

LITERACY, EDUCATION AND KNOWLEDGE: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF ALLAN BLOOM'S THE CLOSING OF THE AMERICAN MIND

The publication of Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* was published by Simon and Schuster in 1987. All references in this paper will be to the Penguin version of the book, published in 1988. caused a sensation in the United States. The book shot to the top of the bestsellers lists, and generated reactions which ranged from the friendly and generally supportive to the hostile and savagely critical. For a wide selection of views in one volume, see Stone, R.L. (ed.) *Essays on the Closing of the American Mind*, Illinois, Chicago Review Press, 1989. Bloom's book sparked controversy across campuses nationwide in North America. For a time, hardly a month seemed to go by without the arrival of another critique of Bloom in a U.S. journal, magazine or newspaper. The *Closing of the American Mind*, as one critic put it, had become not so much a book as a phenomenon, Barber, B. 'The Philosopher Despot: Allan Bloom's Elitist Agenda', in *ibid.*, p.81. and the ripples created by its publication seemed set to continue for some time to come.

In New Zealand, academics have barely raised a whimper about Bloom, and the debate which has been so vigorously waged in the United States has yet to fully surface in this country. It is not as if scholars have been distracted by other books linked to the intellectual battle that has been raging overseas, for equally controversial texts such as E.D. Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy* Hirsch, E.D. *Cultural Literacy*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1987. and Dinesh D'Souza's *Illiberal Education* D'Souza, D. *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus*, New York, The Free Press, 1991. have also hardly rated a mention in New Zealand academic discourse. I am speaking here particularly of published academic work. That there has been less formal discussion of Bloom's book by scholars around the country I have no doubt. At the University of Waikato, Graham Oliver has run a Part Three course on Bloom and Hirsch, and Bloom's work was the subject of much discussion for members of the LEAPS (Liberal Education: A Programme of Study) group in the Education Department at the University of Waikato in 1990. Comment on Bloom has been forthcoming from one or two educationists embroiled in the discussions which surrounded the introduction of the revised sixth and seventh form English syllabus a few years ago, Compare, for instance, Moses, R. 'A Folly of Shallow Thinking', *The New Zealand Herald*, 15 November 1990; Rathgen, E. 'English Syllabus Misquoted', *The New Zealand Herald*, 27 November 1990. and Colin Lankshear has made brief reference to Bloom and Hirsch in his work on literacy. See, in particular, Lankshear, C. and McLaren, P. 'Introduction' to their (eds.) *Critical Literacy: Politics, Praxis and the Postmodern*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1991. But, in

the main, New Zealanders appear to have been conspicuous in their silence on the 'Bloom sensation'.

The reasons for this reticence are not entirely clear to me. Perhaps academics consider Bloom's book unworthy of serious attention, or perhaps it is thought that Bloom's concerns are specific to the U.S. and not 'relevant' to this country. Whatever the reasons for the lack of engagement with Bloom's ideas, I would suggest that there is still much to be gained from critically examining *The Closing of the American Mind* and assessing Bloom's arguments in light of wider educational debates. What, then, does Bloom have to say?

Anything and Everything: The Grand Sweep of Bloom's Victims and Visions

The most immediately noticeable feature of *The Closing of the American Mind* is its breadth. Bloom seems to tackle anything and everything in the text, from books, music, and relationships, to philosophy and education. His sweep of the western philosophical tradition is vast, traversing everyone from Plato to Nietzsche. The omissions and oversights that he makes along the way have raised the ire of a good number of critics, and his scholarship has been found wanting by several accomplished philosophers. See, for example, Nussbaum, M. 'Undemocratic Vistas', in Stone, op. cit.

Bloom opens his 'Introduction' in the book with the following statement:

There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative. Bloom, A. *The Closing of the American Mind*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1988, p.25.

This claim sets the scene for the rest of the book. Bloom sees relativism as the great 'evil' of the present epoch in the United States. Under the old view of what being American meant, Bloom asserts, it was assumed that human beings have certain natural rights which transcend differences across class, race and religious lines. This belief in natural human rights is a powerful source of social unity. In recent times, by contrast, faith in natural rights has been replaced by an (apparent) openness - 'to all kinds of men, all kinds of life-styles, all ideologies'. Ibid., p.27. In the twentieth century, the idea of a 'common good' has been eroded and moves have been made to stem the 'tyranny' of the majority in an effort to protect minorities. See *ibid.*, pp.27-34.

Bloom maintains that all non-Western cultures are ethnocentric: it is only in Western countries that the (moral) supremacy of one's own culture,

customs and ideas is called into question. Contrary to the pervasive mood of cultural relativism in North America, Bloom sees the United States as not just one nation among many others, but as 'one of the highest and most extreme achievements of the rational quest for the good life according to nature'.Ibid., p.39. Against the notion that all opinions are of equal value (or that no opinion is closer to the truth than any other), Bloom holds that the very diversity of opinion in the United States demands that the various views be examined to discover which are 'true' or 'right'. We should, Bloom tells us, be trying to resolve the differences in opinion through assessing the claims and reasons for each point of view. See *ibid.*, especially pp.41-43.

According to Bloom, young people in the U.S. today know less about American history than previous generations, and obtain nothing more than a superficial understanding of other nations and cultures. The real driving force in education - the search for a good life - has been abandoned. In its place is a smorgasboard of courses and subjects, with no clear connections between the endless options and no intellectually respectable distinctions between what is important and what is unimportant. *Ibid.*, pp. 342-343.

