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When the ear gets an earful: Metapoetic connotations *audible* in Persius' satiric programme

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Abstract

The literary-critical force of the ear(s)-motif in Persius' satiric programme has long been detected. My article moves further to consider the 'asexuality' of the ear(s) in Satire 1, while it completes the picture with the 'mimetic' acoustic dimension of the Prologue. In the Prologue, the poetasters of the contemporary literary scene find themselves in the state of a passive listener, not any different from talking-mimicking birds (parrots and magpies) duplicating exactly what they hear. Venal poets write for a living, so they are 'all ears' in order to fill their bellies. In an analogous way, the ear is also the medium for the reception of ethereal inspiration during an encounter with a divine inspirer. In Satire 1, the sensitivity of the ear(s) to being aroused by the sounds of poetry is crucial. To investigate this issue, I analyse a scene representing listeners driven to orgasm. The scene is almost pornographic; the muddle involves poetry together with sex. The sounds of poetry, conceived as an alternative erect penis, do not penetrate the ear(s) of the audience for they are either diseased or clogged, somehow, but rather, the audience's only open and receptive body orifice, which is their anus.

Keywords

Persius; Persius Prologue; Persius Satire 1; Roman satire; satire; ear; ears; inspiration; auditory imagery; metapoetic connotations

1. Introduction

Persius' satiric programme is (in)famously ear-conscious. A sign of this is the plethora of references – whether explicit or not – to the ear(s) in the Prologue and Satire 1: from ears that are either diseased or clogged, somehow (e.g. sound-copying ears, 'unorgasmic' ears, asinine ears, tender little ears, ears readily open to flattery, ears which prefer to be deaf to any kind of moral incrimination), through less conventional types of ears, such as the hole where Persius will whisper his satiric secret, to the much-needed cleansed ear of Persius' acceptable audience. In these and other instances,[1] including above all else the key issue of hearership, inextricably bound up with the ear(s), the ear(s)-motif enables a metapoetic reflection on the degree of hearing capacity and its relationship to both poetry making and audience response.

The present article aims to hear the 'lost' sounds of Persius' satiric programme, seeking the missing piece of the auditory imagery of the Prologue and Satire 1. My purpose is to suggest fresh emphasis on the striking otic undertones of the Prologue that may lead to a more satisfying appreciation. In particular, I shall illuminate the ear(s)-images which inform (especially) its latter part, and, perhaps, read them as yet another argument for the close affinity between the Prologue and Satire 1, so generally acknowledged in every other respect. I also believe that the 'orgasmic' section of Satire 1 (vv.15–21) stands in need of more careful appraisal, and it is my purpose to discuss the 'sexual impotence' of the ear(s), and the metapoetic potentials that arise therefrom.

2. The mimetic ear(s)

A prime example an allusion to the ear(s) aims directly at the composition of poetry can be found in the Prologue.[2] The choliambic preface to the Satires is a complex riddle operating on several levels at once, to be sure, but there is no need here to particularise every individual detail – material already sufficiently well known.[3]

1 Such categories do not exhaust the possible variety of allusions to the ear(s) in both Persius' programmatic preface and the entire body of the Satires, but give helpful reference points for thinking about the ways in which the ear(s) acquires additional meanings besides the obvious sensory one.

2 I take the introductory choliambics to form a preface to the Satires; regardless of how they have been published, they express Persius' conception of his satire and are therefore prefatory in nature, see Dessen (1996: p. 17, n. 6). It is not known whether these fourteen choliambics that accompany Persius' six Satires originally preceded or followed the Satires. In one branch of the manuscript tradition represented by P they are omitted and added as a prologue by a second hand one hundred years after the first. The choliambics are placed at the beginning by most editors: e.g. Clausen (1956). The other branch of the manuscript tradition represented by A and B exhibits the choliambics after the Satires. Among the critics who accept this position are: Conington (1893); more recently, Marmorale (1956). See also the discussion of Clausen (1963).

