THE POET PERSIUS, LITERARY AND SOCIAL CRITIC

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The Roman poet Aulus Persius Flaccus, who is the subject of this paper, was born in A.D. 34 towards the end of the reign of Tiberius and (if one may relate his chronology to better known events) about four years after the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. He lived through the reigns of Caligula (A.D. 37-41) and Claudius (A.D. 41-54) and into the reign of Nero. He was barely ten years old when the great invasion of Britain was organized under Claudius and was set in motion. He died young at the age of twenty-eight in A.D. 62, one year after the rebellion of Boadicea in Britain, and actually in the year when the Emperor Nero at the death of Burrus finally broke away from the guidance and restraint of Seneca, the philosopher-statesman, the other of the two counsellors who had ruled the Empire so temperately during the first half of his reign.

Persius was born at Volaterrae in Etruria some 150 miles north of Rome. His father, a wealthy Roman knight, died when Persius was a child, but his circumstances were always easy: he had a good home and was brought up in a family where virtue was honoured and where the lives and conduct of his people were blameless in an age of much moral degeneracy. He was privately educated up to the age of twelve, and was then taken to Rome for the normal courses of Roman education in literature and rhetoric. At the age of sixteen when he officially reached manhood and assumed the toga virilis, and, being his own master, inherited personal control of the patrimony his father had left him—at this point there took place what he affirms to have been the greatest event in his life: for he then proceeded to the highest stage of Roman education, the study of philosophy, and came

1 A lecture delivered in the Library series of public lectures.
under the tutorship and guidance of the eminent Stoic philosopher and teacher, Annaeus Cornutus, who inspired in him a profound admiration and affection, and from whom as a kind of spiritual director he learnt an ethical ideal and a standard of values which he acknowledges to have been the most potent and formative influence in his being. Both in the ancient world, and in the Middle Ages, and indeed among the few who read Persius in the modern world, this short-lived young man has always been admired for the sincerity and frankness of the character that shines out in his pages: in the age of Nero he was almost unique among notable personages for his genuine goodness and for the inoffensive saintliness of his life. He had devoted himself to secluded study in his quest for the attainment of philosophic wisdom: he did not mix much with the world: he took no part in such political and forensic activity as was possible under Claudius or Nero: he makes not a single overt reference to any statesman or event in the state: he presents no changing, kaleidoscopic picture of Roman society and Roman manners such as we see so vividly in the poems of Martial and Juvenal: for he was primarily a student, a man of letters, an aspirant in philosophy striving to perfect himself in virtue as taught and required by his Stoic creed; and so, apart from books and authors, apart from students like himself, apart from the human types personifying virtues and vices in philosophical discussions, Persius can have had little immediate experience of the world that Juvenal knew, quidquid agunt homines, votum, timor, ira, voluptas, gaudia, discursus: it is curious therefore that this bookish and gentle-mannered student, this recluse in his philosophic detachment, should have tried his hand at satire, the very life-blood of which is a direct observation and critical knowledge of humanity as it moves and acts in the real world. The satires of Persius will inevitably be different from those of Horace or Juvenal. He will criticize contemporary literature, and here he is well within his province: he will give us his philosophic reflections on problems of conduct, and here again the subject is well within his competence: but we must not expect from him any harsh detailed denunciation such as Juvenal vents upon the sins and sinners that have provoked his anger. So I must warn
you that Persius is a serious young man, not censorious, but with a bent for sermonizing, who hopes to persuade his readers that, by paying heed to his message, they can mend their writing or their character or both, and so perhaps increase their happiness also. In the modern world his moral fervour would make him an impressive preacher with a reformist message.

