advertises itself, paradoxically, as a nonperformance, or better, as a very private performance whispered into a book, as into that barber’s hole in the ground, and awaiting the right sort of reader to “dig it up again” (Eliot)—to reperform it well and appreciatively some day and bring it back to life.

### Performing Satire (1): Lucilius and the Greek Background

Nothing has hurt the study of Roman verse satire more than the loss of Lucilius’s satires, now reduced to scattered fragments. Not one satire that Horace uses, let alone Persius, can be reconstructed convincingly. Brave scholars who tried, like George Fiske, became trapped in circular argument, reconstructing Lucilius out of Horace and explaining Horace out of Lucilius. Yet fragments can speak, as the “mute stones” of archaeology are said to do. We can still hear Lucilius’s voice as he proclaims himself a friend of virtue and an enemy of vice, or else, in a lower register, tells funny stories about himself or others. He calls his satires “playful conversations,” *ludo ac*

*sermonibus nostris* (1039M); the Latin *sermo* means not “sermon” but “talk”: conversation, gossip, narrative presentations, and editorializing on a wide variety of social and literary subjects, usually in the “plain style,” though its tone rises sometimes to great rhetorical heights. And Lucilius wrote these talks to be heard, not just read. They were dramatic pieces, sophisticated entertainment in the Hellenistic fashion, whether performed for friends at dinner parties and other festive occasions in private houses, or read aloud and reperformed by the moderately educated readers for whom Lucilius wrote, and then, after the poet’s death, preserved in continuing performance by the teachers and critics of literature, the *grammatici*. I give a few examples, to illustrate Lucilius’s dramatic range and his close affinity to comedy and mime.

His satiric defense, mentioned earlier, emerges from a dramatic *agôn*, a clash of voices. An adversary speaks:

nunc, Gai, quoniam incilans nos laedis, vicissim . . . (1089M)  
gaudes, cum de me ista foris sermonibus differs. (1090M)

[Now, Gaius, since you hurt us with lashing, in turn . . .

You rejoice in spreading this gossip about me in your *sermones*.]

Satire, in this view, is malicious slander; the satirist delights in hurting people, attacking them personally (Greek *mnêsikakia*; Horace’s *laedere gaudes*; German *Schadenfreude*). The later image of the satirist as a “lasher of vice,” picked up by Persius in *Satire* 1,

secuit Lucilius urbem,  
te Lupe, te Muci, et genuinum fregit in illis, (1.114–15)

[Lucilius lashed the city, you, Lupus, and you, Mucius, and broke his back tooth on them,]

may come from this line where, if we listen carefully, the satirist is playing on his own name, Gaius *Lucilius*. He can’t help it, he was born with a “cutting” way about him.

Elsewhere, Lucilius appears in the third person singular, whether (in a hostile report) someone is said to have assembled his friends for counsel, including “that wicked Lucilius” (821–22M; the name is deferred for special emphasis), or whether he represents himself as haranguing the general public in high Roman style:

Rem populi salute et fictis versibus Lucilius  
quibus potest, impertit, totumque hoc studiose et sedulo. (688–89M)

[Lucilius greets the Commonwealth, bearing good news and made-up verses: all this with serious and constant purpose.]

The loose trochaic meter, the mock-serious use of a political-religious formula, the comic zeugma, the mix of casual speech and high poetic seriousness, with alliterative emphasis: all this could come from a Plautine prologue or, behind Plautus, from a parabasis of Aristophanes.

Differently, Lucilius relates a funny story, turning it into casual (for Horace, much too casual) verse:

conicere in versus dictum praeconis volebam  
Grani. (411–12M)

[I wanted to throw a clever saying of Granius, the advertising man, into verse.]

The “dictum” is a “clever saying,” very likely the punch line of a contest of *dicacitas*, or scurrilous wit, for which Granius was notorious. Lucilius made a specialty of reporting such contests, which range from gladiators’ exchange of insults before their fights to mutual vilification in the lawcourt, an expected but dangerous side of oratory. In Book 2 he described the trial of Mucius Scaevola for embezzlement. Albucius, the prosecutor, attacks Scaevola as a bully, a glutton, and a lecher (the obscenity is unusually vivid, and very funny), but Scaevola has, it seems, the last word, making fun of Albucius’s rhetorical extravagances and his exaggerated philhellenism, which invited a practical joke. Since Albucius wanted to be regarded as more Greek (that is, more cultured and sophisticated) than Roman, Mucius and his staff greeted him with a chorus of Greek: *Chaere Tite* (“Bonjour, Tite”). That is why, says Scaevola, Albucius became his personal enemy.

We would like to know more. Was Lucilius, as Erich Gruen has suggested, making fun of the feuding Roman nobility?<sup>20</sup> Or playing with old Italic versus new Greek styles of oratory? Even without the entire satire, we can see why Lucilius’s (actually indirect) “lashing of Mucius” became a touchstone of his aggressive freedom and outspokenness, his satiric *libertas*, for Persius (quoted above) and later for Juvenal. Differently, our fragments tell us something about performance, with the help of Cicero’s comment in *De Oratore* 3.43.171, where, speaking of smoothness of stylistic composition, the orator Crassus remarks that “on this point Lucilius, who could do it most elegantly, played amusingly in the character of my father-in-law” (*lepide soceri mei persona lusit*). Lucilius, that is, assumes the persona of Mucius Scaevola, mimics his voice, and parodies his style as part of a dramatic entertainment that his contemporaries and, by extension, his far-flung readers will enjoy.

I insist on this notion of dramatic entertainment for two reasons. First, it makes us aware of the performability of Roman satire, as of other kinds of poetry, and the kinds of meaning it acquires through performance. And second, despite Quintilian’s famous dictum that “Satire is entirely ours”

(*Satira quidem tota nostra est*)—entirely Roman, that is, with no apparent Greek ancestry—if we look more closely, we find that Roman satire bears a family resemblance not only to the Greek Old Comedy of Aristophanes and the Greco-Roman New Comedy of Menander, Plautus, and Terence, but also to such other dramatic or quasi-dramatic entertainment-forms, popular in the Hellenistic Age, as *iambos*, mime, and pastoral. Indeed, the old notion of a “dramatic *satura*,” mentioned by Livy, and long since exploded as a probably Varronian invention to fill out a neo-Aristotelian scheme of the development of Roman drama, may prove useful after all, for early Roman satire resembles nothing so much as a “variety show” covering many unrelated subjects (the basic meaning of *satura* being “fullness and variety,” though Lucilius gave it what afterwards became its defining character of aggressiveness and indecency).<sup>21</sup> Consider, briefly, satire’s relation to comedy and to the *iambos*.

Horace derives Lucilius’s satire directly from the Greek Old Comedy of Eupolis, Cratinus, and Aristophanes, who “marked down” evildoers “with much freedom” (*multa cum libertate notabant*; *Satires* 1.4.1–5). The verb *notare* implies that these writers assumed a function that at Rome belonged properly to the censor, an official magistrate. Lucilius may have represented himself as a self-appointed censor of morals, as well as a literary “critic” or judge; there is also a play on “making people known,” or notorious. Horace’s own view of satiric *libertas* in *Satires* 1.4 is ambivalent. Although he partly admires, and surely envies, that older Aristophanic and Lucilian outspokenness to which this freedman’s son today must not aspire, he also refines the notion of true freedom (*libertas*) in his own personal life and in Roman society, modifying candor with tact, and self-expression with consideration for others. He endorses Aristotle’s theory of “liberal” or gentlemanly humor as a mean between scurrility and stiffness, and he subscribes to Aristotle’s theory of the evolution of comedy at once from lawless, indiscriminate aggressiveness to socially edifying humor and from casual improvisation to ordered structure—a consummation that, we come to feel, might just possibly be realized for Roman satire too under his personal direction. The move, that is, from Lucilius to Horace would parallel the move from Aristophanes to Menander and Terence—though Aristophanes continued to exemplify many fine stylistic qualities, including especially the interplay of high and low styles, that a good satirist might well imitate, and that Lucilius’s self-styled champions, who disdained Horace, would never understand.

