

## Forum

# Teletherapeia: Ancient Consolation in the Distance Latin Classroom

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I teach Latin and Ethics at a boarding school in rural northern Indiana. Students left campus in mid-March, returning to their homes across the country and around the world. We have been distance-learning since 26 March 2020, broadcasting our classes into student homes and laptops and onto tiny cellphone screens, making valiant efforts to keep our students connected, engaged and hopeful.

I am amazed at my students' resilience. They are kind and understanding with one another; kind and gracious, too, with me. We play games, read, write, speak in Latin and scribble on Zoom whiteboards together. We correspond. Students have sent notes for Teacher Appreciation Week, in an act of selflessness that truly touches. But they are scared.

Tossed in to the all-encompassing phenomenon of pandemic, my students have asked for 'ancient wisdom', some bit of solace or consolation from me, ancient literature, or both. I knew I wouldn't have a quick cure for them, but they are curious, desirous for some perspective on all of this. So, I got to work.

I decided to adapt selections from two ancient Roman philosophers, Lucretius and Seneca, for my first-semester Latin students. I did this to introduce my students to Epicureanism and Stoicism, two Hellenistic philosophical schools which promised in one way or another to provide therapy (*therapeia*) from the vicissitudes and maladies of human life.

To do this, I created multi-level tiered readings of selections from Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura* and Seneca's *Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium* and *Consolatio ad Polybium*. This allowed me to make big ideas from Lucretius' consolatory notes in *De Rerum Natura* and Stoic consolations from Seneca's *Epistulae* and *Consolatio* accessible to Latin readers at some of the earliest proficiency levels, at a moment when it would be most relevant to them.

In the *Journal of Classics Teaching* 21, I wrote about the need for Latin teachers to select compelling, understandable Latin texts for our students as they navigate their own lived experience, which plays out every day in the world around them, sometimes in concert

with a predetermined curriculum and schedule of readings, and sometimes in conflict with those plans (Dutmer 2020). The need for Latin teachers to do this expands beyond the exigencies of the moment. It's important for effective language teaching generally and language acquisition itself. (See 'Further Reading 1' at the end of this article.)

In particular, I wrote about a mediaeval Latin description of the Cathedral of Notre Dame that I adapted into tiered readings and shared with my students in the wake of the shock of the fire that devoured the roof and spire of the world's most famous cathedral (Dutmer 2020). This year, my students were faced with a world event of a far grander scale: the Covid-19 pandemic.

I wrote about how Latin teachers have the power — the responsibility, even — to be ambassadors for the world of Latin letters in all its multiplicity and variety. This means adapting, as an ambassador does, to changes in the nature of the 'diplomatic relationship' between our world, on the one hand, and the world of antiquity (and all other times in which Latin has been used as a medium of communication, too!), on the other. In this way, I suggested that we not be afraid to let current events dictate our curricula. This, rather, should invigorate us and remind us of the enduring adaptability of the classic texts of Greek and Roman antiquity.

But teachers of Greek and Latin face a challenge: almost all of the texts which we have received from antiquity are written at an incredibly high level of literacy. To use the language of the ACTFL (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages), nearly all 'authentic' Latin available to us is written at the 'Distinguished' proficiency level, not readily comprehensible to even the most adept student learner of Latin (and a good many Latin teachers, besides). According to the 2012 (most current) ACTFL proficiency guidelines, 'Distinguished' texts are 'characterised by one or more of the following: a high level of abstraction, precision or uniqueness of vocabulary; density of information; cultural reference; or complexity of structure' (ACTFL 2012). Further, according to a 2010 study conducted at the University of Oregon Center for Applied Language Studies, only about 15% of 4-year high school world language students even reach Intermediate language proficiency (CASLS 2010).

So, how do we make the insights and ideas of these thinkers available to our students? I, like many other Latin teachers in the US, have seen firsthand the power of carefully selected and crafted *Tiered Readings* which adapt original classical authors into language that is appropriate to their proficiency level. Tiered readings give Latin learners the ability to work their way progressively to an

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original text (at the higher levels of a Latin curriculum), and, for lower levels, provide some of the richness of ideas and content available in Latin literature not otherwise accessible for them. For both, tiered readings present a helpful, proficiency-oriented alternative to literal translation into English (for more, see Sears, L and Ballestrini, K 2019 and Gall, A 2020).

For those who may have reservations about this sort of adapted, learner's Latin, the reading list I've compiled under 'Further Reading 1' of this article should be helpful. For a language learner, *any* Latin is *good* Latin (fears surrounding 'pidginisation' on the eventual language proficiency of students, for example, appear unfounded)—and the more comprehensible, compelling, and adapted to the learner's proficiency-level, the better. When we draw from classical authors, we want students to be able to focus on their *ideas*, and not be completely overwhelmed by the complexity of the language presented<sup>1</sup>.

