
VI

PERSIUS, THE PHILOSOPHER-SATIRIST

To turn from the satires of Horace to those of Persius is to move from the tranquility of the countryside and the bustling streets of Rome to the stillness of the study, for Horace writes satire as a participant in the society he is describing, while Persius writes as an onlooker and an analyst. The times were largely responsible for Persius' approach to his poetry, but the upbringing and personality of the poet also had much to do with it.

A fair amount is known about him, since a biography, perhaps written by the grammarian Valerius Probus late in the first century after Christ, has fortunately been preserved. Persius was born on December 12, A.D. 34, at Volaterrae in northwest Etruria into a well-to-do Etruscan family of equestrian or middle-class status. He was educated at home until he was twelve years old at which time he went to Rome to begin the formal part of his training under the well-known grammarian and amateur poet Remmius Palaemon and the equally famous rhetorician Verginius Flavius. At the age of sixteen he joined the circle of young men studying with the Stoic philosopher Lucius Annaeus Cornutus, and Persius' fifth satire shows that a close and lasting friendship blossomed between student and teacher.

Others who exerted considerable influence on the poet's life during these years were Caesius Bassus, the lyric poet who is the addressee of the sixth satire and who eventually edited the *Satires*, the historian Marcus Servilius Nonianus, a man noted for his eloquence, and the learned Plotius Macrinus to whom Persius addresses the second satire. The poet came to know Seneca the philosopher only towards the end of his life and apparently never

cared for him. Thrasea Paetus, the husband of Persius' relative Arria, a doctrinaire Stoic who had written a panegyric on the elder Cato and who as the leader of the Stoic opposition was eventually condemned by Nero, also had a profound influence on the satirist. This education and these influences could easily have left Persius a man of careful and gentle ways, so that there is no reason to disbelieve Probus when he says that the poet was modest, temperate, and respectful and loving to his mother, sister, and aunt.

On November 24, A.D. 62, Persius died at the age of twenty-eight, while visiting his estate eight miles south of Rome on the Appian Way. The cause of his death is mysteriously described as a stomach ailment. Persius' ancient biographer says the satirist was quite wealthy at his death and that he left the bulk of his money to his sister and mother, with the request that a substantial sum be given to Cornutus along with the books which he had accumulated. Among these were some 700 volumes of Chrysippus' writings. Characteristically, the philosopher accepted the library but refused the money.

After Persius' death Cornutus convinced the poet's mother that his early writings should be suppressed. As far as the *Satires* were concerned, after excising some verses from the end and polishing them in other minor ways, he gave them to Caesius Bassus to publish at the latter's request. They appeared soon after Persius' death, perhaps as early as 63, and were apparently an immediate success.

Subject and Form

Probus says that Persius wrote slowly and infrequently. This may be an inference gathered from the first few lines of Satire 3, though the labored style of the *Satires* as a whole and the fact that the corpus consists of only six satires and a prologue amounting to some 650 lines also suggest that this was the case. It is impossible to tell when the *Satires* were written, but it seems likely that they were not begun more than a few years before the poet's death, since Probus indicates that he was still working on them when he died. Neither is there any way of knowing whether or not Persius wrote the satires in the order in which they appear now.

Though in some manuscripts the fourteen lines written in choliambics appear at the end, in the majority they form a preface

and for this reason appear in most modern editions as a prologue. Some scholars have rejected these verses outright because the meter is foreign to Roman satire, while the abrupt ending has led others to feel that the poem is incomplete. Still others take the fact that there is no clear connection between the first half and the last half as showing that there are actually fragments of two poems here. A careful, unprejudiced reading of these lines, however, shows that, regardless of their meter and seeming discontinuity, they do make a complete and coherent poem which serves an important function.

In this brief preface Persius is trying to indicate where he as a satiric poet stands in relationship both to the poets of the past who have gained a reputation for writing loftier poetry and also to those of his contemporaries who aspire to such loftiness in their poetic efforts. In the first half of the poem, then, he carefully disassociates himself from the poets like Ennius who are in a direct line from the Greek by disclaiming any designs on Helicon and Pirene and by insisting that he is going to leave the inspiration that these names imply to those who have proved themselves capable of drawing successfully on such sources. While he admits that he is himself a half-rustic (*semipaganus*), he is after all bringing forward poetry—he uses the word *carmen*—that is worth consecrating in the shrines of the poets.

The adjective *semipaganus* not only puts Persius' satire in the same relationship to epic, tragedy, and the like as earlier satire, but with its Italo-Roman connotations places it squarely in the non-Greek tradition. The word *nostrum* ("our") which brings this half of the poem to a solid conclusion may also remind the reader of things Roman, but it serves the more important purpose of concentrating attention on Persius as having a place between the poets of the past whom he has been discussing and his contemporaries whose appearance is imminent.

When he turns to his fellow writers, he criticizes them as crow and magpie poets who, in spite of a general lack of talent, have been driven by their bellies to attempt the inspired poetry that he has rejected. Persius' repudiation is made clear not only by the tone he takes, but also by the structure of the poem, for he isolates himself completely from the undesirables by keeping himself out of the last seven lines. The strong "I" of the first half of the prologue becomes a "who," an "it," and a vague "you" in the second half, with "our poetry" in the middle underlining the contrast. It should be noticed

that "the nectar of Pegasus" in the last line is an echo of "the nag's fountain" in the first line and shows the poem to be complete.

