

# The New Criterion

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## Global Latinists

by *John Byron Kuhner*

*On Latin as an alive and spoken language.*

When Leni Ribeiro Leite stood up in the main auditorium of Memorial Hall this past July, her name and appearance were enough to distinguish her: it's still unusual on the University of Kentucky campus, where Hispanics make up about one percent of the faculty, to see a Hispanic woman at the lectern. But that was only the beginning of what made this lecture unique. She delivered it entirely in Latin, the ancient language of Caesar and Cicero. And her audience, a hundred strong, understood her and later questioned her about her conclusions, again in Latin. And Ribeiro Leite was lecturing about Latin works written in Brazil, the existence of which would be news to most people, who—if they know what Latin is at all—imagine it vanished long ago, along with gladiatorial games and the sandaled legionnaire.

Ribeiro Leite, a professor at the Universidade Federal do Espirito Santo in Brazil, is trying to change all that. She's part of a small but growing international community of scholars who believe that the survival of Classics as an academic study depends on its languages—Greek and Latin—being spoken and written. “We tend to think of Classics as an age-old discipline, something that has been part of the world's culture for millennia,” she tells me later—in fluent, extemporaneous Latin—over lunch at a Thai restaurant not far from the University of Kentucky campus. She continues:

That's not really true. Classics as it is practiced today—where university professors decode and dissect ancient texts—is almost entirely a nineteenth-century invention. Before that, scholars and explorers and scientists and priests formed a community of Latin speakers, who lectured and debated and composed new works all in Latin. That not only continually invigorated the discipline, but it gave its practitioners tremendous linguistic expertise so they could understand the ancient texts better. As soon as the nineteenth-century method of analyzing the languages without ever using them started to take over, Classics immediately started to die. Now it's gotten to the point where in places like Brazil, unless we return to the older methods that kept these languages alive for centuries, Latin and Greek will completely vanish.

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## fashioned learned society in all of Europe.

Ribeiro Leite is one of a hundred scholars and enthusiasts attending the fourteenth International Conference of the Academia Latinitati Fovendae, or ALF (the ALF has no English name but would be something like the Academy for the Promotion of Latin). At first glance, this would appear to be a typical academic conference. Professors are reading papers in lecture halls. But much is different. Everything is conducted in Latin—papers, announcements, conversations over meals—which is, needless to say, rather impressive. And the crowd is surprising. Most are young, almost half are women, and only a substantial minority are academics. In even the shortest conversations, you discover passion and purpose: passion for Latin, and purpose to bring it to a new generation of students. It's an odd juxtaposition: the ALF in certain ways might be the most old-fashioned learned society in all of Europe. It still prohibits at its conferences the use of what it calls the *lingua vernacula*. But in bringing its conference to the New World for the first time in its history, it was seeking to connect with precisely this younger group of teachers and enthusiasts who are trying to revolutionize the study of Latin. And after just a few hours there, it seemed to me that the ALF had been hidebound for so long it might just be about to come back into fashion. It had graduated from freakish to countercultural. And it was growing.

**A** brief history of the alf—entirely in Latin, of course—is found on their website. It began rather promisingly in Rome in 1966 with an *Omnium gentium ac nationum Conventum Latinis litteris linguaeque fovendis*, a Conference of All Peoples and Nations for the Promotion of Latin Language and Literature. Several important people gave their support to the conference and were made members of the society *honoris causa*, including Giuseppe Saragat, the President of Italy, Aldo Moro and Giulio Andreotti, both future prime ministers, and his Eminence Antonio Cardinal Bacci, the Latin secretary to the pope. More than five hundred people attended that conference, from forty-one nations, including Cuba, the Philippines, Thailand, Turkey, Morocco, Mexico, and the Soviet Union. After this successful conference, the Academy was officially formed as a subdivision of the Italian government's Istituto Nazionale di Studi Romani.

