INTIMATIONS OF IMMORTALITY:
A STUDY OF PERENNIS*

by Grant Parker
(The Thesaurus linguae Latinae, München)

‘Who can speak of eternity without a solecism?’ Thus the seventeenth-century physician and philosopher, Sir Thomas Browne. Combined with an apology to those who might think that the subject demands closer attention to philosophy and theology, this seems a fittingly modest note on which to begin a discussion of one of the Latin adjectives meaning ‘lasting’ or ‘eternal’.

I plan to highlight some of the main features of the word which should become apparent when the Thesaurus linguae Latinae’s article perennis is published in 1995 (vol. X part 1 fasc. 9), and to relate some of the problems I have encountered while engaged in this work. I hope in this way also to cast some broader light on the dictionary and its compilation. For all the word’s various nuances, developments and special applications, the body of this note centres on concepts arising from the two components of the word, per and annus: in the strictest sense then, ‘that which lasts throughout the year’. In the final section some comparison with its more significant synonyms, notably perpetuus, will be attempted.

True to the implications of this etymology, a fragment of Ennius (frg. var. 12) is the first in a long succession of specific usages: ‘constitere amnes perennes, arbores vento vacant’. But perhaps best known in this regard is the laus loci in Cicero’s Second Verrine (4.107): ‘Henna quidem, ubi ea quae dico gesta esse memorantur, est loco perexcelso atque edito, quo in summum est aequata agri planities et aquae perennes, tota vero ab omni aditu circumcisa atque directa est; ... sunt plurimi atque laetissimi flores omni tempore anni’. Indeed these last three words provide the key to one major sense of the word, namely duration through a single year in the face of climatic variation.

In fact most instances of the adjective have to do with water. This subsection in the ThLL article currently stands at more than 50 lines of computer typescript, and that after several attempts at pruning. A long list of nouns indicating water may be cited as occurring with this adjective. Perennis is distinguished variously from brevis, torridus or torrens. The last of these is evidenced in an extract from Ulpian (Dig. 43.12.1.2–3),
which also suggests that the adjective had become a technical legal term by the time of Cassius Longinus (cos. AD 30), the writer's source.\(^8\)

\[
\text{fluminum quaedam sunt perennia, quaedam torrentia. perenne est, quod semper fluat, ἀέν(ν)ας, torrens (ὁ) χειμάρρους; si tamen aliqua aestate exaruerit, quod alioquin perenne fluebat, non ideo minus perennius est. fluminum quaedam publica sunt, quaedam non. publicum flumen esse Cassius definit, quod perenne sit (cf. 43.20.1.5–6 aqua).}
\]

The continuity of flowing water is used in various similes and metaphors. Cicero (Mil. 34) says that Clodius 'exercitationem virtutis, suffragationem consulatus, fontem perennem gloriae suae perdidit'.\(^9\) By the same token Ovid (Fast. 2.820) describes Lucretia's tears as flowing 'more perennis aquae', and the younger Seneca (Ep. 40.8) expresses the wish that the stream of philosophy's force flow without ceasing, yet never become a torrent: 'habeat vires magnas, moderatas tamen: perennis sit unda, non torrentis'.

We turn now to another aspect of the natural world. The use of *perennis* in connection with foliage goes back to Lucretius. Ennius, he says, brought from Helicon a widely famous garland of perennial leaves:\(^10\)

\[
\text{Ennius ut noster cecinit qui primus amoena detulit ex Helicone perenni fronde coronam, per gentis Italas hominum quae clara clueret. (1.117–119)}
\]

On the one hand, the immediate sense of the expression is that of foliage which lasts from one season to another, that is throughout the year, but on the other hand the context clearly indicates the idea of eternity: later on we find 'aeternis ... versibus' (121), and in the same breath Lucretius speaks of Homer as 'semper florentis' (124).\(^11\)

In a further example of the figurative use St. Augustine compares the eternity of the City of God with olive and bay trees. Here the continued life of the trees in an annual cycle of regeneration represents the unending kingdom of God: '... ut maneat hic civitas ... aeterna, quamvis morientibus et nascentibus singulis, sicut perennis est opacitas oleae vel lauri atque huius modi ceterarum arborum lapsu ortuque foliorum' (De civ. D. 22.6 p.564, lines 16–20).

