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# Latin Language and Latin Culture

**from ancient to modern times**

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**CAMBRIDGE**  
**UNIVERSITY PRESS**

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK      www.cup.cam.ac.uk  
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA      www.cup.org  
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia  
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain

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First published 2001

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeset in 9<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>/12 Times New Roman and New Hellenic Greek on '3B2' [A0]

*A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library*

ISBN 0 521 77223 0 hardback  
ISBN 0 521 77663 5 paperback

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## CHAPTER

# I

## The nature of Latin culture

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### Coming to Latin culture

At the end of Virgil's *Aeneid* there occurs an episode in which the goddess Juno finally agrees to stop fighting. Her position, however, is far from abject. Speaking to Jupiter and sounding more like a conquering general than the patron of a defeated people, she dictates the conditions under which she will stop opposing the Trojan effort to settle in Italy. The native Latins must not change their ancient name, or become Trojans, or be called Teucrians, or alter their speech or dress. Their country should keep the name of Latium and be ruled by Alban kings forever. The strength of their Roman offspring should consist in their Italian manhood. Troy, having fallen, should remain fallen, even to the memory of its name. Jupiter readily accepts these terms, assuring Juno that "The people of Ausonia will keep their ancestral speech and culture, their name be as it was. Sharing bloodlines only, the Teucrians will subside . . ." (12.823–36).

This Virgilian episode enacts a central Latin myth – a myth that concerns the power of latinity to establish its sway over non-Latins. Throughout history this power has been linked to the role of Latin as a civilizing force: an instrument for ordering the disorderly, standardizing the multiform, correcting or silencing the inarticulate. In these essays I shall explore this myth and other myths that have grown up around latinity or become attached to it throughout its long history. This exploration will take us into some areas where many readers, medievalists and neolatinists, will be more at home than I, and into others that, if not entirely unfamiliar, are seldom thought of as the home turf of any

latinist. The Virgilian myth, I suspect, will be familiar to anyone who has been curious enough to pick up the book and read even this far. But if it is unfamiliar, no matter. This is a tale of initiation, and new initiates are always welcome.

### The “universality” of Latin culture

The *Aeneid* is a foundational text. It tells about the beginning of Latin culture. When Juno stipulates what character this culture is to have, she speaks hardly at all of governmental forms or religious institutions, but of the most ordinary, and yet enduring aspects of daily life: what people wear, what they call themselves, and, most important for our purposes, what language they speak. Despite or because of this focus on the quotidian, Virgil represents Latin culture as almost monstrously potent, capable (through Juno’s sponsorship) even in defeat of absorbing and occluding other cultures – here, especially, that of Troy. Just as Ascanius must change his name and become Iulus, founder of the Julian clan, so must Aeneas’ followers put aside their Trojan language and customs so that their descendants, if not they themselves, may become fully Latin.

This seems to be how Virgil and his contemporaries regarded Latin culture, and later ages have tended to follow suit. For much of its history, latinity has been seen as a powerful weapon in Rome’s arsenal, an instrument, in Virgil’s words again, of sparing the conquered, warring down the proud. From a modern perspective, the idea of Latin as *the* imperial culture par excellence is widespread, and is constantly linked to the civilizing agency of the language itself. This idea was eloquently expressed by Edward Gibbon, who wrote,

So sensible were the Romans of the influence of language over national manners, that it was their most serious care to extend, with the progress of their arms, the use of the Latin tongue. The ancient dialects of Italy, the Sabine, the Etruscan, and the Venetian, sunk into oblivion . . . The western countries were civilized by the same hands which subdued them. As soon as the barbarians were reconciled to obedience, their minds were opened to any new impressions of knowledge and politeness. The language of Virgil and Cicero,

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though with some inevitable mixture of corruption, was so universally adopted in Africa, Spain, Gaul, Britain, and Pannonia, that the faint traces of the Punic or Celtic idioms were preserved only in the mountains, or among the peasants.<sup>1</sup>

The policy is also attested in our ancient sources. Roman officials were expected to use Latin in their dealings with alien peoples; some thought that allowing even Greek to be spoken in the Senate bordered on the scandalous. Eventually, even in such a center of Greek culture as Antioch, Libanius would complain about the necessity of knowing Latin.<sup>2</sup>

If Virgil celebrates the moment when it was settled that Latin would be spoken at Rome, other poets were happy to represent the language's extension throughout the world as a vehicle for their poetry. Ovid predicts that his masterpiece, the *Metamorphoses*, “will be recited wherever Roman power extends over conquered lands” (15.877). Martial, too, revels in the idea that his poetry is read throughout the empire (traveling, often enough, along with the army); but it is in the capital that he finds the strongest symbolic contrast between Latin and barbarian speech. Martial celebrates the emperor Titus' dedication of the Colosseum by speaking of the immense arena as encompassing the entire world: “What race,” the poet asks, “is so remote, so barbarous, Caesar, that no spectator from it is present in your city?” (*Spect.* 3.1–2). Moving around the circle of the great amphitheater, he catalogues the races represented there in a way that conducts the reader on a geographical circuit of the empire: Sicambrians and Thracians from the north; Sarmatians, Cilicians, Arabs, and Sabaeans from north to south in the east, Egyptians and Ethiopians to the south; and the dwellers along the shores of Ocean in the west (3–10). All of these peoples are distinguished by their different customs and characteristics, or by the exotic products of the lands they inhabit. But the poem, like the circuit of empire that it describes, also moves in a ring: the point of *barbara* in

