A rationale for the teaching of Latin
in the latter half of the twentieth century

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Latin is a language as dead as dead can be;
First it killed the Romans and now
it's killing me.

This couplet, amazingly new and
meaningful to each incoming crop of
Latin students, has been appearing in
fewer and fewer texts of late. The
Latin language as a mental discipline,
as a subject for analysis, as a code to
be solved, as a key to history, or as a
means of mastering English, simply
is not attracting the twentieth century
student: something is killing Latin!

Trite though the couplet has become
in over three hundred years of appear-
ances in textbooks in America, it con-
tains one essential truth that Latin
teachers have all too often forgotten
— Latin is a language!

If the majority of Latin teachers
today were to be questioned about
the objectives of the courses they are
now teaching, most of the responses
would be some of the objectives of The
Classical Investigation Report of 1924.
There would be historical-cultural,
application, and disciplinary objec-
tives, although they might not bear
these titles.

It is impossible in the education of
the sixties, in which the various
English-study projects, the very exciting
approaches to English teaching and
learning which have left Latinate
grammars far behind, to say that the
kind of traditional drills which are
done in Latin will benefit the pupil's
comprehension of his own language.
Latin will aid his understanding of
English in the same way in which the
study of German, French, Russian, or
Spanish does — via the contrast with
it. There are no places in twentieth
century curricula for courses of Latin
operating in the province of remedial
English: English teachers can do the
job better and more economically.
Classicists are on dangerous ground
when they claim therapeutic benefits
for Latin study in the realms of vo-
cabulary building also. A very large
part of that English vocabulary which
is derived from Latin is scientific and
abstract and cannot be activated in
any real sense without more time
being devoted to that purpose than the
Latin teacher has to give.

The historical-cultural objectives
and the references to the continuum
of man are also tremulous claims. In
the "typical" sequence of Latin studies
the first and the only Latin author
studied is Caesar and Caesar does not
appear until the second semester of
the second year. In the third year
the student "reads" Cicero, sometimes
Cicero and Ovid; the fourth year is
almost always devoted to Vergil. All
four of these men fall in the very late
Republic or the very early Empire;
the pupil is then studying two gener-
ations of Romans, the time from the
advent of Julius Caesar though the
reign of Augustus, Julius Caesar's
successor. This is less than an inch
on a mile-long graph of the continuum
of man. Medieval Latin is seldom
mentioned, much less studied, so that
the mass of Latin students consider
but a minute segment of the continuum
"frozen" for them; since that mass is
engaged in only a two year sequence,
the solitary author read is Julius
Caesar and the possibilities for either
some real understanding of the con-
tinuum or an appreciation of Roman
authors or the civilization from which
they sprang via the Latin course is
all the more reduced.

The other of the most frequently
advaced "selling points" is that Latin
prepares the student for his study of
the other foreign languages. In an era
in which all languages were taught by
a grammar-translation or a reading
approach, this might have been true,
in that the student would be condi-
tioned to certain necessary study
habits. There is nothing in the tradi-
tionally taught Latin course, however,
which would prepare a student for the
audio-lingual approach which his mod-
ern language teacher will be taking.
There is nothing in the traditional courses to prepare him for the miscellanea, the dialogues, the pattern drills, the directed dialogues — the use of the target language to the point of mastery before formal analysis is undertaken. In truth, were the student to take Latin first, he might suffer some real inhibition and interference from the kind of study habits and teaching he has acquired to accept as constituents of foreign language learning.

What then is a rationale for the teaching of Latin in the twentieth century? Before we can establish the rationale, we must yet do away with all the "Classical" resentment of the National Defense Education Act and the impetus it gave to modern foreign languages and adopt some new attitude toward the Latin language itself. We cannot remain contented until we dispense with the rationalization of the reasons for our present predicament and consider the predicament with an eye toward improving our status. We are, in the process, going to have to face the fact that the greatest boon NDEA presented to modern language teachers was increased knowledge of what foreign language learning actually entails and improvement of their methods of teaching. We Latin teachers have been so busy worrying about our exclusion from NDEA funds that we neglected to capitalize on those areas which were open to us; there has never been a time when we could not adapt the methods and techniques the modern foreign language teachers are now using. One of our extreme difficulties has been in adapting our courses to the needs of classicists and modern foreign language teachers alike, teachers of foreign language! There will be some difference in goals, some variance in objectives, but the principles involved in the teaching of a second language are the same, regardless of the language. Modern language teachers are getting the publicity and the students because they are giving the students a skill they can readily recognize for themselves! Two major steps must precede the acceptance of the rationale to be proposed here: Classicists must approach their teaching with a strong conviction that Latin is, first and foremost, a language and they must set out deliberately and conscientiously to learn techniques and methods from their modern language colleagues. The pupil, when he enrolls for our Latin courses, contracts to study an ancient language: there is never any contract that this language must be taught by ancient or medieval methods! We must learn from our modern language colleagues what they have been able to learn from the fields of linguistics, physics, psychology, psycho-linguistics, anthropology — from all the sources they have tapped — so that we, too, can teach the language and not just some interesting facts about it.