The passages discussed point to a common problem in the business of writing articles. Poetic and Christian uses of words so often defy the neat categories striven for in producing a clear disposition. Traditional senses are strained in the interests of heightened expression, or reveal a certain inflation of rhetoric by the time of late antiquity. Other than Lucretius, writers notorious for individualistic word-usage are Tertullian and Martianus Capella, while the multivocality of for example Horatian or Vergilian diction has also caused many a lexicographical headache.
Though lacking the word *perennis*, Catullus 5 may also be cited to illustrate this phenomenon:

\[\text{vivamus, mea Lesbia, atque amemus} \]
\[\text{rumoresque senum severiorum} \]
\[\text{omnes unius aestimemus assis!} \]
\[\text{soles occidere et redire possunt:} \]
\[\text{nobis cum semel occidit brevis lux,} \]
\[\text{nox est perpetua una dormienda.} \]
\[\text{da mi basia mille ...} \]

If light symbolises the joys of living (equated with love, in particular the affair with Lesbia), then night (= death), so harshly juxtaposed here (‘lux’/‘nox’), is the antithesis; *perpetual* night is an intensification. In this respect ‘una’ and ‘perpetua’ have much the same sense. One might compare Ov. *Her.* 14.74, where night stands more or less directly for death: Hypermestra warns Lynceus ‘nox tibi non properas; ista perennis erit’. *Perpetuus* is used more often than *perennis* to describe a lasting period of time. A possible explanation is that the etymology of *perennis*, that is, *per-annus*, would have created an awkward combination when used in conjunction with a word expressing a shorter unit of time such as a day. This might indicate Roman sensitivity to the literal meaning.

As work on the Thesaurus progressed, direct contrast evolved as the guiding principle for devising dispositions—in other words the attempt to find mutually exclusive characteristics for the word in question. In some problematic cases this fails to produce the clear division sought for, and cautious formulation (for example, ‘praevalente notione ...’) can help circumvent the problem. Sometimes semantic criteria have to give way to more neutral syntactic ones—a less satisfactory option when important differences of sense and context exist. In *perennis* the two major categories seem to reflect a major divergence of sense; when metaphor and immediate context suggest opposite directions, as we have seen in Augustine and Lucretius, it is always possible to append appropriate remarks to individual instances or in the heading.

The structure of the article *perennis* hinges on the distinction between duration over seasons of the year on the one hand, and continuation into a (largely unspecified) ongoing future on the other, that is, ‘uninterrupted’ as opposed to ‘eternal’. Chronology dictates that this is the order in which the two main sections occur. Whether the predominant sense is ‘uninterrupted’ or ‘eternal’, the adjective is used to describe a wide range of things and beings. The main division of the article, however, appears to have different emphases: tangible phenomena like water, leaves, snow in the first section (that is, *per annum*), and predominantly abstract nouns in the second, in
the context of eternity: *virtus*, *amor*, *maiestas*, *quies* are typical examples.

A technical use of the adjective, belonging to the first section of the dictionary article and offered here in passing, is found in the elder Pliny (*HN* 10.73, cf. 1.10.36). ‘Perennial’ birds are those which do not migrate in the winter: ‘temporum magna differentia avibus: perennes, ut *columbae*, semestres, ut *hirundines*. Doves are ‘throughout-the-year’ birds, whereas swallows are only six-monthly sojourners.

A further technical use, in Columella’s *De re rustica*, may be considered important in the semantic development of the word. The author prescribes various concoctions to prolong the life of wine or must, that is, so that it does not ‘go off’: e.g. 12.20.8 ‘*ea res etiam si non in totum perennem, at certe usque in alteram vindemiam plerumque vini saporem servat*. The fact that it is possible for Columella to use the adverbial phrase ‘in totum’ is a sure sign that the term has by this time lost the absolute sense of ‘lasting through the year’. The related words *perennitas* and *perennare* offer comparable instances from the same author, often with some specification of the length of time. This use of the word, limited though it may be, is significant in that it takes us away from the original context of duration through the seasons of the year to a different sense of ‘lasting’, and thus points in the direction of the later more common, less specified sense of eternity.

