

Oncological Argument

THE YOUNG COME to the university with "flat souls" (whatever other organs may be tumescent), incapable of allying that eros which used to run from the gonads through married and familial life, and the pursuit of such wisdom as was available to man, to the beatific vision. This Allan Bloom takes to be the principal symptom betraying what we might call the malignant and probably irreversible growth that consumes the American psyche and American society from the inside out.

The book is immediately engaging, at least for many of us who teach or have taught, for its observations and analyses echo ones we have made over the years. Indeed, the "draw" of Bloom's book lies in its systematization of numerous observations and analyses of the same sort as those many of us make casually and inconsequentially.

The Closing of the American Mind is divided into three main sections: "Students"; "Nihilism, American Style"; and "The University." Subsections in the first part strike hammer-blows in the carillon of the mind, setting off a sympathetic, if melancholic, melody there. Some chapters in the second and third parts continue to ring true (e.g., "The Self," "Values," "The Sixties," "The Student and the University"), while others seem at times to be played on slightly cracked bells. But more of that presently.

To speak a bit less figuratively, Bloom has said that he wants the book to be understood, "more than anything else," as a "report from the front." It is that; but in a sense it is two books rather than one. It is a "report from the front" (an all-too-apt metaphor for the classroom situation, one fears, whether the war there be "hot" or "cold"), but it is also a retrospect on the paths of vainglory which led to the conflict and the entrenchment.

Both "books" sparkle with brilliant insight and are plagued by generalizations which one suspects would be difficult to substantiate (they are at least unsubstantiated in the text). Examples of both will be given shortly. One begins to recognize—and to a some extent fear—the presence of a certain style, that of the far-seeing, indeed lynx-eyed, intellectual nostalgic for an order of things slain by America's combination of rootless intellect, boundless belief in progress, and inordinate devotion to affluence. It is perhaps the style of Jonah before Nineveh, not yet swallowed himself by Leviathan: the style of "the prophet unharmed." Yet our sympathies are engaged.

Of the two books, however, the "report from the front" is more convincing than the retrospect on how the troops got there. Part one and sections of parts two and three smell of gunpowder and trench mud. And the general contours of the march from Leviathan through the social contract and the will-to-power to present American nihilism are generally convincing. But one suspects, for instance, the rather summary treatment of those road-signs marked "Heidegger" and "Weber."

All reservations aside, however, and to return to our initial metaphor, the book is an extraordinarily perceptive diagnosis of our corporate disease based on a skillful symptomatology. The relativity of truth and the primacy of equality (both autophagic phrases), which tend to function for our society not as theoretical insights but as moral postulates, are signs that our society's immunological system has broken down, that synapses are firing in no recognizable sequence, and that no cellular function is to be preferred to any other. Our social organism is increasingly composed of "turned-on" cells, cells "doing their own thing," interrelated by

an increasingly tenuous organic contract, but still well-supplied with nutrients. Perhaps a large number of these anomalous polymorphic entities should be called "Yuppie cells."

Put synoptically, and in words other than those used by Bloom, the book argues that the American academy has ceased to aim at the creation of an imperial intellect, one capable of arranging things hierarchically, and has fallen back on various schemes for the de-colonization of the mind. Indeed, in the backwash of intellectual imperialism, one might argue that the academy has moved beyond merely negative de-colonization to positive re-tribalization. Reason's power denied, lack of discrimination celebrated, love of wisdom reduced to philosophy (in the departmental sense) and genuine knowledge to electronic digital utilitarianism and opinion through the deprivation of the appeal to nature and revelation, the American mind appears increasingly like the mental equivalent of the West End of London.

At the core of this retribalization and consequent retribalization stands the American school system, that immense array of Bastilles for the poor and mad-houses for the semi-sane, "with its utter inability to distinguish between important and unimportant in any other way than by the demands of the market." Aided and abetted by the disintegration of all economic, social, and religious functions of the family, the disarray of the schools enhances the anarchy and antinomianism endemic to our nominal political order as presently constituted. We proceed on our purblind way, galumphing to Golgotha, knowing already that there is but one God, that he is dead (or at least has had a sex-change operation), and that utilitarianism is to our profit.