<sup>1</sup> Gibbon (1909–14), 1.41. Gibbon's position is upheld by linguist Jorma Kaimio, who writes that, to prove that the Romans followed a definite language policy, “it is only necessary to point to a linguistic map of modern Europe.” Kaimio (1979), 327.

<sup>2</sup> Libanius, *Orat.* 1.234, 255.

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line 1 is finally brought home at poem's end as Martial caps the theme of diversity by turning to the matter of speech:

Vox diversa sonat populorum, tum tamen una est,  
cum verus patriae diceris esse pater.

These peoples speak in different voices, then with one, when you are called true father of your country. *Spect.* 3.11–12

Foreign speech is thus acknowledged, but is represented as multiform, inarticulate, and confused – *diversa* (11). Against this babbling, Martial allows the crowd one intelligible utterance in the one language that could render them intelligible: the poem concludes with the hailing of the emperor, in Latin, by that characteristically Roman and nationalistic title *pater patriae*. The barbarian crowd thus reenacts in speech their own political subjugation by Titus and by Rome.

The effects of Roman linguistic imperialism were real. On the other hand, ancient and modern beliefs about the power of Latin are based on ideological constructs, not universally valid, objective truth. We know for instance that Latin culture took firm root in the west; but Gibbon, in the passage I have cited, goes on to observe what everyone knows, that failure to establish Latin in the eastern provinces was an important factor that led to the eventual disintegration of the empire. What he does not say is that this failure betrays as wishful thinking the imperialist claims of Latin culture generally, as well as the basic fictiveness of these claims. Stories emphasizing this fictiveness tend to be less often told than the imperialist kind rehearsed above. This is unfortunate on two counts. First, these “other stories” are interesting in themselves. Second, and paradoxically, the wishful, triumphalist tales about an all-powerful linguistic and cultural force may actually have contributed to the marginalization of latinity within modern intellectual discourse, and to the perception that Latin is, or wants to be, everything that a modern language is not: that it is the paradigmatic “dead language.”

What “other stories” does Latin culture have to tell? If latinity was no monolith, even in its ancient capital, it was certainly subject to the same pressures as the languages that it encountered along the permeable cultural frontier. The case of Ovid is instructive. When official displeasure relegated him to the very limit of the empire, he got the opportunity to reflect on his earlier boast that he would be recited “wherever

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Roman power extends.” Writing in his exile poetry about conditions at Getic Tomi, he returns over and over to the absurdity of composing or even thinking in Latin so far from Rome, suggesting that removal from the native seat of Latin culture has actually weakened his grasp on the language. We need not take this claim seriously to believe in the anxiety on which it depends. Against the Virgilian model of universal extension and absolute potency we can set the countervailing Ovidian model of an outpost culture barely maintaining a degree of integrity against a much more powerful and numerous barbarian Other. The exilic myth, in fact, is the story that was told more often and more openly as Latin political power waned and the language itself was left as the chief embodiment of the culture that survived, eventually becoming virtually coterminous with it.

Ovid’s excursion to the spatial limits of empire anticipates later developments along the axis of time. With political change came cultural evolution, facts that are reflected with clarity in the mirror of language. By late antiquity, Christian policy makers were vigorously debating whether to observe classical pagan usage or to cultivate a distinctively pietistic latinity. Centuries later the British courtier Alcuin considered the Latin spoken and written in Charlemagne’s realm so corrupt that he instituted a thoroughgoing reform of orthography and pronunciation, and thus played a role, possibly a decisive one, in distinguishing Latin from the Romance languages. The Renaissance humanists fought over the question of whether modern Latin should be based exclusively on a ciceronian model. Examples could be multiplied, but the point is clear. Latin culture tends to imagine itself and its language as universal and powerful beyond all competitors. It constructs an image of the Latin language as possessing similar qualities, along with definite canons of correctness conferring a stability that other languages lack. Though the language does change, these canons remain, and the history of latinity is marked by various “renascences” during which the language is “reformed” on an ancient, “classical” model. Of course, “reform” always involves the rejection as “vulgar,” “rustic,” “provincial,” “late,” “ecclesiastical,” “medieval,” “effeminate,” or simply as “barbaric,” of linguistic habits and protocols that do not conform to the proposed standard. It is as if not power, but anxiety about its ability to resist the forces of linguistic “debasement,” drove Latin culture to marginalize the linguistic Other and to claim an overweening potency and value for



itself. But ultimately, latinity has become a victim of its own success. By promulgating and subscribing to a relatively one-dimensional linguistic caricature, Latin culture – and particularly the classicizing element of that culture – has paid the price for cutting itself off from sources of diversity and energy that might have ensured a more vibrant state of health.

