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ATTITUDES TO HISTORY IN SOME CONTEMPORARY NEO-LATIN POETRY

What are languages *for*? What is poetry *for*? These are not necessarily easy questions, when we turn our attention to Neo-Latin poetry in the modern world. One function of Latin may be as an international language, with an extraordinarily rich literary heritage, that can be used to explain both past and present to audiences across national boundaries. And poetry, perhaps, may do so with more style, spirit, allusiveness, and elegance than prose: it can delight, confuse, and provoke: as long as it is read. Many poets are concerned only, or primarily, with the present, often focusing on their own private feelings. I am interested here in those poets, perhaps a minority, who look both outward and backwards, to bring aspects of the past to the attention of a Neo-Latin readership. Their poetry may be more or less successful, in its own literary terms. It can also be surprisingly revealing of how authors perceive the business of history itself. Having examined what is good, and possibly less good, about several recent approaches, I propose to look forward to the future of history as a poetic subject, and make some (possibly rash) suggestions for new Latin poets to adopt, or adapt, or ignore.

One of the most distinguished and senior Latin poets still (thankfully) active in the world, in the opening decades of the twenty-first century, has been the Mexican, Francisco Cabrera. He has taken a strong interest in the history of his own country, producing Latin verse narratives both of earlier events, including pre-conquest and immediately post-conquest legends, and of the more recent life of its great nineteenth-century political figure, Benito Juárez. Purely as Latin verse, these have received deserved praise – which I would heartily endorse. My intention here, though, is not purely to look at the poetry as literature in its own right, but to examine its interaction with the real world. On that score, I have some qualms about Cabrera's approach. Others may differ on that, naturally – either disagreeing with my thoughts, or not thinking them significant in terms of poetic appreciation – but I think they are worth raising, as part of a broader literary-critical approach to modern Latin verse. We should do more, I think, than merely notice it exists (though poets like to be noticed, so even that is welcome), and praise it simply for good Latinity – or occasionally blame it for trivial errors (as some of the more small-minded linguists can do)¹. In taking modern Latin seriously, we open up the possibility, even the necessity, of different critical angles. And any kind of criticism that could fairly be applied to vernacular writing, can also be applied to Latin. These remarks may seem too obvious to need saying: but I am not sure the implications are always fully realised, by those who look at this field. When criticism is applied to a living poet, who also happens to be elderly and distinguished, it is perhaps worth stressing that, in voicing some negative as well as positive views, one is not showing disrespect to a poet's achievement, but in fact the added respect of treating him with the same seriousness as any major vernacular author, who would self-evidently be open to tough critical examination and debate unfettered by any restraints of deference or over-politeness.

FRANCISCO CABRERA

Francisco Cabrera's life-story reflects his personal presence for most of the twentieth-century history of North America. (I am indebted to his American translator, William Cooper, for the

¹ It is certainly worth noting minor errors in Latin (as indeed I do myself, below; and I would, I hope, accept correction from others of my own not-infrequent errors with reasonably good grace). What I object to is the attitude, from some professors, that nothing really matters except the purity of the Latin. We don't hold that view for serious vernacular literature, and it is equally foolish for contemporary Latin.

following information about him.)² Cabrera was born in Puebla, on 18 May, 1916. His grandfather had purchased European art, and established a museum in Puebla : which later closed, leaving much of the collection to be displayed in the Cabrera family house, a formative influence on the young Cabrera. When he was of a suitable age to commence advanced studies, and wished to concentrate on Latin, the socialist regime in Mexico was so hostile to the Catholic Church that he felt unable to remain and pursue his studies in his native country, and moved over the border to study with the Jesuits at Ysleta, Texas. He had begun writing short Latin lyrics by the time he left them : he decided not to join the priesthood. He also studied some classics at Notre Dame University, but was obliged to return home and devote himself to a non-classical career. He worked as a buyer for Folgers Coffee, and also wrote a number of books on contemporary Mexican art ; it was only on retirement that he decided to take up Latin verse again. His first effort was a hexameter poem in praise of the greatest focus of Mexican religious devotion, the dark Virgin of Guadalupe : *Laus Guadalupensis*, published in 1990 and again in 1999 as a slim volume with his Spanish translation. Next came *Mexicus-Tenochtitlan* (1998), *Angelopolis* and *Quetzalcoatl* (1999), *Quahnabuaac* and *Tamoanchan* (2000), and *Gonzalo Guerrero* (2001). By the start of the new century William Cooper had begun translating the poems and corresponding with him, and the idea of a collection grew to include *Ioannae Virginis Laudes*, *Amato Nervo*, and *Malintzin*, written in that order and collected with the previous seven long poems in *Monumenta Mexicana* (2004)³. *Benito Juárez* followed in 2006⁴, when the poet apparently commented to Cooper that, at the age of 90, he was getting tired : as he is fully entitled to be, having produced a great deal more in his eighties than most of us can manage in our forties. Cabrera is married with three daughters, a son, and several grandchildren. He lives under the volcano at Cuernavaca, and continues to correspond with Cooper several times a month.

Cabrera's poems are made available to non-Mexicans through the editions which Cooper has prepared, with a fairly plain, and just occasionally inaccurate, English prose translation. At line 404 of Cabrera's *Malintzin*, for example, Cooper renders the phrase « *Turbata minis et viribus acta* » as « Cowed by threats and battered by men⁵ », perhaps confusing *vir* with *vires* – though no doubt the force involved is indeed masculine in origin, if not in grammar. The vigour of Cabrera's engagement with his country's past – whether real or legendary, or a mixture of the two – comes over very clearly ; these are stories that seem to mean a great deal to the author, and doubtless to many of his compatriots, though perhaps not all to the same extent, or with the same enthusiastic interpretations. The high proportion of non-Spanish, native names is indicative of his focus on the union of cultures. Peaceful union is celebrated – where it occurred (as, the historian may observe, cannot always have been the case). There may be a tendency towards a rather rose-tinted, hagiographic approach to the stories : not that unpleasant events along the way are ignored, but one may suspect that the overall purpose is to find good things to celebrate in Mexico's past, rather than to offer the more balanced view that would be expected of a prose historian. A union that was arguably, in reality, more traumatic than anything in Virgil's proto-Roman narrative can appear somewhat sanitised, as at the end of *Gonzalo Guerrero* : « *Unde nova hispano-maio de sanguine proles* », « whence sprang a new people of Hispano-Mayan blood ». The first half of a hexameter shortly beforehand appears to have caused some problems, being changed from a version which does not scan (« *Imo, maium genus* », 2004) to one which scans, I assume, by treating « *maia* » as an indeclinable Mayan word (« *Imo maia genus* », 2009) ; might I suggest that *Imo, genus maium* would also have solved the problem (if *Imo* were used, perfectly acceptably, as a trochee) ? Integration of the Mayan race in Latin verse is a challenging business⁶.

