

Looking a Gift Horse in the Mouth

ALLAN BLOOM LAMENTS the replacement of reasoners by ideologues in the humanities divisions of American universities, and the conservative columnists applaud. He deplores "value relativism," and the conservatives kibitz. He invokes the aristocratic tradition of "the serious life of leisure, as well as men's taste and capacity to live it," and the American Right rewards him with favorable reviews. His manner of writing on academic subjects without a bibliography and/or footnotes evokes a nostalgic remembrance of nineteenth-century essayists whose readable prose was likewise innocent of scholastic paraphernalia. And Bloom makes snide remarks about "the Left," which is taken as a sign that Bloom himself is of "the Right."

After a come-on section which consists of enjoyable ramblings about university students, Bloom offers his conception of Western culture and the university. The Enlightenment is the rock-bottom foundation of Western culture. It all began with Locke, Rousseau, and their mutually incompatible but tremendously influential and productive visions of man. The Greeks contributed to the dialectic of the discourse: we are a civilization of curious people, and Socrates has taught us how to dispute. During the two millennia following Plato and Aristotle not much happened in the life of the mind; for even though Aristotle "was very much present in the minds of the leading elements of society in the Middle Ages . . . [this] was, of course, an abuse of Aristotle, who thought that authority is the contrary of philosophy." "Although the universities go back very far, the university as we know it, in its content and its aim, is the product of the Enlightenment." Since the Enlightenment, reason has been the foundation of the university and of civil society: "Ratio-

nalism is the basis of our way of life." Earlier in European history, one gathers, civil society was subject to ecclesiastical law and reason was, if not illegitimate, then at least suspect.

Now, says Bloom, universities seem to be regressing to the times when the use of Socratic reason was suspect. This regression was precipitated by the invasion of American universities by German thought. "German philosophy after Hegel cast doubt on . . . our principles of freedom and equality and the rights based on them . . . and there was some relationship between German politics and German thought. Historicism has taught that the mind is essentially related to history or culture." Thus the universalist drive of Greek thought was weakened and intolerance of rational discourse set in. Today the intellectuals sheltered in universities tend to espouse theories which degrade rationality by "explaining it away" as a product of temporary historical conditions. This nostalgic flirtation with pre-Enlightenment ideas, suggests Bloom, jeopardizes the very existence of the university. It signals the possibility of return to the absence of theological and political freedom that was the lot of those unfortunates who happened to have been born into the Dark Ages (which seem to have lasted for two millennia, from the death of Aristotle to the birth of Descartes).

Bloom says that inquiry into truth at American universities has ceased to follow in the footsteps of Socrates and has succumbed to the ideological agendas. He perceives a similarity between our present situation and that of the German universities in the 1930s. In Germany it was the demands of *Deutschland über alles* that prevailed over rational inquiry; in America since the 1960s it has been—and

here comes the anti-climax—the ideology of the mob, “the folk, the Zeitgeist, the relevant.” Instead of maintaining ivory-tower aloofness, we have allegedly made the taste of the vulgar crowd our own.

Bloom does not propose that we excise German thought from the body of learning; indeed, the core of his book consists of a sympathetic exposition of this thought. “. . . Kant, Hegel and Nietzsche are thinkers of the very highest order.” It remains a mystery how one can cultivate Nietzsche and a Hegelian vision of history and still remain a rationalist. Bloom desires methodological pluralism, but he also wants reason, Socratic reason, to be *the* methodology underlying all academic methodologies.

America as Bloom wants it to be would be divided into two parts: university and non-university. In universities reason should proceed freely, unhampered by “the moral and physical superiority of the dominant will.” Academia should live by its own thoughts, and society by its own. One gathers that in society at large the somewhat Nietzschean “dominant will” is to be left alone. In universities the intellectual elite should be empowered to pursue absolutely all avenues of thinking in mutual tolerance. The profane crowd must not try to invade the intellectual preserve or make any demands on it. In this tolerant atmosphere, Bloom hopes, the great ideas would be thrashed out and the values of society (“the dominant will”) would be refined and redefined. The intellectuals would be like the super-managers, or the managers’ managers.

On the other hand, Bloom is willing to allow the little man to exist and cherish his own thoughts. No de-kulakization will take place in Bloom’s ideal world. This utopian vision contains several sensible ideas. Bloom recognizes that at all times and everywhere the majority of humanity consists of “ordinary people” who neither participate in nor care very much for what goes on in the universities. It is this acknowledgment of the legitimacy of the ordinary “bread eaters” that endears Bloom to the conservatives, as well as his elo-

quent lament about the intellect-truncating sixties.