At the time of the ALF's founding, the use of Latin as a vehicle for scholarly work was uncommon but not implausible. The Roman Catholic Church had been conducting its theology, scripture, and canon law studies entirely in Latin for centuries, and had just concluded an ecumenical council (Vatican II) entirely in Latin. The Church had run the Italian school system for decades, and Italian scholars in particular had heard Latin their entire lives. An international body needed a common language, and it made sense that scholarship pertaining to Latin be written in Latin, especially by scholars in Morocco or Thailand. To conduct business in English or Russian—the dominant languages of the day—was tantamount to making a political statement the ALF did not intend to make (the second ALF conference, in 1970, was held on the other side of the Iron Curtain, in Bucharest). But cultural conditions changed very quickly. During the 1970s, Latin was in retreat everywhere in the world. The year 1977 witnessed what might have been the ALF's most intriguing moment: a lavish conference

staged by the Senegalese president (and passionate defender of Latin), Leopold Sedar Senghor, in Dakar. But the number of scholars who could create competent academic work in Latin was shrinking by the year. When Pietro Romanelli, the first ALF president, died in 1981, his successor Luigi de Nardis thought speaking Latin was a dead-end. Decades of infighting and uncertainty and decay followed. After much handwringing, the use of Latin was preserved at ALF events, but the Istituto Nazionale di Studi Romani cut the ALF loose. Funding dried up. Members argued over ALF statutes such as conditions for membership and whether or not there could be a non-Italian in the role of president. A conference given in 1989 in East Berlin had almost no participants.

Since that time, the ALF has stabilized its bylaws and remains, as one member called it, “the only major fully international body devoted to preserving and promoting the use of Latin in both speaking and in writing.” Meanwhile, there has been a slow but discernible shift in the world of Classics, especially in the United States. Interest in spoken Latin has mushroomed, especially among the younger generation. “When I first showed up here, the thing that struck me the most was all the young faces,” said Michael Fontaine, a professor of Classics at Cornell who gave a lecture the first day. “There are more than a hundred people here for an academic conference, and most of them are not academics? Most of them are young high school teachers? That tells me something is going on. This conference has an audience that almost no other academic conference I’ve been to has.” Much of the credit for this goes to a pair of University of Kentucky professors, Terence Tunberg and Milena Minkova. Two of the world’s best Latin speakers, they have also proven to be two of the most dedicated and successful Latin teachers. Decades of effort on their part have turned the University of Kentucky into one of the world’s main institutional proponents of the active use of Latin.

**I**n 1996—while the ALF was facing collapsing interest and financial uncertainty—Terence Tunberg, by then a tenured professor at the University of Kentucky, began an interesting experiment, which he called “the Conventiculum:” a small gathering of students and scholars who wanted to improve their command of Latin by speaking it together for a week during summer. Tunberg had been initiated into the Latin-speaking culture of the European professoriate in Germany while still in graduate school, and met many ALF members, including the redoubtable Valafridus (Wilfried) Stroh. The Conventiculum was an immediate success, going from thirteen participants the first year to forty the second. Twenty-one years later, the Conventiculum now draws more than eighty people a year. It could draw more, but alumni have gone on to found their own conventicula: the Conventiculum Bostoniense at the University of Massachusetts at Boston, the Conventiculum Dickinsoniense at Dickinson College in Pennsylvania, and even the Conventiculum Corcagiense at the University of Cork in Ireland. Activities at these conventicula vary, but they generally include classes, lectures, trips, plays, and shared meals—with everything done in Latin. The Conventiculum has always been more open than European Latin circles, welcoming tirones (novices) as much as experts, and people have come from all over the world to experience the unique community of Latin speakers there.

At its head is Tunberg himself. Within this Latin-speaking world, whatever one’s resume may look like, people with good Latin are respected, and Tunberg may be the best Latin speaker in the world.

“Whenever people talk of the best Latinists in the world, three names appear on everyone’s short lists,” one participant tells me, wishing to remain anonymous: “Reginald Foster, the former papal Latin secretary; Dirk Sacré, a professor at the University of Leuven and the president of the ALF; and Terence Tunberg. Other people are on the lists, but those three appear all the time.” Tunberg particularly favors what is known as Latin’s “periodic” style, which postpones verbs until the end of the sentence, à la Cicero. Hearing Tunberg do this when talking about where to get a coffee on Sunday morning in downtown Lexington is, for Classicists who always wondered how the hell the Romans ever managed to live with their difficult language, worth the trip to the Conventiculum all by itself.

