



# A CASE FOR TEACHING THE HUMANITIES

*Posted on January 1, 2022 by Nicolas Kinosky*



"I am Roman because Rome, from the time of the consul Marius and the divine Julius to Theodosius, drafted the first form of my France. I am Roman, because Rome, the Rome of priests and popes, has given eternal solidarity of sentiment, of morals, of language, of worship, to the political work of Roman generals, administrators and judges. By this treasure, which it received from Athens and transmitted that deposit to our Paris, Rome means without question the civilization of humanity. I am Roman, I am human: two identical propositions." These words from the pen of Charles Maurras in [\*Barbares et Romains\*](#) (*Barbarians and Romans*) form a vibrant praise not only of Rome, the sweet anaphora, but also of civilization, conveying tradition and transmission and not oblivion and renunciation; perpetuation and not the clean slate; community and not individuality; permanence and not rupture.

For a few days now, the [Minister of National Education](#) has seemed inclined to see the teaching of Latin and Greek return to middle and high schools. The Latinist that I am and who used to unveil to students the mysteries of *rosa, rosae* can only be pleased. However, I am not fooled by these dupes. This kind of announcement is certainly enough to make a whole section of the conservative university and academic intelligentsia of the center-right feel good about the woke and progressive drifts already well underway, with inclusive language, the satanic and non-gendered pronoun "[iel](#)" and the convoluted discussions about male domination in language.

We shouldn't imagine that the Macronian renaissance is about to be launched, as other renaissances were in the course of our history. Minister Blanquer is a liberal-conservative, certainly, but does not have the courage to be conservative. Is he the most cynical of the bunch? That is quite possible—he has already sabotaged the BA degree, reduced to a pittance, and is in favor of the digital school and even of the digital kindergarten.

If I were naive, I would believe that this sudden impulse is inspired by the spirit of [Lucien Jerphagnon](#), whose death, ten years ago, we are commemorating and whose birth we are celebrating a hundred years later. Father Jerph was one of those sparkling, light spirits that contrast with the dullness and pomposity of academics. He was inhabited by joy, the kind of joy that delights youth, lifts the heart, sharpens the soul, and makes it rise above all misfortunes, torments, and distresses. The true joy of knowledge. Lucien Jerphagnon was neither of the Left, nor of the Right, nor a Marxist, nor an intellectual at the forefront of research. He was freelance and classical; close to [Paul Veyne](#) by originality, [Désiré Nisard](#) by taste, [Jean Bayet](#) by academic outlook.

His was a strange life: he dressed like a monk and was ordained a priest; then, a passionate lover, turned into a happy husband and ended up as a patriarch. He was in turn a theologian, historian of ideas, translator and philosopher; of high class, of good style, careful to be versatile if he could not manage the modern complexity of reality. Plotinus was his tender companion, with whom one shares a cigarette and a glass of cognac. In love with Augustine, he knew how to render the full measure of this author. A gifted young scholar, who became a professor in Milan in his thirties when others were at the Collège de France in their twilight. Jerpha revived [Madauros](#), a university town in northern Algeria, that supreme and delicate refinement of Romanization, where Augustine, the orator Maximus, Apuleius and Martianus Capella lived. His biography of [Julian the Apostate](#) seeks to understand how a philosopher-emperor thought he could return to paganism and make Christianity a footnote in history. An unresolved death by the side of Mosul clinched it—Christianity would triumph.

Jerphagnon was a philosopher of time and banality. Influenced by [Vladimir Jankélévitch](#), he was concerned with understanding the everyday, the *alltäglichkeit*, as Heidegger politely said, pretext to all the astonishments, typical of the wise. He was a serious discoverer of forgotten authors such as [Marcus Varro](#) or [Favorinus of Arles](#); a historian of ideas of high caliber who made us understand, in [Les Divins Césars](#) (*The Divine Caesars*), why the emperors of the 2nd century thought they were the sun and who envisaged Rome as the center of a cosmos—all the while writing with amusement and enjoyment a formidable history of Rome.

The young Lucien at the high school in Bordeaux was bored during a mathematics class. On his knees, he flipped through a book containing a few photos of the ruins of [Timgad](#), the Palmyra of Algeria: "That's where I want to live and die," the young lad said to himself. From heaven came down a voice: "Jerphagnon, you will make up two hours!" Then his teacher stuck a future specialist in the Greco-Roman world. "I could never get used to the fact that Rome was dead," confessed the wise old man to [José Saramago](#), "because I loved it since my 6th grade. I lived my life there, faithful to this love of Roman civilization." What a beautiful profession of faith!

If Lucien Jerphagnon is to be made an exemplum, let's not forget that in matters of education, the Left is chopping our legs and causing us many problems. And this is not the end of the story! I hold as proof Vincent Peillon who writes in [la Révolution française n'est pas terminée](#) (*The French Revolution is not Finished*) that it is necessary to reinvent the revolution of the spirit, with the aim of destroying at all costs the Catholic religion and to invent a republican religion. This requires the total conversion of the elites and the young to the sciences and the disappearance of Latin and Greek, languages of the old regime,

of Catholicism, of bourgeois domination.

Such is the pinnacle of the freemasons: radical leftists yesterday, social-democrats today; old-fashioned, stuck in the Third Republic, detached from reality and perfectly barbaric, since they claim, shamelessly, not to transmit any more, to cut themselves off from tradition and civilization. They swear only by individualities in the perspective of human rights. Now they promise inclusiveness, flattering the youth, corrupting it with vague ideas about freedom and equality.

