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Croatian Neo-Latin Literature and Its Uses

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Abstract
In Croatia, for over a thousand years, the Latin language was used for belles-lettres, education, and scholarship, for politics and religion, for private correspondence and public administration, at times addressing the Croatian public, at times an international audience. To demonstrate the contexts of Latin writing, uses to which the classical culture was put in the corpus of Croatian Latin, and ways in which the Latin language was reshaped in Croatian texts, we present and interpret selections from the Historia Salonitana by Thomas the Archdeacon of Split (c.1200–1268), an epistolary poem by Ilija Crjèveić (1463–1520), a report from the wartime military camp near Šisak by Nikola Mikac (1592), the autobiography of Bartol Kašić (1575–1650), a Jesuit missionary in the Ottoman lands, a Nativity canticum written in an artfully archaic Latin by Ignjat Đurđević (1575–1650), and a free-verse poem by Ton Smerdel (1904–1970).

Keywords: 1200–1967; autobiography; Catholic Church; Catullus; Columella; Dubrovnik; free verse; historiography; letter; Ottoman Empire; Plato; Plautus

In historical lands that are today Croatia—roughly between Hungary and the Adriatic—from the Middle Ages to the end of the nineteenth century the Latin language was at the same time object and medium of classical reception. In itself a part of classical heritage, the language provided the most direct access route to ideas and motifs constituting that heritage. At the same time, it was a language of culture. For aspiring intellectuals, it provided the means of entrance to two international communities: the Catholic Church and the Republic of Letters. However, reaching that entrance, achieving Latin mastery, required more than mere acquisition of a basic stock of words and grammatical rules. As the language of culture and heritage, Latin was inseparable from its literariness: from style, conventions, and the long tradition of its sophisticated literature. To use all that with skill and
flourish meant being able to manipulate the linguistic system of symbols on many levels, some of them very high. It was not enough, for example, to treat the phrase *pius Aeneas* as a proper noun with an adjective, nor as a specific unit of sound and syllable lengths, nor as a shorthand for a specific literary character. *Pius Aeneas* had to be embraced as something to think with—and use creatively.

To Croatian authors, Latin and its semiotic repertoire offered at least three advantages compared to Croatian or other available vernaculars (mainly Italian and German). Latin was standardized (standardization of Croatian, across the boundaries of several states and provinces, intensified only in 1830s); it had a well-developed set of symbolic and rhetorical devices, as well as a sound tradition of instruction (at times Latin was the *only* thing seriously taught in the best Croatian schools). Finally, for a thousand years the number of readers educated and leisurely enough to enjoy sophisticated literature in Croatian remained quite limited, while Latin guaranteed access to a significantly wider audience of knowledgeable peers (and most sophisticated Croatian readers had Latin in any case). Moreover, this would be an access happening on equal terms—everybody had to work equally hard to write in Latin, nobody’s first language.

Here I will present examples of the dynamics that developed between Latin and its system of signs and Croatian writers’ use of it; I will show how the authors used the existing elements skillfully, but also how they innovated—how they recovered pieces of the past and moved them into new quarters, how they tested (and sometimes challenged) the limits of what was acceptable and comprehensible to write in Latin. Though Croatia is a small country, a thousand years of its Latin writings resulted in at least 15,000 texts and 1500 authors. In the space available here I can quote and discuss only a few brief extracts from a few works, authors, genres, periods, and regions; the interested reader, however, will find a larger sample of texts discussed here, both in the original and in English translation, in Jovanović (2014), while another, still more extensive collection of writings is freely available online as the *Croatiae auctores Latini* (CroALa; Jovanović et al. 2009).

**Cadmus in Dalmatia: Thomas the Archdeacon of Split (c.1200–1268)**

Setting the scene for his *Historia Salonitanorum pontificum atque Spalatensium*, or *Historia Saloni­tana* (Arhidakon 2003), a chronicle of developments in the archbishoprics of Salona and, later, Split, from Roman times until 1266, Thomas the Archdeacon of Split anchors the coastal region of Dalmatia (where Split is one of the urban centers) firmly in the ancient world, relying on Ovid’s retelling of the Cadmus myth (*Met. 4, 561–603*) and on Isidore of Seville (*Etym. 14, 4, 7–8*), as well as citing Lucan (*Sat. 1, 3, 26–27*):