These lines serve as an appropriate introduction to the *Satires* for a number of reasons. In addition to putting these poems in the proper literary perspective, they prepare the reader for the disjointed style and the irreverent, sarcastic tone that pervades them. Persius is out to catch the attention of the reader by startling him, and he does this not only with his thought and language, but also by using a meter which by now is unexpected in a collection of satires. And yet choliambics were not entirely inappropriate, since they were commonly used in poems of an introductory nature and had long been associated with poetry of criticism.

Satire 1 takes up where the prologue leaves off, since it is essentially a condemnation of contemporary literary tastes and habits. Persius begins with an exclamation: "Oh the concerns of men! How much emptiness there is in things!" This is adapted from two lines of the Epicurean poet, Lucretius (1.330; 2.14), and serves as a theme for this poem and the *Satires* as a whole. As he speaks to his unnamed adversary, he professes a compulsion to criticize and proceeds to lash out at the prevailing taste that promotes unnatural recitation of artificial verse for an affected audience. The poetry that is being written is foamy and puffed up like bark that has dried out, so that for the most part it is weak and artificial. He calls it "the kind of thing that floats weak and lifeless on the spittle that dribbles off the lips." It is the poets who are to blame for this sad state of affairs, since none of them devotes the time and effort to composition that it demands.

The adversary's lame suggestion that the truth should be avoided because it tends to hurt brings the expected reaction from Persius, the dedicated satirist, who insists that he is sincere in wanting to write satire and feels driven to express himself in this way. After all, Lucilius and Horace did it, and besides, Persius has something that he is bursting to tell, if only to a hole in the ground: "Who doesn't have the ears of a jackass?" This is his secret and this is his laugh, and, though it may seem to be nothing, it is worth more than any *Iliad* that any of his contemporaries may write. As far as his audience is concerned, it will hopefully be made up of those who have no patience with low wits and dimwits, but who appreciate writers like Eupolis, Cratinus, and Aristophanes, for Persius is offering the same pointed, well-distilled satire that is to be found in Old Comedy.

The writer accomplishes a number of objectives in his first satire, the most important being to express his feelings about contemporary literary standards and the social and moral shortcomings that these reflect. But within this framework he is also giving an account of his own poetry and satiric purposes, and as he does so, he takes an opposite tack from Horace. For the earlier writer had defined his satire in terms of Augustan discipline, while Persius disassociates himself and his satire completely from the literary atmosphere of the times.

One of the most important points he has to make is that he is a sincere and independent writer, genuinely concerned about the emptiness and gloominess of human life which makes all people no better than jackasses. These are the things he must talk about, regardless of whether his listeners are repelled or not, for this satiric drive is part of his make-up. Out of Persius' forthright approach to satire comes a serious outspokenness which, even when it is colored by humor, is not a Horatian smile but an uncontrolled guffaw (12) with more of the sardonic, sarcastic, and bitter than of any healthy belly-laughing. It is important to notice that what Persius says gains a certain identity of its own and so an extra validity from being presented in a concentrated style. As far as justification is concerned, he carries on the tradition begun by Horace of marshalling the earlier satirists and Greek Old Comedy in support of what he is attempting.

Those who feel that this poem is Persius' most successful effort usually make the point that it is the only real satire in the collection, while the rest are Stoic diatribes or at best essays with Stoic themes. It must be admitted that this is closer in form and spirit than any other satire to what Lucilius, Horace, and Juvenal wrote. But, in view of the broad limits within which the genre was defined by the Romans, it is unfair to single it out as being the only true satire in Persius' collection.

The second satire is a birthday poem addressed to Macrinus, about whom nothing is known, except that he was a man of wide learning and apparently loved Persius as a son. Unique though the form may be, the dedication is little more than a formality, for after the first few lines Macrinus disappears completely, and the poem becomes a study of right and wrong prayers with the emphasis on methods and purposes. Though Macrinus will not make the same mistake, most of those who belong to the upper classes have prayers

that can only be uttered and muttered in secret—the death of an uncle, a crock of gold, the death of a ward who stands in the way of an inheritance. People think they can fool the all-seeing Jupiter and are sure they have when he does not strike them down immediately. But then this is not surprising, for, after all, they *have* bribed him with their plates of greasy offerings. When people think and behave like this, they have themselves alone to blame for defeat.

At the same time, man's materialistic outlook has affected his view of religion and, transferring his feelings about gold to the gods, he has come to gild statues and use elaborate instruments in his religious ceremonies because he thinks that this is what the deities want. It is time, then, to create the proper atmosphere, which can come only from honesty and purity of heart, mind, and soul. With this to guide and recommend a man's prayers there will be no need for hypocrisy and extravagance in matters of religion.

In theme and terminology the second satire is thoroughly Stoic, and it takes the form of a diatribe on the folly of men's wishes and prayers. The atmosphere thus created is reinforced by the paradox that all fools are impious and by the theory of the all-seeing deity, both of which are drawn directly from Stoic thought. The poem is topical, inasmuch as it is actually an attack on a serious problem of the times—the hypocritical, materialistic, superstitious habits of contemporary religion which leave souls "bowed to the earth, with no concept of heavenly things" (61).

