

Latin of the New Sun

The Urth list — 6 messages, 6 voices, 21 Jul 2008

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John Smith — 21 Jul 2008, 16:25

Does anybody understand what Wolfe is up to when he resorts to Latin in The New Sun books? He says, "Latin is once or twice employed to indicate that inscriptions and the like are in a language Severian appears to consider obsolete." (Shadow, appendix). But that doesn't seem to be the whole story.

Wolfe's translations from his Latin seem to be a little off. (I admit that my high school Latin is very rusty.)

Valeria says to Severian, "Do you like the dead languages? They have mottoes. 'Lux dei vitae viam monstrat,' that's 'The beam of the New Sun lights the way of life.' 'Felicibus brevis, miseris hora longa.' 'Men wait long for happiness.' 'Aspice ut aspiciar.'" (Shadow, IV)

"Lux dei" is literally "the light of God." Maybe Valeria's "beam of the New Sun" is just supposed to strengthen the connection between the New Sun and God. But the second translation is strange. It should be something like "Happiness is brief, misery is long", probably based on the Latin tag "Ars longa, vita brevis" (Art is long, life is short). Her last, untranslated phrase means something like "Look in order to see."

When Severian receives his sword, he says he had learned enough of ancient languages to know that "Terminus Est" means "This is the Line of Division." (Shadow, XIV) A simpler translation would be "This is the end."

Is Wolfe making little jokes (showing that Valeria and Severian don't understand the dead languages as well as they think) or is there something deeper going on?

Jack

Best wishes,

Jack

Adam Thornton — 21 Jul 2008, 16:29 · in reply to John Smith

On Jul 21, 2008, at 11:25 AM, John Smith wrote:
Is Wolfe making little jokes (showing that Valeria and Severian don't understand the dead languages as well as they think) or is there something deeper going on?

I could never decide whether it was meant to remind us that this was not really Latin and that translations (including, of course, the one from Severian's tongue into English!) are approximations, or whether he's making little jokes. I incline towards the first.

Adam

Martinus Scriblerus — 21 Jul 2008, 18:52 · in reply to John Smith

On Mon, Jul 21, 2008 at 5:25 PM, John Smith <jsmith2627 at att.net> wrote:

When Severian receives his sword, he says he had learned enough of ancient languages to know that "Terminus Est" means "This is the Line of Division." (Shadow, XIV) A simpler translation would be "This is the end."

Well, there are (the) Doors.

Martinus Scriblerus scripsit ex 50? 21' N, 4?41' W

Lane Haygood — 21 Jul 2008, 20:38 · in reply to Martinus Scriblerus

Consider Typhon's translation that it means "this is the place of parting." I think that we're looking at is a bit of the indeterminacy of translation. First, assuming these really are in Latin (and not, as GW seems to imply in the appendices, merely "a dead language" that he is rendering in to Latin so that it appears to be "a dead language" to us), I think that there are two nominal translations going on: the in-story translation of Latin to Commonwealth, and the meta-fictional translation from Commonwealth to English. As languages change, conceptual schema change as well. One concept in a certain language does not necessarily connote the same in a different language, nor does it necessarily denote the same as well. Our anglicization of "terminus est," for example, is to mean "this is the end." But realize that if we were to travel back in time to speak with a Roman, conversing entirely in Latin, we would not be able to determine if "this is the end" and "terminus est" are really conceptually identical, because language is, to a certain degree, opaque, and our understanding of it entirely external and performative.

What we're likely dealing with here is the original language A which says, as we understand it, "terminus est." But at two different times during the history of the world, as that was translated in to Typhonese (language B) and Commonwealth (language C) we find that concepts have mutated, and the concept of "end" (stop, finish point) has become "where things were parted" or "where things were divided" through translations from A to B and A to C (or even B to C!).

Now, is Wolfe savvy enough to represent the indeterminacy of translation while at the same time making little clues and jokes, such as the association of divinity with the new sun, or telling us to "look (them up) and see (what I'm trying to tell you)?"

Yes.

Best,
Lane

On Jul 21, 2008, at 1:52 PM, Martinus Scriblerus wrote:
On Mon, Jul 21, 2008 at 5:25 PM, John Smith <jsmith2627 at att.net>
wrote:

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Martinus Scriblerus scripsit ex 50° 21' N, 4° 41' W

David Duffy — 21 Jul 2008, 22:47 · in reply to John Smith

On Mon, 21 Jul 2008, John Smith wrote:

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Severian don't understand the dead languages as well
as they think) or is there something deeper going on?

No, I think they are word games, that often have a depth to them. Wolfe delights in giving false etymologies, eg in *_Peace_* for "brand new" and so forth. My hypothesis has been that he uses the same Shorter Oxford Dictionary as I do, so for example "apheta [L f. Gk. apheetes starter, sender off.] Astrol. = Hyleg. Hyleg...Astrol. The giver of life in a nativity" is funny, but the fuller definition of a hyleg by astrologers isn't.

So in the case of "terminus" "2a Rom. Antiq. The god presiding over boundaries or landmarks ... 3. A boundary, a limit rare L17...4b the point at which something comes to an end".

David Duffy.

Dave Tallman — 22 Jul 2008, 04:39 · in reply to John Smith

John Smith wrote:
Valeria says to Severian, "Do you like the dead
languages? They have mottoes. 'Lux dei vitae viam
monstrat,' that's 'The beam of the New Sun lights the
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longa.' 'Men wait long for happiness.' 'Aspice ut
aspiciar.'" (Shadow, IV)

All the Latin phrases Valeria gives are direct quotations of mottoes found on famous sundials. See my recent post on "Valeria" for details.

The phrase "terminus est" can be found in the Latin Vulgate for Numbers 21:13. "... terminus est Moab..."