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THE ROMAN ROAD TO READING
LATIN

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THE ROMAN ROAD TO READING LATIN¹

Can you learn to read Latin better than a Roman? Well, if you study how the Romans learned to read, you can't but observe this: we do have advantages over them. One of them is exemplified by this convention: I didn't know these meetings were so much fun. This is *ludus*. *Ludus* was, of course, the Roman word for 'fun,' for 'game,' or 'play.' And it also meant school, and that was a puzzle the Romans could never figure out. They knew better: school was serious, school was earnest: 'discipline' used to mean 'learning,' you know. That one word, *ludus*, should have such obviously opposite meanings simply begged for explanation. One Roman named Varro, who lived at the same time as Cicero and who loved etymologies, even made up a negative etymology to cover it, something like 'ludus quia non luditur,' which I roughly translate 'they call it fun and games because it's not.'

They typically would send a child off to school to learn to read about the age of seven. 'And so,' Saint Augustine recalls in his *Confessions*, 'my parents sent me off to school to learn to read, an art I could see no use to.' Nowadays, of course, there's much discussion of prayer in the schools, in or out. Impossible then and now to keep it out: there could always be someone like Saint Augustine, who used to pray 'please may I not make a stupid blunder and get whopped.' Juvenal even used 'to get slapped' to mean 'go to school and get an education.' One grown-up Roman is even recorded in the literature as asking, 'you don't expect me to hold out my hands for the whip just like at school, do you?' The Romans had this wonderful active first conjugation verb *vapulare*, to get a cuffing, slapping, or whipping. Slaves and schoolboys had occasion to use it. Or, in the words of Saint Augustine, 'si segnīs essem in discendo vapulabam.' 'If I was slow in learning, I'd get whopped.' Learning to read Latin was no fun at all for the Romans, and there, we have the advantage of them. Let's continue looking at how a Roman learned to read, and see what else we may have going for us.

We have to begin with a place where the Roman schoolchild had the advantage of us. He went to school already knowing a substantial amount of Latin, spoken Latin. That was all right: Saint Augustine recalls how nice it was to learn to speak Latin at home, from the near ones and dear ones. But then they went to school, where the challenge was to take the sounds and match them up to the strange markings on the tablets; just the reverse of the challenge facing us, to take the markings and understand them as language.

The Latin writers on grammar are quite surprising to a modern reader. They are exacting in the very basic details: if you could visit their Roman schoolroom, you would see that they drilled the students on the pronunciation of each

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of the letters, even teaching — or beating into their heads — the difference between mutes and sonants, as well as consonants and vowels, semi-vowels. And the students would have to chant the syllables, every single one of them that occurred in the Latin language, until they got them all right. ‘In syllabis nullum compedium est’ writes Quintilian, ‘in syllables, there’s no short cut.’ You have to make them drill them all. And how would you drill all the syllables? You would have to take each consonant and consonant cluster and successively place the vowels and diphthongs after each one. The drill began ‘ba, be, bi,’ and so on.

This brings us to an important observation: next time someone asks you, ‘it’s a dead language, so how do you know how they pronounced it?’ here’s the ready answer, and the best one: ‘because they told us.’ Because of the extreme attention paid to the fundamental details, the pronunciation of the vowels and consonants and consonant clusters is a matter of record: the titles typical for grammar books are illustrative. Terentianus Maurus, for instance, titled his *De Litteris, Syllabis, Pedibus, Et Metris*. Donatus, a later famous grammarian, titled his work *De Litteris, Syllabis, Pedibus Et Tonis*.

This brings us to a second advantage — there are only two — that the Roman schoolchild had over the modern student: spelling. The Romans believed as Quintilian put it, ‘a word should be spelled the way it is pronounced,’ and that is how it was done. By Quintilian’s time, for instance, all the ae’s of the first declension endings were already pronounced as e’s, and that, Quintilian tells us, is how they spelled them. (Curiously, the editors of the texts have edited all the e’s he wrote into ae’s). The Roman schoolchild, at least, had no troubles with spelling — none of this o-u-g-h nonsense for both bough and rough. That’s tough, and the Roman schoolchild didn’t have to put up with any of it.

Next, once they had mastered the skill of matching what they said with the symbols they could see and write down, they had to drill the cases. ‘What?’ I hear you asking, ‘the Roman kids had to learn cases? Consciously?’ Yes, I answer, just like you, for cases are the way Latin means. If you didn’t know cases, you couldn’t understand, and if you didn’t know where to put them, you couldn’t make yourself understood.

Quintilian said it best: ‘nomina declinare et verba in primis pueri sciunt.’ ‘In the first place, you got to have your kids know the cases,’ he said, mostly because any teachers who wanted to show off their students by having them strut their stuff in the later stages ‘would trip their students with what they thought would be a shortcut.’ In other words, drilling the cases was much like using the stepping stones across a stream: step to each one and you’d get across; try to skip one, and you ran a very serious chance of slipping, falling in, getting dripping wet, and having to start all over again into the bargain.

