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Not Dead Yet

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Latin: Story of a World Language by [Jürgen Leonhardt](#), translated by [Kenneth Kronenberg](#)
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On 22 May 1724 James Logan, a wealthy Philadelphian fur trader, scientist and bibliophile, took a day trip with friends from London to Windsor. Big crowds accompanied them, and no wonder: they were making their way to a dramatic public occasion – a scientific counterpart to the hangings at Tyburn that drew enthusiastic spectators in droves in the same period. A solar eclipse was about to take place. Two rival astronomers, William Whiston and Edmond Halley, had predicted where it would reach totality. As he had done once before, in 1715, Halley published in advance a map of the shadow that the eclipse would project on the earth, as seen from above – a brilliant feat of visual imagination and a superb disposal of quantitative data. Whiston held that the eclipse would not be total anywhere near London. Halley, by contrast, included Windsor in the zone of totality.

Who won? No one knew for certain. 'Expecting to see the sun wholly obscured,' Logan recalled, 'we returned in a state of frustration. For the heavens favoured Halley, since they were covered by clouds. Still, we considered it certain that the moon did not block off all of the sun's light, as Halley had predicted.' Four days later, attending a meeting of the Royal Society, Logan heard Isaac Newton ask Halley to discuss the eclipse. Logan, who thought that Halley seemed quite happy to 'conceal his error' by invoking the cloud cover, was sure that Whiston's work was superior, and that totality had not been reached while he was in Windsor. He even wondered, sticking his bent nib a little deeper into Halley, if Halley had delayed publishing his astronomical tables because of the failure of his model. Both the scene Logan describes and his response to it seem vividly modern: it is the same early Enlightenment London, buzzing with gossip about the rival geniuses of the Royal Society, that fascinated Voltaire when he arrived two years later. So does the fact that Logan entered

his account in a proof copy of Halley's tables, obtained directly from the publisher, William Innys, who, Logan complained, 'took a guinea of me', long before the author released them for publication.

There's only one fly in the ointment, but it's a big and noisy specimen. Logan told the story of Halley and his eclipse in elaborate literary Latin, his preferred language, though he also used English, Greek and Arabic for annotating the books in his immense collection, now preserved in the Library Company of Philadelphia. Logan was a hard-driven businessman, the Montgomery Burns of the 18th-century fur trade, and an up-to-date philosophe. He corresponded with eminent figures in Britain and Europe, wrote with insight about the sexuality of plants and built a splendid Georgian country house at Stenton, near Philadelphia. His chosen city, Quaker Philadelphia, housed no institutions of traditional learning, and many Quakers had deep misgivings about the pursuit of erudition. Logan's close friends included such passionate enemies of pedantry as Benjamin Franklin. Why then did he choose Latin, rather than his own vigorous English, as the medium in which to tell this and other tales?

Even in Philadelphia, it turns out, Latin could do a lot for an ambitious person. It created bonds. One of Logan's friends, the German Quaker Francis Daniel Pastorius, attracted the attention of the great William Penn when he put a grandiose Latin inscription over the door of his cabin: 'Parva domus sed amica bonis, procul este profani' – 'It's a little house but welcoming to good people: profane men, keep your distance.' While riding by, Penn saw the text and recognised that it contained a quotation from Book VI of the *Aeneid*. The incongruity charmed the Proprietor of Pennsylvania. According to tradition, he laughed when he saw it – one of only two occasions in his life when he laughed. Shared Latin learning cemented the friendships between Logan and both the other men.

Latin also enabled Logan to play a role – if a modest one – in the international republic of letters. Correspondence in Latin with the great bibliographer of the classics in Hamburg, Johann Albrecht Fabricius, brought Logan not only cordial greetings but a rare edition of Ptolemy and seven other books – a generous gift that he repaid by sending the German scholar 'an Indian drest Buffalo skin'. Logan's articles in Latin appeared in European scholarly journals and established his reputation for encyclopedic, precise learning in many fields.

