

## Word Power as Recommended and Exercised by the Ancient Romans

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- 1.1 Ideas on the evaluation of literature and through it on the society, was first expressed in the Classical West by the Greeks. It started from the notions of the duty of the poet towards the society as expressed by Aristophanes in "The Frogs". Although the power of 'the word' was highlighted by the Sophists, naming it a 'mighty despot', Plato the philosopher, was critical of the effect of literature on the individual, and through it, the society. Aristotle however in his idea expressed in 'The Poetics' observes the various devices used by the poets to make a stronger impact on the minds of their audience.
- 1.2 In the various ideas expressed, one of the important facts that became obvious was the acceptance and recognition of the connection between literature and emotion. i.e. How, according to Plato, the power of 'the word' watered the unwanted emotions that should be left to wither. Plato for founding and recommending the 'Theory of Ideas' and the idea of 'The Good' was concerned more about philosophy and morality than literature, emotion and psychology.
- 1.3 It is with the Romans that we find the power of 'the word' given its true recognition. In the ideas expressed by Horace and Longinus on literature due prominence is given to language as a form of expression. Expression of thought as well as of emotion. On closer examination it is evident that the recognition had been a result of realisation of how emotion affects expression and therefore how expression could be manipulated to arouse emotion when artfully used. The use of art to supplement nature and nature to supplement art.

The purpose of this study is to, examine the value the two Roman literary theorists, Horace and Longinus had given to expression. And to analyze through examples how emotion had effected expression. This would be done through a study of The Sixteen Satires of Juvenal and On the study of the Universe of Lucretius. Two examples that would examine the diverse effects of 'words' on subject matter.

### 2.1 Horace (65 BC)

The impression the above argument moves towards is that art could be taught. If so can the technique of writing be taught? If so is literature a product of accumulated skill? Horace answers the question in his *Ars Poetica*. The questions have been asked whether a fine poem is the product of nature or of art.

'I myself cannot see the value of application without a strong natural aptitude, or on the other hand, of native genius unless it is cultivated-so true is it that each requires the help of the other, and that they enter into a friendly compact with each other.'<sup>1</sup>

Among the techniques to be studied stands the use of words a prominent one. One should be prepared to cultivate his natural ability through careful study.

'Would sweat tears of blood' to achieve an appropriate style.' For such is the power of words that are used in the right places and in the right relationships, and such the grace that they can add to the common place when so used.'<sup>2</sup>

According to Horace this was a thing that one should not worry too much about.

'A man who chooses a subject within his powers will never be at a loss for words, and his thoughts will be clear and orderly'<sup>3</sup>

The connection between thought and expression is quite clear. It is through words that we declare our inner most feelings. It is the emotion we feel within our depths that we put to words subsequently.

'Our nature has so formed us that we first feel inwardly any change in our fortunes; it is she that cheers us or rouses us to anger, she that torments us and bows us to the ground with heavy burden of sorrow, and it is only afterwards that she expresses these feelings in us by means of the tongue.'<sup>4</sup>

The writer has to experience the emotion he is presenting for him to be able to use the appropriate words. It is only if he is able to convey the emotions to the hearts of the reader that he could be successful.

This was exactly what Plato was worried about. Plato compared the Muses of song to magnets that were able to draw iron rings to them. According to him poetry was a product of a man possessed. A sane man could not compete with an insane one when wanting to enter the palace of poetry. But according to Horace this was an art that could be learnt. Careful observation and study would help a poet in manipulating the appropriate techniques in expression.

Just as smiling faces are turned on those who smile, so is sympathy shown with those who weep. If you want to move me to tears, you must first feel grief yourself...if your speeches are out of harmony with your feelings, I shall either fall sleep or burst out laughing. Pathetic language is appropriate to the face of sorrow, and violent language to the face of anger; a sportive diction goes with merry looks, and a serious with grave looks.<sup>5</sup>

Along with the above ideas Horace has expressed some interesting ideas on language. According to him words of a language are a living thing. It is a subject that could be experimented with.