But Bloom does not limit his criticism to the educational problems that have beset American society in the past three decades: he also has a stab at the music enjoyed by the young of today, and deplores the breakdown of family and other relationships. Classical music, Bloom notes, has all but disappeared from the lives of young people, who turn instead in great numbers to the pulsating rhythms of rock music. Bloom openly acknowledges the value of music in 'giving the passions their due and...[in] preparing the soul for the unhampered use of reason' *Ibid.*, p.72. but sees rock music as an aberration of this noble goal. Rock music, he says, 'has one appeal only, a barbaric appeal, to sexual desire - not love, not eros, but sexual desire undeveloped and untutored'. *Ibid.*, p.73. Students no longer care for (or even read) books: music has become 'the youth culture'. *Ibid.*, p.75. Rock music destroys the imagination and stifles the ability of young people to relate seriously and passionately to 'the art and thought that are the substance of liberal education'. *Ibid.*, p.79. Popular music has become a multi-billion dollar industry, and to Bloom's way of thinking is representative of the shallowness of modern culture generally.

The family - which Bloom sees as an intermediary between the individual and society - has (in Bloom's view) been placed under tremendous threat in the present period in America's history. Divorce is on the increase, and children no longer feel the need to look after their parents as they grow older. The old ties which bound family members together in the same geographical area are diminishing as young people become more mobile and

adopt a more transient style of life. For Bloom, the young of today are lost in a no-person's land: 'They can be anything they want to be, but they have no particular reason to want to be anything in particular'.Ibid., p. 87. The traditional forms of social pressure exerted by the family and other institutions, and the responsibility implied by those pressures, have disappeared.

When Bloom moves on to the subject of race, his assertions become even more contentious. He declares that white and black students 'do not in general

become friends with one another',Ibid., p.91. that black students in universities tend to keep to themselves, and that 'the average black student's achievements do not equal those of the average white student in good universities'.Ibid., p.96.

Foreshadowing the position taken by a number of other contemporary commentators on U.S. universities,E.g., D'Souza, op. cit. Bloom sees affirmative action policies as problematic, to say the least. Quotas and other forms of affirmative action set up an artificial environment in the university, encouraging separatism and tainting the degrees of black students.

Bloom's discussion of relationships between the sexes has drawn even more fire, resting as it does on pronouncements such as the following:

...feminism has brought with it an unrelenting process of consciousness raising and changing that begins in what is probably a permanent human inclination and is surely a modern one - the longing for the unlimited, the unconstrained. It ends, as do many modern movements that seek abstract justice, in forgetting nature and using force to refashion human beings to secure that justice.Bloom, op. cit., p.100.

Bloom premises much of the argument in this section on the notion that there is a 'natural' order to relationships between men and women, based - initially, at least - on biological differences. Modesty, Bloom informs us, was (in days gone by) the female virtue, impeding sexual intercourse but ensuring that 'acquiescence of the will [was] as important as possession of the body'.Ibid., p.102. Lifting the veil of modesty, while it might make

the fulfilment of desire easier, ends up reducing sex to 'the thing-in-itself'.Ibid. Under the influence of the women's movement, men have been forced to turn inwards to examine their consciences at the first sign of any of the sentiments they 'used to feel for women',Ibid., p.101. purging themselves of traits such as possessiveness, jealousy and protectiveness. Sitting

somewhat uneasily alongside this transformation of attitudes has been the increasing acceptance of casual sex as a normal part of human

relationships. All of the old conventions and pretensions of their grandparents' days have evaporated, and young people now live together, talk together, and study together without giving the matter a second thought. Birth-control devices and abortions are readily available. Along with this demolition of past constraints, however, has come a diminution of commitment between men and women and the destruction of unity through love, marriage and the family. Ibid., pp.97-137.

The single theme that binds all of the varied threads in Bloom's attack on modern social life in America together is his assertion that the search for, and reliance upon, truth has been abandoned. The traditions that underpinned the family, and relationships between people generally, have been discarded. In place of traditional (read 'classical') music and conventional ('natural') codes of thought and behaviour in relationships is a culture awash with trivia, social disarray, and declining institutional standards. Bloom spends a good part of the book seeking an explanation of sorts for this sorry state of affairs by tracing the evolution of ideas about nature, the self, culture, and values from Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau to Nietzsche and Heidegger. At the risk of doing Bloom a grave disservice through fragmented coverage of the ideas presented his book, I shall, for present purposes (with space constraints in mind), leave this long, complex section of the text aside, and concentrate on Bloom's remedy for what he sees as the ills of the university. For comment on this section of the book (Part Two: 'Nihilism, American Style'), see: Bellah, R.N. 'Academic Fundamentalism?'; Colmo, C. 'Allan Bloom and the American Premise'; and Galston, W.A. 'Socratic Reason and Lockean Rights: The Place of the University in a Liberal Democracy' (all in Stone, op. cit.).

'The Good Old Great Books Approach': The Opening of the American Mind

Early on in *The Closing of the American Mind*, Bloom laments the loss of (the potential) thirst for knowledge that he observed in students at the beginning of the 1960s. To judge by the testimonials of some of his former students, Bloom is an enthusiastic and inspiring teacher. See, for example, Podhoretz, J. 'An Open Letter to Allan Bloom'; and Zuckert, M.P. 'Two Cheers (At Least) for

Allan Bloom' (both in Stone, op. cit.). This natural desire to learn - which educators and policy makers have failed to capitalise on - can best be met, Bloom

believes, through a traditional liberal education based on the reading of 'Great Books'.

Books are important to Bloom. From his own classes, he has concluded that '...students have lost the practice of and the taste for reading. They have not learned how to read, nor do they have the expectation of delight or improvement from reading.' Bloom, op. cit., p.62. Books no longer matter to students - they

have been supplanted by a never-ending diet of fast food, fleeting relationships, and loud music. Young people turn to Mick Jagger, not Plato, for advice on how to live their lives. Students go to the movies, but what they find there is trite and incomplete by comparison with the educative possibilities in Tolstoy. Even getting students to read at all is difficult these days, Bloom has observed. Bloom attributes this problem to teachers who were products of the sixties, contrasting them with the 'old teachers who loved Shakespeare or Austen or Donne, and whose only reward for teaching was the perpetuation of their taste'.Ibid., p.65. He also takes a customary swipe at feminism, holding it to be the 'latest enemy of the vitality of classic texts'.Ibid. He writes disapprovingly of the efforts of feminist activists to suppress gender references to God in a translation of the Bible, and to remove 'offensive' authors such as Rousseau from the curriculum.Ibid., pp.65-66. So, by his own estimation, Bloom's ideal of a liberal education centred on classic works of literature and philosophy has much in its way at the moment.

