Living Latin: Twentieth Century Literature in Latin

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Most people these days consider Latin a dead language, and they think that the decent treatment for such a thing is to bury it and forget it. But it is a serious crime to bury something alive; and except for the fact that Latin is no longer the spoken language of any country, it is still very much a living force in the world, and is even still spoken by some groups. Just this year there was an international convention held in Ausburg, Germany, for people who love Latin and Greek. Those who attended came from Europe, America, Africa, and Asia. During the entire convention nothing was spoken except Latin by these diverse people. One of the liveliest Classicists in this group was a Peter Caelestis Eichenseer, a Benedictine priest, who will be mentioned later, as will Dr. Alexander Lenard, who found it incomprehensible when he was on the Monmouth College campus that our students read Virgil and Horace but did not have the slightest notion of how to ask for a drink of water in Latin.

Latin has many subtle ways of permeating our modern life. All the Romance languages (French, Spanish, Portuguese, and Italian) started out as simply corrupt forms of Latin, and almost two thirds of the words in modern English are derived from Latin or ancient Greek. Most scientific terms -- in chemistry, biology, geology -- are taken directly from Latin or ancient Greek, and the professions use innumerable Latin words. In law, for instance, we have phrases from *habeas corpus* to *subpoena* to *nolo contendere*--all impeccable Latin. Even in our everyday experiences we run into such abbreviations as lb. (for pound), e.g., i.e., ibid., op. cit. -- all abbreviations of Latin, not English, words. And in some areas where world communication is important, Latin is still the international language. One example of this is the official periodical of the Vatican, which goes out quarterly to every corner of the world, with every word in Latin. And another current all-Latin periodical, called *Vox Latina* and published quarterly in Germany, has worldwide distribution. It includes such things as Latin crossword puzzles, and it uses the latest terms for items like the pocket calculator and the space shuttle. A central figure in this periodical is the Peter Caelestis mentioned earlier, who signs his articles: P. C. Eichenseer.

And yes, there is even literature being written in Latin today. The Latin literature of our century can be separated into two general categories -- translations from other languages, and originals.

Books, of course, are being translated from one language to another all the time. Many of our most familiar stories were not written in English. *Pinocchio* was written in Italian, and *Cinderella* in French. Incidentally, when an early English translator misread the French word *vair* (meaning “fur”) as *verre* (meaning “glass”) -- the pronunciation of the two words is almost identical -- the famous (and impossible) glass slipper in which Cinderella danced came into existence.

But the first question about translating a book into Latin is why on earth anyone would translate a work of literature into a language which is “nobody's” native language. The answer is that it is “everybody's” language. A book in German, if it is translated into French, may still not be readable by people in Spain or in Monmouth, Illinois. But internationally education still includes instruction in Latin. Therefore, if a book is put into Latin, it can be read by

literate people in Spain, in France, in Germany, and in the United States. Thus, this one translation eliminates the need for four or five translations.

Two Italian scholars have made rather different translations of *Pinocchio* from their native tongue into Latin. Both versions are good, but each writer has his own opinion about how the Latin would have expressed these ideas, because idioms vary greatly from one language to another. In Latin a man never married a woman; he led her into matrimony (a term meaning motherhood). This difference in idiom is also obvious in modern languages. In English you "take" an exam; in Italian you "give" it; in French you "undergo" it; and in Spanish you "suffer" it. I am not sure that the Spanish don't say it most accurately. A British student "sweats" for that exam; and an American "crams" for it. And in ouridiom we ask, "How old is the baby?" -- a baby "old"?

Some years ago I translated Van Dyke's "Story of the Other Wise Man" from English into Latin. It certainly did not make me rich or famous, but at least 1,500 copies of it were sold. And in the early 1960's a man did make a neat little sum of money by translating a book into Latin. That man was Dr. Alexander Lenard, an Austrian physician, who was allowed to go into exile in Brazil after World War II. He spoke sixteen languages, and during the war he was assigned the task of teaching an accelerated course of English to some European soldiers. The only book he had available in English was *Winnie the Pooh*. He found that its vocabulary was basic and varied enough to serve his purpose. Later he began putting the story into Latin -- just for fun. When his translation was finished, he felt that it was good, and he started a worldwide search for a publisher. Publishers, however, who judge the quality of a book by how marketable it is, were not impressed. As they saw it, only children would be interested in this story, and children would not have the background necessary to read it in Latin. Therefore, it had no sales value.

But Dr. Lenard did not give up, and finally the American publisher who had published *Winnie the Pooh* in English decided to take a chance on it. With the right publicity, somewhat to everybody's surprise (including Dr. Lenard's), this book was a huge success. It became a status symbol to have it lying on your coffee table for visitors to see -- whether you could read a word of Latin or not. It became the only book in Latin ever to be found on the best-seller list. And Dr. Lenard, who by the way visited our campus twice in the sixties for several weeks at a time, told me that the publishers had constructed a new building for their firm from their profits on this book. Later they published another book of his (this one translated into English from German) on the personalities that the doctor had come to know among the rural people of Brazil after he had gone there to live. The publishers had insisted on capitalizing on the popularity of *Winnie Ille Pu* by calling this new book *The Valley of the Latin Bear*. It had originally been published in German under the title of *The Cow in the Pasture*. Dr. Lenard was quite unhappy about the change of name because, as he said, this book had absolutely no connection with Winnie. However, the publisher won the argument. Incidentally, I hear that a biography of Dr. Lenard has recently been published, but I have not seen it.

