

Good Experience

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πάθει μάθος applies presumably to everything, certainly to Latin lexicography. You go to Munich after spending months browsing in, fiddling with, and reading about the *Thesaurus*, streaming the *Deutsche Welle* on your laptop and perusing von Albrecht's *Geschichte der römischen Literatur* to rub a bit of the rust off of your German. You walk into the old *Residenz* of the Bavarian monarchs, go up the stairs and into the treasure house, where you meet the *Generalredaktorin*, who is very welcoming and teaches you what Swiss-accented German sounds like, whereupon you are introduced to your *Redaktor* who likewise greets you heartily and hands you a small stack of slips, your first word. And then things happen to you, and you learn.

But surely you *do* things and learn, πράξει μάθος, right? Well, yes, but it didn't often feel that way to me. I would arrive at work one morning determined to finish a *dispositio*, the hierarchical arrangement of a word's uses that is perhaps the core of each TLL article. Much of the material would fit more or less easily, but three refractory passages in Tertullian would laugh and say *dis aliter visum*. A few days later I wouldn't so much clarify the obscurity as realize that the obscurity had been clarified; the *dispositio* had fallen into place, but at some indeterminate moment, and not while I was focused most intently on it. *I*, it seems, was just along for the ride. A bit alienating, you might think, but I was learning so much that I learned not to mind.

All of this lay ahead of me on that first day, when my editor, Michael Hillen, handed me the slips for the adjective *reclinis*. Shouldn't be too hard, I thought, only a few dozen attestations, it means "lying down," I can do this word... with my eyes closed. Michael's first instructions to me were thus surprising: pay particular attention to the meaning of the prefix; we really don't know yet what *re(d)*- even *means*, since we're just now getting to those words. Far from meaning simply "back" and "again," (whatever *those* mean, I suppose), the prefix sometimes denotes the reversal or cancellation of an action, like English "un-" (e.g. *recludo*), sometimes implies opposition or hostility (e.g. *redarguo*,

one of “my” words), and seems here and there to have an intensifying connotation (as *per-* commonly does; e.g. *redundo*). One could continue.

In the case of *reclinis*, this meant carefully noticing the *position* of the people or things (mostly people) which are described as *reclinis*: lying flat or at an angle, face down or face up¹, and so on. Of course *reclinis* “should” mean “lying *back*,” but sometimes it turns out not to, and, of course, we’re all descriptivists now. The problem grew even more difficult and complicated when I worked on the (better attested) verb *reclino*; whereas for the former we were able to mark such differences at a relatively high level in the *dispositio*, for the latter the chthonic god of parenthetical cross-referencing (*utilior quam elegantior*) had to be repeatedly invoked.

Later in the year a meeting of the staff was convened to discuss the *re(d)-* problem, which is relevant to a very large proportion of Latin words beginning with R. One *Thesaurist* reported on the scholarship on the problem, after which an extraordinary discussion followed: as is typical of intellectual problems, each added nuance clarified the nature of the problem and dimmed our hopes for easy answers. I do so wish I had a transcript of that meeting. In my recollection it was a series of seemingly offhand observations, one more casually brilliant than the next, culminating in a discussion of places where the prefix seems to be doing no work at all (perhaps only present *metri gratia?*); here Michael, normally so unassuming about his vast learning, took on the look and dignity of a Hebrew prophet, *vel potius* the Rhineland’s answer to a Morgan Freeman character, drew such conclusions as could be drawn, and dismissed us in reverent silence with the words *wir müssen sehr vorsichtig sein*. Anyway, that’s how I remember it.

Sometimes I would muse that a word is a temporal worm or a thread of culture, passing down from one person to another, occasionally written and rarely preserved, doing

¹ This question, as it happens, has rather piquant implications at the word’s earliest attestation (OV. *Met.* 10,558; cf. *Hamlet* 3.2 112-21); the answer is however presumably innocent.

importantly similar but crucially different work from time to time and place to place, “that we may see and remark and say, ‘Whose?’”

Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic,
And it means, Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones,
Growing among black folks as among white,
Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff, I give them the
same, I receive them the same.

And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves.

And so I would now and then grant myself license, in that most humane and learned *ergastulum*, to explore the context of my words’ *loci* a bit more thoroughly, let us say, than my lexicographical exertions strictly required, to heed their epitaphic call: *siste viator!* So the poor monks were enjoined by their pitiless rule to sleep *non iacentes, sed supra ... paululum reclines cathedras ... sedentes*; what other torments did they impose on themselves? Wonder whether they really followed this rule, or cheated and felt guilty? Why does “Sanctus Hilarius” put me in mind of Voltaire on the Holy Roman Empire? What in God’s holy name is Tertullian or Minucius Felix or Lactantius or any other fissiparous African Christian (wasn’t there another big one?) banging on about? These selfish moments were especially illuminating for a workaday Latinist whose learning, such as it is, pretty much stops where a certain old lexicon does, “at Apuleius.”

All of which is to say that my time at the TLL was an incomparable privilege, a *beneficium* which my exiguous contribution to its work can hardly repay. When my daughter, four, who has mostly forgotten her German but can still sing *Ich gehe mit meiner Lanterne* says, “I miss Germany,” when my wife half-seriously suggests we skip out on our (absurdly fortunate) American lives and careers and “go back,” when we look at our little son whom we didn’t take over but brought back, when I steal a late-night peek via Google Earth at our old place, Frau Flury’s beautiful house in Lochham, and of

course when I consult the *Thesaurus*, it is not my struggle with a prefix that makes me think *back, again*.