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# BOOK REVIEWS

## The Closing of the American Mind

Allan Bloom, with foreword by Saul Bellow, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987, 392 pp.

ROBERT PAUL WOLFF

Afficionados of the modern American novel have learned to look to Philip Roth for complex literary constructions that play wittily with narrative voice and frame. One thinks of such Roth works as *My Life as a Man* and *The Counter Life*. Now Saul Bellow has demonstrated that among his other well-recognized literary gifts is an unsuspected bent for daring satire. What Bellow has done, quite simply, is to write an entire corruscatingly funny novel in the form of a pettish, bookish, grumpy, reactionary complaint against the last two decades. The "author" of this tirade, one of Bellow's most fully realized literary creations, is a mid-fiftiish professor at the University of Chicago, to whom Bellow gives the evocative name, "Bloom." Bellow appears in the book only as the author of an eight-page "Foreword," in which he introduces us to his principal and only character. The book is published under the name "Allan Bloom," and, as part of the fun, is even copyrighted in "Bloom's" name.

Nevertheless, Bellow is unwilling entirely to risk the possibility that readers will misconstrue his novel as a serious piece of nonfiction by a real professor, and so, in the midst of his preface, he devotes more than a page to a flat-footed explanation of his earlier novel, *Herzog*, in which, he tells us straight out, he was deliberately trying to satirize pedantry. This bit of hand waving and flag raising by Bellow detracts from the ironic consistency of the novel, but he may perhaps be forgiven, for so compellingly believable is this new

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academic pedant, "Bloom," that without Bellow's warnings, *The Closing of the American Mind* might have been taken as a genuine piece of academic prose.

The novel is, for all its surface accessibility, a subtly constructed palimpsest concealing what old Hyde Park hands will recognize as a devastating in-house attack by Bellow on his own stamping ground, the Committee on Social Thought. ("Bloom" is described on the jacket as a professor in the Committee on Social Thought.) The real target, indeed, is a former member of that committee, the late Leo Strauss, a brilliant, learned, utterly mad historian of political thought who spawned, nurtured, reared, and sent out into the world several generations of disciples dedicated to his paranoid theories of textual interpretation. (Strauss, whose hermeneutics placed special emphasis on concealment, absence, and misdirection, appears only once in the book, in an aside. Bellow leaves it to the cognoscenti to recognize the true significance of the allusion.)

As conceived by Bellow, "Bloom" is the quintessential product of the distinctive educational theories that flourished at the college of the University of Chicago during and after the heyday of Robert Maynard Hutchins. The key to those theories was the particular mid-western, upwardly mobile first-generation version of the Great Conversation that came to be known, in its promotional publishing version, as *The Great Books*. According to this pedagogical conception, Western civilization is a two-millennia-old conversation among a brilliant galaxy of great minds, permanently encapsulated in a recognized sequence of great texts, with Aristotle's plan for the organization of human knowledge as the architectonic armature. Plato, Aristotle, Aeschylus, Thucydides, St. Augustine, St. Thomas, al Farabi, Maimonides, Erasmus, Cervantes, Bacon, Shakespeare, Descartes, Hobbes, Locke, Spinoza, Leibniz, Newton, on and on they come, reflecting on the relationship between man and the universe, chatting with one another, kibitzing their predecessors, a rich, endless, moveable feast of ideas and intellectual passions.

The list, by now, has grown enormously long, but—and this is the secret of its mesmerizing attraction to the eager young students who were drawn to Chicago—it is finite. However much work it may be to plow through the great books, once one has completed the task, one is educated! One can now join the Great Conversation, perhaps not as an active participant, but certainly as a thoughtful listener. And this is true, regardless of one's family background, upbringing, lack of private schooling, or inappropriate dress. Unlike the Ivy League, where the wrong social class marked one permanently as inferior, Chicago offered a "career open to talents."

The virtue of a Chicago education was a certain intoxication with ideas, especially philosophical ideas, that sets off graduates of the Hutchins era from everyone else in the American intellectual scene. When I taught there briefly, in the early 1960s, I was enchanted to find professors of music reading books on Kant, and biologists seriously debating the undergraduate curriculum in Aristotelian terms. The vice of that same system is a mad, hermetic conviction that larger world events are actually caused or shaped by the obscurest sub-quibbles of the Great Conversation. By a fallacy of misplaced concreteness, of the sort that the young Marx so brilliantly burlesqued in *The Holy Family*, Chicago types are prone to suppose that it is the ideas that are real, and the people in this world who are mere epiphenomena. Bellow captures this distorted mentality perfectly in "Bloom," who, as we shall see, traces the cultural ills of the past twenty years implausibly, but with a wacky interior logic, to the twisted theories of two German philosophers.

The novel (which is to say, Bellow's "Foreword") begins with what turns out to be a biting ironic observation. "Professor Bloom has his own way of doing things." And indeed he does! Once "Bloom" has begun his interminable complaint against modernity—for which, read everything that has taken place since "Bloom" was a young student in the 1940s at the University of Chicago—we are treated to a

hilarious discourse of the sort that only a throwback to the Hutchins era could produce.

"Bloom's" diatribe opens with some animadversions upon the culture of the young. After a few glancing blows at feminism, he quite unpredictably launches upon an extended complaint about the music that the young so favor. Bellow's image of a middle-aged professor trying to sound knowledgeable about hard rock is a miniature comic masterpiece.

