

2011

# The Man in the Mirror: Self-awareness and Self-Criticism in the Satires of Persius

Anthony Pinggera  
anpinggera@vassar.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalwindow.vassar.edu/senior\\_capstone](http://digitalwindow.vassar.edu/senior_capstone)



Part of the [Classical Literature and Philology Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Pinggera, Anthony, "The Man in the Mirror: Self-awareness and Self-Criticism in the Satires of Persius" (2011). *Senior Capstone Projects*. 5.

[http://digitalwindow.vassar.edu/senior\\_capstone/5](http://digitalwindow.vassar.edu/senior_capstone/5)

This Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Window @ Vassar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Capstone Projects by an authorized administrator of Digital Window @ Vassar. For more information, please contact [library\\_thesis@vassar.edu](mailto:library_thesis@vassar.edu).

Almost three hundred years after the death of its author, Jerome acquired a copy of Persius' *Satires*. It is said that Jerome, finding Persius too obscure and unintelligible, threw the work into a fire. The centuries since have not treated the author's legacy much better, and Persius maintains a relatively quiet existence positioned between the relative giants that are Horace and Juvenal. The latter two are widely considered to be the models for all subsequent satire through to the present day, and Persius is largely forgotten. A read-through of his *Satires* will reveal why fairly quickly: the poet appears to be concerned with very specific critiques which, if taken at face value, don't resonate much beyond his own time. His criticism of Labeo and other poets, for example, are so difficult for a modern audience to fully contextualize that it is easy to cast his work aside as too specific and obscure. To a certain extent, this criticism is true: Persius is very much concerned with the time in which he is writing. The author's primary objective, however, was not to create a detailed description of his own time period, but to draw from realistic occurrences to illustrate a point. More specifically, he is arguing that contemporary Roman society suffers from a lack of personal self-awareness, and this lack is detrimental to the lives of every Roman citizen.

This deeper message is not often touched upon in the small world of Persius criticism, and while critics seem to often come very close to discussing it, none actually do. This should not belie a lack of intelligence or diligence on the part of the critic, but rather a different focus. Persius' narrative persona, for instance, receives significant critical attention. Critics seem to accept that Persius the author and Persius the Narrator/Commentator are two separate entities, and that the ideals of the Narrator are far too demanding for anyone to ever satisfy. The problem is that the discussion of the persona ends at about that same point; it analyzes the *fact* of the

persona, but not the *why*. Persius never intended solely to rant about the perceived ills of his society, or to lampoon the ideals of the extreme Stoic. The unworthy poets, the citizens lacking decorum, and the oblivious statesmen do not exist in a vacuum. They are all different manifestations of the same social problem: the citizens of Rome are not paying attention to themselves. Furthermore, if society is a collection of individuals, then a change in that society can only come from within those same individuals. Thus, Persius is using his persona to shift the gaze of the audience. His narrative persona is often angry, but his anger is not an end result; it is a tool. When he pushes hard enough against his audience, he alienates them just enough for them to see his artifice. It is then that the reader can question the poet's intentions, and a criticism of the work can move beyond the surface meaning.

The easiest way to understand the poet's project is to analyze it in a way that may seem, at first, counter-intuitive: backwards, beginning with Satire 4. At first, one would think that a true analysis of the poems should begin, if one is going backwards, with the sixth and final satire. One can then proceed methodically through the satires all the way back down to the first. This is not, however, a discussion of the poems as such, but rather an exploration of an idea. The three poems that significantly advance Persius argument for self-awareness are 1, 3, and 4. Persius has his “manifesto” of sorts in the fourth, his own self-reflection in the third, and his introductory exhortation to his audience in the first. Satire Four provides the reader with the most clear description of the principle that Persius has been developing, and is thus the ideal place to begin such an analysis of that principle.

The fourth satire is an outlier of sorts in the *Satires*. It is the only satire in which Persius' original narrative persona, or “Persius the Narrator,” is not present. He presents instead a

hypothetical conversation between Socrates and Alcibiades, in which the former admonishes the latter for his extravagant and vacuous lifestyle. Socrates' call for a “descent into the self,” emphasizing the importance of self-awareness and self-reflection, is not just directed at Alcibiades, but also at Persius' audience. One should focus on himself before criticizing others. This is a principle that the author introduces as early as his first satire, but he does not give an explicit analysis of it until 4. Socrates, however, seems to be ignoring his own advice by refusing to engage with himself. Persius, on the other hand, already did just that in the previous satire. Satire 3 is the poet's own exercise in self-reflection that he later calls for, putting himself at the mercy of an imagined *comes*. The poem is also focused on idealism, as both the *comes*' explicit call for Stoic enlightenment and the poet's implicit statement about the ideals of self-criticism are proven to be impossible to entirely fulfill. That is not, however, Persius' concern; he is more worried about the fact that no one in Rome seems to have any self-awareness *at all*. His opening satire describes the cautious, sensitive attitude of Rome under Nero, and after drawing his public in, Persius abruptly tries to turn their gazes inward. He sees their current state as untenable, and little better than Alcibiades in Satire 4. If the citizens – and the emperor – do not change their path, then they may very well be on the road to a rather nasty end. The *Satires*, then, are not an attack on Roman society, but an exhortation for self-improvement.

#### *Chapter One: Satire 4*

The fourth satire appears to stand apart from the rest of Persius' work; unlike his other poems, which all prominently feature an imagined personification of the author himself, the poet removes the narrative character of “Persius” and presents a hypothetical conversation between Socrates and his student Alcibiades. In truth, the “conversation” is extremely one-sided, and as is

consistently the case in each satire, one voice – in this instance, Socrates – dominates the discourse by the end. It is the only satire in which Persius admits from the beginning that the scenario which he is presenting is imaginary, but the author maintains his overall structure and tone while changing who the primary speaker is. What *is* different about the fourth satire is that Persius' intended target is not who Socrates is criticizing. While the fourth satire has long been viewed as a thinly-veiled attack on Nero, the poem is actually intended as a critique of those who attack Nero, and beyond that, a critique of outward criticism in general. This direction of attention is all a part of the inward turn; if Nero's critics are focused entirely on him, then they are necessarily ignorant of their own selves. Thus, in making his most explicit criticism of one man, the author is most clearly indicating the importance of the self-reflection that is missing from the poem.

Unfortunately, some scholars tend to be slightly dismissive when beginning a discussion of the fourth satire; Hooley thinks of it as half of a frame for the fifth satire,<sup>1</sup> and Reckford calls it “a foil and curtain-raiser to *Satire 5*.”<sup>2</sup> While it is true that the fifth satire, as Persius' longest and quite possibly most personal poem, easily overshadows the fourth, which is the shortest, in respect to length, it would be intellectually naïve to discard the poem outright. It is an excellent transitional piece that introduces some of the Stoic principles which the fifth satire expands upon, but it is also a full poem in its own right. As the most non-traditional poem of a non-traditional writer, it is easy for a reader to feel alienated when first approaching it. It is important, however, to push through that alienation because that very principle is part of how the poem operates. By forcing the reader to step back and re-evaluate the satire before beginning, Persius is ensuring

---

<sup>1</sup> Hooley, *The Knotted Thong*, 122

<sup>2</sup> Reckford, *Recognizing Persius*, 103

that the fourth satire is understood within the context of his work as a whole. The author forces the poem's integration specifically by setting it apart.

Freudenburg has generally categorized the *Satires* as “truncated, veiled, and safely 'philosophical,’”<sup>3</sup> and the fourth satire is perhaps the piece of Persius' work that most fits that description. At fifty-two lines, it is the shortest of the satires, and is the most overtly artificial satire of the six. Indeed, there is nowhere in the *Satires* more blatantly “philosophical” than the rant that is written as coming from Socrates himself. At the same time, however, the poem is also the least “safe” of the satires. It is “a full scale assault on both senses and sensibilities, delivering a barrage of obscenities and pornographic vignettes in its second half, the intensity of which is unmatched elsewhere in the book.”<sup>4</sup> Even though it is “Socrates” speaking, the rant is still just that, and Persius is in top form with his withering invective. Within the compact construction of the fourth satire, the author mounts his cutting attacks on the lack of personal consideration and introspection in Roman society, concealed within a criticism of a man who is very definitively Greek.

Writing as an entirely different person, Persius can be more straightforward in his criticisms, so long as he takes pains to ensure that the primary speaker is *not* necessarily perceived as a representation of the author's opinions. It is for this precise reason that Persius begins with the clearest indication in the entirety of his *Satires* that the primary speaker is someone other than himself. After his first sentence, he says, “*barbatum haec crede magistrum/dicere, sorbitio tollit quem dira cicutae.*”<sup>5</sup> The author could have named Socrates – or, for that matter, Alcibiades – outright, but he chose not to. This decision should not be read as

<sup>3</sup> Freudenburg, *Satires of Rome*, 125

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 189.

