

**“I Am Whatever You Say I Am . . .”:  
Satiric Program in Juvenal and Eminem**

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I. INTRODUCTION: METHODOLOGICAL QUESTIONS

Literary satire has always lent itself well to comparative study, if only because so many of its characteristic traits seem peculiarly stable across time and place. In another era, one might have been tempted to speak of indignation, mockery, and ironic self-righteousness—to name only a few of satire’s continually recurring elements—as human universals, and so to believe that as long as people find artistic outlets to represent their experience, there will always be something instantly recognizable as satire. By now, of course, we are all well aware of the theoretical pitfalls of such essentializing, but no amount of critical sophistication will hide the fact that the history of satire, at least in the West, forms a remarkably coherent generic continuum in which an *ars saturica* can be readily identified even among works that otherwise differ radically in literary form and substantive details. While the term “satire” tends to indicate today, especially in academic literary criticism, a rather circumscribed group of canonical authors—from Horace and Lucian to Boileau, Swift and beyond—who self-consciously present themselves as “satirists,” the history of literature across many cultures and chronological periods is replete with innumerable examples of other authors who may be “satiric” without being labeled “satirists.” It is perhaps understandable that most comparative work on satire restricts itself to those in the first category, that is, those who are seen to be working in a similar tradition as bona fide “satirists.” There is a certain logic, after all, to considering a poet such as Horace alongside a Dryden, or comparing Juvenal to Swift: the later writers in such pairings already have a sense of their place within the long tradition of a well delineated literary genre, and this consciousness of a literary past, even when it is vague or ill-formed, helps the critic make sense of the continuities or discontinuities we may detect when two such works are compared.

Comparing satirical works, however, that appear to operate according to similar poetics, but which cannot possibly have any historical, or even formal, connection with one another presents an even greater challenge to critics, who must suddenly shift from a consideration of "Satire" to one of "the satirical."<sup>1</sup> Such a methodological shift can be immensely unsettling, insofar as it forces us to formulate an entirely new set of questions, many of which, if they are answerable at all, would require the expertise of scholars well removed from literary studies. If, for example, we find that a passage of political satire in a play of Aristophanes from 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE Athens seems to work within its own context analogously to the political satire of a nondramatic text centuries later, how do we evaluate their relationship? If we cannot say that it is historical, is it then merely coincidental? Is it sufficient to say that such texts are "intertextual?" This move may indeed exonerate the critic from the charge of illegitimate historicism, but in the process it begs other questions about what allows us to juxtapose two such works in the first place and claim that they are somehow related. Matters are further complicated when there is a great dissonance not only between the *form* of two comparanda (say, an epigram of Martial and a sketch by Monty Python's Flying Circus), but also between the social and cultural dynamic of both works in their respective historical moments. If we want to say, for example, that the satires of Persius (1<sup>st</sup> C. CE) show a didactic pretense akin to that occasionally found in the satirical television sitcoms of late twentieth-century America, does it make a difference in our assessment of this putative affiliation that the former work was composed with an élite, educated audience of Roman men in mind, while the latter reached—through a technological medium unknown to antiquity—untold millions of people whose social background was far from monolithic? Can the same critical approaches, in other words, be applied to the satire of "high" and "low" culture alike, i.e., to satire intended, on the one hand, for a highly restricted audience and, on the other, for a highly popular one?

Confronted by such a daunting set of hermeneutic conundra, it is no wonder that scholars have not often systematically pursued the question of how (or—an even more intractable question—why) substantively and formally divergent works of satire might be related to one another, and why such a comparative approach might be fruitful to begin with. This is, however, precisely the sort of pursuit we were moved to undertake in this

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<sup>1</sup> There is a large bibliography on theories of satire and the satiric, on satire as a genre, a mode, an attitude, etc. For a useful survey, see Dustin Griffin, *Satire: A Critical Reassessment* (Lexington, KY: U of Kentucky Pr, 1994), 1-70.

essay when we were struck by the various ways in which two very different satirical authors—the ancient Roman satirist Juvenal and the transgressive hip-hop lyricist of our own day, Eminem—so often seem to draw on a common poetics, especially when it comes to their strategies for presenting the satirical self and for constructing a very specific relationship with their audiences. Beyond this, we also found striking resemblances in their respective deployment of satirical tropes of anger and indignation, *ressentiment* and ironic abjection.<sup>2</sup> In a case such as this, when it is all but meaningless to speak of a literary “influence” of the one or the other, one wonders all the more what to make of such connections in such disparate loci. In this essay, however, we hope to show that a systematic comparative analysis—addressing both resemblances and discontinuities—of the ways in which Juvenal and Eminem construe the nature of their poetic activity can deepen our understanding of how each author should be interpreted within his own cultural context. Although one might say that all comparative literary criticism strives for this goal in some sense, it is particularly useful in the case of satirical works, which tend to be highly localized with respect to time, place, and *dramatis personae*. Furthermore, because the satirist’s voice is routinely subjective and relentlessly insistent that its perspective is autobiographical, “success” depends on how well he can convince an audience that the reality proffered in the poetry before them is coterminous with their own, despite whatever formal or generic markers actually mediate their experience of the poet’s reality. Comparative approaches to satirical works, therefore, offer a useful corrective to the genre’s seductively centripetal pull towards the poet’s subjectivity and the specific temporality in which it is implicated. If, for example, we find several satirists in different historical periods adopting similar poetic stances, tropes, or conceits, we are more easily encouraged to understand each author’s work properly as a production informed by certain formal and aesthetic dynamics rather than by the various contingent and idiosyncratic circumstances so often invoked, disingenuously, by the authors themselves.

In the case of Juvenal and Eminem, their vast differences might be more apparent than their similarities: Juvenal wrote, as we might put it, “high-brow” poetry, which drew on a roster of poets already classicized by

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<sup>2</sup> For “*ressentiment*” and “abjection” as tropes associated with satire, see especially, Michael André Bernstein, *Bitter Carnival: Ressentiment and the Abject Hero* (Princeton: Princeton U Pr, 1992). Bernstein’s notion of *ressentiment* ultimately derives from Nietzsche’s philosophical and psychological formulation of the term (see, e.g., *Genealogy of Morals*, 2.11), although Bernstein is particularly interested in the relationship between literary (i.e., fictionalized) and “real” *ressentiment*. For further bibliography on *ressentiment*, see Bernstein, 208-209 note 32.

his own time<sup>3</sup> and intended (one assumes) for an audience of educated, presumably male, élites. Juvenal himself was known to have received formal rhetorical training and this background is evident in both the subject matter and poetic style of his satires. He often engages in the sort of literary parody that only a relatively small group of cognoscenti would be able to apprehend, and his moralizing is usually informed by at least a basic understanding of the various ancient schools of ethical philosophy.<sup>4</sup> By contrast, Eminem is a phenomenon of American popular culture, carefully crafted by record company executives into a commodity that will appeal to a target demographic of adolescents and young adults with a taste for transgressive rapping set to infectious beats. Unlike Juvenal, Eminem shows only moderate interest in politics, and even less in “philosophy,” preferring instead to cast himself in the role of the criminal misfit, violent, erratic, possibly insane, and on the surface, anyway, antagonistic to most values of mainstream culture. Eminem’s fantasies on *The Marshall Mathers LP* involve murder, drugs, and unaestheticized, mechanical sex, and offer a detailed, overpowering autobiographical construction that makes even Juvenal’s fairly aggressive self-presentation seem reserved.

One could continue in this vein for pages pointing out the differences between the works of these two authors, many of which can easily be ascribed to the cultural milieux in which they each worked and presumably (though this is less accessible to us) to artistic temperament. But perhaps it is precisely *because* there are so many obvious differences between the two that the continuities seem so profound. In what follows, we will focus primarily, though not exclusively, on explicitly programmatic pieces by each poet, Juvenal’s first satire and Eminem’s “The Way I Am,” (from *Eminem: The Marshall Mathers LP*)<sup>5</sup> in an attempt to show that,

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<sup>3</sup> Such poets included not only his extant satiric predecessors Lucilius, Horace, and Persius but also poets representing a wide range of literature from epic to comedy, both Greek and Roman.