² W. Cooper, personal communication, September 2012.

³ F. J. Cabrera, *Monumenta Mexicana : Mexican Heritage*, Mexico City, Literal, 2004, with translation by W. Cooper ; second edition, 2009.

⁴ F. J. Cabrera, *Benito Juárez, 1806– 1872*, Mexico City, [Literal], 2006, with translation by W. Cooper.

⁵ F. J. Cabrera, *Monumenta Mexicana*, p. 107 [of both editions].

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 78 [both editions], quoting the final line, 585, and versions of line 583.

The exotic names can be evocative, and deftly handled within hexameters. *Malintzin* can appear in full as a molossus before the caesura, and then two lines later, abbreviated and accusative, in the line-end « *Malimque requirit*⁷ ». Elsewhere, generally « *Malin* ». Quetzalcoatl is abbreviated to the two syllable « *Quetzal* », after being introduced as « *Quetzal cognomine Coatl* », with a sixth foot that might twist the reader's tongue.⁸ While this technique works well enough for early Mexican history, I am less comfortable with it in the nineteenth century, when the emperor Maximilian is not only treated with little historical sophistication, but also shortened to « *Max* ». This may be fine in a deliberately colloquial historical novel, where it serves to illustrate the narrator's irreverent attitude⁹; in Latin verse, it jars with the tone. Many Mexicans may welcome the adoring treatment Cabrera gives to Benito Juárez : many, I suspect, would not. This is indeed Mexican history : but if we consider the content alone, rather than the virtuosic Latin style, it is history as it might be presented to children, in an attractive but elementary form,¹⁰ without the challenge of alternative or subversive opinions. Cabrera adopts the format of the epyllion, or perhaps a series of single epic books, each independent, and connected only by their Mexican subjects and the author's style. He is not attempting to imitate the subtlety of the Catullan epyllion : Cabrera tells his stories plainly, without interweaving other narratives. As far as it goes, splendid. But it has limitations as historical poetry.

BRAD WALTON

Where else should we look, for more challenging approaches ? I have had the opportunity to look at only a limited range of work, and for our present purposes I would like to examine several examples from *Vates*, the online *Journal of New Latin Poetry* recently established by the British poet, author and teacher Mark Walker ; the enterprise, though still in its early stages, seems to offer a successful mix of newly submitted verse, of varying styles and degrees of seriousness, and essays related to Neo-Latin literature (not all of it recent). Readers of *Camenae* may well wish to show support – or even offer a contribution – to another online journal. I would not suggest that poems in *Vates* focus particularly on history : indeed it is an interesting « negative » result of this small piece of research, to find confirmation for my feeling that many poets shy away from historical subject-matter. Mark Walker drew my attention to Brad Walton's work, discussed below ; and said that he had himself contemplated writing on recent history (but has not yet done so).¹¹

Brad Walton, a librarian at the University of Toronto in Canada, gives an introductory note of explanation for *After the Raid*, the substantial 62-line extract from a longer work-in-progress which he recently published in *Vates* :

I have been working on a story poem in hexameters set during World War I on the Western Front. In the following excerpt, a hand-picked group of soldiers from a British battalion has raided a German trench in retaliation for a similar attack. Alfred is a company officer and also the architect and commander of the raid. Walter is one of his sergeants. This raid is Alfred's first experience of close combat¹².

⁷ Cabrera, *Malintzin*, *Monumenta Mexicana*, p. 106, lines 399 and 401.

⁸ Cabrera, *Quetzalcoatl*, *Monumenta Mexicana*, p. 16, line 4.

⁹ Cf. « Max » in George MacDonald Fraser, *Flashman on the march*, London, HarperCollins, 2005, p. 4 : « Then the Frogs cleared out in March of '67, leaving Max in the lurch with typical Gallic loyalty » : a long way from the style of Cabrera, *Benito Juárez*.

¹⁰ British readers of a certain age might remember the illustrated « Ladybird » series : Cabrera is not quite so unchallenging, but he is heading in that direction.

¹¹ M. Walker, personal communication, September 2012. *Vates* is at : <http://pineapplepubs.snazzystuff.co.uk/vates.htm>.

¹² Brad Walton, « After the Raid », *Vates* 4, autumn / winter 2011-2012, p. 3-6.

Walton takes a serious approach to his subject, not shying away from the horror of killing ; he aims to give the ordinary soldier's (and ordinary officer's) perspective. At the start of this extract, his character Alfred vomits – having seen the private soldiers do the same. Mud, blood, and the stress of combat are clearly essential to this topic, and are conveyed in accomplished Latin hexameters with impressive facility. Back in the dugout, Alfred recalls the faces of enemies he has killed, lines 28-33 and 37 :

propinquus
nunc tamen occidi. submissa uoce loquentem
audissem. uidi faciem cutis atque colores
et motus animi, qui perspicerentur ocellis,
ingeniumque liquens : mitis uigil alter, amoenis
et deditus somnis ; audacior alter et acer.

[...]

nunc parisi occisi captum retinentia torquet.

But now I have killed at close range. I could have heard one speaking in a whisper. I saw their faces, the complexion of their skin, whatever feelings could be seen in the eyes, and their personalities as clear as crystal. One sentry was mild and given to pleasant reveries. The other was bolder and fiercer. [...] Now the memory of that slain pair clutches and tortures me.