### Latin culture in the modern world

The *Aeneid* is, of course, famously untranslatable. The episode cited above in which Juno delivers her terms of “surrender,” lacks when read in English or indeed any language other than Latin, much of its effect – but for a reason that, in this case at least, has nothing to do with Virgil’s celebrated mastery of Latin as an expressive medium. Reading the passage in translation, one misses none of the semantic content. A deal has been cut. Its terms and its consequences are clear. It is the impact of the narrative event as much as any prosodic virtuosity that most impresses the reader.<sup>3</sup> But if one does read the episode in Latin, a whole range of additional responses comes into play.

What sort of responses? First, perhaps, there is the consciousness of employing a skill that has been acquired at some personal cost. For many, part of this cost is years of effort and submission to a pedagogical system in which the student must try every day to construe specimens of Latin under the watchful eye of a teacher who will respond by pointing out and discussing at length and in meticulous detail each and every one of the student’s mistakes. This is a type of education that teaches humility as well as Latin and that equates humility with ignorance of Latin, pride with knowing it well. Understandably, few willingly put themselves through this process for long. Some, however, persist until one day they arrive at the end of the *Aeneid*. The sense of youthful accomplishment that might well attend any reader approaching the end of the epic in Latin for the first time is understandable, almost inevitable. Indeed, it can be expected to recall earlier sensations. I can still remember clearly how I felt when a teacher encouraged my classmates and me not to abandon Latin after the tedium of Caesar and Cicero, because after all that hard work we were poised to reap the rewards

<sup>3</sup> On this passage see Johnson (1976), 114–34, especially 124–27.

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offered by Virgil. Some who took this advice lived to wonder about a reward that meant spending a semester or a year slogging through a few thousand lines of poetry parceled out in snippets that were truly minuscule compared to what they could handle in their own, or even in other, foreign languages. But to those who stuck it out, the accomplishment seemed all the greater. Simply reaching the end of the poem, having endured the tedium, the labor, and the seemingly endless deferral of gratification that this process entailed – for to the novice, the task seems truly heroic – even these apparently extraneous elements of the experience helped put the young reader in touch with the emotions Aeneas himself must have felt in his hour of glory.

Viewed from this perspective, the text of the *Aeneid* becomes not merely a narrative, but a kind of script for the establishment of Latin culture, a script that might support a limitless series of performances, each with its own variations, but all sharing certain crucial features. The series begins on the mythic level with the labors of the founder, Aeneas. It includes the political level and the establishment of stable government by the *princeps*, Augustus. And, I suggest, it extends to the education of the neophyte who by acquiring the skills necessary to read the national epic gains full membership in Latin culture.<sup>4</sup>

But what is the culture into which the young modern reader of the *Aeneid* is received? The culture of latinity is not the same thing as a hermeneutics of reception, not a sum total of “influences,” direct and indirect, upon modern encounters with the latinity of the past.<sup>5</sup> It may indeed be related to this. But even more, it is the culture *embodied by* the language, to which all who study and value latinity belong. It is concerned in the first instance with the language itself: its character, its qualities, its capacities, its limitations. The business of learning Latin, reading Latin, studying and writing about Latin, even remembering (with whatever emotions) one’s school Latin or thinking of the language only occasionally, is bound up in shared experiences, patterns of behavior, common rituals, and also in differences of opinion, parallel oppositions, persistent prejudices. To encounter Latin nowadays is to belong to this culture, which is larger and more heterogeneous than one might expect it to be. In fact, even now, as one looks back on a century

<sup>4</sup> On this aspect of Latin education in the Renaissance see Ong (1959).

<sup>5</sup> Important arguments about this problem in Martindale (1993).

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that, judged superficially, has been fairly inhospitable to Latin studies as an institution, Latin culture is not in bad shape; for, while the language itself lies at the heart of this culture, ideas about the language are not confined to professional latinists. One of the beauties of this culture is that it is something to which latinists belong, but it is not something anyone can control. Most of all, it is something from which everyone can learn.

Just as social anthropologists have come to appreciate the unavailability of an objective vantage point on the contemporary, so, I would suggest, should Latin studies abandon any pretense to a disinterested perspective on a past culture that is wholly Other. Indeed, the latinist's implication in his or her "material" is much tighter than the anthropologist's or the ethnographer's. Visiting another culture, an investigator cannot help but have some impact on it, and frequently will attempt to assimilate it to the greatest extent possible, but always with the understanding that the process takes place across cultures that are, ultimately, strangers. The ethnographer's interest in and understanding of other cultures depends upon intervention; but those cultures exist independent of one's own. They may change as a result of the ethnographer's intervention, but they would continue to exist even without it. This is not true of Latin culture. The latinist cannot work by traveling to a foreign land. Access to the past is rooted in the here-and-now. The latinist's subject, unlike the ethnographer's, would not exist without the interest and activity of contemporary scholars, students, enthusiasts, dabblers, even opponents. In an important sense, then, Latin culture is a creature of the modern world. More than any anthropologist can be, we, too, are natives here.

