

Gurus of the Right

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Ravelstein
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The publication of Saul Bellow's novel *Ravelstein* has once again focused attention on the influence of Leo Strauss and Allan Bloom on Canadian and American intellectual life. But has Bellow shed any light on this vexed topic?

Bellow has gone out of his way to declare to the media that his novel is based on his intimate acquaintance and close friendship with Allan Bloom. He claims that Bloom asked him and trusted him to write his memoir, and that the novel is intended as a tribute to his friend. And this is how it has generally been received. But the story itself does not support this claim. On the contrary, it calls into question the suggestion that Bloom was admirable as a man, a teacher or a thinker. The novel also raises serious questions about Bellow. How well did he understand his friend? And what kind of friendship was it anyway?

Bellow presents a story about an aging academic, Abe Ravelstein, who is dying of AIDS. He describes Ravelstein as an eccentric with a large bald head and "erratic gestures," a slob who was "impatient with hygiene," and a rude ingrate who nevertheless loved elegance. We are told that he had a colossal contempt for the bourgeoisie, but was nevertheless addicted to every bourgeois luxury imaginable. What could be more bourgeois than an obsession with brand names, designer labels and expensive wine glasses? His shirts were custom made by Turnbull & Asser--contemptuously dubbed Kissers & Assers by his friend Chick, who represents Bellow in the novel.

We learn about Ravelstein's Lanvin jacket (worth US \$4,500) that he soiled only minutes after it was purchased. But no matter, money was no issue once he struck it rich with a best-selling book condemning academe. That made it possible to live in style without borrowing money from his friends, as he was wont to do.

We also learn about Ravelstein's love of fine bedding. He and his partner Nikki (a young Oriental man with boyish good looks) slept on "Pratesi linens and under beautifully cured angora skins." Nikki was dressed by "Versace, Ultimo and Gucci"--which is to say that he "was better dressed than the Prince of Wales." And when you are dressed like that, you do not take the subway, so Ravelstein bought him a chestnut-coloured BMW with more gadgets than a pilot's cockpit.

Bellow surmises from all this that Ravelstein's training with the great Professor Davarr (the fictitious version of Leo Strauss) taught him how to live like a philosopher. Is Bellow being ironic? Or is he just confused? Or does Professor Davarr think that the philosophic life consists in the unbridled pursuit of pleasure?

Then there is Ravelstein's obsession with Eros in general and sex in particular. Again and again, the novel revisits the Aristophanic sex myth according to which all human beings were androgynous (having two sets of sex organs) until the gods split them into two halves; ever since they have been wandering in search of their other half. Ravelstein was "earnest about this quest, driven by longing." But he was also socially

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practical; he knew that marriages had to be concluded and the quest set aside. Yet Ravelstein was not willing to set the quest aside himself.

Bellow makes no bones about the fact that Ravelstein's misfortunes were the result of his own sexual excesses. He tells us bluntly that Ravelstein was "destroyed by his reckless sex habits." But now that Ravelstein was so "fatally polluted," he could only think with longing of the "pretty boys in Paris." One cannot help but conclude that the Aristophanic sex myth was a fancy excuse for promiscuity. Bellow does not draw this conclusion. He does not know what conclusion to draw.

Although he emphasizes the closeness of the friendship, the discerning reader draws a different conclusion. Chick did not know his friend very well. He admits that he did not know exactly what sort of relation Ravelstein had with his apparent heir, Nikki. Was Nikki a gold digger? Or did he love Ravelstein before he struck it rich? We are not told. What did Ravelstein have in common with a young man who could not be part of his philosophical conversations? What did he see in a youth who watched kung fu Movies to all hours of the night and slept until two in the afternoon? Nikki was surely a most unlikely soul-mate for Ravelstein. But then, was Ravelstein really looking for his soul-mate, his severed half?

Nothing that Bellow tells us makes Ravelstein's character endearing. There is nothing admirable about a character who is self-indulgent and hypocritical and has delusions of grandeur. As a reader, it is difficult to feel any empathy for Ravelstein or for his suffering and death. There is nothing sad, let alone tragic, about a character who is the architect of his own doom.

I did not know Allan Bloom as a man, so I cannot judge the accuracy of this portrait. But one thing is clear: it is not flattering. Yet Bellow insists that the work is a tribute to his friend. What could he be thinking?

Some of Bloom's admirers have criticized Bellow for "outing" his friend. But Bloom's homosexuality was well known within the academy. Besides, his sexual preferences are of no interest. What is interesting is the fact that Bloom wrote a book defending family values--a book that neoconservatives claim as their own, but in truth, Bloom had no use for marriage or families whatsoever. Bellow understands this well. He tells us that Ravelstein regarded marriage as a prison, and a faithful husband as a prisoner with no time off for good behaviour and no applying for parole. Those of us who heard Bloom on CBC Radio's *Ideas* some years ago know that Bellow got it right. His novel reveals the extent of Bloom's hypocrisy. What Bellow fails to grasp is that this duplicity cuts to the root of the Straussian philosophy itself.

