

presses in an article he had written in 1950 and which he includes in the last paragraph of his book) is to ask King Canute to turn back the tides.

On balance, however, Barzun's book is a welcome departure from the hurly-burly confrontation of recent books, articles, and conferences. It makes good sense, with reasoned argument couched in an elegant and witty style.

Recollecting Our Republican Virtues

GAYNE NERNEY

***The Ennobling of Democracy: The
Challenge of the Post Modern Era,***
by Thomas L. Pangle, Baltimore,
Md.: The Johns Hopkins University
Press, 1992. vii + 227 pp. \$24.95.

THOMAS PANGLE'S *The Ennobling of Democracy* is a presentation of Straussian wisdom that confronts its reader with something of a combination of Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and The Last Man* (1992) and Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987). It resembles the former in that it takes *les évènements* in Eastern Europe and the *Absterben* of the Soviet Union as signaling something of a chiasmatic moment within which we might fruitfully endeavor an authentic "recollection" or "*Wiederholung*" of the republican roots of our liberal democracy.¹ It resembles Bloom's book in that it too sees the enervating effects of a corrupt and corrupting foreign philosophical outlook as the stumbling block to effective thought and ac-

tion; and, taking the field of university education as the key arena of post-modern political praxis, it too conceives the basic solution to our problems to lie in cultivating the "dialectical" awareness acquired by reading the "Great Books."

On the other hand, unlike Fukuyama's work, *The Ennobling of Democracy* does not base its observations and prescriptions on a thesis regarding the end of history or of historicism. Thus, the gravamen of Professor Pangle's argument is not attached to any particular philosophy of history, let alone some controversial thesis from this field. Also, unlike Bloom, Pangle does not stray far from his familiar pose as a master commentator on the philosophizing of others. For example, Pangle does not, on his own hook, engage in the kind of direct social and cultural criticism that Bloom did in the first and last parts of *The Closing of the American Mind*. This is not to say, however, that Pangle does not philosophize, or that his opinions on the issues he discusses in this book are bashfully concealed.

Indeed, Pangle has much more on his mind than simply telling us what we should think about when contemplating the challenges of our times. He tells us, for example, that the search for community—a yearning on the lips of virtually all the critics of our liberalism—will be best addressed by trying to recover the republican strand, the neglected republican strand, of our liberal-democratic tradition. He tells us, for example, that the task of recovering the sense of civic identity and responsibility needed to rectify the deficiencies of our individualistic and legalistic liberalism is not primarily one of redesigning basic institutions or one calling for radical experimentation in the area of social policy. Rather, the central challenge turns out to be a matter of educational reform, especially at the university level. Pangle also tells us that the needed educational reforms are not in the area of process or

form, but in the area of content, and that the key to resolving the dilemmas and controversies concerning content can be found by refocusing on the all but forgotten civic ends of education. Throughout his rehearsal of these themes, Pangle shows his reader in practice, with references, allusions to, and quotations from the great works of the Western tradition, as well as to the most current formulations of today's philosophical *avant garde*, just what it means to learn from the Greek Books and not merely *about* them. Finally, his explanation of the Socratic-Platonic-Aristotelian conception of "dialectic" and his claim that reacquiring this intellectual aptitude is the real point behind any serious advocacy of the "Great Books" do much to answer the more thoughtful criticisms of this educational program.²

Notwithstanding my characterization of *The Ennobling of Democracy* as a presentation of Straussian Wisdom (*i.e.*, that provocative historical and cultural insight into the intellectual and political challenges of our times vouchsafed by the recovery of an all-but-forgotten understanding of philosophy), I must observe several interrelated deficiencies in Pangle's argument. One wonders immediately about the idea that a return to the outlook and principles of classical republicanism will provide the answer to our intellectual and practico-political paralysis. The problem is not with these ideas themselves, but with our circumstances. Is there in these United States the kind of ideological and sociological homogeneity that is tacitly assumed by the ideal of classical republicanism? In fact is it not more likely that the United States would undergo some kind of "Caesarist" post-constitutional transformation before anything like the restoration of the "old" republican constitutional order occurred? "Our liberalism" is something we understand all too well; "our republicanism," while it might make

faint hearts race, seems, frankly, more like something that has "passed away as in a dream" than like a reality with "a local habitation and a name."

The problem is not, as indicated above, that Pangle is coy in his criticisms, or that his proposals for educational reform are a kind of self-serving ploy designed merely to make university teaching more enjoyable for "soft nihilists." No, the problem, quite simply, is that in a work that would make the recovery of dialectic the central concern of liberal arts education in our times, and which speaks of the search for truth quite unironically, there is very little "first order" application of dialectic—especially in its polemical manifestations—to those well-described philosophical sophistries symptomatic, or expressive, of our current crisis. Given Pangle's paradoxical proposal for a return to the faith and wisdom of the American Founding as the antidote for a most unprincipled age—an age, let it be said, that all but repudiates the very ideas of faith, principle, and wisdom—one wonders if the cool moderation of this pursuit of old-fashioned virtue is justifiable.

It is not as if Pangle has not "seen the wolf." His characterizations of Lyotard, Derrida, de Man, Rorty, Vattimo, Levinson, *et al.* are penetrating and informative; and his characterization of the trickled-down form of this "advanced" thinking in American intellectual and university life is intrepid and chilling. Indeed, after hearing from Pangle that "the stupefying pall of relativism must be shredded in the name of a common dialectical struggle for the truth about virtue, God, and existence," and that a moral education by way of "values clarification" is but a cover for "its hidden agenda of apparent skepticism [and] actual relativism," one would have expected arguments, or at least some "small indications" for those readers lacking the leisure needed to work these things out for themselves.