

HISTORY AND LANGUAGE AT ROME

The impact of war accelerates many processes in the development of a language that otherwise might have been slow, gradual and imperfect. First and most palpable, the enrichment of the vocabulary—novelties and the new words to describe them. But change may go deeper and further.

The struggle for Sicily in the first Punic War engaged a large proportion of the Roman manpower for more than twenty years. Returning, the soldiers brought with them the words they had used in Sicily day by day. Hence the wide knowledge of Greek revealed by Roman comedy a generation later, before the end of the second war. Then, in a few years Rome became protector of Hellas and arbiter of the civilized world; the language and the literature of the Greeks at once permeated the upper classes.

The Latin language, however, was deliberately safeguarded by the statesmen of the imperial Republic. The enemies and the friends of Hellenism worked for the same end. Cato, conservative and xenophobic, vindicated the use of Latin for serious prose by composing the first native history; and the circle of the younger Scipio invoked Greek theory to shape and refine the harsh vernacular. Latin was the language of law and government, of oratory and history. A long time elapsed before it was capable of dealing with abstract ideas. The words did not exist. The adaption was completed at last by Cicero. He transmuted Greek conceptions, translated Greek terms and, not least, modified the meaning of many native words.

Thus the speech of peasants and soldiers was converted into the vehicle of a world civilization; and the Republic was ready to pass into the Empire. The process and its stages are clear enough. Less easy of apprehension are the developments of style and idiom that proceed, not from foreign influences, but from internal causes, from social and political change. It is the purpose of the present paper briefly to indicate some of the repercussions provoked by the collapse of the old order at Rome, by the civil wars and by the emergence of absolute government.

Wars between states inevitably augment—and debase—the vocabulary of international relations; terms such as ‘security,’ ‘aggression,’ and ‘imperialism’ tend to forfeit much of their meaning. More rapid and pervasive are the results of strife between citizens, for there is a common fund of words and ideas. Hence opportunities for propaganda, with swift reactions. Thucydides, taking the class-war at Corcyra as a text for the political pathology of all Hellas in his time, describes how the accepted meanings of words were turned inside out.¹ He gives pertinent examples—‘unbridled temerity was called manly devotion to the party, prudent hesitation was labelled as an excuse for cowardice,’ and the like.² Especially to the point is his estimate of the rival factions. The one side professed to be champions of liberty and equality, the other of aristocracy and good sense. They paid lip-service to the Commonwealth: in reality they regarded it as the spoils of victory.³

The conception of Thucydides acquired sharp and startling relevance when Rome seemed to go the way of the city-states of Hellas, when the convulsions of the last epoch of the Republic threw up demagogues and an oligarchy, political factions deriving more and more from economic interest, and, in the end the supersession of both aristocracy and democracy, fraudulent names, by the reality of military despotism. Thucydides was read and studied at Rome, not least by Sallustius, a child of the revolutionary age—and its historian. In close imitation of the master he tells how the champions of Senate or People pretended to have at heart the good of the community but strove for personal power,⁴

¹ Thucydides 3, 82, 4.

² Thucydides 3, 82, 4 ff.

³ Thucydides 3, 82, 8.

⁴ Sallust, *Bellum Catilinae*.

how the names of 'good' and 'bad' citizens were allotted on a partisan valuation, the defenders of the existing order being called 'good' because they had the advantage in wealth and in the means to do harm.⁵

Revolution not only modifies the meanings of terms in the current terminology of politics and ethics. It revives old words and begets neologisms. The colouring of the new vocabulary will depend largely on whether the authors of change appeal to domestic precedents, to general principles evinced in the particular practice of other nations, or to the experience and ideals of humanity at large. Finally, the last stage in a political and social transformation, namely the consolidation of the gains of the revolution, may be found to simulate, by the adoption of conservative phraseology, a return to traditional ideas and observances.

In English history the struggle between the Parliament and the King furnishes instructive evidence. The opponents of the royal prerogative were naturally dubbed 'rebels.' They had their revenge—they applied to the Royalists the term '*malignant*' which previously denoted resistance to authority, human or divine, especially the latter. The designation '*Leveller*' emerges as the title of an egalitarian faction; and the first use of the neologism '*dissenter*' is dated to the year 1641.⁶ The political system established by the rebels was called the '*Commonwealth*;' and the holder of absolute power in the new order took for himself an innocuous appellation, that of '*Protector*.'

