3

Latin

Nec mē animī fallit Grāiōrum obscūra reperta
difficile inlūstrāre Latīnīs versibus esse,
multa novīs verbīs praesertim cum sit agendum
propter egestātem linguae et rērum novitātem.

Nor does it escape my notice that it is difficult to shed light on the dark discoveries of the Greeks with Latin verse, especially since one must treat many subjects with new words on account of the poverty of the language and the novelty of the concepts.

(Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, 1.136–9)

For the average American, Latin is the dead language *par excellence*. True, many have come across Biblical Hebrew or Sanskrit for religious reasons, and a handful of high schools still teach Ancient Greek; but only Latin is widely taught enough to have its own Advanced Placement or SAT subject test. Why does it have this pride of place?

In part, the answer is historical. For centuries after the fall of the Roman Empire, Latin remained the language of the literate class. To be viewed as educated, one had to have the ability to read and write in Latin, and this only ceased to be the case over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as the vernacular languages of Europe gained the upper hand. If a language spends sufficient time as the chief means for the learned to communicate, that's bound to give it some staying power. This is only partially due to educational inertia, for it also reflects the substantive ascendancy Latin acquired over time, as seen in the legacy of hundreds of years of artistic, scientific, and religious discourse conducted in the language. The part of that legacy that we'll be exploring in this chapter is found not in the ideas conveyed by the language, important though they are, but in the language itself. This is most obvious in the case of lexical borrowings. While it's certainly possible to write a paragraph of standard English prose without using any words derived from Latin, it takes a conscious effort to do so; indeed, in the first half of this sentence alone, such basic words as *certainly*, *possible*, *using*, and *conscious* all come from Latin. Which brings us to one reason commonly given for the continued study of Latin in schools: it

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helps your English vocabulary. But this, though not a bad reason to undertake the language, is also not the best one. Latin is a complicated language, after all, and if your only interest in studying it is to learn vocabulary for the SAT, there are more efficient ways of doing so. Still, of the utilitarian reasons frequently given for learning Latin, the idea that it improves one's English more generally holds a little more water. Any time someone learns a foreign language, it leads them to consider the workings of their own language in greater detail, and, since the syntactic structures of the canonical works of Latin prose and poetry are relatively complicated, familiarity with the language can give students the understanding needed to work with a greater repertory of grammatical possibilities in English as well. Since the particular character of Latin can be seen most fully in the rich literature the Romans have given us, in this chapter we'll look at three literary high points—the poetry of Lucretius and Horace, and the prose of Tacitus—to get a sense of how Latin does things in ways that English typically doesn't.

Before turning to these examples, however, some historical context is important. An observer of the fifth century BC would hardly have predicted that Latin would be so wildly successful as a world language. At that point, when Greek civilization was at its peak, the age of the great tragedians, of Pericles and Socrates, Latin was spoken by only an insignificant number of people in the immediate vicinity of Rome. Other languages loomed larger in Italy: Greek was spoken in colonies all around Sicily and southern Italy; to the north of Rome, the Etruscans spoke a completely non-Indo-European language; and there were also languages like Oscan and Umbrian, which were related to Latin—belonging to the same Italic branch of Indo-European—but still different enough to count as separate languages rather than just dialects. As commendably detailed by Denis Feeney in a recent book, it was by no means obvious that Latin would flourish as it did, and its history as a literary language is an unusual one.[1] For most of the languages covered in this book, the earliest writings to survive are generally poems, often religious in nature, arising chiefly out of a native oral tradition: the first Greek, apart from Mycenaean administrative documents preserved by chance, is Homeric epic; the earliest Sanskrit texts are the equally poetic hymns of the Rig Veda; and many of what are thought to be the oldest passages of the Hebrew Bible, like the Song of the Sea in Exodus 15, or the Song of Deborah in Judges 5, are poetry as well. Eventually, in each of these cases, a literary prose language would then develop to complement the poetic tradition.

With Latin, the situation is different. On the basis of the languages just mentioned, we might expect the earliest major literary work to be some sort of religious or mythological poem, building on native Italic oral traditions. But instead, the first literary texts to survive in more than fragments are the

[1] D. Feeney, *Beyond Greek: The Beginnings of Latin Literature* (Cambridge, MA, 2016).

comedies of Plautus, written in the late third to early second century BC—slapstick comedies with stock characters like the braggart soldier and the clever slave, which stand near the beginning of a tradition that ultimately led to *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*. Not actually *at* the beginning, however, since these plays are in turn based on Greek originals by playwrights like Menander (active in the late fourth century BC). And if we turn to authors of Latin slightly earlier than Plautus, whose works only survive in fragments, Greek influence is again ubiquitous. The first name in Roman literature is Livius Andronicus, who came from Tarentum, in Greek-speaking southern Italy: according to Cicero's *Brutus*, he put on the first play in Rome in 240 BC, and is best known for his reworking of the *Odyssey* into Saturnians, a native Italic verse form. Roughly contemporary, the tragedies and comedies of Naevius also are also modeled on Greek originals.

But while the influence of the Greeks is a constant theme in Roman literary history, it will only be an accompaniment to the main idea followed in this chapter: the way in which Latin idiom—both what it inherited from Proto-Indo-European and what it borrowed from Greek—encourages certain types of expression that give it a different flavor from most modern European languages. That is to say, for English speakers, Latin has the reputation, compared to Spanish or French, of being difficult. Some of that difficulty is due to the nature of the texts assigned beginning Latin students: we give them Virgil and Cicero much earlier in their studies than a Spanish student will have to read Cervantes, or a French student Proust. And some of it is due to the foreignness of literature written two thousand years ago: allusions are harder to understand, the material culture isn't self-explanatory, and even differences in social norms can cause confusion. But there's another force at work that we'll explore here: sentences are simply structured in Latin differently enough from in English that there's even less of a one-to-one correspondence between a Latin sentence and possible English equivalents than would be the case with Spanish or French.

HOW LATIN WORKS

Before turning to more complicated literature, we can see some of these distinctly Latin features in a couple of short common phrases, many of which have found their way into English. One common theme that will run through this section is the fact that Latin is generally a very concise language compared to English, as it can compress into one word ideas that might require two or three in English. It achieves this in part through the use of numerous endings to express different grammatical relationships that require helping words of various sorts in English. Much of this is comparable to what was discussed in the

chapter on Greek, but Latin sometimes goes farther with this than Greek does. Take cases, for instance. These are the endings that both Greek and Latin place on nouns and adjectives to indicate what a noun, or the adjective modifying it, is doing in a sentence: whether it's the subject, object, or the like. Greek has five of these, but Latin has a sixth, the **ablative**, which is a heterogeneous case that, for historical reasons, serves three main functions. It can show that the noun marks:

1. a location in space or time, as if the noun were preceded by a preposition like "in"
2. the instrument with which an action is carried out, as if the noun followed a preposition like "with"; as is also true of English "with", instrumental usages of the ablative extend from denoting the instrument in a narrow sense ("I wrote this with a pencil") to accompaniment ("I arrived with a friend")
3. an origin or starting point, in space or time, as if the preposition "from" came before the noun.

As an example of the first, locative usage, consider the English abbreviation AD, which stands for *annō Dominī* "in the year of the Lord". Here we see two Latin words expand to six in English. This comes about for two main reasons. First, Latin doesn't have a definite article equivalent to English *the*, or, for that matter, an indefinite article such as *a(n)*. While it might not seem like a big difference, the presence or absence of an article in English often tells the reader whether the noun in question is something new in the discourse (in which case indefinite *a* is more common), or whether it's already active and present in the addressee's mind (in which case it gets the definite *the*), as in the contrast between *The girl saw a bird* and *The girl saw the bird*. Second, Latin can be more concise because of case endings. As the subject of a sentence in the nominative, the word for Lord is *Dominus*, and the substitution of the ending *-ī* for *-us* here, indicating that the noun is in the genitive case, does the same work that the preposition *of* does in English. The same principle is at work with *annō*: the word for year is *annus* in its usual dictionary form, and the change of *-us* to *-ō* here marks the ablative case. Given the regular use of nouns of time like *annus* in expressions that specify the temporal location of an event, that ending *-ō* serves as the Latin counterpart to the preposition *in* in English.

The second, instrumental usage has also made it into English in the phrase *ipsō factō* "by the very fact". But the fact that the preposition here is *by* rather than *with* is one clue that it's not quite a prototypical example—a fact isn't as instrument-y an instrument as a knife or a hammer—but if it is the means by which one clinches an argument, it's close enough to fall under this category. One can see how such classifications of case usages would come to have fuzzy boundaries, and a couple more examples of Latin ablatives in English show

how the locative bleeds into the instrumental, and why it makes sense that a single form could do service for both. Take the phrase *prīmā faciē* "at first appearance", where again both words are marked with the ablative. (Not all words take the same endings to express the same cases.) Translated with *at*, this ablative would seem to belong to the locative variety, but insofar as it is often used of evidence or proof of an argument, it's not so very different from the *ipsō factō* example. Or take *bonā fidē* "in good faith": the preposition *in* again suggests location, but if something is done in good faith, is that stipulation better described as the location where something takes place (as if it could be expanded to "in an environment of good faith") or as a sort of instrument or means by which it happens (as if equivalent to "through the catalyst of good faith")? It's not clear that one would always want to make a sharp distinction between the two, and Latin captures that by allowing both ideas to be expressed through its ablative case.

At times, though, Latin speakers did feel the need to distinguish more carefully what kind of ablative was in play, and they did so by means of the same linguistic tool that English uses to express these relationships: prepositions. In phrases like *requiēscat in pāce* "may s/he rest in peace" or *in vīnō vēritās* "in wine, truth", rather than using the bare ablatives *pāce* or *vīnō*, the preposition *in* is added, in the same sense as in English, to specify that peace is viewed as the surroundings in which the resting will take place, and the wine as the place where the truth resides, rather than simply a tool for eliciting the truth. Similarly, the preposition *cum* "with" may be used to strengthen the instrumental uses of the ablative, as in *magnā cum laude* "with great praise". And the third use of the ablative, to indicate the origin or starting point of an event, is very often reinforced with a preposition, as in *ē plūribus ūnum* "from many, one", where *ē*, a reduced form of the preposition *ex* "out of", clarifies that the many are the source of the one, rather than, say, the location of it.

Now *annō Dominī* is not the only chronological designation to display a characteristically Latin linguistic feature. One means by which the Romans reckoned time was to count the year in which, according to tradition, the city was founded, 753 BC, as Year One, then number sequentially from there, such that something that happened in, say, 44 BC, like the assassination of Julius Caesar, would be said to have occurred in the 710th year since the founding of the city. But how does Latin actually express "since the founding of the city"? Where English requires six words, Latin does it in three: ***ab urbe conditā***, literally "from the-city having-been-founded". Latin has achieved its concision here through two main differences. First, as already noted, it doesn't have a definite article, so neither "the" carries over into Latin. Second, English takes the verbal idea of the city's founding and treats it as a noun, the so-called gerund *founding*. Its noun-like behavior can be seen both in the definite article that is used before it and in the fact that its object, *the city*, is not simply tacked on after it, as in *They founded the city*, but is governed by the preposition *of*, thus making the

expression parallel to *since the establishment of the city*, where the word replacing *founding* is more obviously a noun.[2] Latin, on the other hand, is a little less strictly logical: rather than having the preposition equivalent to *since* governing the word that refers to the founding of the city, which, in a narrow sense, is what provides the starting point for the time-reckoning, it reframes the idea such that the preposition *ab* governs the noun for "city", *urbe*, and recasts the word for the founding as a perfect passive participle—that is, a verbal adjective meaning "having been founded". This construction was imitated by Early Modern writers steeped in the Latin tradition of epic: the very title of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, it has been argued, means not so much "Paradise, which has been lost" as "The losing of Paradise".[3] In any event, this pattern, in which a phrase of the shape "the doing of something" is expressed as "something (having been) done", is common enough in Latin—and *ab urbe conditā* is a prominent enough example of it—that it is regularly referred to as the *ab urbe conditā* construction.

In this type of expression, we see Latin's preference for using a participle (that is, a verbal adjective) rather than a gerund (a verbal noun). This favoring of participles extends to another characteristically Latin expression, the **ablative absolute**. This is a phrase that stands apart from the syntax of the rest of the sentence (hence "absolute"), and in which the two main elements both stand in the ablative case. In most examples, those two elements are a noun and a participle, as in *Deō volente* "God willing". As with English *God willing*, the construction is equivalent to an subordinate clause, with the noun as the subject, and the participle as the verb, as if this were an abbreviated form of *if God is willing*. In this instance, the equivalent clause is generally understood to be conditional (an *if*-clause), but one reason the absolute construction is so useful in Latin is that the type of subordinate clause is left unspecified, to be determined from context.