In an interview given on TV in 1958, Pagnol felt the problem looming: specialization, the end of the humanities and the science of the technocrat. Specialization, by reducing the fields, reduces the possibilities of linking the fields. To have a rational mind is precisely to see relationships. But if the objects no longer exist, the relationships can no longer be made. It can only result in an impoverishment of thought. National education goes even further, since it has given up training literate people, to preparing only future employees for the labor market. The best will be slug-brain specialists, dumbed down like tabletops, the least good will be cashiers at [Franprix](#), salesmen at [Prisunic](#).

The professors stuff the heads of young people with new ideas, smelling of Pierre Bourdieu, ready-made and passed off as revealed truths, so they themselves can continue to dine at the faculty club during silly seminars on anti-racism in literature, and history colloquiums on North African minorities in the gay Paris of the 1920s. The education of yesteryear has degenerated into a total moron-factory based on the ideological teaching of soft sciences. We are far from the gentleman, far from the humanist, far from the cosmopolitan scholar.

Getting beyond her gavel, [Najat Vallaud-Belkacem](#) completed the work, explaining that Latin classes would be for the children of the rich and privileged, that elective classes had to be abolished, and that antiquity had to be made accessible to all by diluting Latin in French courses, thus putting ancient language courses to death in a gentle way; a bit like euthanasia.

Between this caricatured, barbaric Left, in the very sense in which Maurras took it, some have retained the opinion of Raymond Aron in this matter, like Paul Veyne, our dear friend, whose opinion that Latin and Greek should be abolished in secondary school and that a national establishment should be created to train solid scientists and researchers, I do not quite understand. This is a mistake. To dedicate Latin to research is to render it autistic; to leave it in the hands of the colloquium-makers who titillate the coffee-brewers and the editors of scientific articles in obscure journals is to render it mute, invisible,

extinct.

It doesn't matter if people are interested in Aristophanes' scholia, or in the placement of an accent on a word in a twelfth-century manuscript in the Vatican library. One does not ask young people to read the *Pharsalus* in the original, even yours truly would not be able to do so. But to have a good head, made robust by the training in, and knowledge of, Greek tragedy, the functioning of the Athenian city, the Peloponnesian war told by Thucydides, the epic of Alexander the Great, Latin and Greek rhetoric, the work of Cicero, Caesar and Augustus, the personality of Seneca, elegiac poetry, Virgil, the bloody and mannered histories of Tacitus, the orientalism of the emperors, 312 and our world that has become Christian. It is grand to arrive, by love of the *rei latinae*, to the character of Des Esseintes in [À Rebours](#) by Huysmans who, in chapter III, gives us the menu of his likes and dislikes of all literature, criticizing the Chickpea (Cicero), judging the verses of a phony and vain poet, and preferring in the "fin de siècle" Roman authors the rot and the carrion, and at times the supreme refinement of precious stones and topazes.

I do not believe in progressivism and personal development, nor even in the scientific and academic elitism left to the Giscards of thought. I firmly believe in the tradition of inheriting and transmitting, of passing on the work of Hellenic-Christian civilization, from generation to generation. This is achieved through solid and serious learning of civilization, through language and grammar, literature, philosophy and history. It is necessary to go through the pain of declensions and conjugations; to make the effort, as in [Pétanque](#), to have access to the texts, to their style; to reflect on the words and their concepts in order to understand the civilization. Nothing is more precious than to know the feeling of the language, to understand the spirit of an era.

This apparent need for Latin and Greek can take three forms: as a declaration in an electoral context; resistance and head-on opposition to progressivism; or a reconciliation with Wokism. The problem is not so much what Minister Blanquer says or thinks, but what the left-wing ideological machine, the Éducation Nationale, is capable of producing. The teacher conforms to the Houellebecquian image of the tired West. The teachers are mostly mediocre, cowardly and subscribe, under contract, to all the sickness of the modern world: deconstruction, diversity, immigration, inclusion, in the public as well as in the private. If this impulse for antiquity gets mixed up, dare I say it, with this kind of progressive thinking, it would do equally bad things for the mental health of our young people. I can already imagine the titles of the courses: "Migratory Crisis in Roman Gaul;" "the Roman Baths: A Space of Hybridization for Minorities;" "Conspiracy and Fake News: The Catiline Conspiracy;" "Being a Slave and

Gay in Ephesus;" "Transidentity in Rome." What a wonderful antiquity!

What we need are professors who are like Hussars in full cavalry at Jena—scholars like [Bernard Lugan](#), like [Marc Fumaroli](#); focused minds concerned with civilization—like Valéry, Thibaudet; intransigent polemicists—like Bloy or Julien Benda. The rest will follow. I began with Maurras, I end with Charles Péguy and *Notre Jeunesse (Our Youth)*: " What this entry was for me, in sixth grade, at Easter— the astonishment, the newness before *rosa, rosae*, the opening of an entire world, completely different, an altogether new world. That is what needs to be said, but that would get me tangled up in fondness. The grammarian who just the one time, the first, opens the Latin grammar on *rosa, rosae* will never know on which flowerbed he is opening the child's soul."

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*Nicolas Kinosky is at the Centres des Analyses des Rhétoriques Religieuses de l'Antiquité. This articles appears through the very kind courtesy [La Nef](#).*

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*[Featured image](#): "Etruscan Vase Painters," by Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, painted in 1871.*