I am not sure how well the last line here quoted (37) works in the Latin : much pressure is put on few words, perhaps well reflecting the character's mental struggle, though the reader too may struggle to disentangle « *retinentia* », a rather rare word, as a feminine noun (used by Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, III, 675 and, as a variant reading in some texts, III, 851), and « *captum* », here in the metaphorical sense (again, poetically interesting) of an obsessed mind, rather than a literal prisoner. The sergeant's reply is rather stilted in the English translation : « It was a fine achievement for you. You played your part as a great leader. » And I am not sure it is that much better in the Latin (lines 40-41), « *'patrasti facinus praeclarum,' ait optio, 'magni / et ducis egisti partes'* ». It is of course tricky to render, in Latin hexameter verse, a conversation that is meant to be colloquial – but also perhaps slightly formal or reserved, given their military ranks. Indeed a hexameter *optio* may be forgiven for phrasing that no British sergeant is likely to have uttered. The sergeant, Walter, proceeds to share with his officer thoughts on the mental trauma experienced by soldiers. This is part of his speech, lines 47-52 :

haec, domine, occulta est Martis res maxima, nullus
quam populo uates enuntiat : esse reuersus
quae secum ferat ad patriam duo uulnera miles,
hostis quod teneris inflixerit artubus, et quod
ipse suae caedendo animae, repentia saepe
aeternis laceraturum praecordia probris.

This, sir, is the deepest secret of war, which no poet ever tells the people : there are two wounds that a soldier carries home to his country. One is the wound that the enemy has inflicted on his vulnerable body, and the other is that which he has inflicted on himself by killing. This shreds his remembering heart with perpetual reproaches.

Here the Latin poet is asserting his presence in Lucretian *avia* (not so fresh, perhaps, as all that), like the no-man's-land of his opening line (in this extract), « *avia per deserta* ». And Walton may echo the reluctance of many veterans to give a realistic picture of their war experience. The psychological issue also dominates the final lines, 57-62, of the *Vates* extract :

'ut reor,' inquit,
'sunt quibus occidisse placet.' 'placet,' optio reddit,

*'nonnullis, inter centum fortasse duobus,
qui faciunt caedem, caedem meminere libenter,
atque iterum occidisse petunt. plerique uirorum
sclopeti nocuum uix adducuntur ad usum.'*

« I suppose, » he said, « that there are some people who like to kill. » His sergeant replied, « Perhaps two in every hundred like to kill, gladly remember having killed, and seek to kill again. Most men can hardly be persuaded to fire a shot in anger ».

From a historical perspective, it is interesting to consider how true this is, of various armies in various periods – I am sure Walton could point to twentieth-century historical research to back up his characters' assertions. Reluctance to shoot is probably more common among the citizen-soldiers of modern democracies, conscripted for great wars. Professionals, especially standing in close ranks in earlier ages, may not have positively enjoyed firing to kill, but they cannot have shown widespread reluctance, if only for their own and their comrades' survival. In the ancient and medieval worlds, when most combat was at very close quarters, it would be more normal to kill a personal adversary (and anyone reluctant to do so would end up either as a casualty, or a liability to his own comrades). In the artificial battlefield of Homer or Virgil, if not very often in reality, it would be normal to know one's adversary's name, and to exchange boasts and insults, or occasionally more polite conversation, before lopping off limbs. Walton moves beyond classical epic to show a serious interest in the psychological impact of modern conflict on the individual. It may be common-place for modern war novels and films, as well as verse, to focus on some of these issues, so to that extent parts of his material, if not his literary method, are less than wholly original. But Walton is at least aiming to do more than tell a conventional war story in Latin.

PAUL MURGATROYD, STEPHEN COOMBS AND MARC MOSKOWITZ

Naturally, there is far more to history than war – yet military history is a vital part of human experience ; ancient epic largely focuses on it, whenever it touches on reality at all. It may be more of a masculine interest (the majority of these Neo-Latin writers are men). And it is striking that when they look to history at all, conflict appears still to attract our poets. Paul Murgatroyd, a professor at McMaster University, Ontario, Canada, has offered several translations of *First World War* poems, in two separate issues of *Vates*¹³. His choices are interesting – not the most obvious and familiar ones (and some war poetry of that period is perhaps over-familiar to English-speaking readers). Of the three poems translated by Murgatroyd in *Vates* 2, the first, A. E. Housman's *Here dead we lie* (*More Poems*, n° 36) in fact dates from the 1890s, not the First World War¹⁴. Yet much of Housman's pre-First World War poetry can be seen as relevant to the later, great conflict, and perhaps prefiguring it.

Religious story-telling can also be considered, if not fully « historical », then at least legendary (similar in a way to some of Cabrera's work). Stephen Coombs, a retired teacher living in Stockholm, has attempted to add to this fertile Neo-Latin genre, in the unusually challenging metre of galliambics, and taking as his subject St Wite, a lesser-known Saxon martyr from his native Dorset¹⁵. And if early legend forms one end of the contested historical spectrum, modern politics is material for future historians. The American poet Marc Moskowitz gives only a brief, enigmatic introduction to his *Fabula Vulpina* : « This poem was written as a response to some recent political happenings in the USA¹⁶ » :

¹³ P. Murgatroyd, *3 First World War poems*, *Vates* 2, autumn 2010, p. 16– 18 ; *2 First World War poems*, *Vates* 4, autumn– winter 2011– 12, p. 7– 8.

¹⁴ *The Poems of A. E. Housman*, A. Burnett, ed., Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1997, p. 451 (note on date), p. 137 (poem).

¹⁵ S. Coombs, *Narratio Sanctae Candidae*, *Vates* 3, spring 2011, p. 13– 16.

¹⁶ M. Moskowitz, *Fabula Vulpina*, *Vates* 1, summer 2010, p. 13.

*fabula quam recitas, ulpecula, pronocat ignem.
osa es tu quercum, quercus nunc ecce perusta.
forte sed esuries, quondam, sine quoque patrono ;
frustra per siluam quaeres uestigia glandis.*

The story you tell, little fox, incites a fire. You hated the oak, so now behold the oak in ashes. But perhaps you will hunger, someday, without all your patrons ; in vain you will search through the forest for traces of an acorn.

