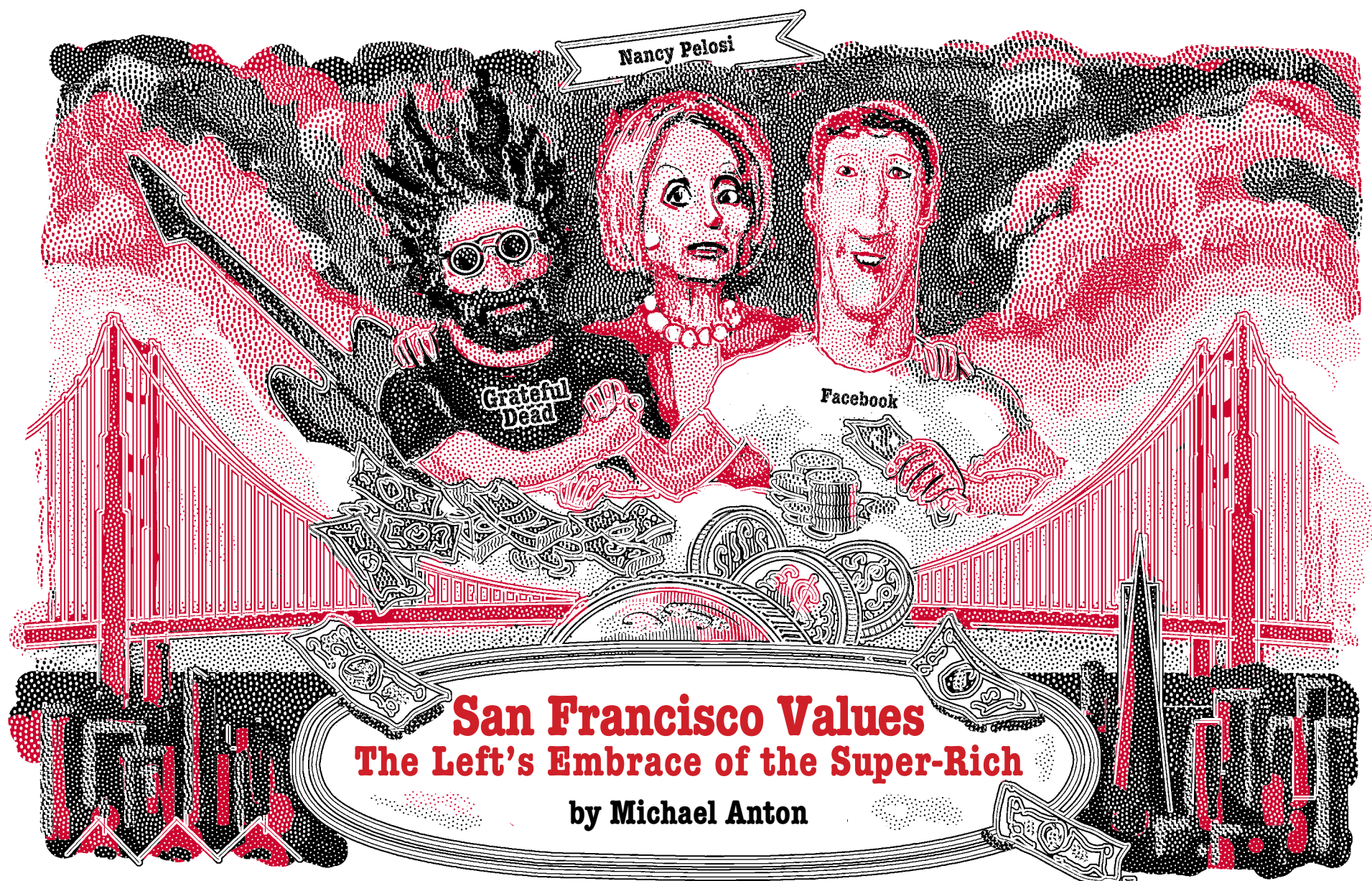


VOLUME XV, NUMBER 4, FALL 2015

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Essay by Algis Valiunas

FULL BLOOM



Allan Bloom

THE STATE OF THE AMERICAN MIND, A collection of 16 essays edited by Mark Bauerlein and Adam Bellow, boldly announces its descent from *The Closing of the American Mind*, which appeared in 1987 and made Allan Bloom the world's most famous professor, for an extended run. Even the book jacket design of *State* strikingly imitates that of *Closing*. And the latter advertised at the bottom of the front cover the foreword by Saul Bellow, who was Bloom's colleague in the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago, the prime instigator of Bloom's un-academic assault on the academic travesty of intellectual life, and the father of Adam Bellow; Adam for his part studied with the two elders for a year or so, enjoyed lifelong privileged access to his father's mind, and has thrived as a writer and editor hospitable to conservative causes. Mark Bauerlein, who teaches English at Emory University, is best known for his 2008 book, *The Dumbest Generation: How*