His actual amount of writing was small. We hear of two works which have not survived, a historical drama of Roman subject, and a book of poems describing travels. At his death these had passed to Cornutus, and were suppressed as of small value. The satires, introduced by a short poem of fourteen iambic sason lines, number six in all—a small volume of no more than 650 hexameter verses, less than a single book of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, and about the length of Juvenal’s VIth satire. Persius was a slow and occasional composer. He reflected much on what he wrote, giving the same care and thought to how he should express himself as to what he had to express, and modelling his wording and turn of phrase on the precedent set by older authors and especially on the diction of Horace in the *Sermones*—with the result that many passages in Persius cannot be explained until one has found the original Horatian expression which our poet has thought it clever to enigmatize in some startling innovation of words. He thus becomes, for all his smallness of output, one of the most intricately obscure poets in Latin, and in reading his 650 lines one can spend a quite undue amount of time trying to discern the meaning of individual lines and in seeking to puzzle out the connection of thought between paragraph and paragraph. I have no hesitation in admitting that to me he is the most difficult author in Classical Latin.

The first satire ranks with the fifth as his best: in it Persius becomes a literary critic and attacks what he regards as the absurdities of contemporary men-of-letters in their style of composition, their subject-matter, their desire for applause, and their readiness to accept as valid the verdict of a degenerate and corrupt public taste. I shall be saying more about this later in my paper. Satire II is on a theme which we know better from the famous Tenth Satire of Juvenal and Dr. Samuel Johnson’s paraphrase of it in his poem “The Vanity of Human Wishes”—
what should men pray for, what are the right petitions to offer, can we have any comprehension of the nature of the deity to whom we pray, how far from a true understanding of the divine nature are most men who pray in the temples when they approach their god with prayers which they would not dare to utter aloud for fear lest their fellow-men should perceive the vileness of their hearts, and their inner wickedness be revealed to the public. His conclusion is that the most acceptable sacrifice one can bring to the gods is purity of heart, duty justly done, and a generous magnanimity in all one's actions:

compositum ius fasque animo sanctosque recessus
mentis et incoctum generoso pectus honesto.

Satire III is a longer and more elaborate poem: it deals with the besetting sin of students and literary men—sloth, procrastination, the creeping paralysis of will which smothers and atrophies the natural inborn vigour and which at the most critically formative time of a young man's life could kill in him all ambition, all effort towards virtue, all disciplined self-control, all advance towards excellence: for it is in youth, says Persius, that we choose the way of virtue or the way of vice, and self-indulgent sloth of mind is the most certain symptom of deadly moral disease. I need not enlarge on this Satire now, for I shall be reverting to it later in my lecture. The fourth Satire is a kind of continuation of the same theme with a particular application—a young man, an Alcibiades, feeling within him the urge of his power and talents, wishes to enter public life and administer state affairs. What are his qualifications? How is he equipped? Apart from his natural gifts of wit, diplomacy and power of speech, what policy has he, what are his purpose and intention in choosing the profession of statesman—the mere selfish enjoyment of exercising his powers, of being a spellbinder and receiving the adulation of the crowd, or is he moved by some higher and nobler ideal of statecraft such as might be learnt from philosophy? And the poet passes on to a general survey of mankind in which he shows that this young statesman's self-admiration is not unique, for very few are as aware of their own faults as they are of their neighbours', that this is the way
of the world, and that the flattering tributes offered by the ignorant mob are worthless as evidence of our character if all the while sin lurks in our conscience. "You should live at home with yourself", says Persius, "and get to know how sparsely furnished your apartments are—tecum habita : noris quam sit tibi curta supellex." The fifth poem is addressed to his tutor and teacher, Cornutus. It is a moving tribute to the noble-minded philosopher, who has guided his youthful footsteps in the path of righteousness, and who as his guide and friend has imparted to him the knowledge of how life is to be worthily and virtuously lived. For Cornutus has realized the true way of life—that the rule of discipline and temperance taught by Stoicism can alone lead to achievement and to the assurance that one's life has not been squandered in purposeless frivolity. This discipline is not the denial of liberty, for true liberty is not just the Roman's civil liberty which any emancipated slave can possess: true liberty is something of the spirit and can only be won by applying the heart to wisdom, so that the man is freed from the sins that tyrannize over the soul—from avarice, pleasure, sloth and the other passions such as ambition, superstition, and lust. Hic, hic, quod quaerimus, hic est; "here, here, we find the freedom that we sought," is Persius' conclusion of the whole matter. The sixth and last satire is dedicated to the lyric poet Caesius Bassus, the senior friend who, after Persius' death, was deputed by Cornutus to edit and publish the satires posthumously. The scene of the poem is set in winter-time; Persius, as he writes, is wintering in the warm climate of Luna, one of the sea-ports of Etruria; and in the contentment of his quiet seclusion he enjoys his separation from public opinion and public clamour, his freedom from anxiety about the weather, and his indifference to the growing wealth of his neighbours. He has no desire to be excessively rich: on the other hand, he has no wish to become poor as a means to virtue: as it is, he has no need to practice miserly economy: he is glad to have an adequate sufficiency, and he means to enjoy it and to use it prudently—but as he pleases. And here let no heir with an eye to the future intervene to express displeasure about the capital shrinkage. "The estate is mine," says Persius, "all mine, capital and interest alike, and within
reasonable limits proper to a man of sense, I will use it as I please: I will not be instructed as to how I employ it. If my natural heir objects to this policy, I will choose another heir. Why should he wish to inherit before his time? This is just avarice on his part; and if I give in to it, I shall never have content or enjoyment: he will attempt to supervise every item of my spending, and I should find that intolerable. 'What I leave will be yours', he says to his heir 'but only what I leave, not what I inherited or now possess. So you do not help yourself by being selfish and grasping. You only provoke me to go on a spending spree.'"