<sup>5</sup> *Satires* IV.1-2, “Believe that the bearded teacher says this,/he who that dire drink of hemlock elevated.”

merely poetic. While he is heavily implying that the conversation is between Socrates and Alcibiades, Persius' refusal to name either character leaves room for the possibility – however remote – that he is talking about someone else. This “someone else” is not necessarily important for the critic – whether Persius is referring to Socrates or some *other* hemlock-poisoned teacher is largely inconsequential – it was of primary importance to the reader. The fact that the satire is kept so slightly abstract reminds the reader that he is engaging with a text that should not be taken at face value. There is more that Persius is willing to say, but is hiding in metaphor.

It is easy to assume that the author is writing in opposition to what many now call “Nero's Rome,” the state of decadence and oppression that is readily supplied to us by historians such as Tacitus. Freudenburg, however, illuminates a major problem with this assumption:

defining Persius as 'Neronian Satirist' is a bit too easy if we can claim from the start to know precisely what the 'Neronian' half of the formula entails. In contrast, I maintain that Persius, much as he may have wanted to, could not rely on any handy monster-narrative of Nero in writing these poems. At best, the story of Nero as we know it from the historians was under construction in Persius' day, existing alongside a number of competing stories[...]<sup>6</sup>

He gives voice to an idea which may, at first, seem painfully obvious: we, as a modern audience, cannot define with absolute certainty the political environment within which Persius was writing. Any attempt to do so, while possibly “true in its general contours,”<sup>7</sup> is not satisfactory as a sole explanation for the form of Persius' writing. It is very likely that Nero was not nearly as reviled in Persius' lifetime as he subsequently became; the Great Fire of Rome, Nero's most notorious failing, would not occur until 64 CE, two years after Persius died.<sup>8</sup> While it is very tempting to read heavily into Suetonius' anecdote about Bassus changing a line of Persius to refer less

---

<sup>6</sup> Freudenburg, *Satires of Rome*, 126

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 126

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 127

explicitly to Nero, it is impossible to accept that Persius is in fact writing about Nero in his Satires without first applying a measure of qualification.

Nevertheless, there is some credibility in a political reading of Persius, particularly his fourth satire. As was mentioned earlier, he does not ever name the character he is speaking through, but rather uses the circumstances of Socrates' death to identify him for the reader. The author could have chosen any one of a plethora of Socratic traits or anecdotes to obliquely name him, but he chose the hemlock poisoning. Thus, it is firmly entrenched in the reader's mind before the satire even properly begins that the speaker is definitively dead. By foregrounding this fact so, Persius is deflecting some of the potential political criticism that he may have incurred from the content of the satire itself. The author can argue that the views expressed in the satire are not necessarily *his*, so much as they are those of "Socrates;" since Socrates has been dead for centuries – and was famous in life for making philosophical trouble – there is no one to punish. Persius is consciously presenting the satire as an imagined scenario, a conversation between two people who he bluntly admits are no longer alive, and thus free to say whatever they might wish without any fear of repercussion.

Within this particular scenario, Persius is taking on the role of Socrates, and the imagined "other" in this case – for there is always a second voice – is Alcibiades. Modern scholarship has recognized that the fourth satire is likely a re-imagination of Plato's *First Alcibiades*, which depicts a very similar conversation between Socrates and his young pupil, and "here, as in Plato's *Symposium*, Alcibiades' tragedy is one of ignorance and refusal."<sup>9</sup> In the fourth satire, as in Plato's work, Socrates is taking Alcibiades to task for his perceived failings and vices. It is possible, even probable, that Persius saw the *First Alcibiades* as fitting in very well with his own

---

<sup>9</sup> Reckford, *Recognizing Persius*, 104

overall project, and subsequently decided to include his own interpretation within his larger work. With this in mind, Persius' abrupt shift to a wholly different persona becomes marginally more contextualized for the reader. Indeed, Persius makes a valiant attempt to separate “Socratic speech” from his own, even pulling phrases and ideas from Plato's work in the first half of his own.<sup>10</sup> Unlike in his previous satires, where Persius is writing strictly as himself, the author makes an effort in the fourth satire, at least initially, to capture some of the distinct style of Socratic speech, and even begins his satire with a question (*Rem populi tractas?*).<sup>11</sup> After giving a certain measure of context in his second sentence, the author immediately follows with another question: “*Quo fretus?*”<sup>12</sup> The context of the satire is firmly rooted between two questions – one rhetorical, one less so – which instills an expectation of Socrates' typical question-and-answer style in the reader.

What the author then presents, contrary to the established expectation, is most unlike Socrates in speech. For all of the questions that the author poses to his imagined Alcibiades – and there are several beyond the first two – Alcibiades never gets to speak. That does not mean, however, that the questions go unanswered; Socrates simply answers for him. Even after exhorting Alcibiades to speak (*dic hoc, magni pupille Pericli*), Socrates eliminates the possibility, providing his own answer (*scilicet ingenium et rerum prudentia velox/ante pilos venit, dicenda tacendave calles*).<sup>13</sup> In addition to being an expected rhetorical device of Persius, this manner of speaking is also very telling as an examination of Socrates. The Athenian philosopher has been re-appropriated as a measure of comparison; the typically-gentler Platonic

---

<sup>10</sup> Hooley, *The Knotted Thong*, 124

<sup>11</sup> IV.1, “You hold the affairs of the people?”

<sup>12</sup> IV.3, “Relying on what?”

<sup>13</sup> IV.3-5, “Say this, great pupil of Pericles./I suppose that wisdom and knowledge of things came swiftly,/before a beard, you are practiced in speaking and remaining silent.”

dialogue is now what the work will be held up against.<sup>14</sup> The author is adapting Socrates to suit his own ends, and “As he speaks for satire Socrates puts on its mask and acquires the characteristics and the frailties of the genre[...]The authority of Socrates and the philosophical dialogue are compromised as they are reworked in the context of Persius' satire.”<sup>15</sup> As the poem progresses, the reader becomes more and more acutely aware – mostly through the hyperbolic elevation of the language from the questioning and abstract to the enraged and explicit – that Persius is indeed speaking through Socrates. As the veil becomes more and more transparent, it becomes increasingly difficult to trust the Socratic narrator. The reader finds himself wondering two things: first, what Persius is actually trying to say; and second, why he felt the need to “hide” behind Socrates to say it.

At first, the main point of the fourth satire seems to be the concept of “the greatest good.” The author poses the question to Alcibiades bluntly: “*quae tibi summa boni est?*” and again answers for him, this time with a rhetorical question: “*uncta vixisse patella semper et adsiduo curata cuticula sole?*”<sup>16</sup> What Socrates is insisting is that Alcibiades' idea of moral and societal perfection is a life of perpetual leisure. Indeed, the second question is double-marked for continuity, with *semper* and *adsiduo* modifying Alcibiades' imagined ideals. The problem that the author sees with Alcibiades' worldview is that he is equating the ability to be leisurely – which is a position created by economic prosperity – with a moral ideal. From his position as an orator who delivers moral judgments to the people of Athens (*'Quirites,/hoc' ... 'non iustum est, illud*

---

<sup>14</sup> Hooley, *The Knotted Thong*, 126

<sup>15</sup> Littlewood, “Integer Ipse? Self-Knowledge and Self-Representation in Persius Satires 4” *Phoenix* 56.1/2, 56-83. 57.

<sup>16</sup> IV.17-18, “What is, for you, the greatest good? To always live with rich dishes and routinely care for your skin with sun?”

*male, rectius illud'*),<sup>17</sup> he is – one assumes – making poverty synonymous with some moral failing. If his own morals are based on economic success, then it is probable that Alcibiades views those who are less prosperous as being less “good.”