Bloom looks back, with great bitterness, to the 1960s to find some of the reasons for the disintegration of his ideal. Living through the experience of seeing university academics and administrators harassed by masses of students, some armed at times, obviously left an indelible impression on Bloom. He remembers not only the chants of students to abolish racism, sexism, elitism, and war, but also his fruitless efforts to resist the removal of a core curriculum for Cornell students. The steady elimination of successive 'traditional' features of the curriculum had a trickle-down effect on the nation's schools: ability in the 'three R's' plummeted, and the attainment of excellence in historical, philosophical and literary scholarship was replaced with insipid appeals to the educational goals of 'growth', 'individual development' and 'inner-directedness'.Ibid., p.321.

Near the end of his account of the 1960s Bloom recalls an incident involving a group of students who were spending their year (together with Bloom and a number of like-minded professors) not as protestors and counter-culture revolutionaries, but as readers of Plato's Republic. As chaos reigned outside, these students looked down upon their activist peers with a degree of contempt, irritated by the activity that was getting in the way 'of what they thought it important to do'.Ibid., p.332. Later some of the students distributed copies of a passage from the Republic describing the methods used by Sophists to corrupt young men. The description offered by Plato, in Bloom's assessment, perfectly captured the circumstances of the moment. Bloom goes on to say that in reading the Republic, the small group of students setting themselves apart from the masses of protestors '...had learned from this old book what was going on and had gained real distance on it, had had an experience of liberation.'Ibid., p.333. This quotation goes to the heart of Bloom's conception of a liberal education. He proclaims further:

Men may live more truly and fully in reading Plato and Shakespeare than at any other time, because then they are participating in essential being and are forgetting about their accidental lives. The fact that this kind of humanity exists or existed, and that we can somehow still touch it with the tips of our outstretched fingers, makes our imperfect humanity, which we can no longer bear, tolerable. The books in their objective beauty are still there, and we must help protect and cultivate the delicate tendrils reaching out toward them through the unfriendly soil of students' souls. Ibid., p.380.

Human nature, Bloom hypothesises, has not changed. The essential questions that we need to ask as human beings are the same as they were in the days

of Plato and Aristotle. The best way of addressing these questions is still the 'good old Great Books approach'. Ibid., p.344. Making the Great Books a

pivotal part of the student curriculum is the surest way, Bloom claims, of exciting and satisfying students, of finding a way into their hearts and allowing them to appreciate the special knowledge and experience they can gain from university study. Compare, *ibid.*, pp.344-345.

Literacy, Knowledge and Education: Evaluating Bloom's Ideal

Bloom's call for a return to the classics is, of course, not a new one. Social and educational critics of various political persuasions have been pushing a similar line of argument for some years now. To cite but one example, Mortimer Adler, to whom Bloom makes only brief and not especially complimentary reference, *Ibid.*, p.54. has created an industry with his 'Great Books of

the Western World' series. For Adler's views on Bloom, see Lyon, J. 'America's Teacher: Mortimer

J. Adler, the Nation's Self-Appointed Teacher for Most of His 85 Years, Takes on the "Late Bloomers" of Academe', in Stone, *op. cit.* In the United States, debates over what

students should read (and why) have been waged to feverish levels. For the past three years, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and the *New York Review of Books* have regularly featured articles which deal with this issue. See, for example, Searle, J. 'The Storm Over the University', *New York Review of Books*, 6 December 1990; Connor, W.R. 'Milton as Misogynist, Shakespeare as Elitist, Homer as Pornographer', *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 5 December 1990; Graff, G. 'Colleges Are Depriving Students of a Connected View of Scholarship', *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 13 February 1991; Bernays, A. 'I Don't Want to Read a Novel Passed by a Board of Good Taste', *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 6 March 1991. The much publicised change at Stanford University from a core Western civilization course to a broader based course entitled 'Cultures, Ideas and Values' has been systematically attacked by D'Souza and others. D'Souza, *op.*

cit.

There appear to be two main antagonistic groups in the debate. On the one hand, there are those (like Bloom) who champion the traditional classic texts, including such philosophers as Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Hegel, Marx, and Nietzsche, together with literary figures such as Shakespeare, Dickens, Proust, Joyce, and Tolstoy. Works by

these authors are considered 'great' by virtue of their long-standing influence on the course of Western thought and culture, and for the essential truths about the nature of the human condition these books are said to contain. Compare, Searle op. cit.

On the other side of the debate, a number of academics have pointed out that the so-called 'Great Books' often seem to be those written by white, middle-class males, with very little representation of works by women and authors from ethnic minority groups. See Giroux, H.A. 'Series Introduction: Literacy, Difference, and the Politics of Border Crossing', in Mitchell, C. and Weiler, K. (eds.) *Rewriting Literacy*, New York, Bergin and Garvey, 1991. The entire tradition of a liberal education in the Bloomian, 'Great Books' sense, is perceived by many these days to be elitist and oppressive. White, middle-class males, it has been argued, have held proportionately greater political power in Western societies than other groups; it is no accident, therefore (critics of the traditionalists add), that the curriculum should reflect and reinforce this power in both content and style. Those adopting this (or a similar) pattern of reasoning have usually called for either an abolition of core curricula altogether and an entirely restructured form of pedagogy, or (more frequently) a re-organisation of core reading requirements to incorporate texts by a wider cross-section of authors.

