



## Battles of the Books

by Thomas Fleming

I have several times passed through Figline Valdarno without realizing it was the birthplace of Marsilio Ficino, the head of the Platonic Academy of Florence. Ficino was a strange bird: part Platonist, part humanist, and part Christian, he has sometimes been suspected of paganism or worse. Perhaps he was a pagan, somewhere in his mind, but I rather think the fault lies with us: after over 500 years of progress, it is easy to believe that any civilized man, particularly one who takes part in a cultural revolution, must be an emissary of Antichrist.

Ficino was, of course, a priest (not that this proves much), and he sincerely believed in what was later called the *philosophia perennis*, the idealist philosophy taught by wise men in all ages. He was not, however, a liberal universalist, but a defender of the very specific traditions of Greek philosophy, Hebrew scriptures, and Christian revelation, all of which were under attack from the ruthless infidels who, after finishing off the Roman Empire in the East, were mercilessly persecuting their Christian slaves in the Balkans. In 1480 Ficino wrote to the humanist king of Hungary, Matthias Corvinus, urging him on in his wars against the Turks. After praising his beloved Plato and other Greek philosophers and writers, Ficino remarks:

In former times all these people sought nothing other than the true glory and light with highest zeal. At length, after many generations of light they have fallen down into darkness under the ferocious Turks. Alas, what pain! Stars, I say, have fallen into darkness under savage beasts. Alas, the celestial lights of liberal teaching

and arts have for a long time lain in limbo, or rather, in a place more darkly covered than limbo.

This is a somewhat different perspective on the so-called “Dark Ages,” which Ficino attributes not to the obscurantism of medieval Aristotelians (whose work he studied) but to the savage domination of the Turks. Martin Luther, I regret to say, did not see the Muslim conquests in the same light. Initially disapproving of the campaigns against the Turks, he finally conceded—in 1529, when the Ottomans were beating at the gates of Vienna—that they should be driven back from Germany like any other infidel invader. Turks or Catholics—it was all the same to him. Something had gone very seriously wrong in the world, when Christians refused to defend Christendom for any but pragmatic motives.

The internecine squabbles of Christians—the Western Church against the Orthodox, Protestants against Catholics—seem to blind their moral vision and obscure their conscience. Today, Catholics will believe the Orthodox Russians and Serbs capable of any evil, just as many Protestants refuse to acknowledge Catholics as any kind of Christian. In the meantime, “the ferocious Turks” are reconquering Europe for the crescent, and in American universities a polyglot rabble of alien creeds is dividing up the spoils of the old humanities curriculum put together by humanists like Ficino, Erasmus, and their godfather Petrarch.

Ours is not the first age to have experienced a struggle for curriculum. On the contrary. There has never been a time in

the past 150 years when the progressives have not been chipping away and undermining what had been a coherent classical curriculum. Even before World War II, the wreckers and hooligans (men like President Eliot of Harvard) had won the battle, and the so-called conservatives of the 50's and 60's were ferociously defending a ruined and devastated city. The aqueducts had been cut, the temples burned, all learning left off and despised, and yet the conservatives continued to march out to do battle against the barbarians. If they had stopped to look at their own barbarian faces in the mirror, they might have stayed home or sold out to the fifth columnist neoconservatives who scarcely pretend to civilization. In the current debate over multiculturalism, neither side takes Ficino's position: that the traditions which made the West should be defended from its enemies. In fact, the defenders of the "traditional curriculum" are like the Bosnian Serbs who, 500 years ago, turned themselves into Turks.

In the Romantic era, the struggle was of the Greeks against the Romans, who were stigmatized as derivative and unimaginative, a label that is still believed by some Hellenists as well as those who have no right to an opinion (Greekless English professors). The Greco-Roman conflict was a mere lovers' quarrel; the two really great struggles which mark the frontiers of modern culture were, first, the humanist revolution of the 14th and 15th centuries and, second, the quarrel of the ancients and the moderns that did so much to drive up the cost of paper in 17th- and 18th-century France and England.

Seen through the lens of the French Encyclopedists, the Humanists were the advance guard of a revolution against Christian superstition, but in the eyes of Voltaire's English contemporary, the very Christian Samuel Johnson, Renaissance humanists were reformers of language, archaeological scholars unearthing the precious treasures of antiquity. Johnson was an assiduous reader of humanistic scholarship—his references to them only less frequent than to the classics. The late Professor Kristeller was of the same opinion and more than once dismissed humanistic paganism as a fiction. Even the Platonism of Petrarch and Ficino could hardly be seen as revolutionary, particularly since it had the warrant of Augustine.