The current American experiment is neatly characterized by Bloom as nihilism with a happy ending. If we might be permitted more liturgical terms: "God is dead, Alleluia! Let us rejoice and be glad therefore, Alleluia!" Or, as Brendan Behan suggested to us: "Oh, Death! where is thy

sting-a-ling-a-ling?"

And the students, the retribalized? The young have been betrayed and in turn have betrayed. They have been deprived of their rightful and irreplaceable cultural heritage by their schools in the name of a flabby secular ecumenism or cultural relativism, which hypocritically masks a sell-out to whatever cultural forces happen to be in the saddle at a given time. Their homes—vestigial social organs of a now-defunct social organism—cannot remedy anything, for they have become if not exactly dens of thieves, then dens of consumers of stolen goods, where television casts its smoky shadow on the wall encouraging further thieving.

The young are no longer shaped by books, Bloom argues. Not stretching his meaning much, we might gloss his argument by saying that the interpretation of books always required skills which had developed from previously established habits or disciplines involving postponed gratification (meaning only came with linear closure: the end of a word, a phrase, a clause, a sentence, a paragraph, a chapter, a book . . .). A heavy imaginative involvement and an understanding of analogical reasoning were inextricably involved here also.

But the young are still shaped, of course. And what shapes them primarily, Bloom argues, is music. "Rock," almost exclusively. Some of the author's prose is too delightful to paraphrase:

[Rock music] has risen to its current heights in the education of the young on the ashes of classical music, and in an atmosphere in which there is no intellectual resistance to attempts to tap the rawest passions. Modern-day rationalists, such as economists, are indifferent to it and what it represents. The irrationalists are all for it. There is no fear that "the blond beasts" are going to come forth from the bland souls of our adolescents. But rock music has one appeal only, a barbaric appeal, to sexual desire—not love, not *eros*, but sexual desire undeveloped and untutored. It acknowledges the first emana-

tions of children's emerging sensuality and addresses them seriously, eliciting them and legitimating them, not as little sprouts that must be carefully tended in order to grow into gorgeous flowers, but as the real thing. Rock gives children, on a silver platter, with all the public authority of the entertainment industry, everything their parents always used to tell them they had to wait for until they grew up and would understand later.

Or, again:

Picture a thirteen-year old boy sitting in the living room of his family home doing his math assignment while wearing his Walkman headphones or watching MTV. He enjoys the liberties hard won over the centuries by the alliance of philosophic genius and political heroism, consecrated by the blood of martyrs; he is provided with comfort and leisure by the most productive economy ever known to mankind; science has penetrated the secrets of nature in order to provide him with the marvelous, lifelike electronic sound or image reproduction he is enjoying. And in what does progress culminate? A pubescent child whose body throbs with orgasmic rhythms; whose feelings are made articulate in hymns to the joys of onanism or the killing of parents; whose ambition is to win fame and wealth in imitating the drag-queen who makes the music. In short, life is made into a nonstop, commercially prepackaged masturbational fantasy.

The consequence? To turn to another arena frequented by the author (but to use our own words), Socrates cannot be heard today because of the decibel level in the cave or the agora or the exercise field, and he refuses to use the electronic media himself. For Socrates is a good Confucian and knows that though a man can amplify his sound, there is no sound that can amplify a man. But the modern counterparts of Thrasymachus have no such qualms. And so we have innumerable reincarna-

tions of Mick Jagger, abetted by the "record-company executives, the new robber barons, who mine gold out of rock." Young Glaucon just cannot hear Socrates anymore and so never finds the guide he knows he needs if his eros is not to miss the mark. He comes to the academy stone-deaf, perhaps stoned. He can be made over, of course, thanks to the technical proficiency of modern training, into a competent physician, but never into a metaphysician; into a computer-programmer, but never into a poet. And when the music goes on, millions fall down and worship whatever slouches onto the stage at Bedlam. President Reagan appears on TV "warmly grasping the daintily proffered hand of Michael Jackson and praising him enthusiastically." A few stomachs turn over. Rather Ollie North a thousand times than this sickening public degradation. Indeed, rather Genghis Khan. But, to be given only such choices! *O tempora! O mores!*

And we are there, in that time, with those manners.