In New Zealand, the debate, while seemingly ignored by most academics in the field of education, developed some new twists among English teachers and literary critics with the introduction of a revised English syllabus in secondary schools not long ago. Here, a key question was whether to focus on 'great' literature from overseas or to devote special attention to works by New Zealand authors. See Department of Education, 'Forms 6 and 7 English Syllabus: Draft', Wellington, 1988; Moses, op. cit.; Rathgen, op. cit.

Along with many who have surveyed the debate (with interest and, at times, amusement) from the sidelines, I am suspicious of extremes at both ends of the scale. Over-zealous exponents of both positions, it seems to me, ignore the importance of examining the way in which books are read. While the problem of deciding what books should be read by university students is a vital one, it is equally crucial that we consider how and why we wish

students to read the texts that are set for them.

Bloom takes it for granted that certain books are unequivocally valuable. Foremost among these hallowed texts is Plato's Republic, which Bloom refers to as 'the book on education'. Bloom, op. cit., p.381. By happy coincidence, the Republic has served as the focus for discussion in a course I have taught at graduate level this year. As students who have taken this course will attest, this classic has indeed been a marvelous text for philosophical analysis and debate. Plato, in a single dialogue, covers many themes of fundamental importance for educators. Reading the Republic provides much food for thought on such contemporary topics as censorship and gender relations. Permeating the more specific themes in the book are some of the most profound ontological, metaphysical, epistemological, ethical, and political questions: What does it mean to be a human being? What is the nature of justice? How are we to distinguish between knowledge and opinion? How are we to understand the nature of reality? What is the relationship between the state and the individual? How ought we to structure society? There is more than enough in this one text for a lifetime of study.

Similar mileage can be gained from approaching other writers noted by Bloom: if one wishes to understand New Zealand politicians, there is probably no better place to turn to than Machiavelli's The Prince; I would hazard a guess that this comment might apply equally well to politicians in other countries! if a framework for working through social and economic issues relating to New Zealand's Employment Contracts Act is sought, Marx has much to offer; and so the list goes.

Care needs to be taken, however, in making such sweeping statements about the value of particular texts. For those of us working with the Republic this year in the graduate class, it would be more precise to say that Plato's text has value for a particular group of people, studying the text in a particular way, in a specific social context. Compare, Levine, K. The Social Context of Literacy, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986; Street, B. Literacy in Theory and Practice, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984; Pattison, R. On Literacy, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1982; Graff, H.J. The Literacy Myth, New York, Academic Press, 1979. We assign value to the text in recognising what we are able to do with it under the circumstances in which we find ourselves (and which we, in part, create). The text

itself cannot proclaim its value or worth: we must create something worthwhile in our reading of it. See further, Roberts, P.R. 'Literacy: A Philosophical Perspective', paper presented at the NZARE national conference, Auckland, 9-12 December 1990. Our reading of the text, moreover, cannot be explained simply in terms of the mechanics of decoding print; rather, to read a book is to engage in a definite set of social practices. See Street, B. Literacy in Theory and Practice, Cambridge,

Cambridge

University Press, 1984; Lankshear, C. with Lawler, M. *Literacy, Schooling and Revolution*, London, Falmer Press, 1987.

In the case of the graduate class, then, (the nature of) our 'reading' of Plato's *Republic* is defined by, among other things, a complex web of policies, procedures and practices associated with university life. These include: the completion and marking of assignments relating to the text; interactions between group members in class sessions devoted to debating aspects of the book; the construction of course outlines, study guides, lectures, and notes before, during and after classes; and so on. Collectively, these procedures denote what Colin Lankshear would call a particular form of literacy - an 'identifiable...set of reading and writing practices governed by a conception of what to read, when, and why'. Lankshear, C. 'Reading and Righting Wrongs: Literacy and the Underclass', (a draft version of a paper submitted for publication), 1989, p.27. See also, Lankshear, C. 'Illiteracy, Improper Literacy and the Development of an Underclass', paper presented at 'Toward Successful Schooling': a conference sponsored by the Royal Commission on Social Policy, Wellington, 12-13 March, 1988; Lankshear with Lawler, *ibid.* Of course, our reading of the *Republic* is not all of a piece: each person in the class brings a distinct body of knowledge and experience to bear on their reading of the text, and each person emerges at the end of the year with a unique conception of what the book means to them.

These comments are in tension with the model of reading advanced in *The Closing of the American Mind*. On the question of how students ought to read, Bloom issues some concise, but very specific, advice. He recommends

...reading certain generally recognized classic texts, just reading them, letting them dictate what the questions are and the method of approaching them - not forcing them into categories we make up, not treating them as historical products, but trying to read them as their authors wished them to be read. Bloom, *op. cit.*, p.344.

On one level, I agree with Bloom here. The endless dissection of texts can sometimes destroy them, and we can lose sight of the whole in painstakingly analysing the parts. Nevertheless, I find Bloom's proposition problematic. In the first place, the supposition that a book can be read with a view to letting the text dictate the questions that are asked of it is questionable. Books do not ask questions of us; we (if we are so inclined) ask questions of them. Bloom's statement denies, or ignores, the role played by the reader in constructing meaning in reading a text. The literature on texts and the construction of meaning is extensive. Seminal essays include: Foucault, M. 'What is an Author?'; Barthes, R. 'From Work to Text'; and Said, E.W. 'The Text, the World, the Critic' (all in Harari, J.V. (ed.) *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, London, Methuen, 1980). For work on texts,