Conservative as it was, the Renaissance—and the Reformations (Catholic as well as Protestant) it gave rise to—was a revolution in the sense that the humanists wished to restore "the long glories of majestic Rome." Petrarch worked unceasingly to bring the Popes back from Avignon and—and an even more futile, if not dangerous wish—to install the Emperor in Rome. The wildest dream was of rebuilding the ancient city and restoring its grandeur. Their project was not without its perils. Classical Latinity was restored to the point of breaking continuity with the recent past so that even as a schoolboy, Erasmus wrote a Latin unintelligible to his teachers.

Those who would reform Latin and restore Rome must maintain a certain critical distance from their own age. Any break with the immediate past may turn into a breach in the walls through which all the demons of doubt and impiety, the love of novelty and the spirit of mockery will come trooping. The habit of viewing your own age—including yourself, your friends, and your nation—with objectivity may, in the end, deaden you to those primitive loyalties and attachments which make, not just civilization, but human life itself possible. A man who can be objective about his mother is a monster, and he is a traitor to his country who does not, on some level, prefer

it to all others. The critical scholarship invented by the humanists separated them first from the medieval past, second from the medieval church, and ultimately from the ancients themselves, once the critical scrutiny was applied to the Greek and Roman masters. Petrarch, upon discovering Cicero's *Letters to Atticus*, was shocked to discover that in his political career the philosopher was just another vain and ambitious politician.

There is danger in every kind of revolution or restoration, but one must not look for bad motives where there are none. It is all too true that men like Erasmus and Montaigne and perhaps even Lorenzo Valla—those sly and ironizing critics of Christian superstition—may have been as interested in subverting as restoring Christianity. Beside Montaigne, Luther is positively medieval in his fidelity to the institutions of the church. But what may be true of Erasmus is certainly not true of Petrarch, a genuinely good and pious man.

Petrarch, who could easily have had a successful career in the law, made the decision to become a priest, while his brother, whom he loved as brothers are supposed to but very rarely love, became a Carthusian monk—a step that Francesco envied rather than condemned. Despite the weakness of the flesh that led him to father several children, Petrarch strove for chastity, which he finally achieved some time in his 40's. Despising the venality and corruption of the cardinals (especially the French cardinals) in "Babylon" (Avignon), he read his daily office and grew yearly in faith, ultimately preferring the Christian to the pagan classics. Petrarch, in more ways than one, defines Renaissance humanism, and neither he nor his friends and disciples displayed the symptoms of apostasy. It was only in the Age of Reason that leading intellectuals began their open rebellion against the Faith, and it is during the same period that the superiority of the ancient classics is first challenged and then denied. Much has been written on the *Querelle des anciens et des modernes* in France and on "The Battle of the Books" in England. The quarrels were often personal, and the makeup of the teams was sometimes bizarre. Richard Bentley, one of the greatest classical scholars of the 18th century, was a "modern" because he decisively debunked the Epistles of Phalaris and entered into polemics with the partisans of Sir William Temple, the much-loved defender of the ancients. Let us brush away these inconvenient details, though, and look at two strange coincidences.

The first coincidence is that, generally speaking, the best modern writers were on the side of the ancients. In France, the officer list of the ancients included not only Boileau but also Racine. In England, Swift and his friend Alexander Pope not only pilloried Bentley (the former in "The Battle of the Books," the latter in the *Dunciad*) but, for all their genius and originality, maintained their loyalty to the classical tradition. Much of Pope's best work consists of either direct imitations of Horatian satire or poems ("The Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot") written in the same vein. The side of the moderns, on the other hand, was taken (then as now) by poctasters and "intellectuals," who drew up their own long canons of the great modern writers—most of them untalented and forgotten nobodies. Charles Perrault, the author of charming fairy tales like "Puss and Boots," was, perhaps, the greatest of the French moderns, while Bentley—who devoted his life to the ancients—is only modern in the application of critical method.

In "The Battle of the Books," Jonathan Swift, confining himself to personalities, pays little attention to what is at stake. He

allows himself to be serious only in the little fable he tells of the spider and the bee. The spider, boasting of his superiority, derides the bee as a vagabond and “a universal plunderer upon nature” and describes himself as “a domestic animal, furnished with a native stock within myself.” For proof, he points to “this large castle [i.e., his web] . . . built with my own hands, and the materials extracted altogether out of my own person.”