3 The Prologue comprises an enigmatic poem, and numerous attempts at interpretation have indeed succeeded in giving keys which unlock certain difficulties in it. I can name here only some of the many scholars who have dealt with the Prologue: Witke (1962); Harvey (1981: pp. 9–12); Lee and Barr (1987); Dessen (1996: pp. 15–23); Reckford (2009: pp. 52–55). For other aspects of the Prologue (date, authenticity,

(Prologue)[4]
Nec fonte labra prolui caballino
nec in bicipiti somniasse Parnaso
memini, ut repente sic poeta prodirem.
Heliconidasque pallidamque Pirenen
illis remitto quorum imagines lambunt 5
hederae sequaces; ipse semipaganus
ad sacra vatum carmen adfero nostrum.
quis expedivit psittaco suum "chaere"
picamque docuit nostra verba conari?
magister artis ingenique largitor 10
venter, negatas artifex sequi voces.
quod si dolosi spes refulserit nummi,
corvos poetas et poetridas picas
cantare credas Pegaseium nectar.[5]

"I neither cleansed my lips in the nag's spring nor recall dreaming on twin-peaked Parnassus so as to emerge an instant poet. The Heliconians and pale Pirene I leave to people with their statues licked by clinging ivy. It's as a half-caste that I bring my song to the bards' rites. Who equipped the parrot with his 'Hello' and taught the magpie to attempt human speech? It was that master of expertise, that bestower of talent, the belly – an expert at copying sounds denied by nature. Just let the prospect of deceitful money gleam and you'd think raven poets and poetess magpies were chanting the nectar of Pegasus."

The Prologue falls neatly into two complementary parts,[6] the link between them being the theme of poetic inspiration: divine and monetary, respectively. In the first half (vv.1–7), Persius disclaims the outmoded *topoi* of ethereal inspiration (i.e. drinking from a holy spring or falling asleep in a divine location and receiving an initiatory dream) – metaphors so often employed by poets –[7] and, by so doing, he distinguishes himself

unity, imagery, purport) see: Pretor (1907); Knoche (1957); Miller (1986: pp. 159ff). In regard to Persius' self-description as *semipaganus*, Wehrle (1992), and Brugnoli (2004) are especially relevant. Moretti (2001) holds that v.7 (*ad sacra vatum carmen adfero nostrum*) alludes programmatically to satire's etymology as *satura lanx*. For metrical-stylistic observations, see Tartari Chersoni (2003).

4 I follow the Loeb text and translation of Braund (2004).

5 In the manuscript tradition, the *varia lectio* 'melos' also appears as the last word of the last verse. On this, see the detailed analysis of Paratore (1964); also, Brugnoli (2004: pp. 106–107); Reckford (1962: p. 503, n. 1): "*Nectar* is apparently an exaggeration of the usual, expected *mel*."

6 Harvey (1981: p. 9); Reckford (2009: p. 53). For further (sub)divisions, see Tartari Chersoni (2003: pp. 271–272).

7 The motif of the poet on Helicon (or dreaming he is there) receiving from divine sources his initiation as a poet occurs at Hesiod, *Theog*. 22–34; Callimachus, *Aetia* i frag. 2; Ennius, *Annales* 5–6 (V^2); Virgil, *Eclog*. 6.64–73; Propertius, III.3. Harvey (1981: p. 10, *ad 2–3*): "Persius' allusion contains two puzzling details: the idea of 'dreaming on' the mountain of the Muses; and the use of Parnassus for Helicon. No poet claims to have fallen asleep on Helicon and had a dream there. Callimachus and Propertius merely say they dreamed they were on Helicon. But O. Skutsch, *Studia Enniana*, 126, suggests that Ennius may have