Question: What sort of a book, other than one to be heartily recommended to all, could contain so many perceptive observations as those in the following sections or passages? Virtually the entire chapter on "Music" (that chapter alone is worth the entire admission price); Woodstock, as our Nuremberg; "it's no big deal" (the young, on sex); "The self must be a tense bow" (despite the work of the skilled bow-unbenders and Jesuits of our days, the psychiatrists); Eros, defined as "the compressed fuel, which was intended to power [us] on [our] flight from opinion to knowledge"; ". . . the empty talk about finding lifestyles"; "The search for solutions . . . to problems is the stamp of modernity, while antiquity treated the fundamental tensions as permanent"; Self, as "the impious mirror image of God"; Culture, as "desire informed by civility"; "Reason cannot establish values, and its belief that it can is the stupidest and most per...icious illusion"; the ironic suggestion that "it was, and I suppose still is, a sure sign of an authoritarian personality to believe that the uni-

versity should try to have a vision of what an educated person is"; that "students do not date anymore . . . they live in herds or packs"; that "parents can no longer control the atmosphere of the home and have even lost the will to do so"; and that "the women's movement is not founded on nature."

Answer: A book that also contains such perilous generalizations and half-truths as these: that "the women's movement is not founded on nature"; that "parents can no longer control the atmosphere of the home and have even lost the will to do so"; that "students do not date anymore . . . they live in herds or packs"; that "the possibility of separation is already the fact of separation" (re: divorce); that "friendship, like its related phenomenon, love, is no longer within our ken"; that "neither longing nor enthusiasm belongs to the bourgeois"; and the certainly confusing dicta about myth, Socrates, philosophy, and Weber on pages 207-211.

(Concerning this last item: although there are explanatory footnotes and references to whole books scattered throughout the text, I do not recall a single specific citation in the book. Little pain has been taken to substantiate extensive and important argument by means of standard scholarly apparatus (is this the publisher's doing?); and, rightly or wrongly, one suspects the scholar without scholarly apparatus, as one would a Greek bearing gifts.)

The concluding chapters of the work seem anticlimactic. Though we are all shamed by, and ought to be ashamed of, what we permitted to go on at Cornell—or our own institutions—in the 60s and 70s; though we may agree with Bloom's diagnosis of and professional opinion about the disease that has closed the American mind, we are left unconvinced by his proposed remedy. "The only serious solution," Bloom writes, "is the one that is almost universally rejected: the good old Great Books approach." The question still remains: What is to be done? For the great books serve all too often like chemotherapy on a patient debilitated by inoperable cancer. Their shock not only does not

cure, it causes great pain and, at best, postpones death and prolongs the patient's agony.

This is said by one entirely sympathetic to, and for twenty years now a practitioner of, the great books approach to liberal education. For, despite all the glitz and genuine simulated glamour thrown over Adler's "Paideia Proposal," for instance, the thing cannot be done. It indeed ought to be tried, to be encouraged, to be fostered. But it can succeed only in hyperbole, that is, in "hype." The great books cannot be administered in a plenary fashion, nor to the mass and conscripted audience of our secondary schools or the mass and unscripted audience of our tertiary schools, amidst the chaos, confusion, and indiscipline of our current educational zoo. Perhaps a saving remnant can be brought out from the crackpots of our Egypt; perhaps even an entire chosen people can be so withdrawn. Even so, to do this under present conditions means a separating out, a discrimination, a "tracking" which majoritarian, "mainstreaming" democracy cannot presently tolerate. And any imaginable alternative to such discrimination would entail political counter-revolution of the most fundamental sort. We are afraid to carry out the first, and incapable of the second.

So we lay down Bloom's book and say, "Yes, yes, that's right. His analysis is basically right. But what are we to do?" Lighting our individual candles rather than cursing the educational darkness may be well and good as a religious response, but it smacks of educational and political irresponsibility. Yet it may indeed be all we can do. Perhaps all that is left to us is to tap about *im dichicht der stadt* looking for honest men, harnessing our eros to the chariot of martyrdom, as many honest men have done in the past.

We do not know. Perhaps we cannot know. Perhaps we ought not know. But we do seem to know that to the great and permanent questions—What is man? How ought we act? What may we hope? By what criteria ought we judge?—and to plausible responses thereto the broad and

liberal mind of our time and place is closed.

And we are here, as with a darkling
brain
Which ignorant psychiatrists trash by
night.

Brain cancer may be incurable in individual cases, but cancer of the mind of a culture is irreparable.

—*John Lyon*