hermeneutics and epistemology, see Olson, D.R. 'Mining the Human Sciences: Some Relations Between Hermeneutics and Epistemology', *Interchange*, vol.17, no.2, 1986; Olson, D.R. 'Interpreting Texts and Interpreting Nature: The Effects of Literacy on Hermeneutics and Epistemology', in Saljo, R. (ed.) *The Written Word: Studies in Literate Thought and Action*, Berlin, Springer and Verlag, 1988. On literacy, texts and discourses, see Gee, J.P. 'What Is Literacy?', *Journal of Education*, vol.171, no.1, 1989; Gee, J.P. *Social Linguistics and Literacies: Ideologies in Discourses*, London, Falmer Press, 1990. The problem of interpreting school textbooks has been addressed in de Castell, S. 'Teaching the Textbook: Teacher/Text Authority and the Problem of Interpretation', *Linguistics and Education*, vol.2, 1990. For an excellent overview of the ways in which readers and writers construct meaning from and for texts, see Spivey, N.N. 'Transforming Texts: Constructive Processes in Reading and Writing', *Written Communication*, vol.7, no.2, 1990. To make sense of anything we read, it is necessary to construct 'categories' for understanding the words of the text. Compare, Rorty, R. 'Straussianism, Democracy, and Allan Bloom 1: That Old Time Philosophy', in Stone, op. cit., pp.100-101. We can certainly try to 'read [books]...as their authors wished them to be read', but once authors are no longer around to (supposedly) eliminate our confusion, how are we to know what the intended meaning was in a text?

One answer, of course, is that some people do know and that those who suggest that the meaning of a text is not clear, or that there might be multiple 'readings' (interpretations) of a book, have simply failed to grasp the author's intentions. I suspect that Bloom subscribes to this view. Such a perspective would be in keeping with the thrust of his argument throughout the rest of *The Closing of the American Mind*. For Bloom, absolutes do exist - there is such a thing as 'truth'. Books, presumably, are no exception. A text, Bloom seems to imply, has a single, absolute, fixed meaning: either one knows what this is, or one does not.

The cohesiveness of Bloom's entire argument about the worth of a liberal education built around the Great Books depends on this assumption. If there exists not one (absolute) meaning in a text but (the possibility of) several, then no one interpretation can be judged as closer to the truth than any other other. This means that a feminist reading of Plato's *Republic* or Rousseau's *Emile* is as valid as Bloom's reading of these texts. Likewise, those who analyse Nietzsche from the far Left must be seen as having no greater claim to having understood the 'truth' of his theories than those who do so from the extreme Right. But Bloom can have not a bar of this, for if all interpretations are equally valid, or if validity is determined on any other basis than the correspondence between one's own interpretation of a text and the 'actual' meaning of that text, then the very point of having a set list of classics for students to read is undermined. The classics, as Bloom himself describes them, ought to be at

the core of a programme of liberal education because they have something to offer which many other books do not. They are better, in certain ways, than other texts (otherwise why not simply advise students to read any books, since nothing more can be gained from reading one text than any other). As far as Bloom is concerned, the classics give us greater insight into the meaning of life than other books; they allow us to participate in 'essential being' Bloom, op. cit., p.380. - they address 'the order of the whole of nature and man's place in it'. Ibid., p.372. If they cannot do this for everybody - if Plato says everything to one person but nothing to another - then Bloom's ideal collapses. The Republic must be able to speak the same truth to all who read it - in whatever historical, cultural or social context - or its claim (or rather Bloom's claim on its behalf) to special, classic status is lost. For Bloom, the classics have an objective beauty Ibid., p.380. - an objective value - which transcends history, and this is precisely why they should be at the heart of university education.

On the face of it, Bloom advances a strikingly passive model of reading. Students are to approach classic texts with a sense of reverence, reading them for the absolute truths they are said to contain. The text is supposed to dictate the important questions to the reader (rather than the other way round). The text itself, not the student, is to define the

parameters for study and understanding. Bloom makes little mention of what it might mean to read a book critically - indeed, there is an implicit assumption in much of what he says that such an approach is inadvisable, at least as far as some students are concerned. This stance is interesting, particularly in light of the attention that has been recently devoted to (exploring, developing and enhancing) 'critical literacy', See all essays in Lankshear, C. and McLaren, P. (eds.) *Critical Literacy: Politics, Praxis and the Postmodern*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1991; Giroux, H.A. 'Literacy and the Pedagogy of Voice and Political Empowerment', *Educational Theory*, vol.38, no.1, 1988; Kretovics, J.R. 'Critical Literacy: Challenging the Assumptions of Mainstream Educational Theory', *Journal of Education*, vol.167, no.2, 1985; McLeod, A. 'Critical Literacy: Taking Control of Our Own Lives', *Language Arts*, vol.63, no.1, 1986; Fueyo, J.M. 'Technical Literacy Versus Critical Literacy in Adult Basic Education', *Journal of Education*, vol.170, no.1, 1988; Graff, H.J. 'Critical Literacy Versus Cultural Literacy - Reading Signs of the Times?', *Interchange*, vol.20, no.1, 1989. and I would like to spend some time considering the ramifications of Bloom's position. By way of initial comparison, let me briefly mention one or two points made by Paulo Freire about critical reading and its place in the university.

According to Freire, a reader should never simply accept what has been presented in a book, as though 'mesmerized by a magical force'. Freire, P. 'The Act of Study', in his *The Politics of Education*,

London, MacMillan, 1985, p.2. Instead, in facing a text he or she ought to adopt a critical, restless, curious disposition, a 'permanent intellectual disquiet'.Ibid., p.3. The reader must be ready to not only be challenged by what he or she is reading, but also to challenge the texts he or she confronts. Whenever possible, one should seek a global view a book (rather than a fragmented one), identifying, ordering and structuring the major themes in the text. Without losing sight of the 'total picture' presented by the text, it is worthwhile for the reader to respond to specific passages which trigger 'deeper reflection on any topic'.Ibid. For Freire, reading involves 'seizing' the text and wrestling with its themes, ideas and complexities: 'The thing is to fight with the text, even though loving it...'.Freire, P. and Shor, I. A Pedagogy for Liberation, London, MacMillan, 1987, p.11. It is through engaging with texts in this critical manner that reading becomes a aesthetic experience, something which is difficult but joyous and beautiful.See Horton, M. and Freire, P. We Make the Road By Walking, eds. B.Bell, J.Gaventa and J.Peters, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1990, pp.23-27.

