

*The Closing of the American Mind.* By Allan Bloom. Simon and Schuster. 1987.

If you do not already know about this book, you have been marooned somewhere on a desert island. As of this writing, it is still on the *New York Times* "Best Seller" list, and the book has been number one on that list for many weeks. It is also a book which vigorously defends the importance of philosophy. Not since Ayn Rand have philosophy and mass consumption been so compatible. This combination is one among many of the ironies of this book, some of which I will discuss below.

As we all know by now, the book discusses the malaise of university education in this country and the loss of appreciation for, and meaning of, the liberal arts. Few read the great classics of philosophy and literature anymore, and when they do the works are treated at best as history and not as living sources of inspiration or guides to the meaning of life. Undergraduates who enter the university at an age which naturally thirsts for inspiration and meaning find none of it in today's universities (certainly not in philosophy departments). They either enter courses which will advance their "careers," or they are confronted with a smorgasbord of loosely connected obstacles known as the "liberal arts." If the student confronts Aristotle or Shakespeare at all, the treatment is often superficial and never as a serious candidate for a coherent world view. This thesis certainly rings true, and one must applaud Bloom's forthright statement of it. For me personally, however, there is a touch of irony in this message; for as an undergraduate in the late 60s and early 70s, my training in literature did not include reading classics like Shakespeare, but rather I was advised into more "relevant" courses which mainly consisted in reading a lot of Saul Bellow—the author of the foreword to Bloom's book!

Saul Bellow not only signifies a personal irony, but symbolizes as well Bloom's approach to philosophy. Quite simply, Bloom treats philosophy as if it were literature. The "story of philosophy" reads like a gothic novel in Bloom's hands. He unfolds the plot, lines up the protagonists (Plato, antiquity) and antagonists (moderns), abstracts the grand themes, identifies critical junctures in the story line, and clarifies the significant symbols and their meaning for us. In the end one feels like one has encountered the "deep" and profound, and one undoubtedly has. But the depth and profundity experienced have a decidedly literary tone to them—the kind of feeling one gets after finishing a moving novel or play. The intellect is engaged, but the end product is emotional. This is the best literature can do, and the best Bloom does for philosophy.

Philosophy, on the other hand, does the reverse. Our emotions may be engaged (though it is not necessary), but the end product is purely intellectual.

Here the *justification* for a conclusion is as important as the conclusion itself. In Bloom we find great themes pitted against one another; we find little of the justification and argumentation that stands behind those great themes. Without that argumentation and the evaluation of its merits, philosophy is indeed reduced to literature. (Of course, the arguments without the great themes characterize much of the contemporary penchant for seeing how many distinctions can be culled from the head of a pin.)

Bloom is unquestionably correct in pointing to the impoverishment of today's students as a result of their lack of proper exposure to the classics of philosophy and literature. But even if that problem were solved, the student would still possess some serious deficiencies not addressed well in Bloom's book. The main one being that there is little indication that one can *do* philosophy from Bloom's account (as opposed to read, understand, and admire it). Saul Bellow again comes to mind. Here is a man who actually *wrote* literature (so much so that the foreword is more about himself than Bloom's book.) He did not simply engage in scholarly studies of great literary figures. Yet much of the appreciation for the greatness of the main figures of philosophy, and much of what it means to take them seriously, comes from doing what they did. One comes to understand the difficulty of the task, the effort, the loneliness, the genius, the insight, and the learning required of oneself and mastered or confronted by others. This is not even to mention the possibility that one might make a contribution. The reader of Bloom's book, in contrast, is left with the image that philosophy is already done and that what one needs to do now is enrich oneself with it and choose sides (e.g., ancient or modern). Perhaps even choosing sides is doing too much philosophy, for part of what Bloom seems to mean by opening our "closed" minds is "keeping the conversation going"—that is, never drawing the conclusion that a great philosopher was wrong.

Bloom is correct in his claim that the modern mind, in the name of openness, has closed off the teachings of thinkers like Plato and Aristotle. If the conversation is kept going, their ideas would certainly benefit. But if truth is our aim, the mind must be prepared to close, although not be locked shut. Given the contradictory array of theses propounded throughout the history of philosophy, keeping the conversation going for its own sake is to play into the hands of the very relativism Bloom deplors—not all those theses can be equally true. If, on the other hand, there is no truth, then philosophy can indeed be effectively treated as literature, i.e., as a collection of perspectives on the human condition capable of enriching us emotionally.

If truth is possible, then philosophy must be done; one must engage in it, argue for the incorrectness of some theses and the correctness of others (no matter what their source), and defend a position. All this must be done in light of an appreciation of the *best* that can be said for the theories one rejects. The reason the closed mindedness that Bloom refers to is so troubling is because it is complacent and dogmatic and not grounded in a serious appreciation of the alternatives. But higher education is defective not just in failing to provide serious alternatives for reflection; but just as importantly, in failing to teach students how to reflect—that is, to think, judge, criticize, reason, and theorize abstractly. Philosophy offers this to students more than any other subject; yet not because these "skills" are peculiar to philosophy, but rather because the pursuit of truth has traditionally demanded them.

If one reflects for a moment on the main themes of this book—the importance of philosophy, the failures of contemporary or Deweyite education,

the search and need for meaning among the young, the closed-mindedness in the name of openness—one discovers that these themes were all fully elaborated a decade or more ago by Ayn Rand. The book contains only one negative reference to Rand; but that is perhaps unimportant since Leo Strauss is not mentioned often either, and he clearly towers behind this book. Nor would one expect Bloom to put the issue quite the way Rand did, so the point here is not to suggest that reading the one is like reading the other. Rather, the point is that the similarity of themes also betrays a fundamental difference: Rand clearly believed in objective truth, while nothing so clear is to be found in Bloom. Bloom offers neither a philosophy, nor a program of reform. There is simply the great debate and the fear it might fizzle out.

