

Literary Captation: Authorial Anxiety in Horace, *Serm.* 2.5

Horace *Serm.* 2.5 introduces the idea of legacy-hunting as a viable way of life, and in fact gives the practice its metaphorical name (borrowed from fishing and snaring): “captation.” Presenting a dialogue between Odysseus and Tiresias in the Underworld, this poem proposes a satiric continuation of the interaction between the mythological pair in Book 11 of the *Odyssey*. Odysseus, aware that his fortunes have been much diminished in his absence by his wife’s suitors, asks Tiresias for advice on recovering his wealth. Tiresias advises him to make a living by flattering childless old men and outlines the methods for doing so, summing up at 23-4: *captes astutus ubique / testamenta senum*. Odysseus is appalled by the concept of ingratiating himself to his inferiors, but Tiresias persists, taking over the dialogue and offering evidence in support of his crass practical solution to the hero’s problem.

This paper suggests a reading of the concept of *captatio* in *Serm.* 2.5 as an ambivalent metaphor that expresses anxiety about the Roman poet’s role as an heir of his revered Greek predecessors. While the argument is focused on this particular poem, other particularly notable programmatic poems of the Horatian corpus (namely *Odes* 2.20 and 3.30) will provide context for the issue. These other poems, interested as they are in similar themes, particularly death and the possibility of immortality through poetry, help us to understand the conflict presented in *Serm.* 2.5. Tiresias’ advice can be seen to represent the practical yet unsavory mode of literary “survival” through the utilization of reverend poetic predecessors, and this fraught impulse is highlighted by the use of the Homeric hero Odysseus to express the danger of debasing the ancient material.

Elsewhere in the *Sermones* the poet outlines his own approach to the genre of satire (particularly vis-à-vis Lucilius), but it is this unique mythological dialogue that perhaps most poignantly expresses Horace's struggle to manage the burden of his esteem for his predecessors and his desire to create his own art in the shadow of the great Greek poets. The *Odes* offer a more developed and directly articulated perspective on this issue, which proved to be a compelling and productive concern throughout the poet's career.