



The Janus Approach to Early Latin Teaching— Grammar/Translation plus Reading

by Rose Williams

Latin students benefit from encountering as early in their study as possible major classical authors who were major because they handled Latin with outstanding facility.

There are two great barriers to their doing so: GRAMMAR AND VOCABULARY. How are these best dealt with? The grammar-translation approach and the reading approach to Latin learning each has its staunch adherents and its textbooks. Each approach has its strong points and its weaknesses, and teachers using either usually find that they need to employ some of the methods of the other.

My book VERGIL FOR BEGINNERS takes passages from the *Aeneid* and presents them for the use of students at the end of Latin I in two formats – one designed to be approached purely by reading and the other incorporating grammar study.

Here are some techniques I used which can be applied to other major works to make them accessible in their original words to students early in their Latin study. Step one can be skipped, if the teacher so desires, or placed elsewhere. Steps two through five deal with the passage without the use of English. Step 6 involves Latin to English vocabulary and grammar questions.

- 1) English skit summarizing the action to help students see “the lay of the land.”
- 2) Reading the target passages aloud in Latin. If they are in poetry, as many of the more accessible passages will be, they can be read aloud first without regard to meter. After some familiarity with a passage is established, it may be read in meter to show the flow of the poet’s language. If the teacher is shy about this, a good tape or CD can be employed as the teacher gains confidence. In VERGIL FOR BEGINNERS there is a section on poetry and meter.

At this point we begin to employ any and every comprehension device short of moving into English. The mind is like a computer – if it must constantly switch from program to program, in this case from language to language, everything slows down

- 3) Using physical objects and pictures combined with Latin words and explanations.
- 4) Using movements depicting vocabulary action or meaning. The focus is on Latin as the only language tool employed.
- 5) Employing Latin to Latin Vocabulary. Substituting Latin words students know for the unfamiliar ones keeps comprehension in the target language.
- 6) Bringing in traditional grammar and vocabulary helps and exercises.

Catullus 3 (Passer Mortuus est)

(The teacher might explain to the class that this poem, beautiful though it is, is not usually considered a genuine poem of grief as are some other works of Catullus. There is another poem during the sparrow's life in which the poet seems to identify with and even to envy the bird which has such freedom with the girl Catullus loves. The poem's beauty and half-playful spirit have inspired many literary allusions, two of which are given at the end of this handout.)

English Skit

It is always good to use as many class members as possible – all of them if feasible. Here are six speaking parts: Catullus, three Cupids, and two Venuses. We have also a Lesbia, a dead sparrow, and several handsome men and Shades (ghosts or powers) of Orcus. Simple props, such as mirrors for the Venuses, paper wings for the Cupids, muscle shirts for the handsome men, black paper masks for the shades of Orcus, and some feathers for the sparrow add clarity and fun without a lot of fuss. Another possibility is signs around the students' necks proclaiming who or what they are.

In center stage are Lesbia and the dead sparrow. As Catullus enters, Lesbia begins to weep, peeking now and then to see if he is watching.

Catullus enters, and speaks to the Venuses and Cupids, who are lounging around.

Catullus: Don't just play around. Weep! The sparrow which my girl loved is dead.

Whenever Catullus is looking at them, the Cupids weep heartily but silently. As soon as his glance leaves them, they suddenly stop.

Don't you understand? This was her pet! She loved him more than her eyes!

Cupid One (aside): Yeah, I'll bet! Her eyes are her best weapon when men are around.

Catullus: He was sweet as honey, and clung to her as she clung to her mother

Cupid Two (aside): I don't think Lesbia had a mother. She sprang full grown from a theater stage somewhere.

Catullus: He never moved from her lap, but hopping around, now here, now there, he chirped for his mistress alone.

Cupid Three (aside): Oh, I get it! He isn't really talking about the bird at all. He's comparing it to a dingbat lover, probably himself.

Venus One (aside): Hush! All lovers are like that, and one of those muscle-bound handsome men is glaring at you.

Venus Two (aside): Besides, when they behave like idiots, it's our fault.

Catullus (sighs): Now he goes on that shadowy journey from which they say no one ever returns.

Cupid One (aside): Our little feathered friend is hopping down to Hades? Oh come on! He's dead as old Nestor.

Venus One (aside): Shhhh! He's talking about the Death of a Lover or the Death of Love.

Cupid Two (aside): *sighing*: Why doesn't he just say what he means?

Venus Two (aside): Because he's a poet, silly!

The Shades of Orcus can either enter here, or stay quietly in the background until now and begin at this point to gather round and look interested.

Catullus (threateningly): Curses on you, wicked shadows of Orcus, who devour all lovely things!

(Shades can either look menacing or shamefaced).

You have stolen the beautiful sparrow from me!

Cupid Three (aside): Now it's his bird?

Venus Two (aside): We told you: he IS the bird.

Cupid One (aside): That's it! I give up.

Catullus continues to speak to the Shades.

Catullus: O evil deed! O poor little sparrow! Now because of your deeds the eyes of my girl are swollen and red with weeping!

Lesbia looks up in horror and stops weeping, beginning to pat her eyes gently.

Catullus 3



Lūgēte, ō Venerēs Cupīdinēsque,
et quantum est hominum venustiōrum:
passer mortuus est meae puellae,
passer, dēliciae meae puellae,
quem plūs illa oculīs suīs amābat.
nam mellītus erat suamque nōrat
ipsam tam bene quam puella mātrem,
nec sēsē ā gremiō illius movēbat,
sed circumsiliēns modo hūc modo illūc
ad sōlam dominam usque pīpiābat.
quī nunc it per iter tenebricōsum
illūc, unde negant redīre quemquam.