In the context of eternity (that is, the second section) fame and glory feature prominently, and of course also the many objects which represent them. One example includes what must be the most famous instance of the word, which also appears to be the only example of its comparative degree:

\[
\text{exegi monumentum aere perennius} \\
\text{regalique situ pyramidum altius} \\
\text{(Hor. Carm. 3.30.1–2)}
\]

The end of Catullus’ dedicatory poem (‘*quidquid hoc libelli ..., quod ... plus uno maneat perenne saeclo*’ 1.8–10) may be called to mind here, as much for the use of the word as for the sentiment. In the context of fame preserved by literature, a famous instance is to be found in Vergil’s apostrophe to the Muses (Aen. 9.78) concerning the metamorphosis of the Trojan ships into sea-nymphs: ‘*dicite: prisca fides facto, sed fama perennis*’. There are long-established grounds for believing the events; while the evidence for them may be lost in the past, their fame is lasting. In a sense ‘*prisca*’ and ‘*perennis*’ here move in opposite directions from the present time.

Stylistic variation evidently plays a major role in the Christian writers’ use of language, and groups of synonyms often occur in close proximity. Apart from synonymous adjectives, one finds even more frequently other
parts of speech more broadly connected with the idea of eternity, for example, the noun aeternitas, or the adverbial expression in perpetuum. Perhaps the reason for this is, quite simply, that eternity is a major concern of the Christian writers, and their detailed discussion of such topics as eschatology or the everlasting nature of God makes variation essential. An example discussing the theology of death is that of Lactantius (Div. Inst. 7.11.1-2):

inalitis igitur temporibus quae deus morti statuit terminabitur ipsa mors. et quia temporalem vitam temporalis mors sequitur, consequens est ut resurgant animae ad vitam perennem, quia finem mors temporalis accept. rursus sicut vita animi sempiterna est, in qua divinos et ineloquibles immortalitatis suae fructus capit, ita et mors eius perpetua sit necesse est, in qua perennes poenas et infinita tormenta pro peccatis suis pendit.

Reading on, we find in the same paragraph such expressions as ‘in hac vita corporali atque terrena’, ‘corpus ... fragile ... atque mortale’, and on the other hand ‘nomen indelebile’. As the underlinings in the quoted passage show, perennis is used in both the positive and negative images of Christian eschatology—most frequently vita perennis / poena perennis. The same holds true for aeternus and perpetuus.

Out of a Christian context writers used the word perennis to express the ongoing suffering of two of classical mythology’s tragic figures. Thus we read much earlier of the ‘perennis ... labor’ of Sisyphus in Seneca (Phaedra 1231), and at Fulg. Myth. 2.6 of Prometheus’ offering an ‘everlasting’ liver to the vulture (‘vulturi iecur perenne praebentem’). Corresponding uses of aeternus and perpetuus may be cited, not least from the tragedies of Seneca.

This may be described as a sort of enallage, or transferred epithet. Properly, what one tends to think of lasting is an action or a state (as so many occurrences of this word show), but in the cases I have mentioned, among others, the idea of duration is conveyed by a sort of transferred attribution to the object performing or undergoing the action. Likewise Amm. Marc. 20.3.3 ‘(sidera) perenni distinctione conveniunt’ (the heavenly bodies meet at a certain time, always with the same, set distance between them) and Prudent. Hamartigenia 478 ‘melle perenni glaeba fluens’.

Perennis is used of God, Christ, holy martyrs (equally of their properties), and specifically in connection with later Roman emperors. Since inscriptions are a major source for the last group, clarity on the chronology is hard to establish. Apparently the earliest instance to be found dates from the time of Maximianus (ruled 286-305): ‘perennis virtus Augustorum’ is inscribed below a picture of the emperor. Interestingly, a river-god is also represented on this gold medallion. Perennitas used by hypostasis
of the emperor himself is not attested until 60 to 70 years later, in legislation from the time of Valentinian I and Valens (Cod. Theod. 9.19.3). An unusual example is found in Optatianus Porfyrius (Carm. 16) who in addressing Constantine speaks of the ‘perennia iura’ of the emperor; the acrostich reveals ‘domino nostro Constantino perpetuo Augusto’.