from both the famous names in Greek literature and their early Roman imitators – all long since canonised and dead –[8] associated with these symbols;[9] in addition, Persius implicitly attacks their successors, who slavishly copy those models and specialise in topics that, by Persius' time, have become trite to the point of meaninglessness.[10] Cut off from commonplaces, the satirist admits to taking a different stance on poetic issues by his introverted diffidence, which finds expression in his self-sufficient 'semipaganism'. If, then, the first five and one-half verses function as a repudiation of past literary tradition as continued by Persius' contemporaries, the last seven verses define the real motivator of poetry of the satirist's own day.[11] In the second half (vv.8–14), by attributing the origin of poetry to the belly's desire, Persius stands against the practices of the contemporary hack poetasters who write for a living; he thus counters airy ideas of the origin of poetry with down-to-earth, utilitarian, ones.[12]

Let us start from the end and unravel backwards, towards the beginning. The second half of the Prologue has received much critical attention in recent years, but most of it has concentrated on the alleged effect hunger has on poetry. Much which professes to come from inspiration, has really a more basic, corporeal, source: the belly's urge (*venter*, v.11), Persius seems to be saying; poets write to fill their bellies.[13] Many scholars have rightly taken this version of the common idea that hunger (or poverty, in general) stimulates poetic activity as having more or less latent corporeal import. Up to this point I can agree. My contention, though, is that the belly is not the only body-part involved in the

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dreamed of Homer while asleep on Helicon. If so, Persius could be referring to Ennius. However, it seems more likely that Persius is not referring to a single poet but instead attempting to embrace the general tradition of inspiration by the Muses and inspiring dreams. The result is a recognisable conflation of two ideas, 'I do not remember being on Helicon' (like Hesiod), and 'I do not remember dreaming I was on Helicon' (like Callimachus and Propertius), cf.1.116–18. That Persius does not have a particular poet in mind is further suggested by *Parnaso*. Ennius may have spoken of Parnassus rather than Helicon..., but Parnassus as the mountain of inspiration is not attested until Virg. *Georg*. III.291. In all probability, 'dreaming on Parnassus' is Persius' own contribution to inspirational convention." Also, Miller (1986: pp. 160–161).

8 Persius conceives of the poets of the past as 'vates' (in the sense of 'divinely inspired poet' who writes in the high style), as opposed to the humbler 'poeta'. See *OLD* s.v. vates. The importance of the 'vates' concept in Persius' satires has been acknowledged by Zietsman (1988).

9 Dessen (1996: p. 18): "Persius rejects Hippocrene, Helicon, Parnassus, and Pirene not simply because they are traditional sources of inspiration but, much more importantly, because they are Greek sources." Moreover, the understated *memini*, in its assumption that one could forget such a vision as Ennius' of Homer, is highly ironic. A further touch of irony emerges when it is realised that the poet has here deliberately given the appearance of not knowing, and hence of not caring about, the details of Ennius' important dream. In keeping with this, Persius goes so far as to allude to Hippocrene as *fonte caballino* and by referring contemptuously to Pirene as *pallida*. Add to which, to conflate the *topoi* and their variations is itself a statement akin to contempt. It is Greek domination in Latin letters that Persius is making the object of assault. On this, see Korfmacher (1933). Also, Miller (2010).

10 Dessen (1996: pp. 18–19).

11 Witke (1962: p. 154).

12 Reckford (1962: p. 502).

13 Reckford (2009: p. 54): "Actually, this notion has an honorable lineage: in Hesiod, when the Muses address him and his fellow-shepherds teasingly as 'mere bellies'; and in Homer, when Odysseus speaks, comically and humbly, of the belly's constraints." On the force of 'γαστέρες οἶον' at *Theogony*, see e.g. Katz & Volk (2000).

process which is implied. In fact, I think that it is because of the ear's workings that the belly can ultimately be filled. Refer verses 8–11 to the ear(s) and all becomes clear. These verses, as we shall see, read as a direct comment on a certain sound-related business of poetry making in Persius' time.