With *God willing*, English is just as concise as Latin (more so, in fact, if one's counting syllables rather than words), but in other examples, Latin capitalizes on the efficiency of its participles so as to produce very succinct turns of phrase. An especially concentrated example of this is the ablative absolute *mūtātīs mūtandīs* "having-been-changed what-needs-to-be-changed". Here Latin exploits to the fullest the fact that it has both perfect passive participles ("having been changed") and future passive participles ("going to be changed") at its disposal. The latter participle, marked by the *-nd-* suffix, is unusually common in Latin, in part because it develops a more particularized usage as the so-called **gerundive**: rather than signifying simply that which is *going* to be done, its meaning extends to cover that which *needs* to be done or *must* be done. This

[2] See also the discussion in Chapter 2 of Thucydides' use of abstract nouns.

[3] This, and further examples, may be found in J. K. Hale, *Milton's Languages: The Impact of Multilingualism on Style* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 111.

broadening of its usage may not seem especially predictable or natural, but we have an expression of similar ambiguity in English. Consider first the sentence *If this is to be done, it should be done well*. Here, *is to be done* could stand in for a future passive: *If this is going to be done, it should be done well*. Perhaps it could suggest that the action in question needs to be done, but it doesn't have to do so. (That is, there's nothing ungrammatical about further specifying: *We all agree that this is an optional activity, but if it is to be done, it should be done well*.) Now contrast that first sentence with *I'm not sure what is to be done*. In this context, *what is to be done* is not equivalent to *what is going to be done*, but is instead closer to *what ought to be done* or *what needs to be done*. So too with *mūtātīs mūtandīs*, the gerundive *mūtandīs* could be rendered simply "what is to be changed". (This particular gerundive also takes on a life of its own in Italian: *mutande*, the feminine plural form, has become the word for "underwear", since, if nothing else, those clothes at least should be changed regularly.) Another Latin gerundive that has found its way into English can also be translated neatly with "to be VERB-ed": *QED*, which stands for *quod erat dēmōnstrandum* "which was to-be-proved". At other times, the idea of obligation or necessity becomes more pronounced: an *addendum* is that which needed to be added for completeness' sake; since addenda are often already incorporated into a document, the nuance of futurity is downplayed. Or, to quote the words with which Cato the Elder is supposed to have closed all his speeches, hammering home his implacable hatred of Rome's enemy Carthage: *Carthāgō dēlenda est* would be rather weakly translated as "Carthage is to be destroyed", and "Carthage must be destroyed" comes closer to the mark.

Of course, *mūtātīs mūtandīs* achieves its brevity not only because of the participles but also because of the ease which with Latin can treat an adjective or participle as a noun. That is to say, to put *mūtandīs* into English, one not only needs to expand the verbal idea to *to be changed* but one also has to understand along with this an implicit noun that it's modifying: *the things that are to be changed*. This is what's called **substantivization**: taking an adjective or participle, and treating it as a noun by giving it a generic default noun to modify, like *person* or *thing*. English can do this as well, to be sure. It's especially natural to add a definite article and supply an understood noun "people", such that one can speak of "the poor" or "the young" as rough equivalents to "poor people" and "young people". Inanimate examples are also possible: philosophers can search for "the good", and an eccentric can have a taste for "the outlandish". So it's just about conceivable that one could say something along the lines of "the inadequate having been changed", but, if one tries to combine substantivization of this sort with the underlying participial nature of Latin *mūtandīs*, one ends up with something like "the needing-to-be-changed having been changed", which really doesn't count as English any more.

Participles aren't the only possible second element in a Latin ablative absolute: they can be replaced by an adjective, leading to phrases like *cēterīs paribus*

"other things being equal". Once again, Latin needs only half as many words as English. Here too, substantivization is partly responsible: English needs the word "things", but Latin can simply use *cēterīs* "other", with the ending *-īs* indicating that a plurality of things is in play. The other word Latin can dispense with is "being", as *paribus* means simply "equal".[4] Once again, it is the ending that enables Latin to do without some sort of participle connecting the two words. If, in English, one said simply "other equal" or, to capture the plural "others equal", there would be nothing to clarify either what role these words played in the sentence as a whole, or that they belong together in a single syntactic unit. In Latin, by contrast, the fact that the *-īs* of *cēterīs* and the *-ibus* of *paribus* are both ablative plural endings serves as a sort of index that says *both* that they constitute a phrase in their own right *and* that the particular sort of phrase that they constitute is an ablative absolute.

Or, at any rate, that it is likely to be an ablative absolute. Because there are, as we've seen, other types of ablative as well, and, as we've also seen, it's not always clear exactly what sort one is dealing with. How does one tell? Partly through contextual clues: if the word for some sort of tool is in the ablative, then there's a good chance that it's an instrumental ablative. Similarly, if there's a noun and a participle together in the ablative, it's likely to be an absolute construction. But even though the ablative absolute is often presented as a discrete usage, the line between it and other types of ablative is also blurry at times. (Indeed, this is one reason why the ablative case is used for the ablative absolute in the first place, rather than, say, the genitive or the dative.) So, for one final example, consider the phrase *vice versā*. The first word, *vice*, is the ablative of a noun that means, among other things, "place" or "position", and *versā* is the perfect passive participle of *vertere* "to turn, change". So one possibility would be to regard this as a straightforward ablative absolute, equivalent to "the position having been changed", or, if expanded into a subordinate clause, "if the position has been changed", or the like. At the same time, it's also possible that such a translation exaggerates the verbal component of the phrase, and that one would be better off treating it as one of the other ablatives discussed, as "in *or* with a changed position". That might seem a little awkward in English, since there's some tendency to place a participle like *changed* after, rather than before its noun, in a way that highlights its status as a predicate—that is, *with the position changed*—getting us closer again to translation as an absolute construction. But adjust the particular English words used to other potential equivalents—e.g. *in the reverse order*—and the line between the ablative absolute and some sort of locative-instrumental ablative becomes rather fuzzy again.

Indeed, it's an especially fuzzy line in Latin if we recall the prominence of the *ab urbe conditā* construction: if phrases like this can slide so easily from "from

[4] Indeed, so little does Latin need a participle equivalent to English "being" that the classical language does without it altogether.

the city having-been-founded" to "from the founding of the city", it follows that it would also be problematic to draw too neat a distinction between "with the position having-been-changed" (treating *vice* as a sort of instrumental ablative that happens to be modified by a participle) to "with a change of position" (prioritizing the role played by the verb). But this is exactly what we expect in language: meaning exists along a continuum, not in discrete chunks, and the tools languages use to express that meaning can also shift seamlessly from one usage to another.

So far, this chapter has been looking at ways in which Latin shows versatility and conciseness that are difficult in English. But it began with a quotation from Lucretius, in which the poet regrets that his task of bringing the Greek philosophy of Epicurus to the Romans is rendered difficult by the poverty of the Latin language. This is not the place to offer an exhaustive list of things Greek can do that Latin can't, but a couple of differences should be mentioned. First, Greek has a richer panoply of participles at its disposal: in particular, most Latin verbs have only an *active* participle in the present tense and a *passive* participle in the past. This is similar to English, where a regular transitive verb—one that takes an object and therefore has a passive voice—has only two simple participles: in *The audience loved the person playing the piano*, the participle *playing* is a present active participle (the noun it's modifying, *person*, is performing the action, so it's active, and the action is taking place at the same time as the main verb, so it's present), but in *The bar sold the piano played by the musician*, *played* is a past passive participle (the noun it's modifying, *piano*, is what's having the action of the verb done to it, so it's passive, and the playing of the piano took place before the sale referenced by the main verb, so it's past). But if one wants a present passive or a past active participle, then English and Latin both have to reword somehow, with English having constructions like *being played* and *having played* to take care of those two options. Greek, however, has one-word participles for all four of these possibilities.

A second linguistic resource that gives Greek an expressive edge over Latin is the definite article: virtually any word in Greek can be turned into a noun by putting an article in front of it, as if English, rather than needing a specific noun to refer to the present, could simply speak of "the now". In particular, Greek gets a lot of mileage out of putting definite articles in front of all sorts of infinitives and participles, allowing philosophers, for instance, to distinguish between "being" as an abstract verbal concept (by putting the article in front of the infinitive, as if English could say "the to-be"), and "being" as that which is (if the article is put in front of the present participle). A difference like this is as hard to express in Latin as it is in English. It doesn't help that Classical Latin, unlike Greek, didn't have a present active participle from the verb "to be", even though regular verbs do have such a form.

In any event, this is enough to give a sense of some of the grammatical shortcomings of Latin that Lucretius had to contend with in setting out Greek

philosophy in Latin verse. But there were also deficiencies of vocabulary. By Lucretius' day, in the mid-first century BC, it had been three centuries since Plato had been teaching in Athens; since then, a formidable technical language for philosophy had developed, and Latin didn't have ready-made equivalents for all these words. Accordingly, a corresponding Latin vocabulary had to be developed, in part simply through borrowing new words wholesale from Greek—*philosophia* "philosophy" and *poēta* "poet", for instance, which have in turn been borrowed into English—but also through the use of **calques**. A calque is a word that has been built out of elements that already exist in a language, but whose meaning has shifted, or which are put together in a new way, on the model of the analogous elements in another language. In this case, Latin words develop new usages on the basis of their Greek counterparts, or altogether new words are coined, through combining roots and affixes in the same way as in Greek. The first of these two patterns is particularly easy to detect in Christian vocabulary, where the range of the Greek source words had often already been influenced by contact with Hebrew and Aramaic. In pagan Greek, for instance, an *angelos* is simply a messenger. But because the Hebrew word *mal'āk* referred to both ordinary human messengers and also the divine sort—that is, the beings that we would call an angel in English—the range of the Greek word was extended to refer to the latter category as well. From Greek, the word was then simply borrowed as such into Latin as *angelus* and English as *angel*. In this particular instance, Greek has a calque (the extended use of *angelos*, patterned on Hebrew) whereas Latin simply borrows the Greek word rather than, say, broadening the use of the native word for messenger, *nūntius*, in this function. At other times, however, Latin also calques, and, in philosophical language, one example is the word *mundus*. In its original sense, it referred to ornaments and decorations such as jewelry. But the Greeks had taken the corresponding word in their own language, *kosmos*, which had meant both "ornament, decoration" and "(proper) order", and extended it to refer to the world order of the universe as well. (This is how both *cosmetics* and *cosmos* can come from the same Greek root.) Similarly, *mundus* takes on this latter meaning in Latin, as Cicero makes explicit in his translation of Plato's *Timaeus* (§35). From that point, it develops in its own right in Latin, passing from "universe" to "world" to "earth", and because the earthly can be opposed to the heavenly, eventually gives us the more prosaic adjective *mundane*.

In the second type of calquing, a new word is created by matching up constituent elements of existing words on a one-to-one basis with those in a word in the source language. Thus, Greek had already taken the interrogative adjective *poios* "of what sort", and combined it with the suffix *-tēs* "-ness", to yield the noun *poiotēs* "of-what-sort-ness". This, of course, isn't a well-formed English word, but we'll make do with it for now. Latin, for its part, also didn't have a word for this concept until the Romans decided, thanks to contact with the Greeks, that they needed one too. In their case, however, since the Latin process

of word formation is a bit closer to Greek than the English one is, it was natural enough for the Romans to take *quālis* "of what sort" and *-tās* "-ness", to yield *quālitās*—which was later borrowed into English as *quality*, which is how we actually express this idea. Similarly, a Greek word like *megathȳmos*, built out of the elements *mega-* "great" and *thȳmos* "spirit", could be calqued as Latin *magnanimus*, with *magn-* "great" and *animus* "spirit" taking the place of their Greek counterparts.[5] Once again, the word is borrowed directly into English, as *magnanimous*.

LUCRETIUS

After this brief glimpse at some of the things that Latin can do—and that it can't—we're ready to look at our first text, Lucretius' *Dē Rērum Nātūrā*, usually translated "On the Nature of Things".[6] It's a lengthy poem (roughly half the length of epics like the *Iliad* or *Aeneid*), written in the mid-first century BC towards the end of the Roman Republic, in which the poet aims to convince his Roman readership that, really, they'd all be much better off if they'd adopt the philosophy of Epicurus as their guiding principle. Once they'd seen that the world is nothing but atoms and void, and that we simply disintegrate after death, and so have no need to fear the torments of Hell, they would be in a better position to cultivate *ataraxia*—the Greek word for the calm, unruffled composure that was the Epicurean ideal. Lucretius carefully structured the poem into six books, which deal with phenomena of increasing size, starting with atoms in the first two books, the human body and soul in the next two, and ending with a discussion of the wider natural world in the final two. It's a comprehensive undertaking, as suggested by the breadth of the title, which doesn't exactly exclude a whole lot.

But while that very title, *Dē Rērum Nātūrā*, is most straightforwardly translated as "On the Nature of Things", the English obscures some of the resonances of the two main words in the Latin title. (For once, I will ignore a preposition: *dē* here does little more than indicate what the poem is "on" or "about"; its object must stand in the ablative case, hence the long final *a* in *nātūrā*.) *Rērum*

[5] I have taken the *quālitās* example from L. R. Palmer, *The Latin Language* (London, 1954), p. 129, and the *magnanimus* example from M. Fruyt, "Latin vocabulary", in *A Companion to the Latin Language*, edited by J. P. T. Clackson (Malden, MA, 2011), p. 152. As it happens, Cicero claims credit for coining *quālitās* in particular (*Academica* 1.25).