5

10

at vōbīs male sit, malae tenebrae
Orcī, quae omnia bella dēvorātis:
tam bellum mihi passerem abstulistis 15
ō factum male! o miselle passer!
tuā nunc operā meae puellae
flendō turgidulī rubent ocellī.

For comprehension and reading work below only salient passages are used. The whole poem and some possible interpretations are present in the skit.

Lines 3-4

passer mortuus est meae puellae, (show sparrow picture, pantomime “dead.”)

passer, deliciae meae puellae, (point to a girl, pantomime petting a bird)

quem plus illa oculis suis amabat. (for **quem** substitute **passer**; for **illa** substitute **puella**; point to eyes; an embrace motion for love)

Lines 8-10

nec sese a gremio illius mouebat, (substitute **passer** for **sese**; indicate **gremio**; substitute **puellae** for **illius**)

sed circumsiliens modo huc modo illuc (act out **circumsiliens**, listen to onomatopoeia of rest of line. [needs to be read in meter])

ad solam dominam usque pipiabat. (substitute **puellam** for **dominam**; act out **pipiabat**)

Lines 13-15

at uobis male sit, malae tenebrae (indicate act of ‘cursing’; use picture for shades of Death)

Orci, quae omnia bella deuoratis: (act out devouring)

tam bellum mihi passerem abstulistis. (substitute **pulchrum** for **bellum**, **cepistis** or **capiebatis** for **abstulistis**)

Read the whole poem aloud and do grammar/translation exercises if desired. (These are given in VERGIL FOR BEGINNERS; here is a sample set).

1. In what case is “**meae puellae**” in line 3? What word does the phrase modify?
2. The three verbs whose subject is the sparrow are in what tense? Why?
3. Which of these verbs is onomatopoeic? (Sounds like what it means)
4. Find and translate an imperative verb; an imperfect verb; a present tense verb, and an infinitive.
5. Looking at the adjective which modifies it, what is the gender of the noun “**passer**”?
6. Looking at the form of it on line 15, what is the declension of the noun “**passer**”?

Poems based on Catullus 3.

PASSER MORTUUS EST

by Edna St. Vincent Millay

Death devours all lovely things:
Lesbia with her sparrow
Shares the darkness—presently
Every bed is narrow.

Unremembered as old rain
Dries the sheer libation;
And the little petulant hand
Is an annotation.

After all, my erstwhile dear
My no longer cherished,
Need we say it was not love
Just because it perished?

FROM A LETTER FROM LESBIA

by Dorothy Parker

...So, praise the gods, at last he's away!
And let me tend you this advice, my dear:
Take any lover that you will, or may,
Except a poet. All of them are queer.

It's just the same—a quarrel or a kiss
Is but a tune to play upon his pipe.
He's always hymning that or wailing this;
Myself, I much prefer the business type.

That thing he wrote, the time the sparrow died—
(Oh, most unpleasant—gloomy, tedious words!)
I called it sweet, and made believe I cried;
The stupid fool! I've always hated birds...

Take one of the poems below and create a lesson similar to the one above

Catullus 86

**Quīntia fōrmōsa est multīs. Mihi candida, longa,
rēcta est: haec ego sīc singula cōnfiteor.
tōtum illud fōrmōsa negō: nam nūlla venustās,
nūlla in tam magnō est corpore mīca salis.
Lesbia fōrmōsa est, quae cum pulcherrima tōta est,
tum omnibus ūna omnīs surripuit Venerēs.**

*Quintia is beautiful to many. To me she is fair, tall,
straight: I admit these individual features.
That the whole (is) 'beautiful' I deny; for no charm,
no spark of salt (wit) is in the whole large body.
Lesbia is beautiful, who is wholly most lovely,
then all charms from everyone that one girl has stolen.*

Catullus 70

**Nūllī sē dīcit mulier mea nūbere mālle
quam mihi, nōn sī sē Iuppiter ipse petat.
dīcit: sed mulier cupidō quod dīcit amanti,
in uentō et rapidā scribere oportet aquā.**

*My woman says she prefers no one in marriage
above me, not if Jupiter himself should ask.
She says: but what a woman says to an eager lover
In wind and running water should be writ. (Keats' epitaph)*

Martial I, 47 and Martial VII, 3

**Nūper erat medicus, nunc est uespillo Diaulus:
quod uespillo facit, fēcerat et medicus.**

*Recently he was a doctor, now Diaulus is an undertaker:
what he does as an undertaker, he had also done as a doctor.*

**Cūr nōn mitto meōs tibi, Pontiliāne, libellōs?
nē mihi tū mittās, Pontiliāne, tuōs.**

*Why do I not send you my manuscripts to read, Pontilianus?
Lest you might send me yours.*

Martial 5, 58

**Crās tē victūrum, crās dīcis, Postume, semper:
dīc mihi, crās istud, Postume, quando venit?
Quam longe crās istud? ubi est? aut unde petendum?
Numquid apud Parthōs Armeniōsque latet?
Iam crās istud habet Priamī vel Nestoris annōs. 5
Crās istud quantī, dīc mihi, possit emī?
Crās vīvēs? Hodiē iam vīvere, Postume, serum est:
ille sapit quisquis, Postume, vīxit herī.**

*You always say that you will live tomorrow, Postumus.
Tell me, that tomorrow, when does it come?
How far (away) is that tomorrow? Where is it? Or where can it be sought?
Or is it hiding among the Parthians and Armenians?
Already that tomorrow has the age of Priam or Nestor.
Tell me, for how much can that tomorrow be bought?
You will live tomorrow? Already it is late to live today, Postumus:
That man is wise, whoever lived yesterday.*