

THE CHOLIAMBS OF THE SATIRES OF PERSIUS

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Some doubt has been expressed as to whether the *prologus* of the work of Persius, or, as some manuscripts¹ would have it, the *epilogus*, traditionally ascribed to the satires, is genuine. However, these choliambic poems are aimed at the same target as the satires to which they are attached, and while appearing to be a statement of literary principles, can be seen as a moral and political denunciation of corruption in Nero's Rome.

Right from the start, we feel the full bite of Persius' art. His lips (*labra*₁, "thick lips"), he says, have not made off (*proluī*) with the trough (*labra*₂, "trough, bath") of the colt Pegasus (*caballino*), disrespectful terms which he applies not only to Nero's poetasters and to the Emperor himself, nor has he drunk from it. But it must be concluded that true poets are first born and then confirmed by endeavour, but not by misappropriating dreams and poetic waters or from some sudden illusory spring.

In *pallidam* one can detect the sexual criticism with which Persius satirically tinges his writings, in the form of perversion, as does the Marquis de Sade though some distance removed. The adjective is transferred here from epic and elegy, where it is often applied to fear (that of cowards or women) as opposed to the manly virtues of the *uir*.

Imagines, *lambunt* and *sequaces* hit out against the rampant servility of Nero's court: fawners, fake ivy, dirty garlands, ashes, expressed in funerary form (*imagines*) to show that this sluggish poetry will not survive, being already dead, the worst possible criticism of art. Thence comes the happy and decorous force of *nostrum*, the accurate poetic plural. *Our* song is that of Persius and of the sacred sages, the

¹I am following Clausen's text, OCT, 1992². Cf. J. Conington and H. Nettleship, *The Satires of Persius Flaccus*, Hildesheim, 1967 (=1893), 138-141. I am very grateful to Catriona Zoltowska and to Rosario Moreno Soldevila for their aid.

holy poets, to whose liturgy (*sacra*) the young Persius comes with humility (*semipaganus*) to offer (*adfero*) not fatty or opulent sacrifices but his paltry, meagre flour, his insomniac obol, the laurel of his rounded tribute, his suffrage of great poetry, one and eternal.

The parrots and magpies who court Nero also define Nero himself (he is "the" most ignorant of them all) but *venter* seems to be reserved for the Emperor alone, in Hesiodic fashion but with less clemency: "Nero, all belly", or perhaps "A deformed belly, Nero, which you have dared to use and tolerate from your *sequaces* and *negatas* voices." For to the wise man poetry is truly recondite, mysterious, *auia*, intermundane. But poetry from the man who knows not what he is doing or saying (*coruos*, *picas*) is an insult, a blasphemy, a sacrilege, whichever is reckoned rashest or most execrable. *Voces negatas* refers to great poetry with respect while showing up Nero's abysmal ignorance with great audacity.

The poem concludes (*cantare*) grotesquely in ring fashion.

These imbeciles (*pallidam*), these fools (*sequaces*), these false poets (*coruos*, *picas*) wish to substitute their insignificant gargling (as indicated by the fusion of the already anticipated *cantare nectar* with *manare*, the flowing voice of the singing fountain) for the clear waters of the initial stream (*fonte caballino*) which is truly the pure, inviolable, lucid and sacred fount of inspired, divine, poetic knowledge.

And so in the end, this double image of the clear course of supreme knowledge enables us to understand the enigmatic epithet, the mysterious definition of the city some lines below: *turbida Roma* (l 5). Turbid mire, stinking sewer, not only when the arduous course of supreme beauty is spied from the faeces below, but also seen from the dizzying heights a solitary viewer can reach: Nero's Rome, so blind and cowardly (*pallidam*) when confronted with great disgrace, so rigid, so evil and abominable.

This is, I believe, what can be understood in Persius when he seems merely to be speaking of the water of inspiration, of parrots and magpies: that is -apparently- of poetic criticism; of fawners, of slaves to urgent necessity (*uenter*, also in the scatological, excremental sense) and of the avarous ambition (*spes nummi*) of fools who believe they have gargled with the newly-discovered, self-inspired, divine nectar of poetry.

One might well ask how Persius was even allowed to reach the age of twenty-eight. The poet, the young visionary, was right: how turbid was the baleful look of his inquisitor, how justly was he steeped in the mire, then and forever more.