[6] Lucretius has become a little more prominent again in recent years thanks in part to S. Greenblatt, *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern* (New York, 2011), which tells the story of the rediscovery of Lucretius' poem in the Renaissance. Readers wanting a more thorough introduction to his work may be directed to S. Gillespie and P. Hardie, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Lucretius* (Cambridge, 2007).

is the genitive plural of *rēs*, the Latin word for "thing", and, since the genitive, as a case, is most often equivalent to *of* in English, "of things" is a natural way to render it. But Latin teachers rightly tell their students to be wary of mechanically translating *rēs* as "thing": it may be the basic English counterpart, but whenever a word is as broad in scope as *rēs* or *thing*, it's unlikely that any one translation will be best in every situation. Our English word *republic*, for instance, comes from the Latin phrase *rēs pūblica*, and while a republic is indeed the archetypal "public thing", it doesn't make for as elegant a translation of the Latin as "the public interest", "the public affair", or, as it has traditionally been rendered, "the commonwealth". Another prominent occurrence of the word in Latin is in the title of the famous inscription in which the emperor Augustus listed his accomplishments, the *Rēs Gestae Dīvī Augustī* "The Things Done of the Divine Augustus". Here it serves as little more than a syntactic hook on which to hang the participle *gestae* "done", and *rēs gestae* together hardly means more than just "deeds". Indeed, in the contemporary Greek translation of the inscription, the equivalent word is simply the noun *praxeis* "deeds". As for the title of Lucretius' poem, it makes use of yet another meaning of *rēs*, in which the plural of the noun is understood to refer not just to "things", but to "all things", that is, "the universe".

Even more complex is the network of meanings associated with the Latin word *nātūra*, borrowed into English as *nature* with a similarly wide range of usages, from one's inborn character to the natural world seen as a whole. It's no wonder that it's the semantic field around this word that C. S. Lewis chose for the first main chapter in his masterful *Studies in Words*. First, take the etymology of the Latin word. It's built to a root *nā-* (simplified from an earlier *gnā-*) "to be born", seen also in English derivatives *na-tal* "related to birth", *na-tive* "by birth", and *co-gna-te* "of shared birth". The suffix *-tūra* turns the root into a noun that will originally have meant simply "birth", but this meaning is very rare in attested Latin, since the extended sense "quality *or* character since birth" quickly took off. That this particular meaning became so common is due in large part to the process of calquing. For the range of meanings that *nātūra* took on in Latin, the Greeks had used the word *physis*, which, like *nātūra*, is formed from the combination of a root meaning "to be born", *phy-*, with a suffix, *-sis*, used to form nouns. When first-century BC philosophical writers in Latin gave their works titles with the word *nātūra*—not just Lucretius' *Dē rērum nātūrā* but also Cicero's prose dialogue *Dē nātūrā deōrum* ("On the Nature of the Gods")—it was in conscious imitation of their Greek predecessors: the major work of Lucretius' philosophical hero Epicurus was a 37-book treatise *Peri physeōs* ("On Nature"), and Empedocles, a fifth-century BC philosopher-poet from Greek Sicily whom Lucretius took as a poetic model, composed a poem with that same title.

The double nature of Latin *nātūra*—that it refers not only to the static condition of things but, more specifically, to their birth or coming into being—is seen especially clearly in the first occurrence of the phrase *rērum nātūra* in

Lucretius' poem. In the first 20 lines, the poet has been praising Venus, the goddess of love, as a generative force that gives rise to life, and justifies his choice of her as the divine addressee of the poem as follows:

*quae quoniam **rērum nātūram** sōla gubernās*
Because you alone govern the nature of things
nec sine tē quicquam dīās in lūminis ōrās
Nor, without you, does anything, into the bright bounds of light,
exoritur neque fit laetum neque amābile quicquam,
Arise, nor does anything become fertile or lovely,
tē sociam studeō scrībendīs versibus esse,
I am eager for you to be a companion for the writing of the verses,
*quōs ego **dē rērum nātūrā** pangere cōnor*
Which I am attempting to compose on the nature of things

In these lines (1.21–5), Lucretius slides easily from one sense of *nātūra* to another: since the previous lines have just detailed Venus' role in the blooming of flowers and the breeding of animals, the derivation of *nātūra* from the "to be born" root comes to the fore in the first line. But, in the second instance of the phrase, when he gives *rērum nātūra* as the subject of his poem, a broader meaning seems to be in play. In any case, the work is certainly not just about the beginnings of life, and the sixth and final book famously concludes with a dismal description of a great plague ending all sorts of lives, human and animal alike.

Many other words in these lines lose much of their resonance in translation as well. The word that I've translated "bright", *dīās*, is the Latin counterpart of a word we saw in the chapter on Greek: *dīos*, the epithet of Achilles that means either "godlike" or "brilliant". Here too there's ambiguity as to whether Lucretius is characterizing the region of light more as "divine" or as "dazzling"—or, most likely, a combination of both. One question that has long troubled commentators on the *Dē Rērum Nātūrā* is the prominent part given to Venus in the prologue: the Epicureans didn't believe that the gods played an active role in human affairs, so Lucretius comes across as having abandoned right at the very start of the poem the philosophical principles he supposedly professes so ardently. Later on, he suggests that it's perfectly fine to speak of the gods in this way, as long as one is aware that it's just a poetic conceit. This might not seem a good enough reason on its own to make Venus so active a participant in the prologue, but it does help matters that even the word *dīās* acts to blur the line between the natural and the supernatural: does it mean "bright" or "divine"? Even the shape of the word, too, is significant: in most authors (and, for that matter, elsewhere in Lucretius), one would find not *dīās*, but its near-equivalent *dīvās*, the adjective that modifies Augustus' name in the *Rēs Gestae Dīvī Augustī*. The alternative without the *v* makes it look a little more like its Greek counterpart, establishing yet another subtle link between Lucretius' poem and the Greek

tradition onto which it has been grafted: not only are the philosophical ideas those of Epicurus but also the metrical form of the poem, dactylic hexameter, is the same as that used by Homer. Another adjective worth singling out for its double meaning is *laetum*, which I have translated "fertile". More often, it means "joyful, happy", but the idea of abundance is foregrounded when it is used in agricultural contexts, prosperity being the shared common element between fertility and joy. But, once again, the fact that both senses are potentially in play enables Lucretius to obscure the boundary between natural phenomena pertaining to the agricultural world and the emotional experiences associated with the goddess Venus—note that *laetum* is paired with *amābile* "lovely"—at the divine level of the prologue.

With *scrībendīs versibus*, we can see in action one of the syntactic features of Latin mentioned above, the gerundive. While I've translated it "for the writing of the verses", a stricter, if misleading, rendering would be "for the verses to be written", as *scrībendīs* is the gerundive of *scrībere* "to write". But as seen in the *ab urbe conditā* construction, it is the Latin way to take the verbal idea that predominates in idiomatic English (in which "the writing" is syntactically more prominent, with "of the verses" dependent on it), and subordinate it to the noun that is its object. (That is, relative to English, *versibus* "for the verses" rises higher in the syntactic hierarchy, with *scrībendīs* "to be written" relegated to the status of a dependent.) But why should this interest anyone other than linguists? How does it affect Lucretius as poetry? Because translating the phrase as "I am eager for you to be a companion for the writing of the verses" flattens out with an abstraction what in Latin is more concrete and immediate. In the English rewording, the act of writing becomes introduced as an intermediary between Venus, whom the poet seeks as a companion, and the verses themselves. In Latin, by contrast, Lucretius calls on the goddess to be a companion directly to the verses. In this way, a sort of physical immediacy is suggested, which is relevant to broader issues of materialism raised in the poem. Lucretius, following Epicurus, reduces everything in the natural world to atoms and void, and, while I wouldn't want to insist that he deliberately uses the gerundive to achieve this poetic end—it is, after all, an unmarked expression in Latin—there are many places in the work where the concrete imagery employed by the poet not only embellishes the abstract philosophical argument of the poem but actually itself embodies that argument.[7] This is especially evident in Lucretius' love of wordplay: just as the world consists of atoms that, when combined in different arrangements, create different objects, so too language consists of elements that, when rearranged, create different words. This analogy is especially easy in Latin, since the word *elementum* signifies both the building blocks of the physical universe and the letters of the alphabet.

[7] This point is brought out especially well by D. West, *The Imagery and Poetry of Lucretius* (Edinburgh, 1969).

In the final line of the passage above, the verb *pangere* "compose" exemplifies nicely Lucretius' habit of using language at two different levels at once. On the one hand, it's a comparatively common word for the writing or composing of poetry. But its original, physical meaning was "to fasten, fix in place". (It is from a different development of this sense, "to settle, agree upon", that the related word *pact* "that which is agreed upon" derives.) Now one of the most notorious features of Epicurus' philosophy, as conveyed to us by Lucretius, is the idea of the atomic swerve: unless one allows that atoms occasionally undergo unpredictable motion, then it's hard to find room for free will.[8] Since Lucretius doesn't want people simply to be machines whose every move is predetermined by the physical configuration of their atoms at the start of their life, the swerve is introduced as a way of allowing for the unforeseeable. In a world, then, which consists of atoms mostly behaving according to the laws of physics, but occasionally deviating from their expected path, it works well for Lucretius to characterize the act of poetic composition with the verb *pangere*: the elements of words, too, can swerve, and he is trying to fasten them in place.

Perhaps the most famous instance of wordplay in Lucretius comes a little later in Book One, when he is praising Epicurus for encouraging men to resist what he regards as the greatest evil in life: a religious superstition that keeps humankind downcast in anxious fear (1.62–7):

hūmāna ante oculōs foedē cum vīta iacēret
When human life lay foully before our eyes
in terrīs oppressa gravī sub religiōne[9]
Pressed down on the earth beneath heavy Religion
quae caput a caelī regiōnibus ostendēbat
Who showed forth her head from the regions of the sky
horribilī super aspectū mortālibus īnstāns
Standing over mortals with a terrible appearance
prīmum Grāius homō mortālīs tollere contrā
A Greek human first, in opposition, to raise mortal
est oculōs ausus prīmusque obsistere contrā
Eyes did dare, and first to take a stand, in opposition

The first word we must attend to is *religiōne*, the ablative (indicating location, with the preposition *sub* "beneath") of *religiō*, a word that Lucretius elsewhere in the poem[10] connects with *ligāre* "to bind, tie (fast)". One could write an entire

[8] Stephen Greenblatt's book on Lucretius takes its title from this phenomenon as well.
[9] While *religiō* normally has a short *e*, its first syllable regularly scans long in Lucretius.
[10] *artīs* | *religiōnum animum nōdīs exsolvere* "to loosen the mind from the tight knots of superstitious feelings" (1.931–2).

book on the wealth of meaning packed into just this one word, but for our purposes it's enough to say that its semantic center of gravity, in contrast to English *religion*, lies not so much with the institution of organized religion as with the internal inhibitions and scruples that arise from religious belief; as such, translators of Lucretius often render it as "superstition"—although this is perhaps misleading, since in most authors, *religiō* is a more positive word than that, and Lucretius comes across as less provocative if he's condemning superstition than if he's attacking religion. Still, "superstition" is an understandable word to reach for in this passage, given the way in which *religiō* is personified: she has a head (*caput*), and stands over (*super… īnstāns*) mortals. The latter phrase, with *super* as a preposition-like adverb meaning "above, over", and *īnstāns*, a participle formed from the root *stā-* "to stand", combined with the prefix *in-*, which further emphasizes the position of *religiō* over mortals, contains precisely the same elements that are found in the word *superstitiō*. Not unlike its English derivative *superstition*, the Latin word has negative connotations, suggesting unreasonable or excessive fear of the gods. In short, Lucretius here takes a generally positive word for religious belief, *religiō*, but personifies it as a monster that, by standing over mortals, enacts *superstitiō*, the negative counterpart of *religiō*, effectively blurring the lines between the two, and calling on readers to question whether even ostensibly good *religiō* is not in fact *superstitiō* after all.

