

Upgrading Latin Pedagogy

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"The glory, the jest, and the riddle of the Academy." Such words can easily come to mind when one ponders the current struggles in Latin pedagogy as expressed in the Spring 1996 issue of *The Modern Language Journal*. Two pieces there illustrate a methodological rift that is well worth our attention. [1] Robert J. Ball and J. D. Ellsworth argue passionately that Latin as a dead language must not be taught with methods that are appropriate for modern languages. Anything like "authentic" oral use of the language or attempted re-creations of original cultural situations must simply be foregone at the outset. Martha G. Abbott and Sally Davis respond that it is precisely through contemporary language-teaching methods that Latin will be more meaningful to students and therefore better and more widely learned. Not to make some adjustment to the present standards for language-teaching could well be to slide further toward the extinction of Latin in the modern curriculum. Developing the listening, speaking and writing skills, even in the case of Latin, will only support the reading abilities that Ball and Ellsworth want to promote.

The arguments suggested in this lively point and counter-point call for some amplification. Ball and Ellsworth's foundational premiss maintains that Latin is dead because the language is simply not, by and large, used for communication any more. On such grounds their pedagogical conclusions seem to follow inevitably. But the situation is actually far more complex than that, and the descriptor that they use to express the present state of Latin, however handy and expressive, is actually quite misleading. The "deadness" of Latin might really be taken to designate its status as a learned language, that is, one that is no longer acquired in an oral context from infancy.[2] Lacking the usual family-to-child oral mode of transmission, the language does belong to an entirely different category of linguistic communication. But should we employ descriptors that imply that it is not used or usable for living communication? Imagine an English-speaking person reading and understanding Seneca's letters in a manner not different from the way that person could learn to read Montaigne's essays after a typical course of French instruction. Should we not say that some "living" communication is actually going on, originating with the author and ending with the reader? In fact, there might even be something of a two-way interaction, since one can, after a fashion, "interrogate" the text, or interact with the constructed authorial persona. For example, we can ask "Why do you hold this?" and by careful reading become better able to give some kind of answer that represents what we think the author would say if present. And often the author is engaged in a kind of self-questioning or in an interaction with a third party, in effect placing the reader in the situation of one overhearing a living dialogue. If one wants to claim that whatever is essentially literary is dead, we would have to admit that there was at the very least a terrible pallor about practically everything that is now studied as English literature. Such a manner of speaking simply tends to spoil the appeal of some of our most lively, most influential, most moving texts. Latin has had a vast cross-cultural literary life that continues into our own century; it deserves the language of life rather than that of death. In the case of more recent literature, it is better to say that writers like Emerson, Milton, Montaigne, Chaucer, and so on, actually do communicate, and they do communicate today, provided that we make the right kind of effort to hear them. Why might the same not be true of Latin works? If so, then Latin can be as alive or as dead as you want to make it. Its status is indeed different from that of other contemporary languages, but the terminology of death should be reserved for the truly forgotten languages like

"Proto-Indo-European" speech or Etruscan or ancient Mayan. Latin's vitality in Western cultural history and consciousness means that it should not be simply lumped together with those others, even by implication, through use of the term "dead."