Freire consistently underscores the importance of linking 'text' with 'context' in reading.See, for instance, Freire, P. and Macedo, D. Literacy: Reading the Word and the World, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987, p.133. This entails not only attempting to grasp something of the historical, social, political, and cultural conditions under which a text is produced, but also striving to relate the content of the text to our - i.e. the reader's - context.See Dillon, D. 'Reading the Word and the World: An Interview with Paulo Freire', Language Arts, vol.62, no.1, 1985, pp.18-19; Horton and Freire, op. cit., p.31. Books must be studied not as empty abstractions, nor as works which deal with ideas unconnected to our own struggles, issues and problems; instead, a definite effort must be made to relate what is being read to something in the realm of our experience or social life. We ought to read a text, Freire argues, in order to understand a certain context. To be able to do this requires some knowledge of the person who wrote the book and the historical conditions under which the text was authored:

I cannot just suggest the students read Gramsci. I feel obliged to say something about the time and space of Gramsci. I cannot just translate Gramsci into Portuguese because in order to make this translation, it's necessary for me to understand the context in which he wrote and thought.Horton and Freire, op. cit., p.32.

In discussing university reading lists, Freire maintains that it is a

mistake to prescribe large numbers of books to be read in short periods of time. In such cases, books are 'more to be devoured than truly read or studied'. Freire, P. 'The Importance of the Act of Reading', *Journal of Education*, vol.165, no.1, 1983, p.9. 'Truly' reading a text - i.e. critically reading the work - takes time and serious study. It is not that Freire is against students being required to read certain texts in particular fields; rather, his point is that often there is an obsession with quantity, rather than quality. If students are to seriously, critically, study the texts pertinent to their field of study, then the number of books that can be read in a year or a semester is limited. Freire supports the reading of classic texts, but stipulates that these works should receive the same critical treatment as all other books. Ibid. He is opposed to any form of discrimination against certain texts:

Of course, the students have to read. You need to read, to read the classics in your field. The students have to read Marx, for example, independent of their rejection or acceptance of the Marxist rigor. What for me is impossible is to deny the existence of the Positivists, of the Structuralists, of the Functionalists. You see, then, I don't accept a kind of scientific racism, where some of the classics are not allowed to be read, not considered part of the fundamental literature. Freire and Shor, op. cit., p.83.

Hence, Freire, like Bloom, sees the reading of classic texts as a necessary and potentially worthwhile activity. But where for Bloom this implies absorbing and accepting the apparent truths embedded in these texts, for Freire the worth of classical texts is only realised through not (necessarily) accepting what they have to say. Bloom argues against treating Great Books as historical products; Freire explicitly supports such an approach. For Bloom, it is the books themselves that have an objective beauty; for Freire, it is the act of critically reading a text that is beautiful. See Horton and Freire, op. cit., p.23.

In some respects, the ostensibly passive model of reading advocated by Bloom is illusory - even on his own terms. Bloom expects at least some reflection on the part of students reading the Great Books, for these books are meant to provide the foundation for choosing and living a good life. Bloom, op. cit., p.345.

Bloom surely cannot demand of his students that they make informed choices about the lives they will lead without encouraging them to develop certain 'critical' capacities. Making a choice involves deciding, through reflection and deliberation, upon a particular course of action among two or more alternatives. But where is the student in Bloom's ideal programme of liberal education going to learn how to reflect and deliberate, if the Great Books at the centre of such a programme are to be read passively rather than critically? He cannot assume that university teachers will

become entirely responsible for instilling a critical disposition in their students, for it is likely that the teachers themselves will need to make critical reference to the classics in demonstrating examples of reflective and deliberative thought. A completely passive approach to reading the classics will also not allow for the submission of a single essay or assignment requiring students to 'critically evaluate' the ideas of an author of a Great Book.

Such speculation, though, ought not to be taken too far. On the face of it, Bloom does appear to promote a passive approach to reading the classics. Yet, at one point in the book, he announces:

True liberal education requires that the student's whole life be radically changed by it, that what he learns may affect his action, his tastes, his choices, that no previous attachment be immune to examination and re-evaluation. Liberal education puts everything at risk and requires students who are able to risk everything. Ibid., p.370.

The notion of putting 'everything at risk' hardly seems to support a passive stance toward the world, and Bloom's suggestion that under true liberal education 'no previous attachment be immune to examination and re-evaluation' makes it difficult to accept that he never intended students to question what they were reading. Bloom is concerned, as much as anything else, to counter what he sees as the excesses of deconstructionist literary theory, and in analysing his statements on reading we do well to take this into account. Many critics of *The Closing of the American Mind* omit to mention that Bloom, having just endorsed 'the good old Great Books approach' as the 'only serious solution' to the problems of the university, proceeds to lay out some of the major criticisms of this approach, even admitting that he actually agrees with these objections! Ibid., p.344. He paints his picture of an educational alternative in broad brushstrokes and should not be too strongly attacked for deficiencies in parts of his analysis without due attention being paid to his vision as a whole. Bloom's overall aim in the book, as I see it, is to convince us that we have become too relativistic in our thinking. His proposal for a Great Books programme is but a part (and an imperfect part, by Bloom's own admission) of a wider effort to re-establish the search for truth as a fundamental goal for humanity.

Notwithstanding these cautionary remarks, it cannot be over-emphasised that in many respects the Freirean perspective on how students ought to read is in direct opposition to Bloom's recommendations. Freire's message is unequivocal:

No matter the level or the age of the students we teach, from

preschool to graduate school, reading critically is absolutely important and fundamental. Dillon, op. cit., p.19.

