How 'Bout Them Apples

by Eric Indgjerd

In an address titled, "The Greatest Single Defect of My Own Latin Education," Dorothy Sayers confessed the lamentable fact that, although she had started upon Latin at the ripe young age of seven—her headmaster father at the helm—and had gone on to Oxford to continue her study for many years under the eminently patient and snuff-pinching Mr. Herbert May, classical Latin "never seemed more than a kind of jig-saw" to her. Sayers, who considered her finest work to be the English translation from the medieval Italian of Dante's *Divina Comoedia*, further bemoaned the snail's pace with which she used to bumble her way from one end of a Latin verse to another by saying: "The shape of the thing as a story or a poem was lost in the slow grubbing over the ground. I could not then, much less since, ever read any passage of classical Latin swiftly, or by the eye; although in my early teens I could read and write French almost as quickly and correctly as English; and was not far behind in German."[1]

So how was it that the word-wielding and polyglot Sayers, "born with the gift of tongues," should find herself so tongue-tied in Latin after almost twenty years of instruction? Why, after two decades of hard study, such sparse, worm-eaten and blighted linguistic fruit? Reasons offered in her speech, originally delivered to The Association for the Reform of Latin Teaching founded by W. H. D. Rouse, were manifold: a pitiable lack of training to converse in Latin; a parsing method by which Latin verses were torn limb from limb and reassembled English-like for the modern reader; haste, on the part of instructors, to get to Golden Agers like Virgil and Cicero "to the almost total neglect" of fifteen Christian centuries' worth of less difficult, more accessible and equally noble Latin literature; and textbooks that introduced the vocative of first declension nouns with phrases like "O, table!"

So how was it that the word-wielding and polyglot Sayers, "born with the gift of tongues," should find herself so tongue-tied in Latin after almost twenty years of instruction?

Some fifty years later, like-minded classicist Luigi Miraglia, undoubtedly one of the finest Latin instructors in the world today currently teaching in Naples at the Accademia Vivarium Novum and whose dynamic lessons, conducted almost entirely in Latin, are available for all to see on YouTube,[2] echoes Sayers' woes as he sums up a hundred years of unfruitful Latin pedagogy in Italy in an article titled, "How Latin Is Not Taught."[3] Miraglia there asserts that "the method adopted in the Italian centers to teach the classical languages is the most difficult and the least productive; it is little useful in arriving at an understanding of the language and even less useful for an understanding of the literary spirit" of Latin. The teaching practice for Latin in the Italian system too, very unlike that employed presently in the instruction of modern languages like German or French the world over, was similar to that of the English grammar school of Sayers' day and our own institutions here in the States and amounted to little more than "exercises of dissection on the cadaver of a 'dead language'" producing the same bruised and juiceless pulp: students who could tell you all about accusatives with infinitives, deponents, and the imperfect subjunctive but who couldn't read "by the eye" for pleasure the Latin equivalent of *Hop on Pop*, let alone a lengthy portion of Livy's *Ab Urbe Condita* or the *Biblia Sacra Vulgata* to save their skins.

Unsuspecting prey to the same questionable instructional philosophy and poor Latin textbooks, my own experience as a student of Latin was such that, up until very recently and in spite of the cappuccino-inspired zeal with which I used to hammer out my *exercitia Latīna* back in college, I had nothing left after a season but a dim recollection that nouns like *agricola* for some reason changed their endings. In the space of three to five years on the contrary, my much more conversational French studies under the watchful tutelage of a few French school marms who refused to speak English in the classroom on principle, were of a sort that still allow me to catch up on international current events via Radio France and to take great reading pleasure in

Eric Indgjerd *teaches Latin and Spanish at The Oaks: A Classical Christian Academy in Spokane, Washington. Go to http://www.theoakscca.org/Default.aspx for more information.*

How 'Bout Them Apples...

Hugo's *Hunchback*, the fables of La Fontaine, and the Thoughts of Blaise Pasca*l*. Not to put too fine a point on it, but due to differences of curriculum and pedagogy in the teaching of the two languages, one classical, the other modern, for every soft and mealy Latin Red Delicious, I had a bushel full of crisp and snappy Jonagolds in French.

Wouldn't you know it! My new post at The Oaks: A Classical Christian Academy in Spokane, WA, was not to teach the language of sweet France, but rather a language which "never seemed more than a kind of a jigsaw" to me either. Imagine, moreover, the trepidation and knocking knees, when just a summer away from the first day of school in 2007, the words" the teacher must know that which he would teach"[4] reverberating in my brain, I discovered that I was to use a new-fangled looking textbook of 328 pages composed entirely and exclusively in Latin right down to the "*uhuhū*" of crying children and the "*baubau*" of barking dogs, by some Danish fellow named Orberg.

