

R. V. Young

## The University Possessed

Visit the campus of almost any university in the land: you will find its classrooms packed with students, its conference rooms buzzing with the activity of faculty and administrative committees, its computer screens overflowing with electronic memoranda detailing new policies and procedures and apprising all and sundry of the latest round of internal assessment and external review of curriculum, of teaching, of research, of diversity—with goals and objectives distinguished and reduced to “bullets” or laid out on an Excel spreadsheet. You will hardly escape without subjection to at least one PowerPoint presentation. If your visit is hasty and unreflective, you may even suffer the delusion that some form of education or scholarship is taking place.

The frantic motion to and fro on most campuses, however, holds the same relation to genuine academic activity as the stampede of the Gadarene swine to the discourse of rational men. Like the luckless pigs, the university has been possessed by a legion of unclean spirits: there is feverish movement and a demonic semblance of life, but the soul has departed and all that remains is the cadaver of an educational institution. In practical terms this means that it is virtually impossible for a student to acquire even the rudiments of a liberal education outside of a few countercultural en-

claves, mostly small liberal arts colleges with religious affiliations.

Allan Bloom diagnosed the morbid condition of American universities twenty years ago in *The Closing of the American Mind*, a book whose unwieldy subtitle bears recalling: *How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students*. Bloom is at his best in explaining the intellectual poverty of students in the contemporary university and in excoriating the neglect of the problem by university professors, who are best positioned to do something about it. His book bears continued attention not merely for saying what everyone knew but was reluctant to admit, but also for his acute analysis of the academic crisis as, fundamentally, a *spiritual* crisis. Nevertheless, Bloom cannot be counted on to provide a solution, in part because his focus on students at elite universities leads him to underestimate the gravity of the situation, but mostly because his attachment to the ideals of the Enlightenment obscures somewhat his own conception of the university. Of course, it is hard to ask anyone to bring a corpse back to life—especially when he must first perform

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**R. V. Young** is Professor of English at North Carolina State University and coeditor of the *John Donne Journal*.

a work of exorcism.

Bloom's discussion of "Students" in Part I—probably the strongest section of *The Closing of the American Mind*—makes it clear that much of the malaise of contemporary higher education begins outside the university in the cultural decadence of an affluent consumer society. Consider the first sentence of his "Introduction: Our Virtue": "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."<sup>1</sup> Relativism is the unexamined assumption—the default setting, so to speak—of entering students, who absorb it from the cultural air they breathe before hearing the first doctrinaire utterance of a Marxist literature professor.

To be sure, in the two decades since the book's appearance, all the elite universities, with the overwhelming majority of lesser institutions following in their train, have established the ideology of multiculturalism, with its rigid regime of compulsory "tolerance" as the bureaucratic incarnation of relativism. But when Bloom wrote, it was still a little cloud, no larger than a man's hand, and "multiculturalism" is not in his lexicon. Now that it has been invoked as an *ex post facto* pretext for racial quotas disguised as "affirmative action," the acuity of Bloom's insight is manifest. "White students," he observes, "do not really believe in the justice of affirmative action" (96); nevertheless, their thoughtless generic relativism disables them from mounting any kind of principled resistance to the diversity indoctrination that serves as its justification.

Bloom showed similar insight about the effect of divorce on university students. Even before the sociological evidence started coming in, he recognized what a powerful force for estrangement and anxiety a broken marriage is for a child.<sup>2</sup> "Children may

be told over and over again that their parents have a right to their own lives, that they will enjoy quality time instead of quantity time, that they are really loved by their parents even after divorce, but children do not believe any of this." Children of divorced parents, he suggests, "have gone to the school of conditional relationships," so it is no wonder if they are not wholly committed to the family or other traditional institutions (119). No generation of students might have benefited more from the influence of a real liberal education for the understanding of their own lives. They have been denied such an education on most American campuses.

The most notorious chapter in Bloom's account of students is called "Music." Students who read the book, at least this chapter, or even hear it discussed, are sometimes outraged, but more commonly uncomprehending and indifferent. Such a response actually reinforces Bloom's point: "Rock music is as unquestioned and unproblematic as the air the students breathe, and very few have any acquaintance at all with classical music" (69). The influence of rock is so pervasive and so deeply ingrained that Bloom's severe strictures are too alien and irrelevant even to seem threatening. His summation, which applies to the entire subculture of increasingly prolonged adolescence as well as to the music per se, is devastating, but meaningless to those whose imaginations have been formed in that milieu:

I suspect that the rock addiction, particularly in the absence of strong counterattractions, has an effect similar to that of drugs. The students will get over the music, or at least the exclusive passion for it. But they will do so in the same way Freud says that men accept the reality principle—as something harsh, grim and essentially unattractive, a mere necessity...