At verses 8–11, Persius compares the poetasters of his generation unflatteringly to parrots and magpies (and shortly after, to ravens) founding the analogy on the shared features of mimicry and cacophony. The sonic environment that emerges from verse 8 onwards seems to give itself as a response to a considerably plausible aural interpretation of the passage. "Who equipped the parrot with his 'Hello' and taught the magpie to attempt human speech? It was that master of expertise, that bestower of talent, the belly – an expert at copying sounds denied by nature". 'The belly's desire even furnishes a substitute for inspiration, pushing would-be poets to efforts beyond their natural ability', seems to be the uncomplimentary gloss of *negatas artifex sequi voces*.[14] There are two poles of thought here: one is that of poetry seen as a product of mimesis, the other that of the dipole *ars* – *ingenium*. On the one hand, there is the parrot's and magpie's imitative utterance – and so (it would seem) poetic utterance in general –, on the other hand, there is the poetic ambition and achievement against the background of one's nature.

The contrast between genuine *ingenium* and acquired *ars* seems to be of more than a passing concern to Persius. The juxtaposition of 'ars' and 'ingenium' in verse 10 (*magister artis ingenique largitor*)[15] implies that the boundaries between τέχνη and φύσις can, under certain circumstances, be blurred, shaping the poetaster's output accordingly. Particularly interesting are also the words 'artifex' and 'negatas' here (v.11), as they together impose the idea that *ars* can easily replace what nature denies. Persius insinuates that the venal poetasters attempt works that are far beyond the range of their experience and ability, something that perverts the prerequisite of *ingenium*. The belly teaches them to grind out poetry just as it teaches parrots and magpies to ape human speech. But is it solely the belly? Answer the question too quickly and you will have stripped the vignette of much of its power and uniqueness. The complexity decreases once we answer the question that is now on our lips: how would it be possible for the parrots and the magpies to attempt human speech if not by listening to and then aping sounds? Poetry is basically mimetic.[16] There is a large element of parroting in it, mechanical repetition.[17] Persius obliquely describes a method based on hearing and mimicking: the overly imitative or even plagiaristic poetasters miss the point of truly creative originality, much as parrots are taught to (unconsciously) repeat dictated human speech. It is a kind of didactic *ars* that, I suggest, is to be understood here – enhanced by the verbs 'expedio', 'doceo', and 'sequor'. The mimicking birds, just like their poet-counterparts, owing to their ability to follow and mechanically repeat even "voices naturally denied", are 'all ears' in order to fill their bellies.

14 Miller (1986: p. 162).

15 Harvey (1981: p. 12, *ad loc.*): *ingenique largitor* is an oxymoron, since *ingenium* is innate, not achieved.

16 Cf. Horace *Epistles* I.3.18–20, applies to a plagiarist friend the fable of the crow and the borrowed plumage; the crow being a plagiarist in the fable.

17 Reckford (1962: p. 502).

Such are some of the considerations that may help our understanding of the role of the ear(s) when it comes to inspiration, of which monetary inspiration forms but a part. Before arriving at any conclusion, it is necessary to examine also the first half of the Prologue to see if the ear is the medium for the reception of divine inspiration too. For if it is reasonable to surmise that poetry is mastered through the ear(s) alone in the case of the bird-poets, the analogy between the two types of inspiration becomes a natural association to make. On this account, I further venture to argue – hoping that my approach does not require a great deal of hyper-interpretation and of filling in what is not expressly stated in the opening 3 lines of the Prologue – that the initiation hinted at in *nec in bicipiti somniasse Parnaso* (v.2) is equated with a hearing process, much like its birdy analogue. During the course of an encounter with a prospective poet, the divine inspirer imparts literary material most likely by appealing to the poet's ear(s), for the lofty instructions to be drilled into the recipient's mind. The process involves at least a minimum of active response on the part of the poet, the derivative character of the end product, i.e. the poetry composed, though, reveals the ear to be an instrument rather passive than active, perceiving merely an external acoustic stimulus without contributing in any manner to its production, transmission, and evaluation. Poetry is conceived through a direct hearing experience, while 'repente' includes the idea that one can be suddenly and immediately granted the gift of poetry. In verse 3, we can detect, in the sarcastic *ut repente sic poeta prodirem*, an allusion to an almost instantaneous 'transformation'. So far as we can judge from the vulgarly mixed version of the Poet's Calling, as it is represented by Persius, those (supposedly) initiated by a deity learn and then faithfully reproduce a 'lesson' suddenly thus making their entrance as poets. Persius rejects this type of inspiration too, for the idea of a supernatural initiation creating poets instantaneously ignores the criterion of *ars*.