<sup>4</sup> In fact, although Eminem himself may be less explicitly parodic than Juvenal, other hip hop artists often engage in the same sort of esoteric parodic intertextuality familiar in the Roman satirists. Some of these artists could be enormously popular, despite the playful construction of intertextual relationships intelligible only to a very small group of cognoscenti. One vivid example of this can be found in the relationship between Snoop Doggy Dogg’s “Who Am I” from his 1993 work *Doggystyle*, and George Clinton’s “Atomic Dog” from his 1982 recording, *Computer Games*. Snoop’s song is an elaborate parody of the earlier Clinton piece, but the parody was largely lost on the public and even most critics. For discussion, see Ralph M. Rosen and Donald R. Marks, “Comedies of Transgression in Gangsta Rap and Ancient Classical Poetry,” *New Literary History*, 30 (1999): 910-12.

<sup>5</sup> Aftermath Ent./Interscope Records 069490629-2, 2000.

despite the many differences of detail in form and content, their satires operate according to a system of remarkably analogous poetic structures and dynamics. By this we mean that at the most fundamental level of literary architectonics and authorial self-fashioning, both poets can be seen to compose along parallel lines. Indeed, we would contend that all satirical works in one way or another raise *a priori* the question of the author's identity and its particular relationship with an audience, and, as we shall see, Juvenal and Eminem pose and confront this question in ways that continually illuminate each other.

### I. JUVENAL AND THE COMPULSION TO SATIRIZE

Satire typically implies criticism, both in the etymological sense as a form of "judgment," and in the more familiar negative sense as a form of disapproval. One of the most common conceits of satirists, of course, is that their criticism of the world around them is ingenuous and spontaneous: it is "easy" to bring oneself to satirize because the general condition of things is so obviously "bad." Sometimes the poet is exercised by trivial absurdities—people's petty hypocrisies and silly behavior, perhaps—other times he claims to be moved by a profound indignation at his perception of moral decay. Either way, this attitude is the first step in the formation of the satirist's distinctive relationship with his audience, a relationship which implies a more intimate bond between the two parties than exists in virtually all other literary genres. We say this for two reasons: first, satire's very premise of the "obvious," that everything it complains about is readily perceptible to anyone with eyes to see and ears to hear. Thus, the satirist assumes that his audience will share in his indignation with little resistance<sup>6</sup> and will regard them as (to use Linda Hutcheon's term) a knowing "in-group."<sup>7</sup> Second, the very act of complaining, blaming, mocking, etc. implies a didactic posture, for why else complain unless you believe—however disingenuously or ironically—that your audience will be edified by what you say?<sup>8</sup> Even the mere act of

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<sup>6</sup> We should perhaps clarify this statement: the relationship we are speaking of here is one constructed and implied by the satirist. We do not mean to say that a *real* audience for his satires will or must agree with him, only that the pretense within the work is that they would and must.

<sup>7</sup> See Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge. The Theory and Politics of Irony* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 52-56.

<sup>8</sup> Again, it is important to emphasize that we mean only that the satirist constructs this didactic conceit in accordance with the expectations of the genre. Whether or not a

"agreeing" with the stance of the satirist can be construed as an act of "learning" in the sense that one can only agree to what one has first come to know. It makes little difference whether an audience is assumed to have been "persuaded" by the substance of satire or whether they come to the satire having already formed for themselves the same views, for either way, the satirist's work is premised on a sympathetic audience whose "knowledge" of the world will be parallel to his own.

From this construction of an intimate, knowing audience, however, a troubling paradox arises: if the guiding pretense of satire is its treatment of the "obvious," and if the audience is construed as a natural, ingenuous ally of the satirist, what is the function of the work's poetic form? *Poetic* satire, after all, gives the lie to any conceit that a satirist is simply "telling it as he sees it," venting from sheer, spontaneous desperation. The satirist may want to convince an audience that they bear witness to an unmediated "conversation" with them, but as soon as his utterance is fashioned into poetry, a layer of *formal* mediation is introduced, which distracts, if it does not thoroughly undermine, the work's claims to realism and sincerity.

Horace played with this issue several generations before Juvenal by pointing out, with tongue in cheek, that his satires, which he revealingly referred to as *Sermones* ("Conversations"), were really nothing more than what his title implied—mere "conversations"—and were not worthy to be considered poetry at all.<sup>9</sup> This kind of writing, he notes, may bear a formal resemblance to poetry, with its fixed metrical quantities and rhythms (*tempora certa modosque*, 58),<sup>10</sup> but one could easily rearrange the words without much damage to the integrity of the poet or poem: reword a satire and you still end up with essentially the same satirist. High epic, by contrast, requires adherence to strict formal protocols, and tinkering with the arrangement of the words is equivalent to tearing apart the poet's limbs. Here, then, Horace articulates clearly the central tension between the satirist's putative desire to represent unmediated, spontaneous experience (hence his claim that satire is nothing more than "pure conversation," *sermo*

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satirist cared about edifying anyone is another point, largely inaccessible for ancient poets in any case.

<sup>9</sup> ". . . And you can't call that man a poet who writes like I do, namely stuff more like a *conversation*. Rather you should reserve that honor for the man who has talent, a god-like mind and a voice destined to say profound things" (. . . *neque si qui scribat uti nos / sermoni propria, putes hunc esse poetam. / ingenium cui sit, cui mens diviniior atque os / magna soniturum, des nominis huius honorem.*) *Serm.* 1.4.41-3.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Horace, *Serm.* 1.4.46-7: ". . . except for the fact that it differs from conversation in having a fixed metrical foot, it's pure conversation" (. . . *nisi quod pede certo / differt sermoni, sermo merus*).

merus, 47), and the fact that his work constitutes a literary act that necessarily compromises any claims to spontaneity. Horace himself in this poem wants to believe that he can have it both ways, as if to say "no, no, it may *look* like poetry, but it's really not; it's more like plain conversation and therefore reflects my 'real' feelings about the world." But the fact remains that he *has* chosen to compose in a poetic form, and what is more, he takes pains at the opening of the satire to situate this form in a long poetic tradition that stretches back to the Greek poets of Old Comedy.<sup>11</sup> For Horace, the question of whether satire is "real" poetry or not is, appropriately enough, little more than a disingenuous jeu d'esprit,<sup>12</sup> a conceit of mild abjection intended once again to enlist an already sympathetic audience in the satirist's struggle against a hypothetical group of critics, perennially predisposed by the genre itself to misunderstand his work.

In his first Satire, Juvenal constructs a similar relationship with his audience, and creates the same set of theoretical problems by fixating on the autobiographical inspiration of his work. Like Horace, Juvenal looks back on a venerable tradition of earlier satirical poets (here, Lucilius and Horace himself), but at the same time insists that his anger at the world leaves him no choice but to compose satire. Horace's *indignatio* is far more muted than Juvenal's, of course, but his insistence that satire is mere conversation is groping for a similar conception of satire as an unmediated mode of social criticism. After self-consciously paying homage to his generic heritage in lines 19-21, Juvenal proceeds to act as if he would be writing satire even without them for guidance. For, in the face of all the vices of contemporary Rome, he famously exclaims, "it's difficult *not* to

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<sup>11</sup> *Eupolis atque Cratinus Aristophanesque poetae, / atque alii quorum comoedia prisca uirorum est, / si quis erat dignus describi quod malus ac fur, / quod moechus foret aut sicarius aut alioqui / famosus, multa cum libertate notabant . . .* ("The poets Eupolis, Cratinus and Aristophanes, and other writers of Old Comedy, if any one deserved being recorded for being a villain and a thief, for being an adulterer or an assassin or infamous for any other reason, they would mark him with great freedom of speech . . ."). On Horace's relationship with the poets of Greek comedy, see Richard LaFleur, "Horace and *Onomasti Komodein*: The Law of Satire," *ANRW* 2.31.3 (1981): 1790-1826, and Kirk Freudenburg, *The Walking Muse. Horace on the Theory of Satire* (Princeton: Princeton U Pr, 1993), 86-92. In the next century, Persius, in his first satire, also looked back to Old Comedy (1.123-25): . . . *audaci quicumque adflate Cratino / iratum Eupolidem praegrandi cum sene palles, / aspice et haec, si forte aliquid decoctius audis* (" . . . and any of you inspired by the bold Cratinus, or who blanch at the wrath of Eupolis along with the great old man himself [i.e., Aristophanes], see if you hear something more cooked down in these verses . . .").