Athenian Old Comedy, which attacked individuals (and worse, public figures) by name, could not be revived on the Roman stage. The poet Naevius went too far, and was sent to prison.<sup>22</sup> Plautus, who brilliantly combined Greek New Comedy with Italic farce, took the warning and kept his satire general. But Lucilius brought Aristophanes’ indecency, invective, and

free-spirited reporting onto the private stage of satire, where—in private houses, at dinner parties, with friends—we may imagine his entertainment-pieces to have been performed, before the jokes and the individual satires were circulated, informally and perhaps dangerously, and the satires collected in book form, in the Hellenistic manner, and published.

Some features of Roman satire go back even before Aristophanes, to the Greek *iambos* of Archilochus and Hipponax (itself a major influence on the development of Greek Old Comedy). Although this *iambos* became known primarily as blame poetry, specializing in invective and obscenity (hence Aristotle's *iambikê idea* and the use of the term *iambisdein* to mean “to lampoon or satirize”), it was more broadly a serio-comic entertainment form, to be performed at private symposia and sometimes, too, from a public platform, preferably on religious occasions that licensed its broad humor and scurrility. The dramatic elements in the *iambos* are striking, even in the surviving fragments, and influential. Archilochus may assume a persona such as “Charon the carpenter” in a dramatic monologue, breaking abruptly into personal or social comment (“I don’t want Gyges’ riches”), and perhaps only identifying his speaker toward the end; or he may speak in his own persona; or he may present an amusing narrative of his erotic adventures, with lively internal dialogue (“I said,” “she said”), as in the *Cologne Epode*. We have learned not to take Archilochus’s satirical comments and narratives at face value as autobiographical self-revelations. They are a mix of fact and fiction, personal experience and generic convention. Their audience is aware that it is watching a performance, and one that includes self-satire together with satire of others. Centuries after Archilochus’s death, the Greek rhapsodes, those professional reciters, continued to perform and interpret (*hypokrinesthai*) his poems, adding a further dimension of impersonation to the satiric *mimesis*.

Callimachus revived the *iambos* in the third century B.C., adapting it to new poetic and critical purposes and to a new, highly educated Alexandrian readership that could be expected to appreciate his ironic humor, his learned allusions, and his indirection of comment on current events, ideas, and personalities. Yet the new *iambos*, like the old, is highly dramatic from the start:

Listen to Hipponax. No, really, I have come  
from the regions where oxen are sold for nothing,  
wielding my *iambos*, that doesn’t sing  
of Bupalean battle.

(*Iamb* 1.1–4)

The verses are choliamb, or “limping iambs,” such as Hipponax used three centuries earlier, and the opening words may be Hipponax’s own, adapted to new circumstances. The “No, really” presupposes a skeptical, laughing audience. Their laughter builds as the New Hipponax reports briefly on

his return from the Underworld; he is armed like an oldtime hero—but he won't employ his *iambos* in savagely destructive invective, as Hipponax notoriously did against his enemy Bupalus. In short, Callimachus's satiric *mimesis* works both ways. He revives an ancient, strong, and highly dramatic form, but in so doing, he turns it against itself for his own artistic and critical purposes. The New Hipponax fights to make peace, to establish a world of refined aesthetic and social values in which rude, old-fashioned competition has no place. All he wants is to be the supreme arbiter of taste. It is for his "listeners"—his literally listening friends, at first, with their fine ear for learned, contrived, highly nuanced poetry, and then the spreading circles of further reader-listener-reperformers—to hear the poems' sub-text, which is how far they have come, how great is the distance between the old Hipponax and the new.<sup>23</sup>

Lucilius's satires are analogous to the Callimachean *iambos*, though not directly, let alone exclusively, derived from it.<sup>24</sup> They have close affinities also to the refined literary mimes of Herodas and Theocritus, as well as to the New Comedy of Menander and his rivals.<sup>25</sup> Mime, pastoral, and *iambos* belong, together with elegy and epigram, to the world of Hellenistic *Kleinpoesie*, or minor poetry. They stand far below epic and tragedy in the now quasi-official hierarchy of genres, and they are play-forms (*paidiai*) like Callimachus's *iamboi*, which pose cheerfully as mere frivolity, mere after-dinner entertainment—although we are meant to notice, and to admire, the hard work of their making, and although, too, their varied mix of play and seriousness, irony and indirection, allows them sometimes to address serious human and social concerns. Lucilius's satires are clearly rooted in that same Hellenistic play-world. They are light entertainment, cheerfully informal "talks."<sup>26</sup> Their essence is variety and colorfulness and blurring of generic boundaries, the Greek *poikilia*, now seasoned with a new Roman liveliness, and sometimes conviction, that Callimachus might never have imagined.

Like the Hellenistic Greek poets, Lucilius collected his satires into little books (*libelli*) to be copied and circulated, first to friends and acquaintances, and then to a wider though still restricted readership that he himself describes. He writes, he says, neither for the *indoctissimi* nor for the *doctissimi*—neither for those too uncultivated to appreciate his writings nor for those overeducated people who, he is afraid, will read more into his writings than is actually there.<sup>27</sup> So he writes for an in-between, moderately cultivated gentleman like Laelius Decumus—what we still refer to, more or less hopefully, as the Common or Educated Reader.<sup>28</sup> We should not forget, however, that what we call publication was a transitional stage between one kind of performance and another:<sup>29</sup> between Lucilius's own dramatic readings for selected audiences of friends and their reperformance from freely circulating written copies (*libelli*), first by those same friends and supporters—who would recall Lucilius's own intonations and gestures

to a degree that we, amid our modern distractions, can scarcely imagine—and then by widening circles of readers, and also by well-trained, highly literate slave readers (*anagnôstai*) who knew how to restore to words inked on papyrus rolls the breath of life.

More than any others, it was the *grammatici*, those humble or (often) not-so-humble teachers of literature, who kept Lucilius's poetry alive in a continuous living tradition from his own day down to Horace's. Suetonius describes their work [after the influential Greek visitor, Crates of Mallos]:

hactenus tamen imitati, ut carmina parum adhuc divulgata vel defunctorum amicorum vel si quorum aliorum probassent diligentius retractarent ac legendo commentandoque etiam ceteris nota facerent: . . .

ut postea Q. Vargunteius *Annales* Enni, quos certis diebus in magna frequentia pronuntiabat; ut Laelius Archelaus Vettiusque Philocomus Lucili saturas familiaris sui, quas legisse se apud Archelaum Pompeius Lenaeus, apud Philocomum Valerius Cato praedicant.

[Still, they imitated him only to the extent that they carefully reviewed poems that had not as yet been widely circulated—the works of dead friends, or of any others they approved—and by reading and commenting on them made them known to the rest of the population as well. . . . So Quintus Vargunteius later did in the case of Ennius's *Annals*, which he used to recite before a large audience on specific days; and so Laelius Archelaus and Vettius Philocomus did in the case of their friend Lucilius's satires, which Pompeius Lenaeus and Valerius Cato boast that they read with Archelaus and Philocomus, respectively.]<sup>30</sup>

These *grammatici* were scholar-teachers. They produced careful editions and commentaries in the Alexandrian manner, and they gave exemplary readings, practising and teaching what is still called “oral interpretation of poetry,” and republicizing their authors in the process.<sup>31</sup> Lucilius may not have received great public performances like Ennius. What is encouraging, though, is the continuity of reading from Lucilius's friends and contemporaries, who probably recreated and passed on something of the poet's own manner and intonation, down through the later generation of Lenaeus, who himself wrote partisan satire, and Valerius Cato, Catullus's friend, the unofficial head of the Roman “Moderns,” of whom it was said that “he alone reads and makes poets” (*qui solus legit et facit poetas*). By Horace's time, Valerius Cato represented a critical Establishment defending Old Satire against what seemed an irreverent young pretender.<sup>32</sup> Yet he saw to it that Lucilius's voice could still be heard—and Horace, when he wrote and published his own two books of *Sermones*, could hardly have asked for more.