I have thought it helpful to give this rapid resumé of the six satires, so that you might have some preliminary idea of the serious line which this young poet takes in his public criticisms. Though in each poem the topics he treats are different, they all have in common a certain moral theme—an insistence on the need for a rigorous discipline of the mind and will, so that a man's life may be directed towards wisdom and goodness whether in literature, statecraft, academic study, or the use and enjoyment of wealth; and he proclaims the doctrine that freedom of the spirit, manifesting itself in control of the passions, is the only genuine liberty. Persius may not be a great literary artist: but even in this sketchy survey there emerges, I believe, something of the fervour and conviction with which he preaches the redemptive and fortifying principles of Stoicism. So much for the general impression of the man and his message: let us now look in more detail at one or two of the more important satires.

It was a question often considered in the ancient world if there is any connection between the morals of a given epoch and the literary style of that epoch, either in the national sphere or in the case of the individual. Can it be argued from stated instances that a decline in the standards of public morality is shown equally in the literary degeneracy of the period, or, conversely, that literary decadence is a symptom of a greater moral disease which is prevalent in the people at large? The question is not without relevance to our own materialistic age when wealth is so widespread and when all the luxurious concomitants of wealth are so easily obtainable: do our own publications, our newspapers, our
art, our drama, our films, our entertainments, our dances, reflect a less austere, a more indulgent way of life, or are they separate phenomena, unaffected by the general condition of the nation? Be that as it may, it was felt by thoughtful men of the first century, and certainly by a puritan like Persius, that the general luxury of the age (and the Romans of the first century A.D., like ourselves in the twentieth century, had never had it so good) is at least one of the main reasons for the decline in the quality of literature from the high level of the Augustan age; and that the decay of the arts is closely connected with the corruption and decay of the Roman character: as Seneca put it in one of his Letters to Lucilius, *genus dicendi aliquando imitatur publicos mores, si disciplina civitatis laboravit et se in delicias dedit:* "the style of literature sometimes follows in the suite of public morality, when the moral atmosphere, the temper of the nation, changes, and gives itself over to luxury." It is this change in literature, originating in the common luxury of the age, that Persius regrets in his First Satire, and he attacks both the affected tone of literary composition and the popular response to it and approval of it; in fact, he finds the whole atmosphere at Rome vitiated and stupidly self-complacent, and he feels that he must cry aloud his opinion of contemporary Roman standards of taste and judgment. The cure is, of course, to be found in a moral reform, which can only come from outspoken criticism (like that of the Old Greek Comedy) leading to the acceptance of a rule of conduct such as Stoicism offers—if only this message could be got across to men in Rome, past the indifference of the bourgeois or contempt of the philistines. This is the tone in which the First Satire opens: it is ostensibly a criticism of contemporary poetry, but to Persius these debased literary standards are symptomatic of a deeper and more general malady which can only be remedied by a return (a return calling for hard study and application) to *severiora iudicia,* to more austere criteria of judgment and conduct.