At the end of the poem Persius insists that he would replace this cult of the external with an internal moral perfection which manifests itself in

a soul where divine and human law are in harmony,
a mind whose most secluded corners show a rare
purity, and a heart filled with nobility and honesty.
Give me these to take to the temple and I will enjoy
a successful sacrifice with a handful of grain.

Though the thought and much of the terminology are Stoic, this is a noble statement of an idea that must have been in the minds of many, regardless of their philosophical leanings. Persius has distilled it into the fewest possible words while recommending an application that goes well beyond the immediate Stoic context.

In Satire 3 Persius sets wisdom against folly and once again gives

what is essentially a Stoic theme a universal application. Though men are aware of the possibilities of living properly with the help of philosophy, most of them as a result of laziness, prodigality, and depravity—that is, because they are human and weak—are unable to bring themselves to follow those who are showing them the way. Persius plunges *in medias res* to present a dramatic picture of a teacher or preacher sitting beside the bed of a young man, chiding him for sleeping until noon. The latter is shown taking writing utensils in hand and petulantly throwing them down because the ink runs and the pen will not write as he wishes.

But this is just an excuse for not writing, and the satirist proceeds to criticize the young man for his laziness by telling him that now is the time to put aside the externals of lineage and wealth and to give up the life of vice and prodigality that blinds him to the truth. A child can be expected to avoid what is difficult, even though it may be beneficial, but a young man who has been exposed to the Stoic philosophy should know where to find instruction, for otherwise there can be no order or direction in his life. If he refuses to recognize this and insists on a life of prodigality and vice, then he is sick.

After introducing a centurion who scoffs at these ideas, Persius returns to the medical metaphor to show a sick man dying because he refuses to heed his doctor's advice and apply the proper remedies. The lazy, undirected man is like him, inasmuch as he is ill from greed, gluttony, fear, and anger, and knows but does not benefit from the proper remedy, which in this case happens to be philosophical. This kind of disease can only be described as a madness.

In the third satire both the theme and the metaphor from medicine which give the poem a unity are drawn from Stoicism. The poem falls naturally into three parts, the first of which, the explication of the disease, is the longest (1-62). After a close look at the patient (1-18) and an analysis of the symptoms (19-43), there is a statement of the seriousness of the problem/disease and an insistence that a remedy be found (44-62).

Diagnosis and description are followed by an outline of the cure (63-87), in which the complacency of the centurion who can only scoff at it serves to show how difficult it is to apply. In the final section Persius describes the consequences of neglecting the problem/disease by putting the physically sick man and morally sick man side-by-side (88-118).

The metaphor does much to relieve the monotony of the sermon, but Persius has also attempted to maintain the interest of the reader

in other ways—by placing a dramatic scene at the beginning, by using examples such as Natta, the bull of Phalaris, and Damocles' sword, by making reference to his own childhood, by introducing a centurion, and by giving a final warning to the prodigal.

The fourth satire is a plea to "know thyself" addressed to those who avoid the unpleasant task of getting to know their limitations and capabilities and tend to delight and trust in their own vanity. Once again the dramatic situation is relatively unimportant, for in spite of the fact that Socrates speaks with Alcibiades, what develops is not a Socratic dialogue, but another monologue or diatribe. The philosopher asks the young man how he warrants the responsibility of governing when he does not have the genius, wisdom, and maturity to make the decisions that are expected of him and when his idea of the highest good is to indulge his expensive appetites.

Socrates advises him not to continue this charade, for relying on one's family to maintain such a position makes a person no wiser than a lowly herb seller peddling her wares. He goes on to observe that men do not really look into their own souls, so that they are quick to pass judgment on others without stopping to realize that they may be open to criticism. Alcibiades is a case in point, for he laughs at a Vettidius for being miserly, but is himself reproachable for a well-plucked effeminacy. Part of this young man's problem is the fact that he has given in to popular acclaim which represents the wrong estimate of him as a man. He should get to know his real self, then, and when he does he will realize that he is less than perfect.

Though this poem, which is at the same time the shortest and most obscure of the *Satires*, may have been inspired by Plato's *Alcibiades I* and by a passage of his *Symposium* (216A), it cannot be called a Platonic dialogue by any stretch of the imagination. There are actually a number of streams of influence that come together in the satire. Besides the connection with Plato, even a cursory glance once again reveals Stoic characteristics, inasmuch as Socrates is actually a diatribist delivering a sermon, in which he points to the folly of emphasizing exterior things and mentions the highest good. Similarly Stoic is the exhortation to philosophy which concludes the poem and which in tone and purpose recalls the end of the third satire.

But the rhetorical tradition is also exerting an influence in this satire, for the theme itself is by now as much a part of rhetoric as it

is of philosophy. Moreover, the anachronistic nature of the situation suggests a *suasoria*, or practice piece, in which an Alcibiades might be given advice on how to use power by a budding Roman orator who no longer has the opportunity to reach such a position.