### Continuity and rupture

Nativism of course is an extremely complex issue in Latin culture, ancient or modern, and I shall return to it at the end of this chapter. Related to it is another problem raised by my reading of the *Aeneid* as an initiation rite. Juno's insistence that Aeneas' people become linguistically and culturally Latin, I suggested, draws a line from the hero himself through Augustus and then to generations of novices who by reading the poem prove themselves as Latins. This raises the question of continuity. Is the Latin culture to which I have referred perfectly con-

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tinuous with that of the ancient Romans? I can easily imagine some readers, for various reasons, answering “No! Latin culture belonged to the ancient Romans, and it died with them. If there really *is* a ‘modern Latin culture’, it is not the same thing as, nor is it even continuous with, the culture of Roman antiquity.” Fair enough; but the issue of continuity cannot be dismissed so easily. To put the matter in perspective, let me reply with a different question: if ancient Latin culture did indeed meet its end, when did this happen? The answer, I believe, is far from clear.

To get some purchase on this question, let us consider, what is a “latinist?” In theory, someone called a latinist might be a student of Hildegard, Petrarch, or Sweedenborg instead of Cicero or Virgil, and might make a professional home in a department of History, Philosophy, Religion, Comparative Literature, Romance Languages, or even English rather than in Classics. But for some reason, a person whose professional interests lie beyond antiquity will usually be called a “medievalist,” a “comparatist,” or something more descriptive (or differently descriptive) than “latinist” – which, as matters now stand, normally denotes the *classicist* who specializes in Latin. Such a latinist’s area of expertise, as fixed by such documents as graduate school reading lists and histories of literature, extends little farther in time than Juvenal (†127?) or at any rate than Apuleius (†170?), Fronto (†175?), and Aulus Gellius (fl. 170), if we are speaking of authors; or, if we prefer to speak of more definite landmarks in political history, than the death of Marcus Aurelius (180). This is a particularly useful landmark because on July 17th of the same year there occurred at Carthage a hearing followed by the trial and execution of several people from the town of Scillum who were ordered to swear their loyalty by the Genius of the Emperor and to offer sacrifice for his health, but who refused on the grounds that they were Christians; and the text that informs us about this event, the *Acts of the Martyrs of Scillum*, is the earliest Christian text in Latin that we possess. The oldest Latin translations of the Bible are thought to date from this time as well. And it is from this point that Gibbon dates the “decline” that led inevitably to the “fall” of the Roman empire.

In any case, we are speaking of a process rather than an event. It was a long time before pagan culture lost its ascendancy to the new religion. If we insist on some sort of terminus, perhaps we should look for a more

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decisive event more firmly linked to the history of the language. What we are seeking may in fact be a nonevent: between the years 254 and 284, no Latin literature that we know of was produced, of *any* kind.<sup>6</sup> This is a remarkable, possibly unparalleled occurrence in the history of literature. The language continued to be spoken, of course; but since we have no real access to the spoken language, the conditions that made possible such a complete lapse in the production of “literature” appear as an actual tear in the fabric of Latin culture. After this disastrous period, new imperial administrative structures were created by new Augusti and a new senatorial aristocracy came on the scene to cultivate a classicizing literature of their own, while grammarians codified the language along classical models. But all of this activity could be motivated by nostalgia, even perhaps denial: by a desperate longing to resuscitate what was, in fact, a dead body.

These points on the timeline have an undeniable appeal, but it is difficult to trust them implicitly. Certainly there are authors on the modern side of this rupture who, like Servius and Macrobius, are valued partly because they are considered native speakers of a living Latin, and thus unlike ourselves. Still, one hardly thinks of them as breathing the same air as Cicero or Virgil. Rome was no longer the seat of power. The time was approaching when there would be no senatorial aristocracy to speak of. Claimants to the title “Augustus” persisted (the last one resigned in 1806); but in late antiquity, the most powerful person in the west came to be the king of the Franks, a people who coexisted in the same territories with the more Romanized Gauls. These Gauls cherished the idea that they were the true inheritors of Latin culture, and modern historians often dignify them with the name “Gallo-Roman.” The Franks, or at least the Frankish court, aspired to this condition as well. Both groups were obsessed with a form of identity politics that has become all too familiar nowadays, and both coveted validation of the right to call themselves Roman, to see themselves as members of a living Latin culture.

Classical poets were in short supply in those days, but anyone who could function as such could make a good career for himself. Venantius Fortunatus, a young man born and raised in the Veneto, arrived in this

<sup>6</sup> On this rupture see O’Donnell (1994).