In writing about Halley in Latin, Logan made a perceptive choice. Logan was a passionate reader of the new philosophy and science. He owned and annotated the first copy to reach the colonies of Newton's *Principia*, which he seems to have bought on the Wissahickon Creek

from the family of a deceased German mathematician and visionary. The book contained a Latin poem by Halley, a clever piece in which he mimicked the diction and even the syntax of Lucretius, in order to praise Newton's work as the beginning of a new age. Even as Logan advertised his low estimation of Halley's attainments, in other words, he did so in a learned language that he shared, as he knew, with the astronomer.

Jürgen Leonhardt admires Halley's poem, in *Latin: Story of a World Language*, as 'a clean, stylistically skilful piece of work'. And he makes clear that Halley was only one of the innovative thinkers who still found Latin an appropriate medium for discussing the most contemporary questions of the late 17th and early 18th centuries. Newton himself, after all, wrote his *Principia* in grammatically correct Latin – though he thought in English as he did so. He translated his work clause by clause, not because he thought Latin especially appropriate for discussing planetary motion but because, like other scientists across Europe, he wanted his findings to circulate across borders. Latin composition took many forms in the 18th century and had many functions: if one astronomer practised it as an art, another used it as a period form of Esperanto. By the time of Newton, Halley and Logan, Latin had become as impractical for some purposes, such as the writing of history, as it remained vital for others, such as the formal discussion of medical theory or Roman law. One of the many achievements of Leonhardt's book is to give readers, for the first time, a sense of what Latin has meant, and what it has been most useful for, in every period of Western history.

Scholars have always known that Latin lived on, long after the Roman Empire fell. But there has been little or no consensus about its character and qualities. Sometimes the persistence of the linguistic old regime appears as a curiosity: historians of science, for example, regularly point out that Carl Friedrich Gauss still composed mathematical works in Latin in the middle of the 19th century. But they usually treat this as a mildly curious fact.

Sometimes the nature of proper Latin provoked debate. In the Renaissance, erudite, sharp-tongued classicists like Ulrich von Hutten made bitter, brilliant fun of the Latin spoken and written in medieval universities. Since the 19th century, by contrast, medievalists have been highlighting the music, life and passion of medieval Latin poetry – and making fun in their turn of the sterile, hypercorrect Latin of the Renaissance humanists, who supposedly strangled the life out of the language by insisting that it conform to classical models that did not fit modern life. More recently still, students of humanism have fought back, insisting on the virtues of the humanists' intelligent classicism. Formidable scholars like the Belgian Latinist Jozef Ijsewijn have trained students in the literary Latin of the Renaissance and later periods. At Harvard James Hankins has mustered an army of classicists, historians and

philosophers to edit and translate humanist Latin prose and verse for the handsome little blue volumes of the I Tatti Renaissance Library, which proliferate with astonishing speed – and, even more astonishing, pay for themselves.

Latin and its supporters have had more crowd-pleasing death scenes than any diva in the history of opera. Sometimes the death of a great Latinist provides the drama. In 1766, appalled by the bad Latin in James Boswell's legal thesis, Johnson commented: 'Ruddiman is dead.' That great Scottish Latinist had corrected students' work until his death, nine years earlier. For Johnson, Thomas Ruddiman's departure meant the end of an age in Scotland, at least: not only had he stood for correct Latin, but he had printed editions of fine models for Latin writing by the humanist historian George Buchanan and others.

Sometimes the corpse in the coffin is Latin itself. When A.E. Housman dissected H.E. Butler's 1905 edition of and commentary on Propertius, he remarked that the editor's 'defects are due to his environment: he has the misfortune to have been born in an age which is out of touch with Latinity.' Housman's phrase still strikes a chill in the heart of those who regularly consult a revised version of that commentary, now a standard point of reference.