Satire 5, which is a treatment of the Stoic dogma on *libertas* or true freedom, begins as a kind of dialogue between Persius and Cornutus, but as with the satires before it, the dramatic situation is soon ignored. When the poet makes a facetious reference to the current literary habit of requesting a hundred voices, a hundred mouths, and a hundred tongues in order to do justice to a lofty theme, Cornutus reminds him that he should leave it to other poets to "chase after the mists of Helicon" and to squeeze their wheezing bellows. Persius is to write about familiar things in a less elevated style marked by smoothness and pungency as he rakes over diseased morals and pins vice to the mat. The writer quickly assures Cornutus that he is not pursuing trifles; he needs a hundred mouths to express his admiration for his philosopher friend.

Persius begins by describing how he came to Cornutus at an early age to be molded by him and how they grew together as if born under the same constellation. But the poet has in this respect been the exception, since, in spite of Cornutus' ability to offer the philosophic instruction and consolation that they need, most men do not take advantage of it, simply because they are too busy with their materialistic pursuits.

As he waxes philosophical at this point about the need that each man has for true freedom, Persius strongly implies that this is the main benefit to be derived from Cornutus' philosophy. It is not that liberty which results from some praetor's edict, but the freedom of soul which comes from knowing the truth and from being aware of what is right in a given situation. The man who has achieved this state has moderate desires, treats his friends fairly, and is generous and sparing at the proper times, while his unenlightened counterpart is simply a fool who cannot lift a finger without going wrong.

Though you protest that you are free by the laws, Persius tells his imaginary sceptic, avarice and luxury will pull you first one way and then the other. Consider the lover in a play. When he says very grandiloquently that he is going to abandon his passion for a young lady and succeeds, he comes to enjoy freedom in the Stoic sense. Usually, however, he is unsuccessful, and he is like the politician or Jew who may feel free, but who is actually a slave to his canvassing

or his superstition. In an abrupt final comment Persius smiles in the direction of his opponents when he asserts that, if you talk like this to a varicose-veined centurion, he will guffaw in your face.

It is difficult to disagree with those who say that this is the most successful of Persius' Stoic satires, for the straightforward narrative style and restrained diatribe prove refreshing and make the poem not so much a sermon, as a *sermo* or conversation, one-sided though this may be. There is also a satisfying alternation in thought between the positive recommendation of the Stoic *libertas* and description of those who have not accepted or cannot accept the idea of this ethical and moral freedom. This atmosphere is reinforced by a wide variety of dialogue that ranges all the way from the personal conversations of the poet with Cornutus, the procrastinator, and the sceptic, through the exhortations addressed to the unlucky moral slave by Avarice and Luxury, to a scene drawn from comedy.

The drama and liveliness of this satire come also from the wide assortment of characters who make their appearance: Cornutus, trader, glutton, gambler, Cleanthes, procrastinator, Dama (who becomes Marcus Dama), Brutus, Masurius Sabinus, praetor, camp-follower, rustic, ditchdigger, Bathyllus, Crispinus, Davus, Chaerestratus and Chrysis, Luxury, Avarice, slaves from Cos, politician, mob, Herod and the Jews, and Cybele with her priestess and followers. It may all still smack of the bookcase, and the poetry may lack the spontaneity of Horace's, but the features just mentioned combine to make this the most spirited of Persius' *Satires*.

The sixth satire is a letter written by Persius from Luna on the Ligurian coast to Caesius Bassus who is on his Sabine estate. The satirist is in a somewhat expansive mood; he is at peace with the world and feels no need to worry about other people and their successes or anticipate any misfortunes that may befall him. He is going to enjoy life not by being too frugal or too prodigal, but by simply living up to his means, though in special circumstances he may use some of his capital. His heir is not going to like this for obviously personal reasons, while others with less at stake will shake their heads at what they consider to be an attitude fostered by one or other of the foreign philosophies. But these criticisms are nothing to worry about, for, after all, what can a beneficiary do to you when you are dead?

At this point Persius turns to his heir and tells him that he is not only going to spend some money on a donation of gladiators to a

triumphal celebration, but that he is also going to make a dole to the people. When the other threatens rather petulantly to refuse the inheritance, Persius informs him that he does not really care, since, even if there is no one left in the family, he can always find a beggar who will be willing to take his place. The satirist advises his heir to accept what is passed on to him and be thankful for it, even if it is somewhat less than it might have been, for Persius is not going to live a miserable life in order to leave his successor the means of living extravagantly. What is more, there is no end to this kind of greed, since the more a man gets the more he wants.

In this satire Persius comes close to recommending a happy mean, at least as far as the enjoyment of life is concerned. He can never become a Horace, of course, but at the beginning of this poem Persius is more genial and amiable than at any other point in the *Satires*. It is tempting to see here a mellowing of his rigidly Stoic outlook, which might have continued had he lived long enough to write more. The genial atmosphere does not last through to the end of the satire, however, for the thought of his heir's reaction leads naturally to a condemnation of prodigality and greed, and it is on this note that the poem ends.

If Probus is right when he says that Cornutus removed several verses from the end of Persius' book of satires, then the lines should logically have come from the end of this satire, leaving it unfinished. But the sixth satire gives every indication of having been completed; it even ends on the same negative note as the first, third, and fifth satires. Moreover, it is difficult to imagine what Persius might have added to round it off. If he had gone on to discuss greed at greater length, the whole thing would probably have degenerated into another diatribe, and the relatively relaxed and informal atmosphere that he works so hard to create would have been lost. As far as the thought is concerned, Persius has made his point about living correctly and has added a few observations on greed, so that there seems to be nothing more to say. It is perhaps better, then, to imagine the excised lines as coming from a seventh satire that had just been begun.