the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future (Or, Don't Trust Anyone Under 30), which picked up where Bloom left off in his critique of American education in the age of fatal distraction.

Creed and Country

THE FIRST FEW PAGES OF BAUERLEIN and Bellow's foreword, "America: Have We Lost Our Mind?", place Bloom in an authoritative tradition of social and political commentary defining the national mind and character, including J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, Alexis de Tocqueville, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Benjamin Franklin, Booker T. Washington, and Martin Luther King, Jr. The American creed they represent upholds popular sovereignty, religious liberty, economic liberty, mistrust of centralized government, "selfless civic virtue" after the manner of George Washington, and "independent

thought and action, thrift and industriousness, delayed gratification and equal opportunity." Bloom's book had such an impact, Bauerlein and Bellow write, because it "seemed to apply to the entire country, not just higher education." *The State of the American Mind* professes to extend Bloom's critique explicitly into various aspects of contemporary American mental life, which invites the reader, in turn, to consider how far these critics are mindful of Bloom's intentions, and how much that might matter at this point.

E.D. Hirsch, Jr.—whose *Cultural Literacy*, with its list of 5,000 facts or topics a minimally educated American had better know, rode the bestseller lists in 1987 alongside Bloom's monster hit—recapitulates in his lead-off essay the essentially economic case for acquiring these facts and joining them to the "universal principles that formed the United States." The failure to have heeded Hirsch his first time around has cost us "our collective nerve" and

“increased economic inequality.” His fundamental argument is that one needs to know something about a subject in order to think seriously about it: to disagree with that you have to be a licensed educationist, convinced of the primacy of “knowing how to think,” for which mere facts are negotiable. Hirsch is quite sound as far as he goes; yet while Allan Bloom joked publicly about being confused with him, he sneered privately that such confusion could be possible. After his initial success, Hirsch sought cover from certain “liberal thinkers” who feared that he “must be advocating a list of great books that every child in the land should be forced to read.” He protested demurely in the preface of a later edition that no poor schoolchild would have such greatness thrust upon her while he was in charge.

Bloom for his part swore by great books, even by Great Books, and taught them in masterly fashion. He presented his students with minds and souls of a quality they would almost certainly never meet outside those pages, using writings of genius as levers to uproot the callow presuppositions of American youth. Bloom demonstrated that genuine diversity was not based on race or class or gender but was to be found in the collision and interplay of the finest intellects at full throttle. He insisted on the possibility that invaluable truth might reside in works that modern university education ignores or treats as quaint period pieces at best, and he intimated that a higher life was available in the very midst of intellectual philistinism and spiritual nullity. Not Professor Hirsch’s sort of thing at all.

Mark Bauerlein studies statistics on various facets of intelligence among young people; noting that “word and information knowledge” lags far behind the growing power of abstract thinking, he advises parents and mentors to “spend more time conversing with youths, reading the newspaper together, going on cultural outings, taking walks.” Yet, he concludes that this will never happen, so the best one can do is to spread the word about how dismal the state of youth culture really is. Here Bauerlein’s jeremiad approaches in fervor, if not in force, Bloom’s animadversions on adolescent sex, drugs, and rock-and-roll. But Bloom did hold out the possibility that the souls of some spiritually parched undergraduates might be saved—some few, admittedly, though many are called—and he declared that this is what every serious teacher considers his principal vocation.