But the wordplay in Lucretius is not limited to the double meaning of a phrase like *super īnstāns*; it extends down to the level of individual letters. As a poet who compares letters to atoms, he is fond of showing how the rearranging of those letters can cause changes of meaning analogous to transformations in the physical world. Thus, in the third line of this passage, the elements of *religiō*, which has just been named, recur, scrambled, in *caelī regiōnibus* "regions of the sky", thereby highlighting through linguistic legerdemain the connection between religious superstition and the celestial phenomena, like lightning, that were so closely associated with the gods in antiquity. (Much of the final book of the poem is devoted to showing how thunder, earthquakes, volcanoes, and the like, are more plausibly explained as produced by the motions of atoms than by Jupiter, Neptune, and Vulcan, respectively. Such arguments go a long way towards giving the *Dē Rērum Nātūrā* its modern feel.) Another fine example of such atom-level wordplay occurs in Book Four, when Lucretius attacks the madness of love in a unrelentingly bitter screed—so bitter a screed, in fact, that four hundred odd years later, Jerome, translator of the Latin Vulgate Bible, thought he'd been driven mad by a love potion. In this attack, Lucretius adheres to his usual materialist view and reduces love to a simple question of fluid dynamics: in order to extinguish a fire, fluid from one body is drawn into another body. This is, poetically, an easier equation to make when, as David West points out, the word for love, *amor*, only differs from that for fluid, *ūmor*, by a single letter.[11]

[11] D. West, *The Imagery and Poetry of Lucretius* (Edinburgh, 1969), pp. 94–5.

One final aspect of the personification worth mentioning is, in fact, the word *aspectū* "appearance". It is a sad fact that many of the Latin words English has borrowed have been rather abused, thanks to historical happenstance. There are many lexical doublets in English, where a native Germanic word competes with one of Latin origin—borrowed either directly from Latin or by way of French, thanks especially to the Norman Conquest. Indeed, sometimes there are triplets:

1. *kingly*, from Germanic *king* (compare German *König*, seen in the city name *Königsberg* "King's Mountain")
2. *regal*, from Latin *rēx* (whose stem is *rēg-*)
3. *royal*, from French *roi* (the natural development of Latin *rēx* in French; the final consonant wasn't stable in the other Romance languages either: compare Spanish *rey* or Italian *re*)

The most famous discussion of the parallel native and French vocabularies of English is no doubt that found in the first chapter of Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*, in which the jester Wamba points out that animals keep their native Germanic names when tended by the Anglo-Saxon herdsmen, but are called by their French names when served as food to their Norman overlords: the swine (German *Schwein*) becomes pork (French *porc*), the ox (German *Ochse*) becomes beef (French *bœuf*), the calf (German *Kalb*) becomes veal (French *veau*). The relevant sociolinguistic point illustrated here is that, when a language acquires doublets like this, they often specialize in particular spheres of language use. As Latin was associated with the prestige of higher learning, words borrowed from it often came across as more impressive, and clustered in comparatively grandiose contexts. Unfortunately, this has led to a tendency on the part of some to inflate their language by using Latin-derived words when simple English ones would do just as well. Now such is the extent to which Latin vocabulary has infiltrated English that it's virtually impossible to do without it. In this paragraph alone, *doubt*, *use*, *serve*, and *language* are all such natural English words now that it would be hard to come up with native Germanic equivalents that would somehow be simpler. But it's still a common rookie mistake for students to dress up their writing by replacing shorter, native words, with longer, Latinate ones: *take* becomes *acquire*, *go* becomes *proceed*, *talk* becomes *converse*. Even worse, this sort of language bloating has mushroomed in bureaucratese as well, where words like *excellence* and *engagement* are bandied about without any real substance behind them. Now this is obviously not to say that such borrowed words have no place in English. As an exercise for anyone who's gotten tired of reading words of this register misused in student essays or administrative blather, I heartily recommend searching the corpus of a first-class writer like Shakespeare or Jefferson for the same, for, sure enough, they find ways of making them work. But, to get back to Lucretius, a word like

aspect belongs very much to this sort of diction, and, when an English speaker sees it in Latin, it's unfairly tarnished by the lexical company it keeps in our own language.

That is to say, it is very easy for a Latin student, on coming across a word like *aspectū*, to observe (rightly) that is the source of our word *aspect* and, if it's a weaker student, simply translate it as *aspect* ("standing over mortals with a horrible aspect"), thus leading to translationese that, because it incorporates a word that can be used vaguely as a synonym of "feature" or "trait", simultaneously sounds like the bland prose of officialdom. Now stronger students, who will be aware that there have been many shifts in meaning between Latin source words and their English derivatives, will look in their dictionary, and translate it with "appearance" or "look", which are closer to the sense here. But even so, it's hard, in the aesthetic appreciation of an English speaker, for the Latin word not to lose a little bit of the poetry it ought to have had, because of this frequent association of the Latin words in English with a very non-poetic register of language. And in a passage like this, it would be especially regrettable for the abstract connotations of *aspect* to get in the way of Lucretius' imagery. This is a passage, after all, in which vision is very prominent: not only does the personification of Religion cause the reader to picture her looming over men but, in the first line, human life is said to lie *ante oculōs*—literally just "before eyes", but one can easily supply a possessive like "before our eyes" or "before everyone's eyes"—and, in the last line, our hero Epicurus has dared to raise up his *oculōs* against this adversary. So when Lucretius speaks of Religion's *horribilī aspectū*, the etymology of the latter word, derived as it is from the root *spec-* "to see", contributes to the concreteness of Lucretius' description.

This is just one example, however, of the constant struggle it takes for anglophones to defamiliarize individual words when reading Latin poetry. In the second line, human life is said to be *oppressa*: it's very easy simply to read this as "oppressed", and indeed it's not wrong to see that connotation in the Latin word here. But if we translate it that way, then once again we lose the physical image of Religion literally weighing people down, crushing them, which is the basic sense of this verb. (Note that Lucretius has taken care to describe Religion as *gravī* "heavy".) *Oppressa* is also the first of three verbs in this passage that are linked through the use of the prefix *ob-* (which changes into *op-* before the *p-* of *pressa*, and *os-* before the *t-* of *tendere*, but remains *ob-* before the *s-* of *sistere*). Like many prefixes that are the counterparts of prepositions, it has a wide range of uses, but for the most part the common denominator is that *ob-* indicates that an action occurs "face to face"—with the frequent additional implication, as in the expression *face-off* in English, that such actions involve a degree of hostility, with the agents working against each other. It is no coincidence that this is the first element in the words *op-ponent* and *op-posite*. By repeating this prefix three times in this section—with Religion pressing against (*oppressa*) mortals, showing forth her head face to face (*ostendēbat*), and Epicurus taking

a stand against her (*obsistere*)—a common thread of physical confrontation is brought out that is lost in translations where the verbs are not linked together by this shared element.

One final word that is not as close in feel to its English derivative as it appears is *mortālis*, here used both as a noun *mortālibus*, in reference to the mortals over whom Religion stands, and as an adjective *mortālis* or *mortālīs* (the manuscript tradition is ambiguous, since vowel length is not marked by macrons in the original text), which (if the former) would be modifying Epicurus, "a Greek human, a mortal one", or (if the latter) the "mortal eyes" he raises against Religion. Either way, both times, it is perfectly sensible to translate it as "mortal" in English, which, like Latin *mortālis*, means "subject to death". And yet there is a difference: since English *mortal* is a borrowing from Latin, it doesn't actually have the word *death* in it; Latin *mortālis*, by contrast, is formed from *mors* (stem: *mort-*), the blunt, direct Latin word for death. When we hear the word *mortal*, the image of death doesn't necessarily spring to mind as happens when something is described as *deadly* or *deathly*. Rather, we hear the opposition to *immortal*—an opposition that Latin frequently takes advantage of as well—and perhaps medical discussion of *mortality*. In either case, instead of the cold, stark reality of death conjured up by the Germanic word, we hear it mediated through the detachment of a learned Latin word. But Lucretius, here, is not detached. He goes on to describe death in grim detail at the end of the poem, as, it is often thought, a sort of test for his readers: if they've properly imbibed the Epicurean message of the poem, they won't be perturbed by the listing of the symptoms of the plague—the phlegm, the bleeding, the ulcers, the cold sweat, the limbs lost to gangrene. English simply doesn't have a word that refers to humans, as a class, opposed in particular to the gods, with the word "death" right at the heart of it. Latin does, so when Lucretius wants to decry human superstition about the gods as something that ultimately arises from the fear of death, in the word *mortālis* he has a lexical resource at his disposal that no English translator can match.

But the difficulties of translating Latin poetry go beyond the impossibility of capturing the resonance of individual words. The structure of the language also gets in the way of turning it into English. In this last example, as noted, it isn't clear in a standard, macron-free Latin text whether *mortalis* modifies *homo* or *oculos*. This ambiguity arises from Latin's rich inflectional morphology. Latin can, for the most part, indicate the grammatical role of a word in a sentence by its ending, which means, as already seen, that it doesn't have to rely on word order, as English does, to clarify, for instance, whether a noun is the subject or the object of a verb. Since the endings of the words serve under most circumstances to link adjectives with the nouns they modify, the former are generally free to drift away from their noun without any loss of clarity. An English teacher can reprimand a student for a dangling participle in a sentence like *Throwing the stick, the dog watched the boy*, as the participle *throwing* is closer to the dog

than it is to the boy who, we assume, is actually throwing the stick. In Latin, however, that participle can change form to indicate what it's modifying: no matter where it was in the sentence, *iaciēns* would indicate that the subject of the verb was doing the throwing, whereas *iacientem* would signal that it was that object that did so. Very often, this ability to index a participle or adjective to its noun through the use of the ending allows for considerable flexibility in word order, without subsequent loss of clarity. In the first two lines of the quotation above, for instance, it is unambiguous that *hūmāna* "human" modifies *vīta* "life", even though the four words *ante oculōs foedē cum* "before (our) eyes foully when" intervene. By moving *hūmāna* so far to the front of the sentence, Lucretius can emphasize its importance to what follows in a way that cannot be imitated directly in English.[12] It is equally unambiguous in the Latin that *oppressa* also modifies *vīta*, even across a line break. This is precisely the sort of situation in which the danger of a dangling participle lurks in English: *cum vīta iacēret in terrīs oppressa sub religiōne* is, word for word, "when life lay on earth crushed beneath religion". Leave it like this in English, and it's unclear whether it's life or the earth that's crushed, but *oppressa* in Latin can only modify *vīta*; if it were the earth that was crushed, the form would need to be *oppressīs*.[13]

Now, in that last phrase, I left out the adjective *gravī* "heavy" from the original text, *gravī sub religiōne*, for the sake of simplicity in the English, but, in the Latin, its position in the sentence is unremarkable: we can only say "beneath heavy religion", but Latin prefers the equivalent of "heavy beneath religion". That the adjective *gravī* can be separated from *religiōne* by the preposition *sub* "beneath", or, in close succession, *horribilī* "terrible" from *aspectū* "appearance" by *super* "over", suggests how ordinary such discontinuity is in Latin. Indeed, it's evident even in a couple of phrases familiar to English speakers: *magnā cum laude* and *summā cum laude* both reflect the regularity with which Latin slips a preposition in between an adjective and its noun. The expected Latin order is thus not "with great praise" and "with highest praise", but "great with praise" and "highest with praise". Use the latter word order in English, and it will be assumed that the adjectives modified the person who is the subject of the phrase. But in Latin, the ending links them with the noun *laude*.

Or at least that is the case in spoken Latin. While the system of rules for spelling standard Latin—its **orthography**—is fairly sensible on the whole, with something close to a one-to-one correspondence between the letters of its alphabet and the sounds they represent, one important shortcoming concerns the vowels. Vowel length in Latin is contrastive: that is, in certain words,

[12] To anticipate a technical term introduced below, placing *hūmāna* this early establishes it as a topic for what follows.

[13] If this were a prose text without macrons to indicate vowel length, then *oppressa* could in theory be modifying *religiōne*. But the meter of the poem makes clear that this is *oppressa* with a short *a*, not with a long *a*, and so must be nominative, not ablative, and therefore in agreement with *vīta*, not *religiōne*. For more on the ambiguity of vowel length in Latin, see below.

whether or not a vowel is long can change the meaning of the word. Thus, *mălum* with a short *a* meant "bad", but *mālum* with a long *a* meant "apple".[14] And, while I've been supplying macrons all along to indicate vowel length (as linguists often do), they are not in fact found in the standard written language. Now you may well ask how we know that they were pronounced differently if this wasn't written down in ancient texts. Partly because in certain places in a line of poetry, only a long or a short vowel would fit the meter, partly because most pairs of long and short vowels develop differently in the Romance languages, partly because a few ancient inscriptions do indicate vowel length with a diacritical mark, and partly because ancient grammarians tell us that vowel quantity mattered. Be that as it may, in purely written documents, there was potentially scope for confusion, and the identical spelling of *malum* "bad" and *malum* "apple" is what led the fruit that Eve gave to Adam to be identified in the Middle Ages as the apple. (It had been left unspecified in Hebrew.)