Characteristics

There is no need to make further mention of the fact that the *Satires* are pervaded by a Stoic outlook. It is important to notice,

however, that they are not merely philosophical diatribes and that Persius is not preaching Stoicism. He is actually using his philosophical background and training to point out men's faults and criticize contemporary social conditions, so that if he is selling anything, it is not philosophy, but morality.

All of this becomes clearer from a glance at the themes of the various satires, for, in spite of the fact that they are heavily layered with Stoic thought, the content is by no means exclusively Stoic. The first satire, for example, has no more to do with any specific philosophy than does Juvenal's first satire on this topic. The same may be said of the subject matter of the second satire, which had been treated in Plato's *Alcibiades I* and had made its way into rhetoric as a standard theme on which an orator-to-be might speak. Moreover, in this poem Persius is dealing with a problem that transcends Stoicism—and all philosophy, for that matter—so that he quickly goes beyond the paradox that all fools are impious to plead for something basic and universal—an honest, reverent attitude to religion.

As far as the fourth satire is concerned, the point has already been made that the theme developed here is common to a number of philosophies and rhetoric. By the same token, the theory of the Golden Mean and the idea of enjoying one's resources that are found together in the last satire are not necessarily Stoic. It is wrong, then, to look upon Persius as a doctrinaire Stoic and to criticize him, as some have done, for giving a thoroughly traditional and unimaginative account of Stoicism. He is not so much a philosophical thinker as a social thinker and as such is not primarily interested in developing and elaborating Stoic thought, but in using it to discover and solve the ills of Roman society.

When Persius is judged as a poet with his eye on people and society, his true worth may be seen. Satire is poetry, and because Persius knew this he drew freely on his literary predecessors. In his poems there are echoes and imitations of writers as widely different as Homer, Plato, Euripides, Theocritus, Ennius, Plautus, Terence, Propertius, and Ovid. It has already been noted that two lines of Lucretius provided the pattern for the first line of the first satire, and it can be shown that Catullus and Vergil also had a strong appeal for Persius.

But the two most important influences on the *Satires* seem to have been Lucilius and Horace. As matters stand, most of the evi-

dence for Lucilian inspiration comes from external comments in the ancient *Life* and commentaries. According to Persius' biographer, the poet was inspired to write satire by Lucilius' Book 10, in which the earlier satirist had commented on contemporary Roman literature and had attacked the early Roman poets. Again, an ancient commentator says that Persius' third satire imitated one from Book 4 of Lucilius which contained criticism of the vices and the prodigality of the wealthy. This authority also mentions the fact that the second line of Satire 1 (*Quis leget haec?*) comes from Lucilius' first book and compares two other lines of this satire (1.27-28) with two lines of Lucilius (1344-45).

A direct comparison between Persius' *Satires* and the fragments of the earlier poet suggests that his first poem is not unlike the introductory satire of Lucilius' Book 26, at least as far as purpose and subject are concerned. A passage of Satire 3 (88-109) has been compared to a few lines of Lucilius (678-88) by virtue of their having a description of sickness in common and also because of verbal reminiscences. There are other similarities between subject matter and vocabulary that may or may not be significant. When all the evidence is considered, however, it would appear that Lucilius' influence lay not so much in matters of detail as in inspiration and general tone.

Persius' debt to Horace is great, too great to cover in any detail here, for in the fifth satire alone there are over 100 quotations, imitations, and echoes. The influence is most obvious in the characters that reappear in Persius' poems. Bestius, the protector of morals, Dama, the slave who has risen to a position of power, Crispinus in his vocation of bath-keeper, and Cratinus, the doctor, all crop up again in their original roles. Nerius, who is a usurer in Horace, is transferred loosely as a man who is out after money, and Natta, who was originally a dirty old man, turns up as a prodigal.

But names are only a small part of Horace's influence. Though he quotes no line in its entirety, Persius uses many phrases and word combinations of his predecessor which he adapts to create interesting and even surprising effects. At one time he simply substitutes a word of his own for a key word of Horace, while in other instances he conflates two or more Horatian phrases. There are still other examples where Persius is obviously imitating a picture or thought of Horace without making any direct verbal connection.

There can be no doubt that Persius knew his Horace very well, but a glance at the many parallels shows clearly that he was no slavish imitator. For, in spite of the fact that his debt to his pred-

ecessor was great, by combining and adapting what he borrowed the satirist made the material his own and used it to create a poetry that was new and different.

Persius' style has at one time or another been described as harsh, angular, disconnected, grotesque, condensed, allusive, and crabbed, while some have contrived delightful new Persian combinations such as "contorted involution," apparently because they feel the traditional qualifiers are inadequate. While all of these terms are appropriate to a greater or lesser degree, it is better not to call his poetry obscure as many have done, for this implies that thought and imagery are difficult to penetrate and understand, and this is simply not the case. What Persius is attempting to say is usually perfectly clear, and, while his figures of speech may at times be contrived, they are with a few exceptions perfectly understandable.

