

Aetatis Nostrae Poeta Latinus

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I suspect that sometimes we who teach Latin and Greek feel that we nobly stand alone to protect the knowledge of our great heritage from being completely destroyed by the insensitivity of our times. Our work is important, granted. But teaching these languages is after all the task we have chosen as our life work. And everybody -- whether his thing is preserving the law, people's health, or the thoughts of the ancients -- considers his job worthwhile, or he should not be doing it.

The person whose love of the classics is not adulterated by any practical considerations is the man whose life-work does not directly concern these languages, but who finds Latin or Greek is recreation and his all-absorbing avocation. Such a person is Dr. Alexander Lenard, whose profession is medicine, but who wrote *Winnie Ille Pu* and made it the only Latin book ever on a best-seller list in the twentieth century. And through Dr. Lenard I became acquainted with another such man, Dr. Josef Eberle, about whom I want to write today.

Josef Eberle was born in southwestern Germany in 1901. He attended high school and college, but instead of going on to the university he became a bookseller's apprentice. Developing a great interest in German literature and the Latin language, he soon started writing poetry under a whole set of pen names. Among these was that of Peter Squenz, who wrote political satires; that of Sebastian Blau, who wrote lyrical poetry in his native Swabian dialect; and that of Josephus Apellus, who specialized in writing Latin poetry. Then, of course, there was still Josef Eberle, who wrote in the so-called High German that is the standard of his country.

Under the Nazis this multi-personality had a variety of fates. Josephus Apellus had not yet appeared on the scene, but Peter Squenz was forbidden to write because of his dangerous democratic concepts, and so was Josef Eberle, because he had a Jewish wife. Sebastian Blau was both forbidden to write and ejected from the Writers' Association; consequently, he was not permitted to publish. At the same time, however, those Swabian poems of his which had already been published before the Third Reich were still included in school textbooks. Dr. Lenard tells me that even today few people identify Sebastian Blau with Josef Eberle, the editor-in-chief of Stuttgart's leading newspaper, the *Stuttgarter Zeitung*. Dr. Eberle himself feels that the double identity is generally recognized.

But to get back to World War II. In spite of all sorts of dangers and difficulties, including a short confinement in a concentration camp, Dr. Eberle continued his activities both as a classicist and as a historian of German literature, saving all sorts of German manuscripts from loss or destruction. Under his direction the *Stuttgarter Zeitung* bought up the entire Cotta-Archiv -- the complete archives of the publishers of Goethe, Schiller, and the entire German classical period -- and gave it to the Schiller National Museum in Marbach as a gift. As a result he later received an honorary doctorate from the University of Tübingen, the university where the philosopher Hegel and countless other German authors had studied. In addition, the government of his province, Baden-Württemberg, conferred on him the title of professor on his sixtieth birthday.

In the early 1960's Josef Eberle published four little volumes of original Latin poems (two mostly of lyrics and two of epigrams) with German verse paraphrases. The success of

these books was so impressive that the Department of Philology at Tubingen conferred on him the title of *Poeta Laureatus* (P.L.) There had not been a poet laureate in Germany since 1804, and Dr. Eberle thinks that he may be the last one.

In November 1970 a new volume appeared from this man's pen, again of Latin poems with German paraphrases. The Latin poems were written by Josephus Apellus, the German equivalents by Josef Eberle. This book, a miscellany containing lyrics, epigrams, and some fairly long satires, is entitled *Echo Perennis*. Besides this book, the other two Eberle books to be quoted in this paper are *Sal Niger* and *Cave Canem*. The English paraphrases are my own.

Since Dr. Eberle knows his ancient Latin poets so well, some of his poems show clearly the influence of these literary friends of his, in both thought and language. Dr. Lenard feels that Ovid lives again in *Echo Perennis*. But if Dr. Eberle is a reincarnation of Ovid, he has also had a few transplants from other classical writers, such as Martial and Juvenal. Yet his work is not just a reworking of classical themes. It is contemporary and "relevant." It is what our classical poets would be writing if they were alive today.