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milieu not too long after the mid-sixth century.<sup>7</sup> In the preface to his collected poems, he announces himself, however playfully, as a second Orpheus, singing in the wilderness to barbarians. It is worth bearing this passage in mind when we read his praises of patrons such as the kings Charibert and Chilperic or the duke Lupus. These Frankish noblemen offered the poet patronage and preferment, and the man who arrived at the Burgundian court a wandering poet died Bishop of Poitiers. The native tongue of these noble patrons was Germanic: if Venantius was an ersatz Orpheus, they were authentic barbarians. But they aspired to membership in Latin culture, which by this time had become so much a matter of language that to a wandering poet fell the power to confer it upon them by writing conventional Latin panegyrics in their honor.

The forms taken by Venantius' praise are instructive. Descending from a long tradition of regal panegyric in prose and verse, they adapt tradition to current realities in telling ways. We have seen Martial praising Titus as singular ruler of the entire world by celebrating the occlusion of plural, inarticulate, barbarian languages by a universal latinity. Venantius invokes a similar motif in his encomium of Charibert, but with an important difference:

Hinc cui Barbaries, illinc Romania plaudit:  
diversis linguis laus sonat una viri.

On this side Barbary acclaims him, Rome on that: in different  
tongues sounds the man's unique praise. *Carm.* 6.2.7–8

Here Latin does not occlude barbarian speech, but is forced to share the stage. Indeed, Latin voices explicitly take second place, as in a later passage that comments on the king's bilingual eloquence:

Cum sis progenitus clara de gente Sigamber,  
florete in eloquio lingua Latina tuo;  
qualis es in propria docto sermone loquella,  
qui nos Romanos vincis in eloquio?

<sup>7</sup> Auerbach (1965) is dated but remains an important assessment of many of the problems with which we are concerned here, including Venantius' place in literary history. Godman (1987), 1–37, offers a stimulating defense and a challenging reading of Venantius' occasional poetry. For a more comprehensive introduction to the poet and his work see George (1992).

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Though born a Sicambrian (of famous lineage), it is in *your* eloquence the Latin tongue flourishes; what must you be like in learned speech in your native language, you who better us Romans in eloquence? *Carm.* 6.2.97–100

Not only does Charibert outshine professional Latin rhetoricians like Venantius, but he beats them at their own game, outdoing them in Latin, leaving the poet – evidently not bilingual like his patron – to wonder what a spellbinder the king must be in his native Germanic, itself praised here as a medium of polished eloquence. In a related move, Venantius combines these two motifs in his encomium of Chilperic, Charibert’s half-brother and dynastic rival:

Quid? quoscumque etiam regni ditione gubernas,  
doctior ingenio vincis et ore loquax,  
discernens varias sub nullo interprete voces:  
et generum linguas unica lingua refert.

Why, whomever you govern under the sway of your kingship you surpass, well-schooled of mind, eloquent of tongue, understanding various languages with no interpreter: your tongue alone answers the tongues of nations. *Carm.* 9.1.91–94

And, in the same poem, the motif of the interpreter appears again to provide a learned gloss on the king’s name:

Chilperice potens, si interpres barbarus extet,  
“adiutor fortis,” hoc quoque nomen habes:  
non fuit in vacuum sic te vocitare parentes:  
praesagum hoc totum laudis et omen erat.

Mighty “Chilperic” – or, had we a barbarian interpreter, “Strong Advocate” (for this is your name as well) – not in vain did your parents call you thus: all this was a presage and an omen of your fame. *Carm.* 9.1.27–30

Once again the poet disavows personal knowledge of barbarian speech, displacing authority for the learned bilingual etymology onto the absent figure of the Frankish translator, skilled in Latin as well as Germanic.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> For more on “Roman” and “barbarian” in Venantius see Szövényfi (1977).

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Granting these diplomas of linguistic skill was not Venantius' most lasting or, perhaps, his proudest achievement. Not long after the poet's arrival in Burgundy he looked elsewhere, seeking the patronage of Radegund, former queen of Lothar I but since 544 the leader of a religious community at Poitiers. Radegund was at the time of Venantius' arrival in Gaul involved in a diplomatic effort to obtain a relic of the True Cross from the Byzantine emperor Justin II and the empress Sophia. To this end she enlisted the services of Venantius, who composed a trio of learned Latin poems to help make her case. The effort was successful and the relic was installed in 569; a fourth poem, a *gratiarum actio*, also survives. These along with the rest of Venantius' oeuvre are, rightly or wrongly, not much read or esteemed nowadays by most of those who identify themselves simply as "latinists." But two of his works, *Vexilla regis prodeunt* (2.6) and the exquisite *Pange lingua gloriosi* (2.2), both written to celebrate the installation of the relic at Poitiers, are still sung by thousands, perhaps millions, in their monodic settings as part of Holy Week observances in the Roman Catholic Church. They have been fairly widely recorded as well; several performances of them could be purchased today in any reasonably well-stocked record store. There would seem to be few artifacts of the ancient world of which anything like this can be said; and yet there are few that are considered less representative of Latin culture than these Christian hymns composed for a female patron of Germanic extraction living in a convent in Gaul. That Venantius' work should be denied a place in the canon of classical poetry is perhaps understandable. How vital was the language in which he wrote or the culture that he conferred on his barbarian and Christian patrons? We are forced to infer from the successful trajectory of his career that Venantius' patrons wanted to be praised in Latin, even as the poet repeatedly defers to Frankish cultural superiority. Nevertheless, the desire of the Frankish nobility for praise of this type is rather difficult to understand. Isn't such poetry in itself compelling evidence that latinity was already not merely dead, but a fossil?