Yet anyone who listens can hear the spirit of Latin crying out: 'I'm not dead yet.' Years after Ruddiman's death, 18th-century governors of the commonwealth of Massachusetts were greeted at Harvard by student orations delivered in Latin, and expected to reply extemporaneously in kind. Paul Oskar Kristeller once told me how much he had appreciated his time in Werner Jaeger's seminar in Berlin, a quarter century after Housman tolled his bell for the passing of Latin. It was in the most modern of European cities, Kristeller explained, that he had learned to speak Latin properly, thanks to the example of his teacher, whose beautiful Latin prose he also praised. And there were active Latinists elsewhere as well. In the 1930s, the young Viennese scholar Ernst Gombrich wrote charming, playful compositions in medieval Latin.

Even now eager students stream to programmes like those of the Paideia Institute, where they not only read but speak, sing and rap in Latin while on summer courses in Rome. I have heard them in the basement of Pompey's theatre, singing about the career of Julius Caesar in Latin, to the tune of 'My Darling Clementine' – and seen them, on the Appian Way, reading Horace as he rails about the miseries of the journey to Brundisium. More than forty male students every year give up alcohol, drugs, tobacco and all music other than classical so that they can spend the period from October to late June in intensive study of Latin and Greek at the Accademia Vivarium Novum in Rome, where 'all communication through the entire

school year occurs in Latin or – occasionally – in ancient Greek.' Leonhardt describes similar initiatives in Germany, noting that they have become far more popular than most classicists would ever have expected. Latin is hot: and living Latin is the hottest of all. Everywhere I go, I find young students swapping information about which programmes turn out really fluent Latinists.

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Leonhardt's informative and useful book ends with a plea to teach Latin as a living language, but the bulk of his work is historical: a lucid, erudite account of the history of Latin, from its origins as a literary language in the third century BCE up to the present. It's a pioneering enterprise, as Leonhardt explains, for a number of reasons. In the great days of German *Altertumswissenschaft*, when Berlin had its own *Philological Weekly*, every schoolboy spent hundreds of hours at Gymnasium reading Latin texts. University students learned to speak the language in seminars managed, ungently, by great professors, who greeted solecisms and foolish remarks with a blunt 'Tace.' A career as a classicist entailed writing prefaces to critical editions, reports on technical discoveries and certain sorts of formal address in Latin. Still, most scholars considered classical Latin an inferior language, in beauty, depth and originality, to Greek, the intoxicating love-object of neo-humanism. It took a real original like Eduard Fraenkel to see both the Greek background and the new, distinctive elements in Latin literature. Even classical Latin was a stepchild of classicism.

Reactions to post-classical Latin were less favourable still. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, scholars interested in language came to see each individual tongue as a reflection of a national spirit. Every 'natural', living language embodied the experience and the worldview of its people. But after the fall of Rome, Latin became a language without a people, a dead tongue artificially preserved not by native speakers, who had ceased to exist, but by clerics and scholars. Classicist after classicist pronounced, with an assurance better suited to a loftier cause, that there could be little point in studying neo-Latin literature. 'All of these descendants of the Latin muse,' the philologist Franz Skutsch remarked, 'are of only secondary interest and will, overall, attract only philologists and literary amateurs.' The Latinist, accordingly, need only study the Latin that really flowed from the Roman spirit: texts written before the end of the second century CE, and the vast majority of them before 120 CE.

Yet, as Leonhardt shows, this would mean ignoring most of what has been written in Latin. He estimates that ancient texts represent no more than 0.01 per cent of all surviving Latin – and of that minute fraction, 80 per cent was written by Christians, not pagans. Erasmus alone

wrote more than three thousand Latin letters, almost half as many as survive from Roman antiquity. Forty ancient Latin dramas have come down to us, as against five to ten thousand Latin dramas written between the 15th and the 18th centuries. Worse, turning away from post-classical Latin means abandoning the technical study of many works that shaped everything from the contemplation of the self – think of Augustine and Petrarch – to the contemplation of nature: in addition to Newton and Halley, think of Copernicus and Vesalius, William Gilbert and Gabriel Harvey, Bacon and Descartes.