The movement that subverted Church and State in France was more radical, its effects on language more visible and enduring.⁷ Both foreign and classical precedents were invoked for reform or for revolution. The word '*responsabilité*,' deriving from the English doctrine about the duties of ministers of the Crown, makes its first appearance in 1787; and a military leader calls himself 'First Consul of the Republic.' Everybody, of course, spoke the constitution; the concepts of legality and patriotism, '*les lois et la patrie*' were widely exploited;⁸ and the new despotism of

⁵ Sallust, *Hist.*

⁶ See the entry in the *O.E.D.*

⁷ Compare the observations of F. Brunot, *Comptes rendus de l'Académie des inscriptions et belles lettres*, 1937, 47 ff.

Napoleon shamelessly appealed to 'les idées libérales.'

It will not be necessary to refer in this context to the linguistic changes which the revolutionary movements of recent years have provoked among the nations of Europe. Some will acquire permanent validity, others are doomed to pass with their authors. The documentary record will survive for the delight and instruction of posterity.

It remains to define the peak and climax of the revolutionary epoch at Rome. With the oligarchy put in power by Sulla the Dictator, settled conditions seemed to return. When Cicero consoled himself for a period of enforced leisure by writing about political theory, the model he recommended was simply the ancestral constitution of the Republic, modified in no vital organ or ideal. But the stability of the Roman State was impaired by the rise of the great political dynasts, the '*monarchic faction-leaders*,' as an ancient writer calls them.⁹ Their compacts and alliances suspended the working of the Constitution, their feuds destroyed it.

Caesar prevailed against Pompeius Magnus. Yet the brief dictatorship of Caesar is by no means as subversive in act and purpose as might be supposed. He had not wanted civil war. Victorious, he did his best to stem the flood, to prevent a political perturbation from turning into a social upheaval. The Dictator had not the time to create a new system of government. The Republicans therefore thought that they could avert Caesarism by removing Caesar. They were wrong. Civil strife broke out again, followed by the proscription of the propertied classes. This time the revolution was social as well as political: the leaders of the Caesarian party had to seize property to satisfy the needs of a proletarian army. Their victory at Philippi, reinforced by the Pact of Brundisium (40 B.C.), abolished all hope of a restoration of Republican government, though the final decision between the rivals for supreme power, Caesar's heir and Marcus Antonius, was delayed for nine years more. The victor of Actium stabilised the revolution, proclaimed the return to 'normal conditions' and devised a formula, the Principate of Caesar Augustus.

⁸ A person called Domergue even proposed to substitute "loyaume" for "royaume."

⁹ Appian, *Bella civilia*, 1, 2, 7.

The year of confusion may therefore roughly be reckoned as 50 - 30 B.C., the central paroxysm of swiftest change as 44 - 40 B. C. As history is often written, the interval is passed over all too lightly. Augustus in fact exerted himself to spread oblivion over it, by asserting the continuity of his system, not with the evil period out of which it arose, but with the last age of ordered government. Literature shows a gap between 'republican' and 'Augustan' writers. A generation of poets had passed away, symbolised by the names of Catullus and Lucretius; and Cicero had perished in the proscriptions.

In truth, the interval was vital both to literary and to political development. Sallustius, whom most manuals of literature reckon as a Republican author, did not turn to history until the Republic was abolished, his own career terminated; on the other hand, Livy the Augustan had set about his task before 30 B. C.; and Virgil and Horace were already writing by 40 B. C. A considerable revision of conventional labels and estimates is therefore called for.

A new order was slowly and steadily taking shape. Oratory could only flourish in a free state¹⁰—and oratory was doomed. The ornate and balanced fashion of public discourse had already encountered notable opposition in the preceding generation, from the adherents of the influential Attic school, to which both Caesar and Brutus belonged. War and revolution, hard masters, shatter the comforts, the pomps and the illusions of peace.¹¹ They killed the elaborate Ciceronian period and confirmed the claim of a plain severe style. Pollio, the enemy of Ciceronianism, was in his element; and Pollio survived to exercise a noteworthy influence on letters.

The revolutionary wars brought to the fore many new men from the towns of Italy. Against some of them, prejudice alleges an obscure origin, usually with exaggeration. If they lacked the equipment for polite studies, the military preoccupations of the age left them little leisure for improvement. It will not be believed that Agrippa, for example, the great plebeian marshal, concerned himself much with stylistic elaborations. Indeed, certain successful *novi homines* fell far below the urbane standards of the

¹⁰ Cf. Cicero, *Brutus*, 45: "pacis est comes otique socia et jam bene constitutae civitatis quasi alumna quaedam eloquentia."

¹¹ Cf. Thucydides 3, 82, 2.

capital. Augustus felt constrained to dismiss a provincial governor of consular rank for bad spelling:¹² clearly one of the successful 'thugs and brigands.'

