

Überstudiert in Chicago

YOUNG MEN EDUCATED to the point of obvious eccentricity, though not certifiably mad, were described by my charitable grandmother as "überstudiert." To her non-German-speaking friends she would say, resignedly, "He over-studied himself." It was a designation she applied to Nietzsche, Karl Marx, and the University of Chicago thrill murderers, Leopold and Loeb.

No doubt my grandmother would have considered Allan Bloom *überstudiert*, though that judgment is perhaps too harsh. After a careful reading of *The Closing of the American Mind*, a book filled with an afflatus which is little short of windy and is twice as long and three times as embroidered as the argument needs to be, I must conclude that Allan Bloom is not *überstudiert*, but rather that he is one of those "late men" whose mode is the "barbarism of reflection." His is neither the world of the Gods nor the world of the heroes, but rather an Alexandrian world on the shores of Lake Michigan where the intellectual ragpickers and grave robbers paw over the semantic rubble of Western civilization. In an odd way Bloom's book, like Ezra Pound's poetry and Norman O. Brown's reworking of Freud and Marx, resembles a gigantic kitchen midden of Western society.

The success of this book is no doubt due in part to the fact that there are two books here. One deals with the current state of the university. Most intelligent men in America and Europe share Bloom's despair at the destruction of openness, standards of inquiry, and the pursuit of excellence which characterizes American university education at the end of the twentieth century. We are even more concerned about the intellectual and the spiritual fate of students cast adrift on a sea of ideology. None but the very dullest of students fails to perceive that intellec-

tual con men make their careers by gulling the public and serving the current ideological idols whether these idols are racist, women's liberationist, or fatuous neo-Marxist. This half of Bloom's book is a ventilation of views widely held by the critical intelligentsia. Even though his criticism is sometimes manneristic and often romantic, it is telling and gives us an insight into the power of Bloom as a classroom teacher. He must, indeed, be very good and I envy his students the experience. My only hope is that as a reward, to paraphrase Sartre, "he raises up opponents worthy of himself."

The second book is an account of the development of Western thought from the pre-Socratics to the present. It is supposedly a diagnosis of the profound illness in Western thought and an effort to describe why and how the university has fallen on such evil days. Bloom makes an effort to establish a connection between our present discontents and what he perceives to be the decay of philosophy and political science in the Western world. In this effort he fails. His account is eccentric, flawed in method, deliberately deceptive, and filled with errors of fact and interpretation. The problems of the university and of society as a whole have their origins in causes simpler, more universal, and different from the causes which Bloom adduces.

I believe that the influence of this book is based on the fact that few of the readers and reviewers read past page 137. If they were to get into "The German Connection" they would be so thoroughly prepared to believe that Germany was the sole source of all evil in the contemporary world that they would not discern the curious love-hate relationship Bloom has to nineteenth- and twentieth-century German thought. In this respect Bloom is rather like the Walther Rathenau who admired Nietzsche's conception of the blond

beast and who wished to be a Prussian Junker and a good Jew—all at the same time. The incongruity in Bloom is no less striking than the incongruity in Rathenau.

In a curious way Weimar Germany lives on in Bloom: anti-bourgeois, elitist, agnostic but philosophically pious, intellectually arrogant and anti-democratic but supportive of a democratic polity as being superior to tyranny. His intellectual ethos was shaped in that curious parody of Christian discipleship and Platonic and Aristotelian eroticism which characterized the George Kreis and the schools of Strauss and Voegelin. It is little wonder that he finds the ethos of the university in its strong Jamesian and pragmatic echoes so strange. The university was, in his eyes, most glorious when it was most like the Berlin of Wilamowitz-Mollendorf and Harnack.

The Straussian hermeneutic demands that we read through the ostensible meaning of a text to the concealed but real meaning. Philosophers are especially artful dodgers who employ words as a disguise. Bloom comments on the behavior of Socrates as follows:

The problem for the philosophers is primarily religion. The philosophers must come to terms with its authoritative presence in the city. Socrates in the *Apology* makes some suggestions as to how the philosopher must behave. He must deny that he is an atheist, although he remains ambiguous as to the character of his belief. Any careful reading of the *Apology* makes clear that Socrates never says he believes in the Gods of the city. But he does try to make himself appear to be a sign sent from the Gods, commanded to do what he does by the Delphic god. . . .

Those conservatives who believe that Bloom is a fellow traveler should read his text carefully once more. Bloom is a man of the Enlightenment sentimentalized by Rousseau. He is an agnostic who lacks the courage of his convictions. He may deplore the consequences of Nietzsche's thought but he also knows that Nietzsche

had the courage to think through to its ultimate conclusion the thought with which Bloom has only toyed. For the moment Bloom would like to arrest thought at the pseudo-Hellenism of Rousseau. However, as John Cardinal Newman observed, unbelief has no halfway houses.