This little poem plays with the long tradition of using Aesopian fable, with its abundance of foxes, for political ends. What are the « Pros and Cons » of its presentation ? I don't really care, even in 2012, a mere two years after the poem's publication, what the precise circumstances in American politics that sparked the poem may or may not have been. No doubt one can make a guess, look back at the newspapers (or television : Fox News ?) of the time, or in this case simply ask the author : but that's not really the point. The poem, as here presented to the public, is not provided with enough contextual information to be politically or historically meaningful ; that may indeed enhance its poetic charm, giving an air of universality to something that (presumably) started off in a specific, perhaps even parochial and rapidly forgettable, episode in the ever-changing and highly-charged public sphere.

STEPHEN PERKINS

Even shorter, but in a way less enigmatic, is the fourth of 4 *Haiku* by Stephen Perkins which (re)appeared in the first issue of *Vates*¹⁷. It reads as follows, in Latin and English.

*seruus captus in
proelio prius miles
timeo noua
Captured as a slave
in battle, I, a soldier,
fear uncertainty.*

By its very brevity, the haiku invites varied angles of interpretation ; its intertextuality is not, perhaps, deliberate, but nevertheless potent. It makes me think, for example, of Horace, *Carmina*, III, 5, 5 : « *Milesne Crassi coniuge barbara...* » For that prisoner, « *nova* » have certainly taken place, not necessarily to his own disadvantage – it rather depends on the wife – and to the shame of poet, *princeps*, and *patria*. But most captured prisoners in the ancient world could indeed expect death, or extremely unpleasant forms of slavery. What kind of war was this ? If civil, the ordinary soldier might hope for rapid freedom, as long as he changes sides (and Horace, after all, had fought for the killers of Julius Caesar). But if his captors are of a very different culture, the new things he faces could be simply baffling, as well as potentially deadly. The potency of such issues has not gone away, in the modern world. From the Second World War (now nearly seven decades behind us), one recalls continuing controversy over how the Japanese treated prisoners, both Western and Asian. And conflicts still rage, often combining the peculiar brutality of tribal rivalries with civil war.

As an example of this continuing contemporary resonance, one may note the coincidence of two small stories published on the same day, 9 October 2012, in the same British newspaper. On the one hand, the death is announced, at the age of 93, of a notable prisoner of the Japanese, Eric Lomax, who wrote about his experiences on the « death railway » which the Japanese forced their prisoners to help construct ; on the other, as part of a daily series reprinting the headline

¹⁷ S. Perkins, 4 *Haiku*, *Vates* 1, summer 2010, p. 14– 15. Perkins' haiku were originally published in « The Heresy of Latin Haiku », *Classical Bulletin*, 78, 1, 2002, p. 67– 68. Cf. other Latin haiku at *Tonight they all dance : 92 Latin and English Haiku*, D. Sacré and M. Smets, ed, Wauconda, Bolchazy– Carducci, 1999.

news of seventy years earlier, the topic happens to be largely symbolic reprisals inflicted on modest numbers of British and German prisoners by their captors. (One side puts 2 500 captives in chains for a perceived breach of the accepted rules, and the other side retaliates by chaining an equal number.) Under the sub-heading « Dignity Hurt : Nazi Complaint » the extract ends :

While Nazi radio stations yesterday continued to broadcast long diatribes against the British for their alleged ill-treatment of prisoners, there was a distinct change of tone in the comments. Previously, the Germans had pretended to be concerned only about breaches of international law involved, but yesterday British « brutalities » were described as an affront to the « dignity of German troops ». Berlin radio, repeating the allegation that German prisoners taken in the Commando raid on Sark had been tied, said : « It amounts to a relinquishment of all those remnants of soldierly chivalry which it has been possible to preserve in these days of highly mechanised and therefore also highly impersonal warfare¹⁸.

This is of course German propaganda (viewed through the lens of British propaganda). One inevitably notices the obvious and appalling hypocrisy of a regime that can expect chivalry on one front, while murdering huge numbers of civilians, and also captured Russian soldiers, at the very same time, elsewhere in its empire. Nevertheless, the attitude is also a genuine one : in certain areas of that war, there was an expectation on both sides that things would be played by an implicitly agreed set of rules, and that prisoners would be treated humanely. The very fact that treatment is portrayed as harsh, which would elsewhere be far kinder than the normal savagery, serves to emphasise the point. Similarly, in the Far Eastern theatre, it was the Japanese refusal to adhere to the expected Western norms of treatment of prisoners that so horrified their enemies : although even in Europe, such norms were only partially observed – in German-British conflict (mostly), for example, but certainly not in the larger and more ideologically poisoned German-Russian arena.

Even so, the emotions of a prisoner who had just been captured by an enemy he expects to be « civilised » could well reflect the uncertainty of Perkins' haiku. The transition from « *miles* » to « *captus* » – and possibly « *servus* » also – was potentially traumatic. Only if the captivity did turn out to be benign, could the prisoner begin to relax and await the end of the war, or a chance to escape ; and dangerous « *nova* » could remain a threat, perhaps producing a new, harsher regime in the camp ; a winter march to new quarters ; or accidental bombing by his own side. Thus a short poem, not in itself historical, can still be of interest to the poet-historian, for encouraging historical thoughts in the reader.

And indeed, given the enigmatic nature of the haiku genre, is this brief poem necessarily even to be read as about real warfare or captives ? In another classical context, the purely literary, it might make us think of the juxtaposition of those two over-worked topoi of love poetry, « *servitium amoris* » and « *militia* » : if a lover is speaking, and he (or indeed she : though the masculine gender is implied by the grammar) has just realised the rules of the game have been changed, and he has been captured when he expected to be a freelance soldier, then an element of half-serious, half-playful fear could enter the equation. There may be nothing very remarkable in the poem itself, as a piece of modern Latin : but the potential range of interpretations does appear intriguing.