One poem, for instance, entitled "Endymion," deals with the moon landings and goes something like this:

The moon goddess, groaning, embraced Endymion and wept: "Our love will come to an end. As long as you were blind I seemed as beautiful as Venus herself to my lover. Now, since you know me, I will no longer be lovely to you. I am described truly as barren, shining only by the reflexion of another's light, with my skin cracked and pockmarked. How can you love such a 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*).

I feel completely inadequate in trying to interpret this man through his poems. I cannot simply present poem after poem, and yet these poems are so varied that any selection gives only a partial and therefore a distorted picture. Dr. Eberle himself, in a poem called "*Musae quoque mortales*" (*Sal Niger*), describes the crime of analyzing a beautiful poem. He describes a professor of literature before a class. Here is my English paraphrase:

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 his scalpel will reveal.
The doctor starts his cutting
with a flourish and a verve;

He uncovers 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 a mutilated body,
of all power and life bereft?

Naturally, poetry is to Dr. Eberle a subject on which he has deep feelings, and his comments on the subject are usually extremely serious. He gives the plagiarist a firm slap with an epigram. On the subject of bad writing he has a variation of an Ovid poem in which he says that if Apollo would shoot one of his arrows every time a poet writes a bad line, he would very soon be without weapons. On the skill needed by the poet here is "*In Lapidinis*" (*SAL NIGER*):

*Ingenti caedunt ingentia saxa labore,
marmoris ad statuam -- quam via longa, gravis!
Lexica volvere, caedere verba, deinde dolata
conciliare modis -- num labor iste minor?*

When a sculptor makes a statue
Tedious work he must perform,
To cut out 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?

On the preceding page of the same collection, Dr. Eberle writes about the unique power of poetry:

*Amnis quis celeres undas horasque fugaces
inhibeat, ventum quis teneatque manu?
Sed vates auram, pectus quacumque movetur,
carmine perpetuat tempus in omne suo.*

Who can stop the swift waves of the river, or the fleeting hours?
Or 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.

Perhaps the bitterest poem that Dr. Eberle has written is on the subject of contemporary taste in writing. This seventy-line satire pulls no punches and uses language that Juvenal would applaud. Here is the general tenor:

If anyone wants to become a popular writer, just let him follow my simple instructions, for it is not hard to write a best-seller if you keep a few basic principles in mind. First of all, be sure to call everything which your predecessors wrote "pure trash" (Eberle's phrase is *digna stercore*). Next, what material should you write about? Well, if you want to be successful, you will choose unpalatable subjects. Whatever stinks and is filthy, dirty, and not to be discussed openly; whatever is vicious, disgraceful, depraved, slimy; whatever is offensive to the eye, the ear, and the nose; whatever goes against the established codes and glorifies smut -- these are your subjects. Be sure that your material is adapted to the immature mind, and dip your pen in stinking dung. Since nothing in the world is pretty be careful not to use any nice words. Treat your personal problems as great, earth-shaking events. Call on the heavens to fall if you get a toothache. If your wife is unfaithful or nagging, if the stupid school can't teach your kid anything, if the critics cut you down --. And don't forget to be insulting to your readers. For some reason or other, most people seem to enjoy being insulted (*Sis memor usque tuos lectores laedere diris:/pluribus offendi -- qua ratione? -- placet*). What does the law or tradition or precedent mean to you? A liberated man breaks such bonds (*Quid tibi lex et mos, exemplum, regula, norma? / talia dirumpat vincula liber homo*). You are the master of your language. Therefore, let words mean anything you want them to mean. If you will follow these precepts, you will stamp out for yourself an indelible name -- at least until tomorrow (*Haec praecepta sequens tu non debile nomen/percipies -- saltem crastinum adusque diem*).