What then is the rationale for the teaching of Latin in the second half of the twentieth century? We teach the Latin language for the same reason for which any of the modern foreign languages are taught. We teach Latin to give our students a control of the basic structures and the basic patterns of the Latin language, to give our students a control of the sound system of that language, and to give our students an appreciation of the culture of the people who originated the Latin language. We teach Latin to teach our students four basic language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. We teach them to develop their listening and speaking skills so that they will have the kind of control of the Latin language which will enable them to read it. Certainly, we should benefit from the experiences of those teachers attempting to teach disadvantaged children how to read, that these children cannot read language they do not control and have never had modeled for them. Our objectives and deliberate efforts must be directed toward teaching our students an acquisition of the habits of the Latin language first by oral techniques and finally by reading the Latin language as a language and in order to do away with our long, long tracts of English during the Latin class and thrust our people into the culture by using the language as much as possible — in pattern drills, in question-answer drills, in Latin-to-Latin manipulative exercises.

If we aim at teaching the Latin language and a mastery and control of it, we shall have a better opportunity to teach our students an appreciation of the people who originated this language and their impact on the history of mankind via a greater use of "real" Latin authors from the outset of the course. Martial and Catullus and medieval Latin can be begun with our students at very early stages; other authors can be found once attention is focused in this direction. Of course, a different type of teaching materials will be necessary for this kind of approach to Latin teaching, but we shall not be facing any challenge which our colleagues in the modern languages have not already encountered. We must stop directing all our attention toward the process of extracting the message from Latin and rendering it into English: we must insert direct communication in Latin into the Latin course.

I am free to admit that I use my Latin for no utilitarian purpose. I speak to no one in Latin, I write letters to no one in Latin, I order no dinners in Latin, and yet I believe wholeheartedly that Latin is a language experience, not merely any experience possible in Spanish, French, German, or Russian. When the modern language student has mastered his target language, he can look forward to the possibility of face-to-face communication with the native speakers of that language. We cannot offer our students this fundamental application of their foreign language. We cannot learn across a fence, in a boundary line, or face to face with a Roman. We can, however, offer our Latin students a comparable if not the same language experience. Our language will enable us to experience an intra-temporal communication which is comparable in scope to the astronauts' reaching into space.

We in Latin education can perform one task for our students that no other group can do in quite the same way. The twentieth century student tends to be a hopeless being. What does a Julius Caesar, intervening in the Haeduns' war with the Helvetians, have to say to a student whose brother or father or uncle is fighting in Vietnam? What do Cicero's orations against Catiline have to say to the student whose experiences the protest march or the demonstration, at least vicariously, almost every day? What can Cincinnatus, Horatius, Mucius Scaevola and Coriolanus say to the youth of today? What values are there for the student whose native land is building the "Great Society" in studying Augustus' threefold building program — the monuments dwarfing man physically, the bureaucracy dwarfing him in relationship to the state, and the erection of a historical picture which dwarfed him in comparison with his antecedents? Nothing — if that student is forced forever to parse and analyze and search for the correct English equivalent! The message of Latin has been losing much in translation!

We owe our students the security of the realization that each generation has had essentially the same perils, essentially the same terrors, essen-
tially the same conflicts to resolve and that no generation was ever really paralyzed by them. We owe our students the opportunity to realize that these perils and terrors and conflicts are part and parcel of that gift which every child receives with the first spank that draws breath into his lungs. We can show him that man has always had the same basic trials—we have accelerated them, we have cloaked them in different terms, we can now analyze them on computers—but the basic problems are still the same. None of these realizations are possible, however, so long as we must draw them out of the student in his own native tongue and force him always back into his own frame of reference. Until he can encounter some statement, some thought, some pithy saying of the Romans and be struck by it directly before the discussion, before the analysis, before the teacher's interpretation, the student will never have a complete Latin language experience.

One of the questions we should be asking ourselves more often is, “Why did Rome's power last so long?” The answer some of us would give is that Rome had the ability to alter with the changing situation so that when the monarchy became untenable, the Romans evolved a republic, but when the republic was too difficult a means of administering the lands they had conquered, the empire was born. Certainly Latin teachers should be able to emulate the Romans in their adjustment to changing situations!

In the U.S. Office of Education Bulletin 1963, Number 26, A Handbook for Guiding Students in Modern Foreign Languages by Ilo Remer, the following passage occurs under the heading, “Why Study a Foreign Language”:

The individual student should consider the study of a modern foreign language for its potential contribution to liberal education as well as for its practical use. The student who acquires a second language acquires a new channel of communication and, in the process, discovers new avenues of thinking and develops an insight into the thoughts and feelings of people of non-English speech. From the very beginning stages of foreign language study, the pupil discovers that other people express themselves differently, and that other languages are not just like English except for the words. Because language not only conveys thought but also helps shape it, speakers of different language view relationships and interpret experience in very different ways. Learning to react in a foreign language and thus actually to participate in a different culture through the language is a broadening educational experience. As the pupil's abilities to understand and read the new language develop, a gradually deepening knowledge of the people who use it, of their customs and institutions, and of the significant features of their country (such as its geography, economics, politics, history, literature, music, and art) can lead to a lifelong enjoyment and, in addition, give a better perspective on American culture.

Is there any requirement here that Latin cannot fill?

In his book Teach the Latin, I Pray You* Paul Distler, S.J. details the classroom techniques necessary to fit the kind of rationale for the teaching of Latin outlined here. Like the Romans, when they conquered the Greeks and were confronted with a superior approach to the ask at hand—life, at that stage—we must be prepared to take over from our colleagues that which is better than what we have. The operative word in the couplet quoted at the outset is “is”: Latin is a language! If we do not begin to teach Latin as a language, we may find that the couplet has to become:

Latin was a language as dead as dead can be;
It did survive the Romans but then died needlessly.