The choice is not between quick fixes and dull calculation. This is what liberal education is

meant to show them. But as long as they have the Walkman on, they cannot hear what the great tradition has to say. And, after its prolonged use, when they take it off, they find they are deaf. (80-81)

Precisely because they are deaf, the few students who do confront such an assessment of their “lifestyle” simply cannot hear it: for them, Bloom is like a man grimacing and gesticulating and moving his lips, but there is no sound coming out of his mouth.

As crucial as the chapter on music is, it is the chapter called “Books” that identifies the most intractable element in the decline of higher education. As far back as we can trace anything that could reasonably be called *higher* education, books and reading have been at its center. As Bloom observes, however, “whatever the cause, our 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” (62). This absence involves serious educational consequences: “It is a complex set of experiences that enables one to say so simply, ‘He is a Scrooge.’ Without literature, no such observations are possible and the fine art of comparison is lost” (64).<sup>3</sup> It is in this context that Bloom makes one of his rare advertences to universities and colleges outside the elite realm of Cornell and Chicago: “Teachers of writing in state universities, among the noblest and most despised laborers in the academy, have told me that they cannot teach writing to students who do not read, and that it is practically impossible to get them to read, let alone to like it” (65).

“Whatever the cause” is a curious qualification in the first of the quoted passages; plainly the “Music” of his next chapter is a preeminent “cause” of the disinclination to read, with its “one appeal only, a barbaric appeal, to sexual desire” (73). And had Bloom considered a book published just

two years earlier, Neil Postman’s *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, which maintains that there is a fundamental incompatibility between reading and electronic media, specifically television, a further cause would have emerged.<sup>4</sup> These external causes of educational decline have, moreover, been reinforced, indeed institutionalized, by the academy itself. If Bloom discussed writing with composition teachers in the 1970s and early 1980s, then he probably was unaware that the theorists who were already taking over composition programs by the time his book appeared would “solve” the problem of students who do not read by disconnecting writing instruction from reading altogether. The focus of composition classes in state universities has turned to group interaction among students and to the “rhetoric” of electronic media, especially the computer. Reading assignments are brief and literature as such has been banished from the composition classroom, because the writing “experts” (by no means expert writers) who administer the programs regard literature and writing as separate “disciplines.” Of course many of the actual writing teachers are unhappy with this state of affairs, but they have little power to change the situation since they are usually non-tenure-track faculty on annual—sometimes single-semester—contracts.

Here we see one of the limitations of Bloom’s study. *The Closing of the American Mind* is based mainly on his own experience at Cornell and the University of Chicago—elite institutions with students who are generally much brighter, or who at least come from more academically oriented homes and better secondary schools, than the students typical of land grant universities and regional colleges and other middle-tier campuses where the vast majority of American bachelor’s degrees are awarded. Students at the less prestigious institutions begin with less developed academic skills than

their more privileged counterparts, and they have fewer resources for overcoming the deficiencies of their education. These deficiencies are formidable, far worse than anyone who has not directly dealt with the problem can imagine. Most ordinary college students never read books for pleasure or for personal interest or enrichment. They read only those—reluctantly and laboriously, and perhaps not all the way through—that have been assigned by a professor for a class. Their neglect of books results not from mere indifference, but from incompetence: most simply lack the ability to grasp a passage of sophisticated literary or intellectual prose, at least not without a great expense of time and effort. Similarly, most are unable to construct a coherent argument in clear, fluent prose. The marginal students who misspell words or use them incorrectly and make numerous errors in grammar and punctuation are less of a worry than those accustomed to making an “A” or “B,” whose spelling, grammar, and diction are adequate, but who arrange sentences capriciously and lack any sense of logical continuity in the ordering of paragraphs and altogether fail to grasp what making an argument entails.

In view of such deficiencies in the verbal skills of most contemporary college students, there is something rather quixotic about what Bloom calls “the only serious solution”:

the good old Great Books approach, in which a liberal education means 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. (344)

Now this passage invites a good deal of sophisticated deliberation regarding the proper means of interpreting classic works

of literature and presenting them in the most effective way to students, not to mention the criteria for determining what constitutes a “classic.” That fascinating pedagogical discussion must be deferred, however, in the face of the overwhelming problem of enabling a sufficient number of the students to understand the plain, literal meaning of whatever classic work they are required to read.