It is this very projection of moral impropriety that Persius, via Socrates, is opposing. He says, “*Ut nemo in sese temptat descendere, nemo,/sed praecedenti spectatur mantica tergo!*”<sup>18</sup> In other words, everyone is far too willing to be critical of others before considering their own shortcomings. His statement at Line 23 is a mournful echo of the advice he gives at the beginning of the first satire (*non, si quid turbida Roma/elevet, accedas examenve inprobum in illa/castiges trutina nec te quaesiveris extra*).<sup>19</sup> Even after giving such a clear and succinct warning to his audience to be honest with themselves, no one of note seems to have taken his advice. Thus, the fourth satire is, in part, an elaboration and clarification of this very idea. For the author, the vanity of Alcibiades is a perfect topic because his ideals are so concretely material, which, when combined with his social position, would prove to be a corrupting influence on the Athenians. Material wealth, the author argues, is not equivalent to personal fulfillment: “*respue quod non es; tollat sua munera cerdo./tecum habita, noris quam sit tibi curta supellex.*”<sup>20</sup> The wealth of this world is not actually part of what makes a person who they are, and if one were to remove a person's possessions, he would see just how much is missing from his life. In the case of someone obsessed with the material world, such as Alcibiades, this hypothesis is doubly true. The greatest good, for Persius, is not having the means to enjoy one's life, but the actual doing of

---

<sup>17</sup> IV.8-9, “Citizens, this...is not just, that is bad, that again is better.”

<sup>18</sup> IV.23-24, “No one attempts to descend into themselves, no one,/but instead stare at the bag on the back before them!”

<sup>19</sup> I.5-7, “If disordered Rome/disparages something, don't approach to set right the poor balance/in those scales, nor should you look for anything beyond yourself.”

<sup>20</sup> IV.51-52, “Spit up what isn't you; let the craftsman take back what he gave./Live with yourself, you will know how broken your furniture is.”

good deeds. The fourth satire is in part a restatement of some of the ideas portrayed in the second, wherein Persius posits that he could make a successful sacrifice to the gods without elaborate rituals. Wealth does not make one pious, and it does not make one moral; all that wealth instills in a person, from Persius' perspective, is a sense of greed.

On a superficial level, the arguments which are presented by Persius are fairly straightforward. In his typically sarcastic fashion, the author suggests that Alcibiades' wisdom has come before age, a reversal of the general assumption that true wisdom is something that can only come as one gets older, and as a result, his own priorities have been confused. This argument is essentially identical to the one that was made in *First Alcibiades*. A refusal to push analysis of the *Satires* beyond this point has unfortunately led to the categorization of Persius as a “needlessly obscure purveyor of Stoic commonplaces,”<sup>21</sup> someone who is merely restating what others have said earlier and more skillfully than he has. What has been argued more recently, however, is that the satire is more than simply a semantic attack on those who don't spend enough time in self-reflection.<sup>22</sup> What is of equal importance to the author to what is being spoken is the reader himself. Just as all satire is, at some level, a criticism of the speaker, the fourth satire is also a criticism of the reader.

As was mentioned earlier, it is easy to read the fourth satire as anti-Neronian. That, in fact, is exactly what the author wants us to read. As Freudenburg says,

by following the poem's many “Neronian” leads, hand-in-hand with our own generically encoded desires for what we want it to say, we make Nero the target, and the butt of the joke. And thus, the joke is on us.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> Reckford, “Studies in Persius,” *Persius and Juvenal*, 17-56. 18

<sup>22</sup> See Hooley, Reckford, and Freudenburg.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 191

By assuming that Nero is the intended object of criticism, the reader opens himself up to a certain amount of criticism as well. Focusing all of one's energy on a critique of Nero is, in effect, exactly what Persius is talking about when he admonishes Alcibiades for refusing to look at himself. If we, as readers, are devoted to seeing the satire as a critical examination of other people, then we are intentionally refusing to challenge Socrates' assertion, and thus proving him right. If the gaze is entirely focused outward, then it cannot be looking inward as well. Persius himself acknowledges this tendency, not just in his readers, but in society in general (*caedimus inque vicem praebemus crura saggitis./vivitur hoc pacto, sic novimus.*).<sup>24</sup> The urge to point the finger, to blame others and criticize *their* behavior without any consideration of one's own, is called a *pacto*; it is more than just a habit, it is tantamount to a social contract. As the author indicated with *sic novimus*, it is the mode in which people operate most comfortably. They are afraid to push out of their own comfort zone, because to do so means analyzing themselves and their own faults. This is not what they “know,” and thus it is not what they will do.

At this point it is beneficial to bring Nero back into a reading of the fourth satire, though not as an object of criticism. The function of Nero has changed; he is now a vehicle from which Persius can drive at what he views as his most important point. The debate about Persius' anti-Neronian tendencies, which was mentioned earlier, is rather inconsequential when one realizes that Nero's reputation was still in flux at the time of the writing of the *Satires*. If Persius is then writing a work which seems, on the surface, to be anti-Neronian, but is in fact a critique of unrelenting critics, then the real subject of scrutiny is likely the anti-Neronian himself. Even though Nero's legacy was far from settled at the time, there were still portions of the population who saw Nero as Rome's singular and most distressing problem, “the mammoth, tail-swishing

---

<sup>24</sup> IV.42-43, “In turn we shoot and offer legs for shots./We live by that pact, such as we know.”

ass on the Palatine.”<sup>25</sup> While later historians have certainly latched on to this reading of Nero, it is difficult if not impossible to pin all of the problems of a state, particularly one as vast as Imperial Rome, on the missteps of one man. Even if Nero were responsible for every single weakness in the Empire at that point, the people would still have to be held accountable for allowing the society to persist in such a state. Persius recognizes the conventional anti-Neronian wisdom, albeit in reverse, asking, “*egregium cum me vicinia dicat,/non credam?*”<sup>26</sup> Just as Alcibiades wants to believe that he is great if everyone tells him so, so too do anti-Neronians want to see the Emperor as a problem because others are saying so. What others say is not necessarily what one should believe.

While it is not necessarily easy to see the multiple layers of criticism in the fourth satire, understanding why the author chose to compose the poem in such a fashion is yet more difficult. The sub-textual targets of the poem – those who were hypercritical of Nero – were clearly too consumed with anti-Neronian opinion to engage in self-reflection, and it is likely that Persius himself would not have been able to make an overt attack on their sensibilities. This would not have been due to any personal danger, but simply because an undisguised attack would have never even been considered by those whom he was trying to reach. Thus, Persius employs Socrates as his surrogate speaker in order to better drive home his point. If Socrates, who was considered one of the most introspective and self-reflexive of all teachers, is unwilling to examine his own flaws because Nero is so easily targeted,<sup>27</sup> then there is absolutely no hope for the anti-Neronians to turn their attention inwards, either. If the reader is curious as to why Persius chose Socrates, then the answer is simple: if even Socrates cannot focus on anything except

---

<sup>25</sup> Freudenburg, *Satires of Rome*, 191-192

<sup>26</sup> IV.46-47, “If the neighborhood tells me that I am excellent,/can I not believe it?”

<sup>27</sup> Freudenburg, *Satires of Rome*, 189-190

Nero, then no one can. Thus, Socrates moves from being the trusted narrator to the object of attack in the poem, and the reader is left wondering who he *can* trust. The answer, of course, is himself, if he would only look inside.

Persius' fourth satire is deceptively straightforward. It exists on three levels: first, the attack on Alcibiades and his ilk by Socrates; second, the understanding that Alcibiades is simply standing in for Nero; and third, the realization that Socrates is engaging in the very same lack of self-reflection that he is criticizing others for. While it is extremely tempting to leave an analysis of the poem at the second level – particularly in the modern era, when much of what is left about Nero is profoundly negative criticism – it is only scratching the surface of the poem's meaning to do so. If, in fact, the reader *does* stop there, then he is himself implicated in Persius' criticism. At the same time, one should respect the anti-Neronian argument as valid, for it was obviously a prominent opinion in antiquity, and quite probably in Persius' own lifetime as well. What one should do is not disregard the argument out of hand, but recognize that there is more to the poem than cheap shots at Nero. As Persius says, in attacking, we open ourselves up to attack, and in the fourth satire Persius is exploiting the advantage, attacking his own narrator to make a deeper and more thought-provoking point than he otherwise might have. The poem does not operate on all three levels because it can, but because it has to. Only by recognizing the outward focus of his own gaze can the reader endeavor to turn it inward. Even in his attack on his narrator, however, Persius is not engaging in his *own* self-reflection, and thus indicts himself in his own argument. The narrator is merely a stand-in for the author, and any true introspective metaphor is left as Socratically-centered. The poet, however, has pre-empted his own argument by engaging with his own self in the previous satire. It is probable, then, that the third satire precedes the fourth

specifically because Persius makes himself the object of criticism. After his own descent into the self in 3, he can safely exhort others to do the same in 4.