Two other essays in the collection stand out for their cogency and rhetorical strength. Steve Wasserman, a much-traveled editor, now at the Yale University Press, mourns the transience of the “vast project of cultural uplift” that was

launched in America after the Second World War and that “sought to bring to the wider public the best that has been thought and said.” Where Wasserman extols the middlebrow culture that produced Mortimer J. Adler’s Great Books, brought opera to Louisville and Fargo, and introduced Gore Vidal and William F. Buckley, Jr., to people who liked to watch television, Bloom saw a contemptible simulacrum of seriousness, a disservice to intellectual rigor, and a sop to hyper-egalitarianism. But then Bloom in his glory days never passed up a chance to talk on television; and as one looks back from the current slag heap of popular culture, the middlebrow has its undeniable appeal and is not to be disdained and dismissed.

R.R. Reno, editor of *First Things* and a former theology professor, justly proclaims that

Books discussed in this essay:

The State of the American Mind: 16 Leading Critics on the New Anti-Intellectualism, edited by Mark Bauerlein and Adam Bellow. Templeton Press, 280 pages, \$27.95

The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today’s Students, by Allan Bloom. Simon & Schuster, 400 pages, \$17

Essays on The Closing of the American Mind, edited by Robert L. Stone. Chicago Review Press, 382 pages, out-of-print

Leo Strauss, the Straussians, and the American Regime, edited by Kenneth L. Deutsch and John A. Murley. Rowman & Littlefield, 468 pages, \$53

current American “moral reasoning” serves “an Empire of Desire,” and that “an antinomian sensibility” rules unimpeded by religious scruple or any other traditional virtue. Reno cites more heroes and villains than one can name here, but he enlists Aristotle, “less dreamy” than Plato, as a philosophic antidote to the antinomian. Aristotle understood the need for “the disciplining power of cultural norms” to shape the virtuous life—though far superior to the Aristotelian natural virtues are the Thomist supernatural virtues of faith, hope, and charity, which could stand a revival. Bloom for his part had no use for the supernatural in general or Thomas Aquinas in particular.

Moreover, he enjoyed pointing out that Aristotle’s moral virtues did not include piety, and that in any case intellectual virtue produced human happiness superior even to that of the man who perfectly embodied the moral virtues: the philosopher’s *makaria* (blessedness) as against the great-souled man’s *eudaimonia* (happiness). Bloom taught that the philosophers have all been atheists, and that they are antinomian to a man: defiant of *nomos*, which means custom as enshrined in the explicit and implicit assumptions of the political regime, the civic religion, the authority of the fathers.

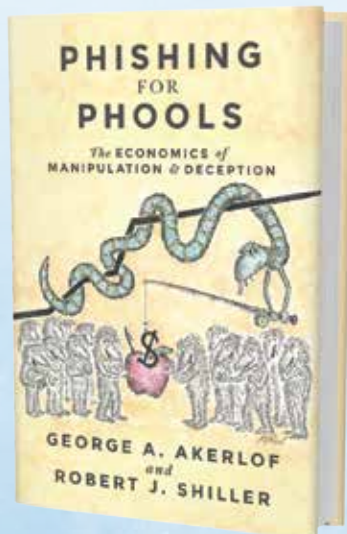
Sublime Longing

SO WHERE DOES BLOOM FIT NOW? WHAT can one say about the state of the universities almost 30 years after Bloom? That it is just as bad as this gathering of critics finds the general condition of the American mind to be, or even worse: it is all but inevitable that a student in the liberal arts will come out of college more foolish than he went in. For what is still called liberal education, although it is now, more precisely, progressive education, has its inspiration in interest group grievance, and its end in broadcasting such grievance as loudly and widely as possible, eventually to determine the law of the land and our policy abroad. All the damage said to have been done down the years and right up to the present moment by racism, homophobia, Islamophobia, the big bankers, and the war against women fills the aching emptiness of the contemporary 18-year-old student’s mind with raging compassion, so that he might be directed by righteous fury all his days.

And then there are the hordes of undergraduate swots and grinds indifferent to mental life except as it pertains to pumping up their grade point average, winning admission to a top-drawer professional school, and securing their rightful place in the upper middle class at the very least. Yet they too will absorb enough of the ambient campus miasma so that 10 or 20 years hence, when they are accomplished tax attorneys or dermatologists or hedge fund wizards, they will proudly cast their vote for Michelle as president, because it is time.