<sup>12</sup> At line 63, he quickly changes the subject, saying that he will look into the matter of whether he is actually writing poetry at some other point (. . . *alias, justum sit necne poema . . . quaeram*)

write satire! For who could be so complacent about the wicked city, so iron-clad, as to contain himself when . . . " (*difficile est saturam non scribere. nam quis iniquae / tam patiens urbis, tam ferreus, ut teneat se / . . . cum . . .* 30-2). Indeed, later in the satire Juvenal even laments his inability to express his seething anger with as much freedom as his poetic predecessors could, a stance that makes two opposing points at once: first, it pretends that his anger is so sincere that he cannot possibly express it without complete freedom of speech; but second, it highlights the fact that whatever he expresses in his satires is in some sense a function of a literary genre:

. . . utere uelis,  
totos pande sinus. dices hic forsitan "unde  
ingenium par materiae? unde illa priorum  
scribendi quodcumque animo flagrante liberet  
simplicitas . . . ?" (149-53)

. . . use your sails, spread out their whole expanse. Perhaps you'll say, though,  
"where's the talent equal to the substance? Where's that frankness we find in the  
old poets of writing whatever they pleased with fiery spirit . . . ?"

Juvenal here, in other words, plays with the notion of *materia* as both the objective experience of social vice, the things that happen out there in the world around him, and the literary content of earlier satirists. What was originally the objective experience of his predecessors, and the inspiration for their own satires, becomes from Juvenal's perspective literary *materia* to which he now has to measure up in his own work. Such, at any rate, seems to be the effect of juxtaposing the mention of *materia* with the effort of earlier satirists in the same verse. Earlier satirists, he says, had access to an unadorned, direct form of expression (*scribendi . . . simplicitas*), so that when they felt the same immediate anger at the world (their *animus flagrans*), they too, for their part, could also claim that their responses were unmediated, even though Juvenal inherits them as *literature*. In wondering whether his own talent (*ingenium*) is equal to the subject matter at hand (*materia*) and then drawing the audience's attention to the *materia* of earlier satirists, Juvenal situates himself in a direct relationship with his literary forebears and blurs the distinction between his status as sufferer and as self-conscious artist.

Juvenal's main regret in this passage is the restraint on his *literary* expression: unlike his predecessors, he cannot satirize openly and must limit his attacks to the dead. Indeed, in the final lines of the poem, Juvenal introduces an imaginary interlocutor to make the point that satire is a



dangerous *genre* to undertake because it will likely ruffle the feathers of its targets and land the satirist in serious trouble.<sup>13</sup>

Satire is explicitly compared to traditional epic, which is deemed by the interlocutor to be a much safer poetic practice, for as soon as one attacks openly with the *licentia* that Lucilius felt was his prerogative, one's very life was at risk:

†securus licet Aeneas Rutulumque ferocem  
 committas, nulli grauis est percussus Achilles  
 aut multum quaesitus Hylas urnamque secutus:  
 ense uelut stricto quotiens Lucilius ardens  
 infremuit, rubet auditor cui frigida mens est  
 criminibus, tacita sudant praecordia culpa.  
 inde ira et lacrimae . . .” (162-68)

“it’s safe for you to pit Aeneas against the fierce Rutulian, the wounded Achilles won’t bother anyone, nor will Hylas, much sought after when he got lost looking for his pitcher. As many times as blazing Lucilius roared, as if with sword drawn, the listener whose mind is cold with knowledge of his own crimes blushes, his heart sweats in its silent guilt. Then follows anger and tears . . .”<sup>14</sup>

In the light of such dangers, therefore, Juvenal famously declares in the last lines that he will attack only the dead (. . . *experiar quid concedatur in illos / quorum Flaminia tegitur cinis atque Latina*, 170). Scholars have long viewed

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<sup>13</sup> In Horace’s and Persius’ programmatic poems too, the abiding function of the interlocutor is to warn the poet of the dangers of satire: so Horace is warned in *Serm.* 2.1. 61 by the legal expert Trebatius: *metuo . . . maiorum ne quis amicus/ frigore te feriat* (“. . . I’m afraid one of your fancy friends might give you a good chill”), and Persius’ interlocutor (1.108-9) similarly warns of the potential renunciation of *amicitia*: *uide sis ne maiorum tibi forte / limina frigescant* (“. . . take care that the doors of your fancy friends don’t freeze you out”). So by the time Juvenal wrote, this warning is so much a part of the satiric heritage that Persius can refer to the appearance of his interlocutor as a mere formality, making fun of the convention of the imaginary objector at 1.44: *quisquis es, o modo quem ex aduerso dicere feci* (“Whoever you are, you whom I’ve created to speak an opposing point of view. . .”). In Juvenal the threat is amplified. As the interlocutor warns at 155-57, a particularly gruesome death awaits one who satirizes the prominent—burning at the stake: *pone Tigillinum, taeda lucebis in illa / qua stantes ardent qui fixo gutture fumant, / et latum media sulcum deducit harena* (“. . . Single out Tigellinus, and you’ll blaze out on that pyre where men stand and burn and smoke with throats skewered, and where your corpse drags a wide furrow through the middle of the arena”). But, as in the programmatic offerings of Juvenal’s satiric predecessors, the advice of the interlocutor is humorously undercut—that is, one wonders what danger Nero’s *praefectus praetorio* (dead since 69 CE) could pose to a satirist writing in the reigns of Trajan and Hadrian.

<sup>14</sup> That is, “anger” from the listener who has been attacked, and “tears” from the poet, who will be attacked by his incensed target.

this claim as exaggerated and disingenuous,<sup>15</sup> since it seems to contradict the thrust of the entire poem, namely that his contemporaries are so wicked that he has no choice but to satirize them. But these final lines of the satire once again highlight the paradox of satire as both putatively lived experience and sheer artifice. The narrator may, on the one hand, lament the fact that he cannot write satire as it really should be written (i.e., *ense stricto*, in the manner of Lucilius), but on the other hand, the very fact that he feels compelled to make this statement in the first place implies that what he *would* say if he could—that is, what he “really” feels driven to write—is so toxic that it would surely get him into trouble. We end up, therefore, with an elaborate *praeteritio*: the poet claims to feel “genuine” *indignatio* and wants to write in a preexisting genre; the genre demands open attack (which would consist of *poeticized* satire), but because Juvenal fears that his attacks would get him into serious trouble, he cannot live up to the *echt* satire that the genre demands and which his putative predecessors were able to practice.<sup>16</sup> Why? Because the content of *his* satire would clearly be too “real,” deriving as it does from his “genuine” experience. So the very act of denying that he can *write* satire as he ought to on account of the depth of his *indignatio* actually calls attention (if indirectly) to his success in doing so in the satire that he *does* write. Even the lament that he cannot name names in his satires is in keeping with the stance of abjection that Juvenal adopts throughout the poem: first he has to fight to be heard above the din of bad poets, and then there is the added liability of having to avoid

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<sup>15</sup> See Susanna Morton Braund, *Juvenal: Satires Book 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge U Pr, 1996), 119: “. . . all three (of Lucilius’ successors) contrive ingeniously varied evasions with which their satiric *personae* (and, by extension, perhaps, they themselves) can avoid the charge of being a menace to society and thereby putting themselves in danger”; also p. 120: “These gaps between the speaker’s claims and his practice combine with his final self-betrayal in the closing lines to hint that he is no paragon of virtue (though he clearly casts himself in this role) but a spineless and petty bigot.”

