

A Socratic Gadfly

Reforming Education: The Schooling of a People and Their Education Beyond Schooling, by Mortimer J. Adler, Foreword by Maurice B. Mitchell, *Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1977. 284 pp. \$14.50.*

MORTIMER J. ADLER has been a Socratic gadfly in the corpus of the academic world for about fifty years. Perhaps best known for his editorship of the 54-volume *Great Books of the Western World* series for *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* and for his widely read work *How to Read a Book* (1940), Adler has been flailing away continuously and often eloquently at what he has rightly felt to be the deterioration of our educational system and the causes thereof.

Reforming Education contains eighteen

essays collected from his writings and speeches from before World War II to the present. One of the remarkable features of the collection is the consistency of Adler's orientation and the accuracy of his prophetic pessimism. Adler has tended to view the world of the mind as a sacred subject; thus, he has constructed a temple for his beliefs. The most sacred altar in this temple is that of liberal education, where reason is enshrined and worshipped. By a liberal education, he means one which contains the trinitarian division of physical training ("gymnastics in the Platonic sense"), "moral training" ("if its aim is to produce moral perfections, good moral habits or virtues"), and "intellectual training" ("if its aim is the production of good intellectual habits or virtues"). The process of this trinitarian approach is one "whereby a man is changed for the better, whereby a man helps himself or another to become a good man, which is something he can be, though perhaps not as readily as being a bad man."

In this sacred edifice there are many gods—Plato, Aristotle, Socrates, but above all, the former president of the University of Chicago, Robert M. Hutchins. Aristotle can sometimes go wrong (" . . . insofar as Aristotle did not clearly distinguish philosophy and science, his logic is both confused and inadequate"), but Dr. Hutchins is apparently invulnerable. All worshippers to this sacred altar of liberal education are welcome, but especially those who have already been trained in the skills of reading, writing, and thinking (skills which the bachelor of arts degree should emphasize and develop) and are on the way to adult education, a leisurely activity which will illuminate the rest of their lives. The "prayer book" in this temple should be the "St. John's [Annapolis, Maryland] curriculum—the curriculum which devotes all its teachers' and students' energies to the liberal arts and the great books." The liberal arts should include "poetry, philosophy, history, mathematics, theology" along with "scientific method, knowledge, and ideas." There should be no separate departments ("pews"?), no specialist teachers. Every teacher ("minister"?) should be able to guide

his students ("disciples"?) *in toto* and *sub specie aeternitatis*. The method of teaching should be dialectic (Socratic), not catechistic. Although the other needs (moral, physical, psychological, etc.) of the students are important, the primary stress should be to develop the intellectual capacity, whereby one knows how to spend one's leisure time wisely.

In Adler's judgment, this sacred shrine must be ever on the alert to keep out the false gods—the elective system, vocationalism, the sciences (he writes of the "insidious encroachment of the sciences, especially the social sciences, upon the field of humane letters"), psychology (because whether it be behavioral or psychoanalytical, it reduces the role of reason and self-discipline in a person's life), positivism and pragmatism (John Dewey's *How We Think* is the book "which more than any other misled millions of American teachers and distorted American education"), the "education can be fun" approach, and the "progressive-innovative" syndrome.

There are many virtues in Adler's book. Despite little change in his diagnosis and prognosis of the academic scene in the United States since the 1930's, his has not been a "foolish consistency." Despite the passionate advocates of change and feckless adaptation to "alternate life styles," there are some verities which can withstand time's erosion. For one, the latest is not necessarily the best; similarly, the "education can be fun" approach leads to more "fun" than education. Education should be prized because it leads to a better life and not necessarily to increased amusement or to a more affluent livelihood.

Adler has proved prophetic in many of his statements. It is difficult to believe that his "There are many signs that the modern world is headed for a drastic cultural eclipse" was written in 1939, and that his complaint that our high school graduates "are neither well-read nor are they able to read well. Their proficiency in writing, speaking, and listening is as poor, if not poorer. Their general intellectual orientation, if they have any at

all, is likely to be fuzzy and foggy," was said long before the jeremiads of the 1970's.

Adler's style is lucid and his material well organized. He has firm convictions and expresses them with courage. There is nothing casuistic in his commenting to the Western Division of the American Catholic Philosophical Association in 1941: "I would feel happier about the graduates of Catholic colleges if they really understood a few truths well— understood them as solving problems which vigorously challenge the mind and perplex it—rather than be able to recite, from merely verbal memory, a whole catechism of philosophical answers to problems they did not really understand or take seriously."

Yet in spite of his firm convictions, he does not hesitate to seek compromise where necessary. He recognizes the limitations of the modern approaches to education and clearly he admires the ancients, but he also knows that the ancients can be wrong and that some of the moderns may be right. Similarly, although he wants students to be docile (in its etymological sense of being "teachable"), he does not want them to be subservient. In other words, he advocates the classical golden mean. Furthermore, while not hesitating to clean the Augean stables of education of their detritus, he also does not hesitate to recommend alternatives. And although one not easily upstaged by the opposition, he admits that, in spite of his worship of reason, he has sometimes "failed to abide by this precept" and has adopted statements by Aristotle and St. Thomas "because of emotional predispositions rather than intellectual light."

Unfortunately, there are some cracks and flaws in this noble edifice which Adler has constructed over these last few decades. For one, despite the almost three-hundred pages in the book, there are only a few major ideas and these sometimes receive more reiteration than elaboration. One is tempted to say, "*Déjà vu*" quite often as one reads of the dangers of modern trends in education and the need to return to the great books of the Western tradition. Why not enlarge this list to include more of the Eastern tradition (excerpts from Confucius' *Analects* are the only representa-

tion from the Far East in Adler's *Great Books* series)? There is occasionally a tone of stridency and proprietary exclusiveness which circumscribes intellectual growth. Are all writers of sociology and psychology (other than Freud and William James, both of whom are included in the *Great Books* series) to be barred from the holy temple? Does Plato really deserve seven of the fifty-four individual readings and James Joyce (to mention one seminal twentieth-century novelist and intellectual omitted from Adler's list) none?

And speaking of style, Adler's is at times lamentably graceless and humorless. One has the feeling that he is proving a theorem in geometry rather than articulating soul-inspiring illuminations. He does not often attempt humor and when he does it is cumbersome. (Here is one example: "Trying to make a baby pig into an adult man is one miracle no educator has ever attempted, though some have tried, and almost succeeded, in making a man-child into an adult pig.") As a matter of fact, the most sparkling stylistic gem is one he quotes from Stringfellow Barr:

With the exception of a few great books in mathematics, astronomy, and physics, the great books do not yield their secrets to the young. Why, then, give them to the young to read and discuss? The answer which Stringfellow Barr once gave to this question goes right to the heart of the matter. He said that the great books in the hands of a college student were like a large bone being gnawed at vigorously by a very young puppy. The puppy might not succeed in getting very much nourishment from the bone, but it certainly gives him plenty of exercise.

The last few decades have certainly been a period of time more appropriate for soul-searching than for germinating humor, but need the road to education be traveled with joyless sweat only? Sometimes, as in the following excerpt, Adler's seriousness lapses into solemnity: "Not only must we honestly announce that pain and work are the irremovable and irreducible accompaniments of genuine learning, not only must we leave

entertainment to the entertainers and make education a task and not a game, but we must have no fears about what is 'over the public's head.'”

These animadversions are made more in regret than in anger. Essentially, what Adler has to say is worth listening to and reflecting on. He may at times seem like a humorless Puritan, but he is certainly preferable to the many clowns that have cluttered up the road to education in recent years.

Reviewed by MILTON BIRNBAUM