CHRIS KELK

It may merely be rash speculation to read lighter, amorous overtones onto a poem ostensibly dealing with so serious a matter as prisoners of war. But social history – including the history of relations between the sexes – can also offer a fertile field for the Latin versifier, as in the actor

¹⁸ *The Daily Telegraph and Morning Post*, London, 9 October 1942 : reprinted in *The Daily Telegraph*, 9 October 2012, p. 30 ; Lomax : *ibid.* p. 2. Lomax's obituary (published in the same newspaper the following day, 10 October 2012, p. 31) records his eventual reconciliation with his repentant torturer.

and translator Chris Kelk's *A View of Old Oxford*¹⁹. The focus of the amusingly scurrilous original, by John Barry, a friend of the translator, is the dramatic social changes in Oxford between the 1960s and the 1980s, mainly due to the integration of female students into colleges that were formerly all-male. As a result, the modern student is « maybe capable of seeing / A woman as a human being. / (I'm told they are.) » : in Kelk's elegant elegiacs, « *forsitan agnosces dominas se iungere genti / humanae : uerum hoc dicitur esse mihi* ». The sexual frustrations of previous generations are entertainingly described, largely in language too exciting for this article. With nine men for each woman, it was likely that some male students would struggle to find a girlfriend :

*hic docta est classica lingua
cuius nos unum novimus inde modum –
optatum.*

In Barry's smoothly-rhyming original :

We learnt the Latin tongue and Greek
And we could write them (though not speak)
Like any native.
Gender and tense we understood,
Person and number, but one mood –
Just the optative.

Kelk's translation wisely does not attempt to convey all the details of this English stanza, or its jaunty phrasing : the key joke is the word « optative », emphasised in English by rhyme, and the end of the stanza, and in Latin, perhaps more effectively, by the enjambement from one couplet to the next. Though it was (and is) true enough that students could not speak the ancient languages they wrote with ease, the word « native » is primarily there for the rhyme, and can well be omitted in Latin. There is an amusing image of male classics undergraduates languishing in an optative mood (turning a grammatical technical term into a psychological problem) : in other words, unable to meet the girls who had instead chosen to study at such new, trendier, fully-mixed institutions as the University of Sussex, to which they felt intellectually superior, but still, as the seaside postcards almost say, « wished they were there ». For at Sussex, « They could enjoy their university, / No constant state of woman scarcity ». In Barry's previous stanza (and this is as far as I feel ought to go...) :

While there was no-one to give *us* sex
The Oxbridge failures down at *Sussex*
Made hay with Cupid.

I am not sure that this is so successfully rendered by Kelk (indeed it would be fairly challenging to convey the full range of British social snobbery involved)²⁰, but the essential point is given, that lesser university towns « *magnos / pulchrarum numeros cuique dedere uiro* ». Whether the Oxford classicist would be quite so successful with the Sussex girls as he assumed, given unlimited access, I leave the reader to speculate.

A similar example of « old » Oxford attitudes, from the earlier part of the twentieth century, may be found in the humorous verses written by « Gerard » (a pseudonym), printed in Oxford,

¹⁹ C. Kelk, *A View of Old Oxford* [translation of English verse by J. Barry], *Vates*, 5, summer 2012, p. 21-26.

²⁰ For non-British readers, « Oxbridge failures » probably needs explanation. Admission to Oxford and Cambridge universities is very competitive, and many try and fail to get in ; usually, only those from exclusive, expensive schools who are not quite clever enough (but wish they were) would be looked down on in any way as « failures » or « rejects ». The type still exists, and its natural habitat is Exeter or Durham.

and allegedly published by the « Bedford Purity League » – which I strongly suspect to be a pseudonymous publisher, not because the town of Bedford lacks purity, but because the book itself does²¹. Gerard's view is more carefree than Barry's. The presiding spirit of the book is the « undergraduette », that is to say a member of one of the women's colleges – a term that would doubtless horrify modern feminists, but would have been acceptable to most readers at the time – « complete with scent and cigarette » ; and if the indolent undergraduate does not seek to kiss her, it is only because he is already daring to kiss his landlady's daughter. « Even the aesthete has his uses », and even – for Gerard is obviously a tolerant man – « the Frenchman » : « But God knows what the Dons are for ». (« Dons », in this instance, I should perhaps explain to non-British readers, means the professional academics who theoretically exercise some authority over the students.) As to the darker side of life, one should beware what « Issues at dusk from Balliol's door...²² ». The comparison of Gerard's and Barry's differing humorous views of Oxford's past social life suggests that there are always at least two ways of looking at such things ; and the circumstances are indeed now largely alien to modern students. Kelk's attempt to put this issue of social history into lively Latin may be only partly successful – I am not sure how well it would work without the English, or for readers not intimately familiar with the older English universities – but I am grateful for his attempt (not least for introducing me to Barry's original), and feel that it shows how rich a vein for Neo-Latin might potentially lie in social or local history.

OTHER POSSIBLE APPROACHES

Another fruitful place to seek inspiration is in visual art, with its rich historical associations. In a recent workshop in Michigan, where I aimed to introduce aspiring versifiers both to the techniques of Latin verse, and to a poet's ways of looking for source-material, a visit to the local art gallery proved inspirational for a number of participants²³. There would be plenty of ideas in such provocative exhibitions as the recent show at Hampton Court Palace devoted to the sex-lives of Stuart courtiers, « The Wild, the Beautiful and the Damned²⁴ ». Whether their tone is frivolous or not, poets need something interesting to say. When they are bold enough to take on serious historical questions, as I would like to see them doing more often, poets should address what is controversial, important, potentially dangerous ; they need not take any particular political position on it – though perhaps it leads to more boring poetry if they take a boringly obvious, conventional position.

In the remainder of the present essay, therefore, I would like to move on from consideration of previous approaches to history, as exemplified in some particular recent poems of which I am aware, to consider some possible topics for current and future writers – which may indeed, in some cases, have been taken up already in poems I have not yet seen. I am less interested, in fact, in the specific topics – there is little point, perhaps, in such suggestions, unless they are carried vigorously into action, and most poets prefer to choose their own subjects. What concerns me more is the level of historical seriousness that Latin verse should aspire to, which I feel ought to (but often does not) equal that of prose history, or other artistic genres such as the novel or film. There, as in everyday life, we can observe the vigorous tone of debate, and the diametrically opposite opinion that can be, quite reasonably, held by intelligent people on different political

²¹ [« Gerard », pseud.], *My Oxford*, Oxford, [Bedford Purity League], 1930.