The bee, in his own defense, defends the classical tradition of what Christian Kopff likes to call human assimilation: “I visit indeed all the flowers and blossoms of the field and garden; but whatever I collect thence enriches myself without the least injury to their beauty.” The spider, on the other hand, may excel (as the moderns are fond of claiming) in mathematics, but his building “is too plain and the materials are naught.” The bee hurls back the spider’s boast of self-sufficiency, observing that “if we may judge of the liquor in the vessel by what issues out, you possess a good plentiful store of dirt and poison in your breast,” and concludes:

the question comes all to this; whether is the nobler being of the two, that which, by a lazy contemplation of four inches round, by an overweening pride, feeding and engendering on itself, turns all into excrement and venom, producing nothing at all but flybane and a cobweb; or that which, by a universal range, with long search, much study, true judgment, and distinction of things, brings home honey and wax.

What Swift realized is that the struggle is not between Racine and Euripides or between Milton and Vergil, but that the battle ranges Racine and Milton and Pope and Shelley and T.S. Eliot against the venomous little scribblers who look into themselves and find only poisonous filth. Here and there in British literature, one can meet untutored “geniuses” from the lower classes, such as James Hogg and John Clare, but even their tastes had been trained by attempting to write for a literary society nursed on the classics.

The second coincidence—even more telling—is that many of the arguments used by the moderns are the same sorts of arguments used today by the multiculturalists: traditions are not, by themselves, worthy of respect; mere antiquity is no guarantee of literary excellence; the progress of civilization has led to improvements of taste. By these criteria, Baroque art was superior both to Michelangelo and to the Elgin Marbles, while the highly mannered dramas of the 18th century were seen as an improvement upon the crude simplicity of Sophocles and Shakespeare, whose works were rewritten to suit contemporary tastes.

Because it is easier to pick up a fad than to master an art, the ignorant and untalented will always prefer the fashion of the moment to the solid accomplishments of the past. They will also run after any foreign craze that comes along. The 18th century witnessed an Oriental fad, and French intellectuals were fond of introducing exotic foreigners who could pass judgment on the inadequacies of Christendom—Montesquieu’s *Lettres Persanes* are only the most famous example. How serious they were in their Orientalizing remains to be seen. But how serious are the multiculturalists who babble about Zen Buddhism or the Popal Vu? Do any of them, apart from a few specialists, actually know the languages that would give them access to the foreign cultures they pretend to celebrate?

Either by accident or by design, the attack upon the classics

coincides with the internal subversion of Christendom. Since the 18th century, European writers and intellectuals have grown ever more skeptical of their own culture and ever more credulous about the claims made for Oriental and primitive cultures. Repudiating the rich and varied traditions of Christian mysticism and philosophy, they turn to Hindu scriptures, Zen Buddhism, and the Cabalistic and Hermetic literatures that hold out the promise of inner peace to the spiritual and magical powers to the ambitious. As Mary Lefkowitz has shown recently, the central claim of Afrocentrism—that an ancient mystical doctrine created in Egypt is the basis of all the world’s great philosophies—was invented by silly white male Freemasons whose grasp of reality was on par with that of the average tarot reader or small-town palmist.

Americans are used to thinking of the Masons as a set of philanthropic businessmen who fund charities and occasionally go to conventions where they get drunk in public and rip up hotel rooms. Many Europeans, on the other hand, speak darkly of a centuries-old conspiracy of rich and powerful Freemasons, with a past as bizarre as the history of the Maltese Falcon. Both sides are right. While American Masons derive from a reformed British tradition, the European Freemasons—and their more mystical offshoots—have been involved in every devilish plot against Christendom since even before the French Revolution.

In Italy recently, Maurizio Blondet (a respectable journalist who has written for *Il Giornale*) caused considerable stir with his little book *Gli adelphi della dissoluzione*. The focal point of Blondet’s study is the ultrahighbrow publishing firm of Adelphi, presided over by hermetic novelist Roberto Calasso (a favorite with American literary degenerates). Along the way, Blondet traces the intersections of cabalistic sects, messianic cults, and enlightenment philosophies that seem to be converging in the late 20th century.

What these various groups have in common is a burning hatred for Christianity (particularly the Catholic Church), a deliberate practice and celebration of sexual depravity, particularly sodomy and incest, and a pretension to mystical wisdom that transcends the everyday knowledge of cab drivers, scholars, and scientists. Some are nominally Christian (especially Catholic); others nominally Jewish (though historically at odds with Rabbinic Judaism); but all preach the need for dissolution—moral and spiritual dissolution, yes, but also political dissolution. As one renegade Catholic intellectual explains to Blondet, the Popes have made a mistake in trying to delay the arrival of Antichrist. This remark, which is the inspiration of the book, sends the journalist looking for the meaning of *katechon* in St. Paul, and he discovers—in Thomas Aquinas and elsewhere—an ancient tradition that regarded the Roman Empire (and the Christian Church, which succeeded to its power) as the force of order preventing demonic powers from taking over our world. His researches carry him into strange places, but everywhere he finds the cult of depravity coupled with an assault on *Romanitas*.

