CHAPTER

I

The nature of Latin culture

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,

> 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.[1]

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.[2]

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

[1] 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.

[2] Libanius, *Orat.* 1.234, 255.

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

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.[3] 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

[3] On this passage see Johnson (1976), 114–34, especially 124–27.

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.[4]

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.[5] 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

[4] On this aspect of Latin education in the Renaissance see Ong (1959).
[5] Important arguments about this problem in Martindale (1993).

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-

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

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.[6] 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

[6] On this rupture see O'Donnell (1994).