Another name for Dalmatia was Liburnia, coming from a kind of pirate ship in use among them—whence Lucan: *And the fierce Liburnians on the sea with the Greek fleet.*
They practiced piracy, taking advantage of the terrain, the sea there being full of hiding places and good harbors on account of the great number of islands. [...] According to stories of the poets, Cadmus is said to have come to this province, whereupon he was transformed into a serpent. His city was Epidaurus, which is near Dubrovnik. In it there is a great cave, and to this day there is a belief that a dragon lives there; whence the poet: Why do you, like the serpent of Epidaurus, discern so sharply the faults of friends? For this reason all these peoples were called “serpent-born.” [...] But according to history this same Cadmus was a king in Greece, who after being expelled from his kingdom came to Dalmatia, and became a most cruel pirate; like a slithering serpent, he took to ranging over the sea, lying in wait for those who sailed and falling upon the helpless whenever he could. (Thomas 2006)

It is obvious that Thomas weaves “local knowledge” (geography of Dalmatia, a dragon cave in Dubrovnik) into the information gleaned from antiquity; a closer reading shows that some notions are even more original—Thomas is, as far as we know, our earliest source there. One of the notions is qualification of the Adriatic as mare … latebrosum et portuosum (“the sea … full of hiding places and good harbors”). The components for this turn of phrase come from antiquity—the dictionaries qualify each of the adjectives as “rare but classical,” found in authors such as Plautus, Cicero, Livy, Vergil, and Lucan—but the pairing of adjectives, marked by parallelism and homoioioteleuton (repetition of endings of words), is missing in Roman literature; the callida iunctura (“clever joining” of words as formulated in Horace’s The Art of Poetry) is Thomas’s own. Another innovation is Thomas’s interpretation of Cadmus as a pirate; authorities for this are alluded to in the text (“according to history”), but no analogous euhemerism from antiquity has yet been identified. It is indicative that Thomas supports the claim by a rhetorical flourish, a poetic amplification on Cadmus’ raiding the Adriatic (where again Roman poetic diction is used—lubricus anguis [slithering serpent] can be read in the eid, in Germanicus’ Aratea, and in Seneca’s Thyestes).

**Peaches in a Letter: Ilija Crijević (1463–1520)**

Some eight generations after Thomas, and 200 km to the south, Ilija Crijević, a Renaissance humanist from Dubrovnik, wrote a verse letter in Latin hendecasyllables to his friend and compatriot Marin Bunić (Marius Bona, d.1540). The very move, and the choice of meter, is reminiscent of Catullus—though the two Renaissance friends, contrary to Catullus, chose not to use their first language for their private correspondence. Catullan is also the ostensibly banal occasion which provoked the letter. “I have promised that my peaches, which came to you mute, will start talking,” writes Crijević in the few introductory lines of prose. “Look, they do talk, and they issue a warning, wishing to persuade you to follow their example and take care of your flames.” The “flames” have to do with love, of course—another Catullan echo—but the poem starts in a different tone:

Quae sunt in patrio uenena caelo,
Hic nectar sapiunt et inquilina
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Sunt suauissima poma; diminuta
Delectant capite exulisque succi,
Nec postliminio, Mari, recaepo
Vescentem indigena sapore laedunt.
Ergo his utere tutus: irrigatum
Dices ambrosia salubre munus,
Foecundauit aprica quod fenestra
Et cultrix Venerilla. Sole bino
Censentur mea poma pensilique
Horto.

(Novaković 2004)

Under the sky of their homeland they are poisonous, here they taste as nectar, and as immigrants they become sweet; having lost their rights of citizenship, they please us with juice of exile; and even if they managed to reclaim their status, Marius, should one eat them, they won’t do harm any more. So take them and don’t worry: you’ll find a healthy gift, drenched in ambrosia, nurtured by a window exposed to sun and by our stewardess Venerilla. Thus my fruit is endowed with two suns, as well as with a hanging garden.

To the modern reader, the opening idea is quite incomprehensible. However, we can begin to understand if we familiarize ourselves with the passage on peaches in Columella (10, 405–410):

And apples, which most barbarous Persia sent
With native poisons arm’d (as Fame relates):
But now they’ve lost their pow’r to kill, and yield
Ambrosian juice, and have forgot to hurt;
And of their country still retain the name:
Those of small size, to ripen make great haste.