The importance of case-mastery for Romans was so primal that a native speaker of Latin could not understand what was being acted out in front of him if he couldn’t hear the case-endings. My evidence for this is architectural. Vitruvius gives careful instructions for the building of a theater, and, explaining how one has to be built, he explains why it has to be built that way. I’ll skip the architectural instructions and go straight to his reason: ‘if you don’t, the case-endings will be lost in the upper rows.’ Without the case-endings, comprehension was not possible.

Given, then, that they had to learn and drill cases, we must ask how they went about it. They went about it with much less system than we have at present. Simply put, this is one of the places where advances have been made. They went by analogy and nominatives. This was just fine if you knew *amica* and went to *amurca*, and you would get *amurca* right *sine vapulando*. But the Romans themselves recognized troubles, complaining of their own language that, for instance, *pater* and *aper* went quite differently. Picture the poor school child confidently saying 'pater, pater (they used the vocative), patris, patri, patrem, patre,' the response being a pat on the head; and then being asked to do *aper*: 'aper, aper (all right so far), apri. . .'

'(Whop!).'

And some of the words they commonly used had their dark and unexplored fringes, simply because the lack of conscious system left ignorance. Quintilian at one point asks, 'and for that matter, what is the genitive plural of *spes*, or the dative singular of *species*?'

Well we automatically put them in the fifth declension, reach in, and pull out the answers. I tell you that if you are confidently and promptly able to decline *silva*, *hortus*, *bellum*, *consul*, *tempus*, *navis*, *mare*, *portus*, *cornu*, and *dies*, you have the system down. We now, of course, decline not by the nominatives, but by the bases, and once we can put a word in the first, second, second neuter, third consonant stem, third i-stem, third neuter i-stem, fourth, fourth neuter, or fifth declension, we can decline the thing with more confidence than a Roman, even a Roman professor, for that is what Quintilian was. The passage of time has here made the system which existed visible and useable, with the result that the all-important matter of the cases can, surprising though it sound, be easier for us than for a native speaker of Latin.

And what about verbs? The alert listener will have noticed that Quintilian used the same verb, *declinare*, to apply to both verbs and nouns. The separate concept of doing something different to a verb simply had not come in by Quintilian's time. It comes in later, with the grammarians of the fourth century. How did they 'decline' a verb? 'Quis loquitur, ad quem loquitur, de quo loquitur.' It was not thought of as a separate thing from the nouns. Since they had no name for it, they had no idea, so it should not be surprising that they had no system for the idea: throughout the entire classical period, including both 'golden age' and 'silver' Latin, they had no numbered conjugations. When speaking of a verb, they would give the first and second person singular, present active: *facio*, *facis*, or *amo*, *amas*. You notice that this would sort out first, second, and third conjugations for you, but it would do nothing about third i-stem. Significantly, when the grammarians have conjugations and a numbered set of them, they still lack third i-stem.

The result of this was confusion. The Romans were, in fact, sometimes confused and embarrassed. Saint Augustine at one point confesses, 'I still don't know whether the passive infinitive of *cupio* is *cupi* or *cupiri*.' And this is a principal difference between third i-stem and fourth conjugations. Lack of the concept meant that even Saint Augustine, who at one point in his checkered career had actually taught grammar school, simply wouldn't know things like that.

Here again, the state of the art has advanced — the stream of succeeding years has made the system more clear and more visible. It is, in fact, easier now to master Latin verbs: we can do the Latin verb system better and more confidently than a Roman schoolteacher, let alone the Roman schoolboy.

Suppose now that we'd got the Roman schoolchild fixed up with his cases and verbs, and now he is reading. How is he doing it? Out loud, yes. out loud. Legend has it that Julius Caesar invented the art of reading silently. Even if he did, it didn't take, and didn't become the normal way. Generally, a writer had to specify that someone was reading silently, or it would be assumed that the reading was being done out loud. This persisted for hundreds of years, so that, if you ran into someone who was reading silently, you would (one) be surprised, and (two) be puzzled enough to have to figure out why. I have a story to tell to illustrate that.

Saint Augustine once walked by the room of a friend and noticed that his friend had a book in front of him but wasn't saying anything. He realized his friend was reading silently, and then stopped to puzzle it out. Why would his friend be doing it? The answer he came up with was that if the reader were reading out loud, anyone who heard would feel invited to come in and discuss the text with him. Therefore, since he was reading silently, he did not want to be disturbed.

Let us review some steps. First, of course, comes speech. Then, through speech, comes the equation of sounds with letters. Then, faced with the letters, one can generate the sounds. This is where the Romans generally stopped. This level limits your reading speed to the speed of speech. Finally, if you have the concept that you can read while keeping your mouth shut, you remove a barrier, and now your only limit is how fast the eyes can be pushed down the page while keeping the mind in tow. Here again, the state of the art has advanced.

Finally, we have readable texts. The native speakers of Latin had to work their way through someone's handwriting. We have printing and uniformity of text: a printed page is simply easier to read than any manuscript style that I, for one, have ever seen.

We have, in sum, five big advantages over the native speakers of Latin when it comes to learning to read their language. First, we have fun at it: nobody's going to hit you. Second, we can beat them at their own cases. Third, we can beat them at their own verbs. We can all read with our mouths shut, and we have readable texts. In these five ways, the state of the art has advanced, and we can advance with it. *Can* we learn to read Latin better than a Roman? Yes.

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