

BOOK REVIEW

Classics, The Culture Wars, and Beyond. By ERIC ADLER. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2016. Pp. 292. Hardcover, \$75.00. ISBN 978-0-472-13015-3.

Eric Adler's *Valorizing the Barbarians* offered an intriguingly even-handed examination of the speeches Roman historians assigned to the other side; here Adler has done something similar in a contemporary frame, locating academic classical studies within the so-called "culture wars" of the 1980s and 1990s. Those conflicts are surely not yet finished, but as far as he has treated them, Adler gives an admirably balanced account that offers hope for at least the possibility of civil discourse across ideological rifts.

Adler first sketches the academic culture wars as shaped by a barrage of variably well-informed assaults on the university (chiefly English departments), from Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* to a range of lesser jeremiads designed more to inflame than to enlighten. In many cases he seems to bring more acumen and integrity to his examination of these works than apparently went into their composition; he weighs even acrimonious arguments charitably, exposing intrinsic contradictions, and retrieving what can be rescued. This framework sets the tone for the whole.

The second chapter traces the evolution of classical studies in American higher education from colonial times, challenging many of the tendentious narratives different parties have brought to recent discussion. Central to his own analysis is the point in the nineteenth century when classical studies began to be pulled in two directions—one rooted in the humanist notion of classics as a tool of character formation, and the other in positivistic, morally neutral *Altertumswissenschaft*, of which the latter eventually came to dominate. His documentation is meticulous and his investigation surprisingly far-reaching. (Any such study has its boundaries, of course, but this would bear further comparison with the nineteenth-century evolution of classics in British universities, which never wholly submitted to German positivism.)

The three central chapters examine distinct episodes at the intersection of classical studies with the wider academy and popular culture. The first is the 1987 publication of "AJP Today" by Georg Luck as editor of *American Journal of Philology*. Luck expressed a strong preference for fine-grained philological scholarship,

effectively excluding most theory-based study from one of the country's more distinguished classics journals. This evoked considerable resistance from many quarters, including, though not limited to, many feminist scholars. Most of the uproar was contained within the discipline, but there were echoes in the wider academy.

The second is the publication of Martin Bernal's *Black Athena*, its sequels, and its rebuttals (1987 and on), taken up in the popular press with a distorting ferocity. Classicists were often reticent to take part in the debate, which immediately became fraught with racial and political hostility; the handful who did so found few vocal allies, and were often subjected to personal attacks and abuse from a variety of quarters. In the process, Bernal's actual arguments, good or bad as they might have been, were largely lost in reductive and polarized dialogue, reframed by journalists along an axis of racial identity politics. Bernal had initially argued for the Semitic and Egyptian origins of ideas traditionally considered Hellenic, asking along the way a number of challenging questions about academic epistemology; in the popular press, however, the debate soon became a vitriolic referendum on Afrocentrism, often (curiously) vilifying Jews in particular who dissented from Bernal's presumed thesis.

The third is the 1998 publication of *Who Killed Homer?* by Victor Davis Hanson and John Heath. More journalistic than scholarly, it leveled a targeted broadside against American classics departments, urging a return to humanistic character formation, with a presumptive bias for the Greeks as icons of civic and intellectual virtue. The work predictably infuriated many with its ridicule and *ad hominem* attacks, but Adler concedes that it also identified systemic weaknesses in American classics departments—especially in the elevation of academic grandees more on the basis of publication than on teaching, which was and remains (in the public eye at least) their chief *raison d'être*. Refusing to discard the baby with the bathwater, Adler acknowledges the book's defensible claims (particularly the “hyperfocus” on publication, the broad identification of the academy with the political left, and the exploitation of adjunct teachers), while at the same time challenging the book's timeline (some of its issues were far from new—they were lamented by Nietzsche more than a century ago), and pointing out its more egregious self-contradictions (Hanson and Heath condemn the discipline for fostering the same preoccupation with societal self-criticism that they celebrate in the Greeks). He also notes that many of these issues characterize American universities generally, and hence cannot reasonably be blamed on classics departments in particular.

In a careful analysis of these three incidents, Adler shows that the liberal and conservative axes (for want of better terms) of the broader culture align poorly

with those inside the discipline. Champions of *Altertumswissenschaft* are often mocked by conservative pundits; those looking for character formation seldom find what they are looking for in the theoretical studies.

Adler's final chapter contains recommendations for restoring classics to greater prominence in the university. Chief among them is a rejection of "smorgasbord" distribution requirements in favor of a coherent core curriculum. The practicability of such a plan in a pluralistic culture is uncertain, but he is surely correct that the smorgasbord approach disadvantages classics as a discipline: those seeking the easy "A" will seldom choose Latin or Greek. A free-market consumerist model of the university almost by definition surrenders the shaping of an education to the uneducated.

In the episodes he has explored and others like them, Adler discerns a lamentable lost opportunity for actual classicists to engage in our broader cultural conversations. He enjoins us all, irrespective of political and cultural affiliations, to enter the fray before we define ourselves out of all relevance to the society we expect to support us.

Self-examination is seldom painless. This book is not comfortable. It is, however, a remarkably even-handed, even generous-spirited, look at American classics in light of both social and academic trends. Few historians achieve the Tacitean goal of writing *sine ira et studio*, but Adler has come remarkably close in difficult circumstances.

BRUCE A. MCMENOMY

Scholars Online, mcmemony@dorthonion.com