Paradoxically, students often have less difficulty with ancient or medieval works, even poems, because they are taught in modern English translations. Even the verse translations used are almost inevitably free verse, and so do not pose the difficulties of rhyme and meter, of which most current college students know virtually nothing. Still, most of them will find the task of simply following the narrative daunting. Although many college students may have read a few excerpts of the *Odyssey* and even the *Inferno*, very few will have read completely through an epic poem or any narrative on that scale. In fact, very few students in current bachelor’s programs in the United States will read either of these works or anything comparable. Only those who happen to register for a first-semester “World Literature” course by way of fulfilling a literature or humanities requirement—if nothing else is available at a convenient time—will ever see Homer after the ninth or tenth grade. The professor in such a course, which will typically begin with Homer, possibly even *Gilgamesh*, and extend all the way to Dante in a single semester, will have to decide whether to teach a handful of complete works or brief excerpts from a larger selection. He will make this decision conscious that the university’s requirements for history and philosophy, assuming there are any, are unlikely to require or even encourage the students to know anything about the history of Athens and Rome or the philosophy of Plato and

Aristotle. In all probability, the professor will go with the anthology of excerpts rather than attempt to lead his students through twenty-four books of the *Iliad*.

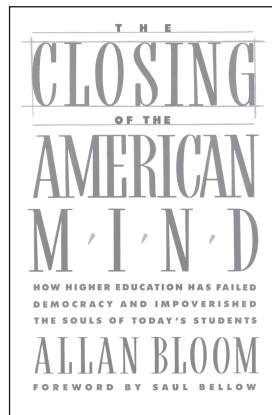
But most students will fulfill their one- or two-course literature requirement with English or American literature. The result is that they will read *Paradise Lost* with at best a hazy memory of snippets of the *Odyssey* from the ninth grade and without even knowing the name “Virgil.” Or Ralph Waldo Emerson’s *Nature* without ever having read a line of Plato, hence with no grasp at all of the usual meaning of *idea* in philosophical discourse. The professor who tries to teach such courses at a university level to such students will truly be in the situation of Socrates’ philosopher trying to explain sunlight to the denizens of the Cave, preoccupied with the shadows flickering on the wall. The same kind of dilemma will, *mutatis mutandis*, confront professors of history, philosophy, and the other humanistic disciplines. The vast majority of students arrives at a college with almost no knowledge of the history of Western civilization or familiarity with its intellectual, artistic, and cultural monuments. They are incapable of reading discourse of any sophistication with even minimum comprehension of its content, much less with a critical spirit. By the same token, the writing of most students is bereft of stylistic clarity and a sense of English idiom, and to ask that they organize a coherent argument with a definite purpose is to dream. When such a student is asked to confront a work of literature, even after three years of university education, the result will not infrequently be sentences like this one: “William Shakespeare’s fairy characters in his 1595 play, ‘A Midsummer

Night’s Dream,’ were his artistic agents he employed to appeal to a vast new audience of intellects and citizens on the horizon of an intellectually advancing England in order to advance the narrowing of spiritual and mental bridges between the social classes.”

Our universities ask students with so little grasp of language and logic to choose “majors” and fulfill vague “general education requirements” from an indefinite and ever-expanding array of courses (“curricular innovation” is a sure way

to win favorable attention from administrators). They are, in fact, offered a farrago rather than anything that might reasonably be called a *curriculum*, in the sense of a rational course in a particular direction with a discernible purpose. Students thus enter colleges and universities deficient in the skills of reading and writing and are there subjected to a course of confusion

rather than of study. The sentence quoted above is typical of writing cluttered with banal clichés, disorganized data, and historical disinformation. The mental state thus revealed is remote from the ideal of liberal education envisioned by Newman: “To have even a portion of this illuminative reason and true philosophy is the highest state to which nature can aspire in the way of intellect; it puts the mind above the influences of chance and necessity, above anxiety, suspense, unsettlement, and superstition, which is the lot of the many.”<sup>5</sup> In the United States we have sent “the many” to college, but their “lot” has remained unchanged: “They are thrown out, and do not know what to think or say, at every fresh juncture; they have no view of persons, or occurrences, or facts, which come suddenly upon them, and they hang upon the opin-



Bloom’s controversial book.

ion of others, for want of internal resources.”<sup>6</sup> Such is today the situation of numerous men and women who have been awarded university degrees and lack even a rudimentary awareness of what they do not know.

To be sure, there are glimmerings of hope. As ill-prepared as most students are for serious academic work by the public school system, in surprising numbers they show sufficient intelligence, enthusiasm, and perseverance to attain at least “a portion” of Newman’s “illuminative reason,” despite being routinely herded into “majors” that are little more than glorified vocational training lightly seasoned with indoctrination in multiculturalism. And they find a few professors in virtually every institution who value actual teaching and scholarship more than the careerism fostered by the bureaucratic regimes that currently dominate the academy. Despite administrative emphasis on athletics and other forms of publicity, patents, business partnerships, and—above all—the endless procurement of funding from government agencies, foundations, and corporations, undergraduates interested in the life of the mind occasionally find encouragement. In this respect *The Closing of the American Mind* continues to offer the inspiration of Allan Bloom’s ideal of personal mentoring, of the professor who knows his students as individuals and takes an interest in their intellectual and spiritual growth.