## Performing Satire (2): Horace

The mixed heritage of Roman satire is indicated by the contents of Horace's bookshelf as described by the busybody Damasippus in *Satires* 2.3, 11–12:

quorsum pertinuit stipare Platona Menandro,  
Eupolin, Archilochum, comites educere tantos?

[What was the point of packing in Plato with Menander,  
and Eupolis, and Archilochus—bringing along such  
great fellow-travelers?]

Damasippus is scolding Horace for not writing more or faster. His opening salvo reveals something of Horace's inner pressure, his struggle as a serious writer upholding standards that Damasippus and his like could never understand. It also reminds us what pleasure, understanding, and literary inspiration Horace found in his great traveling-companions, the (Greek) Classics. Plato, representing philosophy, is grouped suggestively with Menander, whose New Comedy of manners reflects philosophical depictions of character in Aristotle and Theophrastus. From Menander we move back to the Old Comedy of Eupolis (and Cratinus and Aristophanes) and, behind that, to its precursor, the *iambos* of Archilochus. These are Horace's literary and dramatic ancestors. They all contribute, in their different ways, to the "mixed dish" of Roman satire.<sup>33</sup>

Later on, Horace points retrospectively to a different influence, the diatribes of Bion of Borysthene (c. 335–245 B.C.), here characterized by their casual style (*sermones*) and their biting wit (*sale nigro*).<sup>34</sup> These diatribes were lively informal homilies on ethical themes, combining humor and seriousness (*to spoudaiogeloion*).<sup>35</sup> Although we have only a few partial remains, stemming originally from published lecture notes (probably Bion's own) quoted or paraphrased by later writers and anthologizers, we can see how Bion used rhetorical and dramatic techniques to drive his arguments home.<sup>36</sup> He personifies abstract concepts like Poverty, who speaks in her own defense. He uses rhetorical questions, abrupt imperatives, arguments with an imagined opponent or interlocutor, popular analogies, and playful language generally. His attacks on avarice, discontent, envy, superstition, and the fear of death are good "Socratic" teaching, filtered through Cynic individualism and outspokenness (*parrhêsia*), and using the commonplaces of what we now call popular philosophy. Life is a drama, and we are actors: play the part fortune gave you as best you can. Life is a crumbling house, or a good dinner party: depart from it gratefully when the time comes. These comparisons are effective; they carry conviction still today. We find their like throughout Horace's *Satires* and *Epistles*, and before Horace, in

Lucretius's great attack on the fear of death (*DRN.* 3.830–1094). They point forward to the powerful diatribes of Epictetus in the later first century A.D. But they also belong to the Hellenistic world of entertainment literature, together with such other minor genres as iambus, mime, and pastoral; and like these, they depend on reperformance by readers and the recreation of a quasi-theatrical audience to achieve their fullest effect.

I am tempted to linger here, reading Horace's *Satires* 1.1 both as a fine performance piece in itself and, in the larger context of Book 1, as a high-water mark of Bion's influence. Let me, instead, postpone further discussion of diatribe until the next chapter (it will be important to Persius) and come to what Horace himself says about the writing and performance of satire, and about its possible and preferred audiences, in the programmatic literary satires 1.4 and 1.10.

First, the writing. In *Satires* 1.10, the epilogue to Book 1, Horace places his satire writing in relation to Lucilius and to contemporary poets and dramatists:

turgidus Alpinus iugulat dum Memnona dumque  
defingit Rheni luteum caput, haec ego ludo,  
quae neque in aede sonent certantia iudice Tarpa,  
nec redeant iterum atque iterum spectanda theatri. . . . (36–39)

[While word-swollen “Alpinus” butchers Memnon and disfigures the pale-yellow source of the Rhine, I fool around with these [satires]: not stuff to resound in temple competitions with Tarpa as judge, nor to return, time and again, as theatrical spectacles. . . .]

The passage begins ironically. Horace's little, playful writings (“haec ego ludo”) are sandwiched almost negligibly between Alpinus's terrible epics and the poems that, unlike Horace's, enter into public competition and display or theatrical performance. In the following catalogue of good modern poetry, however, satire finds a quasi-official place. The higher genres of tragedy and epic are sandwiched in between the lower genres of comedy and pastoral, and Horace's satire follows closely on Virgil's “tender and witty” *Eclogues*. He does not, he says, mean to displace Lucilius, the honored, if careless founder of Roman verse satire. Rather, he is bringing satire up to the highest contemporary standards of style and tone—as Lucilius himself would be doing if he lived in the post-Neoteric age. This requires painfully hard work. It also means limiting your intended audience:

saepe stilum vertas, iterum quae digna legi sint  
scripturus, neque te ut miretur turba labores,  
contentus paucis lectoribus. an tua demens  
vilibus in ludis dictari carmina malis? (72–75)

[You must often erase, in order to write what merits more than onetime reading; and you mustn't struggle to impress the crowd: a few readers should suffice. Or are you so crazy that you'd want your poems to be dictated in cheap low schools?]

Horace cannot worry, that is, about present popularity or future reputation, which might come down to having your poetry taught by rote in poor elementary schools. He will therefore concern himself, not with bad potential readers and reviewers (he names a few), but only with good ones. His positive list begins with Maecenas, his patron, embraced symbolically by Horace's close friends and fellow-poets,

Plotius et Varius, Maecenas Vergiliusque, (81)

and goes on to list other representative friends and educated people who he hopes will enjoy his writings. The list emphatically crosses party lines. Horace here indicates what we might call his primary readership, though this in turn evidently stands for the further, widening circle of readers, unknown as yet, whom he might expect to reach through publication of this little book (*libellus*) of satires.<sup>37</sup> "Hurry, boy," he concludes, "and add these last verses to my little book."

i, puer, atque meo citus haec subscribe libello. (92)

This ending is comical. The poet who has so much emphasized the necessity of slow, hard, careful writing seems to be dictating his verses, like Lucilius, to a scribe in a great, careless rush of words toward the finish line. But of course, his spontaneity is contrived—as we (if we are *docti*, educated in such matters) are meant to realize.

*Satires* 1.10 ends with the word *libello*, celebrates the completion of this little book of satires, and carefully indicates, as Lucilius had earlier, the aesthetic and critical standards to which Horace adheres and, correlative with this, the right readers he hopes to reach through publication. The artistic organization of the *libellus* is remarkable, as is its resemblance to Virgil's book of ten *Eclogues*, published three or four years earlier. Put the two books together, and you see something of the companionship, the shared Callimachean standards, of the two poet-friends.<sup>38</sup> At the same time, Virgil's *Eclogues* were highly dramatic pieces, like Theocritus's *Idylls*; they lent themselves to recitation and even to theatrical performance.<sup>39</sup> Horace's *Satires*, too, for all his disclaimers, were meant to be read aloud, to please the critical ear, not just the eye.<sup>40</sup>

On this point the very disclaimers are suggestive. In his earlier, very ironic *Satires* 1.4, Horace begins by emphasizing the importance of writing slowly and carefully, as Lucilius did not; he won't enter a contest to see who can turn out the most verses in an hour. Indeed, he has neither circu-

lated his satires nor read them aloud in public (*vulgo recitare*), which is another method of circulation, common among would-be poets, hurtful to satirists' victims and dangerous for the satirists themselves. Yet this satire is full of speech: comic dialogue, everyday conversation, gossip and back-biting, and the narrator's seeming-casual chat (*sermo*). Again, Horace's disclaimer of indiscriminate "reciting" parallels his refusal to publish for indiscriminating readers:

nulla taberna meos habeat neque pila libellos,  
 quis manus insudet vulgi Hermogenisque Tigelli.  
 nec recito cuiquam nisi amicis, idque coactus,  
 non ubivis coramve quibuslibet. in medio qui  
 scripta foro recitent sunt multi quique lavantes;  
 suave locus voci resonat conclusus. (*Serm.* 1.4.71–76)

[I don't want some shop to display my books for sale, for every common hand to sweat over—including Tigellius Hermogenes'; I only read aloud to friends, when asked: not just anywhere, and in public, and for anyone whomsoever. Now there *are* people who give readings in the middle of the forum, or at the baths: the enclosed space makes a fine-echoing auditorium.]