To conclude, a brief word about *perpetuus* by way of comparison. In semantic terms, it appears the two words have much in common, certainly both the senses of continuation and of eternity. The possibility of stylistic difference may safely be ruled out. Judging from the material in the Thesaurus archive, *perpetuus* (whose article is yet to be written) significantly outnumbers *perennis* by well over a thousand instances as opposed to some 300. *Perpetuus* may in fact be regarded as the standard and general word for these concepts, having a duality of sense not present to the same extent in *aeternus* (which relates primarily to eternity) or *continuus* (which relates primarily to continuation). The duality is certainly present in *perennis*, though this word lacks some of the specific contexts which will form important categories in the future article on *perpetuus*: of particular significance will be the political sphere, where *potestas perpetua, actio perpetua, quaestio perpetua* and many other expressions are commonly evidenced from Cicero onwards. On the other hand, the connection of *perennis* with the natural world (especially water) seems to point towards an original sense and context for our word. 26

The duration that both words indicate sometimes has a certain limit (usually understood rather than stated, as with rivers), and sometimes, as in Christian and legal contexts, carries no implication of an envisaged end. As far as the history of the word goes, a development may be traced from the early natural-world sense of duration through the year (as it were, *per annum*), via an intermediate phase glimpsed in Horace and Columella (‘continuing’, ‘uninterrupted’, without an intrinsic time-framework), to the well-attested later idea of everlasting (per annos).

A look at other Latin adjectives indicating the duration of time suggests a strong tendency either to uninterrupted duration or to eternity. By and large, it seems, uninterrupted duration is indicated mainly with *continuus* or *iugis*, 28 eternity with *aeternus, immortalis* or *semipernus*: 30 *perpetuus* 31 and *perennis* stand out in the duality they present. Indeed the Oxford English Dictionary, frequently citing figurative uses among the English equivalents, 32 suggests the same phenomenon for adjectives in that language. And it is precisely this duality which gives a particular point to the solecism bemoaned by Sir Thomas Browne.
My warmest thanks to the Thesaurus editors, Dr. Peter Flury and Dr. Gabriele Thome, and others who offered helpful comments—Professor K.M. Coleman, Dr. Friedrich Spoth, Stefan Stirnemann and Dr. Shirley Werner. An earlier version was read at CASA’s 20th Biennial Conference in Johannesburg, where I learnt much from the subsequent discussion. The financial assistance of the Centre for Science Development, the Fritz-Thyssen-Stiftung, the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst and the Schweizer Eduard-Wölflin-Thesaurus-Stiftung is hereby acknowledged with gratitude.

1. *Religio Medici* 1.11 (1643).

2. Comparison between these two words is in fact suggested by the earliest attested instance of *perennis*, viz. Plaut. *Amph.* 14. Mercury, dressed as a young slave, says in the prologue: ‘haec ... volitis adprobare, adnitier,/ lucrum ut perenne vobis semper suppetat’ (‘a steady income’); he had used the expression ‘perpetuo lucro’ only eight lines earlier (cf. *Trin.* 415 ‘nisi tu immortale rere esse argentum tibi’). One may compare Isid. *Orig.* 10.204 ‘perennis, ab eo quod sit perpetuus annis’ and Gloss. IV 142.43 ‘perennem perpetuum’.


4. Water seems very much the domain of *perennis*, as opposed to its synonyms; cf. the *OLD* article *perpetuus*, where this is much less the case (section 4b, to which one might add Sen. *Qnat.* 6.7.1 ‘amnes’). For *aeternus* in this context *ThLL* 1,1146, lines 17–18 offer only Ov. *Am.* 3.6.20, *Met.* 15.551 and Rutilius Namatianus 1.109.

5. e.g. Lucr. 5.262 ‘latices’; Hirtius *BGall.* 8.43.5 ‘suns’; Hor. *Epist.* 1.15.15 ‘collectosne bibant imbres puteosne perennis iugis aquae’; furthermore *annis, fluvius, Nihus, flumen, rivius, scaturigo, lapsus fluminum, vena, unda*.


7. Livy 4.30.7 ‘perennes ... annes’ are contrasted with the dried-up ‘torridos fontes rivosque’.

8. The jurists’ only other use of this word is discussed at note 27.

9. *Fons perennis* is used figuratively also, for example, at Ov. *Her.* 8.64; Lactant. *Div. Inst.* 1.22.2; Prudent. *Perist.* 12.34; Dracont. *Laud. Dei* 1.603.

