THE STUDY OF LITERARY ANALYSIS VIA LATIN LITERATURE

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That classical language should be a component to classical education is not in dispute. Most schools which brandish the title classical will include at least a few years of a classical language, usually Latin. What is debated is just how many years and to what extent students should study classical languages. The answer to that question lies within the end goal or the *telos* of such study. Is the purpose to improve vocabulary or better understand the rudiments of grammar? If so, then two or three years are indeed sufficient. I would argue, however, that there is a great treasury to be gained in studying a classical language long enough and thoroughly enough to study the riches contained within the original words and composition of Latin literature.

The study of Latin continued long past the fall of Rome, through the Middle Ages, beyond the Renaissance, and into the modern era not for the sake of morphology and derivatives, but so that educated men and women could study the writings of Rome's orators and poets as they crafted their various *magna opera*. These works were not merely words on a page, but works of art thoughtfully constructed from carefully chosen words, arranged with skill to wield power and stir the heart. To read a translator's modern interpretation is to see through a glass dimly. To read the work as originally penned is to meet with the author himself. Students of such literature read not only for pleasure's sake, but also for the purpose of learning how to craft such work themselves. By reading these original pieces, students are permitted to sit at the feet of these skilled craftsmen and learn more diligently their skill and technique so their own writing may benefit. Students do not learn such lessons simply by reading a work. They learn through the careful study and literary analysis of these masterpieces.

What is literary analysis? Literary analysis is not the summary of a work. All too often students, and sometimes teachers, misunderstand this crucial point. A mere synopsis only retells the basic plot or main message of a composition. Such summaries overlook the subtleties of craftsmanship. How is the message conveyed? What makes it effective? Where is its power, its sharp bite? These are the types of questions an analysis of literature seeks to answer. Literary analysis is an exploration of a writer's interpretation or presentation of an event or idea.

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Such analysis requires the study of literary devices, word choices, and syntactical structures the author uses to create an image in the reader's mind or solicit an emotion from within the reader's soul. The analysis seeks to answer the question why and for what purpose the author used such words and devices to create these images.

These are the very questions we must teach students to ask as they read any work—classical or otherwise. We need to train these young minds to discern the design and intent of any author, and the literature of classical Latin is an excellent training ground. For the Romans knew the pen was at least as mighty as the sword, and the man who knew how to wield its power could command legions. Why, therefore, does a master orator choose the words he uses? Why does he choose to arrange them in a certain manner of phrasing? Who better to study for such purposes than masters of oratory and prose such as Cicero or Augustine? Furthermore, students ought to learn how words can take shape on a page in order to create images and convey emotion, and in so doing turn hearts. What teacher for such lessons could be found who compares to the poetics of Vergil or Horace? These masters were the teachers of orators and poets for centuries. These are the same teachers our classrooms should invite to share the lessons of literary composition.

Certainly teachers of the modern era may choose English prose and poetry as their subject, or they may choose English translations of classical works. We must, however, take to heart the warning that there truly is something lost in translation. Flavors of words and shades of meaning are lost when a translator attempts to reinterpret someone else's thoughts into his own language. Latin's loose word order allows for a juxtaposition of words that is often difficult to accomplish in English. Certain literary devices appear more commonly in classical Latin than in more modern renditions of English. In short, there are some valuable aspects of Latin literature that are difficult and even impossible to convey in English.

Moreover, there is great value to be found in asking students to closely study the literature in a language with which they are not overly familiar. A teacher may assign the reading of an oration by Churchill or a poem by Milton for the purpose of analysis and discussion. At times, however, students may find it tempting to slip into the passive reading of such a passage. Students might gloss over words and phrases and still come away with an overarching sense of the passage simply because they are so comfortable with their native language. Even if they find the passage difficult, because of their familiarity with the language, they might be able to get by with a skimmed reading. Such is not often the case with an ancient language. The analysis of literature in a foreign tongue may be likened to resistance training. The exercises that might come easily in the open air are made harder by repeating those same exercises – even simple tasks—in water. The unfamiliar surrounding slows down the exercise, causing the muscles to work harder and in a more focused manner. So also reading is often slowed, and careful study becomes more focused when analyzing the literature of a classical language.

