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Book Review: *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students*

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BOOK REVIEWS

[For this issue, we received two reviews of Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*. Because this book has provoked so much controversy, and because the reviewers take differing positions, we decided to print both submissions. Ed.]

Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students*. Foreword by Saul Bellow. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987.

How can you explain the astonishing sales of this book? Allan Bloom has made an unpopular and scandalizing charge. It is that a Socratic self-examination of college educators and students would uncover a collective intellectual and moral sloth. This sin is evident in that, doubting and even denying that any truth can be known in studying the great questions of man, nature and God, and the good, the true and the beautiful, we have stopped asking the questions. For few seriously will ask whether formal education should be judged by students' mastery of a predetermined set of books, those which are Great Books because they treat the great questions. Still less likely are we to expect students to acquire a certain body of truths about such things. We attach as little moral significance to education as to our own democratic values. It is said that those values, and so our system of education, merely express our way. But there are other people, other ways and other values; so, it is concluded, we cannot say that our way, or any way, is right and good. This conclusion is acquired common sense. Hence it is implausible that with great success a Great Books-oriented, moral ideal of education could be used as a foil to criticize contemporary practice in the American academy. But Allan Bloom has pulled it off!

The reason, I aver, lies in an exigency of human nature, its not-to-be-frustrated desire to know the highest truths. If the academy will not investigate the highest truths, and teach them that can be known, will it not impoverish the souls of today's students, failing democracy in the bargain?

But the university is today officially neutral as regards man, nature and God, and again the good, the true and the beautiful. In fact, the great questions are no longer even raised. This official neutrality, and this ignoring of the great questions, Bloom rightly says, are the closing of the American mind.

Most readers will not be convinced by everything that Bloom says. But it will be hard to doubt his very unsettling claim that a sort of *de facto* nihilism, in effect an

intellectual and moral anarchism, has become a major, if not a dominant, attitude among the educated elite of America. To some this will seem an hyperbole, an extravagance such as you might find in a journal of conservative opinion. But Bloom's scholarly accomplishments, which include translations of Plato's *Republic* and Rousseau's *Emile*, speak for themselves. More importantly, his abundant human qualities are evident throughout the book. Most notable among them are humor, pity, and most of all, a passionate love for the young. Allan Bloom is an *homme serieux*.

Movingly, over several passages, Bloom evokes the confusion that a young student must feel when entering college today, a state of mind exacerbated by lack of direction from *alma mater* herself. The young person should expect to enter an enchanted land, where the erotic and the intellectual intermingle and charge one another, where the youth, unsure whether it is love or wisdom that the heart of hearts desires, can discover that wisdom really is love, and that love really is wisdom. Any parent hopes the child will make this discovery during college years. This wisdom we educators do in fact wish for our students, even if verbally we deny that their formal education can have anything to do with it. But the youth finds an open cavity where once was a heart. "[T]here is no official guidance, no university-wide agreement about what he *should* study. . . . It is easiest simply to make a career choice and go about getting prepared for that career" (338).

A person is a whole person from the very beginning. But at age eighteen, one's center is incomplete. One is undecided as to who one is; energy and interest are centripetal. The university should redirect these, should aid youth to discover the potential within the true self. But universities channel energy and interest further away from the center. It is the perplexed youth, whole, yet incompletely so, who is the greatest embarrassment to universities. For "he seems to be saying 'I am a whole human being. Help me to form myself in my wholeness and let me develop my real potential,' and he is the one to whom they have nothing to say" (339).

Alma mater is a parent disowning the child most in need of formation. She has nothing to say because she believes that there are no permanent truths to be said. Yet "until only yesterday," to use one of Bloom's favorite expressions, this was unthinkable. Until the recent past, universities had some canon or other, and their avowed mission was to aid the intellectual and moral development of their wards.

We have come to the open and empty curriculum because of a crisis in thought, culture and morale. Bloom claims that the left, for most of this century the dominant influence in university life, has been Nietzscheanized. The stylish progressive has come to think that, since Nietzsche said it, there are no permanent truths, and

so no permanent *civitas*, to be transmitted; all is myth. Human greatness, in consequence, can consist only in making one's myths prevail. Nor can this consequence be detached from nihilism. Hard-core nihilism embraces it, while our respectable, soft-core variety wishes it away.

