

A BLOOM OFF THE OLD STRAUSS: REREADING *THE CLOSING OF THE AMERICAN MIND* WHEN AMERICA HAS LOST ITS MIND

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It is almost thirty-five years since I first read Allan Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students*. Back in 1987 I had completed a Master's degree on Plato and Nietzsche, and I was in the final stages of a PhD on Descartes, Kant, Hegel and Marx. I had been introduced to writings by Bloom's teacher, Leo Strauss, in my undergraduate days in the mid 1970s, and during my Masters, although I had a little Greek, Bloom's translation of Plato's *Republic* was my preferred translation. His translation came with a large interpretative essay that took Leo Strauss's reading of the *Republic* even further in the direction of the claim that Plato intended the *Republic* to be a warning against utopia, rather than as a foundational text for people wanting to create a perfect state.

In the main, classicists, including my Greek teacher, at the time, who was passionately enthusiastic about Plato, found the Strauss and Bloom line exasperating. Thus, the fairly highly esteemed classicist, Myles Burnyeat, wrote in his *New York Review of Books* essay of 1985, "Sphinx without a Secret," a review of a collection of Strauss's *Studies in Platonic Philosophy* by Leo Strauss with an introduction by Thomas Pangle (another reasonably prominent "Straussian"): "What Strauss can do, and does, is give reasons why we should believe that Plato taught what Strauss says he taught. He undertakes the difficult task of showing that the *Republic* means the opposite of what it says; that Aristotle read it as Strauss does, and agreed; and finally, that the Platonic view of "the political things" was maintained, in essentials, by the entire tradition of classical political philosophy (not excluding Aristophanes and Xenophon) through the Stoics and beyond)."

Those who have been inspired by Leo Strauss will generally find such a summation of what Strauss was doing to be shockingly simple-minded—though I think Burnyeat has accurately identified Strauss's main flaw, and it is a flaw that is replicated in the writings of many of his students.

Burnyeat's criticism, however, extended to what would eventually become one more contribution to a torrent of accusations against Strauss and his students—that they were conservative elitists. Burnyeat's hostility to the elitist nature of the Straussian enterprise misses the point that the Straussians are absolutely correct in identifying the fact that university students do belong to the social elite, and to pretend otherwise is completely delusional.

Feigning as the radical left did and still do that the university is some kind of egalitarian democratic forum when it produces the social elite who will largely run things is as ridiculous as Harvard and Yale

setting themselves up as mouthpieces for social justice. The real issue concerning universities is which kind of thinking holds sway there—and, like Strauss and Bloom and all manner of others I think the ideas that do hold sway over the educated elite in the Western world are dumb, self-destructive, and completely infantile. So, when *Closing* came out, I enjoyed the fact that someone whose books I had read was sticking it to the ideologues who were politicizing everything and in the process pulling the Humanities into a cultural war.

This did not change the fact that I find Strauss and his followers somewhat irksome—and that has nothing to do with their elitism (I generally prefer reading the best of them to any of the followers of Walter Benjamin or Theodor Adorno et. al.). Still, I get irritated by how they generally read and argue about political philosophy, how they bang on about greatness, how they foist onto the text all manner of things they think any wise person knows, and how lacking in attentiveness to the historical pressures and currents that informed the specific responses of the books they read they tend to be.

No matter what the topic, Straussians usually find some answer to any political problem in their Straussian version of Plato - an interpretation that is very big on imaging the real meaning of a "dramatic" word or gesture in a Platonic dialogue and very hermeneutically licentious in dealing with the plainer words and arguments. They remind me in none more than those disciples of Marx who always identify the answer to any socio-economic and political circumstance as already accounted for in Marx's analysis of capital. Many of the critical treatments, such as those by William Altman and Shadia Drury, are just insane, but for anyone wanting to read a well-developed critical treatment of Strauss and the "Straussian school" (if school it be) more generally, I recommend Paul Gottfried's [*Leo Strauss and the Conservative Movement in America*](#).

Even in the 1980s, when Strauss was far less well known than he would become after a slew of essays and some books connected Strauss's students and the strategy of "regime change" with George W. Bush, there was as little agreement about what Strauss was really teaching as there is now. Partly this is because Strauss taught that serious philosophical writers provide a surface text (which is what most scholars beside Strauss read), and an esoteric message, which those, like Strauss, who have read the history of political philosophy with great attention see. Another way of saying this is that Leo Strauss taught that there are great books that have identified the essential things to be known and presented them in a guise that only the true lover of philosophy might grasp—with great thinkers, things are not what they seem. Likewise, Strauss is a great thinker, and hence must conceal his true teachings—ergo...

