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The Life and Times of Latin

VERY MUCH AS IS THE CASE WITH ENGLISH TODAY, the triumph of the Latin language spelled death for many other tongues. Between 100 BC and AD 400 it is estimated that the number of languages spoken in the territory under Roman administration fell from sixty to just twelve, with Latin taking over not just as a *lingua franca* but in many cases entirely replacing the native speech. Cultural and economic imperialism went hand in hand as the Romans spread their language through military victories, trade, religious conversion, taxation, army levies, and the peculiarly Roman system of resettling retired soldiers. And Latin survived long after the Empire had become a mere memory: its active use lasted three times as long as Rome's dominion, and its employment in specialized areas—the Catholic Church, the sciences, even, on occasion, diplomacy—continued well into the twentieth century. As the linguistic historian Nicholas Ostler has put it in his new book *Ad Infinitum: A Biography of Latin*,¹ “Languages create worlds to live in, not just in the minds of their speakers, but in their lives, and their descendants' lives, where those ideas become real. The world that Latin created is today called Europe. And as Latin formed Europe, it also inspired the Americas. Latin has in fact been the constant in the cultural history of the West, extending over two millennia. In a way, it has been too central to be noticed: like the air Europe breathed, it has pervaded everything.”

Ostler's 2005 book *Empires of the Word: A Language History of the World* told a story so complex as to be almost impossible for a layman to wrap his mind around. *Ad Infinitum*, dealing with only one language, is far more comprehensible, though not everyone will concur with Ostler's conception of Latin as the soul of Europe, for at least as many historians see modern Europe as the geographical expression of historical Christendom. David Levering Lewis' fascinating new book *God's Crucible: Islam and the Making of Modern Europe 570–1215* presents the concept of “Europe” as having been formed by Christians measuring themselves with and against Muslims. The first recorded reference to Europeans (in fact *Europenses*), in fact, was in a Latin chronicle of 754 describing the Christians' victory over the Muslim armies at the Battle of Poitiers.

Ostler is a big-picture kind of thinker, and *Ad Infinitum* invites us to

¹ AD INFINITUM: A Biography of Latin, by Nicholas Ostler. Walker & Co. \$27.95.

speculate not only on the long-term implications of Latin's nearly two-millennia-long dominion over the European continent, but on what Latin's example might have to say about the current dominion of English. Are cultural and military/economic dominance inextricably linked? How long can a language continue to hold cultural sway after its economic pre-eminence has come to an end? (The answer would seem to be a couple of centuries at least, taking Greek as a model in the Western Roman Empire and French in the modern world.) How developed does a new language have to become before it can effectively challenge the hegemony of an older, dominant one, as the developing "Romance" languages finally did during the European Renaissance?

The earliest surviving Latin inscriptions date from the sixth century BC, but the language did not begin to emerge as a literary medium until three hundred years later. It had changed rapidly during the intervening time—as rapidly, Ostler estimates, as English did between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries AD—drawing away from its close relations, Faliscan, Umbrian, Venetic, and Oscan. Before the rise of the Romans, the Etruscans had been the dominant force in central Italy, and the influence of the mysterious, non-Indo-European Etruscan language accounted for many of the changes that overcame Latin during those centuries. "We can see that the effect of Etruscan on Latin was quite comparable to the effects on medieval English of French after the Norman conquest of 1066—a major cultural infusion, essentially of an early urban culture on a more countrified society." The key word is "urban": Etruria civilized Rome as Rome devoured and assimilated its cities one by one, from the conquest of Veii (modern Formello, near Rome) in 396 BC to that of Volsinii (Bolsena) sixty-eight years later. Romans adopted Etruscan words along with Etruscan tastes (as for stage performances and gladiatorial conquests); they also learned about written language from the Etruscans.

The conquests of these and other neighbors were facilitated by the building of the famous Roman roads—beginning with the Via Appia in 312 BC—all of which "remained as a highly durable trace of the route marches, *itineraria*, of the Roman army." These engineering feats greatly enhanced mobility and spread the language with unprecedented speed, along with other Roman winning ways: "after a victory they demanded not tribute, but land, which they would sooner or later settle with their own farmers; and they levied soldiers too from the defeated powers, who would add their strength to the Roman army." The so-called Social War of 90–89 BC, in which non-Roman inhabitants of Italy rose up against their masters to demand the rights of Roman citizenship, resulted in almost all Italians receiving these rights; the resultant cultural homogenization of the peninsula sped the diffusion of the Roman language, as did Roman economic supremacy even in regions that had not yet succumbed to the military behemoth, so that by 69 BC Cicero was already remarking that "Gaul is packed with businessmen, chock-full of Roman citizens. Not a Gaul does the slightest business

without the involvement of a Roman citizen; not a coin changes hands without the involvement of a Roman citizen's accounting."