I had wanted to think of Blondet as a well-read conspiracy monger—he does tie in stories of the Yale Skull and Bones and the CFR, for example, without actually endorsing them—but he is, for the most part, sober and restrained, insisting that he is examining a theology, not unraveling a conspiracy. Turning away from the feverish subject of his book and even assuming that all the representatives of the hermetic tradition are charlatans and their dupes, the conclusion is, nonetheless, frighten-

ing. After all, it is really a small comfort to know that the witch trying to kill you has no supernatural powers and has to rely on hypnosis, psychotropic drugs, mental intimidation, and—if all else fails—poison. The mere knowledge that your neighbors are sticking pins in dolls and poisoning your cow, as they invoke the aid of the Prince of Darkness, should be enough to scare the pants off the editors of the *Skeptical Enquirer*, and for several centuries civilized Christians have been living cheek by jowl with would-be witches and necromancers, repeating their silly spells and practicing their dirty perversities in the hope of working us harm. It is enough to make one want to attribute prophetic insight to H.P. Lovecraft for his mythology of the Old Ones, the ancient race of demons who keep on trying to break in and destroy our world.

It is best not to get carried away. Our civilization in its long history has had its slumps and periods of revival, and it is not always clear whose side someone is fighting on. The best humanists and Reformers fought for the truth and sought to restore the lost glories of ancient literature and the primitive church. In the process, they damaged the fabric of civilization, while at the same time making possible the creation of many uniquely beautiful things: Luther's hymns and the music of Bach, the epics of Ariosto, Tasso, and Milton, the sonnets of Petrarch and Shakespeare, Wordsworth and Baudelaire. The Romantics, of course, were attracted by mysticism and horror, but they also led many of their followers back into the church. Even Baudelaire, his powerful imagination fascinated by evil, confessed in the end.

A writer's true significance may be revealed only to a later

generation. These things take time, and when a premature genius like Sade came along, it was 200 years before a literary audience could be sufficiently enlightened to treat him seriously—as he is today. Sade's studied perversity is, in fact, a clue to one part of the labyrinth: the cult of depravity.

Militant homosexuals, particularly those who have received the anti-grace of AIDS, have become the heroes and martyrs of our culture, celebrated even by heterosexual intellectuals. The whole point of the AIDS propaganda blitz has nothing to do with the disease itself and rather little to do with homosexuality per se. The object is to break down the moral barriers erected against perversity, not for the sake of the perverse, but to destroy the civilization those barriers protect. To revert to the symbolic and religious terms used by Blondet, they are breaking down the walls of Rome to let in the army of Antichrist.

The attack on the classics, then, is one front in a long-standing war against Rome and against Christendom (which includes the Rabbis who fought to suppress the false messiahs, such as Sabatai Zevi, Jacob Frank and, I would add, Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud). Attempts to defend the more modern parts of the curriculum, whether *Huckleberry Finn* or *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, are not only doomed to fail: they are acts of collaboration. We are what and who we are, largely because of the stories we tell, the songs we sing, the Scriptures we recite. In depriving our children of Homer, Shakespeare, and the Bible, the multiculturalists hope to smother the last rays of light given off from the embers of an almost extinct civilization.

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## On the Precolumbian Zero

by Frederick Turner

For Rosa Maria, Sergio, Alejandro, Vivianne, and Marisa

(The zero of the Mayans, Olmecs, and Aztecs was devised 600 years before it first appears in the Old World among the Hindus. It is represented by a shell, *caracol* in Spanish; in the vigesimal system of counting, it is denoted by the suffix *-alli* for multiples of the base 20. Carved on stelae it became a flower, or *flor* in Spanish, *xochitl* in the Nahuatl language.)

Cloaca of the sea, its salt perfume  
Is all the money in Time's purse.  
The zero is no cipher, but a womb.  
Its fruit is nothing but the universe.

The zero's not an absence, but a glyph  
That's always pregnant to be said.  
The splay-head moguls grasp the rods of if,  
Wherewith they join the living and the dead.

The only thing that nothing cannot spawn  
Is nothing. You would need a god  
Greater than master Tlaloc, to undawn  
That first day as it bursts forth from its pod.

But still the naught's as silent as a clam;  
The dark canals of Xochimilco  
Dream in the rain behind their mountain-dam,  
Cloudy volcanoes over Tulyehualco,

Where floating gardens swamped with azure flowers,  
Shut fast as *caracols* or shells,  
Wait for the morning light through the small hours,  
And Sunday's twenty centuries of bells.