We lose far more than just conceptual clarity if we follow such a practice. What is especially forgotten in the Ball-Ellsworth position, and in much current pedagogy, is not only the dynamics of literary interaction, but the long-living tradition of post-classical Latin. Latin has in fact been used for significant communication up until our own days. Many people may not be aware of just how tenacious living Latinity has been, even beyond the meaningful but formalized language of college diplomas, mottos, and handy abbreviations or phrases like *ad hoc*. For example, Bernard Lonergan, one of the most powerful philosophers of the twentieth century, wrote and published his early works in Latin. There was enough understanding of the language in clerical circles to make feasible the idea of a Latin disputation on college campuses as late as January of 1965. [3] Even now there are enough Latin communicators to support a journal like *Latinitas*. But more importantly there has been a whole range of modern Latin classics that stretches far beyond ecclesiastical circles, including works by Dante, Petrarch, Copernicus, Erasmus, More, Bacon, Descartes, Vico, Spinoza, Newton, and Linnaeus. Latin was in addition a quite lively part of the consciousness of many others, including some of the most influential thinkers from Cardinal Newman to Friedrich Nietzsche. Kierkegaard, for example, requested special permission from his king to write his dissertation in Danish, but he defended it publicly, for over seven hours, in Latin. The language is indeed a "modern" one, according to the most common understandings of modernity. On what grounds, then, should we limit its study to its classical manifestations? If one studies English, one does not read only Shakespeare, Milton, and Pope, although it is true that in a comprehensive program one will encounter such authors. So it should stand with Latin. To know Latin well should not mean that one has only learned to read a select group of writers from a two-hundred year segment of history, but that one has attained the right kind of powers of understanding that open upon a very wide range of literature, including that traditional classical material. Perhaps classical philologists would want to argue for a particular focus for determining our approach, but Latinists can have interests that do not coincide exactly with those of classical philologists as such, and it would not be right to limit the study of Latin by the goals of that one professional group, even if some might rightly wish to cultivate the overlap and to maintain a special emphasis on the ancient classical works. Now is the time to maximize value, meaning, and vitality, not to limit it. Our curricula are evolving. Latinists need strategies that will assure their studies the place that they merit.

It should be clear that there are systemic educational and institutional implications in the way we talk about and think about and teach this language. Despite all good intentions, the language of death will probably lead to more widespread extinction. In the meantime, such language might simply promote a truncated classicist mode of instruction full of weaknesses that need to be scrutinized and eliminated. But we must proceed from where we are. I believe that any promising developments will take place against a background of the two dominant understandings currently shaping Latin pedagogy. There is the Philological Model, which tends to teach morphology and syntax, and how to decode texts accurately, frequently using the method called "grammar-and-translation." It stands over against the Humanist Model, which, seeking a deep appropriation of the language as a medium of communication, is open to conversational and compositional practice. I set forth these models as heuristically valuable "ideal types." Though they do tend to move in different directions, they are not contradictory or mutually exclusive. Philologists do not ignore the communicational element. Actually they frequently adopt an analytical methodology that gets students to encounter as soon as possible the classic works (e.g., of Caesar, Cicero, Ovid, Horace, Vergil) that are so dear to humanist hearts precisely because these texts have had so much to say. And for their part, the humanists do not neglect grammar and accuracy and the classical orientation of later specialists. In fact, without humanists modern classical philology might not

have arisen at all. Seeking the deepest appropriation possible, humanists might be inclined to favor an inductive methodology that would provide that deep acquaintance and that wide reading without which scientific philological emendation would be nearly impossible.

Though there is in fact a complementarity to these two approaches that calls for more sophisticated collaboration between them, both have a certain claim to priority that can be defended by their partisans. Both are useful. If one has just discovered a papyrus fragment with Latin writing on it, then one probably wants the hard-core linguistic knowledge of the classical philologist. But if one has five hundred pages of Petrarchan Latin to negotiate, the most refined knowledge of grammar will be of little avail if one's lack of practice has condemned one to read at an unbearably slow speed. Life is simply too short. Too many would be discouraged by the meagerness of the results as larger educational ambitions wither during such glacial progress. Eventually we have to ask something like this about our introductory Latin courses: Should we be training students as if they were going to emend fragments of papyri or as if they were going to engage thoughtful compositions by Petrarch?

Here we confront issues of the larger structure and purposes not only of classical language-study but of liberal education. Discussing the effect of modern curricula on learning the classical languages, A.N. Whitehead once wrote some words that can apply to the disappointments of the present day:

Too often the result has been merely time wasted in the failure to learn the language. I often think that the ruck of pupils from great English schools shows a deplorable lack of intellectual zest, arising from this sense of failure. The school course of classics must be planned so that a definite result is clearly achieved. There has been too great a product of failures on the road to an ambitious ideal of scholarship.
[4]

