

“The Teaching of Elementary Latin”

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[When your editor told me she wanted to reprint this article or speech (she wasn't sure which and neither am I) I was bemused. It had completely passed from my memory: the occasion is still buried in darkness. As it happened, I had just been putting on paper for teaching candidates my thoughts on the same subject. To my relief, they turned out to be much the same. The 1967 version had to be more emphatic. People were less informed about such things in those days, and rhetoric was sharper. The insanity of student control of the syllabus (and consequent abandonment of language requirements) was still supported by renegade educators, and principles had to be expressed forcibly. But, gentle or harsh, tactful or crude, the contents of this piece are still part of me, twenty-seven years after. --GM]

To some of you, it may seem a little ambitious to try and cover a subject like this comprehensively in fifteen minutes. In a situation like this, a speaker can fall into two different traps. The first is to talk in generalities, truisms, platitudes, to waffle away about the subject as a whole. The second is to take something very, very small and try to deal with it in a more exhaustive and, perhaps, just as tedious a fashion. I intend to fall into both of these traps.

Let's start with the generalities, the truisms. There is one thing which is worth saying time and time again, even if it has already been said, so very ably, just some twenty minutes ago. It is this. The aim of learning Latin is to be able to read what is written in Latin.

Let's have that again. The aim of learning Latin is to be able to read what is written in Latin.

And if that seems as much of a truism to you as some of your faces seem to suggest, let me remind you of a few of the other aims that are so often proposed.

The purpose of learning Latin is not to help you with your English. If you want to be helped with your English, I strongly recommend that you go away and study some English. And incidentally, in the process you might find that English grammar is nothing like the variety which we have been deceived and tricked over the last six hundred years into thinking that it is.

Again, the aim of Latin is not to help you learn other foreign languages. If you want to study Italian or French or Spanish, the best thing that you can do is to go away and study Italian, or French, or Spanish. Or, if you think that some comprehensive method can be found for dealing with all three at once, let me suggest that a course in linguistics or, in a more specialized way, Romance linguistics, might be the best solution for your particular problem.

The aim of learning Latin is not to help your reasoning powers. Now this is one that we hear so very often, and I think that if we analyze the argument, it would go something like this: "Latin is a language in which you have to carry out all the time a process of analysis and synthesis. Therefore, since most thought is a process of analysis and synthesis, Latin gives us somehow a special training in this peculiar process." Well, even if you believe in the carry-over of

training--something which modern psychologists have led us to doubt very severely--yet, I suggest that this is an argument you do not advance to anyone you want to teach Latin to. Because, sooner or later, somebody is going to turn around and say, "Well, why not learn Russian? Russian is a language of the same pattern as Latin, that demands a process, a constant process, of analysis and synthesis--and beside all that, it's got the extra advantage that you are able to do frightfully useful things in it--like monitoring airplane pilots' conversations and things like that. And again, somebody may turn around and say, "Why this particular process of thinking? Why not Chinese?"--which, with its emphasis on isolating and arranging, is very much more closely analogous to the processes needed in modern computer technology. This is an argument to avoid, and avoid like poison.

The aim of learning Latin is not to help you with your knowledge of literature, either in English or other languages. If you really think that it is important to know about mythological allusions, then my suggestion is that you go and take a course in mythology or, even better, that you wait until the situation arises and then look up the particular point that puzzles you in any reputable classical dictionary.

The next proposed aim is very seductive, and, for that reason, is more dangerous than the others. "The aim of learning Latin is to teach you about the ancient world." Of course, this is the ultimate aim; this is the further aim; this is the remote aim--but it is too remote for the purposes of our elementary Latin teaching because, again, you are going to get someone to turn around and say to you, (and how on earth could we possibly combat this argument) "Why can't I spend my two years of Latin in a course on the Classical World--a course with all the attractions (meretricious or genuine) of slides, records, illustrated books, architectural models and all the rest of it?" You will find this a very difficult argument to combat, because it happens to be true.

And lastly--this is hardly worth saying but perhaps it needs to be said--the aim of learning Latin is not to teach you to write Latin, nor yet to speak Latin. I think I could hardly bear to elaborate this argument; and so, in completing the generalities, let me say what I started with:

The aim of learning Latin is to be able to read what is written in Latin.

