

Notes and Comments

Rumblings from the Ivory Tower: A Review of Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*¹

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Any reasonable consideration of Professor Allan Bloom's book, *The Closing of the American Mind*, must deal from the outset with two difficulties. Its materials, if not its focus, are very broad and hence rather complex. And the rapid notoriety of the work has produced a host of champions and detractors, equally vehement and loud, making a coolly objective, analytic, and dispassionate assessment a problem for any reviewer.

To point out these two difficulties, however, is to underline a third—perhaps less of a difficulty than a paradox, or at least a puzzle. How has a writer, browsing so eclectically amid the fields of Western philosophy and literature, managed to write a book that has become a publisher's dream—a best-seller? Any book that ushers up so relentless an indictment of modern higher education in America might be expected to draw the attention of the educational fraternity, but how does one account for the book's appeal to the broader reading public? An answer to this last question may provide an avenue to the book's major themes.

Of course, one could point out that the number and variety of criticisms of American education in recent years are an indication that the subject has ready appeal. And it is also true that once any item—a book, an idea, a piece of clothing, a catch phrase—becomes fashionable by some odd chemistry or other, its intrinsic merits are less significant than its value as a symbol.

Neither of these considerations, however, produces anything close to a full answer to questions about the book's appeal. Rather it would seem that *The Closing of the American Mind* catches some of the qualities that, from all reports, make Professor Bloom engrossing and stimulating as a classroom teacher: a passionate belief in the

¹ Simon & Schuster, New York, 1987.

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importance of ideas—even ideas whose importance may be self-evident only to a few people like Bloom—and yet a manner of posing questions about the significance of those ideas that makes them seem vital to an understanding of ourselves and our society.

For Bloom, the gyroscope of anything that calls itself a university must be the liberal arts. This means not just a basis in the study of the values and ideas that have intrigued men perennially and developed their civilization. It also means a recognition of a hierarchy among those values and ideas, and a conviction that such a hierarchy is absolutely essential to the health of that civilization. Society in the large may be expected to be somewhat cavalier in its treatment of these matters, though in better times it will give them grudging respect. When the deadly plague of relativism infects the universities, as Bloom believes it has, they founder and become exaggerated mirrors of the confusion without.

This, in essence, is Bloom's argument. Under the influence of this miasma, we come to see all questions of value as self-regarding; "... the self is the modern substitute for soul," as Bloom puts it.³ The university's task is "always to maintain the permanent questions front and center" (p. 252). When, instead, the university becomes, with society, a co-conspirator in ignoring the "permanent questions," or in making the answers to them dependent on whim, wish, or will, there is no gyroscope, and the whole meaning of education becomes trivialized—or worse. "The old tragic conflicts," says Bloom, "reappear newly labeled as assurances: 'I'm OK, you're OK'" (p. 228). In its attempt to answer a host of practical social needs, the university has neglected its higher and more vital calling: to provide students with experiences that they will not find elsewhere. For all their present prestige and wealth, the universities have forgotten the true riches that are their only justification for that eminence. "We are like ignorant shepherds," Bloom says, "living on a site where great civilizations once flourished" (p. 239).

Much of Bloom's attitude is summarized later in the book, when he writes:

..the university, of all institutions, is most dependent on the deepest beliefs of those who participate in its peculiar life. Our present educational problems cannot seriously be attributed to bad administrators, weakness of will, lack of discipline, lack of money, insufficient attention to the three R's, or any of the

³ Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987, p. 173.

other common explanations that indicate things will be set aright if we professors would just pull up our socks. All these things are the result of a deeper lack of belief in the university's vocation . . . Thought is all in all for universities. Today there is precious little thought about universities, and what there is does not unequivocally support the university's traditional role (p. 312).

And that traditional vocation is to coax, impel, convince each generation to address the "permanent questions," an exercise that may deliver us from our worst selves by giving us a chance to reflect, to choose, and to choose wisely. What Bloom calls the "crisis in liberal education" is a result of devaluing the genuine academic coin, and the result is "an incoherence and incompatibility among the first principles with which we interpret the world, an intellectual crisis of the greatest magnitude, which constitutes the crisis of our civilization" (p. 346).

