

Wer ist der Thesaurus?

Capitalism can make you forget. American capitalism, that is. I have been back in the States for well over a year now, and the daily pleasures of life in a major European capital grow more obscure the longer I am away -- beer, of course, and walkable, habitable cityscapes, and -- the history of classical philology aside -- of course, the true genius of Germany lies in its endless capacity for making bread. Breads and pastries of every description: *Sonnenblumenbrot* with *Irischbutter* in the late afternoon, warm *Weissbrot* in the morning, *Käse-* and *Butterbrezen*, *Semel* upon *Semel* at any hour, to begin. I'm a fairly typical American for this day and age, which means I am not a WASP, nor did I feel it a cultural imperative that I should devote a life to the study of texts commonly acknowledged to be at the core, if there is such a thing, of the honorific epithet, "Western." I understand the dangers and limitations of Eurocentrism, and if you buy me a *Bier*, I may point them out to you at length. But in Munich I forgot them all and lived, so far as I was able, as they did. And it was divine.

It wasn't my first time in Europe, and I don't mean to give the impression that I just got off the truck; but it was my first time living in Europe as a professional. And professionalism, urbanity, and supple, rich minds I found at the *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae*. My year at the Thesaurus was among the most quietly challenging and interesting years I have known intellectually. On my trips back to the US for a conference or interview, I was asked more than once by long-standing members of the profession what it was, exactly, that we did at the Thesaurus. Everyone knows it's a dictionary, and that it's Teutonic in scope and depth. But when confronted with the comparatively swift progress with the TLG -- though the projects are as different as the professional contexts that are producing them -- the TLL might appear to be an anachronism and stubbornly committed to a certain style of scholarship that some Americans do not give much regard. Prejudices distort. Writing Thesaurus articles is a fundamentally humanistic, by which I do *not* mean, "scientific," endeavor. True: TLL articles present an argument about a single lemma's trajectory through 800+ years of literature, coins, inscriptions, etc. But the products of this research should be regarded as essays, not fiats. The hierarchical formality of the presentation and the forbidding array of symbols, abbreviations, and so forth cannot hide the fact that there is a serious person here thinking and speaking through the forms, entirely aware of the risks of choosing one disposition over another, of including one passage here, another there. The *Thesaurista's* creativity is filtered through her architecture. It requires delicate sensibilities, and patience, to appreciate this kind of work.

An honor that goes with being the American *Stipendiat* at the Thesaurus is the periodic correspondence from American scholars requesting information from the *Zettelarchiv* or clarifications on articles already in print. I fielded one inquiry from an eminent Ovidian about a passage cited in an article written many years ago. So, I undertook to write up a response on behalf of the TLL, in consultation, of course, with my *Redaktor* Nigel Holmes and the *Generalredaktor*, the late Peter Flury. I wrote a draft of a response and submitted it to Herr Flury for criticism and, yes, approval. I had begun my response rather bureaucratically with the grand, "We at the Thesaurus believe ...". Later that day Herr Flury found me in the *Bibliothek* -- a Latinist's dream -- and invited me to his office for *Tee und Brot* to discuss my *responsum*. And in his inimitable style, which was so simple, understated yet sophisticated, very masculine, urbane, musical (he played violin in a local orchestra), looking away he intoned in his slightly Swiss accent, "Ja, ja, Sie haben gut getan," and gave nodding approval to my effort as a whole. But catching me with his eyes, and with a slight smile, he asked, "Aber, Herr Romero, wer ist der Thesaurus?" Who, indeed? And in a few small sentences thereafter I understood that the Thesaurus wasn't, at least in this man's hands, an authoritative body legislating Truth to Latin pilgrims in exquisitely clean, double-columned type set. It was a culture, a way of reading Latin, a way of communicating that experience to the highly select group who dare to really understand these articles.

I am an American, and it is very American to, ultimately, disavow the strange formality of Europe and hunger for quantity as well quality, invest in "to-go" cups, reward businesses that do not actively put obstacles in the way of my exchanging money for goods and services. But late in the afternoon, before cycling home from campus to our new place downtown, I sit down in my office, after a day of teaching or reading, and take coffee, looking through a window that overlooks an amphitheatre, until I glance left at two massive bookshelves where my Latin holdings are now fastidiously catalogued and maintained *Thesauri modo*.

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