- \* '...you will make an excellent impression if you use care and subtlety in placing your words and, by skillful choice of setting, give fresh meaning to a familiar word.'<sup>6</sup>
- \* If it happens that you have to invent new terms for the discussion of abstruse topics, you will have a chance to coin words that were unknown to earlier generations of Romans.<sup>7</sup>
- \* 'New and recently-coined words will win acceptance...'
- \* 'Why should I be grudged the right to add a few words to the stock if I can.'<sup>8</sup>
- \* 'It has always been accepted, and always will be, that words stamped with the mint mark of the day should be brought into currency.' (56)
- \* 'As the woods change their foliage with the decline of each year, and the earliest leaves fall, so words die out with old age; and the newly born ones thrive and prosper...'<sup>9</sup>
- \* '...works of men will pass away. How much less likely are the glory and grace of language to have an enduring life! Many terms that have now dropped out of use will be revived, if usage so requires, and others which are now in repute will die out; for it is usage which regulates the laws...'<sup>10</sup>

Language was something that was used according to situation and requirement, on par with what one wants to express. The choice of words, introduction and omission had to be done according to the intensity and impact of what one wants to imprint.

2.2 Longinus (mid 1<sup>st</sup> cen BC) in his introduction to **On the sublime** promises to give a definition of the subject while indicating the methods by which one could raise the faculties to the proper pitch of grandeur in expressions. He defines sublimity as a distinction and excellence in expression.

'...effect of elevated languages is, not to persuade the hearers, but to entrance them; and at all times, and in every way, what transports us with wonder is more telling than what merely persuades or gratifies us. The extent to which we can be persuaded is usually under our own control, but these sublime passages exert an irresistible force and mastery, and get the upper hand with every hearer.'<sup>11</sup>

Can the art of the Sublime be learnt is the next question he poses? To this his answer is though natural genius is essential it needs the spur and curb of education.

'Greatest of all blessings is good fortune, and next to it comes good counsel...nature fills the place of good fortune, and art that of good counsel.'

'...certain linguistic effects derive from nature alone can not be learnt from any other sources than art.'<sup>12</sup>

The connection between the words and effect is obvious. But since emotions evoke a certain style in expression and affects impression and impact, careful study could guide one in reproduction. In doing so art and knowledge would be the agents of instruction.

Language and emotion are connected and supplements each other to such an extent that Longinus points out that the main faults to be avoided in order to reach the Sublime are connected with the use of words. These he names as the use of bombastic high-flown diction, expressions that are low and childish in quality and language that denotes misplaced emotions.

'Writers are often carried away, as though by drunkenness, into outbursts of emotion which are not relevant to the matter at hand.'  
'...while they are themselves in an ecstasy, their hearers are not.'<sup>13</sup>

The five sources of Sublimity according to him are, a) The ability to form grand conceptions, b) Powerful and inspired emotion, c) Proper formation of figures of thought, d) and speech, e) The total effect resulting from dignity and elevation'<sup>14</sup>

Longinus furthermore gives practical advice such as the use of rhetorical figures.

- \* i.e. imagery and the power of imagination.  
'carried away by your feelings, you imagine you are actually seeing the subject of your description and enable your audience as well to see it.'<sup>15</sup>

This is a means one can infuse much passion and energy to not only persuade the reader but to master him. To transcend the bounds of mere persuasion where one addresses only the mind. The writer by the correct use and arrangement of the words could address the mind as well. But this is done by capturing his heart first.