²² Those who know Balliol College, Oxford as close neighbours – and I address here, particularly, the members of Trinity and St John's Colleges – will need no warning. I do not quote what follows, because, while (possibly) acceptable in 1930, it would be thought offensive in the twenty-first century. Lines and phrases quoted from *My Oxford*, poems 3, 5, 6, 7, 8 and prologue.

²³ Some of the results may be seen on the « Inter Versiculos » website, hosted by the University of Michigan, together with videos and summaries of teaching sessions and a public reading. The site is at : <http://www.umich.edu/~rclatin/iv/index.html>

²⁴ The accompanying catalogue is : Brett Dolman, *Beauty, Sex and Power*, London, Scala, 2012.

sides. This diversity can be smothered in a blandly synthesised historical landscape such as Cabrera's Mexico.

Let us start with the words of a deliberately provocative current figure : Boris Johnson, British classicist, journalist, and politician. A classic European, but no friend of its political structures :

On July 1 next year [2013], Croatia becomes the 28th member of the European Union, and under the terms of the Treaty of Maastricht this new, proud sovereign state – not yet two decades old – must accept the entire corpus of EU law ; and she must place her neck in the noose of the single currency. Unlike Britain or Denmark, the Croats have no opt-out. They are now legally obliged to give up the kuna for the euro, and I say, don't do it, folks. It is not only a mistake. To submit to the euro would be a stunning refusal to learn the grim lessons of recent Balkan history. [...] The euro makes an absolute mockery of independence, self-determination – all the things so many Croats fought and died for. Sure, the tyranny of Brussels is not a violent one [to which I might add the single word, *yet*] and it is not as poisonous as the tyranny of Belgrade. It is a velvet kind of tyranny, but a tyranny none the less.²⁵

It does not matter whether or not you – as a cultured, European, Latinate reader – agree with these deliberately provocative opinions. It is entirely reasonable to disagree strongly, and to argue against them. But what does matter is that they are expressed – in one of the highest-circulation serious newspapers in the English-speaking world – by a highly-cultured, Latinate writer, who is the elected mayor of the most multi-cultural city in Europe – with a very large French-speaking population, as well as significant communities from virtually every other nationality in the world. He may indeed represent a centre-right party, but no sane person would call it an extreme or far-right one, and it is currently in a governing coalition with a smaller, even more centrist, grouping. And he was elected in a city which leans, in most respects, towards the centre-left rather than the centre-right, which would hardly have been possible had the electorate perceived him as in any way a rabid extremist. So – whether officials in Brussels like it or not – these are mainstream views, in a major nation within the European Union.

The future of Europe, it seems to me, is very much a suitable topic for present and future Latin poetry. It has a strong historical dimension, as well as a strong relevance to contemporary politics. And widely differing views are held on it, quite legitimately (though some might wish to stifle debate in favour of a spurious uniformity), both within individual nations, and across the continent in which all Europeans hope to continue living in peace, both within and without the political structures of the European Union. Croatia, as a relatively small European nation, with a language little understood in most other countries, is perhaps even more suited than some larger nations to be part of a revival of Latin historical verse – by its own citizens, should they wish to ; or by others, should they wish to select Europe's threatened diversity as a topic. Croatia's heritage as a nurse of Latin poets, not least in the once-independent port-city of Ragusa (Dubrovnik) also deserves celebration²⁶.

Unsurprisingly, the award of the 2012 Nobel Peace Prize to the European Union did not meet with universal approval. The mayor of London was predictably provocative in his response, suggesting (unseriously) that the Norwegian judges might have been drunk ; and (more seriously) that a better recipient would have been the former British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, who faced down the Soviet threat in the later stages of the Cold War²⁷. While many in Eastern Europe may agree, she remains an extremely controversial figure in her home country (mainly for domestic political reasons). Just as Cabrera's view of Juárez, a full two hundred years after his

²⁵ Boris Johnson, « A beautiful nation is placing its head in the Brussels noose », *The Daily Telegraph*, London, 3 September 2012, p. 20 [with my own comment, « yet », in square brackets].

²⁶ Cf. V. Vratovic, *The Croatian Muses in Latin : Musae Croatiae Latini Sermonis : Hrvatske Muze na Latinskom*, Zagreb, The Bridge, 1998.

²⁷ B. Johnson, « Don't honour a Brussels office block – give the Nobel to Maggie », *The Daily Telegraph*, London, 15 October 2012, p. 24.

birth, might be open to challenge by other Mexicans, it would undoubtedly be wise to anticipate virulent British opposition to any celebration of Thatcher – even in a medium so arcane as Latin verse, should anyone care to do so. A more measured and nuanced poetic response, though, might be both better history and better verse, and avoid the extremes of panegyric on the one hand, and jejune vituperation on the other. Those letters which were published on the same day as Johnson's Nobel comment, on the facing page, are all critical of the award – newspaper editors, and readers, can be selectively biased, but this again represents a genuine strand of opinion. Like Johnson, one letter-writer puts forward NATO as a more valuable contributor to peace than the EU ; another calls the latter « an uneasy alliance of member states eating and stealing from the same trough » ; while, in a wry observation on the various crises which seem, at the time of writing, to threaten the eurozone, a third simply asks, « I assume the EU was not nominated for the Nobel Prize for Economics ?²⁸ ».

These are issues, then, that seem worth the attention of poets, as well as political commentators. Will they fudge the issue, or take on the challenge of depicting disagreement ? Poets in any one European language have little chance of being read, outside their own linguistic community : of course they may – if lucky or highly successful – be translated ; but translation raises its own interpretative issues, and is an honour accorded to few poets, and even more rarely accompanied by a large volume of sales. The Latin poet will naturally reach only a Latinate readership, which will not be very large : but at least it has some chance of being genuinely international, and thus there is a real chance of provoking thoughts on serious subjects that might not otherwise reach a foreign audience, and explaining such things as the fears, the mentality of a particular nation, in a tongue that all can share, and which offers (in a common British sporting metaphor), a level playing-field.