Those who read Bloom would do well to examine carefully the language he uses. His favorite word is "soul," which appears in the subtitle of the book, *How Higher Education has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students*. Now what precisely does Bloom mean by "soul"? "Soul" is a difficult and complicated idea and clearly Bloom does not mean by "soul" what the great mass of his ill-educated Christian and twentieth-century neo-pagan readers think he means. Of course, good Straussian that he is, Bloom does not tell you this, for such an admission would give the whole show away. No doubt the idea of "soul" is one of the most complex in Western thought, so complex that neither *The Dictionary of the History of Ideas* nor *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* carries articles on that subject. There are hints that what Bloom means by "soul" is the Greek Platonic-Aristotelian *psyche*, that is, something perhaps immortal, rational, and imprisoned in the material body from which it seeks liberation. This is a very different notion from that which Christians have held for some time and, in fairness to the reader, Bloom should provide a definition for such a frequently used word.

A second frequently used word is almost as important, but it is never defined nor adequately discussed by Bloom. That word is "nature." By "nature" he does not mean what natural scientists mean or even what scholastic "natural lawyers" mean. Bloom has never recovered from the Socratic belief that the "nature" of the Ionian natural scientists was an illusion; that the material world is deeply anti-rational and anti-spiritual. The only "nature" of interest to the Socratics is "human nature" and human existence is thus not simply a life in tension but a life which is psychozoic and divided. Actually,

Bloom has a profound contempt for natural science because natural science is antithetical to the "rationalistic" world view which he holds.

It is important to note a word which Bloom rarely employs: "God," unless he employs this word in the form of "the Gods of the city." Bloom would prefer to see culture as the invention and imposition of the polity, and religion as a Rousseauian "civil religion." But even he must obliquely admit that religion is the seedbed of culture and that cult and myth antedate polity. If "values" are religious in origin rather than political, and if the philosopher is "always" the critic of myth, tradition, and religion, where does Bloom find a warrant for the criticism of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the "German connection?"

In fact Bloom's conception of "culture" is a curious one. He seems to believe that "culture" is something communicated to students in the university by their professors. If such is the case, we are collectively in much worse shape than even Bloom has imagined. Having grown up in a small midwestern town where the culture was not too different in its essentials from that of fifth-century Athens (I say this as a historian who admires Paul Shorey), I cannot help but think that what one learns in the university is often irrelevant anticlimax. Inquiry in such a setting is nicely balanced by a respect for the prejudices and opinions of mankind—a respect which seems to have been absent in both Socrates and Rousseau.

That nature and grace, soul and body stand in a complementary and mutually dependent relationship to one another seems, despite Thomism and contemporary natural science, an idea which has never crossed Bloom's mind. The great Kantian divorce in Bloom's view forever sundered what some benighted souls believed God had joined together. In certain respects Bloom's view is a consoling one, for it avoids the hard work of determining the limits of natural causality and instinct and the efficacy of reason and free will. "Brother ass the body," however, is

no less a part of my humanity and by the Incarnation, my spirituality, than is the "rational" soul.

Is the "German connection" all that important? Surely modernity is not a German invention. After all, another Hellenist, Matthew Arnold, wrote "Dover Beach" long before Nietzsche became a household word. True, the Germans were on the frontiers, the cutting edge of modernity, but it was a development common to the whole of the Western world. What the "German connection" did was to speed up a development which was everywhere already well under way. Leslie Stephen lost his faith without the assistance of German philosophy, and the Apostles and Bloomsbury came to flower at least in substantial measure because of England's own Hellenists.

Bloom is right, the problem for contemporary philosophers is religion. The values of the Western world are the values inculcated by medieval Christianity. When the "philosophers" have succeeded in cleaning out the metaphysical cupboards, when we have all been demythologized, Mother Hubbard will find the "value cupboard" bare. "Wherewith will the earth be salted when the salt hath lost its savour?"

Bloom's ambivalence with respect to Nietzsche results from the fact that if one is Socratically critical one must, if heroic, sooner or later embrace the Nietzschean creation of values through art and violence. If values are not to be discovered in the nature of things and informed by revelation, then every man must invent his own values and the powerful must impose their values on the weak.

Yes, a muddled Platonism is better (more humane perhaps), than Nietzsche. But finally Plato, Rousseau, and Nietzsche are all authoritarians who seek to impose the mask of reason on their fellow men. For them there is no comprehension of sin, reconciliation, and salvation, and no realization of the humanity which is only possible when we share in God's divinity. To offer, as Bloom does in his "Conclusion," as a solution to our contemporary problems inside and outside the univer-

sity, that we all read Plato's *Republic*, strikes me as absurd. Socrates and his successors, in employing a critical philosophy, were not able to save Hellenic civilization in its hour of agony. It is

unlikely that a repetition of this effort, even with the addition of Rousseau and Nietzsche, will be more salvific for our own society.

—Stephen J. Tonsor

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