The poem starts with a dialogue between Persius and a friend, the interlocutor who is a regular feature of Roman satire generally and of Persius' satire in particular. Persius at first assumes a pensive air, and speaks with a tone of brooding concern about
the vanity and meaninglessness of human existence: and the friend expostulates as might be expected from an experienced man of the world:

Persius: Alas for man! how vain are all his cares!
          And oh! what bubbles his most grave affairs!
Friend: Whom do you expect to read stuff like this?
Persius: Why, what a silly question! No one, I assure you.
Friend: What, no one?
Persius: Well, one or two at most.
Friend: Your work is a lamentable fiasco, then.
Persius: Why a fiasco? is it because you fear that everyone at Rome, prince and people alike, will be preferring their own dear Labeo as a poet to me? Nonsense! If this muddle-headed Rome should decry and undervalue a poem, it's not for you to be walking up and adjusting the faulty indicator in that lying balance of hers. You must trust your own judgement of the work, not the popular opinion. For everyone at Rome is... may I say what? But surely I may, when I look at the elderly exterior of us Romans, and our national gravity of demeanour, and the kind of things we've been doing since childhood, all with an air of avuncular wisdom—at such a moment you must excuse me: it's involuntary, I really can't help it—but I have a spleen that's uncontrollable, and I burst out laughing.

And now the laughing, mocking attack on contemporary poetry begins. First we have an amusing description of a modern versifier who with intense labour has produced a poem which he publishes by reading to an audience of friends at one of the recitation parties which were then the popular rage. He had shut himself up in his study to hatch this magnum opus, "this something in the grand style to be panted forth by the lungs with a vast expenditure of breath". The poem is then recited in public by the author, who is combed and brushed and got up all in white with a new toga, and wearing his birthday ring to mark the special importance of the occasion:

'Tis done! and now the bard, elate and proud,
Prepares a grand rehearsal for the crowd,
The desk he mounts, in birth-day splendour bright,
Combed and perfumed, and robed in dazzling white;
His pliant throat with soft emollients clears,
And casts around ingratiating leers.

And what of the audience? As the sensuous sound and rhythm of the verse begin to affect them, these brawny sons of Rome cannot keep still in their seats. They rock and roll and

1 The verse renderings are from Dryden or Gifford, slightly modified.
sway in ecstatic throes of pleasure as the music and movement of the poem thrill their inmost being.

There follows an argument between the critic and the author, Persius blaming the poet for thus prostituting his art, the poet replying that in no other way can he obtain recognition for the study and work he has expended on his subject—"as if," adds Persius contemptuously, "the only reward for knowledge is to have others know that you know." "But," says the poet, "think of the fame one acquires by writing a poem and giving a reading of it—to be a public figure, to be a classic in the schools, to be a hit with the young of the aristocracy!" "Fame indeed" answers Persius, "listen and I'll tell you how I see it. Picture the scene: there sit the aristocrats, noble sons of Rome, in the process of digesting a full meal: and as they drink their wine, they seek relaxation and ask what divine poesy has to say for herself today. Hereupon a professional elocutionist comes forward to give a recital from one of the poets: he wears a hyacinth-coloured mantle round his shoulders; he speaks with an utterance between a lisp and a snuffle: he has selected some mawkish trash, some elegiac woe, something about Phyllises or Hypsipyles, and it comes trickling from his lips, every word of it tripping against the roof of his delicate mouth. The patrons, the great men, are charmed, and signify their approval: and the humbler guests sycophantically chime in: here is your fame," says Persius, "here is your literary apotheosis":

Then graciously the mellow audience nod:
Is not the immortal author made a god?
Are not his Manes blest, such praise to have?
Lies not the turf more lightly on his grave?
And roses (while his loud applause they sing)
Stand ready from his sepulchre to spring.