Also, for the careful reader there is nothing vague and obscure about the organization which Persius employs within the individual satires. Each poem begins from an immediate dramatic situation of which the poet or his spokesman is a part, soon develops into a diatribe-like monologue in which the point of the satire is discussed, and ends with an epigrammatic comment that may contain the moral of the story, as in the first two satires, or may restate the problem by relating to it a typical example from literature, mythology, contemporary life, or philosophy.

It is true, however, that Persius' *Satires* are difficult to read. This is partly because of an uneven narrative style and partly because of the many unusual combinations of words. The problems that his narrative presents are especially evident in matters of transition. The example which springs to mind is the prologue in which the apparent lack of connection between the two halves has led some to be suspicious of the poem.

The third satire is full of such disconnection. The metaphor of the broken pot and unmolded clay (3.21-24) fits only loosely with what precedes it and hardly at all with what follows, making the movement from the reality of the episode with the pen (19) through this metaphor to the reality of the young man's landed possessions a little more than one can follow at a first reading. The transition from Natta to the tyrants a little later (3.35) is also unexpected, and then when the point of this has barely become clear, Persius jolts his reader on to a picture of himself as a boy (3.44), the purpose of which is again not immediately apparent.

There is the same abruptness in the appearance of the centurion, who is not organically connected with the rest of the poem, but is allowed to come and go as a character in a stream of consciousness (3.77-85). Moreover, when the physically ill man is introduced (3.88-106), it is without comment and without connection of any kind, and the morally sick man makes a similarly sudden appearance (107-18), though the other has at least to some extent prepared the way for him. In the third satire, then, Persius shifts gears suddenly and often, though a second or third reading clarifies most of the difficulties.

There is not as much of this kind of thing in any one of the other satires, but abrupt transitions do occur fairly frequently. The shift to Jupiter and then to Staius in the second satire (17-19), for example, is a little uncomfortable for the reader. Towards the beginning of the fourth satire there is a problem of transition and connection in the unexpected, almost jarring appearance of the old woman whose position does not become clear until two lines later (19). When Persius suddenly begins generalizing in the fifth satire about the many vocations of man (52) and appears to be getting to his philosophical point, he instead comes right back to Cornutus (62-64). Then, after this false start, there is a real shift to true freedom (73), which the reader must relate to the earlier praise of Cornutus by assuming that it is the most important lesson to be learned from his philosophy. Another unsignalled transition occurs in this satire when the poet suddenly introduces a scene from comedy (161).

The disruption of the train of thought caused by Bestius' appearance in the sixth satire (37-41) comes from the fact that Persius has a cavalier-like attitude to dialogue. He is not at all interested in exploring its dramatic possibilities and does not even bother to make it clear who is speaking. The reason for this is at least partly the fact that his serious, intense purpose keeps driving him in the direction of diatribe, sermon, and monologue and away from more relaxed devices like dialogue. In the case of the passage just mentioned, the words fall into place as soon as the reader realizes that the heir is speaking.

The many unusual verbal combinations that also make the *Satires* difficult reading occur both in brief phrases and in the larger units that form the imagery of these poems. With regard to his language, Persius insists that he has two purposes in mind—to practice an extreme economy (1.125) and to express what he has to

say in as striking a manner possible (5.14). With the first he is running against the grain of the times, but he tacitly commits himself to such condensation when he expresses his criticism of the frothy, foamy, effete style of his contemporaries in his first satire. In his desire to present his thoughts in an eye-catching manner, however, he is very much a part of this times, as a glance at the rhetorical treatises of Seneca or Lucan's epic poem, the *Pharsalia*, quickly shows.

And so Persius' *Satires* are full of condensed and unusual expressions and pictures, some of which are successful and some not. The satirist's adversary in Satire 1 says in a much quoted passage that display of one's learning is justification enough for writing poetry (24-25): "To what purpose, then, is learning if this ferment and the wild fig tree that has been planted within you does not burst your breast and make its way out?" Here the metaphors of fermentation and fig tree are boldly placed side-by-side in a context entirely foreign to both and presented in starkly simple language, so that, while the result is perhaps a little too grotesque, Persius has vividly and succinctly made his point.

Somewhat similar to this is the satirist's description in Satire 5 of how he will set his critic straight (91-92): "Get ready to learn! But let that anger and wrinkled snarl drop from your nose while I pull your old grandmothers out of your heart." The passage is difficult to construe, but it seems to mean that the poet intends to correct some of the skeptic's outdated ideas. Once again, the picture is perhaps overdrawn, but the choice of adjectives and verbs, the use of the parts of the body, the striking figures of speech, and the general condensation of language produce a blend that can only belong to Persius.