Rand became (and is) popular among students precisely because she offered a vision of the truth, however near or wide of the mark one believes that vision to be. One suspects, on the other hand, that Bloom's book will be discussed by a different audience, viz., faculty, administrators, parents and the like—what the 60s used to call "the establishment." This is because the book is essentially "safe." Now that the children of the "counter-culture" are about to enter college and the "counter-culture" itself integrated into the "establishment," attacks on relativism, drugs, and meaningless relationships are easy to make. Equally easy is the advocacy of the classics, discipline, and traditional values. Moreover, at the intellectual level bashing the Enlightenment is popular sport these days and thus a safe bet also. Never mind that two decades ago Rand, not to mention numerous conservatives, were making such points in print and were being ridiculed because of it, and that no sense of that history can be found in this book. Focus instead on the fact that these basic themes *can* be raised today without serious recriminations for the author—indeed the opposite. There are certainly public disagreements and controversies surrounding this book, but Bloom is not branded an "extremist" and summarily dismissed as others have been in the past. His theses are all now comfortable ones, suited to the democratic temperament of the moment in a way those same theses would not have been twenty years ago. For someone as rightly suspicious of democracy as Bloom is, the phenomenon of his book being a best seller should worry him. (It is evident, however, that Bloom did not set out to write a best seller.)

What would have been much less comfortable and more to the point would have been for Bloom to have done something like attack the public nature of our educational system. For all Bloom's abstract worries about democracy, the concrete fact that our educational system is thoroughly public and democratized is left unanalyzed. The public character of education is present at all levels of education, even the highest. One need only think of the controversy surrounding the Grove City and Hillsdale cases to realize that it is virtually impossible for *private* colleges and universities to remain free of the public domain. Bloom does draw comparisons between our institutions of higher education and the German ones prior to Hitler. He even recognizes the public nature of those German universities. Yet somehow the idea that state supported, financed, and/or influenced education may be a significant factor in the problems with education Bloom refers to does not register with him. Yet for a book that purports to examine the roots of our problems, leaving aside this issue, especially when the analogy is obvious, is surely mistaken.

When Bloom does examine the roots of the problems with education he identifies, he does so at an intellectual level. Yet as often as not he gets it wrong, or at least partially so. For Bloom our problems stem primarily from German philosophy and transplanted German professors (reminiscent of Leonard Peikoff's *Ominous Parallels*, sanctioned by Rand more than a decade earlier). Most Americans, however, could not even name a German university. They could, on the other hand, name the two most prestigious English universities. Although America is certainly a "melting pot," we are in essence British intellectually. German ideas, if they have any hold on us, must be first filtered through an *Anglo-American* consciousness. It is, for example, incredible to me that in a book which rails against relativism in values and searches for its roots in our culture David Hume is mentioned only once. Twentieth century British moral theories such as Emotivism and other forms of non-cognitivism which would naturally enter here are not given any importance either. Moreover, the Enlightenment, regarded also by Bloom to be a significant source of our problems, is primarily a British or British-French phenomenon. The Germans trailed behind, despite significant Enlightenment Liberals like Kant and von Humbolt. In essence, Bloom has gotten the influences exactly backwards. Apparently, a ranking of intellectual influences for Bloom from most to least important would look like this: German, French, English. I would suggest that the correct reading is the opposite.

For years the "Strausseans" have been trying to convince us of the importance of Nietzsche and Heidegger. But the case for these thinkers best analyzing the condition of modern man and the future of philosophy is quite separate from what makes sense as a thesis about the influences upon a failing system of education. Yet the two points are often conflated by Bloom. The matter is different with respect to the Enlightenment. Here intellectual sources may be appropriate guides to our practical problems. After all, America is a concrete product of the Enlightenment, so theoretical and practical concerns do become mixed. But Bloom's discussion strikes me as disingenuous at best, maybe even contradictory. Is there not something strange about holding the Enlightenment to blame for many of our ills while at the same time presenting its most conspicuous product (America) as a beacon for mankind's future salvation? And even if this were not America's "moment in world history," can the intellectual character of a regime be rejected without rejecting the regime itself? In this respect Marxists at least have consistency on their side. Bloom's program cannot be similarly clarified, and the ambiguities in Bloom's account keep the book well within the popular comfort zone. Had he been more forthright and less circuitous about the connection between the Enlightenment and our most deeply held values and institutions, the reception of this book might have been different.

But perhaps the message here is not that the Enlightenment was so bad, but rather that it got carried away with itself? It has gone too far, and we need to capture a sense of balance and moderation between it and antiquity which it replaced. The mean, however, does not lie in the middle between two extremes, but usually tends more toward one extreme than the other. Whatever the excesses to which the Enlightenment was prone, it may nevertheless be that "extreme" to which one should be more prone to err. That possibility is unexplored in Bloom's analysis. So even if we consider Bloom's effort to be one of moving us away from an uncritical acceptance of one extreme and back towards the mean, are we any clearer as a result

of his account about where we are to locate that mean? I think not. For all the brilliance, insight, interest, and perceptiveness of this book—and there is a lot of it, despite the fact that I have not emphasized it here—we are left rudderless. One fears that the undeniable virtues of this book will be forgotten and its message reduced to stale matters of curricular reform. Perhaps that result is inevitable when philosophy is praised but not practiced.

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