What did Allan Bloom offer to students engulfed by such ecstatic destruction on the one hand and premature desiccation on the other? The higher erotics, as so beautifully conceived in Plato’s *Symposium* and *Republic*, in Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale* and *The Tempest*, in Rousseau’s *Emile* and *Julie, or the New Héloïse*. “Wonder, the source of both poetry and philosophy, is [Eros’s] characteristic expression,” wrote Bloom. “Eros demands daring from its votaries and provides a good

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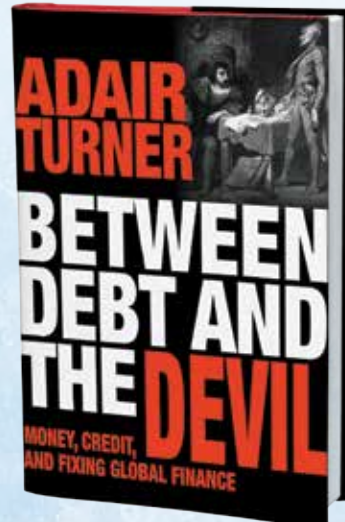
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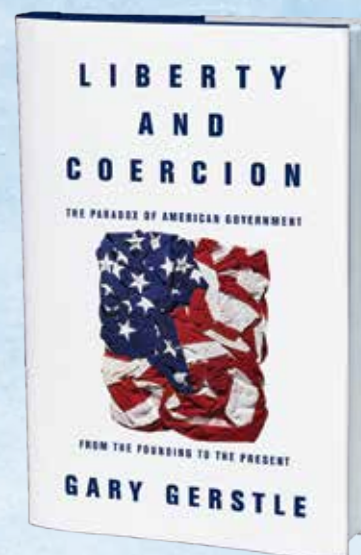
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—Steven Hahn, author of *A Nation under Our Feet*

reason for it. This longing for completeness is the longing for education, and the study of it is education."

Bloom was unafraid to insist that there is an order of rank among even the greatest thinkers, and while he appreciated the philosophic genius of Machiavelli, Rousseau, and Nietzsche—intellectual makers of modernity—the figure he revered above all was Socrates, as memorialized by Plato and Xenophon. For Plato's Socrates, eros finds its supreme expression in philosophic friends' thinking the same sublime thought at the same time. Man rapt in thought is man at his highest, even if knowing what one does not know represents the pinnacle of human wisdom. To reopen the possibility that classical philosophy might present the best life for a human being: this is Bloom's answer to the misbegotten American openness that refuses to grant credence to such archaic, patriarchal, and oppressive ideas as truth, the good, and the primacy of reason.

This invincible confidence of Bloom's that he knew the best way to live stirred the wrath not only of liberal professors but also of eminent conservative ones, such as his colleague the imposing sociologist Edward Shils, in his time perhaps the leading American intellectual expert on intellectuals, who derided Bloom's blinkered certainty as the closing of an American mind. Bloom acknowledged the power of Shils's bear-trap intellect, but said Shils's problem was that he failed to recognize an intellect superior to his own—namely that of Leo Strauss, Bloom's more than estimable teacher, who had seen through the fact-value distinction that governs social science and that Shils could not see his way out of.

A similar rivalry has long existed between philosophy and poetry, going back to Aristophanes' lampooning of Socrates in his play *The Clouds* (423 B.C.). From 1979 to 1992 the rivalry played out in the University of Chicago seminar room where Bloom and Saul Bellow presided together. They were the best of friends—Bloom used to joke about the time the novelist was once again between wives and Saul was married to *him*—but each was quite sure that his particular vocation was supreme, and both could get testy about their respective patents of nobility. Out of his friend's earshot, Bloom professed utmost delight in Bellow's comic gift but deplored his unfortunate infatuation with "half-moralists" such as Rudolf Steiner and Owen Barfield: the famed novelist of ideas swore by too many daft notions. Bellow for his part spoke of Leo Strauss as "a thinking engine," and intimated that the soul has esoteric ways of knowing closed

to minds such as Strauss's, or Bloom's. After Bloom's death in 1992, evidently from AIDS contracted in that part of his erotic life that philosophy did not penetrate, Bellow waited eight years to conceive his memorial tribute to Bloom, the novel *Ravelstein*, a searching study of modern Eros as embodied in the thinker and the artist who loved him: brilliant, madcap, brave, elegant of mind and inelegant in deportment, hilarious and in love with his own wit, rejoicing in his unexpected fame and wealth, sexually ravenous even as death approaches, Bloom is more alive in Bellow's reimagining—the philosopher as a terribly flawed human being loved and understood by the poet—than he could be in the choicest academic *Festschrift*.