Also, Bloom has pointed out correctly, or so it seems to me, that the influence of the German thinkers of the last two centuries has been largely negative not just for America but for Western culture in general. The cynical university population of today which Bloom describes was made cynical by thinkers like Hegel, who was the first to posit the idea that the progress of mankind might necessitate inconveniences and even tragedy for some. As Thomas Molnar put it, within the Hegelian system, “the tragedies that continued befalling mankind could . . . be justified by reference to the process of reason in its historical unfolding.”¹

What took place in German philosophy over the last two hundred years, I submit, was a massive new search for roots, this time outside Christianity. As Hans Kohn has argued in *The Mind of Germany*, there has existed in German culture an undercurrent of hatred toward Western civilization, a longing for the Germanic exclusivity, for a *Reich* in which tribal superiority would bring about a new and healthier Europe.² This anti-Enlightenment tendency has manifested itself not only in Nazism but also in Nietzsche, Hegel, and in other influential German thinkers whose ideas are now being taught to American university students in courses on “Western civilization.”

Here we get to the major faults in Bloom’s book. He praises rationalism and empiricism but also extols the anti-rationalist and the anti-empiricist philosophers. And the terms of the discourse proposed by him, his understanding of rationalism, the university, and the Enlightenment, seem to me indebted to the same German thinkers whom he criticizes earlier in the book.

Even though Bloom lauds Socrates and occasionally Aristotle, he uses the word “rational” and “rationalism” in ways which indicate that he ignores a fundamental difference between Lockean and Aristotelian rationalism, the difference of which Mortimer Adler, an Aristotelian *par*

excellence, has so eloquently spoken.³ Bloom lavishes indiscriminate praise on all post-Enlightenment thinkers whether or not they have paid attention to the methodology of rational inquiry developed in ancient Greece. For all his praise of Socrates and his polite bows to Aristotle, Bloom seems totally unconcerned with the fact that a great many philosophers featured in his book reasoned from epistemological premises largely opposed to those of the Greeks. Bloom would like to have his cake and eat it too; he reserves the right to praise the Greeks and also those who rejected them. His catch-all "rationalism" impairs his philosophical argument and his diagnosis of the ills of contemporary society.

Bloom's vision of an ideal university does not square with his praise of the Greeks and of democracy. His model resembles the nineteenth-century anti-empirical German universities in which thinkers created rather than solved problems (and to which, incidentally, students from Russia and Eastern Europe flocked in great numbers).⁴ It also resembles the great rabbinical academies of Eastern Europe in which learned Talmudists, untouched by the Haskalah, disputed one another in total separation from the Gentile societies in which they lived. In other words, Bloom's university is an intellectual enclave unconcerned with society and its demands on the intellectuals. For Socrates, philosophy, or inquiry into truth, was a sublimation of common experience. For Bloom, it is a special preserve of the few where privileges are granted to some and denied to others. The problem of accountability of the university to society is too easily brushed off, and the question of "the special rights of inquiry" is too easily accepted.

Bloom's Enlightenment sprang like Pallas Athena out of the head of Zeus, fully armed and ready for action. He seems to suggest that all we have to do is to practice the Enlightenment ideas of rational inquiry, humanitarianism, and mutual tolerance, and the rest will take care of itself. Needless to say, this had been tried in the

nineteenth century and it has been found wanting.

The other view of European history and of rational inquiry seems to be a closed book to Bloom, and indeed it is so seldom taught at American universities that it may sound like total novelty to some. It is the old conception of Europe, and more broadly of Western civilization, as an oft-amended attempt to put into practice the Graeco-Christian conceptions of society and virtue. Christopher Dawson put it this way:

For, side by side with the natural aggressiveness and the lust for power and wealth which are so evident in European history, there were also new spiritual forces driving Western man toward a new destiny. The activity of the Western mind, which manifested itself alike in scientific and technical invention as well as in geographical discovery, was not the natural inheritance of a particular biological type; it was the result of a long process of education which gradually changed the orientation of human thought and enlarged the possibilities of social action. In this process the vital factor was not the aggressive power of conquerors and capitalists, but the widening of the capacity of human intelligence and the development of new types of creative genius and ability.

