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Criticism in Greco-Roman Culture: an Introduction

The word criticism springs from the Greek word *krisis*, which had various meanings in the classical antiquity including ‘separation’, ‘selection’ and ‘judgement’. All these meanings were central to the decisions taken in courts and poetic contests, which were popular forms of literary practices prevalent across various city states of Greece. (Day 10) Since the inception of literature and literary criticism then [though Greeks did not have a word for literature] readers needed to separate, judge and select from a plethora of plays and poetry available to them. The ‘bad Poetry’ that could have potentially amoral impact on the readers was to be separated from the ‘good poetry’. Plato did the job of putting an end to the crisis of readers by separating the chaff from the grain and argued that in the ideal ‘republic’ children should hear only good fables, not the bad ones. He offered a trenchant critique of the anthropomorphism of Gods, championed and institutionalized by Homer and Hesiod.

The Great Dionysia

Commenting on the status of criticism in the classical Greece, Gary Day calls the Great Dionysia, a state festival held every spring in honour of the God Dionysus, “the public face of criticism” (12). On the occasion of this festival, comedies and tragedies written by Aeschylus, Aristophanes and others, were performed with the objective of providing amusement and instilling patriotism and other virtues into the audience. This was the time when tragedy and comedy emerged as the state sponsored dramatic festivals within the Athenian democratic city state, for the playwright who won the poetic contest was acknowledged and rewarded by the state. Creativity and criticism, then since their inception, have been deeply entrenched within each other, which becomes self-evident not only by examining the poetic contests of the fifth century BC Greece, but also by looking at the first text of classical literature. Homer is where western literature begins with. When Homer, the fountain head of European literature, began his epic not with the beginning but *in medias res*, that is, in the middle of things, he also set a precedent for the subsequent epic poets, like Virgil, Milton and others, who chose to begin the action of the epic in the middle. Much later Horace in his *Ars Poetica* [*The Art of Poetry*] commends Homer for beginning his epic in the middle of things. Much of the literary criticism of the Greco-Roman literary culture revolves around Homer. Plato, Aristotle, Horace, Longinus and other major critics either excoriate him or praise him profusely. Plato attacks him and emphasizes the need to banish poets whereas Horace and Longinus idealize him as the model of imitation for the aspiring poets. I shall return to a

thorough examination of Homer as the epicentre of classical literary criticism a little later in this essay but first I propose to briefly discuss the wider context of the Roman culture, which produced Horace and Longinus, the two major authors of classical Rome.

Literature and literary criticism of Augustan Rome: An Introduction

The two critics Horace and Longinus that this paper is mainly concerned with can be classified under Roman or Latin Literature as they were writing at a time when the Roman Empire was at its heyday. The conventional classification of European Classical Literature or Greco-Roman Literature (Eighth century BC to sixth century AD) covers a span of more than 1200 years. It thus includes Archaic Age (776 BC to 479 BC), Classical Age (479 BC to 323 BC), Hellenistic Period (323- 31 BC) and Roman or Latin Literature (31 BC to the fourth century AD). Such classifications of literary or historical periods are artificial constructions and at times arbitrarily done after the event, for it is impossible to draw a neat dividing line between these historical or literary periods which flow into each other with both continuities and discontinuities. However, one can read them as signposts and not as sacrosanct categories for a better understanding of literary history and history of criticism.

Roman Literature supposedly begins in 31 BC the year in which Octavius Caesar, nephew and heir of Julius Caesar defeated the combined forces of Antony and Cleopatra in the battle of Actium. The Augustan Age (31 BC –AD 17) is also called the Golden Age of Latin Literature, for during this age Rome emerged as both political as well as cultural capital of the Greco-Roman world during the reign of Octavius Caesar. Prior to this period initially Athens was the cultural capital of the Greek world followed by Alexandria, where Ptolemy I, the food taster and general of Alexander the great, founded the Great Library and Museum with the objective of compiling every Greek text ever written. Thus there was a cultural shift from Athens to Alexandria to Rome, when the last emerged as a major centre of art and culture as well as the military might.