### *Chapter Two: Satire 3*

At this point, it is beneficial to examine how Satire 3 preemptively solves the problem created in Satire 4. The third satire is Persius' exercise in self-criticism, in keeping with the challenge that he issues to his audience in his next poem. The poet achieves a great measure of this self-reflection by making himself the critical target of an imagined "other." In doing so, he gains a new insight into his own ideals. Satire 3 has been called "a wake-up call to study philosophy,"<sup>28</sup> but such a statement is overly-reductive and inadequate if one does not push beyond it. Just as Satire 4 is as much a warning against over-zealous outward criticism as it is a sociopolitical critique of decadence, Satire 3 is equally concerned with philosophy's failure to be a social cure, and with the lack of social awareness exhibited by the younger members of society. The arguments of the *comes*, while sensible insofar as they are opposed to the exaggerated excesses the speaker describes, are also irrational in their excessive fondness for philosophy, particularly Stoicism, as an alternative moral framework. By allowing the audience to see the scenario from multiple perspectives, Persius simultaneously validates and condemns both sides of the argument.

For such a complex poem, Satire 3 begins rather inauspiciously. Persius opens with "*Nempe haec adsidue*,"<sup>29</sup> which initially seems to imply that the presentation of his satires themselves is now becoming routine or habitual. It is possible that Persius simply may have seen fit to acknowledge that fact. There is also the more pragmatic reading that Persius is simply

---

<sup>28</sup> Reckford, *Recognizing Persius*, 63

<sup>29</sup> III.1, "It seems that this is routine."

commenting on the repetitive nature of his youthful hangovers, which is strongly suggested by the fact that the original narrator has slept in until “*quinta dum linea tangitur umbra.*”<sup>30</sup> Establishing the fact that the adopted persona of Satire 3 is frequently hungover is vital to the audience's understanding of the poem as a whole. If the reader is presented with a character who seems to *deserve* a scolding, then the *comes'* speech becomes less uncomfortably accusatory and more morally satisfying. It is essential to create a comfortable environment for the reader immediately, for the imagined other of this satire, “*unus comitum,*”<sup>31</sup> starts off with a sharp and almost derogatory inquisition: “*en quid agis?*”<sup>32</sup> The *comes* clearly does not approve of the young narrator's actions, and his curt tone is meant to both capture his companion's attention and, he hopes, rouse him into action. This disapproval makes far more sense if the poet's vices are indeed *adsidue*, as opposed to a one-time over-indulgence. Regardless, the narrator is briefly energized by the mention of the time (*verumne? Itan? Ocius adsit/huc aliquis. Nemon?*),<sup>33</sup> but subsequently flounders, at which point the *comes* begins his own diatribe.

The *comes'* primary concern in Satire 3 is the perpetuation of what he sees as fatal personal degradation. The first image that the speaker give the reader, a description of someone he views as an embodiment of such moral failing, is both grotesque and unsettling:

Non pudet ad morem discincti vivere Nattae.  
Sed stupet hic vitio et fibris increvit opimum  
pingue, caret culpa, nescit quid perdat, et alto  
demersus summa rursus non bullit in unda.

It is not shameful to live in the style of slovenly Natta.  
But he is numbed by vice and fatty fat covers his  
liver, he is devoid of guilt, knows not what he has lost, and

---

<sup>30</sup> III.4, “until the fifth line has been touched by shadow.”

<sup>31</sup> III.7, “one of my friends.”

<sup>32</sup> III.5, “O, what are you doing?”

<sup>33</sup> III.7-8, “Truly? Really? Quickly, someone/come here. No one?”

he has sunk so deep that he no longer bubbles back on the surface.<sup>34</sup>

Natta's physical decay is meant to coincide with his moral decay. When Persius refers to Natta's sinking (*alto demersus*), he is not suggesting that the character is literally drowning, but rather that his moral failings are “drowning” him in his own excess. While modern society preserves the concept of moral “sinking” – for example, to “sink so low” as to do something shameful – the author is creating a much more literal manifestation of the same idea. As Natta sinks morally, he finds himself in danger of drowning in his own spiritual filth. In the same way that the fat covers his liver, he is submerged in moral failure, albeit without his conscious knowledge. He is, as the speaker says, numb to his own misfortune. If he cannot recognize his problem, then he cannot possibly ever hope for a solution.

What the *comes* sees as the most tragic part of this representation is the inability of Natta and those like him to be conscious of the moral danger that they are in. In Natta's case, it is numbness combined with ignorance (*nescio quid perdat*) and a lack of shame (*caret culpa*) that prevents him from recognizing his own sorry state. The *comes* presents another character in a similar state later on in the poem; this character is aware of his own sickness, but does not understand the cause (*Inspice, nescio quid trepidat mihi pectus et aegris/faucibus exsuperat gravis halitus, inspice sodes*).<sup>35</sup> Unlike Natta, this character is not numbed by vice; he knows that there is something wrong with him, but he cannot understand why. His lack of understanding will prove to be his undoing, for within fifteen lines the character is laid out dead in a coffin after suffering an unspecified attack at a friend's party.<sup>36</sup> This is, for the *comes*, the most serious

---

<sup>34</sup> III.31-34

<sup>35</sup> III.88-89, “Examine me, I don't know what agitates my chest, and my throat/is sore, the breath rises hard, examine me if you please.”

<sup>36</sup> III.92f

implication of the moral shortcomings of his contemporary society. The excesses and vices of the day are not just unsavory, they are literally fatal. If left unchecked, then society will wind up like that poor moral deviant, laid out flat on a bier, with feet sticking towards the door, slathered in perfume to the last.<sup>37</sup>

If the moral failings of society are represented as a disease, then there may also exist some kind of cure for it. If the characters described by the narrator are considered ill, then someone may exist who is morally “healthy.” Because the moral ills of society manifest as physical malady in this poem, someone who is physically fit must also be morally fit. This is a concept that Persius the Student latches on to very literally (*Tange, miser, venas et pone in pectore dextram;/nil calet hic. Summosque pedes attinge manusque;/non frigent.*)<sup>38</sup> If he is not in the same sorry physical state as the other characters that the *comes* describes, then he must not be guilty of the same spiritual shortcomings. The *comes*, however, swiftly disregards this idea, arguing that Persius the Student *should* be more energized now that the *comes* has just spent the past few minutes agitating him (*nunc face supposita fervescit sanguis et ira/scintillant oculi*).<sup>39</sup> In addition, Persius the Student awoke with a rather nasty hangover only a few minutes prior, which can be taken to mean that he is not as healthy as he believes that he is, either morally or physically. If the health of Persius the Student can be called into question, then he clearly must pay heed to the *comes*' advice to ensure that he does not wind up like Natta or the moral deviant.

Much critical ink has been spilled over the years in the quest to discover whether or not Persius is in fact manufacturing a dramatic conversation between himself and a critic, or whether

---

<sup>37</sup> III.103-106

<sup>38</sup> III.107-109, “Touch, idiot, my veins and put a hand on my chest;/it is not fevered. Feel the tips of my feet and my hands; they are not cold.”

<sup>39</sup> III.116-117, “Now, when a flame is put under you, the blood boils and the eyes flash with anger”

the third satire is meant to be read more metaphorically than literally.<sup>40</sup> For these older critics, the extent of the literalism of the poem was of great importance. The problem with such an emphasis on biographical “reality” is that it really adds little or nothing to an analysis of the poem as such.<sup>41</sup> Whether or not the conversation in Satire 3 actually draws from Persius' own life is of no consequence; what is important is how the author makes himself the subject of criticism in an overt and physical way.

It is actually through his own body that the satirist finds a complete and economical means for expressing his poetic consciousness. His body, besides functioning as a social instrument, is thus an intertextual device, useful for making comparisons with other poets and texts.<sup>42</sup>

Persius does not target himself in his own poetry because it is convenient, or because it would be some sort of quaint experiment in form; the author is using his own body as a mirror, reflecting the arguments made by the *comes* back onto his own audience. By removing his own typical authorial immunity, Persius is opening up new avenues of criticism. If the author himself is not above suspicion, then his audience most certainly isn't, either. The audience must both heed the overt invocation of philosophy as a cure for the moral shortcomings of society, as well as understand that philosophy alone cannot solve the problems of society. The vulnerability that Persius creates in his audience in Satire 3 will be exploited in Satire 4, a poem that is, at least in part, a critique of criticism itself. Socrates finds himself ultimately unable to change Alcibiades' moral outlook as the inadequacies of philosophy move from the abstract to the concrete, and the audience is forced to consider the worth of the method of criticism itself, which is, in this case, Stoic logic.

---

<sup>40</sup> Hooley, *The Knotted Thong*, 202f.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, 204f.

<sup>42</sup> Barchiesi and Cucchiarelli, “Satire and the Poet: the body as self-referential symbol.” *The Cambridge Companion to Roman Satire*. 207-223. 209-210.