We need to look to larger picture, to the architectonics of education, even though this is not at all a popular thing to do now. Our greater purposes do condition what we choose to do in our introductory classes, down to the particular strategies that we will adopt in language-pedagogy. They will also condition the way the overall value of the enterprise is estimated. My own sympathies lie with the humanist approach to Latin-learning today because it seems to offer a more universal good, a more exciting and realistic appeal, a sharper relevance, a wider range of meaning. The humanist approach can absorb and support a philological one more easily than the latter can the former, just as *rhetorica* subsumes and advances beyond *grammatica*. It allows for a far stronger link with the value-oriented purposes of liberal education, and it supports more directly an orientation toward an appreciation for the cultural-historical framework that is an extraordinarily important educational good. But it is not only for these reasons that I prefer the humanist model. There are more modest, practical ones as well. The philological approach, which has been ascendent in our century, has contributed, at its best, excellent and necessary foundations in grammar, vocabulary, and linguistics-contributions that are not at all negligible or lacking in humanistic values. But this same approach has also placed a stumbling-block in our way by tending to make students' experience of Latin very much like that of solving puzzles and limiting the possibilities of the gradually increasing intuitive understanding that is part of the joy of knowing any language. Granted, some decoding is absolutely intrinsic to the communication of linguistic meaning; nevertheless, making rule-conscious decoding the norm and the pattern of achievement stymies linguistic maturity, even that kind of linguistic maturity that is possible with a learned language like Latin.

The important dimension that must not be lost is the one that consists in the habitual sub-conscious structuring implicit in most linguistic communication. In fact, Latin is much more than a set of puzzles to be struggled through, bit by bit. It is not some kind of grammatical algebra. It is a language. When really mastered, it is meant to be appreciated subsidiarily, as a mode of

communication, rather than focally, as an object of analysis. Once one makes that leap and takes Latin seriously as language rather than merely as code, one confronts the issues of language acquisition that are also now absorbing professionals who teach those languages that lack an ancient classical literature. Here one can enter into the controversial theories being proposed today by theorists like Stephen Krashen, or one can begin more pragmatically by turning to the pedagogical tradition to see what has worked.

Since the theories are still being strenuously debated, let us take the pragmatic route at this point and ask, "What times and what methods have produced the greatest number of the most highly accomplished Latinists?" Judging by the literary output, I think we are inevitably led to the early modern period and to Renaissance schooling. There were no doubt many erroneous ideas about language then, and many fruitless, boring, painful failures in Latin instruction. Montaigne himself points out how his own Latin skills got worse when he began to study it in school. But one can not deny the bottom line, even if there might be reasons for not wanting to look at the truth: in the early modern period, many, many people learned to read and write Latin with a facility that far surpasses that which is typical of even the best students in our own times. Those times provided more extensive cultural support, it is true, and more curricular space for such language-learning, but on the other hand we have today an overwhelmingly vast advantage in materials, technology, leisure-time, communications, personal opportunities, institutional wealth (of schools, libraries, publishers), and accumulated experience (barring our bouts of amnesia). We should remember that great Latinists like Juan Luis Vives lacked even an adequate dictionary. Given all the helps available now, how far have we been able to bring our most motivated and interested students with the methods that we tend to use today? To what point of understanding does a four-year program usually take students? What quality of language mastery is typical in graduate programs? Again, the bottom line is such that we might want to avert our eyes, or perhaps use criteria that will allow result in less embarrassment.

We do not need to be *laudatores temporis acti* possessed by some quixotic hope for long-gone cultural conditions to see the potential pragmatic value of raising and trying to answer the following question: What was it that Renaissance pedagogues had methodologically that we seem to lack? It seems to me that we can find the most helpful clue in the short sketch of the history of Latin teaching given at the end of George Ganss's book, St. Ignatius's *Idea of a Jesuit University*. [5] There he speaks of how medieval and Renaissance methods were superior to our own insofar as those eras provided that "constant practice which begets automatic recall." [6] Young students were not given the classic works of Cicero or Livy until after they had "thoroughly established and practiced the memory associations to the point of spontaneous recall, and had benefited from four to six years of constant practice in speaking Latin." [7] At that point, such classics were far more approachable, and they could be appreciated as meaningful works in themselves rather than merely as challenges for one's translation-powers. Though we today can rarely afford the space in our curricula that was then given to Latin, the fact is that, in addition to the modern advantages that I have mentioned above, more years of education are now available to more people in society than ever before. And the question of time is in fact relative. Learning the grammar alone can be done rather economically, but if one then actually tries to read any substantial amount of material on the basis of such quickly attained knowledge, one discovers that a tremendous amount of time must now be spent plodding through the text. There is a certain coin that must be paid, sooner or later. Even if we expect to have only a very small absolute number of Latin readers, even if we renounce the tremendous curricular relevance that Latin might have in all liberal arts programs, we still must try to answer the pedagogical question "What method stands the best chance of bringing about the greatest mastery in the shortest space of time?"