Literary Culture of Augustan Rome: Horace, Virgil and Ovid

Publius Vergilius Maro, known in English as Virgil (70 BC -19 BC), Quintus Horatius Flaccus, known by the English readers as Horace (65 BC-8 BC) and Publius Ovidius Naso, known as Ovid (43 BC-17AD) were the major poets of the Augustan Rome. As a patron to art and literature Octavius Caesar, who later on became Augustus Caesar, the first Roman emperor [though Augustus was careful not to use the term emperor, for Romans looked at everyone who wanted to set himself up as a king with distrust] extended his patronage to

Horace and Virgil, but not to Ovid, who faced his wrath. Ovid's father wanted him to become a public servant but he chose to become a poet for which eventually he had to pay the price in the form of his banishment from the city of Rome to the Black Sea in 8 AD. The relation between the writer and the emperor, poetry and power got reconstituted in this age.

Augustus Caesar wanted to restore Rome to old style morality and encourage marriage and fertility for which he passed a legislation outlawing adultery. Prior to this adultery was a private affair but now it became a criminal offence against the state. In this volatile context Ovid produced his major works, which included *Amores* or *Love*, *Ars Amatoria* or *The Art of Love* and *Remedia Amores* or *Cure for Love*, and his magnum opus *Metamorphoses*. His playful and ironic love poetry supposedly propagated amorality by dwelling at length on themes such as how to seduce an attractive man or woman, or how to get rid of an old lover who one had no intention of marrying. This must have infuriated the emperor who was attempting hard to set up a strong overarching moral framework in his newly established empire. Eventually the emperor decided to banish 'the technician of Venus', an epithet that the poet of love had self-gratuitously used for himself in his *Ars Amatoria*. Unlike Ovid, Virgil and Horace won the favour of the emperor, the former by producing an epic of Homeric length and proportion called *Aeneid*, which carried forward the story of the *Iliad*. It dealt with the monumental moment of founding of Rome supposedly by Romulus in 753 BC, and ended with the deification and coronation of the current emperor.

From the second century BC onwards once Rome emerged as a major political centre, Greece came under Roman domination. Rome colonized Greece politically and militarily but in turn got culturally colonized by the rich cultural and literary heritage of Greece. Thus the political colonization of Greece by Rome resulted in the cultural colonization of Rome by Greece. The influence of Greek culture and literature on Rome has been captured by Horace in his letter to Augustus in the most paradoxical terms:

Greece once captured, made a captive of her wild conquer

And introduced the arts to rustic Latium (Horace, Epistles, 2.1.1567)

Perhaps the etymological origin of the term pedagogue can help us understand this paradox better. The modern word pedagogue comes from the ancient Greek term 'paidagogos', which referred to a Greek slave who accompanied the Roman child to school. Such a slave-cum-guide of Roman children, was instrumental in introducing them to art and culture.

Horace

Horace was born in 65 BC in Venusia, a southern region of Italy. His father, who he pays tribute to in his semi-autobiographical satires, provided him with the best education possible and sent him to Rome for studies. In the battle of Philippi in 42 BC, he fought on the side of Marcus Brutus against the combined forces of Octavius Caesar and Julius Caesar's friend and confidant Antony. After his victory, Octavius showed his magnanimity by granting a general amnesty to all those who had fought against him. In the post-war years during his stay in Rome he met Maecenas, a counsellor of Augustus, who became his lifelong friend. It was Maecenas who gave him the Sabine farm, which he cherishes in his satires while celebrating the new *pax romana* or the newly established Roman peace, a term used to denote the period of peace and prosperity of the Augustan age. The new *pax romana* was followed by the decline of Greco-Roman culture with the advent of tyrants like Tiberius and Nero, on the one hand, and with the rise of Christianity, on the other. The Roman emperor Constantine had embraced Christianity in the fourth century AD.