Between the two pictures of undesirable things, the books put on public display and pawed over by sweaty hands, and the voices happily resounding in the forum or, better still, in the vaulted baths, Horace sets his own modest behavior. He reads only to friends, and upon request. His Aristotelian tact embraces time, place, and circumstance. He avoids publicity; his satires won't be circulated, prematurely and dangerously, by word of mouth (as Lucilius's satires may have been); they are carefully restricted to a limited audience; and, as Horace goes on to say, they are ultimately expressions of his own self-educational practice, derived from his good father, of holding moral conversations with himself about the good or bad ways he observes people living. It is all very innocent, and very private. Or is it? Even if Horace only reads aloud to a privileged circle of friends, his witticisms may still get out (hence his famous tact), and publication, which he has evidently planned, will bring about their general and indiscriminate circulation.

We should never focus our attention so exclusively on the mechanics of writing and publication that we forget the oral/aural dimension of Horace's satire at every stage of its emergence.<sup>41</sup> First, he would think up verses, at home on his couch, or walking about Rome, or traveling; then he would shape those verses slowly and carefully into first and second drafts; and when they were ready, he would test them on his friends' ears, not just their eyes. In the *Ars Poetica*, he advises young amateurs to "let anything you write enter into Maecius's ears for judgment, and your father's, and

mine—and then put your manuscript away for eight or nine years” (386–89); and he recalls how severely the late Quintilius would criticize his work in progress. “If you read anything aloud (*recitares*) to Quintilius, he’d insist on changes, or tell you to start again from scratch; or, if you refused, he’d leave you to admire your own work in splendid isolation” (438–44). There is nothing like a good critical ear. What is also important, though Horace omits it pedagogically, is the encouragement and support, the positive feedback and immediate gratification that many of these private readings must have brought him—a pleasure that Persius, under harsher constraints, may have forgone.

After Horace completed his satires, he probably performed many of them for his friends in Maecenas’s great house on the Esquiline. It seems likely, for example, that *Satires* 1.5, the “Journey to Brundisium,” was performed not long after the event for the pleasure of Maecenas, Virgil, and Varius, Horace’s fellow-travelers, taking on added dimensions of meaning and fun against their remembered, shared experience. Here Horace’s ideal audience, his actual audience, and the figures in his satire would remarkably coincide. Here, too, and in other satires like 1.9 and 1.6, Maecenas or Virgil could enjoy comparing the Horace standing before them with his usual satirical persona: that simple, naïve, straightforward, trusting “Horace” who is swept along by circumstances he doesn’t understand, as in *Satires* 1.5, or who speaks out, so very simply and honestly—his untutored father’s own son—amid all those sophisticated friends and foes, as in *Satires* 1.3, 1.6, and 1.9. We are still taken in by that simple, confiding persona;<sup>42</sup> or if not, then we grow so suspicious of the ironic Horace that we look for hidden agendas everywhere. One advantage, I think, of imagining satire as performed before a not-so-hypothetical audience is that it helps us to discern a little more clearly what may be happening in and between the lines and what may not.

The last stage of Horace’s writing was preparing his satire book for publication. The individual satires needed little or no revision now. What is new is their highly artistic ordering, with its groupings, its contrasts, and its strong cumulative effect, like that of Virgil’s *Eclogues*. How Book 1 was received, how wide a public it reached, we can only guess. Later on, Horace says of his first lyric collection, *Odes* 1–3, that people enjoyed his poems privately but disparaged them in public. They did so, he says, because he refused to engage in literary politics and give public readings, whether at professional meetings or in the theater. Elsewhere, however, he indicates that he did take part in some public readings and mutual-admiration sessions, after all. The young Ovid, at least, once heard him read.<sup>43</sup>

In sum, the written and spoken word, the text of satire and the performative event, matter equally to Horace, and the one presupposes the other. If he saw himself as a professional writer, shaping and reshaping his satires

toward publication with post-Lucilian care, still the life of his satires remains in the performance. Kenneth Quinn, though speaking of the *Odes*, puts it well:

As I see the matter, performance is always implied. Even when contact with a writer takes place through a written text, the text was thought of as recording an actual performance by the writer; the published text may be the result of a series of drafts, but it is still offered as, so to speak, a transcript of a performance which the reader recreates for himself, by reading the text aloud or having it read aloud.<sup>44</sup>

To breathe new life into Horace's *Satires*, then, we should imitate the *grammatici* of old and see to it that reading aloud and reperformance keep pace with scholarly commentary and interpretation.

My approach so far has been mainly aesthetic, foregrounding the pleasure of the performance of satire. Now we might ask the question, deferred but not forgotten: What kinds of pleasure do these satires afford in their social and historical contexts, and for whom?

Lucilius was privileged. As a Roman knight, he needed no patron, and although he had powerful friends, including the younger Scipio, he wrote to please himself, declining, for example, to praise Scipio's military exploits in verse. Sometimes he engaged in partisan politics and feuds, attacking enemies with a violence that his successors long remembered and envied.<sup>45</sup> What other functions, from a sociocultural viewpoint, did his satires fulfill, besides furnishing casual entertainment for elite dinner-parties? A New Historicist might argue that as Lucilius derided outsiders, from foolish or vicious aristocrats to lower-class parasites and scoundrels, he reinforced his in-group's solidarity and self-awareness; or else, that his satires helped provide them with the "symbolic capital" (Bourdieu) of Hellenistic Greek culture, clothing a rich and powerful Roman elite with a veneer of civilized *urbanitas*.

All this Lucilius did under the ironic persona of an *elegantiae arbiter*, a self-proclaimed judge of good style in every sphere of life from food and sex to orthography, tragedy, philhellenism, friendship, and high Roman morality. We might wonder, though, with more conservative Romans, whether satire was not a two-edged sword, a threat, not just to "bad people," as Lucilius simply labeled or libeled them, but to the very mores that were now subjected, along with everything else, to the individualistic and often corrosive "criticism" of satire. For all its quasi-educational pretenses, Roman satire could never become a quite respectable genre—could never forget, or let others forget, its subversive side.

Horace's literary criticism begins differently, with limitation. He is not and cannot be Lucilius: partly from birth and social prejudice (the

freedman's son), partly from changing conditions of the time, and partly because he needed Maecenas's patronage. Yet, although he could not exercise Lucilius's polemic freedom—although, indeed, he was attacked, probably as effete and un-Roman, by Lucilius's republican-minded partisans—he succeeded remarkably in making himself Lucilius's successor in satire and the critical spokesman for a new social and cultural elite, the “circle of Maecenas.”<sup>46</sup>

Maecenas's gifts to Horace—first and foremost, the Sabine estate, with the financial independence it brought; less obviously, moral and practical support for writing, performance, and publication—were balanced by social demands and pressures at which Horace only hints obliquely.<sup>47</sup> What matters is that Maecenas let him write, like Lucilius, what he needed and wanted to write, and even renegotiate the terms of their “friendship” (*amicitia*) in the *Epistles*, where feelings of gratitude and obligation collide with the desire for greater independence, both outer and inner. The published *libellus* credits both parties with transcending that conflict through true generosity and loyalty. Maecenas will be remembered as the ideal patron; his poets will be envied for the (relative) freedom they enjoyed. Yet, in retrospect, Horace and Virgil provided symbolic capital and cultural legitimacy to the Principate. “Are you afraid,” asked Augustus (with heavy-handed humor, requesting a poem addressed to himself), “that posterity may think you were my friend?”<sup>48</sup> As it turns out, Horace had reason to worry. He wrote disturbingly, sometimes, about relationships with the great and the compromises, even at best, that they invariably demand.