Augustus himself, a matter-of-fact man, preferred a plain sensible style: he detested luxuriance and preciousness.¹³ Pomp and pretentiousness should have suffered heavy damage in the revolutionary years. The example of Horace shows the tendency of the times, especially in the earliest of his Epodes—a realistic temperament finding its suitable expression. But few of the contemporaries of Augustus and of Horace reveal the predilection for realism in thought and in style that might have been expected to prevail.

The era of tribulation seemed rather to have provoked the contrary reaction, the *escape from reality*. First of all, refuge in the study of history. Some, it is true, like Sallustius and Pollio, turned to Thucydides. Experience of men and affairs sharpened their perception of the difference between appearance and reality; their narratives of recent or contemporary history were instructive, but in no sense 'improving.' More seductive and more satisfying was the call of the Roman past, of the heroes born in happier years, of the very origins of the city. Thus did Livy seek consolation for 'the calamities which for so many years our time had witnessed.'¹⁴ Interest in antiquities was not confined to professional students. Disaster and the sense of guilt evoked nostalgia for the past. It antedates by many years the War of Actium and the Augustan programme of revival and regeneration.

The escape from the present took other forms, not lacking parallel among the phenomena of disturbed and unhappy epochs—Arcadia and even Utopia. Even Horace felt the temptation.¹⁵ Gallus and Virgil wrote pastoral poetry while Roman armies clashed in battle and the Republic went down in ruin. Gallus was swept into war and politics: Virgil developed and created the *Aeneid*, the poem which linked the ideal and legendary past with the glories of the present dispensation.

¹² Suetonius, *Divus Aug.* 88, 2: "tradidisse aliquos legato cum consulari successorem dedisse ut rudi et indocto, cuius manu 'ixi' pro 'ipsi' scriptum animadverterit..."

¹³ Suetonius, *Divus Aug.* 80, 1.

¹⁴ Livy, *Praef.* 5.

¹⁵ In *Epodes* 16; but that poem is in no way cloudy or mystical.

The romantic colouring of Augustan literature is a commonplace of literary criticism.¹⁶ Its source lies in the revolutionary years, but it is in no sense anachronistic to the new order of things. On the contrary, Augustus was himself the master of illusionism: the destroyer of the Republic paraded as its restorer.

Virgil, Horace and Livy had come to maturity long before the War of Actium: like so many of the adherents of Augustus, they had been recruited from the camps of his adversaries. If the literature conventionally described as Augustan is contemplated in its proper historical setting, its novel, vivid and vital features are seen to derive, not from the new dispensation in state and society, but from the years of change and calamity.

To that period belong certain well-defined innovations in literary technique. The hexameter as employed by Catullus and Lucretius was heavy and monotonous. From Virgil it acquires limpid grace in the *Eclogues*, force and variety in the *Georgics*. The latter poem, composed in the years 37-30 B. C., shows Virgil in complete mastery of the style and metre that went to make the *Aeneid*. Likewise will be noted Horace's development of the lyric measures and Tibullus' shaping of the pentameter to its classical norm. The first book of Tibullus' poems was probably not published before 26 B. C., but he may have been at work for a number of years.

Lack of material for comparison precludes much clear evidence for the development of prose. Livy is the only author surviving in bulk, and Livy is in certain respects an anomalous figure. Cicero and the style of Cicero quickly lost favour in the Triumviral period, not merely because the orator ended his career and his life as an enemy of the Caesarians, a martyr of the Republic. Nor did the 'revived Republic' of Augustus herald a reaction. Livy, however, a devoted admirer of Cicero, employed a periodic style for the writing of history, (not always happily).¹⁷ For which reasons one may regard him as the last of the Republican prose authors.¹⁸

The investigation of changes in language cannot dispense with the poets. Virgil and Horace are steeped in contemporary political

¹⁶ Cf. E. Norden, "Vergils Äneis im Lichte ihrer Zeit," *Neue Jahrbücher* VII (1901), 249 ff.; 313 ff.

¹⁷ Cf. E. Norden, *Die Antike Kunstprosa* 2 (1909), 236; A. Klotz, P-W XIII, 850.

¹⁸ As, for example, E. Norden.

ideas—for which they are, in fact, the best evidence. Furthermore, with Livy is already apparent a typical phenomenon of his literature of the Empire, the growing approximation of prose to the idiom of poetry.