Unfortunately for those trying to read Latin, some of the endings that indicate what adjectives belong with what nouns rely precisely on vowel length as a distinguishing feature. So the most characteristic feminine nominative singular ending, used of the subject of a sentence, is *-ă*, whereas the corresponding ablative ending is *-ā*. Thus, without any context, a phrase like *summa cum laude* could in theory be understood (correctly) as *summā cum laude*, with the long vowel at the end of *summā* signaling that it is to be understood with *laude*, or *summă cum laude*, with the short vowel marking it as a subject, and therefore to be taken as modifying an unspecified woman, rather than the praise.[15] This is a somewhat contrived example, but an actual ambiguity can be found in the last two lines of the snippet of Lucretius: *prīmum Grāius homō mortālis/mortālīs tollere contrā | est oculōs ausus prīmusque obsistere contrā* ("A [mortal?] Greek human first dared in opposition to raise [mortal?] eyes, and to take a stand in opposition"). Now, at least on the page, *mortalis* is ambiguous, as it could either modify *homō* "human" or *oculōs* "eyes". But if we could hear Lucretius reciting this passage, we could instantly tell which it was: if he pronounced it *mortālīs*, then it would have to be a nominative singular adjective, and therefore in agreement with *homō*; but if he drew out the last syllable to *mortālīs*, then it would need to be accusative plural, and therefore modify *oculōs*. In the absence, however, of any recordings from the first century BC, we have to rely on other sorts of reasoning to determine which makes better sense. In favor of taking it with *homō* is the fact that it occurs right after it. But while that may seem a strong argument to an English speaker, it's actually rather weak when dealing with Latin poetry, since the examples of separation of adjective from noun are

[14] As an anonymous reviewer has pointed out, this particular near-homonym makes it into the libretto of Benjamin Britten's *Turn of the Screw*, in which "Mālō$_1$ mālō$_2$ mălō$_3$ mălō$_4$" is glossed as "I-would-rather-be$_1$ in-an-apple-tree$_2$ than-a-naughty-boy$_3$ in-adversity$_4$".

[15] Yet another possibility would be to read *summa* as a different word altogether, the derivative noun meaning "chief point" or "sum".

so common. Two other considerations suggest that it is better understood with *oculōs*. First, there's the question of what works better from a poetic standpoint. It's somewhat otiose for *homō*, which already means "human", to be modified by an adjective that is often used with the same denotation. It's less tautological if it's the eyes that are described as mortal. The second point is a stylistic one. While Latin poetry is perfectly happy for an adjective not to be next to its noun, what it doesn't like is for there to be an uneven distribution of adjectives relative to nouns: if there are two adjectives in a clause, and two nouns, then it's much preferred for there to be one adjective for each noun than for one noun to be decked out with two adjectives, and the other to be left bare. Since *homō* here is already modified by *Grāius* "Greek", taking *mortālīs* with *oculōs* means that each noun gets one and only one adjective.

Lucretius stands comparatively early in the Latin poetic tradition, at least as it has been transmitted to us. While there had been written Latin poetry for nearly two hundred years by his time, Lucretius comes before nearly all the other names that loom largest in the canon of Latin verse: Catullus was his contemporary, but the great Augustan poets Virgil, Horace, Propertius, and Ovid all follow. He himself was aware of the difficulties of turning Greek philosophy into Latin poetry, and occasionally the writing is clunky, especially in the presentation of some of the drier arguments. Coleridge was unfair when he remarked to Wordsworth, "Whatever in Lucretius is poetry is not philosophical, whatever is philosophical is not poetry," but one can at times see where he was coming from, what with the profusion of transitional phrases like *praetereā quoniam* "furthermore, since…" or *tum porrō* "then, moreover…" and the somewhat unrelenting Epicurus-worship. But even if critical judgments that took later Augustan models as the pinnacle of poetic practice could carp about Lucretius' lack of polish, the skillful wordplay and arrangement of words in the lines just considered—linguistic craftsmanship that is virtually impossible[16] to capture in translation—is more than enough to justify a prominent position for him in the Roman canon.

HORACE AND HOUSMAN

For our next sample of Latin, we move forward in time from the last years of the Roman Republic (we don't know exactly when Lucretius was writing, but sometime in the 60s or early 50s BC) to the early years of the Empire—13 BC, to

[16] This doesn't mean that people haven't tried. E. J. Kenney has recently noted the continued appearance of new translations of Lucretius as a sign of lively interest in the poem (*Lucretius: De Rerum Natura Book III*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, 2014), p. xi): Ronald Melville's translation, later reissued with Oxford World's Classics, first appeared in 1997, A. E. Stallings's Penguin translation in 2007, and David R. Slavitt's for the University of California Press in 2008.

be precise, when Horace published his fourth book of *Odes*. Only half a century had passed, but the Roman world looked very different: the ructions of the great civil war were over, and Augustus was now in charge. In the (comparatively) calm period of his rule, poetry flourished: this is the time not just of Horace but also of Virgil's *Aeneid* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Rather than tackling one of these great epic poems, however, we'll focus on a poem that the great classical scholar, A. E. Housman, better known to most laypeople as the poet of *A Shropshire Lad*, regarded as "the most beautiful in ancient literature", *Odes* 4.7. Here are the first four stanzas of the Latin, side by side with Housman's translation:

Diffūgēre nivēs, redeunt iam grāmina campīs arboribusque comae; mūtat terra vicēs, et dēcrēscentia rīpās flūmina praetereunt;	The snows are fled away, leaves on the shaws And grasses in the mead renew their birth, The river to the river-bed withdraws, And altered is the fashion of the earth.
Grātia cum Nymphīs geminīsque sorōribus audet dūcere nūda chorōs. immortālia nē spērēs, monet annus et almum quae rapit hōra diem.	The Nymphs and Graces three put off their fear And unapparelled in the woodland play. The swift hour and the brief prime of the year Say to the soul, *Thou wast not born for aye.*
frīgora mītēscunt Zephyrīs, vēr prōterit aestās interitūra, simul pōmifer autumnus frūgēs effūderit, et mox brūma recurrit iners.	Thaw follows frost; hard on the heel of spring Treads summer sure to die, for hard on hers Comes autumn, with his apples scattering; Then back to wintertide, when nothing stirs.
damna tamen celerēs reparant caelestia lūnae: nōs ubi dēcidimus quō pater Aenēās, quō dīves Tullus et Ancus, pulvis et umbra sumus.	But oh, whate'er the sky-led seasons mar, Moon upon moon rebuilds it with her beams: Come *we* where Tullus and where Ancus are, And good Aeneas, we are dust and dreams.

Even without looking at individual words, some differences between the original and the translation are clear. Housman needs a lot more words than Horace does to get the same ideas across, and the line lengths are different: while Housman's lines are all iambic pentameters, Horace's alternate between dactylic hexameters—the same meter used by Homer, Lucretius, and Virgil—and shorter lines that are also dactylic, but only extend for two and a half feet rather than six.[17] In effect, what Horace can express in a line and a half fills up two full lines of Housman. Partly this is the inevitable consequence of translating poetry, a form of language in which every word bears special weight, such that meaning is often unusually compressed. Moreover, the content of the original somehow needs to be adapted to the rhyme scheme and meter of the target language, and, when there's not an easy fit, the natural temptation is to pad the translation with additional words rather than to leave anything out

[17] This particular pattern is rare in antiquity, although, if the even-numbered lines consisted of two of these half-lines each, rather than just one, the poem would then consist of elegiac couplets, which are very common.

that's in the original. But density of expression is characteristic of English poetry, too, and much of the expansion in the appearance of Housman's text on the page is thus best attributed to the general temperament of the two languages. How all of this plays out in practice can be seen neatly in the first two lines of the poem. First, *Diffūgēre nivēs* becomes *The snows are fled away*. While a straight word count—two words have expanded to five—might suggest a degree of padding, this apparent bloating results entirely from the more analytical structure of English. *Nivēs* turns into *the snows* because English requires a definite article, and *diffūgēre* becomes *are fled away* because Latin fuses into one word elements that English expresses individually: *dif-* (an assimilated form of the prefix *dis-*) corresponds to *away*, *-fūg-* to *fled*, and the ending *-ēre*, which indicates person, number, and tense, to *are*.[18] Indeed, it's hardly clear that counting words is the best way to assess conciseness of expression: English may take more words, but they're also shorter than the Latin, and the total number of syllables, six, is the same in both.

Comparing the two versions becomes more complicated in the next line and a half, since the translator alters the order of the ideas expressed in the Latin. For orientation, here is (a) a word-for-word glossing of the Latin, (b) a more polished version that preserves the word order, and (c) Housman's translation:

	redeunt	*iam*	*grāmina*	*campīs*	*arboribus-que*	*comae*
(a)	they return	already	grasses	to/in fields	to/in trees-and	leaves

(b) They're returning already, the grasses to the fields, and to the trees, their leaves

(c) Leaves on the shaws and grasses in the mead renew their birth

Once again, Housman's English has more words: six Latin words have become 12 in English. Once again, judging conciseness by the word count is misleading: the translator has actually *reduced* the number of syllables, from 16 to 14. Some of the shifts parallel those seen with the first two words of the poem: *grāmina campīs*, for instance, becomes *grasses in the mead*, with additional words—but not syllables—needed in English because the definite article comes into play and the idea expressed by the case ending *-īs* in *campīs* requires a preposition like *in* in English. But which preposition is one to choose? With both *campīs* "fields" and *arboribus* "trees", the case ending is ambiguous, since, with plural nouns in Latin, the dative and ablative cases are always identical. If these are understood as datives, then the fields and trees are regarded as the beneficiaries

[18] Note also that Housman chooses *are* rather than *have* to form the present perfect. This used to be a possibility in English when the verb in question was intransitive, much as in German, where intransitive verbs of motion or change in state take *sein* ("to be") rather than *haben* ("to have") as the corresponding auxiliary. It works very well for Housman to use the older construction here insofar as the Latin ending *-ēre* is also an archaizing poeticism, in this case an earlier form of the third-person plural perfect active ending, generally replaced by *-ērunt* in prose.

of the renewal, and the grasses and leaves viewed as their possessions, an interpretation best conveyed by "to" in English. But they could equally well be ablatives, and, of the three main uses of the ablative, the locative fits best here, and is Housman's choice; thus, "*on* the shaws" and "*in* the mead".

But why pick "shaws" to translate *arboribus*, which is the plain Latin word for tree? Or "mead" for *campīs*, which simply means "field"? Because Housman is working in an English poetic tradition that is set apart from the ordinary language of prose in part through the use of distinctive vocabulary. Moreover, English is no different from Latin in this respect. While *arbor* and *campus* (as these words would occur in a dictionary, in the nominative singular) may be prose words, *grāmina* (singular *grāmen*) is not as common a word for grass as *herba*, and *comae* (singular *coma*) is not the regular word for "leaves", which is *folia*, the source of English *foliage*. *Comae*, by contrast, is a word favored by poets, used primarily of hair. Astronomers will have come across the singular *coma* in *Coma Berenices* "The Hair of Berenice", a constellation named after a Ptolemaic queen whose hair had been transformed into the stars in question. (At least that's what the court astronomer claimed.) Because poems praising this metamorphosis had been written by the poet Callimachus in Greek, then again by Catullus in Latin, the constellation ended up with a name featuring the poetic word for hair rather than either of the main prose words, *capillus* or *pilus*. Here in Horace's poem, however, it is used in a figurative sense, very common in Latin poetry, in reference to leaves, which are to the tree as hair is to the head. Indeed, it's so commonly used in this metaphorical sense that it's easy to overlook that it actually means hair, a meaning that should, however, be kept in the back of one's mind since the fundamental point of the poem is to contrast the renewal of nature, collectively, with the inevitable mortal decline of humans, individually. The particular image employed here can only be expressed coarsely in English—tree hair grows back, human hair, eventually, doesn't—but Latin poetic diction can do this very elegantly with the single word *comae*.

Finally, there's the first word of the sentence, the verb *redeunt*, which, as the compound of *red-* "back, re-" and *eunt* "go", simply means "return". But here Housman moves furthest away from a literal rendering of the Latin, offering "renew their birth". This might seem like excessive liberty on the part of the translator, drawing out too explicitly the contrast between Nature's springtime renewal and humankind's inexorable decline. But considering that he has had to let go of the double meaning of *comae*, this is a good way of bringing the subtle anthropomorphization of the natural world back into the poem. Conveniently, the use of a stationary verb ("renew") rather than one suggesting more motion ("return") also works well with his choice of the similarly stationary prepositions "on" and "in" to translate the case endings of *campīs* and *arboribus*. This decision, though, is not without its cost: in Latin, there's a symmetrical balance of movement, lost in Housman's version, between the snows fleeing and the grass and leaves returning.