Although Persius, as a rich and well-connected Roman knight, had the good fortune, like Lucilius, not to need a patron, he must in his relatively private life away from Nero's court have missed the encouragement and support of a centrally influential community of poets, critics, and educated amateurs such as Lucilius and Horace had enjoyed and in part created around themselves—a community of talent that, as Persius saw it, could not be recreated in his time. His satires convey strong feelings of impotence and alienation. Remarkably, though, he made a personal and poetic virtue out of necessity, not lashing out against Nero except indirectly, but rather converting satire itself into an instrument of Stoic self-diagnosis and -reformation. If Nero, the artist-emperor, made Greece and Rome into one great theater for his narcissistic performances, Persius, turning inward, played out his psychological and spiritual struggles on the hidden stage of his little satire book (*libellus*), for himself primarily, and then for whoever, after his death, might care to read and to respond.

Two close friends, the philosopher Cornutus and the poet Caesius Bassus, prepared Persius's book for publication after his death.<sup>49</sup> Whether anyone heard or read the *Satires* in his lifetime is less clear. Perhaps he read them aloud to a small, trusted group of friends and relations, in some

safe place like the gardens of his respected older friend, Thræsea Paetus. It may be, however, that he only read individual satires to Cornutus and Bassus, and that nobody (else?) saw the completed book before he died. Could this be what his riddle meant, “vel duo vel nemo” (“Maybe two people, maybe nobody”)?

Into his hidden book Persius breathes secrets that endanger not only Nero’s regime, but also the satiric tradition itself as Rome has known it. If everyone has asses’ ears, what place is left for the implied audience of satire, ourselves included, to stand? And, again: whereas Lucilius and Horace advocated new, increasingly refined notions of good style in literature and life, based on Callimachean precepts of subtlety and polish, Persius can only denounce the fashionably soft, smooth, and overrefined poetry of his own time as it is practiced at court, from the (unmentioned) emperor on down; so that, in protest against this infectious degeneracy of taste, he must abandon satire’s usual civilized and civilizing pretensions and appear as a redneck “half-civilized outsider” (*semipaganus*), in the prefatory *Choliambics*, or as a child who can’t wait to piss, in *Satire* 1. Give him the leverage of marginalization, and he will move the satiric world—with rude guffaws.

In the remainder of this chapter, I shall follow Persius’s “nonperformance” or metaperformance in *Satire* 1—his rejection of expected aims and purposes and his critique of bad contemporary literary and social performances—to its surprising, but not totally unexpected, conclusion.

### Three Bad Performances

The argument proper of *Satire* 1 begins at line 13, as Persius takes us into the world of poetry writing and performance:

scribimus inclusi, numeros ille, hic pede liber,  
 grande aliquid quod pulmo animae praelargus anhelet.  
 scilicet haec populo pexusque togaque recenti  
 et natalicia tandem cum sardonyche albus  
 sede leges celsa, liquido cum plasmate guttur  
 mobile conlueris, patranti fractus ocello.  
 tunc neque more probo videas nec voce serena  
 ingentis trepidare Titos, cum carmina lumbum  
 intrant et tremulo scalpuntur ubi intima versu.  
 tun, vetule, auriculis alienis colligis escas,  
 articulis quibus et dicas cute perditus “ohe”? (1.13–23)

[We write, shut in: one in verse, another in prose, something large for overactive lungs to puff and pant over. And of course, you’ll read these things to the crowd, your hair well combed, gleaming white in a new



toga, and with your birthday ring: read them from your high throne, after making your throat supple with liquid modulation, the broken subject of a lustful glance. Then you might see our enormous Tituses wriggling—in no decent manner, with no vocal restraint—once the poems penetrate their parts and they are fingered intimately by the tremulous verse. Old man, are you collecting scraps for other people’s ears, scraps to which you yourself, with your ruined joints and hide, would have to say, “Enough already”?] ]

The satire is devastating. It is also notoriously hard to interpret, especially the last two lines with their strange, intense, very mixed metaphors. I begin, though, with a different puzzle. Where are we taken by those fast-shifting first- and second-person verbs?

Imagine them now in performance; (a) the first word, “scribimus,” introduces a vast literary scene: “Here we all are, writing.” Persius himself is presumably included, or better, implicated in the general folly, and so are his readers unto the present day;<sup>50</sup> (b) with “leges” (“you will read”), we realize that Persius has started to address one particular writer whose poems will be performed before an admiring popular audience. That was presumably their aim, as it might have been Persius’s own wish earlier when he was interrupted by the corrective Stoic voice; (c) with “tunc . . . videas” Persius directs his readership, taken as a single or singular individual, to step back and regard the scene critically and dispassionately, as the satirist does: “Then you might see” (or, “Then one could see . . .”); and finally, with a surprise twist, (d) he turns to attack his victim directly. This is, evidently, the bad poet-performer just described, but it could (we have a feeling) have been ourselves, for Persius’s satire moves quickly. Nor does it limit itself, reassuringly, to the usual suspects.

In this first vignette, Persius reduces the *recitatio* to its lowest physical denominator. It is an exercise in lung power; still more, in self-advertisement. What does it take to be a poet nowadays? The right hair-do, the right clothes, the right accessories. The long Latin words suggest the overpowering effect of that enormous, gaudy birthday ring, so prominently displayed. We may imagine the preliminary applause. “Finally” (*tandem*, a key word, suggesting the man’s dramatically slow progress, an effect that Persius’s own satiric mimesis would heighten), he will give his reading—after reaching his high seat, and after clearing his throat, very slowly and deliberately, provoking the audience’s expectation (and our own).

Nor is that all that is provoked. The poetry reading is eroticized to the point of pornography. It is described metaphorically as a complex and various homosexual transaction. There is, first, the sexual invitation and response of the initial eye contact between poet and audience. Then the poetry being recited makes its erotic entrance not into the ears but into the

intimate lower regions, arousing great hulking hearers to a quasi-orgiastic response. The details are notoriously complex, and even untranslatable: not because Persius scholars are especially prudish nowadays, but because Persius seems deliberately ambiguous in his suggested conflation of active and passive homosexual response, and still more, in the extraordinary mix of food, sex, poetry reading, and flattery that follows—two lines that have brought strong scholars to their knees.<sup>51</sup> Horace had described an older man blown up by a legacy-hunter's flattery to the point where he couldn't take any more (*Satires* 2.5.96–98). In Persius it is the performer-poet who becomes exhausted, by the effort of continually feeding scraps of food/poetry/flattery to the insatiable ears of his audience, and also, varying the earlier metaphor, by the physical demands of those longtime sexual transactions. Again, the picture is ambiguous. Is the performer compared to a worn-out pathic or to an active performer who can't get it up any longer?<sup>52</sup> In either case, we have a sense of physical and psychological exhaustion, and perhaps of a sexual Waste Land like Eliot's, here employed to characterize the present state of poetry writing and performance at Rome.

Abruptly, an interlocutor objects:

“quo didicisse, nisi hoc fermentum et quae semel intus  
innata est rupto iecore exierit caprificus?”  
en pallor seniumque! o mores, usque adeone  
scire tuum nihil est nisi te scire hoc sciat alter?  
“at pulchrum est digito monstrari et dicier ‘hic est.’  
ten cirratorum centum dictata fuisse  
pro nihilo pendes?”

(24–30)

[“What's the point of learning, if the yeast doesn't work, if the wild fig tree, born within you, doesn't burst out through your very liver?” There's paleness for you, there's senility! The things people do! Is your knowing really so worthless if another man doesn't know that you know what you know?

“But it's splendid to be pointed at and have them say, ‘That's him!’ To have been the object of dictation for a hundred curly-headed kids—do you count *that* as nothing?”]

As earlier, the voices are unidentified; they need to be played out in performance. Persius is usually thought to be entering into dialogue here with one of satire's straw men, a supposed representative of the poets and their usual mentality. Probably so: but I think he is still holding converse with himself, confronting his own very natural poetic ambitions with harsh Stoic realism. The second, refuting voice insists once again on a consistent inner standard. What matters is learning, not displaying your learning to others. But the first voice has already been made to undermine its own position

through rhetorical exaggeration, metaphorical confusion, and unintended obscenity. The would-be defense of poetic inspiration turns grotesque. A man's liver, the seat of passion, swells up like yeast and bursts, and out comes a wild fig tree (more sterility?).<sup>53</sup> After that, the poet's ambition is described in what seem more acceptable, Horatian terms: first, to be pointed out in public, as Horace was; and then, as an object of dictation in some elementary school—a fate that Horace once disdained as unworthy, but to which, in time, he seems to have become reconciled.<sup>54</sup> But now the finger-pointing turns ambivalent, and the poet's prospective pleasure in "having become the object of dictation of a hundred curly-haired boys" suggests, not just the debasement of poetry among the elementary school crowd to whom the teacher dictates poetry—partly for instruction in reading and grammar, and partly because multiple copies were unavailable—but a confusion of mind, as the poet savors what has already become his extended fame.