- \* Rhetorical Questions. The method of asking questions and providing your own answers. This gives the appearance of being a natural outburst of feeling. 'for a display of feeling is more effective when it seems not to be premeditated...but to have arisen from the occasion, spontaneously.'<sup>16</sup>

- \* Omission of Conjunctions. where the 'words come gushing out, as it were, set down without connecting links, and almost outstripping the speaker himself.... Rapid, give the impression of an agitation which at the same time checks the utterance and urges it on.'<sup>17</sup>

- \* Accumulation of figures. This is where two or three rhetorical figures combine in a kind of partnership to add force, persuasiveness and beauty. This is where continual variations and the disorder of the expression embraces a certain element of order to convey the excitement felt. By this method the writer could transport the emotion he is feeling to the reader.<sup>18</sup>

- \* Interchange of singular and plural. Use of the plural instead of the singular would have a resounding effect and imply multitude and plurality. This could be used where one needs to impress by the very idea of multitude, such as a sudden outburst of feeling or the magnanimity of an event.<sup>19</sup>

The contraction of plural ideas in to singular form would indicate unity as well as the element of surprise.

- \* Arrangement of words or ideas out of their normal sequence and they carry, so to speak the genuine stamp of powerful emotions.<sup>20</sup> (chap. 22)

Interchange of tenses, variations of person, Personal address, Metaphor and round about speech and their effects are discussed with examples by Longinus. But what he emphasizes with the practical advice is that they should be put to correct use in appropriate situations.

Longinus reminds the writer with a warning that the rhetorical figures used in a composition should not be obvious.

'...a rhetorical figure would appear to be most effective when the fact that it is a figure is not apparent.'

The language and word play should be hidden by the very brilliance that it helped to create. Language should not seem artificial or calculated. It should carry the stamp of genuine powerful emotion. What one writes should not seem premeditated.

'For art is perfect only when it looks like nature and again, nature hits the mark only when she conceals the art that is within her.'<sup>21</sup>

### 3.1 The connection between emotion and expression in practice is clearly evident through The Sixteen Satires of Juvenal (AD 55).

The reason he has taken to writing is as Juvenal explains is passion.  
- Indignation.

'.....Though talent be wanting, yet  
Indignation will drive me to verse, such as I – or any scribbler –

May still command. All human endeavors, men's prayers,  
Fears, angers, pleasures, joys and pursuits, these make,  
The mixed mash of my verse.<sup>22</sup>

His anger is directed to poets who ignore the current situation.  
'The stale themes are bellowed daily  
In rich patrons' colonnades, till their marble pillars  
Crack with surfeit of rhetoric.'<sup>23</sup>

When you find  
Hordes of poets on each street corner,  
It's misplaced kindness  
To refrain from writing.<sup>24</sup>

'.....it is harder not to be writing satires; for who could endure  
this monstrous city, however callous at heart,  
And swallow his wrath.'<sup>25</sup>

'Are not such themes worthy of Horace's pen? Should I not attack  
them too? Must I stick to the usual round of Hercules' labors.....

'Will these suffice in an age when each pimp of a husband  
Takes gifts from his own wife's lover – if she is barred in law  
From inheriting legacies – and while they paw each other,  
Tactfully stares at the ceiling, or snores, wide awake in his wine?  
Will these suffice?'<sup>26</sup>

'Don't you want to cram whole note books with scribbled invective?  
When you stand at the corner and see.....'<sup>27</sup>

And Juvenal does 'cram' his satires with such detail. The language  
that he uses for such description seem to be charged with indignation  
Not only the words but the order and the style he has used conveys his  
state of anger.

★ 'So satirist, hoist your sails,  
Cram on every stitch of canvas! but where you may ask,  
Is talent to match the theme? and where our outspoken  
Ancestral bluntness, that wrote what burning passion dictated?'<sup>28</sup>

★ 'But where will men draw the limit  
When they see high-born advocate dress in transparent chiffon  
To prosecute loose – living women, while the public stare pop-eyed?  
If the women are whores, condemn them! Yet even proven whore  
Wouldn't rig herself out like that ! but it's mid July he complains !  
'I'm sweltering hot –' Then plea your case stark naked.<sup>29</sup>

★ .....farewell Rome, I leave you  
To sanitary engineers and municipal architects, men who by swearing  
black is white land all the juicy contracts  
Just like that – a new temple, swamp – drainage, harbor – works.  
River clearance, undertaking the lot – then pocket the cash.<sup>30</sup>