Lingua Latīna Per Sē Illustrata,[5] a beautifully crafted narrative originally published in 1954 by The Nature Method Institute in Copenhagen and edited by some of the most skilled doctors of philology and linguistics of the time from Florence to Helsinki, is the brainchild and masterwork of a master teacher, Hans Henning Orberg. This brilliant teaching tool, more than any other volume, has taught me to teach and my students to learn Latin Latinly in the classroom. It is the perfect embodiment in schoolbook form of John Milton Gregory's principle, "the new and unknown can be explained only by the familiar and known"[6] and Isaiah's "precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little" (Isa. 28. 10). Orberg's method of "contextual induction" is such that students, given nothing more than a Latin map of the Roman Empire and an illustration of an *īnsula, fluvius,* and *oppidum*, proceed from reading baby-talk sentences like "Rōma in Italiā est" to learning the rules of Latin scansion and applying them in turn to the pithy epigrams of Martial and the poetry of Catullus. In the words of the Latin preface of the 1965 edition, "the book is ordered in such a way that the force and meaning of each new word, by means of itself, is clearly revealed from the fabric of the text, and the words are so many times repeated as to be penetratingly learned."[7] I would add, penetratingly and conversationally learned, even by a classroom full of fifth graders in the grammar school.

In a day when some express concern that after six to eight years of formal study in Latin, graduating seniors from classical Christian academies have a difficult time reading the motto of the ACCS quarterly *Classis*, "*Sine doctrīna vīta est quasi mortis imāgō*," without Whitaker's Words or a Latin-English dictionary, the mindful and careful use of the Orberg text paired with the undeniably fruitful conversational methods used to teach the modern languages could go a long way in getting us back to the sources. Orberg's life work, in the form of *Lingua Latīna* and other books like it, is the solution to the Latin sorrows of Sayers; has long been used with such great success by Miraglia in Italy that high-school age students are outreading university grads with degrees in the classics at a glance; and is the learning tool the use of which, by the grace of God and saintly prayers, will continue to allow my own Latin to haul up hand over fist upon the French as well as to make Latin programs flourish at The Oaks and ACCS schools like it. Similar to Pippin Took remembering the regal feast of the High Elves in the greenwood, I look forward to Latin "fruits sweet as wildberries and richer than the tended fruits of gardens."[8] For now, in the presence of an Elf-king like Orberg, a Shire bumpkin like myself very nearly "*Latinless"* until his late 30s, can only conclude in the words of Sam reflecting on that same sumptuous fare: "Well, sir, if I could grow apples like that, I would call myself a gardener."[9]

NOTES

1. Dorothy Sayers, "The Greatest Single Defect In My Own Latin Education," http://www.memoriapress.com/articles/sayers-intropage.html, Part 1.

2. Luigi Miraglia, "La vía de los humanistas (LLPSI) capitulum I," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cCDaGsyExaU.

3. Luigi Miraglia, "Cómo (No) Se Enseña el Latín," trans. José Hernández Vizuete, http://www.xtec.es/~rtorne/miraglia.pdf.

4. John Milton Gregory, *The Seven Laws Of Teaching* (Veritas Press, 2004), 34.

5. Hans H. Orberg, *Lingua Latina Per Se Illustrata: Pars I Familia Romana* (Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 2006).

6. Gregory, *Seven Laws*, 84

Interdisciplinary Measures...

How 'Bout Them Apples...

NOTES

1. Scott Mutter, "Gold Column," http://artwork.barewalls.com/artwork/GoldColumn.html?productid=275166&ns=normal.

2. Covenant Classical Christian School, http://www.covenantcs.org/.

3. Memoria Press, *Latina Christiana I*, http://www.memoriapress.com/descriptions/Latina1.html.

4. Prentice Hall, *Ecce Romani*, http://www.phschool.com/atschool/ecce_romani/program_page.html.

5. *Wheelock's Latin*, http://wheelockslatin.com/.

6. Memoria Press, *Third Year Henle Latin*, http://www.memoriapress.com/descriptions/index_latin.htm.

7. "Hello teacher!" "Hello, friends of Latin!"
8. "The Senate and People of Rome" was the official inscription of the Roman government.

9. "Dum Spiro Spero" means "While I breathe, I hope."

10. "Ad hominem," meaning "to the man" is a logical fallacy attacking the speaker.

11. "Sinistro" is the root that means "left." Left-handed men were thought to be sinister, or cruel evildoers.

7. Hans H. Oerberg, *Lingua Latina Secundum Naturae Rationem Explicata* (Copenhagen: The Nature Method Institute, 1965).

8. J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship Of The Ring*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1982), 121.

9. Ibid.