

began writing in 2004 with one and then a second younger scholar, the intended book grew by fifty percent. It was completed in 2006 for the Sixtieth Anniversary of the Tsinghua Architecture Department. This English version was published thirteen years later. The details are those only someone who knew Liang both as a teacher and a colleague and who lived and worked in the Tsinghua community could offer. The innuendoes of personal relationships are handled with the sensitivity of someone who lived through the Cultural Revolution. Liang Sicheng is presented as the serious, impassioned patriot he was, and the man who understood that, because of his position at Tsinghua, he had the opportunity to alter the course of Chinese architecture and the responsibility to make sure China was appropriately represented by its building tradition.

Nancy S. Steinhardt

Eric Adler, *The Battle of the Classics: How a Nineteenth-Century Debate Can Save the Humanities Today*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. Pp. 272. £22.99 (cloth).

A sure sign of the crisis facing the modern humanities is the spate of recent publications in their defense. Among these, Eric Adler's *The Battle of the Classics* stands out for two main reasons. On the one hand, Adler's case for the humanities is decidedly traditional. By far the strongest rationale for the humanities today, Adler argues, is the very one that great Renaissance humanists such as Petrarch and Leonardo Bruni once encapsulated in the concept of the *studia humanitatis*: through profound works of art, philosophy, religion, and literature the humanities offer standards of intellectual, aesthetic, and moral value that enable students to build their characters and grow as human beings. On the other hand, Adler's defense of the humanities is forward-looking and innovative. More than other authors who champion the humanities on traditional grounds—such as Anthony Kronman and Hugh Mercer Curtler—Adler insists that advocacy of a serious engagement with canonical masterworks should be anything but a defense of the traditional, Western canon. Adler's ultimate aim, indeed, is to point the way toward a truly “ecumenical” or “inclusive” humanism, which induces the young to engage with masterpieces from sundry cultures and traditions.

By combining two seemingly opposing strands of defense, Adler's argument acquires a striking originality and almost inescapable force. To argue that the future of the humanities and, indeed, of human civilization at large depends on reviving ideologically charged concepts such as the canon, literary greatness, and moral education, is brave enough in an

intellectual climate of identity politics. To further show how such a revival can avoid perpetuating a dispiriting, politicized battle between staunch traditionalists and postmodern ideologists is to promote the humanistic educational creed in a most constructive and promising way.

A distinctive quality of Adler's book is that it demonstrates the crucial importance of knowing the humanities' past in order to vouchsafe their future. In a chapter entitled "Skills Are the New Canon," Adler exposes the extreme extent to which present-day defenses of the humanities eschew the topic of content. Instead, most modern scholars recommend the humanities for imparting important mental skills, such as "critical thinking" or "preparation for democratic citizenship." This striking imbalance, Adler demonstrates in subsequent chapters, emerged as long ago as the late nineteenth century, when the old collegiate system and the humanistic pedagogical goals on which it was built were challenged by the rise of the German-style research university. In the "Battle of the Classics" that emerged from this transformation of American higher education, most apologists for classical education refrained from stressing classical literature's intrinsic qualities and character-building potential. Attuned to already firmly established ideals of historical "objectivity" and "value-free" scholarship, they often chose to underline classical education's importance to the acquisition of "mental discipline." In doing so, Adler ably demonstrates, they unwittingly played into the hands of critics of classical education, who could easily prove that mental discipline can be as easily achieved through nonclassical subjects such as modern languages or mathematics. An important lesson the "Battle of the Classics" teaches, then, is that skills-focused defenses of the humanities, by directing attention away from specific humanities content, are naturally at risk of being counterproductive.

A prophetic role in Adler's book is assigned to the Harvard literature professor and educationalist Irving Babbitt (1865–1933), who was the intellectual progenitor of the pedagogical movement known as the New Humanism (ca. 1900–1940). In the "Battle of the Classics," Babbitt was one of the few spokesmen for classical education to avoid the pitfalls of skills-based apologetics and to insist on the ability of great works of literature to help students lead meaningful and fulfilling lives. Yet, while subscribing to humanism's tradition-hallowed moral goals, Babbitt adjusted humanistic pedagogy to the needs of the industrializing and democratizing America of the early twentieth century in three crucial respects: first, by broadening the classical Greco-Roman curriculum through the inclusion of masterworks from modern literatures and arts; second, by changing the objective of humanistic education from the "inculcation" of received wisdom into "critical reflection" thereon; third, by opening up the humanistic curriculum to masterworks from East Asian cultures, such as the Buddhist *Dhammapada* and Confucius's *Analects*. Thus merging traditional humanism with a forward-looking

syncretism, Babbitt fathered an educational philosophy that Adler argues to be of undiminished power: if applied to the twenty-first century, Babbitt's syncretic principles justify stretching boundaries even further toward a truly "ecumenical" curriculum, containing masterworks from a broad range of traditions and cultures and encouraging students to not only reflect on but even to question received wisdom.

Adler's passionate commitment to defending the humanities on the basis of content comes with an unfairly apodictic rejection of *any* defenses based on skills. Vaguely or generally defined skills such as "mental discipline" may be rightly criticized for not being humanities specific, but the same does not apply to the particular skill that has been extolled as the unique fruit of humane studies since the days of Isocrates and Cicero: judgment. The meticulous analysis and interpretation of authoritative texts, it has been argued throughout the humanistic tradition, is not only of educational value by virtue of conveying exemplary content but also by teaching students how to judiciously deal with the type of knowledge that eludes scientific certainty. In fact, what has come to be called "humanistic education" was the result of an attempt to fuse the training of philological judgment with the transmission of standards of moral and aesthetic excellence.

In downplaying the importance of philology to the humanistic tradition, Adler's case for the humanities becomes unintentionally superficial. For, as most humanistic teachers will readily admit, to get students to "reflect critically" on, or even "question" the value of great texts is premature, and can even be seriously harmful, before they have properly understood what these texts actually say. For precisely this reason, in the historic humanistic classroom, painstaking textual explication has often taken overwhelming precedence over content-based reflection. Unjustly blaming this imbalance on the humanists' failure to live up to their standards, Adler fails to see that this imbalance is natural and even a prerequisite for the survival of humanistic education. Bereft of its grounding in philology, humanism's moral agenda risks degrading the classroom to a pseudo-intellectual salon, where teachers play the dubious role of moderators, encouraging students to air their opinions on the "value" or "relevance" of texts that they have not bothered to study in any depth. It goes without saying that such a classroom is not the one Petrarch or Bruni would have ever recommended.

Bas van Bommel