

Loitering With Intent: Juvenal at the Crossroads

This paper examines the Juvenalian satirist as a *loiterer* who hangs about on the fringes of public and private space, waiting for someone or some activity to catch his eye. In his book *Loiterature*, Ross Chambers speculates on the figure of the loiterer and “loiterly” literature, which he distinguishes by its preference for “beguiling” narrative over closure. The *locus classicus* of loiterature is the *trivium*, the intersection of three roads, a place which gives rise to ambiguity and misleading appearances, for while some people stand around aimlessly, others loiter “with intent.” Juvenal’s satirist is just such a loiterer, no neutral observer but one with a definite purpose: to identify, expose, and punish.

In the programmatic *Satire* 1, the speaker situates himself at the *quadrivium*, in the middle of the crossroads where *four* roads meet (63-4): *nonne licet medio ceras implere capaces / quadrivio, cum . . .* (Surely then I am allowed to fill spacious tablets, in the middle of the crossroads, when . . .); the word *quadrivium* is rare and suggests a place of significant confluence, the perfect vantage-point for the satiric loiterer to view the passing parade of disreputables and immerse himself in Rome’s quotidian flow. The only other occurrence in literary sources is Catullus’ *in quadriviis et angiportis*, where Lesbia sucks off various males. By placing himself here, the speaker reminds us that satire is a genre formed by the conglomeration of conspicuous *exempla* and also by the confluence of different literary forms, conventions and techniques. These poems are sites of continuous intersection and place significant demands on the listener and reader, who must keep their ears and eyes open, as they become *flâneurs* in the text, following the satirist as he lists and catalogues, digresses, changes direction, retraces his steps and relentlessly keeps going without obviously getting anywhere.

The satirist’s desire to re-locate—evident in repeated references to escaping to far-off places—is really a desire to recover what has been “lost” at home, to find the “original Rome” in Rome. In a manner not unconnected to the way that epics and novels enact the search for home, father, or identity (and often all three), Juvenal’s *Satires* are a search for Rome, for those fixed points of *Romanitas* to which the subject can attach his

floating subjectivity. The speaker seeks an *anchorage* that will “fix the floating chain of signifieds in such a way as to counter the terror of uncertain signs” as Barthes expresses it in regard to the reading of images. The monuments and sites of Rome should offer this, but in their Juvenalian projection, if they are not inherently repellent like the Subura or the Circus Maximus, they are important public spaces, freighted with historical and cultural significance, that have become repulsive through their contamination by outside elements or repellent behavior of people who frequent them. This paper examines instances of the satirist’s search for anchors of stability in Satires 1 and 3 (the city of Rome), 2 and 6 (traditional gender roles), 4 (the emperor), and 5 (ideals of *amicitia*) and concludes that in all cases they fail to fix his identity as a subject. The Juvenalian speaker is condemned to loiter, rather than reaching “home” and is thus the first embodiment in the western tradition of the troubled urban consciousness later to find its culminating expression in Leopold Bloom and Stephen Dedalus.

Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978)

Ross Chambers, *Loiterature* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999)