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## Within this Latin-speaking world, people with good Latin are respected.

Tunberg took an unusual path to academia. Born in Los Angeles, he was raised in California, London, and Barbados. He began his professional career as a research assistant to a screenwriter (he is almost certainly the only professor of Classics with a screenwriting credit for an episode of “CHiPs”). He was following in the footsteps of his father, Karl Tunberg, who wrote screenplays for forty films, was twice nominated for an Academy Award, and served as president of the Screenwriters Guild. (The elder Tunberg made one notable contribution to the world of Classics, as a kind of presage of his son’s future career: the screenplay for the 1959 Hollywood epic *Ben-Hur*.) Terence decided to become a professor of Classics and took graduate degrees from USC, King’s College London, and the University of Toronto. There he became particularly interested in what is called Neo-Latin, the vast—truly vast—corpus of material written in Latin since the time of the Renaissance. What intrigued him most was that almost all previous generations of Latin scholars not only read and analyzed Latin texts, but spoke and wrote Latin themselves. “I just thought it would be exciting,” Tunberg says, “if I could replicate that knowledge in myself.”

While he was emulating the great scholars of the past, Tunberg continued to innovate. He lobbied for the hiring of Professor Milena Minkova, whose arrival in 2001 turned out to be a transformative moment. Minkova, whose coruscating, rapid-fire Latin is itself sometimes touted as the world’s best, also owns an unusual resume: she grew up in Communist Bulgaria but by the mid-90s held faculty positions in Rome at the Pontifical Gregorian University and the Pontifical Salesian University (positions usually held by clergy, and by men). Minkova’s hiring gave Tunberg enough staff to found the Latin Institute at the University of Kentucky, which offers an M.A. program in which Latin classes are taught in Latin. For any other language this would not even be considered unusual, but in the world of Classics today it is still *sui generis*. And most Classics graduate programs focus on the Ph.D. By creating an M.A. program, Tunberg and Minkova were specifically aiming to train a new

generation of Latin *teachers*. It turned out to be an excellent fit: acquiring speaking skills gives teachers access to a trove of teaching methods designed for language acquisition more generally—techniques used by teachers of French or Spanish or Chinese or English, all over the world.

Tunberg and Minkova also made an interesting decision with the Latin Institute: they decided to offer not specifically *Classics*—the study of European Antiquity—but *Latin*. Students at the Institute are exposed to the entire range of Latin literature, ancient, medieval, and modern. Newton and Linnaeus and Spinoza and Bede and Milton and Galileo—all of whom wrote in Latin—can appear in courses with Catullus and Petronius. This is not a trivial addition: in fact, most Latin literature is medieval or modern (estimates place Classical Latin at 0.1 percent of the entire corpus of Latin writings). Dirk Sacré has dedicated much of his academic career to rediscovering these later writers in libraries, the way Renaissance scholars rediscovered ancient texts in monasteries. The titles of his academic articles abound in words like “unknown,” “unpublished,” and “forgotten.” Sacré has described Neo-Latin as a “lost continent of Latin literature”—an Atlantis awaiting discovery.

**T**he rediscovery and reintroduction of that material dominated much of the conference. Matthew McGowan, a professor at Fordham who had just recently returned from a Classics conference in China, lectured about sixteenth-century Christian–Confucian fusion in China—which left a number of Latin works, particularly by the Jesuit Matteo Ricci, who is buried in the Forbidden City of Beijing. Peter Bryant, known as Petrus Australianus, an amateur Latinist based in Perth, lectured on Latin works written in and about Australia. Leni Ribeiro Leite lectured about the voluminous Brazilian works of Joseph Anchieta. Akihiko (“Accius”) Watanabe, a professor at Otsuma Women’s University in Japan, lectured on the first Japanese Latin writers, such as “Petrus” Kibe Kasui, a samurai warrior who converted to Christianity and walked from India to Jerusalem to Rome, where he was ordained at the Lateran in 1620. He was martyred in 1639 and was later beatified. He left behind a group of letters in Latin. The European Eduardus de Sande wrote a dialogue *On the Different Customs of the Japanese and the Europeans*, in which he claims to have recorded conversations—in Latin, of course—overheard amongst the Japanese converts in the Jesuit compound in Nagasaki in the sixteenth century:

Linus: You said earlier that Europeans do not sit on the floor. How can they possibly perform the duties of politeness among each other, if they know nothing about such things?

