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Guns & other “hermeneutical acts” at Columbia

by Roger Kimball

On Columbia’s Innovations in Education seminar.

Every now and then one stumbles into a situation where some extreme way of looking at the world is unwittingly summed up or dramatized by a particular individual. What I have in mind are not those rare instances in which a genuinely original thought finds public expression, but the much commoner experience of witnessing a stock response unfold itself in radical rhetoric. In such cases, one may speak of a cliché personified. And one should really be grateful for such performances, for though they are generally unpalatable, they are also unfailingly instructive. It is always worth reminding oneself how intellectually crippling a rote adherence to clichés can be, how much it insulates one from the healthy corrective of common sense and renders one liable to spout the most appalling nonsense.

A perfect example of this sort of thing was on display at Columbia University this winter in a meeting of the university seminar devoted to “Innovations in Education.” The seminar, which meets roughly once a month, counts among its regular participants some fifteen or twenty college and high-school administrators, teachers, and professional “educationists.” It was only to be expected that sooner or later Allan Bloom’s best-selling book *The Closing of the American Mind* would appear on the roster of educational “innovations” to be debated, especially since one persistent theme of the book is the folly of almost everything that goes under the name of “educational innovation.” And since I had reviewed the book favorably for *The New York Times Book Review* when it appeared last year, I was invited to the seminar one evening to discuss the book and its reception.

I should say at the outset that I went to the seminar fully aware that Professor Bloom’s attack on the current state of higher education in this country had been greeted with unvarnished rage in the academy—a rage made all the more intense by the book’s extraordinary success; consequently, I did not imagine I should be addressing Professor Bloom’s most ardent supporters. As it happened, the situation at Columbia that evening reminded me of a *New Yorker* cartoon that appeared last year at the height of the book’s success: a bookseller, surrounded by piles of *The Closing of the American Mind*, assures a customer, “I haven’t read it, but it’s excellent.” I had not been at the

seminar long before I realized that, with a few notable exceptions, my hosts were in an inversely analogous position: they hadn't read it, but they were sure it was a terrible book.

My remarks were brief. I began by sketching Professor Bloom's main argument and emphasizing his opening contention that "*the question*" for anyone concerned with liberal education remains the age-old question "'What is man?' in relation to his highest aspirations as opposed to his low and common needs." "A liberal education," Professor Bloom continues in his introduction, "means precisely helping students to pose this question to themselves, to become aware that the answer is neither obvious nor simply unavailable, and that there is no serious life in which this question is not a continuous concern."

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Knowing that the term "elitist" continues to strike fear and loathing into the breasts of most educators, I went on to point out that Professor Bloom's position is elitist only in the sense that it holds that the basis of a liberal education is (in Matthew Arnold's phrase) "the best that has been thought and said." He preaches an elitism of achievement, but a democracy of opportunity. In other words, while Bloom insists that a liberal education should focus first and foremost on the cultural masterpieces of Western civilization, when it comes to deciding who should be encouraged to study these masterpieces, his answer is practically Jeffersonian: anyone who has the talent, commitment, and passion necessary for serious study.

For Professor Bloom, one of the most serious impediments to liberal education is the passionless relativism that is so prominent a feature of today's academic ethos. This relativism is based on the unquestioned and pernicious assumption that truth is merely a kind of sociological construct that varies from culture to culture—the paradoxical assumption that the main enemy of truth is an allegiance to Truth. Among much else, it follows from this assumption that the idea of universal cultural masterpieces is also a kind of sociological construct and that, at bottom, there can be no justification for preferring some works to others: since none express uniquely valuable insights, none are inherently more valuable than any others. In describing this situation, Professor Bloom draws upon Nietzsche's harrowing image of the "last man," the man who blithely rejects the claim of ideals like truth or justice for the sake of an undemanding ethic of cultural relativism. In the end, *The Closing of the American Mind* may be seen as a struggle against the triumph of the last man and the spiritual surrender he represents.

It perhaps goes without saying that my presentation of Professor Bloom's argument did not meet with overwhelming approval. In the discussion that followed there was the usual polite back-and-forth of academic debate. One or two of those who took issue with Professor Bloom appeared to have pondered his position, and they offered thoughtful objections or caveats to one

or another point I had raised. Some—like the poor woman who went on about Professor Bloom, the scientific revolution, and the evil consequences of adhering to “absolutes” in this enlightened age—clearly hadn’t a clue about the contents of the book: such people belonged to that large community who hadn’t read the book but still knew it was terrible. And then there was one Frank Moretti, assistant headmaster of the Dalton School, one of the most prestigious and exclusive primary and secondary schools in New York City. Rarely does one encounter a set of radical clichés so consummately personified as in Mr. Moretti.

This representative of the elite educational establishment did not simply take exception to some aspects of Allan Bloom’s argument, nor did he see it as a rare conservative voice in a field long dominated by liberal pieties. On the contrary, in Mr. Moretti’s view *The Closing of the American Mind* must be regarded as the academic capstone of a conservative (read: “undesirable”) trend in recent thinking about education, a trend that began with the dismantling of the open admissions policies that were put into practice in the Sixties. Never mind that open admissions has been widely condemned as disastrous: for Mr. Moretti, it was evidence of the conservative onslaught that it should be discontinued. (I had to wonder, though: does he support “open admissions” for the Dalton School?) Moreover, Mr. Moretti discerned something positively “Hitleresque” (yes, he actually used that word) about Professor Bloom’s book, something oppressive and deeply anti-democratic about its invocation of the authority of tradition. Nor was that all. When someone raised a question about Professor Bloom’s discussion of the Platonic doctrine of *eros*, Mr. Moretti informed us that he—Professor Bloom—was “obsessed with sex.”

I believe it was at this juncture that Mr. Moretti definitively stepped over the line between being merely provocatively hostile and being completely out of touch with reality. At any rate, he proceeded to provide his audience with a good indication of the level of his own meditations on the erotic when he derisively castigated Professor Bloom for describing sublimation as a virtue. Indeed, though sublimation (as any teacher will attest) is a prerequisite for education, it was obviously a dirty word for Mr. Moretti. One can guess at the contempt he would shower upon the contention that sublimation is a “conspicuous feature of cultural development; it is what makes it possible for higher psychical activities, scientific, artistic or ideological, to play such an important part in civilized life”—until, at least, he learned that this passage comes from *Civilization and Its Discontents*, not *The Closing of the American Mind*. Though perhaps Mr. Moretti regards Freud, too, as “Hitleresque” insofar as he insists on the civilizing function of sublimation. Or is it simply that he prefers the polymorphous perversity championed by Norman O. Brown, Herbert Marcuse, and company?

This wasn’t the occasion to inquire, for Mr. Moretti had even more piquant insights about *The Closing of the American Mind* to share with us. Near the end of the session, someone read aloud the following passage from the concluding pages of the book:

The real community of man, in the midst of all the self-contradictory simulacra of community, is the community of those who seek the truth, of the potential knowers, that is, in principle, of all men to the extent that they desire to know. But in fact, this includes only a few, the true friends, as Plato was to Aristotle at the very moment they were disagreeing about the nature of the good.

Wasn't this evidence of the essentially democratic nature of Bloom's vision of liberal education, the speaker wondered? Not according to Mr. Moretti, who saw in these remarks the rudiments of an argument for . . . well, for *slavery*. (That was the one thing you could be sure Mr. Moretti knew about fifth-century Athens: that it condoned slavery.)

You might think that Mr. Moretti could go no further, that sooner or later he must return to earth. Perhaps on Monday mornings, when he heads off to the Dalton school, he does; but he was still in orbit this evening. When someone brought up Professor Bloom's description of the upheaval at Cornell University in 1969—the upheaval, remember, when gun-toting black students intimidated fellow students and faculty alike, holding people hostage and occupying buildings by force—Mr. Moretti was ready with his *pièce de résistance*. It is a narrow-minded mistake to think that the meaning of a gun was clear in that situation, Mr. Moretti told us; far from being an act of criminal intimidation—which is how I have always interpreted it—those gun-toting students must be seen as having engaged in a noble “hermeneutical act” that cannot be judged by normal bourgeois standards of propriety.

A “hermeneutical act”? So that's what those guns at Cornell meant! I wonder if Mr. Moretti encourages his students to engage in kindred “hermeneutical acts” at the Dalton School? What would his fellow teachers think of the idea? Or his students' parents? Or his Board of Trustees? Is that the sort of “interpretation” that the Dalton School stands for? No doubt Mr. Moretti deigns to serve as assistant headmaster at such a tony educational institution because it helps him make the contradictions inherent in our oppressive society more manifest. But what does it mean that he should so carelessly throw around terms like “Hitleresque” and “slavery”? Is such intellectual irresponsibility the result of the liberation he espouses as an alternative to *The Closing of the American Mind*? Educational innovation can mean many different things. For Mr. Moretti, unfortunately, it has nothing to do with genuine learning or the pursuit of truth.

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