Persius leaves it ambiguous whether this class of poets has any literary skills at all, and whether one occasion of divine inspiration has short-time or constant effects on their work. An important follow-up question, then, is: what exactly does a divinity bestow? Tools to be developed by a poet in order to fulfil his potential – something that requires at least some qualifications to be built upon – or ready-made topics and techniques to be just copied, whereby the poet seems to be relieved from the necessity of making any effort himself? While we cannot be sure about either the duration or the impact (both quantitative and qualitative) of a suggestion given by inspiration of god, nor about the extent of abilities a wanna-be poet might have possessed before engaging in divine inspiration, what we can say with relative certainty is that Persius' scornful attitude towards this very type of inspiration indicates that the poets tend to rely utterly on their source. Besides, the whole notion of inspiration entails artistic deficiency.

Apart from its role in the composition of poetry, the role of the ear(s) in the reception of poetry is also dealt with in the Prologue – Satire 1 will address the issue further. The last three verses of the Prologue are somewhat nonsensical: *quod si dolosi spes refulserit nummi, / corvos poetas et poetridas picas / cantare credas Pegaseium nectar*.[18] I am tempted to

18 Harvey (1981: p. 9): "A question-mark at the end of 14 looks to be correct, since this punctuation alone makes 8–14 meaningful. The full stop unanimously adopted by edd. causes chaos, reducing the second

linger here for a moment, because the complexity of these verses is not justified solely by their apparent, visual, significance; I will also extract acoustic points of significance, which are invariably glossed over. Most obviously, verses 12–14 hit the audience, whose judgment proves erroneous, if not corrupt. Just flash a coin and instantly critics become as corrupt as venal poets, and for the same reason. The charge of bribery latent at verses 8–11 is now made explicit. Persius incapacitates the critical faculties of the audience, whose aesthetic judgement is dependent not on literary criteria, but on the dictates of the stomach. So, the gleam is on the eyes of the critics. The joke is partly on the glitter of deception, insofar as the dulled sight has no power of discrimination, but it is also, and most importantly, on hearing. Ravens are famous for their bad voice; *poetae* and *poetridae* – in a way – 'croak' too. By making a curious address to a shadow 'you' in the prominent last verse, Persius actually says 'credas' (= "you would think"),[19] which in our case can be perceived as an equivalent to "you would hear" crow poets and poetess magpies chanting the nectar of Pegasus.[20] It follows, then, that the prospect of money seems to have a serious impact on the ear(s) of the audience too, for it might lead the critic genuinely to mistake crow-poets for true ones, their cawing for real distillation of 'Pegaseian nectar'.[21]

3. The non-erogenous ear(s)

Persius starts his first Satire by rejecting the current standards of assessing poetry. The reason? Rome's critical scales are out of balance; everyone displays very poor literary taste and opinion. Persius' view rests as much on artistic as on moral considerations, since in attacking false standards of criticism, he touches upon a social disease too.[22] If so, what place is then left for the implied audience of satire to stand? The fact that at the opening of Satire 1 Persius appears to voice a preference for a very small or non-existent readership for his work ('maybe two people, maybe no one', 1–3) causes no particular difficulty, once we are familiar with the independence and isolationism he has already established in the Prologue; we see it in his sense of writing for himself, and again in his

half of the poem to lameness and extreme obscurity. ... 12–14 as a statement is unintelligible. It suggests that money turns a bad poet into a good one, while *credas* (14), 'you would suppose', is not merely otiose but positively intrusive. Further, the obvious link between *picam* (9) and *picas* (13) can only be realised with 12–14 as a question." Wehrle (1992: pp. 59–60, n. 15): In punctuating the end of verse 14 with a question-mark, he follows Harvey; "Despite most editors' preference for the full stop here, the question mark seems to yield the better sense, since the 'belief' implied would be both incredible and absurd."