Michael: It is not that there are no rules of politeness in Europe—they just observe them in a different way from the way our people do. Since their mode of sitting is different, and the food and clothing is very different, it makes sense that the tokens of politeness also differ. Since we are not accustomed to them, we judge the Portuguese who come to us to be barbarians without any culture.

Leo: We can’t help but think of them as barbarians, when we see so much in them that is abhorrent to reason. They enter temples and churches with their shoes on, and spit and blow their noses freely all over them, befouling and staining the straw mats we put on the floor—and many other things that are alien from all true manners.

Michael: That does not come from a lack of manners, but from the fact that they diligently observe different

teachings and customs. The same way we who do not know Portuguese think they have a barbarous way of speaking, their people who do not know our language think we are ignorant and unable to speak properly.

Here the ancient philosophical form of the dialogue—oftentimes awkwardly used by Plato to convey something that might be written out like a lecture—actually expresses the truth that the dialogue is trying to express: that different people really do have different perspectives.

“There is a certain cosmopolitan aspect of ancient Latin literature,” says Tunberg when I interviewed him later in his office. “But when you look at Latin over its entire history, it is *truly* cosmopolitan. In fact, it is unique among all world languages—there is no other language that has been used by so many different types of people, in so many different places, for so many different purposes. And for so much of that time it was nobody’s native language—everyone was coming to it on an equal footing.” Petrus Kibe Kasui had to come by his Latin the same way the Englishman Newton or the Swede Holberg or the Mauretanian Ioannes Leo (thought to be the original for Othello, and who wrote a Latin account of his travels in Africa) had to come by it—by acquiring it as a second or third language.

It is this hard process of acquisition which makes the Latin of a Tunberg or a Dirk Sacré so impressive. I caught Sacré rushing to get off campus for a smoke in between sessions—the University of Kentucky prohibits smoking on campus grounds (while also dedicating an entire building to researching the cultivation of tobacco). Sacré, a good continental (he is Belgian), will not light up until he is safely across the street from campus. He gave a lecture on the Latin works of the wildly dissolute and scandalous Frederick Calvert, the sixth Lord Baltimore, who in the eighteenth century was the feudal lord of Maryland. Calvert wrote a number of suitably scandalous amorous poems about the women of the North, whom he describes as “hot chicks playing in a cold ocean” (“*ludunt gelido calidissimae in aequore nymphae*”). “There are so many authors, so much culture, so much history, so many human stories,” he tells me in Latin before taking another drag on his cigarette, “but so few people know about it. There are no editions of these works, not even online. And few people are trained to read them, and few people know they exist.” But aren’t there many excellent Latinists in Europe? “In the professoriate, yes,” he concedes. “But that is not enough. It is not in the schools. In all of Belgium, there is only one high school which is teaching Latin in an active way—very different from what is happening in the United States.” In the United States there are now hundreds of schools where teachers are at least flirting with spoken Latin, and a Danish Latin textbook written completely in Latin, Hans Orberg’s *Lingua Latina Per Se Illustrata*, is slowly gaining users. “Our schools in Europe are—I don’t know—too stable, compared with your schools. There is no innovation. Classicism”—and here he uses the German word, *Altertumswissenschaft*, as a concept that cannot truly be translated into Latin—“completely took over the schools, and took away all use of Latin as a language.”

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## Galileo, in the original?