The other great world cultures realized their own synthesis between religion and life and then maintained their sacred order unchanged for centuries and millennia. But Western civilization has been the great ferment for change in the world, because the changing of the world became an integral part of its cultural ideal.⁵

Similarly, Oscar Halecki has argued that the Enlightenment was but a secularized version of the ferment which started in the early Middle Ages, expressing itself in the Cluny reforms and later in the reforms of Luther:

In recent scholarship the crisis of the

European conscience which occurred at the turn of the seventeenth century in connection with the so-called scientific revolution . . . is . . . considered the starting point of modern Western culture. Its unquestionable importance should not, however, make the historian overlook that there was another crisis of the European conscience at a much earlier date, in connection with a religious revolution. That first crisis, which made the second possible . . . is one of the dividing lines . . . between the Middle Ages and the modern period. . . . [In turn] . . . the spectacular event of 1517 and the whole Protestant Reformation that followed . . . can be properly understood as parts of a long process which started with the great Western Schism and lasted . . . through the whole Renaissance period.⁶

The Enlightenment is here seen as a step in the process of self-amendment (not to be confused with perfectibility), which has been uniquely characteristic of European and later Western civilization and whose different strands came together during the Middle Ages. This vision of Western history conceives of Rousseau as a belated and secularized voice made possible by the thoughts first articulated by St. Francis. Similarly, Locke's vision of nature is grounded in the Book of Genesis and is a product of a millennium of work of the medieval scholastics who taught the European barbarians to think new and unique thoughts. This conception of Europe takes into account the fact that romantic love (and Bloom bemoans his students' inability to appreciate it) is a Christian-Gnostic creation which was first conceived in thirteenth-century Provence, rather than having been invented by the writers of Romanticism as Bloom seems to suggest. Locke and Rousseau alike exemplify what Denis de Rougemont has called the strenuousness of Western culture, its anti-Manichean "faith in the value of created things, of matter, and of the action of the mind upon the visible world."⁷

Bloom's truncated picture of the

Enlightenment amounts to a ceremonious omission of the roots of Western culture. He sees the notion of rights as grounded in the Enlightenment rather than dependent on the Christian idea of the "children of God." Regardless of technological changes and the successes of "managers," the presence of this idea in society has made a fundamental cultural difference. Not giving credit where credit is due has been endemic among intellectuals; in recent decades it has become epidemic. Sometimes distorted maps of the world are drawn in which some countries appear absurdly small, others absurdly large. On Bloom's historical map the concept of human rights as generated by Christianity is altogether absent, and the Middle Ages are a tiny islet during which Aristotle was "abused." Bloom's Enlightenment minimizes the contribution of the French Encyclopedists and of Montesquieu and over-emphasizes that of the English. He seems to believe that cultural epochs are discrete rather than continuous and that some mysterious fault separates the Enlightenment from earlier times.

The dividing line between conservatives and neoconservatives runs here, I think, in the area of perceptions and interpretations of the Enlightenment. Those who believe that there is no irreconcilable chasm between the eighteenth century and earlier times, and that the Enlightenment is merely another expression of the tension and drive for reform which have been present in Western thought for centuries, are really quite different from those who believe that the *epistēmē* of the Enlightenment brought a qualitative break with the past.

This eloquent book speaks *de omnibus rebus et quidquid aliis*, and it abounds in loose ends. Bloom is part of the tradition of bashing the herd of independent minds grazing at universities and subsisting on a menu of the anti-Enlightenment German thinkers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But he also renders "the Left" harmless by envisioning it as a Woodstock crowd galvanized by random ideologues. His emphasis on the German search for

pre-Christian roots and on the philosophical suggestions of one Englishman and one Frenchman excises a good part of Western memory. It also advances the view that the social system we presently enjoy has shallow roots, which go back to the abolition of the Graeco-Judaeo-Christian hegemony over society's thought, an abolition allegedly accomplished during the Enlightenment.

—Ewa M. Thompson

¹*God and the Knowledge of Reality* (New York, 1973), pp. x-xi. ²*The Mind of Germany: The Education of a Nation* (New York, 1960). ³*Ten Philosophical Mistakes* (New York and London, 1985). ⁴Ralf Dahrendorf, *Society and Democracy in Germany* (Garden City, N.Y., 1967 [1965]), pp. 149-63. ⁵*Religion and the Rise of Western Culture* (New York, 1979 [1950]), p. 10. ⁶*The Millennium of Europe* (Notre Dame, Ind., 1963), p. 206. ⁷*Love in the Western World*, revised ed. (New York, 1956 [1939]), p. 316.

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