Persius's response to the interlocutor's objections is a second satiric vignette that, not coincidentally, is much concerned with life and death:

ecce inter pocula quaerunt  
 Romulidae saturi quid dia poemata narrent.  
 hic aliquis, cui circum umeros hyacinthina laena est,  
 rancidulum quiddam balba de nare locutus  
 Phyllidas, Hypsipylas, vatum et plorabile siquid,  
 eliquat ac tenero subplantat verba palato.  
 adsensere viri: nunc non cinis ille poetae  
 felix? non levior cippus nunc inprimit ossa?  
 laudant convivae: nunc non e manibus illis,  
 nunc non e tumulo fortunataque favilla  
 nascentur violae? (30–40)

[Behold Romulus's full-stuffed offspring, asking, among their cups, "What has divine Poetry to say to us?" At which, some character with a lavender cloak around his shoulders, after venting some putrid remarks from his stammering nose, strains out Phyllises, Hypsipyles, any of the old tearful Poesy, daintily tripping up the words on his tender palate. The men assent: are not the poet's ashes utterly fortunate? Does not the tombstone now press more lightly on his bones? The guests give praise: oh, now, out of those shades, out of the tomb and the oh-so-blessed cinders, will not violets spring?]

What poets want, what they have always wanted, is immortality. "Let no one grieve for me," said Ennius, "for I fly about, living, through the mouths of men." And Horace: "A great part of me will escape the death-goddess."

And Ovid, writing from exile, counts on friends back in Rome to cultivate his memory, to keep him alive through poetry recitations that will constitute virtual acts of cult worship.<sup>55</sup> What really happens, though? Just one more silly performance for the benefit of an after-dinner audience, “stuffed” (“saturi”) and still drinking. Again a performer arises, a professional entertainer this time, wearing the latest thing in fine lavender mantles, to give them some trite love-elegy or epyllion with a preliminary critical introduction in the latest high-pathetic, narcissistic style. And the decadent Sons of Romulus applaud. They have no taste; they are “saturated” with this kind of verse, as well as with food—and they are probably not paying attention, anyway. But there is something sinister about their applause. It carries Virgilian connotations of human sacrifice: not life, but death.<sup>56</sup>

Indeed, this second vignette builds to a magnificent demolition, through wild comic exaggeration, of the whole received notion of literary immortality. Persius’s sarcasm is noticeably strong here (as, indeed, his interlocutor will insist in the very next lines): the more so, I think, because he is outwrestling his own very human desires. His strong mockery, his antic humor (which we shall also see in *Satire* 6) springs largely from his keen awareness of death’s power to frustrate human hopes and ambitions, good poets’ as well as bad. No wonder it finds an echo in *Hamlet*.<sup>57</sup> When Laertes cries out at Ophelia’s grave,

Lay her i'the earth,  
And from her fair and unpolluted flesh  
May violets spring! (v.i.261–63),

he is evidently deceiving himself. Hamlet knows better, especially after the gravedigger scene; he is more honest with himself and (now) with others. Yorick’s skull mocks beauty, ambition, wit—and poetic creativity. What should Hamlet do, or Shakespeare—or Persius—given that dreadful awareness? Strong, mocking laughter is one way of acknowledging the fear, and perhaps of keeping it, if only momentarily, at bay.

Again the interlocutor objects:

“rides,” ait, “et nimis uncis  
naribus indulges. an erit qui velle recuset  
os populi meruisse et cedro digna locutus  
linquere nec scombros metuentia carmina nec tus?” (40–43)

[“You laugh,” he says, “your nostrils curl too much. Can you show me a man who doesn’t admit he wants to have earned the people’s voice, to produce and leave behind poems that merit cedar, that have no fear of mackerels or incense?”]

The objection seems reasonable, Horatian. Isn't Persius being too sarcastic? Wouldn't anyone want his writings to be read, admired, and preserved? Again, the objection somewhat undermines itself, reminding us of the material and historical conditions of survival. Poems stored in cedarwood book-boxes may be honored more and live longer than poems used for fish- or incense-wrappings, and that is something, but book-boxes are still, at best, a sort of coffin.<sup>58</sup> Still, Persius's sarcasm quiets down, as though he has been moved by thoughts of our common human condition. This time, he starts off modestly; but his tone changes as he describes what passes for criticism nowadays, and why:

quisquis es, o modo quem ex adverso dicere feci,  
 non ego cum scribo, si forte quid aptius exit  
 (quando haec rara avis est), si quid tamen aptius exit,  
 laudari metuam; neque enim mihi cornea fibra est.  
 sed recti finemque extremumque esse recuso  
 "euge" tuum et "belle." nam "belle" hoc excute totum:  
 quid non intus habet? non hic est Ilias Atti  
 ebria veratro? non siqua elegidia crudi  
 dictarunt proceres? non quidquid denique lectis  
 scribitur in citreis? calidum scis ponere sumen,  
 scis comitem horridulum trita donare lacerna,  
 et "verum," inquis, "amo, verum mihi dicite de me."  
 qui pote? vis dicam? nugaris, cum tibi, calve,  
 pinguis aqualiculus propenso sesquipede extet.  
 o Iane, a tergo quem nulla ciconia pinsit  
 nec manus auriculas imitari mobilis albas  
 nec linguae quantum sitiatis canis Apula tantae.  
 vos, o patricius sanguis, quos vivere fas est  
 occipiti caeco, posticae occurrere sannae. (44–62)

[You, whoever you are whom I just made speak against me: no, when I write, if something comes out rather well—a rare bird indeed—still, if something comes out rather well, I'll not be afraid to be praised. My fiber's not hard as horn. But I do refuse to agree that your "Great job!" and "Beautiful!" are the outer limit and scope of all that's right and good. Just shake out that "Beautiful!": what don't you find inside? Not Attius's *Iliad*, strung out on hellebore? Not the sweet little elegies tossed off by full-stuffed lordlings? Not everything, in short, that's written on citruswood couches? You know how to serve a pig's paunch hot, you know how to give your shivering hanger-on a worn-out coat, and you say, "I love the truth, tell me the truth about myself." How can he? Like *me* to tell you? It's no good, baldy; you're just fooling around, while your great fat paunch sticks out a foot-and-a-half before you!

O Janus [you're lucky]: no stork's bill nips you from behind; no quick hand mimics pale-white asses' ears; no tongue sticks out as far as a thirsty Apulian bitch's. As for you, gentlemen of noble blood, who are destined to live with the back of your skulls blind: you'll have to hurry to meet that backdoor sneer!]

Persius begins by unmasking his interlocutor as a Rhetorical Convention. He is teasing us, as comic poets do, and he is conversing with himself still about why one writes and for whom. As a Stoic, a rational thinker, he will dig beneath the surface of things, but his rhetorical questions convey a mounting anger and indignation at the meaninglessness of praise in a corrupt and corrupting society. This time, in what amounts to a third vignette and a third metaperformance, he shows us, first, how poetry is produced nowadays: the drug-induced epic (that wretched new *Iliad* again); the "tender little elegies" produced so incongruously by full-stuffed nobles; above all, the comfortable circumstances that make poetry writing possible. Then we see a rich man exploiting a poor dependent. After giving him a hot meal and a mangy old hand-me-down coat, he asks the man's "honest opinion" about what he's written. He can't give it, of course. So Persius gives it for him, in an explosion (his second, this time, but still building to a third) of satiric truth. The section ends, however, with images of suppression and concealment in the society at large. People are reduced to ineffective, even childish forms of protest, making rude faces and gestures behind the backs of our once respected leaders. If those great men could only turn around quickly enough, they might even catch the secret clue that Persius himself is half-withholding from us, the "asses' ears," emblem and *contrappasso* of perverse critical judgment, with which (as we shall see) the whole of society, not just King Midas, has so generously been equipped. For the fools who give and receive flattery and reject honest criticism are lowering themselves to the level of beasts in the overall scale of existence.