(Columella 1745)

The motif of peaches is, however, only an introduction, and we are barely a fifth into Crijević’s poem. The other sun that the peaches are exposed to is metaphorical: it is Venus, the lady of the house, who “makes rosebeds and lily beds faint and sigh—such is the power of passion streaming from her ravishing eyes!” But the poem takes another turn, as the Petrarchan conceit is followed by pragmatic advice:

Under these twin torches, Marius, you burn to this day, and don’t you deny that the flowers may be envied, because a diligent stewardess sheltered them from heat. But should you envy them, indeed? From such a flame (just don’t reject what I have to say) you can be rescued by the one that now is tending to earthenware pots by the stewardess Venerilla! Your fever will be eased in a similar way as the fruit, in danger of twin flames, finds shelter from the heat of these two stars.
Bunić’s position is analogous to that of the peaches—he should avoid the blaze of Venus and let Venerilla, the domestic servant, take care of him. In that context, there is a significance also to the legal personification introduced by Crijević at the opening of the poem into Columella’s description—remember the peaches presented in terms of Roman law as *inquilina poma, diminuta capite* (“immigrant fruit, having lost its right of citizenship”), non-dangerous even *postliminio recepto* (“its status reclaimed”). If peaches point to Bunić, the change of their state points to changed state of the girl Venerilla: she turned into something sweet, accessible, and non-dangerous by becoming a domestic servant in the household of lady Venus. This is a fact of life from Renaissance Dubrovnik, where servants were sometimes slaves, mostly girls, and often heterodox—of Patarine or Orthodox faith (Pinelli 2008).

**From the Borderline: Nikola Mikac (1592) and Bartol Kašić (1575–1650)**

One of the most important and traumatic circumstances of early modern Croatian history was, undoubtedly, the protracted encounter with the Ottoman Empire. From the 1460s until the nineteenth century, Croats were living and surviving on both sides of the borderline dividing the Ottomans from the Kingdom of Hungary and Croatia; much of the country became in effect a war zone, and economy and culture had to cope with the ever-present threat of raids and warfare (Housley 2014). Croatian literature engaged with “the Turkish theme” in different ways (see Albrecht 1965; Petrovich 1979; Dukić 2004), some of them relevant also for the dynamics of use of Latin and the classical reception. Two contrasting examples from the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century will demonstrate the various depths to which antiquity shaped written expression of the Croatian intellectual elite. Nikola Mikac, a canon of the Zagreb cathedral chapter from 1573 to 1604, served in 1591–1592 as the military commander of the fort of Sisak, 80 kilometers away but still under jurisdiction of the Zagreb archbishopric; in 1593, an important battle between the Ottomans and the Habsburg army would take place there. Here is the report that Mikac dispatched from Sisak to Zagreb on May 2, 1592 (Ivanović and Kolanović 1993):

Honorable gentlemen and respected fathers, commending to you my prayers.
Having finished the works intended by the enemy, and having secured the camp well, Caunis today, at eight o’clock, moved camp to that remarkable plain above the dwelling of Hrastovica, where in times past virgins from Hrastovica used to dance until midnight. [...] Yesterday in the early evening the Vlachs burned down one straw beehive hut, built under the Brzaj by the local guards. The day before yesterday, near Letovanić, they set fire to a guard post called Plete. The enemy is creeping upon us like poison and there is no one to fight back. The Germans change
their plans from day to day, and there is no hope that they would help us get free. […] Our Zagreb conscripts are being dragged hither by their hair. Of peasants there is barely a third here and they are a burden to us because of hunger. With these words let our reverend lords be saluted, all the best.

The report is obviously written primarily to convey the gravity of the situation, anguish, and sense of urgency, but it cannot be reduced just to this. The author found time and energy to incorporate an “ethnological” remark on dancing virgins from Hrastovica, whose custom seems pagan. Mikac reserved judgment on it, but used a phrase from Vergil (Aeneid 9.615: desidiaes cordi; iuvat indulgere choreis “idleness is your delight, your pleasure is to indulge in dancing”), just as, a little later, he adapted a phrase from a consular speech on the Bacchanalia in Livy (39, 16: crescet et serpit quotidie malum “the evil grows and spreads daily”). He also managed to vary the diction (combuerunt … vulcano tradierunt “they burned down … they set fire to”) and used to good effect a neologism, capillatim (“dragged by their hair”). Mikac wrote elegant Latin even in dire circumstances.

The Latin of his younger contemporary, the Dalmatian Jesuit Bartol Kašić (1575–1650), was very different. Kašić was also in close contact with the Turks, but in times of relative peace, during two missionary journeys to Catholics in the Balkans under Ottoman rule. In 1612–1613 and again in 1618–1619 Kašić traveled as far as Belgrade (today in Serbia) and Temesvár (today Timișoara in Romania). In Croatia Kašić is known primarily as author of the first grammar of Croatian, Institutionum linguae illyricae libri duo (Institutes of Illyric language in two books) (1604), but he also left an autobiography in Latin, Vita P. Bartholomaei Cassii Dalmatae ab ipsomet conscripta (The life of Father Bartholomaeus Cassius from Dalmatia, composed by himself), written around 1649, and covering the period to 1625. Here is how he describes his stay near Donji Miholjac (in Slavonia, a continental region of Croatia) some time in 1618–1620 (Vanino 1940):

Meanwhile modest victuals were being prepared for a meal, accompanied by a gourd filled with water from some small cistern; when drinking from the gourd, one could feel one’s teeth scraped by grains of sand. There was only rarely wine on the table […] Our host had not a barrel of wine at home; his family quenched thirst by plain cold water, mixed with vinegar and somewhat polluted.