"Ah," says Persius' friend, "you are mocking me: but, in spite of your sneers, there is something splendid in writing a poem that will survive and win fame for its author even posthumously." And now we come to the heart of Persius' criticism of literary fashions and literary standards at Rome. He is not the man, he protests, to reject any honest praise for anything good he may have written—in the rare event of his ever
writing anything good. But he utterly denies that the loud "Bravo ", and the enraptured "Splendid" which one hears in literary gatherings at Rome denote any mark of quality: for these plaudits are indiscriminately bestowed on such drivel as Labeo's translation of the Iliad or even the sweet little love-lyric dictated by the Roman grandees after dinner. Such praise is not honest praise: it is payment for favours received or for favours expected, whereas in fact the verse praised is rubbish, and the noble versifier is often a top-level vulgarian, whose clients make game of him behind his back.

Uncritical applause and undiscriminating admiration have become so rife in Rome that, in Persius' view, they help to spread and perpetuate the very vices in literature which he wishes to see removed. In poetry smoothness and regularity of rhythm and grandiloquence of style are the effects most praised. Nobody nowadays, he says, has any interest in the old Latin poets of two hundred years ago, such as Pacuvius and Accius the tragedians, rough archaic workmen, to be sure, but strong and manly—not like the present-day Romans, who care only for the banalities of fine writing. Even in the law-courts and in criminal trials one does not expect to hear forensic oratory of the old kind: public taste is so corrupted that it requires even a defendant in peril of his life to produce tropes and antitheses and tricks of rhetoric in order to win applause: for example—

Others, by foolish ostentation led,
When called before the bar to save their head,
Bring trifling tropes instead of solid sense,
And mind their diction more than their defence:
Are pleased to hear their thick-skulled judges cry,
"Well moved", "oh finely said and decently!"
"Theft" says the accuser "to thy charge I lay,
O Pedius." What does gentle Pedius say?
Studious to please the genius of the times,
With periods, points, and tropes he slurs his crimes:
"He robbed not, but he borrowed from the poor;
And took but with intention to restore."
He lards with flourishes his long harangue:
"'Tis fine," sayest thou; what, to be praised—and hang?

This claim that the moderns have given Roman poetry the qualities of polish, grace, and smoothness which it never possessed
before—this claim provokes Persius to indignant denial. Judged by the standard set by Virgil not a century before, this modern verse is frothy and fungous trash. If there remained in the present generation one spark of their fathers’ manhood, this devitalized stuff that floats on the spittle of the mouth would not be tolerated.

And so Persius comes to the conclusion of his satire. He rejects the advice that he should suppress his criticism because he will give offence to the great men of Rome, what we would call the Establishment. The satirists before him, Lucilius and Horace, in their different ways of approach, did not spare men’s faults, and why should he? Is it still sacrilege for him to speak out his mind about Rome as he was proposing to do in the first lines of the poem? Well, now he will speak, his book will be his confidant, he will entrust the secret to his book—auricullos asini quis non habet?, “the people of Rome are fools, they have asses ears.” This is his joke, his buried secret. He is not writing for the litterateurs or reading public or philistines of Rome: he is writing for a special kind of reader—for the few who can appreciate the free speech and open caustic criticism of the Old Greek Comedy writers, Cratinus, Eupolis and Aristophanes—it is to such readers only that he addresses himself:

let them but smile
On this my honest work, though writ in homely style:
And if two lines or three in all the vein
Appear less drossy, read those lines again.
May they perform their author’s just intent,
Glow in thine ears and in thy breast ferment.