Horace's Oeuvre and Semi-autobiographical Nature of Horatian Satires

Horace's literary oeuvre included *Satires*, *Odes* and *Epistles*, the most famous of which was *Epistula and Pisones* or *Ars Poetica*, that is, the *The Art of Poetry*. Horace published his first book of Satires most probably in 35 BC, two years after he got the famous Sabine farm from Maecenas, which figures prominently in the Book II of his satires. The acclaimed first century Roman Rhetorician Quintilian claims satire as a purely Roman creation, unlike various other ancient genres which date back to the Classical Greece. The Roman poet Lucilius (180-103 BC), who produced thirty books of *Saturae*, is recognized as the founder of literary satire. The satires of Lucilius were largely autobiographical and topical, dealing with his life and times, descriptions of his friends and foes, as well as follies and vices of his day, a model which was continued by Horace with some modifications. Horatian satires are characterized by topical and autobiographical allusions and self-reflexivity. Some of them begin by reflecting on the universal human condition. His Book 1, Satire 1, where his patron Maecenas is the addressee, begins with a universal sense of unhappiness and dissatisfaction that one feels with one's existing profession. As a result of this eternal dissatisfaction, a trader wants to be a soldier and a soldier wants to be a trader. Similarly, a countryman wants to live like a city dweller and an inhabitant of city wants to stay in the village. The greed to have more invariably does not let the human become self-content. Horace exposes the follies, vices, ambition and greed of his contemporaries and predecessors in his satires. In Book 1, Satire 4, he discusses at length people's vices and contends that some are obsessed with the

glitter of silver, some with boys, and some with married women. In a playful and ironic manner he satirizes not only others but also maintains a self-deprecatory tone for his writing by addressing himself as ‘a man of timid mind with few ideas’, someone who ‘seldom speaks and practically say nothing’.

Discussing the objective of his satires, Horace maintained that he did not write them for public consumption but for circulation among his friends. Writing of satire was a means for him to improve his life and make him endearing to his friends. The act of writing then was a leisurely activity for him, a source of amusement. The nonchalant nature of Horatian satire could not be appropriated and carried forward by another major champion of satire, Juvenal, whose verses are marked by indignation. Juvenal, writing in the late first century AD, mentions the basis of his verses in Satire 1:

It is hard not to write satire

Though nature forbids it, *indignatio* shapes my verses.

Thus from Horace to Juvenal there was a major shift in the nature of Satire, as Juvenal could not manage to get a patron and felt so helpless and angry in the trying times that he could not remain silent; he must speak out and write satire, which was driven not by playfulness or *pax romana* but indignation. Rome which was the cultural centre during Horace’s times had become uncharitable and culturally impoverished. It was reduced to the city of sycophants, whores, pimps and intermediaries for Umbricius, the protagonist of Juvenal Satire 3. Within a span of almost fifty years, Rome which was glorified by Horace and Virgil as the centre of cultural excellence, came under the ambit of biting *satire* in Juvenal. Umbricius decided to migrate to the countryside, for an honest man like him did not have either a patron or other avenues to achieve upward mobility. The fallen nature of the post-Augustan Roman civilization as captured by Juvenal was indicative of the decline of Greco-Roman culture under tyrants and autocrats.

Ars Poetica or Epistle to Pisones

Ars Poetica, Horace’s longest poem, follows into the footsteps of Aristotle as a work of prescriptive criticism. Although it touches upon various kinds of poetry, one-third of the whole poem is concerned with the drama. On the subject of Homer, there is a unanimity between Horace and Longinus, as for both a perfect model of poetry can always be found in Homer. Horace’s theorization of poetry was slightly different from Plato and Aristotle, who

regarded poetry either as a form of ethical training or management of emotions, whereas Horace perceived poetry as covering everything from promoting eloquence to placating gods. Such diversity of purpose suggests that it had a significant function to play in society, but it equally indicates that it may not have a clearly defined role to play in Augustus's empire (Day 44). His contribution to literary criticism can be assessed in two ways: one by analysing his advice on how to write good poetry, and the other is his trenchant critique of effect of money on poetry. For Horace, first and foremost, the aspiring writer must aim at uniformity, simplicity, imitation of nature and maintain decorum. The lack of uniformity in writing may appear as aesthetically displeasing as joining a human head to the neck of a horse or to attach a black and ugly fish below the head of a lovely woman. Similarly he argues that a young author must maintain decorum, that is, the use of right metre for the right genre, for instance, iambus best suits the drama, as it is suitable for dialogue. He also suggests that violence should not be portrayed on stage. In rejecting the onstage representation of violence Horace was not saying anything new but merely reinforcing one of the accepted cultural codes of classical Greek theatre. In the Greek theatre violence was never shown onstage but always reported, for instance, in *Sophocles's* tragedy *Oedipus Rex*, the episode in which Oedipus gouges out his own eyes as a mark of repentance, is not directly shown on stage but reported by a messenger. The onstage representation of violence became the norm much later in the Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre, mostly in the latter, which captured the rampant political and sexual corruption of the age on stage.