19 Reckford (1962: p. 503, n. 1): "Grammatically, the object of *credas* is of course *corvos poetas et poetridas picas*. But Persius is borrowing ... from Hor., Ep. 1,19,44, *fidis enim manare poetica mella*, where the subject of *manare* is the same as that of *fidis* and so (as in Greek) left unexpressed. The subject of Persius' *cantare* is therefore poetically, if not grammatically ambiguous."

20 *LSJ* (s.v. νέκταρ). Harvey (1981: p. 12, *ad loc.*): *nectar* metaphorical for poetry occurs at Pind. *Ol.* VII.7–9, Theocr. VII.82, but its combination with *cantare* is bold and incongruous. Wehrle (1992: p. 60), proposes an alternative interpretation of 'Pegaseium nectar' as 'poetry worthy of the gods' ears'.

21 Reckford (1962: p. 503).

22 The main emphasis is on the decline of poetry as reflective of moral decadence.

advice *nec te quaesiveris extra* (v.7).[23] Persius' (fictitious) interlocutor poses a serious question, though, that acquires new urgency under Nero: *quis leget haec?* (v.2).[24] Reckford is right to suggest that the answer to this first *quis*-question is presumably contained in the answer to the second, *nam Romae quis non...*,[25] broken off at line 8 and only completed at 121: *auriculas asini quis non habet?* Persius' syllogism is rather unorthodox to follow: Persius has to write satire, which, of course, requires an audience, but he has virtually no audience.[26] The riddle remains unsolved until the end of Satire 1, where Persius finally specifies his select – albeit still limited – readership. At the centre of the poem the satirist explains why he cannot but deny the common audience.

At verses 13–21, Persius takes us into the world of poetry writing and performance:

(Satire 1.13–21)
Scribimus inclusi, numeros ille, hic pede liber,
grande aliquid quod pulmo animae praelargus anhelet.
Scilicet haec populo pexusque togaque recenti 15
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 20
intrant et tremulo scalpuntur ubi intima versu.

"We shut ourselves away and write some grand stuff, one is verse, another in prose, stuff which only a generous lung of breath can gasp out. And of course that's what you will finally read to the public from your seat on the platform, neatly combed and in your fresh toga, all dressed in white and wearing your birthday ring of sardonyx after you have rinsed your supple throat with a liquid warble, in a state of enervation with your orgasmic eye. Then, as the poetry enters their backsides and as their inmost parts are tickled by verse vibrations, you can see huge Tituses quivering, both their respectable manner and their calm voice gone."

23 This philosophical position on the value of interiority and introspection has a direct corollary in Persius' attitude toward the entire contemporary economy of poetic appreciation. Bartsch (2015: p. 125). Harvey (1981: p. 16, *ad loc.*): *nec te quaesiveris extra* looks to be deliberately ambiguous. If *extra* is taken as a preposition, the sense is, 'do not ask the opinion of anyone except yourself', i.e. rely on your own judgement of literature. With *extra* as an adverb, the words mean 'do not seek self-knowledge from the outside world'. A transference of γνῶθι σεαυτόν to literary worth is entailed. Also, Ramage (1979: p. 140).

24 On the Lucilian and/or Lucretian influences of the verse, see Harvey (1981: pp. 13–14, *ad loc*). Also, Freudenburg (2009: pp. 199–202); Sosin (1999).

25 Commentators often see this phrase as a deliberate scheme on the part of Persius for safe-guarding himself against a by no means impossible vengeance. Pretor (1907: p. 73): "the words 'quis non?' took the place of 'Mida rex' at the suggestion of Cornutus, who feared the consequences of so direct an allusion." Also, Sullivan (1978).

