

## The Sound of Silence: Horace's "Leaky Ear" in the *Satires*

The Latin title of Horace's *Satires* is *Sermones* ("conversations"), which emphasizes the dialogic framework of satiric discourse between poetic persona, interlocutor, and audience. Yet, as Suzanne Sharland observes, "little attention has been given to the *Satires* precisely *as conversations*" (2009: 3). In dialogue, we expect an interlocutor's sense of hearing to figure prominently in their role as "speaker" and "listener." However, Horace places his eponymous poetic persona in the position of a passive "listener" (*auditor*) in the dialogue-heavy poems of the *Satires* (1.9, 2.6, and 2.7). Following a growing body of scholarship on the readable senses in ancient literature (Butler and Purves 2014; Toner 2014; Bradley 2015), this paper argues that Horace's *Satires* on the whole emphasizes forms of sense perception, whereby listening with the ears takes precedence over speech articulated with the mouth. However, the persona's capacity to take on the role of listener is undermined by his defective ears, which ultimately calls into question the role of the satirist in his own poetry.

Horace, ostensibly the architect and primary "speaker" of his own satire, fashions a poetic persona who tacitly listens to all those around him. Speech becomes a negative force within the *Satires* that places the persona in the role of a passive and perpetual *auditor* – subject to the demands of his position by the plurality of voices that surround him. In *S.* 2.7, slave Davus utilizes his "December freedom" (4) to criticize his master, Horace, for his slavish deference to patron Maecenas. The persona silently listens even as Davus voices both sides of the dialogue: '*liber, liber sum*' *dic, age: non quis* ("Come on, say it: 'Free. I'm free.' You can't," 92). In *S.* 2.6, Horace's persona is bombarded by a cacophony of business and work demands (32-9) and questions from those who believe he is in the confidence of the great men in Rome, like Octavian and Maecenas (49-53). In response, Horace's persona provides only curt

responses to his interlocutors, claiming to know “nothing at all” (*nil equidem*, 53). Additionally, the persona cannot get a word in during a chance meeting with a loquacious pest on the Via Sacra (*S.* 1.9). Rather, Horace expresses his persona’s discomfort through body language: he sweats profusely “to his very ankles” (10-11), rolls his eyes (65), and begins to “cast down my ears like an ass with a stubborn disposition” (*demitto auriculas, ut iniquae mentis asellus*, 21).

Throughout the *Satires*, Horace draws attention to ears in pivotal scenes to signify his persona’s apparently deficient communication skills and abjection. In Latin literature, the ass represents low pedigree, which in *S.* 1.9 above appropriately suggests the persona’s own humble origins as “the son of a freedman father” (1.6.45-6). The ass simile also fashions Horace’s persona as an object of abuse and impotence, an image that recalls Horace’s own cognomen, *Flaccus* (“floppy,” or “flop-eared,” Parker 2000: 455; Freudenburg 2001: 96-7). Additionally, in *S.* 1.6 the persona claims that although he is a man who has the *ear* of the most powerful men in Rome, he is unable to control his own “leaky ear” (*rimosa ... aure*, 46) – a periphrasis for his apparent lack of discretion. Horace’s untrustworthy, “leaky ear” is contrasted with Caesar Octavian’s “pricked ear” (*attentam ... aurem*) which may not always be receptive to “Floppy’s words” (*Flacci / verba per attentam non ibunt Caesaris aurem*, 2.1.18-19). Octavian’s sensitive ears, then, may prevent Horace from communicating his satire freely and without censorship.

Horace purposely places his persona in the subordinated role of an *auditor* to distance himself from the verbose satirist – like Horace’s predecessor, Lucilius – whose biting critique would “rub down the city with salt” (1.10.3-4). Horace manipulates the dialogic structure of his satiric “conversations” to voice multiple perspectives while extolling the brevity of his satiric aesthetics, encapsulated by the silent, “leaky-eared” persona. When it comes to the “pricked ears” of his attentive and scrutinizing audience, Horace’s eponymous persona exhibits verbal

caution – especially since his audience consists of Maecenas and Octavian, whose ears he wants to please most of all with his *sermones*.

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