One of the most powerful lines that Horace produced is: "poets aim either to benefit, or to amuse, or to utter words at once both pleasing and helpful to life." The entire history of western literature and literary criticism before and after Horace revolves around the question: what should be the role of literature? Some argued that literature should please whereas some proposed that it should instruct, and some like Horace attempted to reconcile these two seemingly contrary functions of literature. In the Victorian England Matthew Arnold foresaw in his work *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) and later in "The Study of poetry" (1880) an ethical and semi-religious role for poetry in the light of the constant undermining of the authority of religion. This ethical role of literature championed by Arnold was rejected by the proponents of art for art's sake. Writing in his preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), Oscar Wilde famously remarked: "All art is useless". For Wilde and other adherents of the movement art for art's sake, unlike Arnold, the main aim of literature was to please and not to instruct.

Longinus “On the Sublime”

Longinus’s treatise “On the Sublime” written in the first century AD primarily answers two questions: one, what is sublime, and the other, how to master sublimity in writing. Unlike Horace, we have few information about Longinus’s personal life. “On the Sublime”, like *Ars Poetica*, is written in the form of a letter explaining how to achieve perfection in writing. In Horace’s account if poetry should please and instruct for Longinus it should be sublime. In response to the question what constitutes sublimity in an author he argues that the sublime consists in a certain loftiness and excellence of language. Excellency and distinction of language can alone give the great authors their pre-eminence and immortal fame. Such writers do not persuade the reader but transport them out of themselves (163). The sublime generates such an overwhelming emotion and irresistible force that the reader’s capacity to judge or to believe is confounded. If sublimity can bring immortality, can it be subjected to the rules of pedagogy? Longinus attempts to answer the question whether or not the sublime can be taught. The dominant viewpoint proposed by Caecilius in his treatise on the Sublime and Longinus’s other predecessors and contemporaries was that it is an innate quality and hence cannot be acquired by instruction. On the issue of ‘teachability’ or ‘non-teachability’ of the sublime, he counters and rejects his contemporaries and proposes that it can be acquired. He probes the question of greatness in writing by drawing on and examining illustrative passages from Homer, Sappho and Plato. There are five sources of sublimity according to Longinus: great thoughts, overwhelming emotions, certain figures of speech, noble diction and dignified word arrangement. Some of the examples of intense emotions leading to sublime can be found in Sapphic fragments, especially in Sappho’s “Hymn to Aphrodite”, where the syntactic disorder produced by the pangs of love becomes both a cause and product of sublime. But his first illustrative passage comes from Homer. The images of gods in the battlefield, as captured in the *Iliad* are examples of sublime for Longinus, though they represent gods in a negative light:

Blared round about like a trumpet the firmament
Vast and Olympus;
Shuddering down in the depths, the king of the dead Aidoneus
Sprang from his throne with a shuddering cry, for
fear the earthshaker, Poseidon,
Might soon splinter asunder the earth, and his mansion lie open

In these sentences the very foundation of earth has been shaken, as the whole world is turned upside down. The entire universe, both heaven and hell, immortals and mortals share the peril of war while this topsy-turvydom produces terror effect in the heart of readers. Years later writing in his 1757 treatise on aesthetics entitled *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* Edmund Burke argued that sublime generates terror in the heart of viewers and the terror becomes the source of pleasure. The fear that the above Homeric lines generate comes from the wounding of the gods, their quarrel, revenge, tears, imprisonment and other passions which Homeric Gods share with men. The Homeric tradition of Gods, Longinus writes, “makes the men in the Iliad gods and gods men”, for Homer has attributed not only his gods “immortal natures” but also “immortal sorrows” (189). Longinus then carries forward Plato and Xenophanes’s trenchant critique of Homer’s anthropomorphism. Both Plato and Xenophanes complained that Homer attributed human traits to the Gods by being too casual in his depiction of deities. They also rejected the claim that such stories should be read allegorically by contending that the young cannot distinguish allegorical representations from non-allegorical ones. For Plato, then, Poetry was a way of shaping behaviour of the young ones by offering models for imitation, not the counter-models. Any poetry therefore which weakened the spirit of the warrior by representing the horrors of war and showed gods fighting, hatching conspiracies and treated them like human beings, should be banned.

