

historiographical comprehensions to the growing body of knowledge on the struggle for desegregation in the American South during a time of great conflict.

doi:10.1017/heq.2021.21

Eric Adler. *The Battle of the Classics: How a Nineteenth-Century Debate Can Save the Humanities Today*

New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. 272 pp.

Johann N. Neem 

Western Washington University

Eric Adler argues that the late nineteenth-century “battle of the classics”—primarily over the value of learning ancient languages—has “much to teach prospective defenders of the contemporary humanities” (p. 6). The failure of earlier defenses can illuminate the “historical and definitional missteps” (p. 30) that will result—indeed are resulting—in the failure of similar efforts to defend the humanities today. Adler’s primary claim is that “humanities apologetics that avoid vouching for *specific humanities content* are doomed to failure” (p. 7). Adler is not seeking to defend the Western canon. Instead, he concludes, students need to be introduced to the best from cultures around the world.

Today, Adler points out, most prominent defenders of the humanities rely on the humanities’ ability to produce transferable skills and gains in critical thinking. To Adler, there are two problems with these arguments. First, there is no reason that *any subject*, if taught in a demanding way, cannot make the same claims—a point that opponents of ancient languages made clear in the battle of the classics. Second, justifying the value of the humanities based on skills measured by social scientists (such as the widely cited 2011 study *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* by sociologists Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa) “subordinates the humanistic disciplines to the social sciences” (p. 26). “If the humanities must live by the social sciences,” Adler writes, “they will die by them too” (p. 27).

Adler is not just dissatisfied with skills-based defenses of the humanities. He is also a critic of the modern humanities themselves. After a critical survey of contemporary defenses of the humanities in chapter 1, Adler offers an overview of the humanistic tradition in chapter 2. He argues that the original function of the humanities was to develop human beings. It was about virtue and wisdom. The study of humanistic writings, it was believed, would serve “as conduits for students to ponder life’s great questions and ultimately to lead more fulfilling lives” (p. 11).

The modern humanities, in contrast, emerged as part and parcel of the transformation of American colleges into research universities. While there are still traces of

the older moral tradition in the curriculum, the primary justification for the humanities until recently was that they produced knowledge through research. Drawing from such works as Andrew Jewett's 2012 *Science, Democracy, and the American University: From the Civil War to the Cold War*, Adler argues that the modern humanities are no longer moored to their original purpose. They became scientific disciplines devoted to the specialized production of knowledge, not the formation of character.

But even if the modern humanities are research disciplines, just like physics or chemistry, they justify themselves today without reference to their specific content. Adler makes a convincing case that this is a bad idea and ultimately a losing one. The humanities today, he argues, are in the same position as ancient Greek in the latter nineteenth century, and humanities advocates today are, unfortunately, making the same arguments that defenders of the classics made a century ago. And thus, he believes, these defenses will fail.

The heart of the book, then, are three case studies. The first concerns a debate over the value of the classical curriculum that followed Charles Francis Adams Jr.'s 1883 Harvard speech "A College Fetich," in which Adams called for abandoning ancient Greek as an admission requirement (chapter 3). The second follows the well-known debate in 1885 between Harvard's Charles W. Eliot, an advocate of modern subjects and the elective system over a mandated curriculum, and Princeton's James McCosh (chapter 4). And the third is a close and revisionist examination of Irving Babbitt's *New Humanism* in the early twentieth century (chapter 5).

Adler takes inspiration from Babbitt. He criticizes scholars who have dismissed Babbitt for being elitist and for being Western-centric. He also argues that Babbitt did not hold the kinds of racist views with which he is sometimes associated. Babbitt, Adler claims, challenged the scientific racism of his time even as many progressives embraced it. Babbitt believed that the purpose of education was to develop character, that doing so required reading the best literature, and, importantly, that the best literature was not limited to what came to be called the Western tradition. Indeed, Babbitt's deep reading in Eastern traditions made him suspect to many Christian conservatives.

In all his historical case studies, the winners were the modernizers. Why? To Adler, it's because, unlike Babbitt, defenders of the humanities refused to stand up for the particular knowledge that their subjects offered. Starting, Adler argues, with the *Yale Reports of 1828*, in which advocates of ancient languages praised their ability to foster "mental discipline," defenders of the classics argued that their subjects were best suited to develop mental habits and discipline, the nineteenth-century equivalent of critical thinking and grit. But if that was the case, there was no real reason to study the subjects on their own terms. And as a result, they were soon displaced.

Is the same happening to the humanities today? There are clear danger signs. The Common Core was designed to assess testable skills and to avoid engaging in questions of curricular content, especially given the bitter fights that broke out during the Bush and Clinton years over national standards in English, history, and math. And in higher education, book after book extolls the skills generated by studying the humanities, but few argue that students must read this (or these) books. There is, in other words, no curriculum worth defending.


By using the past to inform the present, Adler demonstrates the challenge facing the humanities today. If the content of what humanists study cannot be defended on its own terms, why does anyone need them? At the same time, Adler argues, the modern humanities must be expansive in their scope. Too often, subjects are chosen to reinforce parochial identities, whether that be “Western civilization” or more contemporary efforts to provide distinct curricula for marginalized identity groups. Instead, education must pull people out of their worlds. The humanities “force all students to look beyond the particular toward what we as human beings have in common” (p. 221).

Adler correctly frames the dilemma that the humanities confront. Humanities professors must defend the specific subject matter that they teach, not just “skills.” And Adler is also correct that professors should care about character. But Adler ignores the possibility that the modern university *is* about character. The scientific university is devoted to knowledge. This means that the people who inhabit the university—professors and students—should embody a particular kind of subjectivity and cultivate specific intellectual virtues. Adler may not consider this the right kind of character, but it is nonetheless a deeply moral project.

doi:10.1017/heq.2021.30

David W. Levy. *Breaking Down Barriers: George McLaurin and the Struggle to End Segregated Education*

Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2020. 233 pp.

Thomas V. O'Brien 

University of Southern Mississippi

The black-and-white photograph of George Washington McLaurin, a well-dressed, elderly African American gentleman—sitting alone in an alcove apart from his White classmates in a graduate class in 1948 at the University of Oklahoma (OU)—has long caught the attention of legal and civil rights scholars and educational historians.

Numerous papers, articles, and video clips have touched on McLaurin, who served as a key NAACP plaintiff in the fight to desegregate higher education, but until late 2020, there has been no book-length account of McLaurin and the well-known court case he headlined. Thanks to David W. Levy, that void is now filled.

Levy details the pivotal case *McLaurin v. Oklahoma State Regents* (1950), explaining how it gained national attention in 1948 when the federal court ruled that McLaurin should either be admitted to the university’s doctoral program or the program should be shut down altogether. The panel argued that because McLaurin could not otherwise acquire an opportunity to pursue a doctorate, by denying him admission, the state had violated his constitutional rights.