Consequently, I've tried to adapt Lucretius and Seneca into digestible, novice-level proficiency versions of themselves. Before I present a few examples, I'll say a bit more about Lucretius and Seneca, and why I chose them.

### The Plague: Stoic and Epicurean Perspectives

In the last 40 years, there has been a flowering of scholarly interest in Hellenistic philosophy, especially with regard to the emphasis of each of the main philosophical schools' preoccupation with psychic balance and effective therapy of negative emotions through its particular philosophical system. Effective management of these emotions — through the powers of the philosophical doctrines and teachings of Epicureans, Stoics, or Sceptics (Pyrrhonist or Academic) — resulted in a state of bliss and freedom from any emotional disturbance called *ataraxia*. (Martha Nussbaum's *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* is now the *locus classicus* for a good introduction into the therapeutic dimension of the practically-minded Hellenistic philosophical schools.)

The ancient Greeks and Romans were of course at times beset by the terrible advent of plagues and the concurrent fear, anxiety, and feelings of worthlessness and restlessness that accompanied prolonged periods of sickness and death on a widespread scale. Thucydides' account of the Plague of Athens is a particularly harrowing and infamous example. (For a fantastic, comprehensive history of plagues' intersection with Roman decline, see Kyle Harper's *The Fate of Rome: Climate, Disease, and the End of an Empire*.)<sup>2</sup>

I think Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* and Seneca's *Epistulae Morales* are natural choices for an introduction to Epicurean and Stoic doctrines. Why? As I discussed in the piece above, they're, in a sense, ready-made 'distance education' texts. More than, say, Caesar's *De Bello Gallico* or Cicero's *In Catilinam*, they're specifically crafted to impart a philosophical idea or doctrine to 'students', i.e., the reader.

Sometimes this educational program comes clearly into view. An ancient philosopher might even hit you over the head with it! For example, note this particularly striking example of explicit educational gesturing in Seneca's *Letters*:

*adsero te mihi; meum opus es. ego quom vidissem indolem tuam, inieci manum, exhortatus sum, addidi stimulos nec lente ire passus sum, sed subinde incitavi; et nunc idem facio, sed iam currentem hortor et invicem hortantem.*

I claim you for myself; you are my work. When I saw your character, I laid down my hand upon you; I urged you; I applied the

spurs and didn't let you go on easily, but kept on you continually. And now I do the same, but now I urge on the runner, who, in turn, urges me on. (*Letter 34*; author's translation).

Indeed, the *Letters* as a whole have a clear pedagogical purpose and structure which makes them ideal introductions to Stoic thought. Seneca's consolations, similarly, hope to dispel grief at a distance.

Lucretius' purpose in the *De Rerum Natura* is also, principally, didactic. He aims to take the philosophical doctrines and scientific worldview from a Greek person — *Graius homo mortalis* (1.66), i.e. Epicurus — and turn them into pleasant Latin verse, rendering the sometimes difficult or strange medicinal truths of Epicureanism (wormwood) into a poetic concoction that tastes like honey at the lip of the cup:

*id quoque enim non ab nulla ratione videtur;  
sed vel uti pueris absinthia taetra medentes  
cum dare conantur, prius oras pocula circum  
contingunt mellis dulci flavoque liquore,  
ut puerorum aetas improvida ludificetur  
labrorum tenuis, interea perpotet amarum  
absinthi laticem deceptaque non capiatur,  
sed potius tali facto recreata valescat,  
sic ego nunc, quoniam haec ratio plerumque videtur  
tristior esse quibus non est tractata, retroque  
volgus abhorret ab hac, volui tibi suaviloquenti  
carmine Pierio rationem exponere nostram  
et quasi musaeo dulci contingere melle,  
si tibi forte animum tali ratione tenere  
versibus in nostris possem, dum perspicis omnem  
naturam rerum, qua constet compta figura.*

For obviously my actual technique does not lack a motive. Doctors who try to give children foul-tasting wormwood first coat the rim of the cup with the sweet juice of golden honey; their intention is that the children, unwary at their tender age, will be tricked into applying their lips to the cup and at the same time will drain the bitter draught of wormwood — victims of beguilement, but not of betrayal, since by this means they recover strength and health. I have a similar intention now: since this philosophy of ours often appears somewhat off-putting to those who have not experienced it, and most people recoil back from it, I have preferred to expound it to you in harmonious Pierian poetry and, so to speak, coat it with the sweet honey of the Muses. My hope has been that by this means I might perhaps succeed in holding your attention concentrated on my verses, while you fathom the nature of the universe and the form of its structure (1.935–950; *M.F. Smith trans.*)

Knowing that these texts were *meant* to function as learner's texts of a sort, and confident that adaptation of these texts, then, is but another way for these texts to get their point across, I got to work adapting them for my students.