In his 1974 memorial to Leo Strauss, collected in *Giants and Dwarfs* (1990), Bloom wrote, "The story of a life in which the only real events were thoughts is easily told." The story of Bloom's far more complicated life cannot be summed up so readily. Bloom would exhort his students to work and then work some more, for thinking hard was the

Bloom habitually said that the American regime was founded in intellectual incoherence.

purest pleasure, and there would be rest enough in the grave. Yet he admitted with a rueful smile that unlike Leo Strauss, who was a philosopher every minute of every day, he was given to diversions that occupied him when he ought to have been immersed in serious thought. Most of these were innocent enough, and some were in fact evidence of cultivation that a lesser man would have been proud of indeed: a trove of classical music recordings that it would have taken several very long lifetimes to play all the way through, a smaller collection of choice paintings acquired with his newfound wealth, and not least the sky-walking exploits of Michael Jordan as he led the Chicago Bulls to glory again and again and again. Other amusements and excitements, which everyone has heard of by now, were gamy at best, ugly and vicious at worst. The most disturbing image in Bellow's novel is that of Ravelstein's corrupted blood coursing just beneath the skin—his life irreparably fouled by the virus contracted in service to the lower erotics.

The writers in *The State of the American Mind*, and most of their readers, would likely

find Professor Shils's mind—solid, scholarly, honorable, militantly inured against soulful transports, demonstratively plain to the point of starkness in his writings, pugnaciously moralizing in exactly the approved conservative fashion, stoutly embodying the traditional values of intellectual and citizen—more to their taste than Saul Bellow's or Allan Bloom's. They would highlight this sad truth: American culture is so flyblown by now that teaching Justin and Jamal to read and write and know right from wrong is a far more urgent task than reviving Socrates or showing the way to aesthetic bliss. But they would miss a sadder truth: Bloom as he understood himself does not count for much in the current American mental life, except to those for whom he has been indispensable.

Politics and Religion

YET IS ONE RIGHT TO BELIEVE THAT Bloom represented political philosophy at its highest reach, and that he spoke for the best life possible? During the season of Bloom's irresistible rise and rapturous supremacy, and amid the barrage of trivial and fatuous abuse sent his way, there was nevertheless a concentrated fire of serious criticism that really did cast his achievement into question, and that needed to be answered, though I don't know that he or his defenders ever did so definitively. One could study in Chicago at that time, be led by Bloom to the enchantments of Leo Strauss, devote one's best hours to the company of Socrates, Glaucon, and Alcibiades, yet never hear mention of a schism in the ranks of Strauss's best students and his students' students: that there were those who placed their faith, as Bloom emphatically did not, in the political genius and moral beauty of Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Jefferson, and George Washington, and in the American citizenry at its best, when it has lived up to the uncommon demands placed on ordinary men and women by these homegrown paragons of democratic nobility.

Harry V. Jaffa, writing in the journal *Interpretation*, and Charles Kesler, in *The American Spectator* (both pieces are collected in *Essays on The Closing of the American Mind*, which was edited by Robert L. Stone and published in 1989 by the Chicago Review Press), found that Bloom had veered far off the mark in his fundamental understanding of political philosophy: that he claimed its foremost concern was making the political regime in question, whatever it happened to be, safe for philosophers. In his exclusive passion for philosophy, they argued, Bloom neglected the enormous

significance of political life, except insofar as it threatened the well-being of an epochal thinker.

It is true enough that Bloom habitually said that the American regime was founded in intellectual incoherence. Unable to reconcile freedom, equality, and justice, lacking an order of rank among its guiding principles and sufficient conviction of its own virtue, and thus incapable of defending itself against foes less scrupulous and more focused in their ambition and enmity, our democracy was bound to go down in the end. True too, it had not yet crumbled, and had indeed withstood the mortal danger presented by Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan, and Soviet Russia, but Bloom saw the seed of eventual disaster in the fiasco of the Vietnam War, and was pungently prescient about the threat of militant Islam. Bloom was a dedicated anti-Communist, with a number of similarly minded former students in positions of political influence; but while he took just pride in this indirect influence of his own, he knew such scattered forces represented a rear-guard action. He thought that the American citizenry was weary of the stress and sacrifice that world leadership exacted, and that it was beginning to disbelieve in the evil of what it had once condemned as tyranny or religious fanaticism. Who were we to judge, to impose our values on alien peoples? The intermittent uplift of democratic patriotism, usually limited to times of extreme distress, could not save the national project.