During the revolutionary epoch certain words and forms tended to recede from standard usage: some, indeed, are rigorously banned. A purism like that so severely enjoined for prose usage by Cicero and by Caesar extends to poetry. Certain grammatical forms are either dropped or permitted only for special effects in traditional phrases.¹⁹ The diminutive, appropriate to familiar letters, and surviving in colloquial speech (as the evidence of the Romance languages demonstrates), had never been admitted to elevated prose; it is now banished from poetry. Again, the creation of compound adjectives on Greek analogy, disapproved by purists, becomes more and more restricted. Virgil, it appears, allowed himself only four innovations of this type.²⁰

It should seem that the political vocabulary dominant in the last age of the Republic must have discarded a number of expressions: the catchwords of one generation become obsolete, if not nauseous, in the next. That was not the case at Rome. One or two phrases, it is true, lose prominence. Cicero, and no doubt other orators of the day, made much of 'tota Italia' and 'concordia ordinum.' Naturally enough—those were ideas, not realities. Not so much is heard of the phrases under the Principate of Augustus—perhaps because Italy had in fact been reconciled to Rome, and the two parts of the possessing class, Senate and Knights, had been compelled to drop their feud.

For the rest, the consecrated phraseology was assiduously explicated by rival leaders and parties in the struggle for power—and monopolised by the victor.²¹ They were all champions of 'liberty and the laws,' friends of peace; and so the principal catchwords of Republican Rome end as 'Libertas Augusta' and 'Pax Augusta.'

In the uneasy months after the assassination of Caesar all men spoke of peace. The Caesarians, some of whom were in a resentful

¹⁹ For example, Horace in the *Odes* shuns the archaic passive infinitive in "ier."

²⁰ Cf. E. Norden, *P. Vergilius Maro, Aeneis Buch VI*³ (1934), 176 f.

²¹ Compare the observations of the present writer, *The Roman Revolution* (1939), c. XI, "Political Catchwords."

mood, were denounced as enemies of peace.²² However, when for their own ends the enemies of the Caesarians fomented war again, efforts at mediation were dismissed as 'peace-mongering.' The term used, 'pacificatio,' is a new creation of the period.²³

Like liberty and peace, the claims of ordered government were invoked to justify usurpation: it was often called 'laying the foundations of the Commonwealth.' There was also a development of the medical metaphor so familiar in ancient diagnoses of the maladies of the body politic. In 52 B. C. Pompeius Magnus was granted special powers to heal the state—a 'doctor's mandate' is—or was—the modern jargon.²⁴ Augustus brought health as well as salvation; he could therefore be described not only as 'salutaris' but as 'salubris.'²⁵

Most instructive perhaps of all is 'pietas,' which denoted dutiful respect for the claims of religion, the family and the State. In the civil wars 'pietas' became a badge of political allegiance. The adherents of Pompeius seem to have begun it.²⁶ The others soon followed. L. Antonius took the word and added it to his own name as a sign of political solidarity with his brother.²⁷ The imperious demands of 'pietas' compelled Caesar's heir to take vengeance on the assassins;²⁸ and the essential epithet adhering to the hero of the national epic, Aeneas, who, by allegory is Augustus, is none other than 'pius.'²⁹

To describe the primacy of Augustus in the Roman state, various descriptive and unofficial titles were available. He might have been called, as was Marius, 'custos,' that is, 'protector.'³⁰ For a time the term 'dux' enjoyed favour, but was soon eschewed

²² Cicero, *Ad Atticum*, 14, 21, 2.

²³ Cicero, *Ad Atticum* 15, 7; *Ad fam.* 10, 27, 2. Note also the new coinage "pacificatorius" (*Phil.* 12, 3).

²⁴ Cicero, *Pro Milone* 68: "sed quis non intellegit omnis tibi rei publicae partis aegras et labantes, ut eas his armis sanares et confirmares, esse commissas?" Cf. Appian, *Bella civilia* 2, 28, 107; Plutarch, *Pompeius* 55; Cassius Dio 54, 39, 2.

²⁵ Suetonius, *Divus Aug.* 42, 1.

²⁶ At the Battle of Munda in 45 B.C., cf. Appian, *Bella Civilia* 2, 104, 430. Then coins of Ser. Pompeius, *BMC, R. Rep.* II, 370 ff.

²⁷ *BMC, R. Rep.* II, 400 ff.; Cassius Dio 48, 5, 4.

²⁸ Tacitus, *Ann.* 1, 9.

²⁹ For this interpretation, cf. *The Roman Revolution* 462 f.; 470.