The most recent addition to the list of translations into Latin is not yet officially published, but I hope that it soon will be. For over two years I have been writing and polishing a Latin translation of E. B. White's *Charlotte's Web*. I feel that this delightful and amusing story, like *Winne the Pooh* and *Alice in Wonderland*, has the qualities that make it appeal to people of all ages. My only problem is that the publishers of the English version have allowed me permission to have privately printed only one hundred copies of this translation, because

they think that they may want to publish a Latin translation sometime, and they want no competition. *

In addition to the books I have mentioned, many others, including *The Little Prince* and *Ferdinand the Bull*, have been published in Latin translation, and not all of them are children's stories, e.g. Dr. Lenard's translation of Francois Sagan's *Bonjour Tristesse* in 1963.

But translations are like impersonations. They are simply mirrors, reflecting the real thing. True literature is original. And we do have some very talented writers who can and do produce original Latin literature, mostly poetry.

One of the most interesting of these is a German poet with a triple personality as a writer. He is a highly respected poet in his own country, who has received many honors and awards, including an honorary Ph.D. from a prestigious German university. Under his own name of Josef Eberle he writes poetry in standard German; under the pen name of Sebastian Blau he writes poetry in the dialect of his native region (a kind of German Bobby Burns); and under the pen name of Josephus Apellus he is a writer of Latin lyrics. An interesting thing about this "triple" man is that under Hitler Josef Eberle was forbidden to write, but Sebastian Blau was not interfered with in any way.

But what we are concerned with here is this man's Latin poetry. These poems obviously show the influence of the ancient Roman writers such as Ovid, Horace, and Martial. But they are not just a warmed-over version of old themes. They are contemporary and relevant to our current concerns. One poem, for instance, called "Endymion" from the name of the Classical moon goddess's lover, deals with our modern moon landings. It says something like this:

> The moon goddess, embracing Endymion, wept. "Our love," she moaned, "will come to an end. As long as you could not see my flaws, I seemed to you as beautiful as Venus herself. But now you know me for what I really am, and I shall no longer be lovely to you. I am described truthfully as barren, shining only in the reflection of another's light, with my skin cracked and pockmarked. How could you love such an ugly thing?" And the moon hid her face. but Endymion answered, "Your charm has not been taken away. What you mean to the scientist studying your composition and what you mean to the lover basking in the moonlight are two totally different things. Does the music of the lyre sound less sweet because we know that the strings are made of sheep gut?" And the moon goddess uncovered her face.
> Reader, as you see, the moonlight is as beautiful as ever.
> (*Lector, ut ipse vides: non micat illa minus*).

From here on, I shall present my English paraphrases of the Latin poems I talk about -- unless, of course, you would prefer the Latin!

A favorite subject for Dr. Eberle's poems is literature. He speaks with disgust of the kind of literature that was so popular a few years ago, where every four-letter word possible was dragged in. He says that authors of these works dipped their pens in *stercus* (the Latin word for manure -- You may translate it with whatever similar word you wish to choose).

And in his book entitled *Black Wit*, he describes the brutality of analyzing a beautiful poem. He introduces a professor of literature dissecting a poem for his students. Here the poem is personified as the Muse:

On the operating table lies the Muse, with feet and hands
Bound, and back of her the figure of the learned doctor stands,
While his students crowd around with an interest you can feel,
As they eagerly await what the scalpel will reveal.
The doctor starts his cutting with a flourish and a verve,
Uncovering all her inmost parts: kidneys, stomach, bones, and nerves.
As a climax he removes and holds up in his bloody hand
Her great heart for all to stare at.
Can't they ever understand
That when he stops dissecting, it's not the Muse that's left,
But just a mutilated body, of all power and life bereft?

On the skill needed by a poet, he says:

When a sculptor makes a statue
Tedious work he must perform,
To cut huge blocks of marble
And then carve them into form.
But to choose words with precision,
And to mold them with finesse.
Then to fit them into meters --
Is this labor any less?

And on the power of poetry:

Who can stop the swift waves of the river,
or the fleeting hours?
Who can hold back the wind by his hand?
Yet the poet's song is able
to make permanent for all time
Whatever little breeze stirs his heart.

But literature is not his only theme. On justice he writes:

Why do you bind your eyes so tight,
Oh, goddess of glorious fame?
"My blindfold is there so I don't have to see
The crimes men commit in my name."

On politicians he can be quite caustic. It is no wonder that the Hitler regime distrusted him. Here are a couple of his poems on politicians:

The poet tells you many things,
In words select and few;
The politician's fluent words
Speak gobbledegook to you.

