THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE NARRATOR PERSONA IN HORACE`S SERMONES

Roxana Lazarescu
PhD., Konstanz University of Germany

Abstract:This article seeks to analyze the manner in which the satirist is creating a persona in order to attain a considerable level of influence in his contemporaneity. The satirist`s power to judge and to influence public opinion is to be sought in the construction of the satirical discourse. In this respect, the present article is seeking to analyze how Horace`s Sermones gain an authoritative and judging attitude by relating them with their audience and their patrons (or powerful men). The poetical attitude towards society and political power will be in accordance to the one sustained and promoted by Maecenas, as the patron of the literary circle created around the new sovereign, Octavian Augustus. Satires are gaining sufficient notoriety and influence over its audience (mainly by their capacity to provoke, irritate and incense), in order for Horace not to make use of this discursive technique and develop a persuasive political ideology. In Horace`s works, the literary persona is constructed in accordance with the new political regime of Octavian Augustus which puts his satirical works in a niche between critical, protestant attitude and panegyric content. The ethical and moral aspects are intertwined with the political one, creating the opportunity not only to display a social mirror of the satirist`s acceptance, but to propagate the new imperial ideology. Consequently, the paper seeks to analyze Horace`s methods of constructing a judging, authoritative and powerful attitude through its literary persona.

Keywords: Horace, satire, literary persona, political power, influencer

Horace, member of Maecena`s literary circle, had a complex experience as writer, which permitted him to create and develop multiple discursive techniques, throughout which we distinguish his satires as a literary genre that has been approached in order to influence public opinion. In this respect, literature can be considered *un espace de communication* that has the power to persuade and shape the audience`s opinions and feelings. A certain level of similarity can be observed between the writers who had adhered to Maecena`s literary circle – a circle that coagulated around the personality of the new princeps (*in persona of* Octavian Augustus), but Horace distinguishes himself by the use of satire. In his hypostasis of satirist, Horace tried to gain affirmation if we consider that he made use of a genre that wasn`t too much used in that moment, and had been a literary genre that was implemented and developed by the Romans, and alsohad a big impact on its public. The importance of personal, auctorial, influence represents one of the main issues that had to be reached in its literary works, if we regard to the imperial literature as a whole propaganda machine. Consequently, Horace`s satires must be observed and interpreted by their contextualization: historically, poetically, and socially. In accordance with all of these three aspects, Horace is building a public, literary persona.

The social aspects that may have had sought to accomplish by Horace could only remain a fragile hermeneutical speculation, mainly due to the lack of a personal written memoir or specific mentions of his private life. All that it is known comes from Horace`s own literary works, from which we can only guess if it was a private acceptance or a well pointed ideological usage. By the use of personal examples, a literary text has the capacity of being more convincing. Consequently, by considering the political ideology from that period, we may assume which was Horace`s

BDD-A29531 © 2019 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:57:32 UTC)

intention. This could only by an assumption, if we look upon to the genre that was chosen by the author[1]. Satire may not have been regarded and written as it is in modern literature, but for sure it had the power and capacity, through its hilarious remarks, to hide some personal, not otherwise accepted ideas. To identify all the personal implications remains a fragile *espace d`interpretation* which conducts us to investigate the auctorial understanding of the political themes and the use of literary techniques in favor of its ideological appliance.