★ But here in Rome we must toe  
The line of fashion, living beyond our means, and often on borrowed  
credit: every man jack of us.  
Is keeping up with his neighbours.<sup>31</sup>

★ 'Today we are elbowed aside  
By men who earn legacies in bed, who rise to the top  
Via that quickest, most popular route – the satisfied desires  
Of one rich matron. Each lover will get his cut,  
On the size of his – services rendered. I suppose he deserves  
Some recompense for all that sweat and exertion; he looks  
As pale as the man who steps barefoot on a snake.'<sup>32</sup>

**3.2 History is a field where one could not afford to get involved when recording it. Tacitus (Birth AD 56) seems to have understood the importance of impartiality. Thus in his The Annals of Imperial Rome he makes a boast of being 'uninvolved'**

'The reigns of Tiberius, Gaius, Claudius and Nero were described during their lifetimes in fictitious terms, for fear of the consequences; whereas the accounts written after their deaths were influenced by still raging animosities....I shall write without indignation or partisanship; in my case the customary incentives to these are lacking.'<sup>33</sup>

However on reading the 'The Annals' one would be tempted to examine how far he had been able to keep his commitment.

\* ...at Rome consuls, senate, knights, precipitately became servile. The more distinguished men were, the greater their urgency and insincerity. They must show neither satisfaction at the death of one emperor, nor gloom at the accession of another : so their features were carefully arranged in a blend of tears and smiles, mourning and flattery.<sup>34</sup>

\* Subdued the army with bonuses, and his cheap food policy was successful bail for civilians. Indeed, he attracted everybody's goodwill by the enjoyable gift of peace. Then he gradually pushed ahead and absorbed the function of the senate, the officials, and even the law. Opposition did not exist.<sup>35</sup>

\* - his thoughts had been solely occupied with resentment, deception and secret sensuality. And then there was that feminine bully, his mother. So we have got to be slaves to a woman' people were saying<sup>36</sup>

One tends to wonder to what extent Tacitus had been able to carry out the promise of impartiality he had given at first.

The Sarcasm and the indignation that has led him to the tone indicate a soul moved by emotion. In spite of the fact that he was out to record history, the language and style seems to be colored by impression.

Therefore Tacitus seems to be unable to keep the standard he aspired to achieve in his subject matter due to the emotions that were conveyed by his use of language. For his subject was history writing.

When it comes to literature, closer examination of practical use makes it evident that in most cases it is not the poet who manipulates language but the word that commands his writing. This is done through the innermost thoughts and sentiments of the poet. i.e. Though a poet may make a selection of the subject matter, he would find it difficult to completely deny the poetry in himself. Therefore the results may turn out to be unexpected.

**3.3 Lucretius of Epicurean Philosophy through his *On the Nature of The Universe* could be taken as an example. In his book he sought to popularize the philosophic theory which was materialistic to the extreme among the Romans by presenting it in the poetic form. Since**

**it provided 'a way of life' to mankind acceptance was of utmost importance. By selecting poetry as a mode of transportation he hoped to enhance the attraction.**

'I will reveal those atoms from which nature creates all things and increases and feeds them into which, when they perish, nature again resolves them. To these in my discourse I commonly give such names as the 'raw material' or 'generative bodies or seeds of things.'<sup>37</sup>

According to him it was Epicurus who by expounding the theory of atoms who sought to release man from the clutches of superstition.

'When human life lay groveling in all men's sight, crushed to the earth under the dead weight of superstition whose grim features lured menacingly upon mortals from the four quarters of the sky, a man of Greece was first to raise mortal eyes in defiance, first to stand erect and brave the challenge. Fables of the gods did not crush him, nor the lightening flash or growling menace of the sky. Rather, they quickened his manhood.'<sup>38</sup>

Lucretius is well aware of the power of the word in presenting a subject. He acknowledges the difficulties the novelty of the language may impose. But he is ready to meet the challenge.