Now "Bloom" arrives at his real message. The deeper cause of the desperate inadequacies of our contemporary culture, it seems, is the baleful effect upon us of Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger! Inasmuch as only a handful of American intellectuals can spell these gentlemen's names, let alone summarize their doctrines, "Bloom's" thesis has a certain manifest implausibility. But, as Bellow well knows, true Straussians spurn the obvious, looking always in silences, ellipses, and guarded allusions for the true filiations that connect one thinker with another, or a philosophical tradition with the cultural and political world.

"Bloom's" expository style, so skillfully manipulated by Bellow, makes it extraordinarily difficult to tell what he is actually saying. Its most striking surface characteristic is an obsessive name-dropping that turns every page into a roll call of the Great Conversation. Consult the book at random (my copy falls open to pages 292-93), and one finds, within a brief compass, mention of Christopher Marlowe, Machiavelli (a Straussian buzzword, this), Bacon, Descartes, Hobbes, Leibniz, Locke, Montesquieu, Voltaire, Jacques Maritain, T.S. Eliot, Rousseau, Newton, Socrates, Moses, Cyrus, Theseus, Romulus, Swift, and Aristophanes. But despite the talismanic invocation of these and many other great names, there is precious little real argumentation in "Bloom's" "book." Indeed, despite his academic style of exposition, "Bloom" rarely enunciates a thesis that he is prepared to stand behind. All is irony, allusion, exposition, and undercutting reserve. Eventually, one realizes that Bellow is deliberately, and with great skill, conjuring for us a portrait of a man of Ideas, if not of ideas, whose endless ruminations on moral and intellectual virtue conceal a fundamental absence of either.

The turning-point in "Bloom's" monologue comes late in the novel, in a chapter entitled "The Sixties." Suddenly, the mist disperses, the allusions evaporate, and we discover what is real-

ly eating away at "Bloom's" innards. It seems that, in the course of his distinguished academic career, "Bloom" taught at Cornell University during the late sixties. Two decades later, "Bloom" is so dyspeptic about the events there that he can scarcely contain himself. "Servility, vanity and lack of conviction," "pompous," "a mixture of cowardice and moralism" are among the phrases with which he characterizes his colleagues of that time. For "Bloom," at Cornell, Columbia, and elsewhere, the rebellious students were blood brothers to the Brown Shirts who supported nazism. "Whether it be Nuremberg or Woodstock, the principle is the same."

Stepping back a bit from the fretwork of the novel, we may ask ourselves what Bellow's purpose is in committing an entire book to the exhibition of "Allan Bloom." Clearly, simple good-hearted fun must have played some motivating role, as well, we may suppose, as a desire to set the record right concerning the Committee on Social Thought. But as the final portion of the book makes manifest, Bellow has a deeper aim, one that is intensely earnest and, in the fullest and most ancient sense, moral. The central message of the Greek philosophers whom "Bloom" so likes to cite is that ultimately morality is a matter of character. Plato's brilliantly rendered portraits not only of Socrates but also of Gorgias, Calicles, Thrasymachus, and the others is intended to show us how virtue is grounded in character, and right action in virtue. Merely to know what can be found in books, or indeed on clay tablets, is no guarantee of virtue. As Aristotle remarks in a celebrated ironic aside, one cannot teach ethics to young men who are not well brought up.

"Bloom," as Bellow shows us across three hundred tedious pages, is as intimate with the Great Conversation as any Chicago undergraduate could ever hope to become. And yet, at the one critical moment in his life, when he confronts inescapably the intersection between political reality and his beloved Great Books, "Bloom's" vision clouds, his capacity for intellectual sympathy deserts him, and he cries "the Nazis are coming" as he shrinks from America's most authentically democratic moment of recent times.

In the end, Bellow is telling us, the Great Conversation is not enough. One needs compassion, a sense of justice, and moral vision. Without these, the Great Books are merely dead words in dead languages. I strongly recommend *The Closing of the American Mind* to anyone who desires a fiction of the

mind that takes seriously the old question of the role of reason in the formation of virtuous character.

## Legal Deskbook for Administrators of Independent Colleges and Universities

Kent M. Weeks, original editor; Mark G. Yudof, 1984 revision editor, Macon, Georgia: Mercer University, Center for Constitutional Studies, 1986, loose leaf.

DALE STEWART KOEPP

An assistant professor's contract is not renewed, and she wants to see the department meeting minutes that record the votes of the committee. A student is charged by another student under a local disorderly persons ordinance and wants to know what to do. An elderly woman attending a free concert in the auditorium falls and breaks her hip. The music librarian wants to sell cassette tapes of recordings from the collection she has made and donate the proceeds to the music department. A group of students has set up a booth to sell tickets for a lottery to earn money to go on a white-water rafting excursion. A student referendum demands that the college stop buying towels from a company that is being picketed for unfair labor practices, and one of the trustees is on that company's board of directors. A graduate student in psychology intends to use a personality test he has devised on the first graders at a local elementary school. You, as an administrator, wonder whether any of these situations might have legal implications.

Whether the lawyer acting as counsel for an independent college or university is a member of a private firm or acting in-house, two continuing problems must be faced on a day-to-day basis: how to provide the administrators who depend upon legal advice with a basic background and/or a reliable reference so that they may function comfortably without constant and inefficient reference of minor matters to counsel, and how to be reasonably sure that legal counsel does not overlook important issues when questions arise in areas not dealt with on a regular basis. This deskbook is an attempt to approach both problems.

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