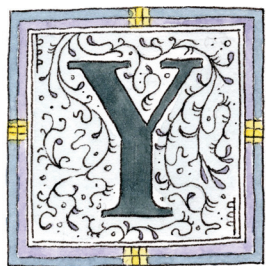


The Case for Secular American Yeshivas



YOU DON'T NEED me to tell you that the American educational system is failing our students, from the very youngest through those enrolled in graduate and professional schools. But let me tell you about one particular problem that I confront as a professor of classics and linguistics: Many students would appear never to have been taught how to read.

I am not talking about illiteracy. I teach at Princeton University, after all. What I am talking about is a lack of attention to the fabric of language—to text, a modish but useful word related to “textile” that English has borrowed from Latin (*textum*, “woven stuff, web”). Language is a wonderful, intricate web, and when students skim rather than read deeply, they necessarily miss the ways in which word choice and word order structure an argument or narrative. Furthermore, many seem unable to tell an elegant sentence or paragraph from a lousy one, which means that their own writing is often filled with malapropisms, non sequiturs, and

bizarre punctuation. Without philology—literally “love of words” in Greek—no one can properly follow, reproduce, or debate the merits and failings of a text.

And yet, sidelining philology is what most humanities departments have been doing for decades. All too often, professional humanists, and therefore also their students, do not so much read texts as approach them with one or another deliberate lens. They prioritize what is typically referred to as theory, believing—in large part in order not to seem irrelevant in a progressive world—that the central mission of education is not the search for truth but rather innovation, however wacky, for the sake of innovation. Textual tradition be damned.

It is because they value approach over text, theory over philology, that my colleagues in the Princeton classics department felt in spring 2021 that we could eliminate our language requirement, allowing classics majors to graduate without even a single semester of either Latin or Greek. Although I am sure they would deny the charge, a great many people who make a living studying and teaching Homer, Aristotle, Cicero, and Ovid do not care enough about what the ancient texts actually say, or exactly how they say it.

If I sound like a cranky professor, it's because I *am* one. I appreciate innovative thinking as much as the next person, but I also believe in tradition, and it is baffling to me that there are classicists who don't. Still, inattention to language poses problems well beyond the academy.

The fact is that certain texts, maddeningly obscure though they can be, are the bedrock of our society. Not to read and not to engage with them is to give up on responsible citizenship. But how many people have actually read the Constitution, not to say absorbed it? How many people remind themselves of this document's guarantees before weighing in on the latest Supreme Court decision (usually without having bothered to consult the opinions)? How many people take the time to read about the hot-button issues of

the day from all sides, assessing arguments and sources dispassionately rather than throwing out 280 ill-informed characters based on a sound bite or two from a single media source?

What is the solution to the problem? I have been asked to suggest a Jewish answer. Since Jews famously care about tradition but also — stereotype alert — have a reputation for innovative thinking, there is a theoretical reason to believe that everyone, regardless of faith (or its absence), may benefit from looking at Jewish practice. But experience suggests that the reason is far from merely theoretical. The fact is that many of my very best students over nearly a quarter of a century of teaching have been Orthodox Jews who studied at a midrasha (for women) or a yeshiva (for men) before arriving on campus as college freshmen. These are young people who have been trained in the deep study and interpretation of text: They know the Torah intimately, they know the debates in the Mishnah and Gemara, and they — stereotype alert, again — love to argue.

Introducing Project Sefer (Hebrew *sefer*, “book”). I propose that we build a series of secular institutions across the country modeled on schools of Jewish textual learning. While I have no personal experience with yeshivas (never mind midrashas), I recall with great fondness the many Talmudic hours that I — and in two especially wonderful cases also my most learned colleague at Princeton, the intellectual historian Anthony Grafton — have spent at a table with one or another student trained in Jewish scholasticism. The scene: There we are, hunched over some text or other — in Hebrew, in Greek, in Latin, in English — arguing cheerfully but with determination over the interpretation of a given word or phrase.

I like to think that this is what life is like behind the scenes at the Supreme Court, which in April of last year handed down an opinion that hinged on, of all things, the meaning of the word “a.” Is this silly, idle philology? Not to Augusto Niz-Chavez, whom the government was blocked from deporting thanks to a remarkable 6–3 decision in which three conservative justices and three liberal

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ones agreed on a strong interpretation of the indefinite article in the phrase “a notice to appear.”

As this example shows, philology is not — or at least should not be — a right-wing exercise. Take the two Orthodox Jewish students who worked with Professor Grafton and me, one of them surely the only person ever to graduate from an American university with an undergraduate degree in “philology.” Both are considerably to my left politically. The debates we sometimes had as we moved from old texts to present concerns were part of the fun. Philology helped make such debates possible: Despite our differences, we knew we were united in a good-faith effort to interpret a shared document.

And so: Project Sefer, which I think of as a Jewish-inspired but secular complement to the extraordinary rise across the country of classical schools — frequently classical Christian schools. The distinguished Renaissance historian James Hankins recently coined the term “Edexit,” writing of the collapse of K–12 education that “it’s time to organize a major exit from unionized public schools.” But whatever type of education you receive through 12th grade — and indeed, especially if you received a shoddy one — I propose to give you the opportunity to participate, cost-free, in a gap-year program that stresses textual tradition and good-faith argument. It would

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be a year spent reading (really reading!) the texts that make up our American story: founding documents, famous speeches, and the canonical works that influenced them.

I imagine that for most, the experience—which, if popular, would necessitate a substantial change to our educational infrastructure—would take place immediately after high school, though it would also be available to those who feel the need for something different after their undergraduate freshman year. Most important, it would be open to everyone, not just those who are labeled, or label themselves, academically talented. The goal is to save both academia and society at large by creating better and more-engaged citizens of all stripes: plumbers as well as professors, landscapers as well as lawyers.

I admit that until recently I was skeptical of the value of non-standard educational tracks. I'm an institutional guy through and through, the son of a professor myself, and I thought we could fix colleges and universities from within. I still hope we can. At the same time, I've also come to see the value in new institutions. I am, for instance, proud to be a founding member of the Board of Advisors of the nascent University of Austin, an enterprise that only a couple of years ago I would have said was crazy.

To paraphrase Tevye: Project Sefer, sounds crazy, no? I don't think it is. A major issue, of course, is how to pay for it. But because the project is about texts and arguments, not ideology, I believe that charitable foundations across the ideological spectrum will support the goal: to produce responsible citizens who can read and listen closely, express humility in the face of the unknown, and duke things out respectfully.

Imagine the scene: small groups of 18-year-olds sitting around a table hunched over some text or other and arguing cheerfully but with determination over the interpretation of the Second Amendment. Or the difference between the coverage of some event in the *Washington Post* and the *Washington Examiner*. Or the meaning of statesmanship, as defined by Plato, George Washington, and Barack Obama. The discussion of a given text or set of texts could go on for hours or days or weeks: There would be no formal curriculum, just a sense of doing philology, which Friedrich Nietzsche described as “slow reading.” I love this picture. *