The subject of the Third Satire, as I indicated earlier, is procrastination, tomorrow and tomorrow, and tomorrow, never to speak of the lost yesterday that was tomorrow the day before yesterday, and all the new tomorrows turning to lost yesterdays that can consume our years without any effective achievement. I fancy there are few of us, young or old, who have not at some time surrendered to the beguilement of tomorrow and postponed tiresome business in favour of the more enjoyable. For students and men-of-letters the temptation is perhaps more insidious
than, say, for the journalist who is always working to the clock and against time: we academics can deceive ourselves by a semblance of activity, but static activity: we meditate on the subject, read round it, make notes about it, card-index every item, tabulate a bibliography, and assemble all the parts for a final completion—which somehow recedes and recedes—and, unless Necessity intervenes in the form of an 'appointed day' (and sometimes not even then), we are no better than potterers or dilettanti with no settled plan or purpose. It is to such a student, a dilatory beginner in philosophy, that Persius addresses himself in this Third Satire, appearing in the person of the young man's tutor and speaking words of stern reprimand.

The tutor is a Stoic philosopher: he comes to visit his pupil at eleven o'clock in the morning when the sun is high in the sky, and he is shocked to find the young man still heavily asleep, snoring off the fumes of the Falernian he drank at the party of the previous evening. The tutor says some brisk words about slackness and inattention to study: the pupil gradually bestirs himself:

The yawning youth, scarce half awake, essays
His lazy limbs and drowsy head to raise:
Then rubs his gummy eyes and scrubs his pate,
And cries, "I thought it had not been so late:
My clothes! Make haste!" Why then, if none be near,
He mutters first, and then begins to swear:
And brays aloud, with a more clamorous note
Than an Arcadian ass can stretch its throat.

This is a vivid piece of writing; and, though Dryden to some extent fills out and expands the original, yet he gives us the authentic tone and meaning of Persius.

Next we see the reluctant student preparing to tackle his work: all the apparatus of study is before him—the book, the parchment, the paper for notes, the pen, the ink, and he is about to start. But the ink is thick and viscous: it forms a blob on the pen. Well, pour in some water: now he complains that the watery ink flows twice as fast and floods the pen! How can he work with such impossible pen and ink! The tutor loses patience and gives him a dressing down. "All these excuses and evasions", he cries, "they don't impose on me. You are
the person who will suffer for this foolery. You are frittering away your precious time—just at the age, too, when like moist clay, you should be taken in hand by the potter and moulded on the philosophic wheel to some good and useful purpose. And don't tell me, young man, that you are someone, a squire with a landed estate, a noble with an ancestry running back into generations of Tuscan forebears, an equestrian by rank and entitled to wear purple when annually reviewed by the censor. These external trappings may impress the mob, but I know the inner man: *ad populum phaleras, ego te intus et in cute novi:* and that inner man, if he doesn't reform, is in danger of becoming a castaway, like the reprobate Natta whose conscience is so seared that he is dead to the distinction between virtue and vice."

"Oh", says Persius in a passage of impressive solemnity, "the horror of such a life in death. No torture ever invented by tyrants for the punishment of their victims is comparable with Heaven's punishment meted out to great sinners, *virtutem videant intabescantque relicta:* for there is no more appalling fate than for the sinner to realize that he is past repentance, that he is slipping over into the abyss, and that he is haunted by a ghastly inward fear which even the wife of his bosom cannot know."