In Homer, the wrath of God becomes a source of terror whereas in Sappho overpowering emotions produce the sublime. She deals with extreme forms of emotions to such an extent that while depicting her passion, her soul, body, ears, tongue, eyes, colour, all fail her simultaneously:

If I see you but for a little, my voice comes no more
And my tongue is broken.
And once a delicate frame runs through my limbs;
I see nothing with my eyes, and my ears thunder.
The sweat pours down: shiver grips me all over. I
am grown paler than grass, and seem to myself
to be very near to death. (Sappho, Fragment 31)

Longinus's methodology of citing passages from Homer and Sappho as the examples of the sublime must have been a source of inspiration for Matthew Arnold while developing his theory of the Touchstone method, which Arnold formulates in order to assess the greatness of a work of art. As regards the use of figures of speech, especially metaphor, he proposes that they should be used with restraint; not more than two or three should be used for the same subject. It is paradoxical that Longinus urges restraint in the pursuit of the sublime, which by nature inclines to infinity. One of the problems that an author may encounter while producing the sublime poetry is the issue of immoderate emotion. Centuries after Longinus authors and critics have been trying to come to terms with the emotional side of the sublime. T S Eliot in his seminal 1921 essay "Hamlet and his Problems" maintains that "*Hamlet* suffers from its eponymous hero being dominated by an emotion which is inexpressible, because it is in excess of the facts as they appear" (Day 48). Longinus was concerned with the disconnect between thoughts and emotions, for an ill-timed and empty display of emotions, where no emotion is called for, lead to affectation in writing. Earlier Plato in his *Republic* had raised his objection to the poets who capture emotion in an exaggerated manner, which is diametrically opposite to the way people respond to affliction in their real life.

Underlining the difference between Horace and Longinus's approach to the relation between aesthetics and economics or poetry and market forces, Gary Day contends that both agree that commerce corrupts poet and playwright alike. However, they disagree on the issue of countering the impact of market on poetry. Horace advises poets to master technical perfection in poetry whereas Longinus asks them to aim for the greatness of thought, which is, both a cause and an effect of the sublime (Day 47). The pursuit of greatness or novelty in thought also causes glaring improprieties of language, which like a double edged sword may be not only a source of excellence but also of failure. Longinus, therefore, undertakes the task of suggesting the ways in which faults of style related to sublimity can be avoided. He does so by distinguishing between true and false sublime. Using universality as a literary and artistic criterion to judge a work of art he contends that if a work produces a strong and lasting hold on the memory and it equally pleases all the readers by elevating their soul, we can assume that we have come across the true sublime.

Although the idea of sublime poetry being pleasing to all may not be appealing to the adherents of high theory, who immediately become suspicious to any form of writing which makes claims of universal appeal, yet Longinus's treatise of sublime has influenced a wide range of subsequent thinkers, like Burke, Kant, Slavoj Zizek and others, and continue to do

so even now. And, it is this after life of the sublime that makes it worth reading even today in the age of theory.

Conclusion

Thus Horace and Longinus represent two significant historical junctures in the history of classical criticism, as both were concerned with prescriptive criticism, especially with the art of writing. Both found in Homer a perfect model of imitation for the aspiring poets. For Horace great poetry should fulfil the dual function of giving instruction and pleasure whereas for Longinus great poetry should be sublime and be able to generate overwhelming emotion in readers. Both of them attempted to respond to two significant questions: one is what constitutes great poetry, and the other is, how the love for money affects the quality of poetry, questions with which poets and thinkers have grappled alike since antiquity. An example of what could the greed for money do to poets can be found in the fifth century BC Greek poet Choerilus. It is said that he was given a gold coin for each good poem he produced, and a beating for each bad verse: in the end, he was flogged to death for his writing. But, it is also true that the relationship between poetry and market gets reconstituted in each age, and in the age of best sellers the overwhelming impact of market on literature cannot be undermined. Both Longinus and Horace nevertheless continue to be relevant, for they help us address the question how to retain the element of excellence in poetry despite the overarching influence of money and market on art.

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