<sup>16</sup> Lucilius, at least, was able to pull off the kind of overt aggression that Juvenal claims to desire for his own poetry. Horace’s attempts to act like Lucilius were heavily ironized, but there is no question that Juvenal regarded him in a direct Lucilian line. See Braund (above, note 15), 88, ad Juv. 1.51, and Kirk Freudenburg, *Satires of Rome. Threatening Poses from Lucilius to Juvenal* (Cambridge: Cambridge U Pr, 2001), 100, who notes that when Horace tried to act like Lucilius, “. . . he never quite gets it right. Instead he manages to look very different, like someone trying, but clearly not up to the task of delivering, the Lucilian goods.” This is particularly evident in *Serm.* 2.1, which signals a Lucilian program for the second book that Horace never really pulls off. This has been a notorious dilemma for scholars, most recently discussed in Freudenburg (100-117), who ultimately locates the “real satire” of the book precisely in the jarring effect that Horace’s “compliance” to social ~~pressures~~ <sup>pressures</sup> would have had on an audience who had been expecting (as a result of the opening poem) satire in a more Lucilian vein.

satirizing living people! In the end, however, such stances of poetic enfeeblement seem calculated—paradoxically, and so, humorously—to stake a strong claim for the very power of his satire, since they inevitably imply, in their turn, claims of self-righteousness and a sense of moral urgency.<sup>17</sup>

### I. EMINEM'S JUVENALIAN PROGRAM

Juvenal's first Satire, therefore, features a continual interplay between claims of artless spontaneity, highly self-conscious poeticizing, and oscillating postures of abjection and arrogance. Virtually all of these elements, as we have seen, occur in the earlier Roman satirists and, in fact, they can also be found in one way or another in other forms of Greco-Roman poetry that relied on satirical tropes, such as the Greek iambus, Athenian Old Comedy, Catullan "iambi," or Horatian Epode.<sup>18</sup> For antiquity, at least, such poetic devices can be readily seen as a function of specific generic dynamics, even as the poets themselves continually insist that what drives them is personal experience rather than art. To experienced scholars of literary satire, of course, it will come as no surprise to find that this *mise en abyme*, in which the satirist's subjectivity is generated by *a priori* generic demands, while the genre itself requires the pretense of an independent subjectivity, is hardly idiosyncratic to the Classical tradition nor indeed limited to literary traditions that are historically affiliated with one another. What might be somewhat surprising, however, is how two chronologically and culturally unrelated satirists, such as Juvenal and Eminem, adopt highly similar poetic strategies in the strikingly analogous ways that they do.

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<sup>17</sup> For a recent discussion of the end of Juvenal's first Satire, with all its apparent paradoxes and contradictions, see Freudenburg (above, note 16), 234-42. As he states of the satires in the first book, ". . . They bluster on about being relevant and risk-taking when, in fact, they are all too flaunting of their failure to address the present. The failure is felt most keenly at the end of the first satire, and no amount of scholarly patchwork has been able to fill the cracks completely." Juvenal's "failure to address the present" certainly owes much to the historical contingencies of second-century Rome, but Freudenburg exaggerates its uniqueness (234). Horace, after all—as Freudenburg himself discussed (see previous note)—wrestled with the same issue in a slightly different form in his ambivalence about "acting Lucilian," and the conceit of *Serm.* 2.1 that satirists should worry about legal recrimination for their work is a functional precedent for Juvenal's alleged fears of satirizing living persons at the end of his first satire. As we argue, such anxieties seem to be deployed ultimately in the service of a more common satirical stance in which the poet simultaneously aggrandizes and restrains himself ("my satire is *so* incredibly effective that I can't really say it without fear of the law . . .").

<sup>18</sup> See Freudenburg, (above, note 11), 52-108, on the ancient generic theorizing that informed Roman satire (and Horace in particular, the focus of Freudenburg's study).

The title alone of Eminem's song, "The Way I Am," foreshadows the apologetic program that will be played out at length in the lyrics, drawing the audience's attention to the poet's subjectivity and preparing them to consider his "nature" as the cause of his behavior. The opening lines confirm our expectations, as the speaker traces his *indignatio* all the way back to his birth:

I sit back,  
 with this pack  
 of Zig-Zags  
 and this bag  
 of this weed,  
 it gives me  
*the shit needed*  
*to be the most meanest*  
 mc on this . . . on this earth . . .  
 and since birth  
*I've been cursed*  
*with this curse*  
*to just curse*  
 and just blurt  
 this berserk and bizarre *shit that works*,  
 and it sells  
 and it helps  
 in itself  
 to relieve  
 all this tension.  
 Dispensin'  
 these sentences,  
 getting the stress  
*that's been eatin' me*  
*recently off*  
 of this chest.  
 And I rest again  
 peacefully . . .

On the one hand, Eminem would like us to believe that he is simply constitutionally predisposed to engage in satire ("since birth I've been cursed with this curse to just curse and just blurt . . ."), and that by venting his spleen, he is able to calm himself down.<sup>19</sup> But, as in Juvenal, any

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<sup>19</sup> Horace claimed to be similarly doomed to satirize—and unable to rest peacefully until he had done so—in the opening of *Serm.* 2.1, where he tells his friend Trebatius that if he had to stop writing satire he would never be able to sleep (" . . . *verum nequeo dormire*"; " . . . but [if I stop writing satire] I can't sleep", l. 7); Trebatius recommends in response swimming the Tiber three times and drinking plenty of wine to cure his insomnia ( . . . "*ter uncti / transnanto Tiberim, somno quibus est opus alto, / inriguumque mero sub noctem corpus habento* . . ." 8-9). On ancient theorizing about the therapeutic and quasi-medical effects

notion of a "natural" satirical bent is quickly compromised by the clear signals that his satire is equally (if not exclusively) a function of premeditated generic decisions. First of all, it bears mention that the entire song is cast in a metrical form quite unusual for rap—a continuous succession of unresolved anapests (˘ ˘ —, ˘ ˘ — . . .), a fact that makes the song feel highly contrived, despite the claim that he has no choice but to "just blurt" out his unmediated thoughts. Even beyond the form itself, however, Eminem is completely inconsistent about the origins of his satire, for despite his one claim that he comes by satire "naturally," he notes in the first two lines that his inspiration derives from smoking marijuana: ("I sit back, with this pack of Zig-Zags and this bag of this weed, / it gives me the shit needed to be the most meanest MC on this earth . . ."). The peculiar implication here is that he requires *external* stimulation to turn him into the most successful satirist possible ("the most meanest MC"). Even if we do choose to believe that he is a "natural" satirist, it is clear that the *composition* of satire does not necessarily come "naturally" to him. He needs what he refers to as "shit," a rather bland obscenity under ordinary circumstances, but here freighted with generic significance: while it obviously refers to a drug-induced high, it also represents the poet's literary wherewithal, as both the state of mind and the substance necessary for the composition of satire. A sober Eminem, in short, does not write *poetry*, no matter how angry he may claim to be.<sup>20</sup>

Juvenal, of course, does not mention any need for altered states as a prerequisite for literary composition,<sup>21</sup> but his own allusions to the origins

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of satire, see F. Bellandi, *Persio: dai "Verba Togae" al solipsismo stylistico: studi sui Choliambi e la poetica di Aulo Persio Flacco* (Bologna: Pàtron, 1988), 34-38.