³⁰ Cicero, *In Cat.* 3, 24; *Post reditum ad Quirites* 9. For "custos" applied to Augustus, cf. Horace, *Odes* 4, 5, 2.

as being too military for an epoch of liberty, legality and peace.³¹ 'Princeps' was safer. The word has a history. The singular usage develops from the plural. The 'principes civitatis' were the leading men of consular rank in the Republic; but before the Republic ended, the singular appears, 'princeps,' with the meaning of 'political chief,' which develops into that of sole ruler. 'Principatus' was not so very different from 'dominatus.'³² In Augustan usage, however, that form, being applied to one who clearly was not to be regarded as a despot, is used as the antithesis of 'dominus.' The antithesis is fundamental to the whole ideology of the Empire. Further, 'princeps' being engrossed by the First Citizen in the restored Republic, a new designation was needed for the ex-consuls: it was quickly found, 'primores.'

In his ordering of the Commonwealth Augustus appealed to Republican past. No Roman could have acted otherwise. Not only were all new things detested, and tradition worshipped. Archaism, ever a highly respectable tendency, acquired new strength in the years of change—for archaism too was an escape and a reaction from the present. Words normally avoided by Cicero, such as 'tempestatas' and 'proles' return to prose usage.³³ The latter is especially significant in the light of the demographic policy of the Princeps; he once read to the Senate the speech of the censor Metellus 'de prole augenda!³⁴ The poet takes to calling himself a 'vates';³⁵ and 'priscus' becomes popular—Livy describes with affection the earliest history of Rome as 'priscan illa.'³⁶ Above all, the venerable word 'augustus,' a felicitous revival.³⁷

The governing class had always imposed an embargo on the use of Greek words in serious prose or for official occasions. Contemporary events now reinforced the salubrious habit: the

³¹ For the use of "dux," cf. *The Roman Revolution* 311 f.

³² Cicero, *Phil.* II, 36: "dominatum et principatum."

³³ Cf. Cicero, *De oratore* 3, 154, For "tempestatas," Livy 1, 18, 1. On "proles" note the observation of Norden, P. Vergilius Maro, *Aeneis Buch VI*³ (1934), 321.

³⁴ Suetonius, *Divus Aug.* 89, 5.

³⁵ In *Epodes* 16, 66, the word means "prophet." But cf. *Odes* 1, 31, 2; 4, 6, 44; 9, 28.

³⁶ Livy, *Praef.* 5: "dum prisca illa tota mente repeto."

³⁷ The word had a religious atmosphere, and it suggested Romulus' founding of Rome, "augusto augurio" (Ennius, quoted by Varro, *RR* 3, 1, 2.).

dangers threatening the supremacy of the Roman people in the war against Antonius and Cleopatra evoked a great outburst of xenophobia and nationalism. Greek retained its place in education and in private intercourse; but a Roman emperor apologized in the Senate for the unavoidable use of a Greek technical term.³⁸ As for Latin poetry, Greek forms of words and metrical licenses abate; and close imitation of the Alexandrians is replaced by a subtler adaption designed to reproduce at Rome the equivalent of the models of classic Hellas.

In general, the momentous transformation of state and society had less influence on the language than might have been expected. Innovations are few, literary standards and literary continuity are maintained. Apart from the revival of archaic words and the beginning of the encroachment of poetry on the style of prose composition, the puristic and normalising tendencies evident in the last generation of the Republic go on, strengthened and even accelerated. The poetic and archaic colouring of the earliest books of Livy is striking; it may be explained, partly but not wholly, by the subject-matter. His later work shows a reversion to severer standards.³⁹ Virgil was especially commended by that sound critic Quintilian for the manner of his employment of archaisms;⁴⁰ he discreetly confines himself to forms and words consecrated by the practice of predecessors.

The peculiar art of Virgil and of Horace consists not so much in new coinages as in a skilful exploitation of the existing resources of the language through subtle modifications and unexpected juxtapositions. Agrippa, a plain man, objected to Virgil's style: Virgil, he said, was the inventor of a new kind of preciousness, distorting the meanings of familiar words.⁴¹ Not so very different is Quintilian's praise of Horace—'varius figuris et verbis felicissime audax.'⁴²

³⁸ Suetonius, *Tib.* 71, 1.

³⁹ Cf. S. G. Stacey, "Die Entwicklung des livianischen Stiles," *Archiv. für lat. Lex.* X (1898), 17 ff.

⁴⁰ Quintilian 8, 3, 24.

⁴¹ Donatus 44: "M. Vipsanius a Maecenate suppositum appellabat novae cacozeliae repertorem, non tumidae nec exilis, sed ex communibus verbis atque ideo latentis."

⁴² Quintilian 10, 1, 96.