10. Cyril Bailey (comm. Oxford 1947, vol. 1, 158 and 2, 619 ad loc.) tentatively cites this as an example of Lucretius’ predilection for juxtaposing words of similar roots, creating a type of jingle: ‘Ennius ... perenni’.

11. It seems then that literal and figurative senses of the word tend to point in opposite directions in such cases. Cf. the *Oxford English Dictionary* article *perennial*, which registers a similar phenomenon in the English word: ‘Both in this category (a i.e. that lasting through the year, esp. of water) and b (remaining green throughout the year) the sense is capable of being understood as “lasting through successive years, never-failing, perpetual”, as in 2 (lasting a succession of years, of which continuation throughout all seasons of the year is the condition).’

12. The earliest articles have less of an antithetical structure than those of more recent volumes (see for example the one-time model article *animosus, ThLL* 2,88, lines 32 ff.); that attempts were, however, made on these lines from early on is visible in the articles *annus* and *annus* (*ThLL* 2,115, line 12 to 2,121, line 47). Yet it is not always possible to find mutually exclusive characteristics: cf. U. Keudel, *Thesaurus*

13. Hans Peter Syndikus, *Catull: eine Interpretation* 1, Darmstadt 1984, 94–95, offers several parallels starting with the *Iliad* for night (or sleep) as a metaphor for death; this often implies a connection between light and life (cf. Richmond Lattimore, *Themes in Greek and Latin Epigraphy*, Urbana 1942, 161–164). Significant are for example Verg. *Aen.* 10.745–746 (*Turnus has killed Òrodes*): ‘*dura quies oculos et ferreus urget/ somnus, in aeternam clauduntur lumina noctem*’, and Prop. 2.15.23 ‘*nox tibi longa venit nec reditura dies*’.

14. An exception: Martianus Capella 6.666 the island Thule has ‘continuus dies’ at the summer solstice, and ‘*perennis nox*’ at the winter solstice.


16. [Sen.] *Octavia* 189–192 (the nurse moralises to Octavia): ‘*iuvenalis ardo impetu primo furti,/ languescit idem facile nec durat diu/ in Venere turpi, ceu levis flammae vapor:/ amor perennis coniugis castae manet.*’

17. Optatus 4.9 p.115, lines 6–8 ‘*in Deo perennis maiestas exundat, sicut in fonte aqua largiter fluentibus venis exuberat*’.

18. *CL* 13,1898 ‘*memoriae perenni, quieti aeternae Tertiniae*’.

19. ‘This mixture generally preserves the flavour of the wine until the next vintage is made, even if it does not make it last forever’: cf. 3.2.10; 12.19.1; *De Arboribus* 3.7.

20. 1.6.10; 4.24.1 ‘*quam longissimam perennitatem*’; 12.46.7. cf. 2.9.18 ‘*perennant diu tus quam cetera*’; 4.3.1 ‘*castanea ... in palum formata e re usoque in alteram caesionem perennat*’; 12.15.2 ‘*melius*’; 12.19.2; *De Arboribus* 16.4 ‘*diu tius*’.

21. *ThLL* 1,1142 lines 32–33 lists only two instances of the comparative of *aeternus*: Plin. *HN* 14.9 and Lactantius *Epic.* 63.3. Like Columella’s technical use, Horace’s poetic comparative reveals a departure from the original absolute sense and points in the direction of the later Christian sense of ‘eternal’.

22. Some others: Bachiauius *De Fide* lines 224–225 ‘*qui tartaro et aeterno igni perpetuo deputatus est, perennis est poenae, non immortalis vitae*’; Fulgentius of Ruspe *De Remissione Peccatorum* 2.13.3; Cassiodorus *In Psalm.* 87 line 323; Pseudo-Gregory of Tours *De Miraculis Thomae Apostoli* 13; *Passio Bartholomaei Apostoli* 5 p. 139, lines 11–13. Death finds no place ‘*ubi felicitas perpetua, beatitudine perennis est et gaudium sine fine; et sunt ibi deliciae sempiternae*’ (the corresponding Greek version reads as follows: ὅπου ἡ μακαριότης αἰωνία ἐστὶ καὶ ἡ χάρα ἀνεκλάπης καὶ ἀγάλλης αἰωνίως καὶ ἐκείνος ἀναπαύοντας δερναίοις). Albert Blaise, *Le Vocabulaire Latin des principaux thèmes liturgiques*, Turnhout 1966, 437–463, illustrates the importance of such adjectives as *perpetuus, perennis* and *aeternus* in all aspects of Christian eschatology as reflected in late Latin. More generally on this subject see also Gerard O’Daly, *‘Aeternitas*’, in C. Mayer (ed.), *Augustinus-Lexicon* vol. 1, Basel–Stuttgart 1986–, 159–164. In contrast to these examples from Christian Latin, ‘the New Testament does not have any “concretized” image of heaven’: thus A.P. Orbán, ‘*The afterlife in the visions of the Passio SS. Perpetuæ et Felicitatis*’, in A.A.R. Bastiaensen et al. (edd.), *Fructus Centesimou: Mélanges offerts à Gerard J.M. Bartelink* (Instrumenta Patristica XIX), Dordrecht 1989, 269–277, at 270.