Great opportunity for this training in literature is afforded through the Advanced Placement courses in Latin as created by the College Board[1]. Indeed, this course requires essays of literary analysis. It would be a terrible shame, however, to wait until this advanced level in which fewer than all students would take part. It is far better to begin integrating discussions and compositions in literary analysis at the earliest possible opportunity when all can benefit. Many curricula are available which offer students the opportunity to read authentic Latin literature while still in grammatical studies[2]. Lessons in analysis can begin using the passages found in such texts with discussions on the simple topic of vocabulary. Select a few words for exploration and discuss the variety of meanings a dictionary assigns the word. Discuss with the class the best possible meaning for the context. Consider together Latin synonyms (or even English synonyms in translation). Ask students why they think the author chose a particular word. There is not always one correct answer (though sometimes

there is only one correct answer). More important than the answer, is that students begin learning to ask this question.

As the class reads passages aloud, consider together the arrangement of the words. Word order for Latin is fluid and the author has the luxury of placing words first or last for emphasis. Students can readily discern literary devices such as anaphora, asyndeton and polysyndeton, and discuss their impact on the passage. Note how Tertullian uses asyndeton in the following excerpt from his Apologetic to illustrate how the Christians, though a recently formed group, are everywhere.[3]

> *Hesterni sumus, et vestra omnia implevimus: urbes, insulas, castella, oppida, conciliabula, castra ipsa, tribus, decurias, palatium, senatum, forum; sola vobis reliquimus templa. (Liber Apologeticus, XXXVII)*

As students advance, they will begin to see how authors employ more complex devices such as hyperbaton, chiasmus, and synchisis to create emphasis or paint images. The placement of *sola . . . templa* in the above quote from Tertullian is an intriguing example of hyperbaton. Take for another example of syntax the following verse from Ovid's Metamorphoses.[4]

> *solis ab occasu solis quaerebat ad ortus (Metamorphoses, V.445)*

Note the syntactical pattern used to portray the setting of the sun and its rising. Even more, note how the seeker interrupts that pattern. The words appear to mimic the orb of the sun around a confused mother seeking her daughter to the ends of the earth. Such word imagery beautifully constructed here is difficult to imitate in English. And yet, such discussions should cause students to begin to consider word arrangement more carefully, both as a reader and as a writer.

As students' grammatical knowledge and reading ability increase, so also should the opportunities for literary discussion and deeper analysis. Move students from the discussion of words and phrases to whole passages. Begin to discuss and then compose essays on the development of characters and themes within a larger work. Train the students to cite passages in a manner that will empower their own analysis of the literature they are reading. Again, the AP Latin course will naturally lend itself to such study, but again classical schools would do well to incorporate this valuable study into their own Latin literature classes. Creating such lessons, and even whole classes within the curriculum, will allow teachers the opportunity to select works important to the *cursus vitae* of the school. The oratory styles of Cicero may be studied alongside St. Augustine or even Queen Elizabeth. St. Augustine's confession may be read and compared to that of St. Patrick, written less than a century later. The poetry of Catullus and Vergil can be compared with the poetry they inspired in Tennyson and Milton. In allowing students the opportunity to learn the art of literary analysis through Latin literature, we equip them with the knowledge and skill to engage in an exploration of texts, both secular and sacred, beyond any limitations of age or genre.

Note: Karen Moore will offer a presentation on Literary Analysis via Latin Literature at the 2014 ACCS Conference in Orlando, Florida. This presentation will expound upon the ideas set forth in this article as well as offer sample lessons for such study.

NOTES:

1. AP Latin College Board https://apstudent.collegeboard.org/apcourse/ap-latin.

2. Some recommended grammar texts containing selections of *Latin literature: Latin Alive Series* by Moore & DuBose, *Introduction to Latin* by Shelmerdine, *Wheelock's Latin* by Wheelock and LeFleur.

3. *Hesterni sumus, et vestra omnia implevimus: urbes, insulas, castella, oppida, conciliabula, castra ipsa, tribus,*

decurias, palatium, senatum, forum; sola vobis reliquimus templa.—We are of yesterday, and we filled all that is yours: cities, islands, fortresses, towns, marketplaces, the very army camp, tribes, companies, the palace, the Senate, the Forum, for you we left the temples alone (Tertullian's *Liber Apologeticus*, Chapter 37). This quotation is taken from a reading selection in *Latin Alive, Book 2*.

4. *solis ab occasu solis quaerebat ad ortus*—from the setting of the sun to the rising of the sun she was seeking (Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Book V, line 445). This line is taken from a reading selection in *Latin Alive, Book 3*.