The nature of the advice given in Satire 3 may appear at first to be thematically different from the reader's perspective. The fact that it is the *comes* and not Persius himself who is inveighing against moral ills sets this satire apart from the rest. In the first satire, for instance, the poet sets himself up as the primary speaker, in part by revealing that the second participant is merely hypothetical. If the second participant only exists to be the theoretical adversary in his argument, this implies two things: first, that Persius either cannot find or does not want to find someone to contest his views; and second, that the imaginer – Persius himself – is the one who is understood to have the “correct” viewpoint. In the third satire, however, it is the *comes* who takes up the role as primary speaker, and Persius is relegated to a position similar to the one in which he places his own adversary in the first satire. Persius also emphasized that he – as Persius the Student – is considered a part of the group against whom the *comes* rails by using *stertimus* to describe the snoring of the blacked-out youths, of whom he was certainly one, and by twice using *querimur* to describe the complaints of those youths about their pens. The young students are not meant to be sympathetic characters, and Persius makes sure that the reader understands that he is a part of them. One can thus infer that the “correct” perspective has been supplied to the *comes* in this particular instance as opposed to Persius himself, who always prevails in the other satires. In the case of the third satire, Persius is a “spoiled student,”<sup>43</sup> and it is his imagined other who must set him on the right path.

The idea of “the right path,” however, is misleading. As is often the case with Persius, what the characters say is not always what the author wants the audience to ultimately take away from the poem. The *comes* clearly has his own conception of “the right path,” which he lays out rather explicitly:

---

<sup>43</sup> Reckford, 79

discite et, o miseri, causas cognoscite rerum:  
 quid sumus et quidnam victuri gignimur, ordo  
 quis datus, aut metae qua mollis flexus et unde,  
 quis modus argento, quid fas optare, quid asper  
 utile nummus habet, patriae carisque propinquis  
 quantum elargiri deceat, quem te deus esse  
 iussit et humana qua parte locatus es in re.

Learn, o miserable ones, and know the causes of things:  
 what we are and what way of life we were born for, what order  
 has been given to us, or when and where we make a smooth turn around the post,  
 what the measure of silver is, what it is right to wish for, what use  
 a rough coin has, how much is appropriate to bestow upon the fatherland  
 and the dearest, what is judged by Jove to be  
 for you and in what part of human things you have been placed.<sup>44</sup>

These are perhaps among the most famous lines of Persius, if only because they have been so frequently quoted without context, going back as far as the time of St. Augustine.<sup>45</sup> What many have read as a call to attend to the gods – or, more curiously, the Christian God – is in fact the detailing of the *comes'* moral ideal. He abruptly changes from a personal dialogue to a general criticism, saying “*discite et, o miseri, causas cognoscite rerum.*” Only a few lines prior, the *comes* had still been focused on Persius, and says “*stertis adhuc laxumque caput conpage soluta/oscitat hesternum dissutis undique malis.*”<sup>46</sup> It could be that the *comes* is speaking now to the other students, who may just be waking up. Less superficially, it is also possible that Persius began to move away from his original project of self-deprecation at this point. Line 66 could indicate the turning of the poet's attention from the personal to the societal level. This society-level criticism is what Persius eventually settles on, and the scope of his discussion increases as his audience does. The poet moves from chastising a sleepy student to calling upon all people to

---

<sup>44</sup> III.66-72

<sup>45</sup> Reckford, 64

<sup>46</sup> III.58-59, “For this you snore, and your lax head with joint unhinged/yawns for yesterday with jaws utterly unstitched.”

understand the causes of their own misfortunes. This is the moral definition against which subsequent characters in the *Satires* will be judged, beginning with Persius himself.

Unfortunately for the *comes*, the mindset that he proposes is a completely unreachable ideal. If the reader looks closely at the passage, he sees that what Persius lays out is a laundry list of unknowable things: the purpose of our own lives, what our destinies are, what it is appropriate to desire, and what the gods have planned for us. There is absolutely no way for a mortal to concretely answer any one of those problems, let alone all of them. This is, in fact, largely the point: for as much as the *comes'* arguments against social excesses are to be lauded, the alternative that he presents should be strongly challenged. The audience who accepts what the *comes* says at face value would be guilty of the same refusal of self-reflection that Persius discusses in Satire 4. The reader who is engaging with the text beyond the superficial level will recognize the impossibility of the *comes'* exhortation; not even the greatest philosopher, he will think to himself, has all of those answers. As if to reinforce that very point, Persius presents the fourth satire from the perspective of none other than Socrates, who himself falls short of causing social improvement via his own philosophy. While he criticizes the social lack of self-reflection, he is himself refusing to engage in a self-reflexive act. In Satire 3, Persius is actually going further than Socrates in this respect by opening himself up to overt criticism. In doing so, the author is demonstrating both how he fulfills his own ideal, and how he simultaneously falls short of it.

The self-reflecting act is an attempt to examine himself *before* examining others, both literally and figuratively. Even though the *comes* is presented as a separate entity, he is nothing more than a different manifestation of the same consciousness, namely Persius himself. The

*comes'* criticism becomes Persius' criticism. That also means, however, that the flaws of the *comes* also become Persius' flaws. It is, in fact, impossible to make a value judgment of one's own self, because no one can judge himself without a bias. Most ironically, the observer of Persius' behavior with the most potential for impartiality is, in fact, another person. In order to critique himself, Persius must first hold up a sentient mirror to himself. This is why it was essential to create the *comes*: the conversation has to maintain the illusion of genuine criticism, or else the audience will become too acutely aware that Persius is criticizing himself. If that were to happen, the audience can subsequently disregard the poem as one man's examination of his own failings. By making the argument more concrete, everyone can hear the ideals of the *comes*, and thus can recognize just how impossible they are to fulfill.

In addition to his own unreasonable ideals, the *comes'* position is undercut by the very nature of his relationship to the narrator of Satire 3. He is, by virtue of his existence, a *comes*; that is to say, he is a companion of Persius who is likely of an age with him. Since Persius never lived to see his thirtieth birthday, it is easy to assume that the characters of the poem are rather young. If this is the case, then the *comes* is not speaking from a position of experience, but rather from one of assumed superiority. The only noticeable difference between Persius and the *comes* is the latter's perspective, and the *comes* sounds very tonally similar to the persona that Persius adopts in his other satires. He has the same anger, the same directed vitriol, the same grotesque language. He is essentially the same persona that Persius uses in the earlier poems, but called by a different name. Unlike Socrates in Satire 4, the main speaker of Satire 3 is nothing more than a pretentious brat; when he first appears, the only discernible difference between the *comes* and Persius is that the former does not share the latter's hangover. His similarity to earlier

incarnations of Persius, combined with his own youth, serves to make the *comes* a distinctly unreliable source of wisdom in the poem.

It has been said that the third and fourth satires are closely related in their treatment and their theme,<sup>47</sup> a statement which is, generally speaking, accurate. Insofar as the two poems are at their most fundamental level critiques of critics, they are almost identical. Where the difference lies between the two is in what is being said by the poems on all levels. Satire 3 is a meta-critical attack, but it is also still a valid critique of perceived social failings. Just as there is a valid point made in Socrates' attack on Alcibiades, the *comes* has a respectable and defensible position in his own diatribe. The physical maladies of the age are certainly disgusting, and if it is at all possible that the moral failings of society are the cause, then the Roman people obviously need to change their own lifestyle. That does *not* mean, however, that Stoicism is the answer or the cure. In order for the satires to reach their full figurative potential, there must be both literal and metaphorical merit to the presented arguments. While the *comes* is an unreliable commentator, he still expresses a legitimate desire for social betterment when he lays out his ideals. If the reader is able to dismiss the initial standpoint of the poem without engaging it, then he can never find the more covert message within the satire. Put another way, the audience cannot recognize that the critic is supposed to be questionable unless they question him first. This is not to say that the poem *can* exist as both a valid social critique and a critique of the critic; rather, the poem *must* exist this way. By occupying both spaces simultaneously, the poet ensures that everything can be questioned, and thus the final understanding of the poem's meaning rests not with Persius, but with the reader. The reader can choose to take the arguments of the *comes* at face value, or he can question the reliability of the narrator and find an entirely different perspective. The ingenuity

---

<sup>47</sup> Reckford, "Studies in Persius," *Juvenal and Persius*, 17-56. 33.

lies in the fact that in either scenario, the reader has been successful in his attempt to understand the poem.