26 Reckford (2009: pp. 20, 49).

To show graphically why and how literature is performed in his time, Persius depicts a typical poetry recitation as if it were a sex show in which the audience is brought to orgasm. Part of the richness of the vignette I focus on here resides in the fact that the realities of performance and reception point towards particular bodily functions that work to build both the reciter's and the audience's pleasure, creating a feeling of sexual excitement. As earlier, – in the Prologue, Persius associates poetry with food to suggest its physical appeal to an appetite of the body: the belly's craving for food – Persius reduces the *recitatio* to its lowest physical denominator. What does it take to be a poet nowadays? It requires great lung capacity to puff and pant over some great stuff, to begin with. Still more, the poet gives his reading after washing his agile throat out with a liquid modulation. Nor is this all; performance has become an exercise in self-display and self-advertisement: the physical perfection of the poet-performer is prioritised over the substance of poetry itself. What matters more is the right hair-do, the right clothes, the right accessories. The particular writer whom Persius addresses with *leges* ('you will read', v.17) is neatly combed, dressed in a fresh white toga, and is wearing a sardonyx-birthstone ring,[27] so prominently displayed, while perched on a high throne. By portraying the reciter as a dandified homosexual, Persius insinuates that wantonness and effeminacy of character are likely to engender a smooth and effeminate literary style.[28] With this description, not only does Persius sum up partly the literary degeneracy of the age of Nero, but he also warms the audience (both internal and external) for the main, erotic, scene that is to come. Accordingly, as we will see below, the audience's enthusiastic reception of the performance is described in terms of perverse sexuality.

According to Persius, poetry recitations have reached a very debasing state, as they have turned into nothing more than spectacles aiming at striking the audience's eye(s). I insist on the visual inputs for two reasons. First, they make the audience aware of the performability of poetry and the kinds of meaning poetry acquires through performance. And second, they highlight the discrepancy between the visual and the oral/aural dimension of poetry reading. The emphasis on the poet who cares a great deal about his physical appearance, as well as his seat aloft, allowing an interactive all-seeing and all-seen view, is indicative of Persius' intention to represent a typical poetry recitation as a visual experience par excellence. Vision dominates. The same optic logic is also seen in the way in which Persius directs his readership, taken as a single or singular individual, to step back and regard the scene critically and dispassionately: *tunc ... videas* (= 'Then you might see' or 'Then one could see', v.19).[29] Persius actually prompts us to zoom in on somewhere specific, and see 'enormous Tituses wriggling once the poems penetrate their inmost parts and they are fingered intimately by the tremulous verse'. This very audience-engagement technique appeals to our eye and incites them to react. Again, vision is privileged over hearing.

27 For further analysis, see Bramble (1974: pp. 72ff.).

28 Harvey (1981: p. 21, *ad loc*). Also, Dessen (1996: pp. 23–26).

29 Reckford (2009: p. 40).

At verses 19–21, the satirist's gaze turns from the fop reciter to the outlandish enthusiasm of his audience. After narrating in outline the present state of poetry writing and performance in Rome, Persius concentrates, with a surprise twist, on what seems to be the core of the problem, since it turns out that the ears of the audience are either unreceptive or unable to hear; they are clogged in some way, and thus 'unorgasmic', as opposed to the lecherous, 'orgasmic' glance of the reciter (*patranti ocello*, 21).[30] For although the reciter manages to please his audience by flattering their eyes with superficial attractiveness of manner and style, he cannot, paradoxically enough, please their ears as well. The poetry reading is eroticised to the point of sexual intercourse until orgasm is reached: as mentioned in passing above, the poetry enters the backsides of hulking 'hearers' (*cum carmina lumbum / intrant*, 20–21)[31] and as their inmost parts are tickled by verse vibrations they start quivering.[32] Although this scene has been read in a variety of ways, I would argue that it is especially the medium through which the transaction between poet-performer and audience takes place that produces anal sex effects to compensate for non-auditory effects, the acoustic emissions notwithstanding. In fact, I think that the 'closed ears' pattern that emerges – though the point emerges only by implication here – is closely connected with the punch line *auriculas asini quis non habet?* (v.121), to which it provides a background perspective about the inept Roman audience. Therefore, the role and significance of the (closed) ear(s), when considered in this very sexual context, is worth looking at in more detail.