Over and above the serendipity of a student finding a particular professor who provides a model of scholarship and integrity, some colleges and universities are, as institutions, demonstrably doing a better job than most. The Intercollegiate Studies Institute commissioned a survey carried out in the fall of 2005 to determine the “civic literacy” of entering freshmen compared with that of seniors on the same campus.<sup>7</sup> A multiple-choice test comprising sixty ques-

tions concerning American history, government, political philosophy, and economics was administered to students at fifty American colleges and universities, including twenty-five elite institutions and twenty-five that are considered less eminent. The overall results were abysmal, with the average score on the test as a whole barely over fifty percent. This disaster would not surprise many professors, since it merely confirms the anecdotal evidence circulating in faculty lounges for years.

The really interesting finding, however, involved improvement: to take an especially telling example, the freshmen at Rhodes College in Memphis scored nineteen percentage points lower than the freshmen at Yale, but the seniors at Rhodes improved by nearly twenty percentage points over Rhodes freshmen and surpassed the seniors at Yale, who actually did slightly worse than the Yale freshmen. Other small colleges and some mid-rank state universities also showed impressive improvement between the scores of their freshmen and seniors, while most of the other elite institutions showed no significant improvement. The lesson is clear: today’s students can learn, but the academic agenda has to be the learning and understanding associated with liberal education, not indoctrination in political correctness. It is also worth remarking that the findings of ISI’s National Civic Literacy Board reveal the shortcomings of Bloom’s prescription for higher education. None of the colleges and universities that showed the most improvement on the survey between freshmen and seniors offers a strict “great books” curriculum (which does not mean that their students do not read a fair number of great books), and it is doubtful whether the students at Rhodes College, for example, would have shown such improvement in their knowledge of American history and government had they been turned loose with

“certain generally recognized classic texts, just reading them, letting them dictate what the questions are and the method of approaching them.” Without the guidance of professors and a structured curriculum creating “categories we make up” for these books, most contemporary students would be utterly lost.

Even success on the civic literacy survey is not, however, a cause for optimism. It consisted, after all, of multiple-choice questions, which can only reveal superficial, if necessary, knowledge. If doing poorly on such a test is catastrophic, doing well is hardly an occasion for rejoicing. Only in extended essays can a student display the capacity to understand and expound conceptual knowledge. We may conclude, therefore, that the American mind has not “opened” over the past twenty years. The problems that Allen Bloom pointed out are more acute now than when he wrote. The overwhelming majority of colleges and universities are more firmly in the administrative control of the enemies of liberal education than ever. The men and women who occupy the seats of power in the modern academy—nearly all children of the radical 1960s—have a vested interest in multiculturalism, affirmative action, political correctness, and the suppression of Western moral, intellectual, and cultural traditions. Odd as it may seem, they have also largely committed themselves to banal vocational training for most undergraduates and to indenturing universities to the multinational corporations, government agencies, and foundations which supply the funding for research grants. In other words, they have sold their souls to the “Establishment” for power and money—the money that provides both the pretext and the wherewithal for the endless expansion of administrative personnel and apparatus, which loom over the current academic scene like the shadow of Mordor

in *The Lord of the Rings*.

Allan Bloom did not anticipate the destruction of what he thought of as the Enlightenment university by the unholy marriage of technocratic rationalism and deconstructionist unreason. If liberal learning survives the twenty-first century, it will not be in an Enlightenment institution or even in a recrudescence of the medieval university. Learning for its own sake, for the sheer love of intellectual excellence, is more likely to persist in small, religious—or at least traditional—liberal arts colleges, much as it survived the Dark Ages in monasteries.

1. Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 25. Further references to this book will be given parenthetically in the text.

2. See *inter alia* Judith S. Wallerstein, Julia M. Lewis, and Sandra Blakeslee, *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce: A 25-Year Landmark Study* (New York: Hyperion Books, 2000).

3. This notion of how a sufficiency of cultural knowledge embedded in literature is essential for serious reading and writing is expounded intelligently and passionately in another controversial book also celebrating its twentieth anniversary, E. D. Hirsch Jr., *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

4. Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1985).

5. John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University*, ed. Martin J. Svaglic (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1960), Discourse VI, 6, 104.

6. *Ibid.*

7. *The Coming Crisis in Citizenship: Higher Education's Failure to Teach America's History and Institutions*, a report by the Intercollegiate Studies Institute's National Civic Literacy Board, 26 September 2006. See especially the table of overall results on p. 8. In the interest of full disclosure: I served briefly as a faculty consultant for this project.