Without the subtextual argument, Satire 3 is little more than a cheap attack on a weakened, hungover student; the audience may very well find themselves sympathizing with the student instead of the *comes*. What makes the *Satires* worth reading is that, at the moment when the audience questions the main speaker of the poem – if they choose to do so – the perspective of the reader changes. If the satire is presented to the audience like a marionette show, then the reader can now see the puppet master, and the show itself becomes less consequential. The reader can recognize that the entire scenario is artificially constructed, and that if the third and fourth satire are almost identical in their superficial critique, then the author must have intended for the reader to see beyond the initial subject of criticism. The attacker is now placed under scrutiny just as the victim was before, and both sides are implicated in the same moment. However, the *comes* is not critiqued on the same level as the Narrator, similarly to Socrates in Satire 4. If both characters are extensions of Persius, then a portion of the poet's self is escaping examination. The ideal that Persius presents concerning self-reflection is proven to be just as impossible as the *comes'* list of unachievable Stoic ideals. The *Satires* gain the most power by forcefully occupying this middle ground. In giving a voice to both victim and attacker, Persius eventually condemns them both.

### *Chapter Three: Satire 1*

Within his *Satires*, Persius “challenges us to read deeply, to find meaning hidden inside his words, half-expressed, less in what we read, than in the ways of our reading.”<sup>48</sup> Satires 3 and 4 are, as has already been discussed, criticisms of the critic and of the self disguised in an attack

---

<sup>48</sup> Freudenburg, *Satires of Rome*, 159.

on another. The first satire completes the sentiment expressed in later satires by asserting that value judgments of any kind are entirely personal and subjective phenomena,<sup>49</sup> and while they can be discussed with others, one's opinions are ultimately his and his alone. Much like in his later satires, the author emphasizes his point by personifying it: the primary speaker of Satire 1 is making broad value judgments of contemporary poetry that ultimately fail to convince the opposing speaker of his point. A reader can experience the poem superficially and find himself despising the poetry of Neronian Rome, or he can find the deeper meaning within Persius' writing and discover that a more enlightened worldview begins with the knowledge can truly be criticized beyond the self. Put another way, knowing the world begins with knowing oneself.

Certain critics think of the first satire as “a traditional program poem, setting forth the principles, limits, and goals of the satirist's art.”<sup>50</sup> On a perfunctory level, this is true. Persius' discussion of criticism and the self will play out over the entire course of his *Satires*, and the first is an introduction to the idea that outward criticism is an ultimately vain and useless endeavor. As much as it is a conceptual introduction, however, it is also the first time that the reader experiences the character of Persius the Narrator. The poet uses the first satire as an opportunity to establish the biting tone of the Narrator that will carry through the remainder of the *Satires*. The use of a two-person dialogue is essential to the creation of a directed invective in 1; if Persius the Narrator had been the sole contributor in the first Satire – as he is in the second – he would appear to the reader to have a more general displeasure as his ire would lack a certain focus without a concrete opponent. This statement, however, is problematic to an extent because Persius, by his own admission, invents the second person in the dialogue. He calls him “*quisquis*

---

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 158

<sup>50</sup> Hooley, *The Knotted Thong*, 26

*es, o modo quem ex adverso dicere feci.*”<sup>51</sup> As a result, both perspectives stem from the same authorial voice, and the so-called “dialogue” is merely a pedagogical construction entirely told from the Narrator's perspective. Persius is, from the very beginning, arguing with himself. He switches between the two personas as the dialogue requires, and in the end no one is shown as the clear victor, even though the primary speaker does get the last word. The author cuts the discussion off before the poem can come to a satisfying conclusion, and the reader is left wanting more.

The vague nature of this imagined interlocutor has been alluded to by other critics, but it is impossible to concretely say what the character does or does not represent. Among the more compelling arguments is the idea that the interlocutor is “a hypostatized inner self, the conventional 'reasonable' poet, set over against the radical iconoclasm of the satiric 'Persius.'”<sup>52</sup> Put more plainly, the imagined other in the first satire is the voice in Persius' head given flesh; it is his common sense. Reckford puts forth a similar idea, saying that the interlocutor is a concerned friend who is trying to gently urge Persius away from writing satire and towards a genre that is less inflammatory.<sup>53</sup> While there is a fundamental weakness in this theory – the dialogue between the two characters is, with the Narrator's frequent insults of the Interlocutor, simply not friendly – it is not without its merits. Given Persius' inclination to engage in self-criticism, it is probable that the interlocutor represents, on its deepest level, part of Persius' own sense of taste. He is entertaining the idea that there are certain advantages to the poetry of his day – the imagined other never explicitly states that contemporary poetry is “better” than the kind of poetry that Persius enjoys – while simultaneously convincing himself that the benefits of

---

<sup>51</sup> L.44, “Whoever you are, who I made to speak in the opposing fashion.”

<sup>52</sup> Hooley, *The Knotted Thong*, 26

<sup>53</sup> Reckford, *Recognizing Persius*, 20

thoughtful writing outweigh the costs. Satire writing can be a risky affair if one is not careful about what he says about whom, but Persius is always vague enough to provide plausible deniability for any specific attacks.

When the author gives his reader a concrete physical description of the interlocutor, it is one of an old and decrepit man. He describes him as having sagging skin and aching joints (*articulis...et...cute perditus*),<sup>54</sup> with a generally sickly appearance about him (*pallor seniumque*).<sup>55</sup> The author, by contrast, is writing the *Satires* while still in his twenties, and would appear in stark contrast with the interlocutor. The contrast drawn between the young, spry Narrator and the old, broken-down interlocutor would almost automatically incline the audience towards the Narrator's opinion. As modern critics have pointed out, “the poet's physical appearance...played an important role in figuring and expressing the moral and literary character of his work.”<sup>56</sup> Even if the Narrator is not actually Persius himself, he is still a representation of the man, a persona that he adopts for his writing. He is a different character in personality, but not in form. While it may be difficult to initially accept such a bold statement at face value, it has been said by critics that “orality is the missing dimension in interpretations of Persius.”<sup>57</sup> It is likely that Persius, had he lived to see the publication of his work, would have recited his satires in an at least semi-public setting, and those who had their own copies of his work after its publication likely had the poems read to them by servants.<sup>58</sup> The speaker, then, strikes a bold and resonant contrast to the interlocutor, and immediately undercuts the latter's position. The interlocutor is described as weak, and much more importantly, it is impossible for him to actually

---

<sup>54</sup> I.23, “with joints and skin having been decayed”

<sup>55</sup> I.26, “pale and worn-out”

<sup>56</sup> Barchiesi and Cucchiarelli, “The body as self-referential symbol,” *Roman Satire*, 207-223. 209.

<sup>57</sup> Reckford, *Recognizing Persius*, 22

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid* 25

come and defend his opinion. Even though the argument is presented between two people, the reader interacts with the satire through Persius and Persius alone.

Line 44 is intended not only to establish the fact of the interlocutor's unreality, but also to clearly state that the Narrator sees the interlocutor's opinion as incompatible with his own. Two lines later the phrase "*non ego.../laudari metuam*"<sup>59</sup> appears. This is a direct response to an earlier point made by the imagined other that "*pulchrum est digito monstrari et diciet 'hic est.'*"<sup>60</sup> While it is true that Persius the Narrator does not fear praise, he certainly appears to have a distaste for it. This is because the kind of praise that is offered by the contemporary public – a praise based entirely on the value judgments that the author already sees as misguided and subjective – means nothing to him. The Narrator does not need other people to affirm the fact that he is himself; he could do that alone any time he wished. What's more, public attention is not always positive. The imagined adversary, for instance, has some sort of defined taste, for he values contemporary poetry over that of Vergil.<sup>61</sup> If even a poet as revered as Vergil is not universally adored, then no poet can reasonably expect to have the kind of beloved reputation that the Neronian poets are aspiring to. The solution that Persius suggests is that poets write for themselves, and produce their poetry before an audience if they happen to write something worth sharing (*non ego cum scribo, si forte quid aptius exit,/quando haec rara avis est, si quid tamen aptius exit,/laudari metuam.*)<sup>62</sup> The poets of the age are not necessarily universally bad, but they are playing out every single bit of their poetry in the public eye, regardless of quality, to the point that much of the meaning of poetry itself is lost.

---

<sup>59</sup> I.45,47, "I do not.../fear praise."

<sup>60</sup> I.28, "But it's beautiful to be pointed out with a finger and for them to say, 'that's him.'"

<sup>61</sup> I.96-97

<sup>62</sup> I.45-47, "I do not, when I write, if something good comes out/ – that would be a rare bird – but if something good comes out,/fear praise."