GO TELL THE SPARTANS

Let us move on, to a comparison with a different art-form, far more popular than verse (in any language). We should not be ashamed of copying its methods, when it has something interesting to offer. My example is a war film, now not very well known, set in Vietnam in 1964, starring Burt Lancaster : *Go tell the Spartans*²⁹. The title for the film, with its direct classical reference, is dramatically different from the very downbeat and literal title for the novel on which it was based, Daniel Ford's *Incident at Muc Wa*³⁰. Ford's choice is, naturally, deliberate : it is just a minor incident, at a place no one is expected to have heard of – to those involved, however, it is either fatal or traumatic. Why, then, should a classical epigram intrude into modern warfare ? Because of a French inscription, on a cemetery from their conflict a decade earlier, which the American soldiers and their local allies stumble upon, before they in turn are attacked by « Charlie » : their enemies, the Viet Cong (« Victor Charlie » in standard wireless code), little-understood by the Americans, understood rather too well, and arbitrarily murdered, by their fellow Vietnamese. Here is Simonides on the Spartan dead at Thermopylae, reinterpreted in imperfect French : « ETRANGER / DITES AUX SPARTIATIS / QUE NOUS DEMEURONS ICI / PAR OBEISSANCE A LEUR LOIS », translated by an educated corporal for his less-learned officer, « It says, roughly : Stranger, when you find us lying here, go tell the Spartans we obeyed their orders ». While the details of the ancient battle, and the literary allusion, are lost on the officer, he is impressed by the number commemorated : « You think there's 300 French buried here ?³¹ »

²⁸ *The Daily Telegraph*, London, 15 October 2012, p. 25 : letters from R. Stephenson, T. Savidge, S. Baldock.

²⁹ *Go Tell the Spartans*, directed by T. Post, 1977.

³⁰ The British edition of the novel is listed in the British Library catalogue as : D. F. Ford, *Incident at Muc Wa*, London, Heinemann, 1967.

³¹ Transcribed from the film (about 38 minutes in : French wooden sign [sic], Corporal Courcey's speech, Lieutenant Hamilton's response) ; the phrase « Go tell the Spartans » originates in the much-older verse translation of William Lisle Bowles, which would have been familiar to many classically-educated English-speakers, even if they could not recall its author's name.

Three hundred, of course, were very few to fight for the whole of Greece ; rather a lot (if literally that many) to die at Muc Wa, in muck, for... what ? Needless to say, perhaps, the rather foolish but dedicated officer is soon to join the dead, being shot early in the ensuing battle, about 25 minutes (of the film's running time) after his naive query about Thermopylae. Sophisticated, multi-layered and multi-lingual literary allusions are not essential to war films : but this one is much enhanced, in terms of its ability to provoke thought, by the choice of title and the role given to that old French inscription.

What has all this to do with new Latin poetry ? Well, I would suggest that we can learn from other art-forms, in terms of the value that can be given to allusive historical reference. *Go tell the Spartans* is not a simple anti-war epigram, in any language, and it acts as a layer of ambiguity over what might otherwise have been a simpler anti-war message, about a war that was, in 1964 when the incident took place, still a little war, for the Americans, confused and far away, but was shortly to escalate into the national catastrophe that it already was for the Vietnamese themselves, and had been for the French. When a Latin poet approaches a topic of historical or political controversy – and much of recent history should be treated as politically controversial, while much politics should be seen in its historical dimension – it is worth remembering how much depth and subtlety can be added to a literary treatment of the subject by such devices as the Thermopylae allusion, in a film about Vietnam. The less heavy-handed such allusions are, the more likely they are to impress the reader (or film-viewer), and provoke a whole series of profound reflections.

I have taken a Vietnam film only as a parallel example, rather than to suggest that particular conflict, more than any other, as material for prospective historical poets. Nevertheless, the various stages of that long-drawn-out tragedy, including the French war and the aftermath of the American war, may repay attention. The best-known catastrophe (for the French side) of their war in Indo-China, Dien Bien Phu (1954), was recently analysed for English-speaking readers by Martin Windrow, with emphasis on some of the more poignant moments of the doomed defence. The last radio message from one outpost, as it was overrun by the enemy, has an emotional simplicity that might well inspire a poet : « It's all over – they're at the command post. Goodbye – tell Gars Pierre we liked him a lot³² ». The nickname, « Gars Pierre », gives a sense of intimacy with the boyish charisma of men who had been through the Second World War and other colonial campaigns before parachuting into Dien Bien Phu : men like the Breton Colonel, « Gars » Pierre Langlais, from a region resistant to « the arrogance of Paris », « a grown-up whisky drinker, famous for his sulphurous temper³³ », whom his subordinates remembered to say that they liked, as their resistance finally collapsed.

The Vietnamese poet Nguyen Chi Thien, who died on 2 October 2012, might act as a source of inspiration to Latin poets thinking of tackling tough political subjects. For him, poetry was certainly not just a recreation, or an art-form devoid of direct personal consequences. Imprisoned and persecuted for many years by the Communist regime, he was forced to memorise his work, and to take great risks to get it published in the outside world ; « what a paradise the French occupation seemed, in retrospect !³⁴ » He was himself inspired by the eighteenth-century Chinese poet Li Bai – who sounds, to the European classicist, somewhat Epicurean, and with resonances in his life-story of Horace or of Ovid. But he did not lose himself in the more romanticised aspects of a poetic past, instead retaining a hard-edged determination. That hardened edge might well help to sharpen the products of future Latin poets, too ; even though, let us hope, few of them are likely to be faced with such political persecution, they may have acute personal difficulties of other kinds, and may also wish to engage more directly with the challenges of history and politics.

³² M. Windrow, *The Last Valley : Dien Bien Phu and the French defeat in Vietnam*, London, BCA, 2004, p. 608.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 299.

³⁴ Obituary of Nguyen Chi Thien, *The Economist*, 13 October 2012, p. 106.