The escape is obvious: undo nihilism. But pathetically, we fail even to ask whether nihilism can be wrong. It is the philosophy of the latest of the greats, Nietzsche. Who today will fight him in the trenches? In point of fact, there are some: a good many students find Nietzsche's thought repulsive, false, even insane; and a few philosophers unqualifiedly will reject Nietzsche.

Bloom rightly thinks that there is a moral failing behind all this. However small their number, those educators who disavow our Nietzscheism and its trappings, especially the open-ended curriculum, have not spoken out. Nor is this only a moral failing. It is a failure profoundly to love the truth which they believe they know.

But what is the hard evidence that this soft-core nihilism, this Americanized, left-ized Nietzscheism, has gained sway in the academy? Bloom says that it is the student riots of the late 1960's. Convincingly, and from personal experience, he writes of one such. In 1969 Cornell University acquiesced to an armed student rabble which demanded curriculum changes, faculty resignations, and certain racial-separatist demands. Neither faculty nor administration had a vision of what the youths entrusted to their guardianship ought to become, a farcical yet chilling reminder of Heidegger's *Rektoratsrede* of 1933, in which was said: "The time for decision is past. The decision has already been made by the youngest part of the German nation." In 1969 at Cornell, one faculty cravenly told the students, "You don't need to intimidate us."

Bloom's book raises this question: what kind of educator is one who thinks that the academy has nothing in particular to teach, in order that an educated human being also be a good human being? Bloom thinks that persons of good will, had they world enough, and time, must recognize the open and empty university curriculum as unreasonable and immoral. Indeed, if this curriculum would divert the young fully from seizing their intellectual birthright, and if it would make self-government and good government incompatible, then could a defender of current practice also be a good man?

While the Great Books-oriented curriculum that Bloom champions can liberate the American mind, his picture of the liberation itself is unconvincing. His is essentially a philosophic liberation. According to Bloom, among the liberating conclusions of the Great Books are these: one cannot be a philosopher and an unqualifiedly good citizen, and also an orthodox religionist (as philosophy must question common beliefs);

and one cannot appeal to a higher form of knowledge than the philosophical (since the philosophy of the Great Books teaches that philosophy is the highest knowledge man can possess).

The philosophy that teaches these liberations is Platonic philosophy, or a part of it as interpreted by Bloom. According to this view, philosophy did not emerge until Socrates discovered that religion is myth, and that myth is untruth. Again according to this view, Socrates, or at any rate the philosopher as depicted by Plato in his *Apology*, *Republic* (and in some few other, but, significantly, not all Platonic dialogues) is the philosopher. Hence, philosophy as such and religion as such are irreconcilable. What is more, since philosophy yields truth, religion, if there exist truth in it, cannot co-exist with philosophic truth in one's mind. One, therefore, must choose, *a la* Pascal. One must, with Averroes, deny as a philosopher what one believes on faith.

However, Scholastics and others who can be read in the Great Books have argued that all truth, religiously, philosophically or however apprehended, is one, and that not philosophy but theology must be the highest knowledge available to man as man. It is doubtful that the American mind can fully be reopened, and American students fully liberated, without considering that there might be a higher liberation than philosophic knowledge.

These differences, like those in any family quarrel, run deep. But nothing is likely to prevent deep divisions within the family that looks to the Great Books for inspiration and truth. Those books do not teach only one lesson, even if, as Bloom and I both believe, the right one is to be found in them. So lest I appear unwilling to sup with him, let me say that Bloom has put supporters of the status quo on the defensive, that he has done so forcefully and that he was right to do it!

Don Asselin

For several months now a book by University of Chicago professor Allan Bloom was at the top of the New York Times nonfiction list. Surprising, indeed, not only because "nonfiction" by a professor is usually not of the titillatory type, but also because *The Closing of the American Mind* does little more than describe in voluminous chapters the existing doomsday in the American system of education, offering little hope and no solution. Perhaps the book, a criticism of the present social situation, pointing an accusing finger at the educational trends of the sixties, owes its popularity to the timeliness of its appearance — a time when the American public is disgruntled with