#### **Grammatical and vulgar speech**

This commonly-held position remains surprisingly hard to establish. By the sixth century, the Latin language and Latin culture had reached the



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point at which scholars stop looking for the death of Latin and start searching for the birth of Romance. But the more we learn about medieval Europe, the more difficult it is to discern the moment when Latin dies and Romance is born.

To begin with, we do not know when the Franks, who began to occupy the Roman provinces of Europe from the fourth century on, adopted Latin and abandoned Germanic as their “native” language. Indeed, we do not know to what extent this is even an accurate model of what happened. Did they, in fact, abandon Germanic, or did the Franks consider both languages their own? Are we speaking of the nobility only, or did the phenomenon transcend distinctions of class? When did Latin begin to evolve into Romance, and how long did this process take? Did Latin survive as a written language long after the spoken language had ceased to be recognizable as such? Where it used to be assumed that the process whereby Latin became Romance took place at the latest during the seventh, eighth, and ninth centuries, it is now thought by some that two different languages cannot be clearly distinguished until two or more centuries later, and not finally distinguished even then.<sup>9</sup>

On one view, the distinction between Latin and Romance was the artificial creation of Alcuin’s previously mentioned attempt under Charlemagne to reform the orthography and pronunciation of Latin on (what he thought was) a classical model. This argument rests partly on the notion that Alcuin, a Briton, would have come to Charlemagne’s court speaking an insular Latin, a language different from the vernaculars that surrounded it, one that was taught to Britons very much as a foreign tongue constructed on conservative grammatical principles. Under such circumstances, one infers, Latin would have been more resistant to corruption than on the continent, where vernacular influence would have been inevitable. In his attempt to enforce a uniform standard of spelling and pronunciation, then – an attempt based on contemporary insular practice – Alcuin can be argued not to have restored classical Latin, which was his goal, but to have “invented” medieval

<sup>9</sup> This is an enormous, difficult, and much-debated topic fraught with problems related to nationalism and modernist ideology. Important contributions include: Barty (1948); MacMullen (1966); Norberg (1966); Millar (1968); McKitterick (1989).

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Latin as an artificial and mainly literary entity distinct from spoken Romance, which then developed into French, Spanish, Italian, and so forth.<sup>10</sup>

It is a good story. It may even be, in some sense, true. But true or not, it is a spectacular vehicle for thematic analysis. At issue in this as in other stories of Latin's demise is a strong element of teleology that appears to work like this: it is "known" that Latin is now a "dead" language, the exclusive preserve of academic specialists, unsupported by a living culture. The task is to discover when this situation first came about. One feels sure that this is in fact what happened, just as the Roman empire "fell," but the coroner's certificate contains a blank space labeled "date." Alcuin's reforms are as good an event as any on which to blame Latin's demise – which is to say, not very good at all. Long after Charlemagne, scholars, clerics, and diplomats throughout Europe continued to write and converse fluently in Latin, many of them perhaps exclusively or nearly so. That this can be said only of a cultural elite is true enough. But the same view can be taken of the rise of any official modern vernacular, such as Italian, which in its "official" form was spoken by only a tiny fraction of the total population of Italy until late in the last century.<sup>11</sup> It is further striking that we find in the story of Alcuin the pre-echo of a characteristic still operative in modern Latin culture. First, his classicizing objectives awaken the sympathies of the modern (classical) latinist, who sees in the presiding intelligence of the Carolingian "renaissance" a kindred spirit. Second, though Alcuin did not "restore" latinity to its ancient form, by marking a boundary between classical and medieval Latin on the one hand, and between Latin and the vernacular on the other, he performs a service of great importance by ratifying linguistic and cultural categories that latinists hold dear. Third and last, it is significant that the individual credited with performing this service is figured as an interloper, the product of a culture in which Latin was already cultivated as a learned language so different from the vernacular as to be immune from contamination or confusion with it. The linguistic situation in Francia we imagine as much more fluid, so much so that we cannot draw a line between Latin and Romance. In Britain, we imagine that Latin existed only among certain social groups as a highly constructed idiom that had no rela-

<sup>10</sup> On this theory see Wright (1982).

<sup>11</sup> De Mauro (1972), 36–45.

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tionship to or interaction with the vernacular; and it is therefore, paradoxically, the British arriviste who, appalled at the condition to which the language has descended among native speakers, sets things straight. What makes this story so intriguing is its resemblance to situations both in the ancient world, as when it fell to Greek slaves to organize and operate a system of education and a national literature for native speakers of Latin, and in the modern world, in which scholars raised speaking languages that are not descended from Latin have occasionally, in their own minds at least, tried to assume over speakers of the Romance languages a certain hegemony with respect to Latin studies. It is as if the status of the linguistic foreigner were actually an essential qualification for full membership in Latin culture.