Approached by enthusiasts who want to learn the language really well, professional classicists usually resort to the same advice: "Read, read, read." This directive is not enough to be very

helpful. An athletic coach might merely encourage a team to "Play, play, play," but excellence will probably not be achieved without skillful coaching and appropriate practices constructed with definite ends in mind. The injunction to read implies, quite rightly, that an unconscious reservoir of linguistic experience is necessary for the achievement of facility. But it is hard to believe that the best way to establish such a reservoir is by stumbling through texts all on one's own and armed only with an all-purpose vocabulary, a general knowledge of grammatical rules, and a dictionary or two. The clue provided by Ganss ultimately suggests that we spend much more time using very simple thought-units, in writing, in reading, and in conversation until we achieve a certain level of "automaticity," i.e., reliance on speedy subconscious linguistic processing. It may be time for us to rediscover the value of what might be called "primary *rhetorica*," that is, this easy communication. It can precede or accompany the work of *grammatica* without substituting for it. The key pedagogical strategy will be to make use of many short, simple sentences for a much longer time than we usually do. Our leading pedagogical maxim ought to be "Practice comprehension!" Following the implications of the humanist approach, we may find that there is a great pedagogical advantage in learning how to focus on phrase-length units that stand between the longer sentences of literary communications and the individual items in lists of essential vocabulary that almost all Latin textbooks highlight as some of the most important material to be learned. It may even be helpful to move away from a single-word lexical approach almost completely, toward a consistently phrase-based one in which words and forms are always learned in some sort of verbal context, facilitating the students' mental acts of "direct" understanding. Such an approach might be the best way to accelerate the process of establishing the imaginal and affective components of the vocabulary. Somehow we must effect a correspondence not between Latin word and English word as much as between the Latin expressions and the sensuous basis of such expressions. This too is a point that follows upon basic Renaissance insights, from humanists like Vives and that pioneer in pedagogical multimedia, Comenius.

The general direction I have been taking largely parallels some of the thinking presented in an excellent article cited by Davis and Abbott in their response to Ball and Ellsworth. In "Learning Process and Exercise Sequencing in Latin Instruction" Andrea Webb Deagon suggests that

exercises should (1) be simple enough to keep anxiety levels low and develop automatic responses; (2) through context, reinforce the vocabulary and syntax of the lesson and build the idea of Latin as a meaning; (3) become gradually more demanding. [8]

Grammatica is of course not at all ruled out by such an approach. It could rather be enhanced through this development of an instinctual feel for the most common patterns of the language.

There already exist course materials that attempt to incorporate some of the wisdom of the humanist approach, though perhaps none that goes as far as we might reasonably expect. It does not seem to me utopian to suggest the development of introductory textbooks that would help students to read and to produce many times what they might tend to average in most programs today. Many short, simple, phrases and sentences can get us there, perhaps in conjunction with something that will increase linguistic experience considerably: using Latin as the language of communication in class. Even if few of us are ready to leap into such a practice, it is an avenue that needs to be explored if we really do take language-mastery as our goal. It matters little that we can not reproduce exactly what a Roman might say in a contemporary setting or that our sentences will be brief and our vocabulary strange: the point is that patterns of meaning and verbal structures are being reinforced and mastered. Later on, the students' progressive understanding of the language will include precisely that realization that the ancient Roman might not speak of what a Renaissance writer might. In all such experiments language as a living means of communication must be allowed a certain "play." Conversational practice-books were an old pedagogical aid that received renewed prominence in the Renaissance through the efforts of Vives, Erasmus, Cordier,

and many others. It is a method that we should not reject until we believe that we can be happy with the "bottom line" that I mentioned above. The genre has recently been revived by John C. Traupman, with his *Conversational Latin for Oral Proficiency*. [9]