Horace`s *Iter Brundisinum* (Sermones I.V) could be considered one of the most relevant examples in this sense while it treatise a political subject, a social one and a personal one. Our historical sources confirm that Horace took part of three historic events (The Pact of Brundisium, 40 BC[2]; Maecenas` mission to Athens, 38 BC; The Peace of Tarentum, 37 BC), from which the one to Brundisium is chosen to be the subject of one of his satires, perhaps for the reason that it represents the great reconciliation[3] which was to result in the matrimony of Marc Antony and Octavia. From this rapprochement Octavian will gain public acceptance of its political practices and tactics, which may influenced Horace in his subject choosing. While composing the fifth satire, Horace might have had in mind Lucilius` exemplum (*Iter Siculum*) and might have fictionalized the journey by compressing two other historical events. In this *iter Brundisinum*, Horace suffered from sore eyes and dysentery – which may be considered a direct acceptance of his personal presence in this journey[4], but doesn`t assure us that he was actually there. In the space of fact and fiction in this fifth satire, the presence of the auctorial *persona* can be sought. Real facts are hard to identify, as Edward Gibbon[5] and other scholars have tried to track and measure Horace`s journey, but without reaching to a sharp conclusion. The statements and descriptions made by Horace`s literary persona could give birth to numerous hermeneutical speculations, in which some of the auctorial hypostasis can be identified: Horace as friend of power men (historical and political public position held by being in Maecena`s circle), Horace as observer of the Roman world (social observer), Horace as satirist (old and new/revived genre[6] in Latin literature). In the same order of ideas, E. Gibbon (Gibbon, 1796: 94) expresses his disappointment in satire while Horace is writing about the details of a journey, considered by the historian as without significant value, if we exclude the political, propagandistic elements. His lead of interpretation seems accurate in its speculated purpose: ``written to convince his enemies that his thoughts and occupations on the road were far from being of a serious or political nature`` (Gibbon, 1796: 94). Some clarifications can be noted for making the satirical porpoise clearer. One verse provides several meaning: *hic oculis ego nigra meis collyria lippus/ illinere* (Horace, I.V: 30-31). At a first reading we detect an assurance of Horace`s personal presence in *iter Brundisinum*, because of the recurrence of conjunctivitis in this type of journey. On the other hand, a more hidden, subversive, message can be identified at a speculative level. It resides in the political implication of the narrative *persona*. By observing the presence of sickness contextualized in the satire, we may be able to affirm that the narrative persona suffers from another type of incompetence, a socio-political one, more than a physical one. Firstly, his

[1] Satire in detriment of the other genres used by Horace: lyric, pastoral, elegy, ode, epigram.
[2] Appian, *The civil wars*, V.64 remembers that the delegates chosen to go Brundisium were Asinius Pollio – *amicus* of Marc Antony, Maecenas – confident of Octavian, and L. Cocceius Nerva – considered neutral. While comparing the two sources, Appian`s and Horace`s, we do not detect many differences. The only exception is that Asinius Pollio is not present, his place being taken by C. Fonteius Capito: *Interea Maecenas advenit atque/ Cocceius Capitoque simul Fonteius, ad unguem/ factus homo, Antoni non ut magis alter amicos.* (Horace, Sermones, I.V:31-33).
[3] The common goal was the war against Sextus Pompeius.
[4] Widu-Wolfgang Ehlers (1985, pp. 69-83) debates Horace`s presence into this journey.
[5] E. Gibbon, *Receuil de mes observations* in Lord Sheffied (ed.), *Miscellaneous Work of Edward Gibbon*, vol. III, Dublin, 1976.
[6] The satires of Horace are to be considered old genre because it follows Lucili exemplum, and new/ revived genre due to its poor usage in Latin Literature at the beginning of the Principate.

BDD-A29531 © 2019 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:57:32 UTC)

handicap is that he cannot have pertinent political and scribal abilities[7], as we can see from the method which is used for the satirical composition to be formed, more specifically through a comparison:

Huc venturus erat Maecenas optimus atque
Cocceius, missi magnis de rebus uterque
Legati, aversos soliti componere amicos
Hic oculis ego nigra meis collyria lippus
Illinere. (Horace, I. V: 27-31)

Secondly, the sore eyes are cured when the narrator sees the mountains of his childhood: *Incipit ex illo montes Apulia notos/ ostentare mihi, quos torret Atabulus et quos/ numquam erepsemus, nisi nos vicina Trivici* (Horace, I.V: 77-79). The relationship between narrator and author is here very tense and solid, mainly due to the connection that is made between present and past: Horace an existing member of Maecenas` literary circle, therefore part of the high society, and Horace as the son of a former slave[8] and later expropriated freedman[9]. In his personal situation there is no going back and no deep feelings to expose, only a tear in his eye and a spectra haunting his dreams (Horace, I.V: 82-85). The author`s only solution is to go straightforward and keep his membership as an Augustan writer. He is no Lucilius, as for him to be situated in a secure position[10], and he knows his limits, therefore the satire has an abrupt finalization: *Brundisimum longae finis chartaeque viaequest* (Horace, I.V: 104). An *ex abrupto* end intrigues the reader, because it seems that the journey became more interesting, but from another perspective, that of one in which Horace wins every point that he makes, the satirist has to put an end to his verses. The main reason seems to be satire`s impossibility to cross borders. There are places that he, as a writer, cannot take us[11]. To justify his lack, the satirist finishes the story-telling and makes use of personal criticism. Author`s failures and vices (among which we notice the carnal pleasure of having a hooker: *Sermones*, I.V: 82-85) are becoming a façade of personal, auctorial freedom limits.