DAVID MONEY

It will not, I hope, seem too narcissistic to mention fairly briefly some of my own attempts, both as poet and as editor, to bring the topic of history and contemporary Latin poetry together. In two commemorative collections, I have addressed the impact of battles that took place 300 years ago (marking the anniversaries in 2006 and 2008, of Ramillies, 1706, and the campaign of 1708) : deliberately choosing events that were not well known to the modern educated reader, whether in Britain or in Belgium (where the events took place).³⁵ My Belgian colleagues, within and outside the Neo-Latin community at the university of Leuven, were happy to take an interest, once the project had been suggested, but would have been unlikely to have come up with it for themselves. The intention was not to be deliberately obscure : I do think these events were important at the time, and that their historical significance remains considerable. But focusing on something less obvious also provides an interesting challenge, and an encouragement to both poet and historian to go beyond their usual « comfort zone ».

The range of poetic responses, particularly in the second volume³⁶, proved interesting. Some modern poets felt happy with attempting to engage with the events of 1708, either on a level of detailed historical description (like Tom Ford, Martin Freundorfer) or of over-the-top panegyric, in the case of Massimo Scorsone's extraordinary 250-line poem in the shape of a triumphal column. In the cases of Ford and Scorsone, this was combined with metrical experimentation and exuberance. Others were willing to oblige the editor by contributing (for which he was, and remains, duly grateful), but less engaged with the historical topic. One of the approaches that amused me the most – because it so clearly tries, and fails, to be relevant – was that of Karin Zeleny, essentially a love-poet, here being asked to go well outside her normal range of interests, in a direction that was not immediately congenial. Ironically, though, what could be more relevant to the essential question, « What, if anything, does this history mean to us ? », than a response that suggests it doesn't mean very much, in itself, but can nevertheless serve as a source of inspiration for some new poetry that goes off on a tangent ? Poetry need not be direct in its approach to any topic, and is often enhanced by allusiveness and uncertainty. Perhaps I delude myself, as a historically-minded editor, in being proud of having elicited verse that resists my own historical aims : nevertheless, I am. If that were all, the enterprise would have to be judged a failure ; but surrounded by more direct and serious engagement with history, both from poets and from historians of local, national and international distinction, a degree of disengagement has its own distinctive charm.

Historical anniversaries, of a more famous kind, can indeed produce a rather dangerous level of contemporary resonance. In Putin's Russia, for example : « The historical significance of the Patriotic War of 1812 meant that there was a political dimension to the bicentennial. The weakening of Russia's position in the world after the collapse of the Soviet Union makes historical episodes in which the country played a key role in world affairs very important for the government and society³⁷ ». That is all very well, and the whole Napoleonic period offers very suitable material for both specialist historians, and poets in any language ; but a more detached view of those events, than one promoted by a particular modern government not noted for its liberality, might be desirable. Creative writers offering an international view, even using an international language such as Latin, could be well placed to add to the body of literature that responds to history. My own recent re-reading of Tolstoy's immortal blockbuster *War and Peace* (in English translation) found rather more satisfaction, from a historian's as well as a literary-critic's viewpoint, in the « peace » parts than in the « war ». Can our genre do any better ?

In a more recent poem, *Murus Magnus*, which takes its title from a commemorative wall in the American military cemetery near Cambridge, I attempt to fashion a fitting response to a central

³⁵ Also the siege of Lille, 1708 : a city now firmly in France, but only restored to France by the peace treaty of 1713 – otherwise, it would probably now be in Belgium.

³⁶ *1708 : Oudenarde and Lille*, D. Money, ed., Cambridge, Bringfield's Head Press, 2008.

³⁷ A. Vershinin, *Russia Now* [English-language supplement produced by *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*], 6 September 2012, p. 1.

feature of twentieth-century history (the liberation of Europe), in a manner relevant to a specific audience. By choosing names from one American state – the state where the poem was composed and first recited, Kentucky – to stand for the whole of their countrymen, a sense of immediacy and individuality can be given to what otherwise is a forbidding list of victims ; and a modern roll-call can take its place in an archaic metrical structure. It remains to be seen, as I write, whether or not it will attract any notice in print ; but in recitations it appears to have had an impact on its listeners³⁸. Even the commemoration of American soldiers (primarily, here, airmen), in itself fairly uncontroversial, can remind us of additional levels of historical controversy, or of the perhaps unavoidable suffering of innocents. Some of the men who died trying to liberate Europe may also have dropped bombs on France, which will have killed some French civilians : that is not what they came from Kentucky to do, but it was an inevitable side-effect of an invasion that flattened Normandy on the way to liberating Paris. The personal stories of the people of 1944, like those of 1706-1708, can be reimagined through poetry that takes history seriously, both as an academic discipline and as a complicated and multi-layered way of interpreting our world.

We enquired at the beginning of this essay about the purpose of poetry. One might also ask about the purpose of history. According to one popular television historian and journalist, in a definition that may itself be controversial, « History is either a moral argument with lessons for the here-and-now or it is merely an accumulation of pointless facts ».³⁹ Are facts without an obvious moral really pointless ? The poet may well disagree ; but some worthwhile literary use should be made of those facts, and if a moral is drawn from them, let it not be overly simplistic. As a literary genre, Neo-Latin verse in the twenty-first century is showing some vitality and resilience. But it has a long way to go, if it is to re-establish even a fraction of its former place in European culture, let alone move beyond that, to become more meaningful on the world stage than it ever was in Renaissance Europe. Even Virgil has his limits, and detractors, as a communicator of historical fact. Surely we can do better than that, as poet-historians ? A degree of ambition can be attractive in a genre, as in a poet or a muse. So if new Latin poets wish to set their sights suitably high, they could do worse than take history more seriously.

³⁸ D. Money, « Latin poems written in America, 2010 and 2011 », *The Classical Outlook*, 89. 2 (Winter 2012), p. 44-49 : « Murus Magnus », « The Great Wall », p. 46-49.

³⁹ Andrew Marr, *A History of Modern Britain* (Basingstoke : Macmillan, 2007), p. xxii.

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