Now, let us suppose that you are--and by your very presence at a meeting of this sort I am almost certain that you are--sympathetic, regenerate, enlightened teachers; that is, that you agree with all that I have just been saying. And more than this--that you accept the logical development that the best way to teach a person to read Latin is to read Latin.

Now, sooner or later, in doing this, it's very likely that you are going to find a difficulty of technique. You see, the old traditional lesson was so easy in a way. First you translated some Latin into English and then you were asked to do various clever things like identifying various breeds of subjunctives and ablatives and things like that and then you perhaps chanted a little and then you translated a little from English into Latin, and, before you knew it, the fifty minutes was gone. There was a certain pattern in it, a certain crazy pattern but at least a varied pattern.

Now, if you teach a person to read Latin by reading Latin, you may very well find that your

lessons can become all translation. In the rest of this talk, I would like to suggest some techniques which may be used to vary this potentially dull pattern, techniques which are far more directly connected with the reading-understanding process than some of the elements of the old traditional lesson.

I am not putting these techniques in any order of simplicity or of effectiveness or importance--I just want to suggest the variety of means which any good Latin teacher will have at his disposal for the teaching of reading and understanding.

The first technique might be called "information-retrieval," and since the vast majority of reading is, in fact, information-retrieval, this can be called the basic technique of the lot. Suppose we have a couple of chapters of Eutropius in front of us. The student is asked, without translating, quite simply "What improvements were made to the city of Rome at this particular period?" or "Who was the King after Numa?" or questions of this sort.

A variation of this is when the student is asked to organize the information that he has in the form of a table or diagram. Using this same text of Eutropius or perhaps a few more chapters--(and I would stress and keep on stressing how important it is that the material in front of the student is of some magnitude and continuity)--using this sort of material, he could be asked to make a time-diagram of the early kings of Rome. The diagram might take the form of a map. There are enough battles described in Roman writers for a student to draw a simple sketch map of the enemy forces and the Roman forces and where the camp and the mountain and the hills were,--just the sort of thing that we are used to seeing in text books, but twenty times more valuable if it comes out of the student's own reading. He could read Pliny's letter about his villa and then go away and draw a diagram of Pliny's villa. (I wonder how many of the present audience could do that with any accuracy.) An illustration to a scene from some Latin poetry is always valuable, provided that the student is prepared to justify each detail in his illustration by close reference to the text.

A variety of the information-retrieval exercise is to set a pupil a problem and then ask him to list the irrelevant facts in the piece of Latin in front of him. Suppose he has a passage about the history of a family, how so-and-so was born in such a year and what he did and how his grandson became a consul and had two famous sons and this sort of thing. If the main problem were to draw a dated family tree of this group, then the incidental problem would be to list the irrelevant points of information: that one of the family had a beautiful tomb, or another died of lumbago in the swamps near Marseille.

From the irrelevant, it is just a short step to the impossible. An exercise could easily be devised in which the student was asked to find the impossibilities: that so-and-so won a battle thirty years before he was born.

Yet another variety of this technique might be called "retrieval under pressure." It looks something like this. You would have a mimeographed sheet. On one side of it is your Latin passage. The teacher or one of his students reads the passage through, not so much to practice the sound of Latin, (which, incidentally, I consider to be one of the most important things in the

teaching of the language), but simply to pace the student through the piece so that he doesn't linger over any difficulties, but learns to take the matter as a whole. Then, at a certain signal from the teacher, he turns over the page and, for sixty seconds say, he is allowed to study the questions on the other side. Some of them he may be able to answer immediately, but whether he can or not, at the end of sixty seconds he turns back and the passage is read again. At the end of the second reading, he turns to the back of the page and answers anything he can, and then, after another sixty seconds, again to the front; and so the process goes on, four or five times. This technique can, used occasionally, give fifteen or twenty minutes of intensity and concentration of a sort that you very rarely get in a classroom.