Unlike Strauss, Allan Bloom was not the founder of a school of thought, although Bloom is invariably identified as a Straussian. This would not have been obvious to anyone who had read *Closing* without knowing about Strauss or Bloom's background—Bloom mentions Strauss just once in the book.

Although, of the many critical reviews that *Closing* attracted when it first appeared, two reviews by two students of Leo Strauss which appeared in the (largely) Straussian inspired journal *Interpretation*, were among the most damning and inciteful to appear. They were by Claremont's two Harrys—Neumann and Jaffa, whose contrary philosophical positions (the former a self-described nihilist, the other an Aristotelian) made them unlikely pedagogical allies (they taught a joint seminar for ten years).

Neumann kicks his review off by saying: "Professor Bloom shares the error informing this book with most liberals. That error is their unwillingness to realize the nihilism or atheism responsible for their subordination of politics to individual freedom or self-interest. By liberal I mean anyone who believes that the individual is more important than the state; individual liberation takes precedence over political obligation however that liberation is interpreted. Bloom's brand of liberalism gives rise to his unqualified preference for philosophers over nonphilosophers, for philosophy over politics, for Socrates over Achilles, for peace over war."

Amongst other things, Neumann sees in Bloom a man preening over his own loves and interests, who is irritated by the lack of reverence in the temple of higher learning, and is completely oblivious to the clear and present geopolitical dangers to America. It is in a word a damning review. And the harshness of the review finds its apogee in Neumann's suggestion that Bloom is a phony who lacks the courage, and wherewithal to see who and what he really is: "Without the courage to see it, Bloom has written a more Nietzschean than Platonic Book. The book on education for Bloom is not the *Republic*, as he insists (p. 381), but [*Beyond Good and Evil*](#) or [*Death in Venice*](#)."

The suspicion that Bloom and even Strauss are really more Nietzschean than Platonic has been aired by others, but Neumann's criticism lumps Bloom in with the enemies of the civilization that Bloom believes he is undertaking to bury. As for the comparison between Bloom and Mann's Aschenbach (in *Closing* Bloom speaks somewhat disdainfully of *Death in Venice* as heavy-handed Freudianism), Bloom had publicly declared on several occasions that the title he had envisaged, but which was overruled by the publishers, was *Souls without Longing*.

Indeed, while the surface argument of *Closing* was the failure of higher education in America and the

cultural demise that the various ideological occasions of the relativist malaise Bloom had seen as gripping the American university, the more "esoteric" argument—which Bloom spelled out every time he discussed the book—was that the bad German philosophical ideas of Nietzsche, Weber, Heidegger had conspired with American popular culture to destroy the erotic longing for wisdom that the tradition of the great books had nourished. On popular culture, Bloom's criticism of rock music sounds like none more than the Frankfurt School's doyen and aesthete in chief, Theodor Adorno when writing about the cultural oppression inflicted on the masses by jazz.

Moreover, in spite of Bloom's diagnosis of the American mind being closed and the souls of its future elite being stunted also regularly appealing to the moral sentiments and habits of previous generations as if he were a conservative, Bloom could write of that most conservative of institutions: "The dreariness of the family's spiritual landscape passes belief. It is as monochrome and unrelated to those who pass through it as are the barren steppes frequented by nomads who take their mere subsistence and move on." So much for the millions of American families who may not read bedtime stories by Rousseau or Plato to their children, but who sacrifice themselves to raise them to pray, tell the truth and do their best to others.

In spite of the scorn Bloom pours onto the wreckers of the university, and the social damage they are doing, the voice and diagnosis of *Closing* belonged to an aesthete, rather than a moralist—hence "It is not the immorality of relativism that I find appalling. What is astounding and degrading is the dogmatism with which we accept such relativism, and our easy-going lack of concern about what that means for our lives." And it is not at all clear that in spite of Bloom's advocacy of rational inquiry, and his (Straussian) Platonism, whether he really thought there were any absolutes by which he should live other than the erotic pursuit of wisdom and the value of the philosophical life (which, to his credit, had nothing whatsoever in common with having a day job solving philosophical puzzles as was, and largely still is, the case with most of those employed in Philosophy Departments in North American).