Then there is the question of Bloom's greatness as a teacher. In the novel, Bellow tells us that Ravelstein trained his students exactly as he had been trained by Davarr. His students used the same esoteric jargon and shared the same vision of the world. And Ravelstein agonized about which students to entrust with the secret teaching. But Bellow has no idea what the secret teaching is.

Bellow describes Ravelstein's students as holding important posts on national newspapers and in the U.S. State Department and other world centres of power. We hear them reporting to their guru at regular intervals--phoning from around the world, discussing their daily triumphs, dilemmas and strategies. As presented by Bellow, Ravelstein spent hours on the telephone--which made possible an ongoing seminar on the "policy questions" and the answers of Plato, Rousseau and Nietzsche. In this way, the guru remained in charge of the education of his "old boys" even when they were into their forties.

As Bellow portrays the matter, the guru took pleasure in being the *éminence grise*, the power behind the throne, the mastermind of a shadow government. He prided himself on having taught his students well, and now he was rewarded by their serious efforts to put his ideas into action.

But policy was not enough. The disciples did not limit themselves to his doctrines and his interpretations; they imitated his manner and his dress. Those who could afford it bought their clothes at Lanvin and had their shirts made by Kissel & Asser. What is more, the students confided to their teacher details of their private lives, their loves and their deepest longings. He arranged their marriages and screened their friends. The guru was so "crazy about gossip" that he awarded points to the groupies who brought him the juiciest details. Nor did he give a damn about secrets--he felt absolutely no obligation not to gossip about his friends, including Chick. What kind of friend is that?

The novel is supposed to be about a great friendship. But what we learn from the novel is what friendship is not. Friendship presupposes equality, not to mention trust. But there is no equality between Chick and Ravelstein, let alone trust. The appeal of Ravelstein is the same as the appeal of Vela, Chick's unloving and unfaithful wife who was a chaos physicist. Chick liked her beautiful face and figure, but it was her "major-league" brain that kept him in awe. It seems that Chick is simply enchanted by the incomprehensible. Is Chick just one more adoring and subservient companion--a geriatric groupie? Or did Bellow intend to write a scathing exposé of Bloom?

Ravelstein did not just train his disciples, he "formed" them, "indoctrinated" them and divided them into "groups and subgroups": husbands, fathers, lovers, philosophers, bureaucrats. He alone was subject, they were his objects. None of them would be his equal. Not even Chick.

In short, we are presented with a portrait of a manipulator surrounded by mesmerized disciples and sycophants, lured by a secret doctrine that is "radically mysterious." Is this the portrait of a great educator? Hardly. But anyone who has been part of North American academic

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life for the last two decades can testify, to the accuracy of the portrait of Bloom as an educator. Students of Bloom, like students of Strauss, are groupies. They are cut from the same cloth, spout the same jargon and share the same picture of the world. They put on intellectual airs, but they are not very good at thinking. In fact, they are chronically incapable of critical reflection about the dogmas passed on to them by their guru. They are unwilling to question the fundamental assumptions of the guru. They regard the ideas of their teachers as incontestable and beyond doubt. Far from being well trained, the students of Strauss and Bloom are indoctrinated or confused.

To be indoctrinated is to be a true believer in simple doctrines. Such people make perfect party hacks because they are willing to do whatever it takes to ensure the success of their party and its dogmas. These sorts of people are small minded enough to believe that they are in possession of great wisdom, which is necessary to save the modern world from its folly. When simple-minded people take on such grand missions, they become morally unscrupulous. They begin to see vice and dishonesty as legitimate in view of the stakes at hand. When in positions of political power, these people are dangerous.

And as to the claim that many of these students have moved out of the academy and into important posts in government--that is a fact that has been well documented by journalists and scholars. And it is a fact that should give us pause.

The Straussians who remain in the academy, when they are not simpleminded ideologues, tend to be intellectually confused. The source of the trouble is the esoteric style of teaching. Bellow hints at this difficulty, but fails to grasp its implications. It is difficult to teach a secret doctrine. It is a contradiction in terms. How can it remain secret once it is taught? So there must be two doctrines, one esoteric, the other exoteric. But the two doctrines are not intellectually coherent or

compatible. Because it is not easy to teach different doctrines to different students at the same time, it was inevitable that the two doctrines would get mixed up and students would end up imbibing an incoherent mixture. And that is precisely what accounts for the intellectual fuzziness of so many Straussians in academe. They are people who were not destined for the secret doctrine, but who have nevertheless imbibed parts of it in conjunction with the more sober exoteric teaching. The result is a chronic case of muddle-headedness.