'I am well aware that it is not easy to elucidate in Latin verse the obscure discoveries of the Greeks. Poverty of our language and novelty of the theme compel me often to coin new words for the purpose... leads me to stay awake through the quiet of the night, studying how by choice of words and the poet's art I can display before your mind a clear light by which you can gaze into the heart of hidden things'<sup>39</sup>

Lucretius tries to be scientific but at the same time as simple as possible in putting forth the scientific theories.

'The second great principle is this: nature resolves everything into its component atoms and never reduces anything to nothing.'<sup>40</sup>

He talks of -

'bodies whose existence you must acknowledge through they cannot be seen.'<sup>41</sup>

And argues,

'There is vacuity in things.'

'if there were no empty space, these things would be denied the power of restless movement – or rather, they could not possibly have come into existence, embedded as they would have been in motionless matter.'<sup>42</sup>

The poetry in him comes through in the various examples he gives to illustrate. It not only enables one to understand the theories but adds beauty to the poem and provides relaxation to the mind of the reader.

'a ring is worn thin next to the finger with continual rubbing. Dripping water hollows a stone...'<sup>43</sup>

'my art is not without a purpose. Physicians, when they wish to treat children with a nasty dose of wormwood, first smear the rim of the cup with a sweet coat of yellow honey. The children, too young as yet for foresight, are lured by the sweetness at their lips into swallowing the bitter drought. So they are tricked but not trapped, for the treatment restores them to health. In the same way our doctrine often seems unpalatable to those who have not sampled it, and the multitude shrink from it. That is why I have tried to administer it to you in the dulcet strains of poetry, coated with the sweet honey of the, Muses.'<sup>44</sup>

On an in-depth study of the text we find that the poet has indeed been successful in explaining the difficult philosophic theory. But the problem arises only when the poet in him takes command and there by affects the total effect he is out to create.

The reason for the is this is times poetic melancholy and his love for description tends to disturb the minds of the reader that he had set out to attract and bring solace to.

Examples could be taken from the first book itself. Lucretius starts by assuring and putting before the reader the fundamentals of the atoms. According to him one does not have to fear the unknown over powerful hand of the supernatural. But at the end of the book the poet in him elaborates a possible pessimistic outcome in a rather 'moody' description.

'...if you allow matter to escape from the world in this way, you are leaving the ramparts of the world at liberty to crumble of a

sudden and take flight with the speed of flame into the boundless void. The rest will follow. The thunder-breeding quarters of the sky will rush down from aloft. The ground will fall away from out feet, its particles dissolved amid the mingled wreckage of heaven and earth.'<sup>45</sup>

In such a case, one could not but wonder what a pathetic and helpless situation man could be forced to face, without even the gods to pray to ! The fear and anticipation of a possible threat as disastrous as Lucretius had described would produce exactly the opposite sentiment that he had originally set out to create.

Lucretius by his philosophy tries to advocate a simple way of life. Life after luxuries is looked upon as unnecessary.

'Do you not see that nature is clamoring for two things only, a body free from pain , a mind released from worry and fear for the enjoyment of pleasurable sensations ?'<sup>46</sup>

'What matter if the hall does not sparkle with silver and gleam with gold, and no carved and gilded rafters ring to the music of the lute? Nature does not miss these luxuries when men recline in company on the soft grass by a running stream.....'<sup>47</sup>

'Burning fever flee no swifter from your body if you toss under figured counterpanes and coverlets of crimson than if you must lie in rude home spun.'<sup>48</sup>

According to the Epicurean philosophy, all who are born have to face death. Death is ultimate. There was no after life or punishment you have to fear after death. The facts are given so effectively that the finality of all strikes the reader with utmost force.

'We see that water flows out in all directions from a broken vessel and the moisture is dissipated, and mist and smoke vanish into thin air. Be assured, therefore, that spirit is similarly dispelled.....we are conscious that mind and body are born together; grow up together and together decay.'<sup>49</sup>

'However many generations you may add to your store by living there waits for you none the less the same eternal death.'<sup>50</sup>

However if one was to examine what is denoted by his poetry what one has to fear is what one might have to face before death. The suffering and the misery is given at the end of Book V, which is the last book of *On the nature of the universe.* That is the end of his work.