Close contact with the Greek world introduced a large measure of Greek self-consciousness to the way Romans looked at their language. Influence had long emanated from Greek colonies in Magna Graecia at Cumae (near modern Naples), Syracuse (Siracusa), Catania, Paestum (near modern Salerno), Rhegium (Reggio Calabria), Tarentum (Taranto), Sybaris (on the Gulf of Taranto), and Croton (Crotona). Greek cultural arrogance long outlasted its military might, and even as Rome was swallowing up not only Magna Graecia but the Greek city-states themselves, Hellenes continued in their belief that Greek was the only literary language that could be taken seriously. In the early days of Rome's ascent, "the very idea of a written literature was inseparable from the Greek language"; Rome accepted this worldview, with its early writers—Naevius, Plautus, Terence, Ennius—borrowing their subject matter from Greek drama and epic. As Latin became more sophisticated, however, it was soon clear that Greek was, as Ostler writes, "curiously ripe for transplanting." Eventually the two languages were taught together, with Latin being studied and analyzed in the same terms as Greek had been. "The pair of Greek and Latin came to be expressed by the clichés *utraque lingua* or *uterque sermo*, 'both languages': no other language came into consideration."

The analysis of Latin following the principles of Greek was launched in the second century BC with Varro's *De Lingua Latina*. A century later, the authors of the Latin Golden Age—Cicero, Sallust, Lucretius, Virgil, Horace, Propertius, Livy, Ovid, Catullus, Tibullus, Sulpicia—were still following and imitating Greek originals: Virgil modeled himself on Homer and Hesiod, for instance, while Livy followed Polybius. Greek was considered absolutely indispensable to anyone who considered himself educated throughout this period, and it was not until the fourth century AD that a major philosopher (St. Augustine, in fact) would realize that he could get by without any Greek at all.

One of the most interesting sections of the book is that in which Ostler describes Cicero's infusion of neologisms into the Latin language. Having set himself the task of rewriting all Greek philosophy in a corpus of Latin works, the orator realized that Latin seriously lacked words for expressing abstractions. Therefore he set out to create them, adding immeasurably to the language's versatility and breadth. This effort would be redoubled a millennium later by the medieval schoolmen with their "festival of neologisms, new words generated from the inherited resources of Latin, but with a freedom that had never before been acceptable." For a parallel in modern times, we might look at the language engineering-by-committee undertaken by the Académie française over the last couple of centuries in an effort to create specifically French words for new concepts and inventions, rather than borrowing the terminology from other languages.

In the wake of the breakup of the Western Roman Empire in the fifth

century, it was Christianity—enforced from above from the fifth century on—that would ensure that Latin remained the official language of Western Europe. The Eastern part of the Empire had never given up Greek for Latin, and after the two halves of the Empire split away from each other, Latin became essentially a foreign language in the Greek-speaking East. In the West, however, Latin became more entrenched, especially when it became the official vehicle of the Church liturgy during the papacy of Damasus. Damasus also commissioned the Vulgate from St. Jerome, in the late fourth century. As Ostler says, “Greek was in its use clearly far too promiscuous (and indeed, in the original sense, catholic) to have built up any privileged link with the Christian faith; and for those with a literary education, it had a heavy load of pagan associations. How much better for westerners to leave all this behind and express God’s truth in the simple language of daily Roman speech, Latin!”

Now the nature of the language changed, at least temporarily. Christianity was supposed to be an egalitarian religion, so the emphasis was placed on *sermo humilis*, or humble, earth-bound speech. “A general feature of Latin as used by Christians was its aggressively vulgar, plebeian, tone, quite happy to commit what traditionalists would call solecisms or barbarisms”—rather like the style of English spoken by evangelical Christians in the United States today, in fact. Fine speech, certainly the measured periodic style of classical Latin, began to seem what we might now call elitist. As St. Augustine noted, “what is called a solecism is nothing other than putting words together on a different rule from that followed by our authoritative predecessors”—with which observation he approached the modern idea of descriptive grammar, quite a new concept after centuries of the prescriptive variety.

Curiously enough, the various barbarian tribes that overran Western Europe in the fifth and sixth centuries retained Latin in their new dominions. The social and economic structure—taxation, trade, and business—continued to be conducted in the language of the Romans, and region by region the new rulers joined the Christian fold. There can be no arguing with Ostler’s contention that “Catholic Christianity ultimately proved the most significant institution throughout this period.” (Of all the countries in Western Europe, it was only in Britain that Latin completely died out with the end of empire.) Evangelization efforts brought Christianity, and with it Latin, to remote areas like Scandinavia, Russia, Iceland, and the Balkans. The Holy Roman Empire, born with Pope Leo III’s coronation of Charlemagne in 800, spread Catholicism and Latin into Eastern Europe.