Given the disdain with which Bloom treated the "life-style" view of values that had infected America, there is no small irony in how Bloom makes a case for a life of personal intellectual exhilaration as if that were of the same value as a life of righteousness (and it is far from obvious that Bloom has any idea or interest in what the righteous life might be—apart from reading great books and talking about them).

To be sure Socratic aesthetes are rare plants, but Bloom was nothing if not rare—and being a best-selling celebrity political philosopher is about as rare as one can be. Saying that does not change the

fact that *Closing* does expose the moral confusion and idiocy that seized the collective imagination of the generation of students that Bloom observed. The book is laced with aphorisms and *bon mots*, and full of wit, venom, and learning—even if the details of his learning were often outrageous and, at the very least contestable, leading to some predictable academic carping that Bloom was a terrible scholar, but Bloom did more than almost anyone to make the educated public want to go off and read Plato, Rousseau, Locke et. al.

That is terrific, but it could never had been enough to save the United States. And while *Closing* was a book that not only had sounded the alarm about the dreadful state of higher learning in the United States and the social poisoning it was doing, its author was an embodiment of what higher learning looked like in the incarnation of a very well read, highly articulate, balding professor in a sharp suit. Bloom may not have liked rock stars, but he was as close to one as any middle-aged professor, not gone completely to seed, could be.

While Bloom and the book had style, it was not simply that that rocketed the book to the top of the *New York Time's* best seller list, in 1987 his exposé of the ideological state of university campuses did touch a social nerve, because plenty of people, including educated ones, could see that these new social movements were pouring out of the university, and taxes were being poured into an institution that had a great deal of influence that was doing much to turn the youth of America against the traditions and (dare I use the word?) values at its founding.

Any reader today who opens *Closing* for the first time will recognize that identity politics was already wreaking social and cultural havoc some thirty-five years ago, and Bloom had done a good job of yelling, "Fire!" This is irrespective of whether one is swayed by the depth, accuracy or even pitch of his diagnosis—relativism is the cause and Weber—yes, Bloom did write this—"was the chosen apostle for the American promised land."

Now that we live in a time of rabid censorship, denunciations, sackings and non-hiring of those who do not kneel before the (to be sure ever changing) absolutes of contemporary liberalism, the claim that relativism is the cause and the end of all this seems wildly wrong (though it amazes me how many conservatives still repeat this). Woke absolutes are imbecilic, but they remain absolutes, and reading Bloom is like being transported back to a time when the American mind might have been closing but it was not completely lost to the imbecilic absolutes of its own servitude.

I cannot imagine that a book that is so caustic (and funny) in its criticism of feminism and the shibboleths of identity race politics would garner such reviews as it received in the *New York Times*, *New York Review of Books*, *San Francisco Chronicle Book Review*, and the *Chicago Tribune* when it first appeared. Indeed, the books that now receive glowing reviews from these bastions of cultural taste come out of the very ideological swamp that Bloom hoped might be dredged. Though, it is possible that Bloom's critique, even then, found enthusiastic support for its weaknesses rather than its strengths. That seems to have been Harry Jaffa's, as well as Neumann's, take on the book.

If Bloom had thought Jaffa a fellow traveller along the Straussian path he was certainly in for a rude awakening when Jaffa's review essay appeared. The review is most brilliant when it comes to schooling Bloom in American politics, though it is perhaps most remembered for slyly and unceremoniously blowing the lid off Bloom's homosexuality - an open secret in Chicago at the time. Years later Bloom's friend Saul Bellow would make public Bloom's sexual 'life-style' in the thinly veiled portrait of Bloom in *Ravelstein*, a book which in turn triggered another wave of anti-Bloom hysteria—this time for his hypocrisy.

Before *Ravelstein*, Jaffa wrote that Bloom's "remarks about feminism, and the changing roles of men and women, for example, are dated not because they are mistaken, or irrelevant, but because in the intervening years the so-called "gay movement," which Bloom hardly mentions, has emerged as the most radical and sinister challenge, not merely to sexual morality, but to all morality." Given that Bloom had referred to "perverse sexuality," and "gay rights" being "the most consequential social movement of the last three decades," Jaffa may have been hitting below the belt, but when he observed that by "Looking only to books, politics for Bloom is a closed book. And no one can comment instructively on the relationship between political life and the philosophic life who does not know what political life is," he had landed a KO.

The problem with the *Closing* is not that Bloom is wrong to think that students are being served up mindless ideological stew as if it could nourish their souls and minds, it is not that he is wrong in thinking that Humanities students should know the philosophical tradition, but while the crisis he is confronting and diagnosing is a cultural, social, and political crisis he is extremely naïve in thinking that a library is the place to save a civilization. Jaffa holds nothing back when he attacks Bloom for essentially holding a view of the world as if the world were a library writ large.

There is something of an irony (and reading Bloom I am struck by how ironic almost everything about

him is) in a man who wrote a fine book on Shakespeare and politics remaining untouched by the warning in Shakespeare's most philosophical of plays—*The Tempest*: a library can cloud the mind and thus lead a ruler (the Duke of Milan, Prospero) to neglect his obligation to safeguard the territory from the ruthless ambition, cunning and rule of unscrupulously evil men.

While Neumann and Jaffa were opposed in their philosophical appeals of last resort what they shared was a commitment to the United States as a political entity, and what they saw in Bloom was a fundamental failure to fathom what that entity was founded upon—and hence what would be required to preserve it into perpetuity. Thus, while Bloom was celebrating his celebrity status, and in various talk shows oozing charm and the smarts given in the midst of the cultural and social destruction his book was describing, men like Jaffa and Neumann held Bloom to be guilty of what no Straussian ever wishes to be—he was guilty of a lack of seriousness.

According to Jaffa, "As far as I can see, everything Bloom says on the subject of the American Founding is derived from his readings of Hobbes, Locke, or Tocqueville. I have found not a word of serious interpretation apart from his birdseed scatterings coming from an American source: not Jefferson, Washington, Madison, Hamilton, or Lincoln. No one has maintained more persistently than I have, during the past thirty-five years, the importance in the American Founding of Locke's teachings as they were understood and incorporated into their handiwork by the Founding Fathers. But to say that a radical atheism discovered in Locke's esoteric teaching was part of what they understood, believed, and incorporated into their regime when every single document bearing on the question contradicts it, and there is not a shred of evidence to support it is just plain crazy."

Along similar lines, "Bloom has completely misread not only the American Founding, but all political life, since he does not read political speeches to discover the form of the consciousness of political men. He assumes that political men are mere epigones of philosophers whether they know it or not. The political nature of man is however understood by the Founders if one reads what they say, and not only what Hobbes or Locke or Kant say in the light of the inequality of man and beast, as well as in the light of the inequality of man and God." And finally: "Someone who can write of the American and French Revolutions as scenarios thought out beforehand by Locke and Rousseau, and who can say that "the English and American regimes founded according to instructions, is hardly in a position to reproach others for the lack of "the study of... history."

This last citation is a failing that I see as fairly common among followers of Strauss, and I (unlike Jaffa)

cannot help but tracing it back to Strauss himself who wrote of the importance of political philosophy as if it were a conversation across the ages addressed to those seekers of wisdom who more or less saw the same things as they each contribute to insights that make the whole more accessible to the rational man, i.e., the man who sees the problems and solutions much like Strauss. The different historical circumstances within which men find themselves is treated as essentially irrelevant, and those who think those circumstances to be all too relevant are dismissed as historicists, who are but one more variant of relativism.

Strauss himself had sought for a cure of the ailments of his time by turning to Plato as a teacher of an ahistorical nature, a nature which seems impossible to locate outside of the tradition of great books of political philosophy.

But whereas all scholars of Plato agree that the forms or ideas are timeless, and in this sense, ahistorical, in *The City and Man*, Strauss says that "the doctrine of ideas" in the *Republic* is "very hard to understand; to begin with it is utterly incredible, not to say that it appears to be fantastic...No one has ever succeeded in giving a satisfactory or clear account of this doctrine of ideas." Whether that is true or not—and it takes a lot of hermeneutical ingenuity to deny that Aristotle thought he had done a pretty good job of showing the problems with the doctrine - the fact that the American higher educated mind is not just closed but lost is indicative of the fact that the problem of saving the Western world from the mad and bad ideas largely, albeit not exclusively, churned out in American universities today extends far beyond reading great books, and pursuing a life of greater longing.

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The [featured image](#) shows, "The Orator," by Magnus Zeller, painted in 1920.