### Tiered Adaptations

I'll now present a few examples of tiered versions of Lucretius and Seneca that I shared with my students. I'll also say a few words on how these can be used in a classroom setting, whether online or in-person.

The first comes from a touching human moment among Seneca's Stoic consolations, where Seneca exhorts Polybius, one of the

literary members of Emperor Claudius' court, to a measured, philosophical grief at the death of his brother — but *not* the absence of grief completely. He writes:

*numquam autem ego a te, ne ex toto maereas, exigam. et scio inveniri quosdam durae magis quam fortis prudentiae viros, qui negent doliturum esse sapientem. hi non videntur mihi unquam in eiusmodi casum incidisse, alioquin excussisset illis fortuna superbam sapientiam et ad confessionem eos veri etiam invitos compulisset.*

*satis praestiterit ratio, si id unum ex dolore, quod et superest et abundat, exciderit; ut quidem nullum omnino esse eum patiantur, nec sperandum ulli nec concupiscendum est. hunc potius modum servet, qui nec impietatem imitetur nec insaniam et nos in eo teneat habitu, qui et pia mentis est nec motae. fluant lacrimae, sed eadem et desinant, trahantur ex imo gemitus pectore, sed idem et finiantur; sic rege animum tuum, ut et sapientibus te adprobare possis et fratribus.*

But I'll never demand from you that you not grieve at all. I know that there are some people whose wisdom is more harsh than strong, and who think that the wise person should never grieve. These people seem to me to have never suffered mishap like this, as if they had, fortune would have knocked out their proud wisdom and compelled them to admit the truth.

It's enough that reason should remove what is excessive and overabundant; it shouldn't be hoped or wished for that reason should make it so we don't suffer grief at all. Rather let reason conserve a sort of moderation, which imitates neither impiety nor insanity, and let it hold us in that place that is characteristic of an affectionate (rather than disturbed) mind. Let the tears flow, but also let them stop; let groans be led out from deep in the chest, but also finished; thus, control your mind, so that you may get praise from both the wise and your brothers. (Consolatio ad Polybium 18.5–7; author's translation).

Seneca here arrives at a powerful message. As a practicing Stoic — a fellow *proficiens*, one making progress — he doesn't offer up a kind of emotional teetotalism. Rather, he suggests ways for us to lessen and soothe our grief through 1) feeling it — not hiding from it; and 2) realising when it has, in effect, run its course. This is an important distinction for anyone who reads from Seneca or the ancient Stoics, generally, with the intent of learning anything like rules for living — but especially so for younger readers, who may be susceptible to overly-simplified Stoic caricatures.

But how might we give this passage a sort of 'novice' treatment? How might we make the Latin more accessible for very early Latin learners? First and foremost, I think, is that we try to preserve as many ideas as possible from the reading, while simplifying its vocabulary, using repetitive constructions, and, as teachers, practising some new, specialised vocabulary 'up-front', that is, before we confront the reading itself.

Let's take a look at how I adapted this reading for a novice-level interpretive reading proficiency.

*Seneca erat philosophus. erat philosophus Romanus. erat philosophus Romanus Stoicus. multos libros de philosophia scripsit.*

*Stoici dolorem malum hominibus esse cogitaverunt. dolor homines insanos facere possit. Seneca alteros Stoicos philosophos legit, qui has res cogitaverunt.*

*Seneca multas epistulas philosophicas scripsit, in quibus de dolore scripsit. interdum homines epistulam Senecae scribebant, quia frater vel soror vel mater vel pater vel amicus an amica eius mortuus erat.*

*frater amici Senecae, nomine Polybius, mortuus erat. Seneca consolationem sibi scripsit. haec est epistula:*

*'Seneca ad Polybium salutem:*

*Polybi, non rogo te, ne unquam doleas. alii philosophi id dicunt. sed cogito hos philosophos magis duos quam fortes vel intelligentes esse. fortasse hi philosophi numquam dolorem habent. fortasse fortuna numquam mortem familiae an amicorum sibi dat.*

*magis rogo te, Polybi, doleas cum ratione. ratio possit immodicam dolorem auferre. non speramus nec desideramus rationem posse omnem dolorem auferre. moderatio aufert insaniam, impietatem, dolorem immodicam.*