There are some figures of speech that are similarly strange and exaggerated—the heart that sweats drops of blood that come from the left side of the breast, the avaricious man who flogs the stock exchange, Cornutus who is planting Cleanthes' crop in clean, receptive ears. At times Persius tries to pile too many of these metaphors together as when he has Socrates in Satire 4 introduce the scales of justice, the metaphor of the curved and straight lines, and the theta of condemnation close upon one another (10-13). In this case the irony is heightened, but the mind is distracted by such concentrated exaggeration. Perhaps the most obvious example of this kind of hyperbole occurs towards the beginning of the third satire, when the Stoic preacher addresses the young reprobate:

It's your game that's being played; it's you who are dripping away like a madman; you will be despised. The pot half-baked and made of green clay when struck shows its flaw in the sound and gives a grudging response. You are damp, soft clay, and now, right now, you should be taken quickly and molded without stopping on the swiftly revolving wheel. (20-24)

Games, a leaky bottle, a cheap pot, clay on the potter's wheel are all crowded together in such a way as to suggest that the poet was carried away by it all. Again, as Persius describes his stage of development when he came to Cornutus for instruction, what could have been a relatively straightforward account becomes a maze because of the poet's search for the striking word and the brilliant figure (5.30-36).

But this is not to say that Persius cannot put together successful combinations of language and metaphor. His description in the first satire of a typical reciter of contemporary poetry is quite effective for the feeling of contempt that almost oozes from it:

Here is someone with a hyacinth-colored shirt speaking something stinking through his nose; with a lisp he filters forth his Phyllises and his Hypsipyles and whatever else of the seers is weepworthy, as he trips up his words on the roof of his delicate mouth. (32-35)

The criticism is devastating because of a concentration of metaphoric language of the senses and the images of filtering and wrestling and also because of a careful use of adjectives and verbs.

Another passage that catches the eye in much the same way occurs in the third satire when Persius asks the prodigal whether he has any certain goal:

Is there something at which you are aiming and directing your bowshot? Or are you chasing crows every which way with potsherds and mud, not worrying where you're going, and are you living life on the spur of the moment? (60-62)

The young man's lack of direction is neatly developed by the metaphor from hunting, and the point is driven home in the last

three words. The much quoted comparison that Persius makes between the procrastinator and the rear wheel of a wagon in the fifth satire is similarly vivid and forceful (70-72).

But, as a rule, Persius is most effective in his shorter passages and individual words. His keen powers of observation are at work, for example, as he describes the illusion of the morning sun widening the crack through which it enters (3.2). He also has a talent for keeping close to the traditional while adding a new dimension to it, as when he speaks not of "knowing thyself," but of "getting down into oneself" (4.23-24).

One of his most striking figures is the metaphor of the curve that keeps recurring, but which never extends to more than a line in length. The best example is found in the second satire (61): "Oh souls bowed down upon the earth and empty of anything that smacks of heaven!" Here language, figure, and meter combine to produce a feeling of agitation, depression, and foreboding. Everywhere in the *Satires* there are eye and ear-catching turns of phrase and metaphor expressed briefly: the rare bird, a warty Antiopa, a [sizzling] frying pan of speaking, a stupid beard, glassy bile, a sick throat slowly giving forth sulfurous fumes, citizens made yesterday, chunks of hearty poetry, the varnish of colorful language, and a circumcised sabbath.

To create these effects, Persius draws on all levels of language from the colloquial to the literary. When he insists that he is using "words of the toga" (5.14), he seems to mean language that is in everyday use in Rome and vocabulary that is primarily Roman and not Greek. As a matter of fact, the mixture of idiom and vocabulary that is found in the *Satires* is the healthy combination that characterizes earlier Roman satire. Persius draws much from the colloquial language of the city, but at the same time is not afraid to adapt and quote even from lyric and epic poetry. The odd barbarism and solecism appear, and there are a fair number of archaisms, many of which are probably drawn from Lucilius. From time to time he will even coin a word for effect. The *Satires* also leave the impression that Persius avoided Greek vocabulary, for he uses such words sparingly, usually limiting himself to those which had by this time made their way into the everyday language of Rome.

One dimension of Persius' style that is often overlooked is the relatively straightforward narrative that occurs from time to time. There is a Lucretian simplicity about his charge to prodigal young men (3.66-76), for instance, and though the ideas expressed are not

original and show a certain repetition, the simplicity of the Latin balanced against the loftiness of thought and purpose makes this one of the most attractive passages in the *Satires*. Persius' description of the man who enjoys true freedom leaves somewhat the same impression (5.104-12), while his warning to his heir is also free of erudite allusion and unnecessarily complicated language (6.52-60).

Part of this narrative technique is the bright and graphic picture that Persius paints on occasion. Both in the scene at the beginning of Satire 3, where the reprobate young man is visited by the sage while he is still in bed, and in the description a few lines later of the sick man who enjoys a sudden and unexpected funeral, the poet has presented the type under discussion with particular perspicuity. Especially attractive is the portrayal of the misdirected grandmother or aunt in the second satire. After inviting the reader's attention as if to a portrait, Persius goes on to show her superstitiously charming away the evil eye with saliva and her middle finger and impatiently praying for success for the newborn baby as she imagines him on the estate of a Licinus or in the villa of a Crassus. Persius makes her desires stand out even more clearly by quoting part of her prayer directly, and then almost as an anticlimax he personally requests Jupiter not to grant such prayers. With these lines the episode takes on an epigrammatic identity separate from its function as part of a satire and becomes a little poem in its own right.