In the foregoing discussion, vision has emerged as a major weapon in the arsenal of performing. And quite reasonably so. The first attraction depends solely on the poet's looks. There is the sexual invitation, followed by the response to the initial eye contact between poet-performer and audience. But the scene, as it moves quickly from non-verbal to verbal communication, does not limit itself, reassuringly, to its visual dynamics. As the poetry is being recited it makes its erotic entrance not into the ear(s), as we might have expected, but into the intimate lower regions, arousing sturdy citizens to a quasi-orgiastic quivering.[33] In practice, we notice a total absence – indeed, a notable one – of the ear(s), the proper organ of hearing, and in our case, the direct medium of poetry reception. What we have is a sexual arousal caused by poetry instead of a normal, acoustic, response. In my view, Persius provides an image which illustrates the underlying diseased condition of the ear(s) of the contemporary Roman audience. The ears of the (internal or/and external) audience are clogged, asinine – as revealed later in Satire 1 –, and thus unreceptive. Therefore, if my interpretation is correct, it is not far-fetched to infer that the sound of poetry, conceived as an alternative erect penis, penetrates the only body orifice which is open and receptive, that is the anus. In literal sense, the anal

30 Freudenburg (2009: p. 212): the 'ejaculating eye' metaphor refers not to an orgasm generally, but to a sexual climax. Also, Bramble (1974: pp. 76ff.).

31 For 'lumbus' in sexual contexts, see Adams (1990: pp. 48, 92). For the sexual desire of the male located in the *lumbi*, see *Schol. Pers.* 1.20.

32 For further analysis, see Bramble (1974: pp. 78ff.); Miller (2009: pp. 335–337).

33 Reckford (2009: pp. 40–41).

orgasm is the climax of sexual ecstasy. In metaphorical sense, it is a proof that this type of poetry has won public recognition and approval.[34]

4. Conclusions

The literary-critical force of the ear(s)-motif in Persius' satiric programme has long been detected. My article moves further to consider the 'asexuality' of the ear(s) in Satire 1, while it completes the picture with the 'mimetic' acoustic dimension of the Prologue. In the Prologue, the venal poetasters of the contemporary literary scene find themselves in the condition of a passive listener, not any different from talking-mimicking birds duplicating exactly what they hear. Nothing but mere sterile repetition, drawn from an adequate bodily urge. In an analogous way, the ear is the medium for the reception of divine inspiration too. In Satire 1, the sensitivity of the ear(s) to become aroused by the sounds of poetry is crucial. To investigate this issue, I analyse an almost pornographic scene representing listeners driven to orgasm. The sound of poetry, conceived as an alternative erect penis, does not penetrate the ears of the audience, for they are either diseased or clogged, somehow, but rather, the only body orifice which is open and receptive, that is their anus.

I intend in this article to probe into some aspects of the key metaphor of the 'diseased ear(s)' in Persius. Ear(s)-disease has various manifestations; here I deal with the mimicking and the sexual blockage, which pertain to both the poetry making/performance and the audience response sector. In each of these cases, it has to be noted, there is no direct mention of the ear(s), the metapoetic connotations are, nevertheless, acoustic in origin. While my reading of the Prologue and Satire 1 does not claim to be definitive, it does unite the satiric programme of Persius by the ear(s)-axis.

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34 Freudenburg (2009: pp. 215–221), argues that the pleasure is not mutually satisfying.

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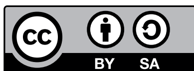

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