As I have said, this is Dr. Eberle's bitterest denunciation on any subject. But he also makes short, sharp stabs at other types in our modern world -- those, for example, who scream for freedom only to be able to destroy it, and those who preach equality but mean lowering everybody to the minimum level. On the "love child" he has a quatrain called "*Timon Inversus*" (*Cave Canem*):

*Totum implectitur genus humanum
universique salute calescit.
Hoc autem Timon inversus arcanum
suis vivendi cum proximis nescit.*

"We must love the whole human race" is his cry.
Let your love grow more and more."
Strange, for he never yet has learned
To live in peace with the man next door.

And on "*Iustitia*" (*SAL NIGER*) he writes:

*Vitta cur oculos densa, dea iusta, ligasti? --
"Ne videam quod fit nomine saepe meo."*

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

In "*Cultus et Barbaries*" (*Cave Canem*) his disillusionment with his own people has an undertone of wistful sadness:

*Apud alios amare
solent inter se pugnare
inimicae duae res:
cultus et barbaries.
Sed in plebe, cuius sum,
ineunt coniugium
tam inseparabile,
ut sit admirabile.
Tota nostra haec est res:
elegans barbaries.*

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.

His gentleness and tenderness are revealed most clearly in his poems on his dog's loyalty and the joy it has brought into his life. One, an epitaph, (*Sal Niger*) says:

*Hic mea fida canis requiescit nomine Domna
praegrediens paulum more suo dominum.*

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

Although all these poems are in Latin, those that are about Latin have a special appeal to the classicist. There are many of these, and Dr. Eberle is almost militant on the subject. In *Echo Perennis* there is a dialogue between the poet and his friend during which the following exchange takes place:

Friend: "Why do you write your poems in Latin? You can

count your readers on your fingers. How many people do you think can understand the beauty of your words or your meter?"
Poet: "The Muse weighs rather than counts her followers in her evaluation."

In *Cave Canem* he sums up his "Battle of the Books" in a little poem which expresses this idea:

A literary genius, discovered just yesterday, laughed at me and said: "What relevance do your ancient poets have? Their ideas and their language are completely out of date." In order that I might become better informed on the new thinking, the next day I looked for this man who knew so much. My search was in vain -- nobody even remembered his name.

His delight in his friends from ancient Rome is expressed in "*Solacium*" (*Sal Niger*):

*In terras alii fugiant orasque remotas,
effugio tempus tempora prisca petens,
miris quae superant et amoenis visibus illud
atque ubi non socios temporis invenio.*

[To remote lands and beaches some people flee,
But my escape leads to antiquity.
The wit and the beauty from ages past
Have a charm that increases and joys that last.
And in this retreat the friends that I find
Are not at all timely, but timeless in kind.

In "*Lingua Mortua*" (*Sal Niger*) he answers the assertion that the Latin language is dead:

O quotiens obitum linguae statuere Latinae!
Tot tamen exsequiis salva superstes erat.

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

But perhaps his best summary of the whole situation is found in "*Physica Hodierna*" (*Cave Canem*):

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.

I wish there were space for his delightful lighter and more flippant poems, which are scattered generously among the bitter or wistful pieces, but I can refer to only a couple. Somehow I got a nasty pleasure from the one that says that no matter how much expensive bubble bath the lady uses, it is no Aphrodite that emerges from the bath. And "*Consecutio Temporum*" (*Cave Canem*) is a delightful little jingle which gives this warning:

*Ordinem temporum pueros iubeo
non in grammatica stolide laedere,
virgines non in amore: conubio
ne antecesserit subolem edere.*

Boys, be careful about the tense
Of the verbs you write in each sentence.
Girls, watch time sequence another way --
Let the child not precede the wedding day.

Some of his most effective comments are made in two lines. One of my favorite couplets is "*Bellides Perennes*" (*Cave Canem*):

*Sicut interdum ad carduos bellis invenitur parva,
ita spinosa haec arva ferunt et flores innoxios.*

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

To provide a fitting close to these remarks about a distinguished Latin poet of our times, I can find nothing more appropriate than the couplet with which Dr. Eberle himself takes leave of his reader in *Echo Perennis*:

*Si dare laetitiae tibi, lector, carmina possint
dimidium nostrae, laetior auctor erit.*