Persius' main objection to the interlocutor's opinion, then, is the idea that contemporary poets are not writing for themselves, but for others. He says,

Scribimus inclusi, numeros ille, hic pede liber,  
 grande aliquid quod pulmo animae praelargus anhelet.  
 Scilicet haec populo pexusque togaque recenti  
 et natalicia tandem cum sardonyche albus  
 sede leges celsa, liquido cum plasmate guttur  
 mobile conlueris, patranti fractus ocello. [...]
   
 tun, vetule, ariculis alienis colligis escas[?]

We write in isolation, this book in verse, that one in prose,  
 grand things which only a copious lung of breath can gasp out.  
 Certainly you will at last read this to the people, combed and in a fresh toga  
 and wearing your birth-ring of sardonyx, dressed in white, from atop  
 the platform, after you have rinsed the pliant throat with  
 liquid affectation, captivated by your shivering eye. [...]
   
 Why, old man, do you collect edible things for other people's ears[?]<sup>63</sup>

The idea of writing alone is not what Persius takes issue with. It would be unreasonable to do so; with few exceptions, writing is a solitary process. The problem that Persius sees is when things are made in isolation for the express purpose of public consumption. The image that the author presents has little to do with the poetry itself; the poet has become the center of attention, not his poetry. With the work in such a secondary position to the craftsman, poetry becomes little more than a vehicle for fame and renown, and the personal quality of the writing is all but lost. Persius' own writing seeks to be a counterbalance to this trend; the *Satires* are an intensely personal and self-critical work if nothing else. This is a large part of why Persius insists that he is *not* a poet in his prologue (*nec fonte labra prolui caballino/nec in bicipiti somniasse Parnaso/memini, ut repente sic poeta prodirem.*)<sup>64</sup>. If Persius wants to be considered anything, it is a *semipaganus*, someone who exists between the urban and rural social spheres. By occupying the “middle

<sup>63</sup> l.13-18, 22

<sup>64</sup> Pro.1-3, “I have neither washed my lips in the horse-stream/nor have I remembered sleeping on two-headed/Parnassus, that I might thus be, crawling, a new poet.”

ground” as a half-citizen, he can draw the attention of all of the groups he exists outside of, and then turn all of their attentions back on themselves. He does not want his audience to associate his own writing with that of his contemporaries, because he wants them to listen to the substance of his writing instead of just praising his style.

Indeed, style appears to be what the average Neronian audience cares about most. Persius, through the interlocutor, poses the question, “*quis populi sermo est?*”, to which the Narrator responds, “*quis enim nisi carmina molli/nunc demum numero fluere, ut per leve severos/effundat iunctura unguis.*”<sup>65</sup> Simplicity is the critical word of the day; the more seamless a poem appears, the more well-received it is by the audience. In order for a poem to be so seamless, it must almost by necessity be rather simple in content. Persius' own writing is extraordinarily complex, and one would be hard pressed to find a single person who would argue that the poems always flow well. Modern critics have called him “fragmented” and even “psychedelic” in nature, but this does Persius a certain disservice. He is writing exactly the type of poetry that the average audience would absolutely revile, and in doing so, he captures their attention beyond the fleeting moment. His work is messy, complex, and vitriolic, and in writing it, he makes everyone stop and stare. His poetry does not just give the audience pleasure by going in one end and out the other (*tunc neque more probo videas nec voce serena/ingentis trepidare Titos, cum carmina lumbum/intrant et tremulo scalpuntur ubi intima versu.*).<sup>66</sup> They must engage with his poetry on a personal level to reach even a superficial level of understanding. By making himself stand out, he ensures his own preservation.

---

<sup>65</sup> I.63-65, “What is the opinion of the people? ' What indeed, that poetry now/at last flows with smooth meter, so that severe nails/flow with smoothness over across the joints.”

<sup>66</sup> I.19-21, “then, you will see huge Tituses tremble with neither respectable manner/ nor calm voice, as poems enter/their backsides where their inmost parts are tickled by verse vibrations.”

What all of the Neronian love of praise indicates is that contemporary audiences suffered from a severe lack of confidence. The interlocutor even warns the Narrator, “*vide sis ne maiorum tibi forte/limina frigescent: sonat hic de nare canina/littera.*”<sup>67</sup> There is no willingness to challenge powerful people for fear of personal retribution, which is part of why, in the poet's mind, contemporary poetry has become so facile. A society that is overly concerned with the approval of others will never challenge anyone for fear of the repercussions. This is largely due to the immense shadow which Nero was casting over the Roman society of the day. The emperor was everywhere, and no matter what one's personal opinion of the man was, it was not politically “smart” to mock him publicly. Persius, for his own part, does not care, and will not be silenced to please others, even the emperor. His poetry is not *for* others, it is for himself. He happens to believe that it is good enough to be shared with other people, but if he thought otherwise, then the “conversation” that the Narrator is having never would have occurred in the first place. Persius believes that he has something to say that is worth saying, and that it is worth the audience hearing it. With that in mind, the interlocutor never had any chance of dissuading the Narrator; if he was at all concerned with what other people thought, then he would not have been reciting his poem, and he certainly would never have become a satirist. The satirist allows for many things, but acceptance of the status quo is rarely one of them.

In what might seem to be a contradictory move, the poet begins his satire with an example of exactly the kind of poetry that he wishes to avoid; it is smooth and plaintive, but it lacks substance. He begins,

O curas hominum! O quantum est in rebus inane!  
 Quis leget haec? Min tu istud ais? Nemo, hercule. Nemo?

---

<sup>67</sup> I.108-110, “beware that the thresholds of the great/do not grow cold towards you: you will hear there the snarl/of a dog.”

Vel duo vel nemo. Turpe et miserabile. Quare?  
 Ne mihi Polydamas et Troiades Labeonem  
 praetulerint? Nugae.<sup>68</sup>

Oh, the cares of men! Oh how great the emptiness of things!  
 Who will read this? Are you asking me? No one, by Hercules. No one?  
 Perhaps two, perhaps no one. That's foul and miserable. Why?  
 Because Polydamas and the Trojan women puff up Labeo,  
 not me? Nonsense.

The Narrator draws the attention of the interlocutor by using that which he detests; that is to say, a line of over-stylized, melodramatic poetry. On a strictly formal level, the opening line is extremely odd. The line is broken up into two short sentences, and if one scans the line, he will find that the caesura should fall right after *hominum*. The grammatical caesura does in fact fall here – this is where the break in the sentences occurs – but the poet chooses to elide over it and not allow the reader a pause between sentences when reading aloud. Thus, the sentences themselves mix together, and the entire phrase becomes an enormous muddle (*O curas homino quantumst in rebus inane*). Saying the phrase aloud with all of the elisions becomes a challenge, and one strains to keep the sense of it when speaking. A Neronian audience, however, may very well have praised the fact that the two sentences run together. The adversary asks *quis leget haec*, to which the Narrator responds *min tu istud ais? Nemo, hercule*. It's an honest answer on the surface, but it becomes deceptive upon closer examination. Both of the narrator's statements contain an elision in the middle. When spoken, the sentences would sound much more like *min tustud ais? Nemercale*. Even in his response, the Narrator is eliding with irregular frequency. Additionally, he is making a pragmatic statement: no one will read poetry like that of Line 1 precisely because no one *does*. Since the poet has surpassed the poem in importance, audiences would rather *hear* their poetry than *read* it. When the Narrator responds *vel duo, vel nemo*, he is

---

<sup>68</sup> I.1-5

not being self-deprecating, he is being realistic.

Finally, in line 3, the interlocutor is drawn into Persius' presentational style, responding with *turpe et miserabile*. The elision between *turpe* and *et* is minor, but it is still worth noting that after eliding three out of his first four sentences, the Narrator does not elide again until line 6. From this point onward, the style of the poem remains in keeping with the rest of the *Satires*, with no obvious attempts at overwrought elision. Even when the interlocutor and the Narrator are quoting examples of contemporary poetry between lines 93 and 102, their examples do not have any elisions. The first two lines, then, are intended to be read as “bad poetry” which will draw the audience – and by extension, the interlocutor – into the poem. Lest there be any doubt, Persius' opinion of contemporary poetry is clear. He says that “*summa delumbe saliva/hoc natat*”<sup>69</sup>; the words literally float, and cannot sink down into our hearts and minds. The audience can hear the contrast between Persius' poetry and popular poetry for themselves, and make their own subjective judgments on the matter. In the end, the audience is the only body with any decision-making power on the public perception of value, and then only because they are a collection of individuals. Persius takes it upon himself to demonstrate the poetic contrast and attempt to convince his listeners – or readers – individually that his style has the most substance. If the audience really takes the first satire to heart, then there is a possibility that the poetry of Labeo and his ilk will fall out of favor and a new, more personally critical audience will arise.