Everywhere in the *Satires* there is a striking sense of climax that contributes to the effectiveness of Persius' style. Natta's final immersion in vice, for instance, where not even a bubble comes to the surface (3.34), and Jupiter's cry of "Good god!" at a preposterous prayer (2.23) are at the same time climactic and ironic. But perhaps the best example of the ironic climax is the cap which Persius puts on his description of a man who has squandered everything he owns on offerings to the gods in the hope of increasing his resources (2.50-51): ". . . until a dime disappointed and without hope gives forth a helpless sigh in the bottom of his money box." This is the result of all the man's striving, and the personification provides a nice twist, for his complete frustration and dejection are transferred to the coin and underlined by words of negative connotation: disappointed (*deceptus*), without hope (*exspes*), helpless sigh (*nequiquam suspiret*), the bottom (*imo*).

Finally, Persius' tendency to use *sententiae*, or brief pithy comments, for effect is typical of the period in which he is writing. Some of these have already been mentioned, but among the others that

should be singled out are his espousal of an enjoyment of life without prodigality in the last satire (25-26): "Live right up to your crop and grind your granaries completely," and his comment on people's relations with one another in the fourth satire (42): "We attack and in our turn we offer our legs to the arrows." He also sums up the message of this satire in a striking way (52): "Live with yourself and get to know how sparse your furnishings are." The ending of the second satire where he recommends an honest approach to life and religion is equally pithy (75): "Let me take these to the temple and I will have success with just a little grain."

Though the hexameter that Persius uses displays a little more regularity, perhaps because of Ovidian influence, it is essentially the informal verse of earlier satire. The poet is careful to avoid dactylic and spondaic words at the beginning of the line, while at the end he uses words of four and five syllables only seven times all-told and seldom allows a monosyllable that is not part of an elision. Within the line there is no hiatus, and the male caesura in the third foot predominates, occurring in some 600 of the 650 lines. Informality is achieved by word grouping in the line and often by an enjambment that puts a conjunction, relative, or correlative at the end of one line and the rest of the construction in the next.

Before leaving Persius, some attempt must be made to give him his proper place in the history of Roman satire. It is not enough to say that he is inferior to the other writers in this genre, for the point has already been made that much of his poetry is effective and some of it is even striking. Nor is it fair to brush his poems aside on the grounds that they are not true satires, since as a matter of fact, the three elements of personality, variety, and criticism, that were such important constituents of earlier satire, are repeated here.

The poetic personality that pervades the *Satires* cannot be the well-rounded individuality that Lucilius and Horace present, simply because Persius is under the influence of a thoroughgoing Stoicism which leaves him a sincere and earnest moralist, but little else. Every now and then, however, there are flashes of feeling that suggest a greater depth of character. His honest admiration for and attachment to Cornutus in the fifth satire, for instance, and his near genial attitude in the sixth satire make it a distinct possibility that, had he lived longer and written more, Persius might have presented a better rounded picture of himself. But even if the poetic personality is

incomplete, the moral earnestness of the *Satires* remains an important element of Persius' originality, for such an eager, serious, and at times almost grim attitude does not predominate in Lucilius and Horace.

The variety that has been mentioned from time to time as a feature of Roman satire is not as pronounced in Persius' poems as it is in the writings of his predecessors. At least part of the reason for this is the simple fact that Persius did not produce a corpus of comparable length. But a broad panoply of characters does make its appearance, and quite a number of human shortcomings and vices are criticized.

With Persius, however, it is a variety of style and language that predominates, and it is because of this that no two satires are alike, in spite of the similarities that have already been mentioned. Within the individual poems this miscellaneous element makes itself felt in rapid and unexpected changes of scene and metaphor and in the uneven alternation of narrative and dialogue, with the novel use of language reinforcing this illusion of diversity and variety.

But it is the element of sincere, outspoken criticism that so predominates in Persius' *Satires* that it might be called their essence. By combining the passionate approach of Lucilius with the language of the genial Horace and adding his own touch he has created a kind of satire that does not in the least resemble that of either of the earlier poets. He has produced an invective that may at one time be insulting and at another sardonic, but which most of the time is filled with ridicule and irony. Juvenal owed much in his satiric technique to Persius.

The *Satires* of Persius, then, have a vein of originality in them that gives them an identity of their own, but when they are put in their proper place in the hierarchy of satire, they most certainly fall below those of Lucilius, Horace, and Juvenal, simply because Persius' narrower outlook has produced poetry of more limited scope. This came at least in part from the poet's overwhelming commitment to moral teaching, which imposed certain restrictions on subject matter and methods and left little room for the informality and spontaneity of Lucilius, the relaxed and genial approach of Horace, and the honest and natural disgust of Juvenal.

But it is not entirely fair to judge Persius against the other writers of satire without recognizing the fact that he was in a sense a victim of the times in which he wrote. By now Lucilius' freewheeling approach was inconceivable and Horace's geniality was anachronis-

tic, while Juvenal's indignation was not yet possible for both political and literary reasons.

Moreover, Persius had to cope with a situation which made satirical writing very difficult, and so he turned to the Stoic philosophy as the vehicle for his satire. This was a clever move on his part, both because the popularity of Stoicism gave a certain validity and even protection to his poetry and also because it enabled him to speak in more general terms about the vices of society and so avoid the risk of offending those in power. But Persius faced another problem, that of making his satire novel and forceful in a period when novelty was a byword in literature. He solved it by adopting and extending the outspoken criticism that marked much of Lucilian satire and by creating a new and colorful satiric style.