Some will still prefer using more traditional patterns and texts to incorporating an oral component into their teaching. Certainly other types of mediation between the dominant pedagogical models are indeed possible, following the leading clue that I have highlighted above. The *Oxford Latin Course* is a series that in effect attempts just that type of mediation, although the learning curve of the first edition might still have been a bit too ambitious for many. [10] Some are no doubt happy with what is currently available: the philological model might be giving them all that they most want. But those who find such an approach inadequate should discover each other and corporately develop the alternative one. If well elaborated, humanistic solutions may well have a better chance of minimizing frustration and maximizing delight so that the absolute numbers of Latin readers will tend to rise rather than to fall. The wider popularization of humanistic pedagogical methods will eventually result not only in greater numbers of people who have had direct engagement with important documents of the world's history, but in a greater number of highly skilled philologists than we have today. More widespread interest and ability can only create more of a supply as well as more of a demand for such professionals.

I hope that I have given here something at both ends of a spectrum that extends from the macro-level of professional self-concept and orientation to the micro-level of pedagogical maneuvering. I have wanted to highlight how these two ends can be quite closely linked with each other, our methodological choices being tied to the understanding of what is desired, feasible, and worth attempting. Ultimately they are implicated in a set of larger though often tacit purposes and in some kind of educational vision. There are solid common-sense reasons for cultivating the humanistic model today, and larger educational ones as well. My reflections are not meant to be taken as some kind of nostalgic attempt to re-live the Italian Renaissance. They rather aim at catching us up with a "cutting edge" in Latin pedagogy that we have long lost sight of. Our progressivistic age always wants improvements, but it must be humble enough to admit when it must return to the past to find them. The much-praised "production of new knowledge" will often not occur without an adequate recovery of old knowledge. How well we can adapt Renaissance insights is yet to be seen. We may finally have more in common with that earlier period than we at first realize. Following a long popular neglect of the classical language arts, that time was greatly stimulated by the new print technologies that had arisen. Today's cybernetic wonders may in a similar way help us to replicate and to surpass the Renaissance's humanistic and philological achievements, as we recover old and discover new ways to achieve the mastery-and the exuberance-that has so long eluded so many generations.

Notes

1 The *Modern Language Journal* 80, number 1 (1996) presents an article by Robert J. Ball and J. D. Ellsworth, "The Emperor's New Clothes: Hyperreality and the Study of Latin," pp. 77-84, and a response by Martha G. Abbott and Sally Davis, "Hyperreality and the Study of Latin: Living in a Fairy Tale World," pp. 85-86.

2 Cf. Walter J. Ong, S.J., *Orality and Literacy* (London and New York: Methuen, 1982) pp. 112-115. Also see the same author's *Interfaces of the Word* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1977) p. 25.

3 This is the date that I have been given for the last disputation at the Jesuit scholasticate at Spring Hill College in Mobile, Alabama.

4 Alfred North Whitehead, "The Place of Classics in Education" in *The Aims of Education and Other Essays* (New York: The Free Press, 1957, originally 1929), p. 70.

5 George Ganss, S.J., "A Historical Sketch of the Teaching of Latin," Appendix 1 in *St. Ignatius's Idea of a Jesuit University* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: The Marquette University Press, 2nd edition, 1956), pp. 218-258.

6 Ibid., p. 222.

7 Ibid., p. 225.

8 Andrea Webb Deagon, "Learning Process and Exercise Sequencing in Latin Instruction," *The Classical Journal* 87 (1991), p. 69.

9 John C. Traupman, *Conversational Latin for Oral Proficiency* (Wauconda, Illinois: Bolchazy-Carducci, 1996).

10 Maurice Balme and James Morwood, *Oxford Latin Course* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).