<sup>20</sup> In addition, the fact that Eminem describes his output as "shit" plays on the trope of satire as substandard and nugatory, as a kind of low-down and dirty genre. Juvenal's own designation of satire at 1.86 as *nostris farrago libelli* drives this point home: it refers not only to the etymology of *satura* as an eclectic mixture of foods but more pointedly to swill fit only for animals. See Braund (above, note 15), 95-96, and Christine Schmitz, *Das Satirische in Juvenals Satiren* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2000), 37. Juvenal and Eminem appear to be playing a similar game, adopting the stance of the "shit hero." In this sense, they both tap into the heritage of Horace's notion of his *Sermones* as *nugae*. For "shit" as a programmatic conceit of gangsta rap, see Rosen and Marks (above, note 4) 927 note 39.

<sup>21</sup> While Juvenal may not need to indulge in marijuana before composing satire, it is perhaps worth noting that drunkenness was associated with "satura" at least in some ancient circles. See Freudenburg (above, note 16) 28 note 18, who cites Pseudo-Acro's scholia to Horace's *Sermones*; also M. Coffey *Roman Satire* (London: Methuen and Co., 1976) 11 and note 1, who notes the (etymologically spurious) connection, at least in later antiquity, between *satyr* (and in turn the association between satyrs and wine) and *satura*.

of his satire play in similar ways on the unstable, sometimes contradictory, relationship between one's "nature" and poetic stimuli external to his own subjectivity. One readily thinks of Juvenal's famous declaration at 1.79-80, where he claims that if he does not have the literary skill to write satire, his deep indignation will pick up the slack: *si natura negat, facit indignatio uersum / qualemcumque potest, quales ego uel Cluuienus* ("If nature says no, then *indignatio* makes my verse, of whatever sort it can, kind of like my verses or Cluuienus"). These lines have always been read straightforwardly as a somewhat disingenuous declaration of Juvenal's satiric program, but in fact its sentiment seems humorously ambiguous. While *natura* can certainly refer to the poet's "natural" ability to write poetry, it could just as easily refer to the poet's temperament or natural character: "if I'm not constitutionally cut out for this kind of writing . . ." On this reading, the *indignatio* of the next clause—which seems at first to refer to Juvenal's subjective experience (in contradistinction to his literary talents)—strikes a different, more technical note, referring instead to the external generic demands of satire. In other words, the normal interpretation of these lines is reversed: if Juvenal has trouble writing satire because of any subjective deficiencies, he can make up for this by adopting an *a priori*, generically constructed *indignatio*. Like Eminem, however, Juvenal too wants to have it both ways: both poets want to portray themselves as so inherently angry that they are driven to write a kind of "natural satire" (the traditional reading of Juvenal 1.79-80 and Eminem's notion of his birthright "curse to curse"), but both also call into question their ability to engage in *literary* satire without the aid of external sources of technical and/or generic inspiration (Eminem's need for drugs; Juvenal as "deficient" in *natura* and his *indignatio* construed as a *technê* external to the self).

The unresolved tension between a spontaneous and a contrived literary satire is further highlighted when Eminem mentions that his allegedly heartfelt outpourings happen to "work" and "sell": (. . . just blurt this berserk and bizarre *shit that works*, / and *it sells* and it helps in itself to relieve all this tension"). It is certainly convenient that his satirical songs help to "relieve all this tension," but this would presumably never happen if he had no audience, and Eminem's allusion to the fact that his songs are successful in the marketplace essentially serves to construct the sort of relationship with a sympathetic audience that we saw in Juvenal. And so, another paradox arises: the satirist claims the necessity to vent but notes

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Cf. also above, note 19, which cites Trebatius' advice to Horace in *Serm.* 2.1 to saturate himself with wine as a substitute for writing satire.

the importance of having an audience<sup>22</sup>; but as soon as he needs to cater to an audience, he immediately undermines any notion of unmediated spontaneity. One suspects, therefore, that Eminem's description of his verse as "berserk" and "bizarre shit" is highly disingenuous, insofar as he implies not only that his temperament alone generates his verse automatically and uncontrollably, but also that his success depends on deliberately and actively encouraging his audience to perceive him as essentially insane:

The conceit in Eminem and Juvenal, then, is analogous: the poet articulates the necessity to compose satire, embraces the genre's tropes of personal attack and didactic posturing, but also complains that people incorrectly characterize it as excessively vindictive. But these complaints themselves are nothing more than comic gestures, serving to *maintain* satire's pretense as a perennially "low" genre, rather than to "correct" a popular misconception of it. Just as Juvenal's satires, as he claims in line 80, seem destined to remain associated with the poetaster Cluvenus, so does Eminem revel in the "berserk and bizarre shit" that will always set him apart from a putative norm.<sup>23</sup>

This desire to be marginalized from mainstream artistic culture (in Eminem's case, from popular culture) is readily apparent in the Roman satirists, who routinely portray themselves as engaged in an unpopular, inferior poetic endeavor. To put it more accurately, the Roman satirists like to complain that most people were suspicious of their motives and regarded satire as dangerous. Naturally, those who are worthy of censure in the first place will be the ones most fearful of the satirist, and as Horace concludes at 1.4.33, "all these fear poetry and hate poets" (*omnes hi metuunt versus, odere poetas*).<sup>24</sup> Juvenal for his part admired Lucilius's ability to instill a fear

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<sup>22</sup> Persius offers a unique, and contrasting, perspective on this paradox. While he portrays himself as fit to burst (1.11-12; 1.119-23), he also admits to the interlocutor at the very opening of the poem (1.2-3) that he may well have no audience at all, an admission which takes to the extreme *satura*'s self-definition as nugatory: "*quis leget haec? min tu istud ais? nemo hercule. "nemo?" / uel duo uel nemo. "turpe et miserabile."*" ("Who will read these things?" "You talking to me? No one, by Hercules!" "No one?" / "OK, a couple maybe, or maybe no one." "How disgusting and wretched!" . . .)

<sup>23</sup> In Eminem's most recent release, *The Eminem Show* (Aftermath Records, 0694932902, 2002), he describes himself in the opening song as "the ringleader of this circus of worthless pawns" (from "White America," track 2), setting a tone of comic, ironized abjection that pervades the entire work.

<sup>24</sup> Note also the opening of Horace's second book of Satires, (2.1.1), where he complains to his lawyer friend Trebatius that some people find his satire too bitter (*acer*): "*sunt, quibus in satira videar nimis acer . . .*" ("There are those who think I'm a little too sharp in my satire . . .").

of the satirist in his targets (. . . *rubet auditor cui frigida mens est / criminibus, tacita sudant praecordia culpa. / inde ira et lacrimae . . .* 166-68; “. . . the listener whose mind is cold with knowledge of his own crimes blushes, his heart sweats in its silent guilt. Then follows anger and tears . . .”)<sup>25</sup> even if he felt less able to emulate the latter’s *licentia*. Eminem, too, construes his lyrics as likely to be dangerous,<sup>26</sup> a point he drives home in the refrain of “Kill You” (“I’mma be another rapper dead, / for poppin’ off at the mouth / with shit I shouldn’t’ve said . . .”), and elsewhere in that song he firmly acknowledges, even more forcefully than the Roman satirists ever did, that he is, in fact, an unpleasant person who should not be crossed:

I said, you don’t—  
Wanna fuck with Shady—<sup>27</sup>  
'Cause Shady—  
Will fuckin’ kill you—<sup>28</sup>  
(from “Kill You”)

Eminem’s lyrics here are deliberately crude, and without its engaging musical context (a jagged, stop-start rhythm laid over a sarcastic, almost self-ironizing vocal intonation) it is difficult to see much in the refrain beyond a puerile desire to say nasty things. But the sentiment itself is curiously reminiscent of ancient constructions of the satirist extending back even to classical Greek literature. The Athenian comic poet Aristophanes (5<sup>th</sup> C. BCE), for example, frequently created characters who engaged in threatening, obscene invective of this sort, all in the service of a self-righteous stance<sup>29</sup> with which the poet implicitly “aligned” his satirical

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<sup>25</sup> On this passage, see above, p. 9-10.