In presenting this indictment, Bloom has not bothered to tread lightly, and a lot of toes bear the imprint of his boots. Students and their parents, professors and administrators, feminists, sociologists, teachers of Black Studies, philosophers—if one finds one's foes pilloried neatly and exposed in the stocks to Bloom's scorn, one is apt to find a few friends sitting no more comfortably there. From purveyors of rock music to pundits of social psychology, many have occasion to feel among the insulted and injured. The very breadth and sharpness of the charges make the inevitable questions all the more necessary to face squarely. Is Bloom merely yearning for the "good old days"? Are the materialism and relativism of our times really more prevalent than heretofore? Is the call for a commitment to values and the insistence upon the need to establish a hierarchy of them simply a cloak for a kind of elitism? And, perhaps more pointedly: Were Bloom's painful experiences at Cornell University during the period of the student upheavals in the late '60s, was his disgust at the spectacle of colleagues surrendering cravenly to mob pressures and then justifying their lack of spine by appeals to a higher social morality, is his recognition that the universities underwent changes then that left scars still marring their faces—is this the root of his grievances, a private wound that finds its salve and catharsis in public excoriation of a host of supposed villains?

Certainly Bloom's Cornell experience had an emotional impact that seems to have shaken him deeply. One cannot read those

sections of the book without sensing the mingled pain and anger that those memories evoke. But that is not to say that those reactions are not justified, and I must confess to feeling much sympathy in reading passages that recall my own experiences broadly similar to those that Bloom is recounting.

However, perhaps the deeper and nobler cause of Bloom's disquiet is more the reaction of the spurned lover. Perhaps, like Eliot's J. Alfred Prufrock, he has bared his soul, put his "overwhelming question" to the loved one (here his students) only to have her yawn in his face and blandly suggest that he is missing the point. But if that "question" is what Bloom maintains it is, we *are* the poorer for not granting it the respect it merits. The popularity of the book suggests that his concern about education as it can and should be has found an audience that, one assumes, must share a considerable number of Bloom's concerns—and perhaps that fact, by itself, would imply that the course of the disease that the good doctor is diagnosing may not be as bleak as he is telling us.

It is true, too, that Bloom has gained attention for his ideas by verbal shock tactics. One does find evidence in the book for the disclaimer he made to one reviewer, " 'I'm not a writer.' "⁴ But what he lacks in grace of style and careful attention to sequence of ideas he supplies in pyrotechnics that, when the sudden light and noise of the explosions have receded, do frequently leave us with the kind of insights, or at least questions, that stick. The large generalizations, the dogmatic assumptions, the accusations and name-calling, the occasional reveling in cleverness and paradox for their own sake are not the marks of a careful writer. They are, however, effective. If Bloom is quite consciously swapping a more impeccable and judicious style for one that conveys something of the visceral intensity of his feelings and concerns, the popularity of his book is some evidence that his technique has had at least that measure of success. All really good teachers have something of the entertainer and showman in them. The gadfly techniques that Bloom uses in his classes he can apparently translate in considerable measure onto the printed page.

What I find most trenchant and compelling in *The Closing of the American Mind* is its underlying conviction that civilized men must live by standards and values that gain their authenticity from the

⁴ James Atlas, "Chicago's Grumpy Guru," *New York Times Magazine*, Jan. 3, 1988, p. 31.

long march of human experience, and that determinism and relativism are not highways either to the good or useful life. Bloom deplors the "tendency in the social sciences to prefer deterministic explanations of events to those that see them as results of human deliberation and choice" (p. 255). At one point, he insists: "There must be religion, and reason cannot found religion" (p. 196). In the university, the Bible can find its *raison d'être* only in its value as "literature," and to try to face it on its own terms, that is as revelation, Bloom maintains, is to expose oneself to the charge of irrelevancy or Neanderthalism:

To include it [the Bible] in the humanities is already a blasphemy, a denial of its own claims. There it is almost invariably treated in one of two ways: It is subjected to modern "scientific" analysis, called the Higher Criticism, where it is dismantled, to show how "sacred" books are put together, and that they are not what they claim to be. It is useful as a mosaic in which one finds the footprints of many dead civilizations. Or else the Bible is used in courses in comparative religion as one expression of the need for the "sacred" and as a contribution to the very modern, very scientific study of "myths: (p. 374).

If anything emerges solidly from Bloom's book it is the importance of distinguishing the "significant" from the "convenient." The view that Bloom provides of the university and of the society that it is meant to serve presses us irresistibly to reach some conclusions of our own about the distinctions between those two words. That, by itself, is worth the price of admission.■

Biblical Translations

Dear Editor:

While Richard Goerwitz's article on Biblical translations in the October-December issue is in the main both thoughtful and constructive, I should like to raise questions about his statement that "... a New Church version would theoretically be a boon to both priests and laymen...."

NOTES AND COMMENTS

In drawing spiritual meaning from the letter, Swedenborg uses different aspects of the text at different times. Simply looking through the Table of Contents of W. F. Pendleton's *The Science of Exposition* should impress this fact upon us. One finds such diverse headings as "The General Sense of the Letter," "The First Thing Said," "The Names of Persons," "Numbers," and "Affection," to which we must add "the letters and sounds of the text."