Alcuin's example points out the crucial fact that one can hardly conceive of Latin as anything but an "other" language. Indeed, it is essentially impossible to point to a single specimen of Latin written at any time or place that can stand as a witness to the existence of a sincere, nativist Latin culture. In each period and every form through which Latin speaks, it has demonstrably internalized its "othered" status.

The most influential statement on this aspect of Latin is Dante Alighieri's essay *On Eloquence in the Vernacular*. In book 1 of this work, Dante divides all the world's languages into two categories: the natural, which are the original and more noble sort, and the "artificial" or "grammatical," which are later human constructs. In the former category he places the vernacular speech used every day in different forms in different places; in the latter such languages as, preeminently, Latin. His argument is remarkable in that Latin was in the late Middle Ages a language of great prestige as compared with the vernacular. Dante acknowledges this fact by referring to Latin's enormous utility as a "grammatical" language, one based on a rational system rather than on natural usage and thus impervious to change across time, national boundaries, or any similar factor. Latin for Dante is Latin, one and the same, always and everywhere. The vernacular, on the other hand, is capable of extensive and confusing variation over time and from place to place. Typically, he explains this property of natural language with reference to a Judeo-Christian view of history, tracing the mutability of natural language to God's punishment of humankind for constructing the Tower of Babel. The pristine state of the original human speech – probably some form of Hebrew – gave way to a degraded condition in

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a way that mirrors precisely the contrast between the Edenic and post-lapsarian conditions lived by the original humans Adam and Eve. Artificial language based on grammar is thus but a synthetic expedient, like clothing, a cultural institution that enables humankind to cope with the degraded life that is the wages of sin. But natural language, according to Dante, retains its inherent superiority and greater “nobility,” despite its mutability and the confusion to which this gives rise, as a matter of ontology. If one were to plot their places on a Platonic line of authenticity, Latin would be found to be a mere representation of vernacular speech; and Dante is clearly working with some such notion in mind.

An important element of Dante’s position is the remarkable argument that Latin and the vernacular are more or less entirely unrelated. In particular, it follows from the fact that he regards the vernacular as the more ancient language that it cannot be descended from Latin. If anything, the opposite would on Dante’s account be true, Latin being a stable form of the vernacular constructed along grammatical principles. It was over a century after Dante’s essay before humanist scholars reached a consensus that ancient culture was not bilingual, writing the Latin that survived in classical literature while speaking a vernacular of which no record survived, but that it rather spoke and wrote a plural Latin that, far from being impervious to change, underwent many changes over time and in different places, emerging as the various forms of the vernacular spoken in contemporary Italy, Provence, France, Spain, and Romania.<sup>12</sup> This conclusion anticipated the findings of later comparative philologists, which are the basis of modern historical linguistics. But neither Dante’s position nor the terms of the humanist debate have failed to leave their mark on the Latin and vernacular cultures of today.

Relevant to this discussion is the idea that the Latin of classical literature was effectively walled off from other kinds of Latin – from the spoken language, regional dialects, and so on. It is an open question how well most ordinary speakers uneducated in the elite dialect could have understood a public literary performance during the early empire: whether the performer was, in effect, speaking one language and the

<sup>12</sup> See, variously, Tavoni (1984) and Mazzocco (1993), especially pp. 189–208 (a vigorous critique of Tavoni).

man in the street a quite different one – almost the situation Dante describes in hypothesizing an ancient spoken vernacular that coexisted with an exclusively literary Latin. Linguists stress that modern Romance descends not from the prestige dialect of the Roman elite, but from “vulgar” Latin of the masses. A member of the former group, wishing to tell a friend that he had bought a horse, would have said “*equum emi*,” whereas his lower-class or less-educated counterpart must be presumed to have said something like “*ego habeo comparatum unum caballum*.” It is thus not unusual to employ Latin in its common modern role as a technical language to coin terms such as *sermo cotidianus* or *sermo plebeius* for what an English speaker would call “everyday speech” and to treat an adjective like *harenosus* (“sandy”), when it occurs in serious poetry, as a “borrowing” from the vulgar tongue almost in the same way as if it were a loanword from Greek or Persian. There is, so far as I know, nothing to suggest that Dante’s views on this matter have actually influenced modern scholarship; but it is intriguing that linguistic investigation has produced something not altogether unlike Dante’s idea that the Latin we still read was not the language that the Romans actually spoke, the language that did produce the vernacular of Dante’s own time. Furthermore, it is difficult not to recognize in Dante, in humanist linguistics, and in the work of modern philologists a common theme – namely, that that Latin we know from the written record is a strange and unusual thing, a language so artificial that it cannot serve the purposes of transient, everyday speech – that it is an artificial language, and not a natural one.