<sup>26</sup> See also now track 12 from *The Eminem Show* (above, note 23), “Sing for the Moment,” in which Eminem, like Horace, complains that satire is feared and attacked by people who fail to understand its goals: “. . . But then these critics crucify you, journalists try to burn you, fans turn on you, attorneys all want a turn at you / To get they hands on every dime you have, they want you to lose your mind every time you mad / So they can try to make you out to look like a loose cannon. Any dispute won’t hesitate to produce handguns / That’s why these prosecutors wanna convict me, strictly just to get me off of these streets quickly . . .”

<sup>27</sup> “Shady” or “Slim Shady” are alternate nicknames for Eminem, whose “real” name is Marshall Mathers.

<sup>28</sup> See also the line from “The Way I Am”: “I’m not what your friends think, / I’m not Mister Friendly. / I can be a prick . . .”

<sup>29</sup> Since Aristophanes composed plays, the poet’s own satirical voice generally had to be “embedded” within his plots and their characters. Most of his fifth-century plays, however, featured a section called the “parabasis,” during which the chorus leader “stepped



voice.<sup>30</sup> And even earlier, the archaic poet of the Greek iambus, Hipponax (6<sup>th</sup> C. BCE), engaged in similarly aggressive posturing: (cf. e.g., fr. 120 Dg: "take my cloak, I'm going to hit Bupalus in the eye . . ."; or 121 Dg: "I'm good with both hands, and I don't miss when I hit . . ."). Indeed, an entire epigrammatic tradition subsequently arose concerning Hipponax's alleged violence and the dangers of his poetry. Several Hellenistic poems from the Greek Anthology pretend to be Hipponax's epitaph and warn people not to disturb the vitriolic poet, now at rest in death. As AP 7.408 (58 G-P) concludes, ". . . his fiery words know how to inflict pain even in Hades!" (τὰ γὰρ πεπυρωμένα κείνου ῥήματα πημαίνειν οἶδε καὶ εἰν Ἀΐδῃ). Like Hipponax, Eminem too wants to give the impression of someone likely to explode into violent (physical) attack against his targets at any moment—

If you tip me my tank is on empty.  
No patience is in me and if you offend me,  
I'm liftin' you ten feet . . . in the air.

—and the sentiment is echoed throughout Juvenal 1 every time he wonders how any right-thinking person can endure the state of the world. As he asks rhetorically at line 45, *quid referam quanta siccum iecur ardeat ira?* ("why should I recount how deeply the anger burns my heart to a crisp?").

In the case of Juvenal and Eminem in particular, it is revealing that they continually explain their *literary* marginalization as a function of their

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aside" (*parabaino*) from the main action and addressed the audience on the poet's behalf. This was an obvious moment of self-construction for the comic poet. See, G. M. Sifakis, *Parabasis and Animal Choruses*, (London: Athlone Pr, 1971) and Thomas K. Hubbard, *The Mask of Comedy: Aristophanes and the Intertextual Parabasis* (Ithaca: Cornell U Pr, 1991), 1-40. On other strategies of self-construction in Greek Old Comedy, see also, Ralph M. Rosen, "Cratinus' *Pytine* and the Construction of the Comic Self," in *The Rivals of Aristophanes*, ed. David Harvey and John Wilkins (London and Swansea: Duckworth, 2000), 23-39.

<sup>30</sup> By "aligned" we mean that an audience would be led to make the assumption that in the case of two antagonists, one was portrayed as the target—a figure worthy of blame and abuse—the other as the attacker, justified (as the plot would lead the audience to conclude) in the eyes of the poet. This should not be confused with the notion that the poet necessarily "agreed" with the views or attitude of the characters he creates to be self-righteous blamers. One excellent example of such a violent and obscene exchange between characters is the altercation between the Sausage-seller and the Paphlagonian in Aristophanes' *Knights* 245-497, where the former "defeats" the latter in a contest of invective and threatened violence.

violent, reactionary persona:<sup>31</sup> satire (the logic runs) can never be a mainstream art form because of its transgressive tendencies, and since they each claim that their vituperation is an unavoidable aspect of their temperament, they construct themselves as hopelessly doomed to a career of frustrated ambitions.<sup>32</sup> Once again, we see the paradox inherent in a highly wrought literary genre that claims to be “inevitable.” Indeed, the opening lines of Juvenal’s first Satire profess a desire to situate his work within a contemporary literary context, even as they implicitly repudiate any genre that does not offer the sort of “spontaneous” response to contemporary moral decay that he will. After expressing his frustration at the endless recitations of contemporary drama and epic in lines 1-16 (*semper ego auditor tantum? . . .*; “must I always be only a *listener? . . .*”, 1), Juvenal notes that anything he could produce, however bad, would have to be better than what’s out there already.

. . . stulta est clementia, cum tot ubique  
uatibus occurras, periturae parcere chartae. (17-18)

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<sup>31</sup> Horace in his *Sermones* does not so much himself adopt a stance of explicit violence, but he is well aware that this is the common expectation of satirists (at 2.1.39-42 he styles his pen as a sheathed sword, implying that most people would expect the opposite: *sed hic stilus haud petet ultro/ quemquam animantem et me ueluti custodiet ensis / uagina tectus . . .* (“but this pen will not attack any living person on its own, but will protect me like a sword housed in its sheath. . .”). As he imagines one detractor saying, 1.4.34-35: “*faenum habet in cornu; longe fuge: dummodo risum / excutiat sibi, non his cuiquam parcat amico*” (“he’s got hay in his horns; keep far away from him: if only he can produce a laugh for himself, he’ll spare no friend . . .”). In the process of complaining that people too hastily associate him with poets of overt attack, of course, Horace actually calls attention to the aggressive nature of satire. For his humorously disingenuous defense in this passage consists not in denying that he attacks anyone, but rather in the claim that his own writings are not to be considered poetry in the first place (37-44, on which see above), and that, in any case, people who are morally upright have nothing to fear from him (implying, of course, that he *will* attack those who deserve it!). Cf. the rather oblique logic at lines 65-70, where Horace defends himself by saying essentially that at least he is not as bad as a public informer!: *ut sis tu similis Caeli Birrique latronum, / non ego sim Capri neque Sulci: cur metuas me?* (“though you might be like the robbers Caelius and Birrus, I’m not like [the informers] Caprius and Sulcius; so why are you afraid of me?”). All three of Lucilius’ successors regard him—their literary patriarch—as violent, so it should be no surprise that they would construe their own work in a similar vein. See Horace *Serm.* 2.1.62-65, and Persius (1.114-15); Juvenal’s description of Lucilius as an epic warrior at 1.19-20 is an only slightly more elevated variation of the same theme.

<sup>32</sup> Just to be perfectly clear: we are speaking here of the stance of the poet within the fiction of his satires. Whether or not the poet in fact becomes popular with audiences is a different matter, with little bearing on the portrait he wishes to convey of himself in his work.

It's idiotic to hold back from writing, when everywhere you go you run into poets, and the paper will be wasted anyway.