Again, if we consider all of the possible implications of this conviction, some serious questions can be raised. Where does one 'draw the line' between being passive and being critical? On the Freirean view, it would seem that we are being advised to take nothing for granted, to question everything, to always adopt a critical posture in the act of reading. But this, if taken to absurd limits, would barely allow us to make reasonable progress in (say) studying for a university degree, for all of our time would be taken up with asking ever-deeper questions of a text and developing increasingly critical analyses of its arguments. Temporary suspension of critical examination of the parts is often necessary if we are to move toward a mature, critical understanding of the whole. I cannot hope to acquire a well-rounded, critical but balanced, understanding of Plato's Republic if I spend all of my time exploring his specific statements on censorship: to make sense of these, they must be seen in light of broader arguments in the text and evaluated in these terms. At another level, if I wish to attain a critical understanding of Plato's work as a whole, I must not devote all of my efforts to one dialogue. And if anything like a connected understanding of the history of Western philosophy is desired, it would be foolish to dwell forever on the work of one theorist. Critical reading (and criticism more generally) cannot proceed without certain assumptions and ideas having already been presupposed; ironically, criticism, for its very existence, always requires a degree of acceptance. The idea of critical reading itself rests upon the assumption that a critical approach to texts is desirable or worthwhile.

Freire would probably agree with most of these points (though I am sure he would not simply accept them all uncritically!). He does stress the importance of pursuing a well-rounded, 'global' understanding of the texts we read, and he would, I am certain, concede that his theories, in common

with all others, depend upon a particular set of pre-held ideas - in his case, ideas about the nature of reality, knowledge, what it means to be a human being, and so on. Just as Bloom's specific statements on reading and books must be considered in relation to his broader critique of culture and society, so too must we see Freire's theory of critical reading as part of a more expansive call for social transformation through critical reflection and action. See Freire, P. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1972a; Freire, P. *Cultural Action for Freedom*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1972b; Freire, P. *Education: The Practice of Freedom*, London, Writers and Readers, 1974; Mackie, R. (ed.) *Literacy and Revolution: The Pedagogy of Paulo Freire*, London, Pluto Press, 1980; Roberts, P.R. 'Paulo Freire and Science Education', *Delta*, no.41, 1989.

Where does all of this leave us as far as the debate about reading in universities is concerned? In the first place, if we take on board what

both Bloom and Freire have said, we must not abandon the classics. If we accept anything like the Freirean argument on critical reading, however, we cannot elevate these books to a position of absolute privilege over other texts. From a Freirean point of view, the so-called 'Great Books' can never be above criticism. Extending Freire's line of thought, I submit that one of the criteria for describing our reading of a particular text as worthwhile ought to be the extent to which we find ourselves opposing the author's arguments. I find myself in substantial disagreement with much of what Plato has to say in the Republic, but this does not make studying his text any less worthwhile. In fact, for me, it is precisely this disagreement, and my response to it, which indicates the educative value of the experience. The more I am able to engage myself with the ideas of another, and in so doing sharpen and re-work my own ideas, the better the educational experience.

With these (and earlier) comments in mind, some of the requests that have been made for a wider range of authors in core curricula warrant careful consideration. Can all students always gain more from reading Plato, Shakespeare, and all the others on Bloom's implied list of 'greats', than they might from tackling less well-known, contemporary, perhaps local texts? I believe not. A text that is 'close to home', related to a way of life with which we are familiar or to a set of ideas that are important to us, can often inspire more searching questions of the soul than a book that seems distant or remote from us. Indeed, as Aronowitz and Giroux point out, some of the books which end up on lists of 'classics' start out as popular novels (the work of Dickens being one example), with narratives

grounded in the everyday lives of their readers. Aronowitz, S. and Giroux, H.A. 'Schooling, Culture, and Literacy in the Age of Broken Dreams: A Review of Bloom and Hirsch', Harvard Educational Review, vol.58, no.2, 1988. The potential value of (reading) the classics cited by Bloom is not in question in this paper; I am merely suggesting that there may be books additional to those so loved by Bloom that might serve equally well as texts for study and debate.

But we need to go a little further than this. The process through which something comes to be called a 'classic' is ripe for critical inspection. I have considerable sympathy for feminists, Marxists, and others who have argued that the construction of lists of 'Great Books' is an interest-serving activity - certainly it cannot be a neutral process. Compare, *ibid.*; Cope, B. and Kalantzis, M. 'Contradictions in the Canon: Nationalism and the Cultural Literacy Debate', *Discourse*, vol.12, no.2, 1992; Garbutcheon Singh, M. 'A Counter-Hegemonic Orientation to Literacy in Australia', *Journal of Education*, vol.171, no.2, 1989; McLaren, P.L. 'Culture or Canon? Critical Pedagogy and the Politics of Literacy', *Harvard Educational Review*, vol.58, no.2, 1988. There has never been a finite list of classics which everyone (even at one time) agrees students must read, though certain groups over the course of history have without doubt had a greater say than others over what is deemed to be

important and worth studying as far as reading material is concerned. This applies not only to the 'Great' books, but to books generally: the production and teaching of texts, a number of theorists have argued, has always been a thoroughly political process, serving the interests of management over workers, men over women, and so on. See Anyon, J. 'Ideology and United States History Textbooks', Harvard Educational Review, vol.49, no.3, 1979; Apple, M. 'The Politics of Text Publishing', Educational Theory, vol.34, no.4, 1984; Luke, A. Literacy, Textbooks and Ideology: Postwar Literacy Instruction and the Mythology of Dick and Jane, London, Falmer Press, 1988; Lankshear with Lawler, op. cit., pp.155-158.