Thus even as skilled a translator as Housman can't capture everything that's going on in the Latin. Horace, to give a further example, can throw shades of emphasis on different words by manipulating the word order in a way that's not possible, or at least not natural, in English. To understand how he plays with the word order, though, one first needs to have an idea of the baseline he's starting from. In the typical English sentence with a transitive verb, the default order of the main elements will be subject–verb–object (SVO): *The poet wrote the poem*. In Latin, while there is considerably greater freedom of word order, it would be most common for the verb to come last (SOV), as if English said *The poet the poem wrote*. For the first three verbs in this poem, however, Horace places the verb first in its clause: *diffūgēre nivēs*, *redeunt iam grāmina*, *mūtat terra*. Understanding what he gains by this requires a brief consideration of how sentences are shaped by the wider context in which they occur, the sort of question studied by the branch of linguistics known as **pragmatics**.[19]

Now subjects come first across a wide range of the world's languages,[20] and a major reason for this has to do with the flow of information in a sentence. On the whole, it's easier for the listener to process a sentence if the given, accessible material (often called by the technical term **topic**) comes first as an orientation, and the new material that's the reason for making the utterance in the first place (called the **focus**) is only presented afterwards. What's more, just as the discourse, at a pragmatic level, is organized around a topic (that is, the person or thing that the narrative or conversation is about), so too the sentence, at a syntactic level, is centered on a noun or pronoun subject of which some verbal predicate is said to be true. Sentences flow best when these two levels are aligned, so if you're writing a poem with Achilles as the topic, Achilles is likely to be a frequent sentence subject as well. And because it works best to put topics first, so too subjects are also often first in their sentence.

But there's also no requirement that the topic of a sentence be the same as its subject. Sometimes a grammatical element other than the subject is a better starting point for the thought being expressed. Consider the simple exchange:

A: Do you like *To Kill a Mockingbird*?
B: The movie's very good, but the book, embarrassingly, I've never read.

Since speaker B has been asked about *To Kill a Mockingbird* by speaker A, it makes sense for it to be treated as the topic of the reply. Now English, in most circumstances, doesn't rearrange the elements of a sentence to highlight the

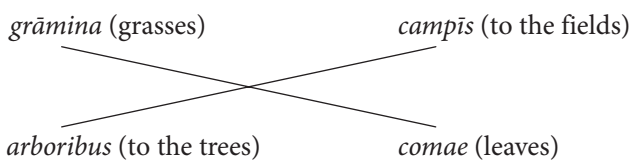
[19] For a general introduction to pragmatics, see G. Yule, *Pragmatics* (Oxford, 1996).

[20] For answering such questions as "How many languages have such and such a feature?", the World Atlas of Language Structures Online (https://wals.info/) is an outstanding resource. Feature 81A catalogues the order of subject, object, and verb in no fewer than 1377 languages, complete with a color-coded map; the subject comes first in 1053 of these, or 76%.

topic as much as certain other languages do, so a straightforward answer might be simply, "Yes, I like it a lot", with the usual SVO word order. But here, speaker B wishes to distinguish between two different versions of *Mockingbird*, the movie and the book, either of which could potentially be treated as the topic of speaker B's answer, once speaker A asked a question about it. In such cases, where a topic (*Mockingbird*) encompasses two or more subtopics (the movie and the book), English has the option of bringing the subtopics forward in the sentence, even if (as is the case with "the book") it's the object of the verb and would normally follow it.

Topics, thus, have a tendency to move further forward in the sentence than they might otherwise appear, and this can even happen with verbs in some languages. Here Horace's *diffūgēre nivēs*, *redeunt iam grāmina*, and *mūtat terra* all have this sort of gentle dislocation, in which the verb moves earlier in its clause, thereby emphasizing that it is the ideas expressed by the verbs—the cycle of seasonal change—that serve as the topic of the poem rather than what happens specifically to snow, grasses, and the earth. While this sort of topicalization of verbs doesn't happen as such in English, a similar effect can be achieved through the use of the gerund or other verbal nouns: "There's a fleeing of the snows, a return of the grass, and a changing of the earth." But it comes at a cost, since the change from finite verbs to verbal nouns not only obscures the shift in tense in the Latin (the snows *have fled* in the perfect tense, whereas the grasses and the earth *are returning* and *changing* in the present) but also leads to a much more static picture (not to mention stilted language) than is offered by the Latin.

Some of the other features of Horace's word order also fail to translate well. In *redeunt iam grāmina campīs arboribusque comae*, the final four words fall into a pattern common in Greco-Roman poetry: rather than grouping two conceptually parallel pairs as ABAB—grasses$_{A}$ to the fields$_{B}$, leaves$_{A}$ to the trees$_{B}$—Latin often arranges them symmetrically, in the order ABBA. If one writes the pairs over one another, and draws lines between the corresponding members (e.g. subject to subject, object to object), a cross is formed, giving this pattern its technical name, **chiasmus**, after the Greek letter chi, which is shaped like a St Andrew's cross (X):



While chiasmus is often treated as if it were no more than an ornamental stylistic device, something a poet includes simply to dress up an otherwise ordinary sequence, in fact it is based on a rationale similar to that which causes topics to come early in the sentence.[21] The tendency for clauses to start from the given

and proceed to the new is part of a general strategy whereby speakers make what they're saying cohesive for the listener by moving from what is either already in the addressee's mind, or could reasonably be inferred on the basis of what has already been said, towards what is less expected. In a chiasmus like *grāmina campīs, arboribus comae*, at the end of the first pair, the B item of the pair, *campīs* "to the fields", is what's in the speaker's mind, so it works well for the second pair to begin with the corresponding element, *arboribus* "to the trees", and only then move on to *comae* "leaves". This sequence of thought is rendered even easier in Latin thanks to a quirk of the word that here means "and", which I've left out of the last couple of quotations of the phrase to isolate the chiasmus more clearly. As mentioned in Chapter 2, Greek, Latin, and Sanskrit all have a word for "and"—*que* in Latin, *te* in Greek, and *ca* in Sanskrit—that, as a postpositive conjunction, comes *after* the second word of the pair it joins together rather than between them: not *A que B*, but *A B-que*, as if we said in English "salt pepper-and". Here Horace uses *-que*[22] to join not just two nouns but two clauses. And using postpositive *-que*, rather than the alternative *et*, which goes between the two elements it coordinates, leads to two felicitous effects difficult to replicate in English. First, its position after, rather than before, *arboribus* puts *campīs* and *arboribus* directly next to each other, thereby working together with the chiasmus to achieve an especially smooth flow from one idea to the next, with the two locations which turn green in spring contiguous with one another. Second, recalling that *arboribusque comae* constitutes an entire line in the poem, we see that the postposition of the conjunction allows the two most important words, *arboribus* and *comae*, to take pride of place at the start and end of the line, yielding a symmetry in which the two full nouns are located on either side of the weak conjunction.

Untranslatable intricacies of word order continue throughout the 16 lines I've excerpted. To touch on just a few of these effects, from the second stanza, consider again these lines:

immortālia nē spērēs, monet annus et almum quae rapit hōra diem.	The swift hour and the brief prime of the year Say to the soul, *Thou wast not born for aye.*

Housman has here altered the sequence of thought considerably. A word-for-word translation would run something like this, and be virtually incomprehensible without recourse to the original poem:

immortālia	*nē*	*spērēs,*	*monet*	*annus*	*et*	*almum*
immortality	that not	you hope for,	warns	the year	and	nourishing

[21] Readers who already have a grounding in Latin and/or theoretical linguistics can find a considerably more detailed treatment of the pragmatic factors underlying chiastic constructions in A. M. Devine and L. D. Stephens, *Latin Word Order: Structured Meaning and Information* (Oxford, 2006), pp. 242–9.

[22] When written in its own right, *-que* is usually given a leading hyphen, since it's attached to the previous word in standard Latin orthography.

quae	*rapit*	*hōra*	*diem.*
which	snatches away	the hour	the day.

Rearranged into something a little more idiomatic, this becomes: *The year warns that you shouldn't hope for immortality, as does the hour which snatches away the nourishing day*. Whereas Housman's translation begins, as is natural for English, with the subjects of the main verb, the seasons of the year that remind us of our transience, Horace places the idea of immortality front and center. In English syntax, this would be difficult, since not only is *immortālia* the object of the verb, namely *spērēs* "hope for", but the whole clause in which it's situated, *immortālia nē spērēs* ("…that you shouldn't hope for immortality"), is also acting as the object of the verb *monet* ("it warns…"), the reverse of the natural English order. Nor, for that matter, is "immortality" all that great a translation of *immortālia*. First, it suffers from the same problem that *mortālis* does in the passage of Lucretius discussed above: it belongs to the Latinate register of English diction, and is therefore one degree more distant from the blunt expression of death than is *im<u>mort</u>ālia* in Latin. Second, *immortality* is an abstract noun in English, whereas *immortālia* is the neuter plural of the adjective *immortālis*, which has undergone the same substantivization seen earlier in the examples *mūtātīs mūtandīs* and *cēterīs paribus*. That is, what the addressee of Horace's poem shouldn't hope for isn't immortality in the abstract but deathless things in the concrete. Of course, the exact identity of those theoretically concrete deathless things is left unspecified, so the concept is effectively reabstractified. But the fact that the Latin word is actually the plural form of an adjective, and not a noun, leaves space for the reader to wonder what those multiple deathless things might be—put syntactically, to wonder what the adjective could potentially be modifying.

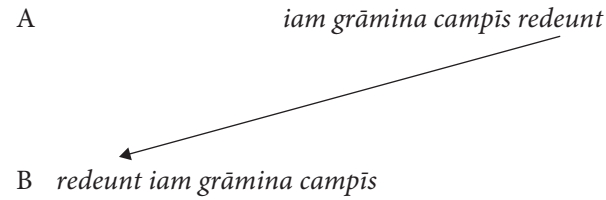
A much more complicated word order marks the main clause—complicated even by the standards of Latin, as this sort of interlacing goes beyond what one would expect to find in the prose of a Cicero. It starts off simply enough: *monet annus* "the year warns", with the verb fronted, both to bring it closer to the content of the warning, just given and, as with the other examples of clause-initial verbs seen so far, to topicalize it. But then the simple conjunction *et* introduces a second subject of *monet*. It comes across as a sort of afterthought, since *monet* itself is marked as having only a singular subject. (With an ordinary plural subject, the verb form would be *monent*.) But Horace leaves the reader guessing as to what exactly that second subject is. First, we hear *almum*, an adjective meaning "nourishing" (also found in the phrase *alma māter* "nourishing mother"), whose ending *-um* tells us that it's likely to be modifying an object, but that it could also be in agreement with a neuter subject. Next comes *quae*, a relative pronoun "that, which", which again is ambiguous, but could either refer to a plurality of neuter things or, as will turn out to be the case, a feminine subject. With *rapit*, we get a second verb, which the reader is expecting

once the relative pronoun was introduced, but we don't know yet what its subject is, or how any of this is coordinated with *monet annus*. Only with the last two words of the line do things fall into place: *hōra* is feminine, and it can only be a subject, so it easily slots into place both as the antecedent of the relative pronoun *quae* and as the noun that *et* coordinates with *annus*; and *diem* is the object that *almum* is modifying. If this seems unusually jumbled, that's because it is. In ordinary Latin prose, while there would still be a lot of flexibility, we would probably expect the order:

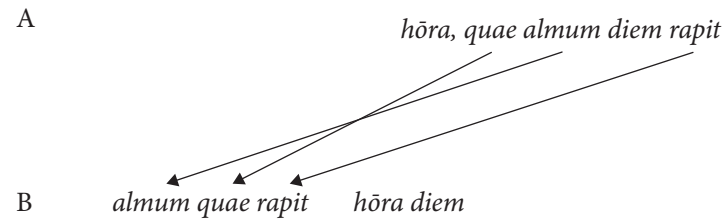
et	*hōra*	*quae*	*almum diem*	*rapit*
and	the hour	which	the nourishing day	snatches away

Now an English speaker is likely to process even this order incorrectly: arranged thus, we have to understand the relative pronoun *which* as the object of the verb, and *the nourishing day* as its subject. But the only transposition needed to turn this into English is to move the verb in between *which* and *the nourishing day*. Importantly, everything that belongs together syntactically is grouped together in continuous units: *almum* modifies *diem*, so they appear next to each other. And *quae almum diem rapit* is also a single constituent—a relative clause—and it too appears as a single, uninterrupted sequence. Not so, however, with Horace's poem, where *almum* is separated from *diem* by three words, and *hōra*, rather than preceding the relative clause as its antecedent, appears in the middle of it. Such dislocation, especially the positioning of *almum*, is striking even by the standards of Latin, and the technical term for it is **hyperbaton**. Why does it happen? One explanation might be that Horace had to rearrange the words for them to fit the meter, and this is what he came up with. But that's intolerably weak: there are plenty of lines of Latin verse where this doesn't happen, and we'd be accusing Horace of being an awfully lousy poet if we assumed that it was only *faute de mieux* that he fell back on this word order. A better explanation would be to propose that some sort of movement has taken place, like the topicalization of verbs mentioned earlier in this section. While hyperbaton involving the dislocation of this many words would be unusual in prose, there are plenty of parallels for individual topics and foci being brought forward in the sentence because of the particular emphasis placed on them. One should prefer, where possible, the economical explanation, so if we can argue that something similar is happening here, only to a greater degree, then we haven't introduced any unnecessary complications into the grammar of Latin.