Once again for Bloom the Greeks had it right where we have it wrong: Americans are promised life, liberty, and the *pursuit* of happiness, while the ancients had death, slavery, and *happiness*. This mordant bon mot captured like the flash of light in a diamond Bloom's sensibility and his tutelary principle: only those who accept how cruel life really is, and who pit their own powers against nature's overwhelming destructive force, deserve the richest prize available to most human beings: a soul undefeated and excellent, among fellow citizens similarly endowed. Bloom rejected Stoicism, however, declaring it to be impossibly noble. But he honored the characteristic Athenian and Spartan citizen, both of whom were shaped by the lower-case stoicism endemic in regimes familiar with conquest and annihilation, while he lampooned the typical American, unmanned by his fear of pain and death and by his excessive love of peace at almost any cost. Bloom exulted in telling of the conversation he claimed to have overheard between two Hyde Park ladies, faculty wives most likely: one told her friend not to look at the sun to-

day, because there was going to be an eclipse and the sight of it could blind her; her friend replied, You mean they know that and they don't do anything about it?

For many of our ills Bloom fingered Christianity, in which modern democratic sentiment originated; but this faith of mildness and compassion and universal brotherhood happened to be a gross delusion, pernicious at its core, for it refused to face the hardest truths, which will have their knee on your windpipe before you know it. The hope of heaven was a particular *bête noire* of Bloom's, and the persistent democratic fantasy of heaven on earth nettled him even more than loose talk of the afterlife. Politics always has been and always will be a nasty business, with the stink of the abattoir about it, and the sooner that lesson is learnt the better. Bloom took pride accordingly in demonstrations of his unsparing cold-eyed reasonableness, which were customarily accompanied by warm festive laughter as he kicked over some idol of the tribe. He enjoyed citing his favorite line of George Bernard Shaw's: if the ends don't justify the means, what does? He did have a flair for the outrageous remark, meant to spark thought from indignant heat.

America Redeemed

HARRY JAFFA, ANOTHER EMINENT student of Strauss's, and himself a past master of animadversion, was deeply outraged by much in Bloom's celebrated book. Jaffa directed the first wave of his attack at Bloom's failure to emphasize the dangers that homosexuality posed for young students, already plagued by the "disaster, disease, and death" sown by rampant promiscuity: "[T]he so-called 'gay rights' movement, which Bloom hardly mentions, has emerged as the most radical and sinister challenge, not merely to sexual morality, but to all morality." Looking back from the era of the Rainbow White House, even a natural-law conservative is likely to find Jaffa rhetorically overheated here, though he was writing when the AIDS epidemic was rampant and before science had commuted its death sentence. Nonetheless, Jaffa saw the polymorphous disorder of the pansexual future clearly, and with dread, where Bloom evidently did not.

Jaffa never mentioned Bloom's homosexuality in his bitter extended passage on the general subject, but one can only assume he had Bloom in his sights. Yet what Jaffa also failed to mention was that Bloom did not proselytize in his writings or in the classroom for gaiety in theory or practice. He addressed himself principally to the relations between

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men and women, hoping to restore confidence in the possibility of love to souls disenchanted by their parents' divorce, the easy availability of no-strings sex, the sharp end of feminism. He was as eloquent a spokesman as one could find in the modern university for the sexually normal. He answered one student's praise of promiscuity with a gentle demurrer: what everyone really wanted was one person to love and be loved by. That he could not live up to his own teaching was, I suspect, a source of pain to him.

Jaffa also lit into Bloom for being a foreigner in his own country, his every opinion on American civilization derived from European authority: Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Tocqueville. The American intellectual achievement, in Jaffa's eyes, quite overshadows even the best that European culture has produced in the past 200 years. "Bloom complains loud and long" that America has no writers whose works encompass and help to define the national character, as France has Balzac and Hugo, Germany Goethe, England Dickens; so Jaffa suggests that Bloom have a serious look at *Huckleberry Finn*, which is rich with "the themes of the Civil War," and at *Moby-Dick*, which "is a distinctively American confrontation of the problem of evil." But America has produced writers superior even to Twain and Melville, and the supreme genius of American civilization eludes Bloom completely, for it is "above all to be found in its political institutions, and its greatest writers have been its greatest political men, Jefferson and Lincoln and Washington. The American book of books is the story of America itself, as the story of the secular redemption of mankind."