It's hard to imagine the surgeons of the world deciding that a certain group of patients – those who study early modern history, for example – should be left to take out one another's appendixes and gall bladders rather than relying on expert treatment. In essence, though, that's the decision many classicists have made: those who worked on early modern history would have to rely on whatever philological tools they could find and learn to wield. The results, all too often, have not been pretty, and Leonhardt clearly believes that trained philologists should not simply enter, but settle and cultivate fields that not many of them have previously explored. This doesn't just mean 'reception studies': Leonhardt wants Latinists to help with the reading and interpretation of every single kind of Latin historical and literary document.

His take on his colleagues – some of them at least – is mildly subversive, but his take on Latin itself is more so. Where traditional scholars saw it as a 'natural' language that expressed the Roman character, he treats it as the product of a much more complex history. Literary Latin, for Leonhardt, has always rested in part on external models. In the third century and after, he argues, when writers like Ennius and Plautus began to import Greek genres into Latin, many of them were not bilingual but multilingual. Ennius, for example, said that he had not one but three hearts, Greek, Oscan and Latin; Plautus came from Umbria. Surely these men had already begun to experiment, mixing Greek forms with native ones, in their own languages and locales, before they and their experiments were imported into Rome. Like the American Latinist Joseph Farrell, Leonhardt dissects the myths and shows that 'there are no native Romans ... All members of Latin culture must journey to Rome, each in his or her own way.'

Classical Latin still plays a central role in Leonhardt's account. It took shape, as he shows, with astonishing speed during the period, less than a century long, when Cicero and Caesar, Lucretius and Virgil, Propertius and Horace created a textual canon so powerful that the basic grammatical and syntactical features of the language ceased to evolve. But this creation, too, he explains not as the autonomous expression of the *Geist*, but as the conscious effort of men like Caesar and Cicero, who were determined to build a literature and saw themselves not

only as writers, but also as authorities on the form the Latin language should take.

As to post-classical Latin – the Latin written after the late third century CE – it's here that Leonhardt's approach is most comprehensive and enlightening. From the start, he assumes that the history of Latin is not unique, or even strange. In Gaul and the German lands, in Britain and Italy, clerics and a few others spoke and wrote Latin, which also connected them to counterparts in other lands. Ordinary people spoke dialects that were becoming independent languages, Germanic or Romance. Systematic comparisons show that the western Europe of the early Middle Ages was hardly alone in displaying a form of 'diglossia' (the use of two languages or dialects by a single community). In the Byzantine Empire members of the elite spoke and wrote classical Greek, while the speech of ordinary people gradually developed into a very different language. In the Islamic world scholars read and interpreted the Quran in a uniform classical Arabic – even as strikingly different dialects began to take shape in different regions.

For most of its life, Leonhardt shows, Latin has been not a 'natural' but a 'world' language, used by many people in many lands, not for everyday speech, but for writing and for speech on special occasions. A fair number of world languages have existed at one time or another, from Sumerian and middle Babylonian in antiquity to the complex but clearly non-native academic English that has become, since the Second World War, the international language of science and scholarship. In many cases, histories of world languages have followed similar courses: instructional manuals for Sumerian bear a striking resemblance to those drawn up for Latin by the Renaissance humanists.

The continuity of grammar and usage in these languages over the centuries is often astonishing. Latin threatened to disappear with the Roman Empire. In the time of Augustine, Leonhardt conjectures, when the empire and dozens of cities supported schools, as many as a hundred thousand people around the Mediterranean were well schooled in Latin. By the seventh century, only a few hundred real Latinists remained: it was a good time to be a grammarian. Most writers, outside the most learned Irish monasteries, conflated cases and declensions and dropped their aitches with abandon. And then, as soon as formal education was reorganised, Latin became itself again. While Leonhardt emphasises the variety of the Latin written in the Middle Ages, he notes that the grammar and syntax used by writers as diverse as Abelard and Aquinas were still basically classical, even as they introduced new words and expressions.