Self-criticism is often used by Horace in his work[12] and it could be described as a discursive technique which is capable of serving useful and various purposes[13]. At the political level of the hermeneutical exegesis we can detect the presence of the auctorial, personal, intervention: Horace as a member of Maecenas` and Octavian`s circle who has the commitment to serve the purpose of its circle of friends. In this specific case, the satirist displays a self-critic attitude, accusing himself that he cannot be situated at the same level with some other pertinent politic figures, such as Cocceius or Fonteius:

Interea Maecenas advenit atque
Cocceiu Copitoque simul Fonteius, ad unguem
Factus homo, Antoni non ut magis alter amicus. (Horace, I.V: 31-33)

[7] Andrea Cucchiarelli shows that Horace`s *lippitudo* (conjunctivitis) has a similar history in Greek Old Comedy, where it symbolizes the political incapacity. The similarity is made in connection with the ``blear-eyes`` of Neoclides of Aristotle (*Eccl.* 395-407). The idea is sustained also by Kirk Freudenburg in *Satires of Rome*. p.54.

[8] Horace`s father was probably a Venutian who was taken captive by Roman in the Social War, which makes him a slave – even for a part of his life.

[9] His father was expropriated after Philippi, when Octavian decided to encourage the military life by giving properties to veterans.

[10] Lucilius dared to use a virulent and direct tone in his satires, in behalf of his social position: Roman citizen of the equestrian class and member of the Scipionic Circle.

[11] To be seen in contrast with the Lucilian example, a far more detailed description of a journey. Kirk Freudenburg (2004: 55-58), in his trying to justify Horace`s choice of ending the satire *ex abrupto*, argues that it may be a matter of high diplomacy and political issues to which Horace doesn`t have the position and power to assist and describe. In accordance, a limit to his freedom is set.

[12] Not only in satire, but also in his Epistles.

[13] In *Epicurean Ethics in Horace: The psychology of Satire*, Sergio Yona is sustaining the idea that the self-criticism in satire represents a use provided by the Stoics.

BDD-A29531 © 2019 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:57:32 UTC)

The critical attitude towards his incapacity to serve a high cause – a political and historical journey– must have been a method of excuse his moderate interventions. A similar incapacity is described in the programmatic satire of the second book of *Sermones*:

Caesaris invicti res dicere, multa laborum
Praemia laturus. ,,Cupidum, pater optime, vires
Deficient; neque enim quivis horrentia pilis
Agmina nec fracta pereuntes cuspide Gallos
Aut labentis equo describit vulnere Parthi.
,,Attamen et iustum poteras et scribere fortem,
Scipiadam ut sapiens Lucilius``. ,,Haud mihi dero,
Cum res ipsa feret: nisi dextro tempore Flacci
Verba per attentam non ibunt Caesaris aurem
Cui male si palpere, recalcitrat undique tutus.``
(Horace, II.I: 11-20)

Instead of describing military campaigns and offend the new Caesar, Horace is choosing to celebrate his achievements and qualities from a different perspective. Octavian is appreciated as an intelligent political man, *attamen et iustum potera et scribere fortem* (Horace, II.I: 16). The writer`s panegyric choice is minor, and also critical, at the limit of being an author `s form of protest against the new rule. Author`s objection is subtly transferred into the satirical discourse. In his recommendation for other writers, he introduces a critical perspective towards the image of Octavian: a man with an umbrageous and capricious character that has all the power in his hands. Therefore, a writer must be very careful not to upset him: *cui male si palpere, recalcitrant undique tutus* (Horace, II.I: 20). Having a capricious personality and total power could not be a desirable association, but he is also the military leader that restored the Roman state after the civil wars and must be appreciated for this. Satire V from the second book of *Sermones*, probably written after Actium (somewhere between 31-30 BC) presents also Octavian as a military leader: *iuvenis* and *magnus* (Horace, II.V:62, 64). Political language and themes are now mixed in the fictional world of satire where Tiresias predicts the future glory of Rome under the arms of Octavian. We cannot know with certainty if Horace truly believed in his own statements, since some contradictory positions are observed: Octavian is a good military person, but he is an adept of one-man rule – which could fell under the undesirable incidence of capricious behaviour. A discursive equilibrium is sought by Horace in his literary works. His narrative persona finds the best route to feign in a satirical construction. A complete detachment of his private life from his writings could not be made, as long as every written message has judicial power, but at least he has the freedom of writing satire, a subtle and intricate type of discourse. At the end of *Sermones* II.I, Horace emphasis the marshy ground on which a satirist is staying:

,,Equidem nihil hinc diffindere possum.
Sed tame nut monitus caveas, ne forte negoti
Incutiat tibi quid sanctarum inscitia legum:
Si mala condiderit in quem quis carmina, ius est
Iudiciumque`` (Horace, II.I: 79-83)

In other words, a satirist must be very careful with his words in order for him not to fall under the incidence of law – a law set in *Lex duodecim tabularum,* consequently a sacred one. Three main interpretation lines converge from the same Horatian sentence: 1. The Romans keep and respect their traditional laws, 2. The writer has judicial responsibility of his published ideas, 3. Satire had the power to influence public opinion[14].

[14] A closer approach to the judicial power of a written world, emphasizing Horatian satire, is made in the following article: *Roxana Lazarescu, Satire as an agent of social control in Ancient Roman culture. Lucilius and Horace* in Iulian Boldea (ed.), *Literature as Mediator. Intersecting Discourses and Dialogues in a Multicultural World*, Tîrgu Mureș, Mureș, 2018, pp. 284-289, therefore not largely debated here.

BDD-A29531 © 2019 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:57:32 UTC)

The use of satire, as a literary genre suitable for exposing Horace`s conceptions, could be also justified by considering it a convenient technique of gaining recognition (at a public and private level). Public acceptance and recognition is gained by the facile circulation of humor and invective. The following verses not only that they attest writer`s perception over satire, but they also indicate satire`s notorious usage, as it represents a source of fright for guilty persons[15]:

``Postquam Discordia taetra
Belli ferratos postes portasque refregit``,
Iuvenias etiam disiecti membra poetae.
Hactenus haec: alias iustum sit necne poema.
Nunc illud tantum quaeram, meritone tibi sit
Suspectum genus hoc scribendi. Sulcius acer
Ambulat et Caprius, rauci male cumque libellis,
Magnus uterque timor latronibus; at bene siquis
Et vivat puris manibus, contemnat utrumque. (Horace, I.IV: 60-68).

Horace`s use of satiric discourse demonstrates that a difference between narrative *persona* and the social figure of the author can be made. These variations are emphasizing the role of satire as an instrument of propagandistic ideology, in Horace`s case the glorification of Maecena and Octavian Augustus, even though some sharp critical remarks are to be discovered at a second hermeneutical level. Enclosed in these verses is to be found the double status of Horace: his position as public Roman author and his literary, narrative *persona*.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ehlers, Widu-Wolfgang, *Das `Iter Brundisium` des Horaz (Serm. 1.5)* in *Hermes*, 113. Bd. H.1 (1st Qtr., 1985), Franz Steiner Verlag, pp. 69-83. – http://www.jstor.org/stable/4476414 (22-01-2016).
Freudenburg, Kirk, *Satires of Rome. Threating Poses from Lucilius to Juvenal*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
Gibbon, Edward, *Receuil de mes observations* in Lord Sheffied (ed.), *Miscellaneous Work of Edward Gibbon*, vol. III, Dublin, 1976.
Horatius, *Opera Omnia*, 2. *Satire. Epistole. Arta Poetică*, ediție critică, ediție îngrijită, studiu introductiv, note și indici: Mihai Nichita, București: Editura Univers, 1980.
Lazarescu, Roxana, *Satire as an agent of social control in Ancient Roman culture. Lucilius and Horace* in Iulian Boldea (ed.), *Literature as Mediator. Intersecting Discourses and Dialogues in a Multicultural World*, Mureș: Tîrgu Mureș, 2018, pp. 284-289.
Mommsen, Theodor, *A history of Rome under the Emperors*. Based on the lecture notes of Sebastian and Paul Hensel, 1882-6, German edition by Barbara and Alexander Demandt, English translation by Claire Krojzl, edited, with the addition of a new chapter, by Thomas Wiedeman, London/ New York: Routledge, 1999.
Yona, Sergio, *Epicurean Ethics in Horace: The psychology of Satire*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.

[15] Who will fear a statement if it hasn`t the possibility to influence opinion and be notorious. I am stressing my point on the idea that a humorous message gains rapid recognition due to its captivating tone and composition.

BDD-A29531 © 2019 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:57:32 UTC)