But what's going on in the information flow of this sentence that this sort of movement would be called for? Most of the relevant syntactic theories hold that a default order A shifts to a marked order B through the leftward movement of topics, foci, and the like. We've already seen an example of this with the verb *redeunt* fronted because it's a topic:



That much is fairly clear and not impossible in Latin prose either. But in the example at hand, we see that no fewer than three of the five words have to move forwards in order for *hōra*, which should come first, to be relegated to the penultimate position:



Just as the end result is not the sort of word order one would expect in prose, so too this sort of movement is rather too extreme to be accounted for by the usual pragmatic rules whereby topics and foci are fronted. We could certainly try to do so: *almum* could be in a topic slot; *quae*, as a relative pronoun could be fronted in its role of introducing a subordinate clause (something similar happens regularly in English: in *the person whom I saw*, the relative pronoun *whom*, though an object, comes before the subject); and *rapit* could be regarded as a focal element, since one could argue that the snatching away of the day is what's most salient here. But that all seems a little ad hoc. The topic should be something that the sentence is about, which connects it to what precedes, and *almum*, as an adjective meaning "nourishing", probably fails on both counts. A better case could be made for taking *rapit* as the focus of the subordinate clause, but its movement in front of the noun *hōra*, which is the antecedent of that clause, would still be strange.

No, in a situation like this, it's better to remember that Horace is a poet, and think about other effects that are achieved by these dislocations. In terms of the overall impression, there's the very confusion caused by all this syntactic movement: even the most fluent Latin speakers would have to wait until *hora* before they could start to make sense of the relative clause. Such uncertainty is very much at home in a line of poetry that reminds us how quickly the passage of time snatches the days away from us. This general effect is further enhanced by the particular residue that's left after the fronting has taken place: the line ends with the two words in the clause most associated with time, *hōra diem*. By forcing the reader to wait until the very end of the line to hear the two words that enable the preceding syntax to fall into place, the poet can emphasize them all the more strongly.

All of this, of course, poses immense difficulties for the translator, who cannot jumble the words in this way in English, because we don't have the case endings on words that would enable the reader to make sense out of Horace's syntactic spaghetti bowl. But this doesn't mean that an English poet can't draw attention to some of the same words and ideas, just that it must be done in way more suitable for the particular character of our language. One means of underlining words that does work well in English is alliteration: Housman's "We are dust and dreams" makes for a very effective close to the fourth stanza and, while alliteration occurs from time to time in Latin poetry, it's nowhere near as pervasive a poetic device as in Germanic languages like English, as we'll see at greater length in Chapter 4. Furthermore, while Housman can't put immortality at the start of the first line without sounding stilted ("Immortality, that it should not be hoped for, the year warns…"), he can place "aye" at the end of the verse, another strong position in the line. Indeed, verse-end is stronger in English than it is even in Latin because of a common structural feature of English verse that is absent altogether from Classical Latin poetry: rhyme. In a stanza like Housman's, the sonic reinforcement created between the line-end rhymes (*fear ~ year*, *play ~ aye*) inevitably draws the ear's attention to these words in particular and goes a long way towards restoring the prominence of *immortālia* in Horace's original. But while that much can be conveyed in translation, there is very little that can be done in English to capture the complex interweaving that permeates the rest of that couplet.

As a final note, though, before moving on from word order, it is also important to forestall any impression that this sort of complexity is unique to Latin. In fact, most of the other languages discussed in this book, like Greek and Sanskrit, take advantage of the flexibility enabled by case endings and other inflections to a similar extent. In Greek, for instance, equally intricate word order can be seen in the lyric poetry of Pindar, a poet just as difficult to translate as Horace and, not coincidentally, one of Horace's models. (The second poem in Horace's *Odes* 4 warns that imitating Pindar is no easy task, with the explicitly agonistic first line: *Pindarum quisquis studet aemulārī* "Whoever desires to rival Pindar.") But the centrality of such syntactic play to Horace's poetry makes him especially appropriate as an illustration of what inflected languages can do that English can't.

TACITUS

Some may wonder whether I have exaggerated Latin's flexibility by choosing poets as the source of the first two examples of "Things Latin can do that English can't": Surely poetic license exists in Latin just as much as in English? Yes, it does, but most of the features of Latin we've seen so far can be paralleled in

prose language—it's just that their prominence in poetry makes them easier to single out for observation there than in more pedestrian texts where linguistic craftsmanship isn't at such a premium. But for our third text, we turn to the prose of the historian Tacitus, who was writing a hundred-odd years after Horace, in the early second century AD. Most of his works—which are anything but pedestrian—are marked not only by a delightfully bitter cynicism but also by a style that exhibits an extreme compression of thought, eschewing the balance and fullness of Cicero, the great master of earlier, Republican prose.[23] Tacitus' economy of language can be seen at a glance if one opens pretty much any page of the bilingual Loeb edition of his works: the left page, with the Latin, is virtually double-spaced, or, if closer to single-spaced, is filled out with copious notes at the bottom of the page; the facing page, with the English translation, is crammed with text from top to bottom. That said, the same is often true of other Latin authors as well, so, rather than relying on such anecdotal evidence, it's better to turn to Tacitus' own words to get a sense of how he takes advantage of the linguistic resources of Latin in order to achieve his extreme brevity.

In this, we'll focus on a couple of passages from the *Annals*, Tacitus' final work, in which he covered the history of the Julio-Claudian emperors, starting from the death of Augustus in AD 14, and ending with the reign of Nero in 68. Much of the work is lost—we don't even know how many books it consisted of, with 16 or 18 being the best guess—but eight books, including the first four, survive intact, as do substantial fragments from four more. Right from the very first sentence, the work is a study in untranslatable succinctness:

urbem	*Rōmam*	*ā*	*prīncipiō*	*rēgēs*	*habuēre;*
the city	Rome	from	the beginning	kings	held

lībertātem	*et cōnsulātum*	*Lūcius Brūtus*	*īnstituit*
freedom	and the consulship	Lucius Brutus	established

Until recently, the most widely available translation of the *Annals* was probably Michael Grant's 1956 Penguin edition, which renders these lines as such:

> When Rome was first a city, its rulers were kings. Then Lucius Junius Brutus created the consulate and free Republican institutions in general.

Twelve words have become 23, partly because of the exigencies of English syntax—all those definite articles—but also because of the extent to which Grant expands the phrasing in order to give more context for the contemporary

[23] In both these respects, Tacitus is often compared to Thucydides; we will return to this at the end of the chapter.

reader: most noticeably, *lībertātem* becomes "free Republican institutions", as a way of slipping into the text the reminder that, for a Roman audience, the mention of Brutus signals the start of the Roman Republic.

A couple of new translations, however, have appeared in the past few years, both of which stay rather closer to the Latin. In 2012, Penguin published a completely new version, by Cynthia Damon, who renders the opening as follows:

> The city of Rome was originally in the hands of kings; liberty and the consulship were instituted by Lucius Brutus.

At 20 words, Damon has only shaved off three from Grant's version, but much more of Tacitus' style comes through. Particularly noticeable is the abruptness of the transition from the first to the second half of the sentence, with only a semicolon in Damon's rendering where Grant slips in "Then" as a sort of lubricant to smooth out the sequence of thought. Such absence of a connective particle is not uncommon in Latin (it's given the Greek name **asyndeton**, which simply means "not (*a-*) tied (*-deton*) together (*-syn-*)"), and it often implies a contrast between the two clauses joined thereby, such as here, between kings and liberty. Perhaps the most important difference, though, between these two translations lies in the treatment of *lībertātem et cōnsulātum*. Tacitus here makes grammatically parallel two words that are not (or at least not straightforwardly) on the same semantic plane: *lībertātem* is the abstract concept of freedom or liberty, *cōnsulātum* the more concrete institution of the consulship, the highest public office in Republican Rome. Once again, Grant completely erases this somewhat jarring combination by rewriting *lībertātem* as "free Republican institutions in general", thus artificially restoring a semantic parallelism with "the consulate". Damon's version is much closer to this typically Tacitean turn of phrase both in its brevity and in its deliberately incongruous juxtaposition of the two terms. Less obviously, Damon also rewrites the syntax of the Latin so that the subjects of the two clauses are not people ("kings" and "Brutus") but the inanimate entities that are the grammatical objects in the Latin ("the city of Rome", "liberty and the consulship"). While this superficially makes Grant's a more faithful version, Damon has probably captured the spirit of the original better. As seen above in the case of Horace, Latin word order is often determined not by syntactic functions like subject and object but by the pragmatic roles played by the participants in the clause: items that come early on—here *urbem Rōmam* and *lībertātem et cōnsulātum*—are often placed where they are to signal that they are the topic of the sentence. But in order for them to register as topics in English, they have to come earlier in the sentence than is generally possible for grammatical *objects*. Thus, if the information flow is to be preserved, then the sentences need to be rewritten with passive verbs ("were instituted by") or equivalent periphrases ("was in the hands of"), so that these topical elements can be

brought forward as sentence-initial *subjects*. Recasting the verbs in this way allows the translator to make clearer that these sentences are not so much about kings and Brutus as about Rome and freedom.

For a final translational comparandum (yet another English word that comes from a Latin gerundive), we may turn to A. J. Woodman's 2004 translation for Hackett, which is especially useful for our purposes because of its deliberate attempt to remain as faithful to Tacitus as allowed by the constraints of English:[24]

> The City of Rome from its inception was held by kings; freedom and the consulship were established by L. Brutus.

This version, which also comes to 20 words, is clearly much closer to Damon's than to Grant's: Woodman has anticipated Damon in adopting the same sentence structure, asyndeton, and a single-word translation of *lībertātem*. That said, his choice of "freedom" better captures the fact that *lībertātem* in Latin is transparently derived from *līber* "free", and thus has a visceral straightforwardness not as apparent with the more abstract "liberty" in English. Still, both of these words acquired such baggage in English in the wake of the American and French Revolutions that either choice is inevitably loaded with anachronistic resonances.[25] The issue is reminiscent of the earlier discussion of the best way to render Lucretius' *mortālis*: "liberty" here, like "mortal" there, preserves the Latin root, but at the cost of directness.

The other noticeable difference lies in the rendering of *ā prīncipiō*, with Woodman's "from its inception", unlike Damon's "originally", retaining the syntax of a prepositional phrase. This may seem like a minor difference, and, considering that "inception" is a fairly rarefied word in English while *ā prīncipiō* is perfectly ordinary Latin, one might be tempted to see Damon's version as here adhering more closely to the underlying feel of the original. Indeed, the choice of "inception" makes sense primarily in the context of Woodman's general aim of allowing as much as possible of Tacitus' wordplay to show through in the translation (just as *prīncipium* "beginning" echoes *prīncipātus* "principate, empire", a key concept in Tacitus' œuvre, so too "in**cep**tion" has the same central root as "prin**cip**ate").[26] Yet it is the decision to retain the prepositional

[24] For an outstanding introduction to the impossibility of understanding what Tacitus has really said if one can't read Latin, with further examples along these lines, see especially A. J. Woodman "Readers and reception: A text case", in *A Companion to Greek and Roman Historiography*, vol. 1, edited by J. Marincola (Malden, MA, 2007).

[25] Geoffrey Nunberg's editorial "The Nation: Freedom vs. Liberty; More Than Just Another Word for Nothing Left to Lose" (*New York Times*, March 23, 2003) nicely draws attention to the historical shift in the relative popularity of the two words in American political discourse, with *liberty* more prominent at the time of the Revolution, and *freedom* coming to the fore with Roosevelt's Four Freedoms and the civil rights movement.

[26] It's not absurd to see *prīncipium* in the neighborhood of *lībertās* and surmise that Tacitus might at some level have had the word *prīncipātus* in mind. After all, a memorable statement

phrase that actually has more significant repercussions for the construal of the Latin.

There are several different ways of saying "at *or* in the beginning" in Latin: one can either use the ablative case on its own (*prīncipiō*), which, as noted earlier, can be used to mark the location, including the temporal location, of an event; or one can add a preposition, either *in* "in" or *ab* "from", as Tacitus does here (with the final *-b* dropped before the initial *p-* of *prīncipiō*). Of these three, it is probably *in prīncipiō* that will be the alternative most familiar to readers because of its prominence in ecclesiastical Latin and classical music: *In prīncipiō erat Verbum* ("In the beginning was the Word") at the start of the Gospel of John, and *Sīcut erat in prīncipiō* ("As it was in the beginning") in the Gloria. Still, all three are perfectly good Latin (Cicero, for instance, uses all three), and it is not always easy to determine how they differ from one another. But while there may be some contexts in which they would be interchangeable, their distribution is also not entirely random. In the collected works of Tacitus, for instance, *prīncipiō* occurs 13 times in the ablative, 12 times without a preposition (mostly expressions with a dependent genitive, e.g. *annī prīncipiō* "at the start of the year"), only here with *ab*, and never with *in*. If a writer as meticulous with his words—and as sparing with them—as Tacitus only uses the prepositional option here, then readers should take note, especially since this is the very first sentence of his magnum opus, and thus one that he will presumably have crafted as painstakingly as possible.[27] And what the historian achieves by adding *ab* is the introduction of a useful ambiguity.