Some of the solutions that have been offered to 'correct' these imbalances, though, have been highly controversial. To prescribe a text simply because it has been written by a person from a particular gender or race, without considering its literary or philosophical merit; to exclude certain texts on the grounds that they do not 'fit' the lecturer's personal political perspective; to ignore whole sections of texts because the lecturer finds them 'offensive' (sexist, racist, homophobic, colonialist, etc.); to inhibit free and frank discussion of texts by allowing or rewarding only those criticisms which are compatible with a given political perspective:

all of these practices come under the umbrella of what has popularly become known as 'political correctness'. See Bernays, op. cit.; D'Souza, op. cit.; Asante, M.F. 'The Escape into Hyperbole: Communication and Political Correctness', Journal of Communication, vol.42, no.2, 1992; O'Keefe, B.J. 'Sense and Sensitivity', Journal of Communication, vol.42, no.2, 1992; Dennis, E.E. 'Freedom of Expression, the University, and the Media', Journal of Communication, vol.42, no.2, 1992. The evolution of this term has been charted by Whitney and Wartella, who note:

Where the popular writing of this decade locates "PC-ness" as a derisive term (wherein minority positions silence majority positions because they don't have the correct politics, they don't favour the appropriate groups of blacks, women, gays, lesbians, the handicapped, and so forth), it earlier referred to a position...of liberal, progressive, and humanitarian concerns for the poor, homeless, disenfranchised groups of society. The image of the current PC framing is that American universities are now adrift in ideological battles and no longer places of academic freedom, tolerance, or justice. Whitney, D.C. and Wartella, E. 'Media Coverage of the "Political Correctness" Debate', Journal of Communication, vol.42, no.2, 1992, pp.85-86.

Bloom, I'm sure, would view the debate that has ensued since the publication of *The Closing of the American Mind* with a mixture of horror and amusement. His book takes a sideways jab at curriculum developments

which some would regard as precursors to the 'politically correct' decisions of recent years. See, for example, Bloom, op. cit., pp.65-66. For Bloom, the only legitimate basis for determining whether a book is to be included in a curriculum or not is the quality of the text, which, for him, is fixed and absolute: some books have immense academic merit, others are demonstrably inferior. See Bloom's comments in Stone, op. cit., pp.368-369. From a Freirean point of view, the issue is not quite so clear-cut. Freire sees all decisions pertaining to curriculum policy and practice as necessarily 'political'. Compare, Freire and Shor, op. cit.; Horton and Freire, op. cit.;

Freire, P. 'Education: Domestication or Liberation?', *Prospects*, vol.2, no.2, 1972c. Decisions about what students ought to read will always be underpinned by particular conceptions of what is good or worthwhile in

human life; an educator cannot but bring his or her values, attitudes, beliefs, and assumptions about the world to bear on curriculum decisions. From our earlier outline of his ideas, it is clear that Freire would oppose any attempt at preventing students from reading texts that do not mesh with a lecturer's personal politics. It almost goes without saying that he is opposed to any deliberate obstruction of critical thought. Freire would say, I think, that the debate over 'political correctness' focuses rather too much on questions of content (i.e. what students should read) and devotes too little attention to questions of process (i.e. how students should read). To a certain extent, it does not matter to Freire what the text is. It may be Marx's *Capital*, or it may be a six-page transcript of an interview with a Brazilian peasant. See Freire and Shor, op. cit., pp. 83-85. but whatever the text, it ought to be read critically.

The fury that has been unleashed in arguments about political correctness is just one element in the growing tide of dissatisfaction with universities. Bloom's book has been pivotal in this assault, but the differences between recent critiques of the university are as significant as their similarities. Compare, for instance, Smith, P. *Killing the Spirit*, New York, Viking, 1990; Wilshire, B. *The Moral Collapse of the University: Professionalism, Purity, and Alienation*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1990; Jacoby, R. *The Last Intellectuals*, New York, Basic Books, 1987; Sykes, C.J. *ProfScam: Professors and the Demise of Higher Education*, Washington, D.C., Regnery Gateway, 1988; Agger, B. *The Decline of Discourse*, London, Falmer Press, 1990. Bloom's central thesis in *The Closing of the American Mind* is that the search for truth - through the time-tested means of a traditional liberal education based upon a reading of 'Great Books' - needs to be renewed. He makes it plain that this will not be an easy task, given the relativistic, superficial world that he sees us living in today. Against the current of his time, Bloom is quite happy to say that some opinions, some cultures, some books, some ways of living one's life, are

better than others.

In a single text, Bloom has addressed some of the most complex issues and haunting problems in the contemporary Western world. He raises all of the 'big' questions (as he portrays them) about life, and lines these up against the changing face of higher education. To me this is one of the book's principal strengths. With the ever-increasing tendency toward specialisation, it takes considerable courage to cover such a broad

territory as Bloom does in *The Closing of the American Mind*. The ironies in the text, in a curious way, only add to its appeal. Bloom decries the decline in academic standards in educational institutions, yet commits elementary academic 'sins' in failing to acknowledge exact sources for information and in not supporting many of the claims he makes with appropriate evidence or substantive argument. He covers almost everything in the book, and ends up discussing nothing in depth.

I believe that Bloom's conception of reading is seriously flawed, and I strongly disagree with many points in his analysis of the problems of modern society. But, taking Freire's advice to heart (and disregarding Bloom's), it might be said that to 'fight' with the ideas presented in *The Closing of the American Mind* is to affirm the potential value of the book. People from almost every political persuasion have found something in Bloom's text with which to engage their critical energies. While it is indisputable that ideas matter to Bloom, Atlas, J. 'Chicago's Grumpy Guru: Best-Selling Professor Allan Bloom and the Chicago Intellectuals', in Stone, op. cit., p.69. the vigour displayed by those who have so vehemently criticised him is evidence that ideas still matter to a good number of other people as well.

LITERACY, EDUCATION AND KNOWLEDGE: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF
ALLAN BLOOM'S THE CLOSING OF THE AMERICAN MIND

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