Persius's three vignettes help explain his initial aloofness and disdain, his withdrawal from the literary fray. In a society dominated by bad poets and flatterers, a society in which honest criticism has become impossible, why and for whom should an honest, self-critical poet write? But Persius's radical criticism goes deeper than the Horatian contrast of *we happy few*, with our good standards, *versus all of them*. The desire for literary immortality that motivates all poets to write, that motivates *us* as well as *them*, is mocked by realities of reception and performance. Not only will violets not spring from the poet's grave, but his poetry, even if it is good (and most is not), will only be what people make of it. It may survive (if it does survive) only as a form of casual entertainment, mostly unappreciated and misunderstood. Worse still, in his choliambic preface to the satire collection, Persius reduces all poetry writing to its lowest common denominator: the belly's

craving for food that inspires poets, like parrots and magpies, to perform their clever vocal tricks. What once seemed a noble, independent, spiritual art, the Muses' high gift to humankind, is now revealed as a function of the material nonculture: no more, and no less.

Even granted these harsh general truths, Persius's age seems more than usually unpromising. In the following section (lines 63–106) he reveals its underlying artificiality and falseness through an Eliotic clamor of fragmented, competing voices.<sup>59</sup> Evidently, modern poetry is admired for its exaggerated smoothness, so easy on the ear, so lacking in any real force and substance. Persius gives us traces of an Aristophanic contest, or *agôn*, between the Old Literature and the New: between the rugged old Classical authors like Pacuvius and Accius, nostalgically misremembered and praised by grumbling elders, and the smooth, effeminate, precious, hyper-Alexandrian verse beloved by modern youth, all about orgiastic Maenads and self-castrating Attises. It is all special effects nowadays, all style and no substance. Modern poetry has no balls. And not just poetry: for rhetorical pleading in the lawcourts, once the vital center of Roman political life, has also become theatricalized; defendants give artificial performances for show, just as their prosecutors do, and both sides hope mainly for applause. Underlying the parody is a dangerous thought. As Tacitus was later to demonstrate in his *Dialogus*, oratory atrophied under the empire because the lawcourts' decision-making power had been taken over by the emperor; what was left was flattery and self-display. Take the case of Pedius. In *Satires* 1.10, written under the Triumvirate, Horace could cite Pedius (Publicola) as an example of a serious and effective pleader who wouldn't mix Greek words with Latin—a fault in which Lucilius indulged himself, and which Horace carefully avoided. But now, with fine comic intertextuality, Persius shows “Pedius” transformed into a careless defendant who doesn't live in the real world any longer, but in some never-never-land of pretentious style.

Not just Roman poetry, then, but all Roman society has become a sexual and cultural Waste Land. Its once-respected citizens have been transformed either into pathics (“Romulus, do you wag your tail?”) or into Attis-like eunuchs. Bad art and bad politics reinforce one another. So, once again: what is the point of writing satire nowadays? What difference can it possibly make? Or as Persius puts it, as he begins the last, climactic section of *Satire* 1: “sed quid opus teneras mordaci radere vero / auriculas?” (“Why scrape those tender little ears with the biting truth?”).

### Persius's Return to the Colors

The passages just described are strong satire. They give a devastating critique of contemporary poetry, poetry-readings, and what passes for criti-

cism. Rhetorically, they justify Persius's stubborn isolation, his refusal to look outside himself for evaluation or approval. And yet, by the satire's end, he will reverse himself and offer a new account of satiric meaning, purpose, and audience.

The ending has three parts. In the first, Persius is warned not to write satire, and he pretends to acquiesce:

“sed quid opus teneras mordaci radere vero  
auriculas? vide sis ne maiorum tibi forte  
limina frigescent: sonat hic de nare canina  
littera.” per me equidem sint omnia protinus alba;  
nil moror. euge omnes, omnes bene, mirae eritis res.  
hoc iuvat? “hic,” inquis, “veto quisquam faxit oletum.”  
pinge duos anguis: “pueri, sacer est locus, extra  
meiite.” discedo. (107–14)

[“But why scrape tender little ears with the biting truth? Take care that great men's thresholds don't turn cold for you: one can hear the snarling sound of the dog.” Well, then: so far as I'm concerned, call everything good; I make no objection. Bravo, everybody! Great job! Really wonderful! You like that? “Here,” you say, “I forbid anyone to commit a nuisance.” So paint two snakes: “Children, this spot is sacred; piss outside.” I withdraw.]

The warning has been delayed. We expected it earlier, in connection with the adversary's “‘Quis leget haec?’”; now it is spelled out. Satire is hurtful and dangerous, and it may offend important people. Echoes of earlier charges (whether fact or fiction, or a mix of both) against Lucilius and Horace recall those poets' defenses. Lucilius (to paraphrase) put it bluntly: “I speak the truth; it needs to be spoken; but good, honest people have nothing to fear.” Horace was ironic: “I only write for my own amusement and edification, and for a few close friends; and anyway, I'm a decent sort of person who wouldn't go around hurting anyone—unless, of course, someone attacks me first.” (Even barking dogs have their uses.) But Persius insists that satire has to “bite,” has to offend people, if it is to provide honest criticism and possibly healing in a dishonest world. The tenderness of society's so very sensitive ears, which can only bear the smoothest, most effeminate verse, is in fact a symptom of their diseased condition. To scrape those tender little ears (*auriculae*, again the vulgar diminutive, not *aves*) naturally gives offense; but again, to pursue the medical analogy, this is like what the skilled surgeon does when he scrapes or cuts away diseased flesh.<sup>60</sup> Similarly, in *Satire* 5, probably written earlier, Persius's mentor Cornutus reminds him that he is “skilled at scraping pale-sick habits, and nailing down faults in free-spirited play” (“pallentis radere mores / doctus et in-



genuo culpam defigere ludo" [15–16]). You can see why this surgical metaphor appealed so much in later times, like the Elizabethan Age. It excuses satire's roughness, gives it an almost respectable social function. Like the court fool, the satirist may be allowed the rare privilege—at least occasionally, and within certain limits?—of telling the truth.

Although Persius feels the need to speak out as urgently as the child needs to piss,<sup>61</sup> he also feels, or pretends to feel, strong constraint. So he withdraws. "Discedo." Three long syllables. A strong, emphatic stop in mid-verse, at the caesura. "I'm out of here." What else can a satirist do, or a decent man, but (in Tom Stoppard's words) "withdraw in style from the chaos"?

And yet, hardly has Persius conceded when he begins again, again takes up arms, recalling his great predecessors and building to the satire's climactic revelation:

secuit Lucilius urbem,  
te Lupe, te Muci, et genuinum fregit in illis.  
omne vafer vitium ridenti Flaccus amico  
tangit et admissus circum praecordia ludit,  
callidus excusso populum suspendere naso.  
me muttire nefas? nec clam? nec cum scrobe? nusquam?  
hic tamen infodiam. vidi, vidi ipse, libelle:  
auriculas asini quis non habet? hoc ego opertum,  
hoc ridere meum, tam nil, nulla tibi vendo  
Iliade.

(114–23)

[Lucilius lashed the city—you, Lupus, and you, Mucius—and broke his jawbone on them. Flaccus makes his friend laugh, shrewdly touches on his every fault, and, once let inside, plays around his heartstrings—clever, too, at hanging the crowd from the end of his cleared-out nose; and *I'm* not to mutter a word? Not secretly? Not in a hole? Not anywhere? Yet, I'll dig in here. I've seen it, little book, seen it with my own eyes: *Who doesn't have asses' ears?* This secret, this laugh of mine, this thing of nought, I'm not selling you for any *Iliad* in the world.]

