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The Ablative of Place Where

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The Ablative of Place Where

Long ago, when I studied Latin in high school, we intrepid sophomores had to grapple with a grammar that was considerably more complex than that I had been familiarized with in English. Suddenly, there were declensions, which meant that a noun looked different depending on how it functioned in a sentence, unlike in English where a noun looks the same wherever it is (Bennett, 2008). So, the genitive case meant that a noun belonged to, or was “of” another person or thing; the accusative (which had nothing whatever to do with accusations) meant something was headed to or pointing to that noun. Yet another of these is called the ablative, and in this group there is the “ablative of place where.”

In the ablative of place where, we might answer a question in English like, “Where is the boat?” with “at sea.” But if we answer in Latin, we would say, “in mari.” But if that sea were the subject of the sentence, it would be “mare” (Jenks, 1911). So to the Romans, the nouns, or “things” in their lives that were reflected in their language changed, depending on what happened to them, where, how, and by whom or what.

Knowing what happened to whom or what, and how it came about to be in that condition is a key part of narrative. I think that the delicacy and precision by which ancient languages like Latin and Greek expressed things permitted their philosophy to flourish, because they could make very fine points in several ways. They had different words for the same things, and they described natural things like the sea, with more than one word; they had “mare,” as well as “aqua” and even “undis,” which meant “wave,” and which often metaphorically stood in for the sea. Combine that with nouns changing according to how they are used in a sentence, and you end up with a very rich language indeed.

So, getting back to my earlier question in English, “Where is the boat?” we get a very interesting answer, indeed, from our familiar David Harscheid, who in his narrative, true-to-life “Boatyard” gives a story “moored” in history, with a palpable geography as well, even if it is, from the perspective of the natural world, a somewhat despoiled one. Everything in the world he describes is old or “disused,” to use his word. It is also, pointedly, a world that no longer exists, being riven, in many ways, by the punctuation of the collapse of the World Trade Center. Years later, he revisits the grimy boatyard where he had lived with rascals and scalawags; it is now a green, beautiful park. Little remains of the world he knew there; for all of the new park’s beauty, he is sad for what and who had lived there before. Give it a read; it is juicy indeed.

We have an interesting painting by Dr. Lori Fredricks, entitled Lake Artemesia. Lake Artemesia is a man-made lake located in College Park, Maryland, just outside Washington, D.C. The lake is named after a grandmother, mother, and daughter, all of whom had the same first name of Artemesia. The daughter, Artemesia N. Drefs, donated some land lots to Prince George’s County, so that the Green Line rail system could run by there, and Lake Artemesia as it is today was born (<https://www.greenbeltonline.org/lake-artemesia/>¹). Notably, the name Artemesia is probably derived from Artemis, the Greek goddess of hunting and wild nature (Oxford English Dictionary, 2007).

My friends in D.C. who hike speak highly of the trails and natural beauty of the place. So in this case, people with an ecological sense and an imagination created a “where,” and now hundreds of thousands of people have enjoyed how nature and humankind—working together—created a “there.”

Perhaps it is unimportant for us that in our language, nouns do not generally change form depending on how they are used in a sentence; we have only the faintest hint of it in our

possessive case, where, for example, something belonging to a woman is referred to as “the woman’s ...” Otherwise, whether it is to the woman, from the woman, of the woman, or the woman doing something, it’s all the same, unlike in Latin, Greek, and some contemporary languages. In English, the placement of the noun in the sentence is what determines what function it serves; noun placement is comparatively unimportant in classical Latin.

Scholars believe that spoken Latin, of which we have only those records that were written down, probably differed from formal written Latin markedly as time went on in the Roman Empire. For one thing, most people in Rome were functionally illiterate. Only the educated (read: rich) could read and write. Interestingly, however, the Romance languages—Spanish, French, Italian, and Romanian—did not derive from Classical Latin, but from the Vulgate, or the language spoken by the people in the Late Roman Empire (Herman, 2000). And one of the first things to go was the declension of nouns. That is because spoken emphasis on words, coming from where those words went in a sentence, became crucially important in speech, rather than changing the noun depending on what it did, in written Latin.

So why should we care about all this? Because that speech, that vulgate, *itself became written language*, i.e. the Romance Languages, and from those written languages sprang written fictional literature—poetry, plays and stories. It is interesting that people today admire literature in the Romance languages and often prefer it to the literature of the classical Romans. From Dante’s *Inferno* to Calderon de la Barca’s *La Vida es Sueño*, the richness of these languages comes from their “spokenness,” the fact that emphasis, placement and choice of words are what makes these pieces come alive. The ablative of place where is now the place where nouns come alive. They come alive in stories, in poetry, and in the well-turned phrase.

In *Ubiquity*, because we concentrate on literacy, such notions are important to us. We're the literacy people, and today we're about multiliteracies that embrace the graphic, the audial, the phonological, and the cinematic with the same avidity with which we embrace prose and poetry. Stay with us, submit to us, tell your friends about us. *Ave atque vale.*

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