I have not time in this lecture to follow Persius through the rest of the tutor's exhortation: it is all well worth reading, for it is urged with much force and variety of argument. I would like, however, to add one thought which always occurs to me as I read this Satire. Does it not seem almost inevitable that the poet as he wrote this exhortation, had in mind the tutor-pupil relationship between Seneca and the young Nero? It is said in the Life of Persius, ascribed to Valerius Probus, that Persius in the original form of line 121 of Satire I had allusively attacked Nero in the words *auriculas asini Mida rex habet* but that Cornutus as literary executor had altered the passage to the now generally accepted reading and so had removed the sting and danger of offence. The eminent scholar, Isaac Casaubon, who published his edition of Persius in 1605, accepted this statement from the Life and maintained that Persius in this passage *suum ostendit iudicium de Neronis poesi et omnium qui eius exemplum*
sequebantur, sed animi sui mentem allegoria pulcherrima extulit. And this opinion that Nero is referred to, he reinforces by working out in detail and at length an interpretation of Satire IV which presents that poem as an attack on Nero's lack of statesmanship under the guise of a criticism of the young Alcibiades. In the modern world Casaubon's opinion has been discredited. Personally, I am inclined to accept his view, all the more so when I consider the setting of Satire III, a Stoic tutor remonstrating with a half-hearted pupil and warning him against the danger in his zest for pleasure and inattention to duty. Here I cannot help feeling that the parallel with the young Emperor and his Stoic tutor Seneca is too exact to have been accidental. True, there is no direct reference to Nero, any more than there is any direct reference to Augustus in Virgil's portrayal of Aeneas: but is it fanciful to suggest that here in Satire III the parallel with Nero is implicit, tactfully and inoffensively implicit, and would not have been missed by serious Roman readers, any more than similar critical references to Nero which were thought to have been allusively inserted by Lucan in his Pharsalia? I throw out this reflection in passing, hoping that the problem might be re-examined with perhaps more respect for the strong conviction of a rational scholar like Casaubon.

In the Fifth Satire, the last I shall mention and undeniably the most seriously impressive of the collection, the poet pays a tribute to his old tutor, L. Annaeus Cornutus; and this tribute has conferred a certain immortality on Cornutus, about whom very little would otherwise be known. He had come to Rome from Leptis in Libya, probably as a slave but a talented and highly educated slave; from the name Annaeus that he carried, it seems probable that he was attached to the family of the Annaei (to which Seneca belonged) and that he had been emancipated by them. We know that he was a man of much learning and of great reputation, both as a philosopher with a special interest in Aristotle, as a writer on philosophical topics, and as a grammarian and teacher. His works have all perished except for quotations and fragments embedded in later writers. He would have remained no more than a shadowy name like so many in Roman literary history, if it had not been for the deep sense of
gratitude and affection which prompted his young pupil to write this appreciation. Here in the poem he lives again, not merely as an academic figure, but as a man of strong character and personality, who believed that it was his duty, as a teacher, to enlighten and quicken the understanding of his young pupil, but (more important still) to lay before him and persuade him to accept, a code of conduct, an ethical standard, by which he might regulate his life and govern his actions, and become a wise and good man both in his private capacity and publicly as a citizen. He did not teach by flattery or compromise: he saw clearly what was necessary: Non multa peccas, (Cicero quotes the old tutor Phoenix as saying to Achilles), sed peccas; te regere possum; and that was the educational principle on which Cornutus appears to have shaped the moral development of Persius. We do not often hear in the Roman world of pupils' gratitude to their teachers. Persius is one of the notable exceptions, and it is greatly to his honour.

The poem opens with an exchange between Persius and Cornutus, Persius beginning far away from his intended theme and offering no immediate clue to his subject, Cornutus taking him up sharply for what appears to be a piece of insufferable bombast. Persius remarks that it is the fashion of poets to call for a hundred voices and a hundred tongues to utter their lays: "it is a standing rule with poets to put in a requisition for a hundred voices, to bespeak a hundred mouths and a hundred tongues for the purposes of song, whether the work be a drama to be mouthed on the stage by some sorry tragedian, or an epic showing the wounded Parthian drawing the Roman spear from his thigh."

CORNUTUS: Heavens! to what purpose, (sure, I heard thee wrong,) Tend these huge gobbets of robustious song, Which, struggling into day, distend thy lungs, And need a hundred mouths, a hundred tongues?