*post mortem familiae vel amicorum, lacrimare debemus. sed etiam lacrimare desinimus. debemus gemere, sed debemus gemitus finire. sic duc animum tuum, ut sapientes et fratres tui te adprobarent.'*

Notice the frequent repetition — all aimed at helping to make Seneca's crucial distinctions between a sort of untamed, immoderate grief, an inhuman show of no grief at all, and, lastly, a sort of philosophical, moderate grief. Using simple, straightforward Latin constructions, we can express even complicated, intricate philosophical thoughts *in Latin* to our early Latin readers. A teacher can separate these sentences for picture-draws, practise vocabulary discretely before coming upon the reading, have students read out the passage multiple times through affected declamations (in essence, a declamation consists in having students volunteer to deliver a *dramatic* reading of argumentative Latin texts, at the front of class or 'unmuted' in an online classroom, giving vitality and energy to the text as if they were arguing before a group) — *anything* to make the Latin here come alive and actually *communicate* something.

Depending on the year of Latin study, we may even show them the unadapted Latin, as well. Tiering — or embedding — offers us the chance to build as many tiers as we like up to the original text. (In this case, with Latin I students, there's a limit to how many rungs up the ladder we can go.)

Let's take a look at a consolatory text from a different tradition, the Epicurean one. I'll present a few lines of Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*, which, as we've seen, aims to make the atomistic underpinnings of the universe accessible to readers through the sweet verse of Latin poetry.

I draw from the opening to Book 6, where Lucretius says that Epicurus showed that everything we need in life is *already* provided for us (despite the ills we might see in our surroundings and the things we might desire through a life of ambition and fame-seeking):

*omnia iam ferme mortalibus esse parata  
et, pro quam possent, vitam consistere tutam,  
divitiis homines et honore et laude potentis  
affluere atque bona gnatorum excellere fama,  
nec minus esse domi cuiquam tamen anxia cordi,  
atque animi ingratis vitam vexare sine ulla  
pausa atque infestis cogi saevire querellis,  
intellegit ibi vitium vas efficere ipsum  
omniaque illius vitio corrumpier intus,  
quae conlata foris et commoda cumque venirent...*

He saw that almost everything that necessity demands for subsistence had been already provided for morals, and that their life was, so far as possible, established in security; he saw too that they possessed power, with wealth, honour, and glory, and took pride in the good reputation of their children; and yet he found that, notwithstanding this prosperity, all of them privately had hearts racked with anxiety which, contrary to their wish, tormented their lives without a pause, causing them to chafe and fret. Then he realised that the cause of the flaw was the vessel itself, which by its own flaw corrupted within it all things, even good things, that entered it from without. (6.10–19; *M.F. Smith trans.*)

Lucretius, of course, writes in a different philosophical tradition from Seneca. For the Epicureans, the good in this life was simple, stable pleasure — most associated with a life of quiet retirement. They thought that everything we needed to be happy in this world was available to those who could see the simple, lasting pleasures of an undistracted, unambitious life. Our ‘vessel’ (*vas*), namely, our soul, was prone to confusion and disorder — thinking that loss of wealth, power, fame, or, even, death, were terrible losses for us. But the Epicurean, so the thinking goes, sees *only* loss of a state of pleasurable peace and quiet as a true loss. Hence, the Epicurean could be happy in all sorts of situations that others would generally find terrible — because they had the few things they needed.

Let’s take a look at how I adapted this for my Latin I students:

*Lucretius poeta erat. poetae antiqui carmina scripserunt vel cantaverunt. Lucretius poeta Romanus erat. sed Lucretius etiam philosophicus erat. ergo, Lucretius philosophus poeticus vel philosophicus poeta erat.*

*Lucretius non Stoicus erat. erat Epicureanus. ‘magister’ eius erat homo Graecus, nomine Epicurus. Epicurus totum regimen vitae habuit.*

*Lucretius voluit philosophiam Epicureanam in versos poeticos convertere. cogitavit versos pro hominibus sicut mel pro infantibus esse.*

*Epicurus docuit omnia pro vita beata esse parata mortalibus. docuit voluptatem solum bonum esse. homines possunt in securitate vivere, si voluptatem simplicem habeant.*

*sed homines errant. homines cogitant: ‘multa egemus! egemus potentiam! pecuniam! famam!’*

*Epicurus hos homines vidit, et cogitavit: ‘hi homines errant. nesciunt quid velint.’*

*vero, Epicurus intellegit hominum difficultatem in vase ipso inveniri— i.e., animum! ergo, purgemus voluptates malas ex animis nostris! deinde, erimus beati sicut philosophicus Epicurus.*

By focusing on direct statement and translating Lucretius’ poetry into prose, we can help to make this text vastly more accessible for our students. These simple, digestible pieces of Lucretius’ *ideas* are now easily manipulated by both teacher and student for various text-centred activities. A teacher can develop lesson plans out of one or another part of these texts — there can be characters, elaborations, and additional lines of dialogue generated by students.