On the one hand, *ā prīncipiō* can be as neutral as Damon's translation suggests: the preposition's original sense "from" has frequently been bleached away, and the phrase means simply "in the beginning" or "originally".[28] On the other hand, there are also examples where *ab* still retains its full force, as is clear in more extended expressions like *ā prīncipiō ūsque ad hoc tempus* "from the beginning right up to the present time". By the time, then, that the reader has

on the (in)compatibility of *prīncipātus* and *lībertās* is found in the *Agricola*, Tacitus' encomium of his father-in-law: *quamquam…Nerva Caesar rēs ōlim dissociābilēs miscuerit, prīncipātum ac lībertātem* "Although…the emperor Nerva blended things that were once irreconcilable, the principate and freedom" (3). For further pairings of *prīncipātus* and *lībertās*, see Woodman's commentary *ad loc.*

[27] The first lines of works were at least as important in ancient literature as they are now. Dionysius of Halicarnassus, a teacher of rhetoric in the Augustan age, records that, when Plato died, there was found among his possessions a tablet containing the opening eight words of the *Republic* arranged in various orders, so determined had he been to get it just right.

[28] This shift from "from" to "in" is prominent in the spatial question-words of Latin and the Romance languages, with interrogatives that mean "from where?" coming to mean simply "where?", as we'll see in Chapter 5.

read *Urbem Rōmam ā prīncipiō rēgēs habuēre*, some uncertainty hovers in the air: "Kings held Rome *in* the beginning [but no longer do]" or "Kings held Rome *from* the beginning [and perhaps they still do]". Indeed, the potential for the latter reading is even greater than that translation suggests since the verb form *habuēre*, as a Latin perfect, can be understood either as equivalent to an English simple past ("held") or present perfect ("have held"). Now, since the basic facts of Roman history are what they are, and all of Tacitus' audience knew of Brutus' expulsion of the kings, no reader would hear this second option as literally true. In any case, Tacitus goes on to mention the end of the kingship in the very next clause, thereby canceling the possibility of the second interpretation. But given that he portrays the emperors of his own era as engaged in the same sort of tyrannical behavior that led to the end of the kings, one can certainly see *ā prīncipiō rēgēs habuēre* as inviting the reader to ask: Just how long did the kings' rule last for? Is it in fact over? And this nuance is easier to detect in Woodman's "from its inception was held by kings" than in translations that flatten *ā prīncipiō* to "originally" or the like.

Some may find it a bit excessive to extract so much meaning out of the *ā prīncipiō* of the first clause, especially if that reading only works if that clause is considered in isolation from what follows immediately afterwards. But there is in fact an excellent reason to take these six words as a statement in their own right, and it is a final important feature of this opening that is inevitably lost in translation. They form a perfect dactylic hexameter, the same metrical pattern used by Lucretius in the *Dē Rērum Nātūrā*, by Virgil in the *Aeneid*, by Horace in the odd lines of *Odes* 4.7, and, for that matter, in Greek, by Homer. To recap, lines in this meter consist of six feet, of which the first four may be either a dactyl (a long followed by two shorts) or a spondee (two longs), the fifth nearly always a dactyl, and the sixth a spondee. Compare the first lines of Tacitus and Horace's ode, with the rhythms marked out; the musically-inclined may wish to hear this as a 2/4 rhythm, with the long syllables as quarter notes, the short syllables as eighth notes:

–		–			–			–			˘ ˘	–		–		–		˘ ˘		–	–	
ur-		*bem*			*Rō-*		*mam ā*[29]			*prīn-*	*cipi-*	*ō*		*rēg-*		*ēs*		*habu-*		*ēre*			
–		–		–		˘ ˘		–		˘ ˘		–		–		–		˘ ˘		–	–	
dif-		*fūg-*		*ē-*		*re niv-*		*ēs,*		*rede-*		*unt*	*iam*		*grā-*		*mina*			*campīs*			

[29] Final *-m* in Latin was pronounced weakly—in all probability it represents simply nasalization of the preceding vowel, with *-am* pronounced as if it were French *an*—so the final syllable of *Rōmam* is elided into the preposition *ā* to become a single long beat in the meter of the verse. Incidentally, the prosodic shape of the line would be the same if the preposition were omitted or changed to *in*, so the use of *ā* cannot be attributed to metrical factors.

That Tacitus should work such a clearly poetic rhythm into his prose history apparently goes against Aristotle's injunction, in the *Rhetoric*, that prose should be neither metrical (*emmetron*) nor without rhythm (*arrhythmon*).[30] If it's metrical, says Aristotle, then it comes across as artificial and draws too much attention to itself; but if a sense of rhythm is altogether lacking, then sentences never come to a proper end, and that's unpleasant too. But if Tacitus here seems to be disobeying Aristotle, he does so with good reason. First, the genre of history was described by the important rhetorician Quintilian (*fl.* first century AD, about a generation older than Tacitus) as *proxima poētīs* ("closest to the poets"), in part because it aimed to preserve the renown of great events and people for posterity—also a key goal of the sort of epic poetry composed in dactylic hexameters. Second, Tacitus is not the first Roman historian to have directed readers' attention by casting an introductory sentence in a dactylic rhythm. While it is not the opening line of the work, Sallust, a historian in the late Republic, signals that the heart of his account of the Jugurthine War is getting started with this line:

– – | – – | – – | – ˘ ˘ | – – | – –
bel- lum scrīp- tū- rus sum, quod popu- lus Rō- mānus
I am going to write of the war which the Roman people…

With the sentence-initial object (*bellum*), first-person verb (*sum*), and relative clause giving further specifics about the object (*quod* …), this is not so different an opening gambit from that followed a generation later by Virgil in the *Aeneid*, an actual epic poem:

– ˘ ˘ | – ˘ ˘ | – – | – – | – ˘ ˘ | – –
ar- ma vir um- que ca- nō, Trō- iae quī prī- mus ab ōrīs
I sing of arms and of the man who first from the shores of Troy…

And Tacitus' other great predecessor, Livy, writing in the time of Augustus, begins his history with what's trying to be a dactylic hexameter but doesn't quite get there in the final foot:[31]

– – | – ˘ ˘ | – ˘ ˘ | – – | – – | – ˘ –
fac- tū- rus- ne ope- rae preti- um sim, sī ā prīm- ōrdiō
Whether I'm going to do something worth the effort, if from the beginning…

[30] *τὸ δὲ σχῆμα τῆς λέξεως δεῖ μήτε ἔμμετρον εἶναι μήτε ἄρρυθμον* (1408b21–2).

[31] In both this line and the Sallust, the penultimate foot is a spondee, which is much rarer than a dactyl at this position in the verse, but not unheard of. It is also just possible that the final word could in fact scan as a spondee if the short *i* in *prīmōrdiō* is treated as a glide (i.e. as if it were an English *y*) rather than as a full vowel.

It is also worth noting how Livy's sentence proceeds in full: *factūrusne operae pretium sim, sī ā prīmōrdiō urbis rēs populī Rōmānī perscrīpserim, nec satis sciō nec, sī sciam, dīcere ausim, quippe quī cum veterem tum vulgātam esse rem videam, dum novī semper scrīptōrēs aut in rēbus certius aliquid allātūrōs sē aut scrībendī arte rudem vetustātem superātūrōs crēdunt* "Whether I'm going to do something worth the effort, if I write the affairs of the Roman people all the way through from the beginning of the city, I neither know very well nor, if did know, would I dare to say, inasmuch as I see that it is both an old and common thing, while new writers each in turn believe either that in the contents of their work they're going to contribute some sort of greater certainty or that they'll surpass old-fashioned roughness in their craft of writing." Two points deserve attention. First, Livy uses the phrase *ā prīmōrdiō* "from the beginning", with *prīmōrdiō* a near-synonym of Tacitus' *prīncipiō*, in a way that makes clear that the preposition here must bear its full sense "from", rendering more likely a similar reading of Tacitus' *ā prīncipiō*.[32] Second, whereas Tacitus' initial sentence is a mere 12 words, with no subordinate clauses, Livy's extends to 47, and has considerable syntactic complexity, with an indirect question ("Whether…") and a conditional clause ("if") at the start, and causal "inasmuch as" and temporal "while" clauses at the end. Tacitus' opening shows that Latin can be very concise; Livy's, that it doesn't have to be.

Before leaving Tacitus and Latin behind, an additional example of its brevity is worth noting quickly, simply to emphasize what the language is capable of. As a contrast to the first passage, the very opening of the work, consider next a comparatively ordinary and unremarkable couple of sentences from the middle of the *Annals*. It's the year AD 28, the Romans have just been defeated by the Frisians, a Germanic tribe, and Tacitus reports the effects as follows (*Annals* 4.74.1); to give a sense of where Latin takes shortcuts, I've put hyphens in the translation between words that are expressed through a single word in Latin; words in parentheses have to be supplied from context:

clārum inde inter Germānōs Frīsium nōmen,
Illustrious then among Germans (was) the-Frisian name,

dissimulante Tiberiō damna
Tiberius concealing the-losses,

nē cui bellum permitteret.
so-as-not to-entrust the-war to-anyone.

neque senātūs in eō cūra,
nor (was) the-senate's concern in this,

[32] The similarity of *ā prīmōrdiō* and *ā prīncipiō*—as well as their usefulness in programmatic statements by historians—can also be seen in their both occurring as readings in one fragment of Sallust's *History* (1.8).

an imperiī extrēma dehonestārentur:
whether the-empire's boundaries were-dishonored:

pavor internus occupāverat animōs,
domestic fright had-seized their-minds,

cui remedium adūlātiōne quaerēbātur.
whose remedy in-flattery was-sought.

At this point, most of the reasons why Latin has a lower word count have been seen already: it doesn't have a distinct definite article, prepositions are often expressed through case endings, and the auxiliary verbs of English often correspond to suffixes or endings in Latin. But we also see here the fact that Latin doesn't need to use a form of the verb "to be" in sentences which simply connect a subject with a predicate noun ("Their name *was* illustrious") or state where something is located ("Nor *was* the senate's concern in this"). Such omission is relatively unambiguous in a language that already signals subjects and objects through case endings, and is found in other languages, too. But not having a verb specifically marked for tense in such sentences does allow them to come across as timeless truths more than is the case in English, where the syntax requires a verb that, in this case, gives them away as past tense. (That an impression of lasting grandeur is aimed at in the first words is suggested not only by the presence of *clārum*, exactly the sort of adjective that an epic hero would want applied to himself, but also by the fact that the first four and a half words, *clārum ◡ īnde ◡ īntēr Gērmānōs Frī-*, could be the first four spondees of a dactylic hexameter. The ties between the first two words indicate that the final syllable of one word is elided, that is, runs together and counts as one with the first syllable of the next.)

Furthermore, that Tacitus' material here does not have to be as anchored to the specific temporal context recalls his Greek predecessor Thucydides' description of his own history (1.22.4): "It has been composed as a possession for all time rather than as a showpiece to be heard in the moment." Because of this tendency to abstract away from the present to arrive at general truths—not to mention a shared propensity for thorny language and pessimism—the two historians have often been associated with one another. The pairing occurs in passing in a letter of Thomas Jefferson's, who, on January 21, 1812, three years after the end of his presidency, wrote: "I have given up newspapers in exchange for Tacitus and Thucydides, for Newton and Euclid; and I find myself much the happier." Considering the reputation that both historians have for a rather gloomy view of human nature, there's a somewhat mordant irony in Jefferson's finding even their writings to be a source of greater happiness than current politics. Certainly, that gloominess, made all the more piquant by the conciseness of Tacitus' expression, is in evidence in this passage just considered, with its characteristically cynical content: the depiction of the paranoid Tiberius,

together with the bitter understatement that the senators chose to save their own skin through sycophancy instead of taking steps to defend the empire's borders.

Still, Rome was able to hold off those barbarian Germans to the north for about four hundred more years: after sporadic incursions in the following centuries, in 406 Germanic tribes crossed over the Rhine, previously the border with the Empire, and Rome itself was sacked in 410 by Alaric and the Visigoths. The situation in Britain was also grim: already in the previous century, the Romano-British (that is, the inhabitants at the time of what is now England and Wales, whose linguistic culture was a fusion of Latin and Celtic elements) had been coping with attacks from the west by the Irish, from the north by the Picts, and the east by the Saxons. And when, in 410, they appealed to the emperor Honorius for help with their defenses, they were told they were on their own—not surprising, considering the turmoil in Italy itself. Whatever the exact circumstances, they are said to have invited Germanic speakers to come over from the Continent as mercenaries, notably Angles and Saxons. Over the course of the fifth and sixth centuries, it is these peoples whose language became rooted in what at this point became England, as the newcomers gradually pushed the Celtic speakers back to Wales and Cornwall in the west. And it is to this language branch, Germanic—to which not only English and German but also Dutch and the Scandinavian languages belong—that we now turn.