"What national poetry has ever surpassed that of Lincoln?" Jaffa asks. His eloquence rivals the best of Demosthenes, Cicero, and Burke. Jaffa avers that Leo Strauss held the Gettysburg Address in greater reverence than Pericles' funeral oration in Thucydides. And Jaffa is perhaps our time's most important interpreter not only of Lincoln's poetry, but of his singular conjoining of reason and revelation. There is an allusion to this in Jaffa's review of Bloom. And Kesler, in his essay "A

New Birth of Freedom: Harry V. Jaffa and the Study of America," in the collection *Leo Strauss, the Straussians, and the American Regime* (1999), edited by Kenneth L. Deutsch and John A. Murley, without speaking of Bloom, shows where he is plainly inadequate in the light of Jaffa's Lincoln. In this philosophical, political, and spiritual hero,

"the profane is transformed into the sacred," and the Civil War, as interpreted by [Lincoln], fused religious passion and secular rationalism into the canon of America's "political religion." In rethinking the Founders' views on religious liberty, however, Jaffa discovered in them a profound meditation on, and response to, the changes that Christianity over many centuries had wrought in politics; and in this context, even the most Enlightened of the Founders' arguments glowed with a reasonableness and a true charity that bespoke a genuine love of man's highest ends.


Spirit of the Abyss

IT WAS NOT THE AMERICAN REGIME, THEN, that Jaffa found intellectually incoherent, but rather Bloom's philosophically louche enterprise, which concealed from most admirers an inexorable nihilism. In his former friend's estimation, Bloom was never anything like certain about the nonpareil wisdom of classical philosophy: Bloom evaded the grasp of honest seekers after virtue, for moral virtue was simply not in his line, and intellectual virtue mingled with Rousseauian passion and Nietzschean will thrilled him more than his vaunted discipleship of Socrates and of Leo Strauss would have led an innocent reader to believe. Jaffa yelped as though snake-bitten at Bloom's assertion that in modern times, "it was Heidegger, practically alone, for whom the study of Greek philosophy became truly central." Jaffa rightly demolished this with one sharp blow: "To speak thus of Heidegger, without mentioning Strauss, is like speaking of Hitler, without mentioning Churchill." Jaffa concluded that when "Bloom says that

the one thing needful is the study of the problem of Socrates, and yet makes no mention of Strauss's study of the problem of Socrates (or of Greek philosophy), then he cannot think that Strauss's is the needful one." Thus in Jaffa's view Bloom churlishly disowned the teacher who had originally molded his mind and soul.

Did Bloom brush off this lacerating assault? Did he happen to give Leo Strauss such slight mention in his famous book (Bloom mentions Strauss exactly once, citing his remark that "the moderns 'built on low but solid ground'" because otherwise he would have had to cite his master teacher in every paragraph? Did Nietzsche and Heidegger entice him into nihilism? Was he forced to consider whether Jaffa knew him better than he knew himself? Or did Bloom recognize himself only too clearly in Jaffa's eyes? I never heard Bloom speak of Leo Strauss with anything but respect approaching veneration. I never heard him speak of Professor Jaffa at all. I studied with Professor Bloom from 1979 to 1992; his course on *The Republic* and *The Prince* showed me how serious reading is to be done. He also introduced me to Churchill's *Marlborough: His Life and Times*, and was an invaluable adviser on my Ph.D. dissertation on Churchill's histories, though he died as I was reaching the final chapter. Professor Bloom was as fine a teacher as I could have hoped for, but I often wondered whether behind his yen for the life of endless questioning, and even behind his insistence that Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle represented human life at its highest, with the everlasting truth in their grasp, there was not a spirit of the abyss, superbly proud of its intelligence yet in the end indifferent to every fate but its own, and perhaps those of a few friends. So I cannot but wonder whether Jaffa might have been on to a disturbing truth about Bloom: that if one is to live as a philosopher one must do so with his entire being, joining the moral virtues to the intellectual virtues, which Allan Bloom was unable or unwilling to do; and this failing ultimately diminished him as man and thinker.

Algis Valiunas is a fellow of the Ethics and Public Policy Center.



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