Lucilius spoke out, he attacked his enemies by name. Horace, more subtly and ironically, infiltrated his friends' hearts; or, differently, he became (what seemed) a confidential friend and adviser to his readers, putting his finger on their every fault, even as he scorned the general crowd. Ideally, perhaps, Persius will combine Lucilius's aggressiveness with Horace's playful, mocking irony. By all rights, he will make a third in the grand tradition of Roman verse satire. If he is silenced—if he can only "dig in here" and whisper his dirty little secret into the hidden cavity of his little book—still, this anticipates the long-delayed revelation.<sup>62</sup> For Persius, as it turns out,

finds himself playing the part of King Midas's barber who discovered that his master had asses' ears and could not, in the end, keep that dangerous secret to himself.

Persius's secret, that *everyone* at Rome has asses' ears, is worse. It is bad enough to offend one man if he is king, or Caesar, but if asininity is so contagious, like rhinoceritis in Ionesco's farcical play, that nobody, or almost nobody, can escape it—if everyone's literary taste and, behind it, the moral and aesthetic standards of the whole decadent society have become corrupt—what possible audience is left? The answer to Persius's first *quis*-question earlier, "Quis leget haec?," is presumably contained in the answer to the second, "nam Romae quis non?" But the syllogism is difficult to complete: (a) Persius must write satire, which requires an audience; (b) nobody today can tolerate satire, let alone appreciate it; (c) then Persius will write "for Nobody." He will whisper his great secret into his little book. If he alone, for now, knows the true value of his satirical laughter—knows how much better it is than that wretched new Latin *Iliad* that everyone is praising—then that must suffice. Again, the argument stops: over the line, after that single debased word, "Iliade."

And, irrepressibly, starts again, as, with no warning, Persius turns to address an unknown reader:

audaci quicumque adflate Cratino  
 iratum Eupolidem praegrandi cum sene palles,  
 aspice et haec, si forte aliquid decoctius audis.  
 inde vaporata lector mihi ferveat aure,  
 non hic qui in crepidas Graiorum ludere gestit  
 sordidus et lusco qui possit dicere "lusce,"  
 sese aliquem credens Italo quod honore supinus  
 fregerit heminas Arreti aedilis iniquas,  
 nec qui abaco numeros et secto in pulvere metas  
 scit risisse vafer, multum gaudere paratus  
 si cynico barbam petulans nonaria vellat.  
 his mane edictum, post prandia Callirhoen do. (123–34)

[Whoever you are, who have been inspired by a blast from bold Cratinus; who grow pale over Eupolis's anger and the Great Old Man, then look at these things too, if by chance you can listen to something quite concentrated. I want a reader who, with his ear steamed open, can come to a good slow boil—not your mean-spirited type who jokes about Greek footwear, or who can say, "Hey, one-eye!" to a one-eyed man—who thinks himself somebody because, lying on his back, as a local Italian magistrate, he smashed some crooked pint-measures at Arretium; nor the type, either, who gets a great big laugh out of somebody's counting on an abacus or drawing geometric figures in the dust, and who's espe-

cially happy if a brazen hooker tugs on a Cynic's beard. Well, they can always listen to the news, and enjoy some popular stripper.]

So an acceptable reader exists, after all. It is someone who has studied the Athenian Old Comedy writers, Cratinus, Eupolis, and Aristophanes, and felt their impact, and knows what good, strong, educated laughter is about—unlike the philistines with whom *Satire* 1 mockingly ends.

In lines 123–26 Persius brings satire back to an old allegiance. Horace, in his first literary satire, began by tracing Lucilius's satiric freedom of speech (*libertas*, Greek *parrhêsia*) and wit back to the Old Comedy writers, but went on to redefine *libertas* in satire much as Menander and Terence had redefined it in comedy. The personal and social norms of friendship, tolerance, moderation, and good humor that he advocates are very much the norms of post-Aristotelian New Comedy, both Greek and Roman. But Persius goes back to where Horace began: to Lucilius, with whom he too begins, and Aristophanes, with whom he (almost) ends. The circle is complete. In the Age of Nero, not Augustus, Aristophanes, not Menander, is what you need.

As one who has, in fact, “grown pale over Aristophanes,” let me respond belatedly to the challenge. For I *do* hear Aristophanes behind this last section of *Satire* 1. I hear lines from his *Frogs* where the Chorus distinguishes good people from bad, and among the good are people who appreciate Old Comedy, who “have been initiated in the [Dionysian] rites of bull-headed Cratinus.” In *Frogs*, living and dead become confused; Dionysus descends into the underworld to find, and bring back, a good poet (who turns out to be Aeschylus, not Euripides); and the rich underworld where the Chorus of Initiates sings is also the place where true vitality, wisdom, and civic spirit are to be found. So, too, if I am right, Persius appeals to initiated readers and critics the other side of death. Again, I hear lines from *Wasps* where Aristophanes praises the cathartic, “purifying” power of his own Old-and-New Comedy. He has cleaned up the comic stage, or so he self-ironically professes, and if we will only listen to him, appreciate his comedy rightly, and follow his supremely good advice, he will clean up Athenian politics as well.<sup>63</sup>

Persius's right reader, then, will have learned from Old Comedy to appreciate the “strong distilled spirits” of his new cathartic satire. His metaphorical complexity, not least in lines 123–26, is itself a test. Cratinus impresses one like the blast of a mighty storm.<sup>64</sup> The reader of Aristophanes and his rivals grows pale (“palles”), partly from the effort of study, partly from awe before those great passionate creations.<sup>65</sup> “Decoctius aliquid” (literally “something more boiled-down”) refers (a) to the highly condensed expression of good, strong poetry (Aristophanes' powerful metaphors were praised in antiquity), and (b) to the cleansing of dirty or sick ears with a

stinging dose of comic or satiric truth-telling, as with vinegar. It seems likely that “audis” too has a double meaning: “if you like to hear,” and “if you are in fact able to hear.” If you enjoy Aristophanes, that is, you will be able to hear Persius: and not least, as I have argued, by reading him aloud, by reperforming his satires, if only in the private theater of your mind.

“So may my reader seethe,” says Persius, “with steamed-open ear.” There is an implicit pun here. Most writers would want the reader to “warm to their favor” (*foveat*), but Persius wants his reader to “seethe” (“ferveat”): not pleased, but changed. More important, now that they have been cleansed, the sick and tender “little ears” (“auriculae”), so all-pervasive at Rome, have given way to a single good ear (“aure”)—which is where Persius wants to end, but the world won’t comply with his wishes, any more than Aristophanes’ world did with his. So *Satire 1* ends with eight lines describing the reader Persius doesn’t want, the average Roman philistine who laughs so mindlessly at all the usual things—at foreigners, cripples, intellectuals, and philosophers. This ending is satire in the more obvious sense of the word. It also reminds us, one last time, of Persius’s isolation in present-day Rome, where everybody has asses’ ears and nobody, or almost nobody, is willing or able to hear the truth that the satirist must voice.

We end with a paradox, then, and with a challenge.

The paradox, as said earlier, is that satire was made to be performed and to entertain its audience, but what Persius displays is a strange kind of nonperformance written for almost nobody in the foreseeable future: “vel duo vel nemo.” A corrupt society requires strong satire, but in a corrupt society strong satire won’t be tolerated or understood, or even heard. What Persius writes is condensed and difficult, and it stings. In the end, he can only whisper his secret into a little book and bury it there. I think of Eliot’s *Waste Land* again:

That corpse you planted last year in your garden,  
Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?

Persius wrote *Satire 1* toward the end of his short life. Perhaps he was already dying. He had, as we saw, no illusions about poetic immortality. If a decent reader or two find him out, that will be their business, not his.

And this is our challenge: to dig Persius up again (so to speak), to read and reperform his satire and listen, really listen, to what it has to say. What he said of Aristophanes—that you must grow pale studying him, that you must submit yourself to the comic catharsis—shows also, I think, how he himself ideally wanted to be read, and how we should read him today: with strong laughter, yes, but also “in fear and trembling.” For Persius pursues truth and integrity with a passionate self-honesty that is hard to follow. I shall say more about this in chapter 2.