The description is a detailed representation of a plague that fills the reader with depression. The poet in Lucretius had found what one could describe in detail irresistible.

'the mind delirious with agony and terror; the brow contracted; the features wrung with frenzy and passion; the ears tormented by incessant noises; the breath coming in short gasps or heavy and labored; a glistening stream of sweat trickling down the neck; a thin phlegm in little drops, tinged with yellow and tasting of salt....'<sup>51</sup>

'One of the main factors that heaped death on death was this. Those whose excessive love of life and dread of death made them shrink from tending their own sick were punished before long by their own fatal negligence....Those, on the other hand, who stood by the death bed were overcome by contagion and exertions.....This, then, was the fate that overtook the finest characters.'<sup>52</sup>

What other description would have conveyed so forcefully the misery of a people who had no gods to pray to or future to look forward to? Being loyal and good had no bearing on the predicament they faced either. The materialistic philosophy Lucretius set out to popularize had no sympathetic ear. The power of poetry had prevented him from exercising restraint.

4. Thus we see by the above argument how powerful the Lord could become. The Roman Literacy critics had recognized the importance of language in expression. They had examined the effect and impact emotions had on language. It is the careful study of those changes that had paved the way to reproduce emotion through the use of diction. How one could, by the use of technique imitate nature and its power. One may interpret this even as manipulation.

In the above study I have also examined the theory in practice. However on closer scrutiny one is led to a startling discovery. Of how, despite the subject matter undertaken, the power of the word takes over. Of how, the poet in the writer at times tends to take over and disrupt even what he initially aimed at.

#### Notes:

1. Horace, *Ars Poetica* lines 405.
2. *Ibid* 144
3. *Ibid* 42
4. *Ibid* 106
5. *Ibid* 90
6. *Ibid* 48
7. *Ibid* 50
8. *Idem*
9. *Ibid* 60
10. *Ibid* 72
11. Longinus, *On The Sublime* Chap. 1
12. *Idem*
13. *Ibid* Chap. 3
14. *Ibid* Chap. 8
15. *Ibid* Chap. 15
16. *Ibid* Chap. 18
17. *Ibid* Chap. 19
18. *Ibid* Chap. 20
19. *Ibid* Chap. 23
20. *Ibid* Chap. 22
21. *Ibid* Chap. 22
22. Juvenal, *The Sixteen Satires* I. 80
23. *Ibid* I. 12
24. *Ibid* I. 20
25. *Ibid* I. 31
26. *Ibid* I. 52
27. *Ibid* I. 68
28. *Ibid* I. 147
29. *Ibid* II. 65
30. *Ibid* III. 29
31. *Ibid* III. 182
32. *Ibid* I. 40
33. Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome* II
34. *Ibid* I. 6
35. *Ibid* I. 1
36. *Ibid* I. 4
37. Lucretius, *On the Nature of The Universe* I. 50
38. *Ibid* I. 62

- 39. Ibid I. 134
- 40. Ibid I 218
- 41. Ibid I. 275
- 42. Ibid I. 345
- 43. Ibid I. 300
- 44. Ibid I. 940
- 45. Ibid I. 1125
- 46. Ibid II. 45
- 47. Ibid II. 70
- 48. Ibid III. 340
- 49. Ibid III. 1085
- 50. Ibid V. 1190
- 51. Ibid V. 1265



What other description would have conveyed a more accurate picture of a people who had no past or future, who were not even to be born? How first and good had no bearing, whose children were either the immediate offspring of Likertat or to be born in the next generation? The power of poetry had exercised its influence on the mind of the poet.

A. Thus we see by the above argument how powerful the influence of the Roman Likertat culture had on the development of the language of expression. They had obtained the artistic and scientific riches of the language, if in the verbal study of their language had been the source of their knowledge. The poet had been able to describe the past and future of his people by the use of the language of the Roman Likertat. The poet had been able to describe the past and future of his people by the use of the language of the Roman Likertat.