It's common for creativity in writing to continue long after a world language ceases to be the

possession of native speakers: the Sumerian and Old Babylonian versions of the epic of Gilgamesh, for example, developed for centuries after the languages in question had ceased to be 'natural'. The history of Latin shows similar developments, such as the epithalamia, sexier and less discreet than their ancient models, which served, as Leonard Forster argued long ago, as safety valves for Renaissance Latinists. Their arteries would have snapped like pipestems if they had been confined to writing chaste Petrarchan verse.

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Only in the late 18th century, Leonhardt argues, did elites gradually abandon their conviction that an active command of Latin was essential, as it lost successive competitions for usefulness with modern languages in one domain after another. A rich and fascinating case study, centred on Leipzig, offers insight into the complicated process in which patrons and professors, teachers and theorists sustained a lengthy dance routine of one step forward, two steps back, as one group asserted that it was not necessary to study classical Latin texts and then retracted, whereupon their successors argued the contrary (and then retracted). In 1723, Bach was hired to be Kantor of the Thomasschule in Leipzig, even though he was not certified to teach Latin, as his predecessors had been. For Leonhardt, that date is as good a marker as any for the moment when Latin, driven out of local institution after local institution, gradually began to surrender its position as a world language. Scholars from different traditions may see things a little differently, arguing – as Françoise Waquet did in her elegant, witty *Latin: The Empire of a Sign* – that Latin retained its value as a mark of social and cultural distinction until quite recently.

Leonhardt's comparative approach illuminates the entire book. He notes, for example, that the Renaissance debate over Ciceronianism has much in common with the ancient debates of Cicero and Caesar – and that many of its protagonists, such as Pietro Bembo, also debated the nature of vernacular languages and how they should be cultivated. This was another of those discussions that helped to shape the language in concrete (and, in this case, regrettable) ways. Arguments sometimes ridiculed as mere pedantry take on their full historical force in Leonhardt's treatment. He notes that the Carolingian revival of the classics was really a revival of late antiquity – a phenomenon as visible in the architectural projects of the time as in its canon of texts.

At times, Leonhardt pushes too hard as he tries to wrangle his vast herd of facts and texts into order. He exaggerates the 15th-century Italian humanists' turn away from Italian. Leonardo Bruni wrote influential lives of Dante and Petrarch in Italian, and Leon Battista Alberti chose Italian, not Latin, for the first version of his innovative treatise *On Painting* and for his

astonishing dialogues *On the Family*, with their vivid portraits of the hyperactive entrepreneur and his ideal, energetic wife. The great philologist Friedrich August Wolf did as much as anyone to create the new, historically acute German scholarship that took shape in the early 19th century. But he did not abandon the active use of Latin, as Leonhardt suggests. Wolf edited texts that he saw as models for modern Latin composition – for example, the works of the French Renaissance humanist Marc-Antoine Muret – and composed his own epoch-making *Prolegomena to Homer* in Latin, a decision that enabled his work to reach a far wider public than it would have in German. Though Leonhardt is clearly right to emphasise that formal Latin education remained classical in the early modern period, he underestimates the period's passion for the Fathers of the Church and other late antique writers. Petrarch, after all, included many works of Augustine with the classics in his list of his favourite authors.

Leonhardt has dethroned Latin from its traditional position as a marmoreal, static sidekick to Greek and taught us to understand the history not only of Latin, but of language and literature, in a new way. His approach seems natural in a time of intellectual globalisation, but it is the fruit of hard thinking, and adds to our sense of the complex ways in which language and power intersect. A comprehensive account of Latin, he insists, has to acquaint us with every form of writing in the language, from hard science to scandalous ethnography; from cold-eyed absolutist politics to warm-hearted idealistic utopias. James Logan, that Latin-besotted master of multiple languages, connoisseur of mathematics and eager student of world history, would have loved it.

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