The politician calls his opponent a liar;
He answers, "That word describes ”you•.
Which can you believe?
Well, I won't deceive --

The words of both men are true. There is a wistful sadness in his poem about his native Germany, written at the time of World War II:

Two hostile forces are at strife
In almost every nation's life.
Refinement against savagery is set
Throughout all history, and yet
The nation to which I belong
Has forged a bond, unique and strong,
Between these forces; here we see
A race of refined savagery.

On a more optimistic note is this little epigram:

As the thistle in lawns occasionally grows,
So too, thorny fields can produce the wild rose.

And perhaps his tenderness and gentleness are most clearly revealed in his poems about his dogs, like this epitaph on his dog Domna:

In death your pattern of life you have kept,
Preceding your master by only a step.

But I think that my favorite of all his poems is the one called "Yardstick":

How does a nation respect its language?
What does it do for its aged?
How are its animals treated?
By these things its worth can be gauged.

His Latin states these thoughts in two lines instead of four, thus making a much more terse and powerful statement.

So far I have named only one contemporary writer of original Latin poetry, but he is not alone. In the 1960's Dr. Eberle published an anthology of original contemporary Latin poetry. He invited writers from all over the world to contribute, and contribute they did -- from Dr. Lenard to Robert Graves. I don't know how many actually submitted manuscripts, but the anthology that came out included poems by forty-nine writers from sixteen countries of Europe and the two Americas. Eighteen of these writers were from two nations (Italy and Germany), and the next greatest number was five from the United States -- although two of these American

poets were really "imports" from Italy and Germany. Here are a few examples of the poems in this book, the first one from Van Johnson of Tufts University in Massachusetts:

O dog, so relentless and grim,
Your voice never fails you.
Your savage bark sounds terrible,
But prints from your bite are few.
"We" know that you are harmless
When your lips curl back and show
A row of dangerous-looking teeth;
But how will others know?

And Arminius Libertus of Vienna wrote:

They grab by force whate'er they want,
And then they ask for peace.
Just so the wolf devours his prey,
Then wants bloodshed to cease.

Clemens Plassmann of Dusseldorf wrote some anagrams for this volume. Of course, an anagram is no longer an anagram when translated, so here is one of these in the original, entitled "Mars [the god of war] and Ars [the fine arts]." Notice that in every two lines the last two words are identical except that the initial "M" shifts back and forth:

Furoris facem aluit Mars;
tranquillam pacem maluit Ars.
Profecto hostes arcet Mars;
in bello autem marcet Ars;
et quanto crescit acies Martis,
heu, tanto crescit macies Artis.
Est iracundus urus Mars,
humanitatis murus Ars.
Dementis, eheu, ira Martis
delentur dona mira Artis.
Vae mundo, si Mars oritur
horrendus, et Ars moritur.

These couplets translate:

War feeds the torch of madness;
Art prefers tranquil peace.
War, to be sure, stops the enemy;
but in war Art withers;
and to the extent that the battleline of War increases,
alas, to the same extent the deterioration of Art increases.
War is an angry bear,

Art is the bulwark of culture.
Alas, by the fury of senseless War
the wonderful gifts of Art are destroyed.
Woe to the world, if horrendous War arises,
and Art dies.

"But," you will say, "this book came out twenty years ago. What about 1985? Are people still doing any writing in Latin?" The answer is a resounding “yes.” At the convention last summerthat I referred to earlier, Aristune Mizuno, a professor fromKyoto, Japan, read from his poems -- and he writes poetryexclusively in Latin. Also Wolfgang Preuss from Erlanger distributed copies of his *Utopia*, a science-fiction rock operain Latin. And Joseph Zgoll showed a Latin video tape based on asatire by Horace. (I understand that he had taken his entire high school class to Rome for filming "on location." That seems to me as good an excuse as any for getting a field trip to Rome).

Or if your mind craves comic books, there is a whole seriesof these available in Latin, based on Disney characters such as *Donaldus Anas* and *Michael Musculus*, a.k.a. Donald Duck and Mickey Mouse. And Dr. Sienkewicz returned from Harvard this fall witha book entitled *Insuperabilis Snupius* (“The Unconquerable Snoopy”).

The subject of this paper has been Latin as a contemporary force in literature. We might end this discussion with two of Dr. Eberle's comments on the current vitality of the ancient Latin and Greek cultures and languages. He says:

A tree that is torn from its roots will soon die
In spite of warm sunshine and rain;
Yet our leaders say Europe can forget Greece and Rome
And still blossom and flourish again.

And finally he answers the assertion that Latin is a dead language. Speaking directly to Latin, he says:

How often they've announced that you
No longer are alive.
What else so many funerals
Has had to yet survive?

So, if anyone tells you that Latin is a dead language, he simply does not have eyes to see what is all around him. And that is his problem, not yours.

*In late 1990, five years after this talk was given, HarperCollins (the successor of Harper & Row, the publishers of *Charlotte's Web*) published this book, entitled *Tela Charlottae*.