Sometimes it happened that the Father had to sleep lying on the floor, putting straw or hay under the mattress; sometimes three Turkish serâtlîja soldiers (borderline guards) would lie down nearby, almost on the same level; they did so decorously and very quietly, uttering not a word nor doing anything indecent after going to bed. […] Three beds on planks were raised somewhat higher from the ground; there husbands and their housewives would sleep, each with his spouse; after the lamps were put out, under cover of darkness they would lie not making themselves noticed, most decently, in utter silence. On the contrary, only the Father could have been annoying to others, who were enjoying peaceful sleep, as he suffered from heavy cough and had to spit out phlegm that was flowing down into his throat. He would
spit under the raised bed, on its foot side, turning his head away from the Turks, so as not to cause them any annoyance. The Turks would awake next day at dawn, and silently rise from their bedrolls, politely pack up their kit, and without troubling anyone they would ride away on their horses, under arms.

To a reader schooled in classical literary Latin, Kašić’s language, with expressions like *aqua frigidula extinguere satagebat* (“quenched thirst by plain cold water”), or the abundance of gerunds, may seem barbaric or medieval. It is clearly shaped by centuries of active Church usage and unconcerned with Ciceronian purism. Kašić’s language is, however, expressive in ways that would be familiar to Plautus or Petronius, using for emotional force diminutives (*lacuncula* “small cistern”, *arenula* “tiny grains of sand”, *frigidula* “a bit cold”), superlatives, paired idioms (chiastic *aceto diluta et infecta aliquantulum* “mixed with vinegar and somewhat polluted”; modestissime *atque silentissime* “decorously and very quietly”; *ne verbum quidem proferendo aut aliquid indecentius faciendo* “uttering not a word nor doing anything indecent”; again, chiastic *extinctis lucernis tenebrisque obtecti* “after the lamps were put out, under cover of darkness”). This is not a direct reception of antiquity—we would not say that Kašić modeled his language on Plautus or Petronius—but, as an instance of Latin used for lively and emotional storytelling, it has its own family lineage.