These texts (which are easy to create!) help make classic Latin or Greek literature available to our students when the texts themselves are so far beyond their proficiency level. This helps students to feel empowered in their language learning — not every word is trans-

lated nor subjected to grammatical autopsy. The *ideas* live for our students when presented in a way they can understand and can read with ease.

### Cicero on the Limits of Consolation

I think these texts just how ‘adaptable’ ancient philosophical texts can be. With some creativity, Latin teachers can make them into valuable novice or intermediate-proficiency Latin learning texts.

But I end on a more sombre note — one that reminds us that the ancients, too, were often at a loss with how to deal with disaster. In short, often these distance consolation syllabuses — in the form of handy, ready-made philosophical pamphlets — didn’t always work.

As when my students first asked about ‘ancient wisdom’ I could share in the wake of Covid-19, I actually first thought of the sad case of Cicero’s *Consolatio*.

In February 45 B.C.E., Cicero’s daughter, Tullia, died in childbirth. Their connection was deep. His grief was immense. He wept uncontrollably for weeks. He worried whether he might lose his mind. In desperation, he committed himself to an intense solitary reading and writing regimen lasting the entire day, interrupted only by occasional aimless long walks in the wilderness. He couldn’t come into contact with others; he was worried it would make him (and them) sick.

In particular, in his reading he sought out *consolationes*, the very sort of philosophical essays I’ve discussed here. He scoured his and his friends’ book collections, looking for anything to alleviate his grief. He wrote to his friend Atticus on 8<sup>th</sup> March: ‘At your house I read anything anyone has written on lessening sorrow. But grief conquers every consolation.’ (*sed omnem consolationem vincit dolor*). (*Cic. Ad Att. 12.14*).

Nothing worked. To cope, to bide time, he wrote his own *Consolatio*, a consolation to outdo all previous consolations, a consolation to himself. The work was highly regarded in antiquity, but is now lost to us.

But the arguments of his own *Consolatio* weren’t enough to overcome his grief either. In the end, the only thing that got him through was his intense daily rituals in reading and writing. Did these *console* him? No. He writes on 10<sup>th</sup> March: ‘Writing and literature don’t comfort me, but they do distract me.’ (*me scriptio et litterae non leniunt sed obturbant*). (*Cic. Att. 12.16*).

In May 45 B.C.E., after three months of agonised reading, writing, and solitude, Cicero finally emerged from Astura to head to his villa at Tusculum, where Tullia had died. Even among the ghosts of his daughter, and remembering the walks and talks they shared together on country paths around the villa, he keeps writing. He writes to friends at a distance to explain himself. ‘And even though I don’t have anything to write about to you, I still write; because then it seems like I’m talking with you.’ (*ego etsi nihil habeo quod ad te scribam, scribo tamen quia tecum loqui videor*). (*Att. 12.53*).

I haven’t yet, but I plan to share these few lines to my Latin I students as well.

Sometimes these words won’t comfort us. They won’t make it all seem better. But they will distract us. They’ll take us to a different place, a different time, a place where it might even seem we’re with the authors — that we’re talking with them (...*loqui videor*).

Reading Seneca, Lucretius, or Cicero won’t make things go ‘back to normal’; nor will our reading them be as sweet as if the outside world wasn’t so scary. But it’s something. *A consolation prize*.

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### Further Reading

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### Notes

1 For more on the use of 'authentic', see ACTFL's 'Use of Authentic Texts in Language Learning' at <https://www.actfl.org/guiding-principles/use-authentic-texts-language-learning>. For a counterpoint to the trend of emphasising and privileging unadapted authentic texts for language learning and classroom use, see Simonsen (2019). For a helpful breakdown of ACTFL's interpretive reading proficiency levels with examples (in English), see the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines (2012).

2 Stoicism, in particular, has found numerous 'pop' treatments in the age of Covid-19. As just a sampling, see these two recent pieces from *The Guardian*: Delaney's (2020) *Remaining Calm in Adversity: What Stoicism can teach us during the Conovirus pandemic* and Robertson's (2020) *Stoicism in a time of pandemic Coronavirus. How Marcus Aurelius can help*. Lucretius gets his own treatment (via Stephen Greenblatt, author of *The Swerve*) in *The New Yorker*.