I have failed to find a convenient name for the next technique which is suggested. It consists roughly of asking the pupil not what is in a sentence but what is the question implied by a sentence. At a very elementary level, we can say that if we take the three Latin words *rex*, *filium*, *occidit*, and arrange them in all their permutations, they could potentially answer the following English questions: "What happened?" "Who killed his son?" "What did the king do to his son?" "Who did the king kill?" (you notice the modern grammar!) "Who did what, and who on earth did he do it to?" This sort of exercise at an early stage can lead the student to have some comprehension of what Latin emphasis means.

I must confess that I have very serious doubts about the next technique that I should suggest, the *precis* of a Latin narrative. This is a very time-honored and reputable technique, and in France, as you may know, it is made the basis of a great deal of classics teaching. But I somehow feel that in the conditions of modern secondary-school teaching, you may find yourself spending more time on telling your pupils what a *precis* is than the whole process is worth.

The writing of dramatization from a piece of narrative is an old and very useful exercise. More profitable, I think, as far as Latin poetry is concerned is the writing of a film scenario. This is particularly useful in reading Vergil (and I may say that you can read Vergil with your students at a much earlier stage than is usual with the traditional methods). Take, for example, the scene of the serpents coming across the sea to devour Laocoon, or the scene where Sinon is surrounded by the inimical Trojans. If you go back and reread these, you will find out, I am sure, how very suitable they are for film treatment. The cutting between one face and another, the cutting between the individual and the crowd, between the close shot and the long shot, they are all there. They would delight any modern film director. And the greatest virtue of this exercise is that it forces you and your students to take the Latin poetry in the way in which it is written, and not to go around jigsaw-puzzling at it, looking for a verb here and a noun there.

It may seem to you hardly worth talking about the next technique because it is one which I feel sure every one of you uses every day and every lesson that you are in the classroom. That is to say, the technique of questioning. Yet I wonder how many Latin teachers are really conscious of the level at which their questions on a Latin text are being directed.

To take an example: let us suppose that your students have in front of them a text about Pliny and Vesuvius. I hope it's going to be something pretty near the original--perhaps the original itself, but let us suppose at least that they have some Latin in front of them which might run, roughly:

"He asked for his slippers and went up to a place from which he could see a huge cloud in the shape of a pine tree." Let's imagine various levels of questioning on this passage.

The first case would be with a class which just simply hasn't seen this before. After they've had it read, you could say something like this: "And so, he asked for his slippers and then he went up, where?--to a place--yes, that's right, from which he could see a huge--cloud--yes, good, and the cloud was in the shape of--a pine tree." All that you have asked from the class is that they should be following the text and that they should be supplying occasional one word answers.

At a rather higher level, the questioning might go like this. "And then he asked for his slippers, and then what did he do?--yes, he went up to a place; from which he could see, what did he see?--a cloud--what sort of cloud?--a huge cloud. Yes, a huge cloud; what's it like?--it's in the shape--in the shape of what?--in the shape of a pine tree." All that you are doing here is increasing the unit of comprehension from one word to two.

The next level of questioning might run something like this: "He asked for his slippers--(you see, they'll never come across that particular word again so why bother about it!)--he asked for his slippers, and then what did he do?--he went up to a place.-- Yes; from which he could see, what did he see? and you don't pause until you get to the whole unit of "a huge cloud in the shape of a pine tree." You are here again increasing the unit of comprehension.

And you notice how in all these stages, you are avoiding the relative difficulty in the sentence: "from which he could see." There are two elements involved in teaching Latin. One is to give the student the technical equipment to read, and the second, and by no means the less important, is to give him the feeling that he can read. We know he can't, perhaps; but if he feels that he can read, then he goes on and sooner or later he will read.

The top level of questioning would be "What happened from the time that Pliny asked for his slippers to the time that he ordered the cutter to be fitted out?"

This may all seem familiar, even simplistic. But all that I am really asking is that at every stage of your questioning you are quite certain and quite conscious of what level you are using. This, I may say, is a consciousness which is remarkably absent in most Latin textbooks.

Along with all these, there are the questions which are designed to elicit the students' sympathy and second-degree understanding of the text. We have already started with this on our emphasis exercises and our scenario-writing, and now we must continue with questions like "Why does the author use this word instead of that?" or "What are the points which the author is trying to emphasize in this particular sentence?"

And, finally, the ultimate, supreme question is "What is he trying to say, and does he say it well?"

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