Eminem displays a similar attitude towards the rivals of his own day throughout the songs on the *Marshall Mathers LP*, and he reserves special animus for artists such as N'Sync, Britney Spears, and Christina Aguilera<sup>33</sup> (summed up well in a line from "The Real Slim Shady": "I'm sick of you little girl and boy groups / All you do is annoy me / So I've been sent here to destroy you . . ."),<sup>34</sup> but in the following lines from "The Way I Am," we can see perhaps most clearly how he articulates his status as a poet in terms of an inevitable alienation from the mainstream. Indeed, with a quite remarkable economy, these lines address practically every defining element of satire:

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<sup>33</sup> For example, from the song "I'm Back":

. . . and by the way  
 N'Sync, why do they sing?  
 Am I the only one who realizes they stink?  
 Should I dye my hair pink  
 and care what y'all think?  
 Lip-sync and buy a bigger size of ear rings?  
 That's why I tend to block out when I hear things  
 'Cause all these fans screamin' is making my ears ring  
 So I just throw up the middle finger and let it linger  
 Longer than the rumor that I was sticking it to Christina.

<sup>34</sup> See John Henderson, "Pump up the Volume: Juvenal, *Satires* 1.1-21," *PCPS* 41 (1995): 102-103, whose analysis of Juvenal's ability to get his readers to share in his role as critic of the contemporary poetic scene is strikingly appropriate to the strategies deployed by Eminem. Juvenal's ranting against contemporary genres of poetic recitation in the opening of the first *Satire* both assumes the readers' complicity, and prepares them to regard his own poetry as superior. As Henderson puts it: "Salient is the reader's cultural competence as *littérateur*: to see through the eyes of this *ego*, we must (in particular) know what it is to survive the *Theseid* of Cordus." Eminem likewise assumes a knowing audience saturated by contemporary popular (musical) culture and, like Juvenal, must situate himself as a player squarely within that tradition, even as he claims to be opposing it. On Juvenal, Henderson continues (104): "However unorthodox, alienated and marginal his perspective on the 'common culture' of the elite reading public, he associates his own performance with that arena. He will himself press on his readers the importance Roman poetics placed on the ability to innovate within a tradition. We should already be asking where Juvenal is placing his first paragraph in the history of the poetic programme. If he turns his back on this, he does so as an 'insider'. And there is a *literary* history to such classical tergiversation." Perhaps another way to put this, from Eminem's perspective, is that without the "little girl and boy groups" that he ridicules, Eminem's work—if it could somehow exist at all in such a milieu—would be culturally adrift and virtually without meaning.

Sometimes I just feel like my father.  
I hate to be bothered . . .  
with all of this nonsense.

It's constant  
and "Oh, it's his lyrical content.  
The song 'Guilty Conscience'  
has gotten such rotten responses."

And all of this controversy  
circles me  
and it seems like the media  
immediately  
points a finger at me . . .

So I point one back at 'em  
but not the index  
or pinkie  
or the ring  
or the thumb.

It's the one you put up  
when you don't give a fuck  
when you won't just put up  
with the bullshit they pull  
'cause they full of shit too.  
When a dude's gettin' bullied and shoots up your school  
and they blame it on Marilyn . . .  
and the heroin . . .  
where were the parents at?

And look at where it's at:

Middle America  
now it's a tragedy  
now it's so sad to see  
an upper-class city  
having this happenin'.  
—Then attack Eminem  
'cause I rap this way.

But I'm glad 'cause they feed me the fuel  
that I need for the fire to burn,  
and it's burnin' and I have returned.

(Refrain)

And I am, whatever you say I am  
If I wasn't, then why would I say I am?  
In the paper, the news, everyday I am.  
Radio won't even play my jam.

'Cause I am, whatever you say I am.  
If I wasn't, then why would I say I am?  
In the paper, the news, everyday I am.  
I don't know it's just the way I am.

Despite its highly localized, utterly twentieth-century fin-de-siècle American context, much about these lines recalls the literary strategies of Roman satire (and of Juvenal in particular) which we have discussed above: The tension between a perceived need to expose hypocrisy (blaming school violence on artists like Marilyn Manson or drug use, when the real culprits are parents<sup>35</sup>), the risks the satirist must assume in taking on such difficult issues (" . . . and it seems like the media immediately / points a finger at me . . . ."),<sup>36</sup> and the presumed inevitability—precisely because he must adopt an aggressive stance—that his poetry will never be adequately understood (" . . . and 'Oh, it's his lyrical content.' / The song 'Guilty Conscience'<sup>37</sup> / has gotten such rotten responses"). But the stanza before the chorus, and the chorus itself, offer the song's most incisive commentary on the entire satiric enterprise, suggesting once and for all that satire relies more on literary gamesmanship and the dynamic interplay with an audience (real or constructed) than on the poet's "natural" temperament.

Like Hipponax reaching out from the grave to threaten passers-by with his blazing choliambes, Eminem also conceptualizes his satire as fire, but for him the metaphor is more elaborate: If his lyrics are fire, what is it that is being burned? As he puts it, all things he dislikes about the world become his "fuel," so paradoxically (that is, in spite of the satirist's routine

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<sup>35</sup> Eminem's allusion here to the Columbine High School shootings and his indictment both of "Middle-American" parenting and of the press for implicating himself and the rock musician Marilyn Manson, look ahead to the last stanza of another track on *The Marshall Mathers LP*, "Remember Me," where he presents an ironically helpless version of the violent and corrupting stereotype:

Came home, and somebody must've broke in the back window  
 And stole two golden machine guns and both of my trenchcoats  
 Sick, sick dreams  
     of picnic scenes,  
     two kids, sixteen  
     And M-16s  
 with ten clips each  
 And them shits reach  
 through six kids each  
 And Slim gets blamed in Bill Clint's speech  
 to fix these streets?

<sup>36</sup> Eminem further elaborates this risk in two other tracks on the album: in "Criminal," the ghost of the couturier Gianni Versace asks, "How many records you expecting to sell / after your second LP sends you directly to jail?" Meanwhile the chorus of "Kill You" ends "I'mma be another rapper dead, for poppin' off at the mouth with shit I shouldn't've said."

<sup>37</sup> A song from Eminem's first recording: *The Slim Shady LP*. We are well aware that our present endeavor casts us as the whining interlocutors mocked by Eminem here!

claim to be angry and upset), Eminem claims to be “glad” to have the “fuel” available with which he can stoke the incendiary genre he has chosen for himself:

But I'm *glad* 'cause they feed me the *fuel*  
that I need for the *fire* to *burn*,  
and it's *burnin'* and I have returned.

The substance, in other words, of his satires is necessary, as he puts it, to keep his genre ablaze, not the other way around. This formulation implies an *a priori* choice of genre (in this case emblemized as “fire”), only *then* followed by the search for the *materia* that would make it a success. Juvenal had a similar attitude towards his work, as is clear from 1.86, where he famously refers to the content of his work as “animal feed” (*farrago*):

*quidquid agunt homines, uotum, timor, ira, uoluptas,*  
*gaudia, discursus, nostri farrago libelli est.*

“Whatever people do, their prayers, fears, anger, desire, pleasures, their comings-and-goings, such is the *farrago* of my little book.”