It has also taken away the majority of the Latin corpus, which is a particular concern for scholars outside of Europe. In Europe the study of European antiquity has a certain amount of natural appeal. In the first paragraph of the Gallic Wars Caesar talks about the Belgae, the ancient inhabitants of modern Belgium. The study of Caesar is demonstrably relevant to Belgium. “It’s a much harder sell in Brazil,” says Leni Ribeiro Leite. “I don’t see why it should be unacceptable for students in Brazil to learn from Latin works written in Brazil, or about Brazil. This is part of our history. It gives our classes immediate relevance. And from a scholarly perspective, it’s exciting because so much of this material is unstudied.” Nor are there good scholarly resources. The Oxford English Dictionary contains information about the entire history of the English language, and is continually being updated with new words. The Oxford Latin Dictionary, by contrast, stops in 180 A.D. No dictionary of the entire Latin language, including scientific Latin, medieval Latin, legal Latin, etc. has ever been compiled. Teachers who wish, for instance, to give their students a chance to read Magna Carta—a document of prime importance in the history of Anglo-American civilization—will find themselves confronted with Latin words for “bailiff” and “county” and “sheriff” found only in specialized legal lexica. Teachers who wish to teach the scientific Latin of Linnaeus will encounter a whole world of technical vocabulary. Brazilian students will find new Latin words for Brazilian plants, animals, foods, and places.

Latin teachers are just now beginning to question the scholarly taboo which prohibits such texts from being used in a Latin class. In an era in which every administrator loves talking up STEM courses, why shouldn’t Latin students be able to read Newton or Linnaeus or Copernicus or Galileo, in the original? In an era that prizes diversity, why wouldn’t a Latin teacher bring in Brazilian or African or Japanese or American Latin writers? Akihiko Watanabe prodded the crowd on this topic during his lecture. He offered an excerpt from a remarkable account of a journey from Europe back to Japan undertaken by a Japanese convert who called himself Georgius Loyola. The account was written in complicated, elegant Latin that was the admiration of the conference—and which in the past provoked some questions (with perhaps racist overtones) on the part of European scholars who disbelieved that a Japanese man could write such good Latin. Watanabe proclaimed, “Litterae Latinae patrimonium totius mundi sunt, non Europaeorum to idiotikon haberi debent.” “Latin literature is the whole world’s patrimony—it should not be considered the private possession of Europeans.” The line got thunderous applause. For Watanabe and other non-European scholars, studying non-European Latin authors may also be the key to keeping Latin alive in their countries. In Africa, in Asia, in Mexico and South America, and elsewhere, despite a robust heritage of texts written about these regions, Latin is seen as European and irrelevant.

Classical scholars have up until now dismissed all this Latin as irrelevant to their field. That is an opinion Tunberg is trying to change. Over the centuries Latin has been used in different ways by different authors, and there are quite a few people who believe that the Christian Latin of St. Francis, or the philosophical Latin of St. Thomas Aquinas, or the scientific Latin of Linnaeus, represents a higher cultural ideal than the Classicism of Cicero and Vergil. But Tunberg is not one of them. Tunberg is a true Classicist. One of his primary interests is Ciceronianism, and the way Neo-Latin has managed to conserve the norms and practices of the Classical writers. And he thinks that by using the

language, and reading and discussing Neo-Latin authors in Latin, he can train people to be better Classicists. “What I have learned is that speaking and writing Latin gives you an intimacy with the language which makes you a much better reader of Latin, and a much better Classicist. And for me, that is the ultimate reason why we should be doing this in the field of Classics. I am at the point now where I can read a Latin author the way I read an English author. For most people that happens only when you really use a language.”

Not all scholars achieve this kind of fluency. The renowned Cambridge scholar Mary Beard recently confessed that she had difficulty reading Latin without the help of translations—after studying and reading Latin for fifty years. The field of Classics is now under a threat of extinction, and can hardly afford to take so long to train its students. “Students who speak and write Latin become better at Latin faster,” says Ribeiro Leite. “I can see it. Here in the United States, thanks to the Conventicula and other groups using active Latin, there are young people who are really getting good at Latin. And now that this has been happening for an entire generation, you have a group of young people who actually *started* doing Latin this way—and they have no doubt this is the way forward. This is the future. We’re just looking to bring it to more places.”

Dirk Sacré, stamping out his cigarette, agrees. “In Belgium right now, it’s hard to see how things will change. Our schools are stuck in the old way. But in the United States, there is a chance that this approach can be brought first to the high schools, and spread up to the universities from there. And if it can be brought to more universities, then I think we will really begin to see things change.”

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