**A Philological Joke: Ignjat Đurđević (1675–1737)**

Plautus is directly engaged by a poet-priest from Dubrovnik, Ignjat Đurđević, in the poem *Iter ad antrum Bethlemiticum stylo Livii Andronici, poetae vetustissimi iambici* (Going to the cave of Bethlehem, iambic verse in the style of Livius Andronicus, a most ancient poet), known from a manuscript copied around 1703–1708. This soliloquy of an old shepherd on the night of the Nativity (perhaps intended for a Christmas recital) is at the same time an example of literary mimicry—not only because it proclaims to be “in the style of Livius Andronicus” when it is actually an imitation of Plautus’ cantica, but also because ostensibly it is a religious poem, while its much more salient aspect is wild—or baroque—linguistic experimentation. Here is an excerpt (in the original manuscript, the text is written as continuous prose; verse boundaries are taken from Gortan 1951):

```plaintext
Acurasso, ne mihi abusa sit via, grandibo gradus./Vix queo, pape! oppido mi prae curriculo istactenus desudascitur,/Egomet iam gravastellus, nec meo immerito, cluo,/Defloccata canitudo et vires concipilatae meum itiner lamberant./Inque tute, bucaeda bubsa, per tua te quaeso pecuda,/Sic ne te infelicare velit magnos Iovis, inque mihi ignaruri,/In qua domu puerum puera Puerpera peperit et lactem nato danit./Atat, gemiti vox meas aureis batuit. Ellum! euax! ipsus est Diespiter,/Qui manceps humanum capital in specu suo cordolio luit./Salve, mea lubentia, turturille; salve, passercule, columbule,/Mi lepus, mea monedula, mulse, mel, mellilla,
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Insistence on archaic Latin presupposes a reader proficient in the “standard,” or “classical” variety of the language; the joke and the fun are simply lost if a reader is not capable of spotting the differences and deviations. Đurđević, whose comical bent is otherwise well known from his writings in Croatian, here baffled the first editor of the poem; after all the philological acumen invested in reconstructing the prosody and lexical range of Iter ad antrum Bethlemiticum, Gortan (1951) at the end of his paper offered only the feeble conclusion that, for Đurđević, “linguistic expression seems more important than intimate poetic experience.” The editor did not even consider the possibility that Đurđević’s text could be playful; at the time, both Croatian Latin and classical culture in general could have been publicly presented only as phenomena of utmost seriousness and decorum.

**Language from Another World: Ton Smerdel (1904–1970)**

Latin ceased to be in active use in Croatia around 1848, at the time of the Spring of Nations. More than a hundred years later, when the country was a federal republic of socialist Yugoslavia, Zagreb-based Ton Smerdel chose to be a Latin poet to express dissent with the dominant ideals and ideology. Smerdel, however, does not use classical languages for satire (as did the Czech author Václav Pinkava, 1926–1995, when, as Jan Křesadlo, he wrote an ode to Stalin in ancient Greek). Smerdel’s protest is more lyrical and indirect: he used a language that the
rulers would not understand, a language that transcended the borderlines, briefly: a language that belonged to another world. But Smerdel also brought ancient linguistic and cultural content to modern forms, because he wrote free verse in Latin. Here is a poem from his cycle Vagationes lyricae (Lyrical roamings) (Smerdel 1967):

1.

Umbracula nucis dulcia  
ego et cicada umbratici  
redeunte aestate sumus solis phanatici  
Hic angulus ridet nobis umbrifer  
et cicada cantum lucente sole  
alis suis nitentibus incipit:  
–Amice  
Umbratice  
momentum nos habemus brevis Fortunae  
ex sinu Fati raptae  
Amice  
umbratice amice  
video etiam cupressos  
et Parcae venientes  
sine filis nobis et nuci arridentes  

1. Sweet shades of the nut-tree  
I and a cicada, shady characters,  
as the summer returns get frenzied by the sun  

*  
Here a corner welcomes us with shade  
and as the sun is glittering the cicada  
starts to sing straining its wings:  
– O my friend  
in the shade  
we have a short moment of Fortune  
seized from the bosom of Fate  
O my friend  
o friend in the shade  
I see the cypresses as well  
and the Parcae coming  
without threads they smile at us and at the nut

On one level, Smerdel’s Latin is Christian, but in a way different from Kašić’s. His free verse may be laid out on page as vers libre, but it resonates closely with rhythms of the Bible, of the Christian Church and the Middle Ages. Smerdel’s lexical choices, however, remain resolutely Roman: all his words can be found in a
dictionary of classical Latin. An abundance of sound effects in his poem, its attention to form, brings to mind Vergil or Horace—but more as models of poetics than as sources of words or phrases.

Similar indirect presence of antiquity can be detected in Smerdel’s images. The cicada, the sun, the shade, the tree, the cypress—all are rich in classical connotations (remember, for example, the setting of Plato’s Phaedrus and its myth of the cicadas; cf. also Smerdel 1955). But the poet reinterprets the Parcae; contrary to their ancient counterparts, they smile and carry no threads. This is an augmentation of the antiquity, and perhaps a Christian one. Smerdel’s Parcae are benevolent because they do not bring “proper” death. The cicada, an ancient symbol of immortality and a symbol of poetry, will not die completely; the nut-tree, to be reborn from the nuts it bears, will not die completely—and, consequently, the human singer will not die completely; not only is he a singer, but for him to die is “to fall asleep in the Lord.”

**Conclusion**

Neo-Latin literature—writing in Latin by people who were not Romans—may seem an artificial phenomenon, a curiosity or an idiosyncrasy. In Croatia it was not so. Not only was Latin, for a number of political reasons, in continuous use in civil and religious administration, and actively taught in schools; from the texts we have (and here we have examined only a small selection of excerpts from that corpus) we must conclude that, for at least a thousand years, Latin was also a medium of creative expression. “Creativity” here means both linguistic mastery and skill in semiosis. Croatian writers used Latin in different periods, from the Middle Ages through to the post-World War II years; they used the language for different purposes, for history and autobiography, for playful intimate letters and military reports, for occasional monologues and lyrical free verse; they remained inside the boundaries of standard (classical) Latin and crossed these boundaries bravely (or indifferently); they used Greek and Roman mythological and historical apparatus or abstained from its use; moreover, in their writings “pagan” ancient tradition interfered—in my opinion, fruitfully—with Christian uses of Latin. The authors invested significant energy into writing in Latin; it must have been important for them and for their public; the challenge is to understand both how and why it was so.

**Note**

1 On another aspect of classical reception in Split, see the chapter by Jasenka Gudelj in this volume.
References