He has subtly shifted here, in other words, from a completely subjective orientation (“I write because I am angry at what I see in the world”) to a more explicitly literary one, in which the poet’s “personal experience” takes on only minimal significance (“I have first *chosen to write* satire, so I now need to look for material”). It may or may not have been “real” *indignatio* that drove him to satire in the first place, but the fact remains that he ends up consciously looking for “content” rather than that the satires somehow “write themselves,” as the programmatic pretense of *indignatio* implies.<sup>38</sup>

The refrain of the “The Way I Am,” however, is where Eminem makes the most profound statement about the nature of his poetic endeavor, for here he acknowledges how deeply dependent his satire is on a poet’s relationship with his audience—yet another gesture that problematizes the satirist’s claims to spontaneity and emotional compulsion. This stanza begins with a brilliantly enigmatic statement about his identity, “And I am, whatever you say I am . . . .” Does he mean

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<sup>38</sup> The act of choosing a literary genre may certainly arise from an author’s personal preferences or temperament, but the many constraints of form and occasion inherent in any poetic genre give the lie to any claims about the “immediacy,” “spontaneity” or “inevitability” of the poetry’s content. Even if we imagine a poet to be genuinely inspired by *ira* and *indignatio* to write satire, what emerges in the literary production will have been constructed first and foremost in accordance with generic demands—demands which will, of course, incorporate the poet’s claim that he is “accurately” representing his own subjective experience.

by the word "whatever" that he *becomes* whatever an audience says he is ("I am *that which* you say I am") or that his audience is merely "correct" in what they say about him (i.e., that they have correctly understood what Eminem has already said about himself: "yes, that's right, that's exactly what I say am")? Either reading is possible, and the ambiguity seems deliberate and playful, for it allows him both to construct his own audience and to be constructed by them in turn.<sup>39</sup> If, that is, Eminem means to imply that his audience characterizes him just as he portrays himself in his work, this represents the first step in the satirist's construction of an audience at least notionally scandalized by his transgressive tropes, and so imagined as a perennially disapproving "out-group."<sup>40</sup> Hence, the last line of the stanza: ". . . Radio won't even play my jam"). This is the audience that Horace complained about in 1.4.34-75, a group always imagined by the poet to fear satirists and misunderstand their work.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>39</sup> In fact, the ambiguity of Eminem's identity has been transformed into one of its selling points, with fly posters on the London Underground in the summer of 2001 promoting his albums as "The Many Faces of Eminem" and action figures for sale on the Internet depicting him in different "character poses."

<sup>40</sup> The opposition, in other words, to Hutcheon's "in-group;" see above note 7. Hutcheon draws on Erving Goffman's discussion of what he calls "collusive communication," a term he uses to describe a form of discourse used when "one or more individuals [try] to manage activity so that a party of one of more others will be induced to have a false belief about what it is that is going on." "Collusive communication" occurs, according to Goffman, whenever people conspire with one another to deceive another person or group, resulting in one group that colludes, and another, to use Goffman's pun, that is "excolluded." The connection with satire is, of course, clear, as Goffman himself intimates (83-84); in a sentence that succinctly captures exactly the relationship Juvenal and Eminem seek to construct with their audience(s), Goffman states: "for those in on a deception, what is going on is fabrication; for those contained, what is going on is *what* is being fabricated. The rim of the frame is a construction, but only the fabricators see it." Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Boston: Northeastern U Pr, 1986 [reprint of 1974]), 83-86. See also Rosen and Marks (above, note 4) 924-25 note 8) for the applicability of Goffman's concept also to early Greek satirical forms.

<sup>41</sup> In the case of Eminem, at least, we can see how disingenuous—or how much of a pose—the claim to public neglect and fear really is. While some radio stations presumably refused to play him, the vast majority helped make hits out of several of the CD's cuts, especially "Stan" and "The Real Slim Shady." The former was even performed at the 2001 Grammy Awards in a controversial duet with Elton John. Eminem's claim that "radio won't even play my jam" is clearly a historical fantasy, but entirely appropriate to the genre. There surely exists a real "out-group" who would remain offended by anything Eminem would say or do, but this is not the group he construes as his "real" audience. The opening verse of the opening track ("White America") on his recent CD, *The Eminem Show* (above, note 23), gives the lie to any claims about not having an audience: "I never would've dreamed in a million years I'd see, so many motherfuckin' people who feel like

If, on the other hand, Eminem intends us to believe in this refrain that his identity is a function of “whatever” his audience “says he is,” he once again emphasizes that it is ultimately the genre itself that constructs the subjectivity of the satirist. Satire virtually presumes the existence of an audience whose antagonism is generically determined, so in announcing that he *becomes* what his audience says he is, Eminem implies a desire to calibrate his identity first and foremost according to generic needs, as they are determined by such a force external to his own subjectivity. The second line of the refrain then turns this poet-audience relationship into what we would describe as a kind of “mimetic loop”: “I am whatever you say I am. / *If I wasn't, then why would I say I am?*” The line displays a brilliant economy, in fact, in the way it resonates with the two interpretations of the passage we have been discussing. First, it insists on the autobiographical authenticity of the work (“*of course* I am just as you describe me—why else would I say that I am this way, if I *really* wasn't?”); but it also implies that, once Eminem’s persona has been created by his audience (“I am *whatever* you say I am...”), he turns around and claims it to be “natural,” as if to say “I may be whatever you say I am, but that’s because I will of course already *be* what you say I am—because why else would I say I was that way, if I wasn’t already told by *you* that that’s the way I am? . . .” And so it goes, around and around . . . .

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS

For Eminem, therefore, as for Juvenal, satire derives its *raison d’être* ultimately from its interplay with the two audiences it imagines for itself. On the one hand, the satirist assumes that anyone he can imagine reading or hearing his work will lend a sympathetic ear to his venting. This is the knowing, collusive, “in-group,” contrived essentially so as to replicate the poet’s censorious posturing and empower the *reader* with the same sense of moral indignation that the poet claims for himself. On the other hand, however, the poet must always assume that his satire is actually *needed*, that there are people “out there” who deserve his attacks and should be “corrected,” and this group constitutes another of the satirist’s audiences. This group includes the poet’s targets, the sort of people who make others think that satire is somehow dangerous and malevolent. Without conceptualizing his *targets* as one of his putative audiences, after all, the satirist would have no cause to worry—as they so often do—that his work is

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me / Who share the same views and the same exact beliefs, it’s like a fuckin’ army marchin’ in back of me / So many lives I touch, so much anger aimed in no particular direction, just sprays and sprays / Straight through your radio it play and plays, ‘til it stays stuck in your head for days and days . . . .” Not a hint here that “radio” will not play his “jam.”



destined to be a "misunderstood" genre of capricious abuse. Indeed, without the constant threat (however fantasized) that some segment of his audience will take offense at what he says, there is little reason for his satire even to exist in the first place. For even verbal aggression loses its sting when an opponent is nowhere to be found. Juvenal and Eminem, as we have seen, may both complain about the state of the world and about the fact that they are not part of mainstream popular culture, but they could not survive as satirical poets if the world's problems were suddenly to disappear or if they suddenly attained (or, more accurately, felt that they could present themselves as having attained)<sup>42</sup> universal critical appeal.

Despite the obvious historical and cultural discontinuities between our two satirists, we have located in each of them a strikingly similar poetics of *ira*, *indignatio* and *ressentiment*. This is a poetics, as we have argued, that thrives on disingenuousness and authorial evasion, even as it adopts a rhetorical pose of utter sincerity. Likewise, each poet portrays his work simultaneously (if paradoxically) as both spontaneous and meticulously contrived. In their transparent efforts, therefore, to construct both themselves and their audiences in accordance with poetic forces external and antecedent to the actual details of their satires, they belie any claims to emotional authenticity and continually disorient the reader/listener with the instability of their subjective personae and their moral stances. This playfully edgy elusiveness is, of course, hardly unique to Juvenal and Eminem—indeed, it is no doubt responsible for much of satire's enduring appeal throughout history—but we find it remarkable that two such disparate authors found their way to the same end by using such extraordinarily similar poetic strategies. While we cannot here address whether our analysis has, or should have, any effect on questions of Eminem's social and aesthetic *value* in our own time,<sup>43</sup> it should at least be useful for those who do address such questions to understand that his transgressive posturings, which may seem to us so idiosyncratic and wedded to time and place, deploy a poetics of satire that extends far back to antiquity.

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<sup>42</sup> That is, a satirist could, in fact, be enormously popular and hypothetically, at least, even have no enemies; but the genre would still demand that the poet adopt a stance by turns aggressive and abject.

<sup>43</sup> On the particular problems of evaluating a problematic contemporary art form such as gangsta rap and other forms of transgressive hip hop, see Rosen and Marks (above, note 4) 898-99.