### The return of the native

The conflict with respect to nature that we find in Dante is not just a quirk; it is a recurring theme, even a defining characteristic of Latin culture. The conflict appears with great clarity and significance in Cicero’s dialogue on *Laws*, where the leading idea is that Roman law – or, for the purposes of the dialogue, human law – is based on natural law. Here the idea of natural law gives rise to a discussion that defines in a surprising way just what constitutes a Roman’s fatherland.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> The main issues of interpretation and source criticism are well covered by Rawson (1973); see further Salmon (1972), Bonjour (1975), 78–86, and Eichenberger (1991).

#### THE RETURN OF THE NATIVE

The dialogue on *Laws*, uniquely, is set at Cicero's ancestral villa in Arpinum; the participants are Cicero himself, his brother Quintus, and their friend Atticus. Near the beginning of book 2, Atticus waxes enthusiastic about the setting: "Nature is supreme in matters that concern spiritual repose and diversion," he says, "just as you were saying before with regard to law and justice." He then launches into a spirited encomium of the villa's natural beauty. Cicero replies that he comes whenever possible, since the place is dear to him for a personal reason as well: because it is his *patria*, his "fatherland." His family has lived here for generations; it is still the seat of their ancestral religion. His father spent almost his whole life in a house that still stands, and the place is full of family memories. He compares his paternal homestead to that of the ancient Sabine, Manius Curius Dentatus, and his desire to return to it to that of Odysseus, who preferred his homecoming to Calypso's offer of immortality (2.3).

It is here that the discussion takes an especially interesting turn. Atticus happily admits his complete empathy with Cicero's nostalgia for Arpinum: he too now loves Arpinum, knowing that it is the birthplace of his friend, just as he loves Athens not so much for its "stately and exquisite works of ancient art" as for the great men who lived there (2.4). Note how Atticus appears to miss the point entirely. The expected reply to Cicero's encomium of his birthplace would be, "Yes, I feel just the same way about my own home town." Instead, Atticus inscribes himself within a triangular erotic relationship: Cicero's love for Arpinum produces in Atticus, who loves Cicero, a similar love for Arpinum. Similar, but different, in that Cicero loves Arpinum "naturally," because it is his birthplace; Atticus' love is predicated on a prior social relationship. His comparison of the love he feels for Arpinum to the love he feels for Athens confirms this point. Atticus actually takes pains to deny that he loves Athens as a center of culture, but rather insists that he loves it because, like Arpinum, it was loved by men he loves. The parallelism that Atticus sees between Cicero and himself is false, because the love that Cicero feels for his birthplace is natural, whereas the love felt by Atticus is an acculturated love, something learned – the kind of attachment that an individual might feel to a place with which he has no natural connection at all.

This position makes Atticus a convincing spokesman for the idea that follows. "What did you really mean by the statement you made a while

ago, that this place, by which I understand you to refer to Arpinum, is your fatherland?" The reader might be forgiven for wondering, has Atticus been listening? Arpinum is Cicero's birthplace: what other fatherland could he have? Atticus turns out to be thinking much the same thing, but from a different perspective: "Have you, then, *two* fatherlands? Or is our common fatherland the only one? Perhaps you think that wise old Cato's fatherland was not Rome but Tusculum?" This is of course just what any modern reader would think. Cato was born in Tusculum. He moved to Rome and made his career there, but Tusculum remained his fatherland. Or didn't it?

In what follows, Cicero enunciates the doctrine of the two fatherlands. According to this doctrine Cicero, Cato, and all natives of Italian *municipia* have two fatherlands, one by nature or birth and one by citizenship or law – *unam naturae alteram ciuitatis* – "just as the people of your beloved Attica, before Theseus commanded them all to leave the country and move into the city (or *astu*, as they call it) were at the same time citizens of their own towns and of Attica, so we consider as our fatherland both the place where we were born, and also the city into which we have been adopted." Cicero's comparison is telling. Taking his cue from Atticus' well-known love of Athens, which Atticus himself had just made the vehicle of a similar comparison (and which is the source, after all, of his *cognomen*), Cicero explains the condition of modern Italy by appealing to that of ancient Attica. That is to say, the modern custom is justified not by an appeal to nature, as Cicero's derivation of the legal order from the natural order might suggest, but by a paradigm drawn from another culture. Further, the culture to which Cicero appeals is distant, the particular usage that interests him no longer in force. After Theseus' organization of Attica, everyone became a citizen of Athens alone, and presumably lost any tie to a second fatherland. This is not the usage that Cicero has described as obtaining in modern Italy: "so we consider as our fatherland *both* the place into which we have been born, *and also* the city into which we have been adopted." But Cicero then in a sense validates his previous comparison between Rome and Athens and shows that his conception of "fatherland" is in fact much closer to Atticus' than to ours. "But that fatherland must stand first in our esteem in which the name of republic signifies the common citizenship of us all. For this fatherland it is our duty to die, to give of ourselves entirely, to stake and, as it were, to