23. *Iuvencus* 3.14 and Prudent. *Hamartigenia* 923 use the adjective in referring to the wailing and gnashing of teeth mentioned for example at Matthew 8.12; 13.42; 13.50.

24. Cf. *aeternus* *ThLL* 1,1434, line 71 to 1,1446, line 12 (= section III).

emperor worship. H. Sasse, ‘Aion’, RAC 1 (1950) 193–204, sketches the religious-
philosophical background.

26. The existence of *perennis* (from *per* and *annis*; contrary to Lewis and Short in
fact a distinct word) suggests a possible folk etymology further linking *perennis*
with water. *Perennis*, surviving only at Cic. Nat. D. 2.9 and Festus pp. 245 and
250 Müller, refers to auspices made in preparation for crossing rivers (see Pease’s
comm. on Cicero).

27. Two further examples: *Cod. Iust.* 1.23.2 (AD 270) ‘ea, quae ad ius rescribuntur,
perennia esse debent’; 4. 63. 6 pr. (AD 409) ‘perennis exilii’. The second example
of course assumes the accused’s death to be the terminus.

28. For *continens* and *continus* in their more temporal (as opposed to spatial) sense see
*ThLL* 4,710, line 61 to 711, line 3 and 4,726, line 58 to 728, line 6. On *iugis*, formed
from *iungere*: Tertullian’s apocalyptic vision (*Apol.* 18, 3) includes an ‘ignem aequem
perpetum et iugem’ (note *ThLL* 7,2,1,630, lines 34–45 in the context of water).
Cf. also the non-technical sense of *assiduus*, which conveys the predominant idea
of continuity (esp. *ThLL* 2,883, line 61 to 887, line 6), and *perpes* which occurs
frequently with a period of time, e.g. Plaut. *Amph.* 732 ‘nocem perpetem’.

29. Of the various words for eternity, *aeternus* is the one best represented in the Ro-
mane languages: Arnulf Stefenelli, ‘Sprechsprachliche Universalien im protoroman-

30. *Aeternus*, tending essentially to the idea of infinity, very often presupposes unin-
terrupted duration: e.g. Cic. Cat. 4.10 ‘P. Lentulum aeternis tenebris vinculisque
mandare’. Also linked with *aevum* is ‘sempiterneus’: as a technical use compare
p. 4 with Pliny *HN* 16.78 ‘arborem aliis decidunt folia, aliae sempiterneae fronde
virent’. *Diuturnus* and *diutinus* are used of enduring objects, conditions, or periods
of time, occasionally also as a synonym for *longaeus* of long-lived people (*ThLL*
5,1,1643, line 8 to 1644, line 21); not generally in as extreme a sense as the pre-
ceding. *Immortalis* (*ThLL* 7,1,492, line 16 to 495, line 31) like ἀμβρότος, is used
predominantly of persons and deities.

31. *Perpetuus*: *OLD* sections 1–3 generally imply continuity over a defined period of
time, whereas 4–7 tend more towards our idea of ‘eternal’; the first two major
sections of the article in Forcellini’s *Totius Latinitatis Lexicon* vol. 3,616–617 parallel
this division.

32. E.g. *evergreen*, *everlasting* (both, like perennial, serving also as botanical terms).
Acta Classica is published annually by the Classical Association of South Africa. The journal has been in production since 1958. It is listed on both the ISI and the SAPSE list of approved publications.

For further information go to: