A Personal Remembrance of ***Allan Bloom***

I first met Allan Bloom some thirty-one years ago, in January 1962, at the beginning of the spring term of my junior year at Cornell University. He had just arrived from Paris and was carrying most of his worldly possessions-primarily books-in two battered suitcases. This was his first opportunity to secure a permanent teaching position at a leading university, but if he was nervous about it, we students were unable to distinguish that nervousness from the general aura of hyperactivity which constantly 'surrounded him.

As it happened, I was in the foyer of the Telluride House-the Frank Lloyd Wright-style building that housed the "scholarship" fraternity to which I belonged and at which Allan had been invited to live-as he trudged up the snow-dusted steps and on to the front porch, so I was literally the one who opened the door on what has ever since seemed to me to be an exceptional moment in American education. Until 1969 (except for the academic year 1962-63, which he spent at Yale), Allan taught political philosophy at Cornell; at the Telluride House, where he lived for one and one-half years as a faculty guest and at which he remained a looming presence throughout his stay at Cornell, he conducted what can best be described as an around-the-clock seminar on philosophy, literature, and politics, seasoned with wit and guided by his knack for seeing into students' souls and understanding what was most important for them.

At the time, Telluride House, like any group of good students at a major American university, was feeling the effects of the post-Sputnik scare. Although open to undergraduate and graduate students in all departments, over half the house members were, at one point, majoring in mathematics. Nevertheless, Allan became in short

order the focal point of the house's intellectual life. It would be impossible to describe the intensity of effort he devoted to this role. Perhaps its most characteristic manifestation was the impromptu seminar which sprang up in the house kitchen every evening at about 11:00 p.m., when he was wont to come down from his room for a snack. Once the house members detected this habit, they would congregate around the toaster and wait. Allan's arrival signified the start of a discussion of whatever opinion on philosophy, literature, or life a student was brave enough to put forward. His cross-examination or refutation could at times be harsh, but it was always leavened by good will and humor. The combination of gravity and levity, or seriousness of purpose with self-deprecating irony and wit, produced an intoxicating atmosphere.

At the time, Allan was in the process of finishing work on his first book, *Shakespeare's Politics,* and carried on a house tradition by leading an informal reading group on the *Merchant ofVenice.* This was a bold choice given the atmosphere of early sixties liberalism that ruled practically unchallenged in the university: wasn't Shakespeare just mindlessly repeating the anti-Semitism of his time, if he wasn't anti-semitic himself? It also did not please the literary aficionados; we were well on our way to the "multiversity"-authoritatively defined by the head of the University of California at Berkeley as a collection of departments and centers fighting over parking-and poaching on another discipline's field of study was almost as bad as encroaching on its parking spaces.

Nevertheless, the seminar prospered, and well over half the members of the house attended its weekly meetings as it read its way through Shakespeare's play. Allan relentlessly challenged every opinion, every prejudice we held. We were forced to consider the possibility that the conflict engendered by Antonio's and Shylock's different religious beliefs was such that the liberal formulae of "tolerance" and "separation of church and state" were inadequate to resolve it. Maybe Shylock's famous outburst "Hath not a Jew eyes. . was less suited to Brotherhood Week observances than we had be-

lieved: Allan pointed out that the similarities among men noted by Shylock have to do with the body and the passions; missing are those things-such as reverence for the law-that Shylock thought most important. Time after time many of us had the strange sensation of the intellectual ground shifting under our feet due to the force of Allan's arguments and his rhetoric, his wit and his ridicule. Ideas took on a life and vibrancy they had never possessed before; beautiful and inviting new worlds opened up before our eyes.

But at the same time, he was confusing us by defending Shakespeare's questioning of the adequacy of liberal universalism, he was opening up, especially for those who, like myself, had tended to scorn the humanities because they seemed intellectually "soft" in comparison to mathematics or science, a whole new realm of thought and beauty whose existence we had not even suspected. In particular, I remember the group's long discussion of the trial scene in Act IV and Shylock's surprisingly sudden surrender to Portia's machinations. At first, it all seemed incomprehensible-Shylock was so truculent one moment, and then submits unconditionally the next. As the discussion proceeded, however, one began to see the underlying logic. By the end, we understood the force and poignancy of Shylock's *cri de coeur,* "Is that the law?"

I have dwelt at such great length on this seminar of three decades ago because it showed us so well Allan's understanding of liberal education, his primary concern throughout his career, from his earliest teaching experiences through the publication of *The Closing of the American Mind* to the end of his life. Liberal education involved addressing the question "How should I live?" This required a freedom from the conventional wisdom of the day, a liberation that could be achieved by the careful study of the serious works of philosophy and literature of the past. The ceaseless confrontation of Shakespeare's perspective on political life, as it could be understood from a careful reading of the play, with our own half-considered views marked the beginning of such a liberation. The task did not belong to any one of the university's disciplines, which competed for our allegiance and offered ever more specialized methods and

theories. Rather, the full range of such thought and sensibility as we possessed had to be brought to bear. Finally, we came to understand what it meant to read a book, not as a source of specialized knowledge or as a text to be interpreted according to some method, but rather, naively, and without preconceptions, in the expectation that the author understood things in a way in which we did not, and that, by entering into a conversation with him, we could learn. We came to understand that the "Great Books," as they are called, were our passports to beautiful and wonderful worlds.

Allan Bloom devoted his life to liberal education. Despite the many problems and obstacles it faces-difficulties which he described so brilliantly and trenchantly in *The Closing of the American Mind-he* continued *to* believe *that such an* education could flourish wherever and whenever teacher and students have the leisure to read together the works of the great thinkers of the past and to reflect on them. Thus, he remained an optimist and a cause for optimism in those who care about the possibility of cultivating in students true openness and of preparing them for an examined life, which is alone worth living. Up until the end, he demonstrated that possibility better than anyone else I have ever known.

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