Clearly, it is impossible for *any* single translation to represent all these features of the original. One can (as is done in interlinear translations) faithfully follow the precise word order of the text, but at the cost of intelligibility—sacrificing "the general sense." One can translate proper names, sacrificing their sound. In general, the more literal the translation, the more is sacrificed in the affectional flow.

The reason for this is, I believe, simple and ineluctable. Different languages simply do not correspond to each other in any consistent, point-to-point manner. Words rarely match precisely in meaning range. There is, for example, no English word that means "attend to," "visit," "muster," and "appoint." There is such a word in Hebrew, and faced with this word in different contexts, the translator must either use different words, obscuring connectedness and consistency, or use one word in all instances, obscuring the meaning. There are equally basic and intransigent non-correspondences in the realm of syntax.

Prerequisite to a "New Church translation," then, would be the choice of what dimensions of the original were to be granted highest priority, and what were to be sacrificed. It is unlikely that a single set of priorities could be uniformly applied, simply because there are different styles in the Word; but however appropriately the choices were made, there would always be a loss of some dimension of the original.

The most adequate solution to this dilemma is, I believe, our present situation of having access to a variety of translations, each representing features of the original that others suppress. The net effect of a "New Church translation" would surely be to devalue others, and thereby to distance us from the full richness of the Word.

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ABBREVIATED TITLES OF A SELECTION FROM SWEDENBORG'S WORKS

PREFATORY NOTE

In regard to Swedenborg's works which are frequently cited in articles published in *The New Philosophy*, we make two observations. Firstly, contributors commonly make a distinction between those works which are essentially theological (referred to as "the Writings" or "the Theological Works") and those which are essentially scientific or philosophical (referred to as "the pre-theological works" or "the philosophical works"). And secondly, when reference is made to a particular number in a work, the title of the work is abbreviated—as given in the accompanying table—and this is immediately followed by the number; thus (AC 590) refers to number 590 in *Arcana Coelestia*.

In the tabulation below, titles marked with an asterisk were published posthumously.

Editor.

ABBREVIATED TITLES

Theological Works

Abom. —Abomination of Desolation*	Idea —Angelic Idea concerning Creation
AC —Arcana Coelestia	ISB —Intercourse between Soul and Body
Adv. —Adversaria*	Inv. —Invitation to the New Church*
AE —Apocalypse Explained*	Jus. —Concerning Justification and Good Works*
AR —Apocalypse Revealed	Life —Doctrine of Life
Ath. —Athanasian Creed*	LJ —Last Judgment
BE —Brief Exposition	LJ post —Last Judgment (posthumous)*
Calvin —Conversations with Calvin*	Lord —Doctrine of the Lord
Can. —Canons*	Love —Divine Love*
Char. —Doctrine of Charity*	Mar. —On Marriage*
CL —Conjugal Love	PP —Prophets and Psalms*
CLJ —Continuation of the Last Judgment	Q —Nine Questions*
Conv. Ang. —Conversations with Angels*	SC —Scriptural Confirmations*
Coro. —Coronis*	SD —Spiritual Diary*
DLW —Divine Love and Wisdom	SD min. —Spiritual Diary Minor*
Dom. —De Domino*	SS —Doctrine of the Sacred Scripture
DP —Divine Providence	TCR —True Christian Religion
Ecc. Hist. —Ecclesiastical History of the New Church*	Verbo —De Verbo*
EU —Earths in the Universe	WE —Word Explained (Adversaria)*
F —Doctrine of Faith	WH —White Horse
5 Mem. —Five Memorable Relations*	Wis. —Divine Wisdom*
HD —New Jerusalem and its Heavenly Doctrine	
HH —Heaven and Hell	
Hist. Crea. —History of Creation*	

Philosophical Works

AK —Animal Kingdom	Observations
BR. —The Brain*	Ont. —Ontology*
Cer. —The Cerebrum*	OPS —Origin and Propagation of the Soul*
Chem. —Chemistry*	Pr. —Principia
EAK I, II —Economy of the Animal Kingdom	Psych. Trans. —Psychological Transactions*
Fib. —The Fibre (EAK III)	R. Psych. —Rational Psychology*
Gen. —Generation*	Sens. —The Five Senses*
Inf. —The Infinite	Trem. —Tremulation*
JD —Journal of Dreams*	WLG —Worship and Love of Go
L Pr. —Lesser Principia*	
Misc. Obs. —Miscellaneous	

For lists of the Theological Works see: Tafel's *Documents*, Vol. II, pp. 950-1023; Potts' *Concordance*, Introduction; and General Church *Liturgy*, 5th ed., pp. 236-238. For lists of Swedenborg's earlier philosophical and other works see: Tafel's *Documents*, Vol. II, pp. 884-949; and *A Classified List* by the Rt. Rev. Alfred Acton.