Then there is Ravelstein's philosophy and politics. What sort of ideas was he busy inculcating? What is the secret doctrine? Bellow has no idea. He is totally out of his league, and he knows it. He considers Bloom an eagle while he is merely a flycatcher. He makes an effort to give us an account of the philosophy involved, but he fails. He reports what he considers some very deep conversations, but they are profoundly contradictory. Nevertheless, they give us a few examples of what is involved.

On one occasion, he tells us that Ravelstein was callous about the millions of peasants, kulaks and people who were slaughtered in the German concentration camps and the Russian gulag of the 20th century--these dispensable "losers" did not attract his attention. But at the same time, Ravelstein realized that as a Jew, he was meant for extermination, and that he and Chick had a special solidarity with the massacred victims of that century.

Another example is Ravelstein's ambiguous attitude toward religion. On one hand, he claimed that no philosopher could believe in God; on the other hand, he had a profound respect for "Jerusalem," which is Strauss's jargon for religious faith in general.

One more enigmatic contradiction is Ravelstein's fondness for nihilists, supposedly because they have no reason to be liars. The suggestion is that people who are not nihilists are liars. At the same time, Bellow informs us that Ravelstein's best-selling book was intended to undermine relativism, nihilism and historicism. Is Ravelstein a nihilist or a liar?

Bellow accurately reports what appear to be contradictions in Bloom's thought. But he has no idea that the contradictions he has observed are easily resolved by the duplicitous nature of the esoteric philosophy. There is one truth for

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the few, another for the many. One standard for others and a different standard for the supermen--moral truths for the many and nihilism for the few; religion for the many and philosophy for the few; family values for the many and unbridled pederasty for the few. That explains why Ravelstein, like Bloom, was opposed to gay liberation; it would be unbearably common once it was out of the closet and socially acceptable. The same is true for atheism and nihilism. They are delicious as long as they are the prerogative of the few. For Bloom, as for Strauss, the role of the philosopher is to spin lies that are supposedly salutary for the masses. It explains why Ravelstein enjoyed the company of nihilists--he must have gotten tired of his own lies.

What kind of politics does this sort of duplicity suggest? In my view, it is the basis of postmodern politics--a politics that dispenses with truth. Hannah Arendt once said that totalitarianism was the triumph of politics over truth. But she never imagined that this sort of politics would become business as usual. She never imagined that postmodern thinkers such as Leo Strauss and Michel Foucault would see no conflict between truth and power. Truth, especially moral truth, or what is usually called values, is but a function of power. The powerful are those who are able to make their values triumph. They are the ones who decide what is to be admired and what is to be despised.

The question is: what sort of values would the right-wing gurus like to see triumph? The simple answer is not liberal values--not the values of equal rights, freedom and individuality. Strauss and Bloom should not be regarded simply as conservatives. There is a difference between being conservative and being right-wing. Being conservative is primarily a disposition of sobriety and moderation where politics is concerned. Conservatives respect existing traditions and make their peace with the present. Being conservative is timeless, but being right-wing is a postmodern phenomenon; it is a response--a frenzied and furious response--to liberal modernity.

Strauss and Bloom are right-wing gurus. To the triumphant liberal modernity, being right-wing indicates a visceral hatred. Its goal is to turn back the clock on the successful liberal revolution of the last 300 years. Straussians are hostile to human rights in general, and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms in particular. But what is the reason for such animosity to freedom, justice and equality before the law?

Simply stated, Strauss and Bloom's answer is this: Equal rights give people equal dignity and this is simply contrary to nature. In nature people are not equal. Nature is profoundly hierarchical. Equal rights are an effort to remake nature in accordance with the desires of the rabble. Supposedly, the latter are so filled with resentment against their superiors that they demand the impossible--they demand to be their equals. Equal rights is a revolt of the inferior many against the superior few; it is a revolt against nature.

Somehow, it never dawns on the disciples that this is a profoundly flawed view. Equal rights before the law do not bestow equality of condition or equality of status in society. Equal rights provide only equality before the law, which is the absolute minimum that is required by justice. Of course, those who are enamoured of their own superiority have an aversion to every kind of equality, even the most formal and abstract sort; they fear that it will diminish the pleasure they take in the pathos of distance that makes it possible to look down on the inferior rabble.

What about freedom? Why would Strauss and Bloom wish to set themselves up as enemies of freedom? Briefly stated, their answer is that ordinary people, or what Strauss calls the vulgar, are not fit for freedom. Give them freedom and they will do nothing but pursue their own pleasures and neglect their duties to the state. Give them freedom and they will stop weeping and worshipping--they will drink, gamble and fornicate instead.