Ironically, or perhaps appropriately, the style which Persius is writing in opposition to is largely concerned with complaining. Of contemporary poets, he says, “*sive opus in mores, in luxum, in prandia regum/dicere, res grandes nostro dat Musa poetae.*”<sup>70</sup> While there is nothing

---

<sup>69</sup> I.105-106, “this stuff swims/weak on the saliva.”

<sup>70</sup> I.67-68, “Whether his work is to speak on morality, on luxury, on the banquets/of lords, the Muse gives our poet

necessarily wrong with the act of complaint – Persius engages in more than his fair share of it in his own work – it is all complaint with praise as its goal, not help. The typical poet who opposes the excesses of the rich, for example, is not seeking to sway public opinion, but to garner public affection (*crimina rasis/librat in antithetis, doctas posuisse figuras/laudatur.*)<sup>71</sup> This undercuts not only the poet's own writing, but the poetry of the age in general. Once again, the poet has superseded the poetry. What the Narrator finds far more moving is, unsurprisingly, genuine poetry (*verum nec nocte paratum/plorabit qui me volet incurvasse querela.*)<sup>72</sup> The man who should be complaining is the one who has a problem; if it turns out that he is producing poetry, then so much the better. Poetry is not a necessary condition for lamentation, nor is it a sufficient one. More importantly, the personal complaint is just that: personal. If everyone is endeavoring to find something to criticize, then all criticisms eventually ring with the same hollow tone. Unless lamentation is reserved for those who have something to lament, it loses its meaning. Even though the individual is the focus in a true lament, the audience is focused on aiding the individual lamenting, not judging him or those whom he speaks of.

It is through complaint that Persius seeks to turn the gaze of the audience inward towards themselves, away from facile contemporary poetry. Even though criticism of contemporary poetry is his vehicle, his true focus is, as always, on self-criticism. His metaphors, particularly lines 17-21, which liken the experience of poetic recitation to sex, are intended to shock and disorient the audience out of their stupor of constant, uncritical praise.<sup>73</sup> This is Persius' true complaint against contemporary poetry: the audience is so focused on the poet, and the poet so

---

grand things.”

<sup>71</sup> L.85-87, “he balances the accusations/in smooth antithesis, and he is praised for making clever/expressions.”

<sup>72</sup> L.90-91, “he will utter a true lament,/not one made the previous night, who wishes to bend me.”

<sup>73</sup> Freudenburg, *Satires of Rome*, 164

focused on the audience, that neither party is paying any attention to themselves. If Persius views the morals of his current society as being warped, it is because the members of that society have allowed themselves to be led by the desires of others, rather than their own personal compasses. As Persius himself says, “*non, si quid turbida Roma/elevet, accedas examenve inprobum in illa/castiges trutina nec te quaesiveris extra.*”<sup>74</sup> This statement may seem, at first, to be hypocritical; if Persius is making such a strong argument against contemporary poetry, it is difficult to imagine how he is *not* stepping in to correct the balance of faulty scales. Upon further reflection, however, one understands that the poet's goal is not to challenge the overarching trends of Roman poetic taste. Rather, he is trying to ensure that his listeners are not looking for personal satisfaction outside of their own selves.

The Rome of Persius' day had one citizen who was famous for his own social hyper-awareness above all others: the Emperor Nero himself. Nero was himself an aspiring artist, musician, and even Olympian athlete. Whatever creative endeavor he undertook, his people always praised his immense skill. As it is highly unlikely that Nero was nearly as much of a virtuoso as his subjects had him believe, there is a strong probability that many of the empty compliments Persius cites in the first satire were payed in similar form to Nero. While Persius is not pointing directly at Nero as the cause of the lack of self-awareness in Rome, it would appear that the repetition of empty praise for Nero has become a more general practice; in other words, for the critics, everyone is as critically unassailable as the emperor. It is this idea of immunity for immunity's sake that Persius is pushing against; it is not wrong to tell someone that his work is bad if it is bad. What's more, one would not have to say such things if artists were self-conscious

---

<sup>74</sup> I.5-7, “if turbid Rome/disparages something, do not approach to correct the improper balance/in those scales, and do not search outside yourself.”

enough to discern for themselves what of their work, if anything, is of actual value. This self-awareness begins with the understanding that the only person that anyone ever has to please is himself.

*Conclusion: Rewind, Replay*

After proceeding backwards through the *Satires*, one gains a better picture of what Persius intended going forwards. The exploration of the self, discussed obliquely Satire 1, is demonstrated by the poet on himself in Satire 3, and then turned outward towards the audience in Satire 4. Alcibiades is functioning as a warning to the audience in the fourth satire; he was, according to surviving accounts, a man of no true personal conviction, and just as few scruples. Alcibiades' chief concern was the social preservation of Alcibiades. Similarly, Nero's chief concern appears to be the legacy of Nero. Persius' contemporary audience, then, may become just like Alcibiades or Nero if they do not change their ways. There is danger in living for the praise of others without heeding the desires of the self; eventually, one becomes an empty vessel. Empty vessels can be filled with any sort of idea, and Persius exploits this fact. By exhorting his audience to turn their individual gazes inward, Persius fills the empty vessel with the substance of the self. An audience who is self-aware is an audience full of opinions, and an audience full of opinions can very quickly become a body of profound influence in the sociopolitical life of Rome. Persius, though is not so concerned with *what* people's personal convictions are, so long as they *have* them. The only true loss, for the poet, is living without a sense of self. Without the self, there is no self-awareness, and without self-awareness, there is no true life.

This is not some high-minded social ideal for Persius to share with the philosophical elite, but rather something that he feels needs to be said for the benefit of all Roman citizens. He

emphasizes in his first satire how important it is to present one's poetry in public only if one feels that it is worthy. Similarly, he is wholly unconcerned with the style of poetry, far preferring the substance. If the importance of self-awareness is indeed the poet's ultimate message, then it has long been overlooked by critics. Most prefer, ironically enough, to focus on Persius' angry persona or explicit style, leaving his implicit intent woefully under-analyzed. In fairness, though, it has already been said that Persius is successful because he is able to occupy “the middle ground” so effectively. Critics are not wrong in examining Persius' style, nor is it right to wholly disregard style in favor of substance. Because Persius understands that criticism is, at its core, subjective, he must necessarily operate with multiple levels of meaning. That is what makes an effective satirist: both the explicit persona and the implicit message make logical sense to the reader, and the reader can choose to accept or ignore what he will.

It is unlikely that there were many people in Nero's Rome willing to say what Persius felt needed to be said. Nor, moreover, were there many people who would listen even if he said them. Persius presents himself, then, as not a poet, but a *semipaganus*, a half-citizen. He stands in between cultural spheres and calls attention to all first by calling attention to himself. When he has his audience, he forces their attentions inward. Even if they can't stand his speech, even if they hate every word he says, they will have some idea of *why*. Persius will give them all opinions, whether they want them or not. The only reason that the poet is writing at all is because he felt that it needed to be done; someone had to say something. The entire composition of the *Satires* is, in part, hypocritical because it is concerned with the betterment of others rather than of Persius himself, but the poet has never excluded himself from his own criticism. Thus, when he asks the famous question, “who doesn't have ass' ears?,” the answer is a resounding *Nemercule*.

We are all of us asses in one way or another, so we need to stop braying and, just for a while, mule things over.

## Works Cited/Consulted

- Barchiesi, Alessandro, and Andrea Cucchiarelli. "Satire and the Poet: the Body as Self-referential Symbol." *The Cambridge Companion to Roman Satire*. Ed. Kirk Freudenburg. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2005. 207-23. Print.
- Braund, Susanna Morton. *The Roman Satirists and Their Masks*. London, UK: British Classical, 2007. Print.
- Freudenburg, Kirk. *Satires of Rome: Threatening Poses from Lucilius to Juvenal*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001. Print.
- Hooley, Daniel M. *The Knotted Thong: Structures of Mimesis in Persius*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 1997. Print.
- Littlewood, Cedric. "Integer Ipse? Self-Knowledge and Self-Representation in Persius Satires 4." *Phoenix* 56.1/2 (2002): 56-83. *JSTOR*. Web.
- Persius. *The Satires of Persius. Juvenal and Persius*. Trans. Susanna M. Braund. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2004. 41-125. Print.
- Reckford, Kenneth J. "Studies in Persius." *Persius and Juvenal*. Ed. Maria Plaza. Oxford, UK: Oxford UP, 2009. 17-56. Print.
- Reckford, Kenneth J. *Recognizing Persius*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2009. Print.