Simultaneously, a process Ostler calls the “hamletization of Europe”—that is, cultural isolation due to the breakdown of communications and technology—caused Latin to fragment, with individual dialects becoming mutually incomprehensible over the course of a couple of centuries. Alcuin of York, brought by Charlemagne to his court at Aachen to preside over the cathedral school there, attempted to halt

the process and to return Latin to its classical roots, incidentally enforcing a universal style of pronunciation. Fine in theory, but one effect of Alcuin's reforms, Ostler writes, "must ultimately have been to impress on everyone that Latin, as written and spoken, was actually now a foreign language, not just the written, quasi-eternal form of Roman speech." Hence, the regional dialects continued to develop apace as vernacular, or "vulgar" forms of speech—soon to evolve into the Romance languages with literatures of their own.

As communications improved in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, outside influences began to have an impact on these developing literatures. Arab advances in the sciences, diffused from the courts of al-Andalus and Sicily, enlightened the schoolmen of Western Europe. The crusades revealed strange new worlds to masses of Westerners. Arab culture and poetry inspired the Provençal troubadours. Later, in the fifteenth century, the fall of Constantinople exiled many Greek scholars, the famous *dotti bizantini*, to Western Europe where they shared the fruits of their knowledge. The fourteenth- and fifteenth-century humanists, an international intellectual community, communicated among themselves in Latin.

Nevertheless, in Ostler's view the humanists' consciously academic standards, exemplified by Lorenzo Valla's *Elegantarium linguae latinae libri VI*, hastened the transformation of Latin into a "dead" language. "By insisting on ancient models," he writes, "the humanists tore Latin away from its old, massive root structure, pruned it, and replanted it in well-weeded display beds, in admirable but alien splendor. Latin remained a privilege of the educated. . . . Latin was now that little bit harder to learn. . . . Latin, up on its pedestal, began to wilt." And he characterizes intellectual Europe's love affair with the dead classics as "profoundly inward-looking." Meanwhile, the new Romance vernaculars were flourishing in unimagined new ways, as Spain, Portugal and France claimed large hunks of the newly-discovered Americas. There were already printing presses in Mexico City by 1535 and in Lima a half-century later. The Latin-based academic curriculum flourished there, too, as it did in Europe.

It wasn't until the seventeenth century that Latin went into its terminal decline as a spoken language. People continued to write books and plays in Latin, but they were clinging to a dying tradition. In Jacobean England for example, Ostler points out, "It is noticeable that our own memory of this era, and our evaluation of it, have been re-conditioned by the subsequent triumph of vernacular English. Latin culture was doomed, and those who failed to see it have paid with their reputation." The shift was largely due to increased social mobility and the huge spread of literacy that resulted from the invention of the printing press. "When education was expanded to take in larger segments of Europe's population, including many more women, Latin was seen as too impractical for local, daily life to be offered much more widely. . . . The constant political theme all over Europe in the centuries

after the sixteenth was the declining influence of the elite before the rising aspirations and, ultimately, rising power of the masses." A knowledge of Latin came to be seen, for better or worse, as an upper-class marker. (A fascinating fact: When the Bolsheviks took over in Russia, they immediately abolished the teaching of Latin in schools.)

In modern times, Latin has continued to be useful in the sciences, where it provides a handy *lingua franca* for the international community, and especially in botany with its complex vocabulary of classification. The law, too, employs an extensive Latin terminology. The history of Latin in the Catholic Church has been dramatic. The *sermo humilis* of the early Christians soon gave way to the hierarchical language of the Catholic priesthood, until Luther and his followers came to see the use of Latin as deliberately obscurantist: the Vulgate, originally commissioned so that the common people could have direct access to the Scriptures, was now incomprehensible, and one of the first priorities of the Protestant churches was to translate the Bible into vernacular languages. But Latin continued as the language of the Catholic liturgy until the 1960s; even now there are movements in favor of restoring it.

Latin was often seen by its users as universal; by outsiders, it could justly be accused of provincialism. "An important feature of this book," Ostler says, "has been that users of Latin have tended to see their world as all the world that counts." The same could certainly be said of English, both among the imperial British of the nineteenth century and the imperial Americans of the twentieth. Language study in elite British education at the height of their empire was largely confined to the dead classical languages; in America very few students become seriously competent in any foreign language at all. Arabic and Chinese, so potentially important to our interests, are hardly taught. Imperial hubris? Shortsightedness? Whatever the answer, it will be very surprising if the English language proves to last as long, over as broad a geographical expanse, as Latin did.