Strauss and Bloom are convinced that a state intoxicated with liberty will be weak and hence vulnerable to external aggression. They are certain that a populace that loves liberty too much will not be willing to lay down its life to defend the homeland. And this is the foundation of Bloom's critique of America.

But surely, Strauss and Bloom are wrong. America's fighting spirit is a testimony to the contrary. Americans are intoxicated by their love of liberty. It does not make them passive or unwilling to fight. For good or ill, they are fighters. They are not only wildly protective of their own liberty; they are also eager to impart it to the world--whether the world wants it or not. But the disciples of Strauss and Bloom are convinced, despite evidence to the contrary, that liberalism leads to nihilism and indifference, which in turn leads to fascism. The argument is flawed, to put it mildly. But Strauss and Bloom never make the argument explicitly. They merely point to Weimar as the classic model of liberalism and draw suggestive parallels with America that are intended as dark premonitions of disaster.

The comparison of America with Weimar is not persuasive, but it is never questioned by the minions. First, there is no reason to assume that fascists are nihilists. It is equally plausible to think of them as people who believed in an absolute standard established by nature--a hierarchical standard that was being violated by the modern world. The Nazis were the party of nature; they intended to restore the true order of things. There is nothing particularly nihilistic

about their self-understanding. They were demagogues who came to power in a democracy. But they were neither liberals nor nihilists.

Second, liberals do not subscribe to the philosophy of Nietzsche. They defend freedom for the sake of truth. They defend freedom because they think it will create the conditions in which truth can best emerge. For they rightly believe that no one has a monopoly on truth. We all see it through a glass darkly. But it is precisely this monopoly on truth that the right-wing gurus aspire to have.

The enchantment of Strauss and Bloom with Rousseau is no accident. Rousseau is the architect of a democratic regime in which the towering figure of the Great Legislator looms large. The latter is to the democratic state what the tutor is to Emile. Just as Emile emerges helpless and dependent on his educator, so the masses are helpless in the absence of the great legislator who forms, shapes and defines the general will of the people. For Strauss and Bloom, Rousseau's Legislator possesses elements of Plato's philosopher-king and Nietzsche's superman.

The chicanery of this legislator-philosopher-superman is what Strauss and his entourage like to call the "ennobling of democracy." The idea is to manipulate the will of the people while making them believe that they are the supreme sovereign. But the sovereignty of the people is a noble lie. Or is it? Just how noble is it to indoctrinate, control and manipulate others? How ennobling is this to democracy? Is democracy not better served by leaders who tell the truth, leaders who inform and persuade the people rather than deceive and manipulate them? Strauss and Bloom are enemies of liberty more than democracy. Democracy makes it possible for supermen to manipulate the people. The difficulty is how to get the masses to consent to values that subvert hard-won liberal rights and freedoms. The ingenious solution is to use democracy itself to defeat liberalism. The idea is to turn the people against liberty and equal rights. But how is this to be done? I think the strategy is as follows.

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The first step is to appeal to the people's religious beliefs. This is not so difficult when the populace is inspired by Christian orthodoxy. Fallen humanity is not fit for freedom. Freedom can only lead to licentiousness and crime. Once the people are mobilized against liberty, then they can be trusted with power. The result is the rise of right-wing populism, which is the distinctive feature of neoconservatism--the philosophy that fuels the Alliance Party in Canada and the Republican Party in the United States.

The second step in the populist ploy is to flatter the people. Tell them that they are sovereign. Then convince them that having a charter of rights undermines their sovereignty because it supposedly gives too much power to judges. The result is the emergence of that grand enemy of neoconservatism--judicial review. The latter ostensibly allows judges to make law, which in turn robs Parliament, the only true representative of the people, of its sovereignty. So if the people wish to assert their sovereignty, they should rebel against the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, because contrary to all appearances, it surreptitiously robs them of their power and sovereignty.

This populist ploy pre-supposes that people are suckers; they probably are. That is why those of us who love freedom prefer to live in a society governed by law and not by the whims of a sovereign populace. The Charter does indeed set limits on the sovereignty of the people and their representatives; it sets limits on what sort of laws Parliament can pass; it sets limits on what the majority or their representatives can do to individuals and minorities; it is indeed an obstacle to the tyranny of the majority -the rule of the mob.

Inspired by right-wing gurus, neoconservatives are willing to gamble on the rule of the mob. Their hope is that the people will be dim-witted enough and mean-spirited enough to endorse their war against rights and liberties.

Even though Bellow has little insight into the political philosophy of his friend, his portrait of Bloom can hardly be considered a tribute. It does more to unravel Bloom than to praise him. It may be more suitably called Un-Ravelstein.