He could understand the need for this kind of rant if Persius was a modern tragic poet writing insipid dramas about Procne or Thyestes, panting like a blacksmith's bellows, or "croaking the grave nothings of an idle brain". But he is sure that writing in this grandiose tone is quite unnatural for a satiric poet. His
job is to criticize mankind: and his style must be the plain language of everyday life—*verba togae*; he is not called on to present stage-horrors, but to show common society and ordinary men as they are. In reply Persius fully accepts this, and at once discloses the real reason for having wished for a hundred tongues—his sincere love for Cornutus is immeasurably beyond the power of one voice to express:

'Tis not, indeed, my purpose to engage
In lofty trifles or to swell my page
With wind and noise; but freely to impart,
As to a friend, the secrets of my heart;
And in familiar speech to let thee know
How much I love thee and how much I owe.
For this a hundred voices I desire,
To tell thee what a hundred tongues would tire
Yet never could be worthily expressed—
How deeply thou art seated in my breast.

It was Cornutus who, like a second father, had taken Persius under his care and guided his wavering footsteps: "just at the time when the way of life for a young man begins to be uncertain, and the bewildered mind finds that its ramblings have brought it to the branching cross-ways—then it was that I placed myself under your care, and submitted my character to your guidance to have its moral twists straightened out and to assume a new shape." Persius recalls the happy days he spent in Cornutus' school, mornings of hard study compensated by evenings of genial social relaxation: and such is their friendship and unanimity that Persius is convinced they were born under the same beneficent star:

Sure on our birth some friendly planet shone
And, as our souls, our horoscope was one:
What star I know not, but some star I find,
Has given thee an Ascendant o'er my mind.

This is by no means the whole of the poem: but I think it is enough to show you the quality and temper of this generous young man.

Well, how shall I sum up Persius? I do not think he can be called one of the great poets of Rome, and he certainly is not a
saturist to be compared with Horace or Juvenal. He has none of the subtle penetrating humour of Horace, that laughs its way into your consciousness, and makes you smile at your own ridiculous appearance. He has none of the burning anger of Juvenal that shrivels and blasts like the jet from a flame-gun. He has nothing, either, of the torrential rhetorical inventiveness of his younger contemporary, the epic poet Lucan. As a poet, Persius is a slow, careful, scrupulous workman: his literary effects are all considered, all studied: his style is *oratio meditata et composita*: one finds in him nothing spontaneous except perhaps once only—when the warmth of affection he feels for Cornutus liberates his spirit and his utterance. But he is a young man: he is writing his satires at an age when our young men would be finishing an M.A. thesis or beginning a Ph.D. course: he is still something of an apprentice in poetry, and he is trying to write well—I think he has not yet passed the stage of trying to write better than he could, and that accounts for the impression we get of crabbiness and obscurity. Yet as a literary artist he has his points: he is a purist in language: it is his aim that whatever he writes should be genuinely Roman, not foreign naturalized—*ut oratio Romana plane videatur, non civitate donata*, as Quintilian excellently puts it. He is entirely free from slickness: he detests the smooth mobility of contemporary literature: he has no desire to placate the public and become a popular figure, but like Horace he regards himself as *nobilium scriptorum auditor et ultor*, "the disciple and the champion of the great writers"; and so he feels himself bound to maintain the ancient character of Roman poetry with all its natural gravity, as compared with the modern refinements of language and versification which he dislikes and rejects as un-Roman. His literary criticism, therefore, he intends to be a sober corrective to these bad tendencies, but he directs his message not only against bad writing, but against what he believes to be the more serious trouble, both in persons and in the nation—bad standards of judgement and conduct. In the world around him there is far too much luxury, far too much sumptuous living. He would like to see a return to a reasoned asceticism which he believes to be in the Roman tradition. The nation has sadly declined from
its old characteristics of sturdy austerity and puritanism which seemed to be so much in accord with Stoic doctrine. He therefore constantly preaches the need for a regeneration through Stoicism, through hard-won knowledge and self-discipline leading to the supreme good—virtue. This is at the heart of his literary and social criticism. He is a satirist only to be a reformer—and it is here that the noble fervour and goodness of his spirit shine out.