

Reopening the Cave of Illusion

ALLAN BLOOM'S *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* is a book whose time had come long before its publication in 1987. The list of jeremiads bewailing the state of higher education had already become depressingly impressive by the time Bloom hurled his mortar cap into the academic arena. Not only were there in existence the booklets by William J. Bennett (*To Reclaim a Legacy*), The Association of American Colleges (*Integrity in the College Curriculum*), and The National Commission on Excellence in American Education, but also there were numerous articles in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Change*, and other publications. What is new in Bloom's book is the allegation made explicit in the subtitle, that higher education "has failed democracy."

The book has been surprisingly successful. The original expectation of its publisher, Simon and Schuster, was a sale of a modest 10,000 copies. At the time of this writing (November 1987), the book had sold close to half a million copies and was appearing on *The New York Times Book Review* non-fiction "Best Sellers" List for the thirty-first week. Such success for a book that tries to diagnose some profound philosophical questions and also contains countless allusions to figures like Alcibiades, St. Thomas Aquinas, Aristophanes, Aristotle, St. Augustine, and Jane Austen (just to pick some names in the first part of the alphabet) is cause for celebration among all academicians. But celebration is one thing and cerebration is another.

There should be no question in the mind of anyone who has been teaching in college for the past dozen years or so that Bloom's gloomy assessment of both American higher education and American

society in general is correct. Nor will many disagree with Bloom's itemized indictment of the following: the deterioration of the quality of curricular offerings; the inflation of higher grades; the growth of "relevant" and "faddish" courses; the wimpiness among administrators and faculty in yielding to student pressures (especially during the 1960s); the substitution of easy sex for serious love; the growth of meaningless jargon (including such words as "lifestyle," "commitment," "openness," etc.) in order to hide the moral emptiness of the student's existence; the vulgarization of taste in the verbal and nonverbal arts.

What is troublesome, however, is that Bloom's vision is seriously blurred by clouds of illusion. It is to some of these illusions that I should like to devote the major portion of my remarks.

Illusion One. Bloom claims that philosophy is the best discipline for understanding the "soul" and creating and maintaining a "civilized" society. Clearly Socrates is Bloom's god and Plato is his prophet. The "permanent questions" (such as "What is the good life?"; "What is justice?"; "What is truth?") are questions with which colleges and universities should be primarily concerned. Plato's *Republic* remains for Bloom "the book on education." Reason becomes the means by which "civilization" will reach its highest peak, and the university is the place where reason can best be taught:

The university is the place where inquiry and philosophic openness come into their own. It is intended to encourage the noninstrumental use of reason for its own sake, to provide the atmosphere where the moral and physical superiority of the dominant will not intimidate philosophic doubt.

And it preserves the treasury of great deeds, great men and great thoughts required to nourish that doubt.

It seems unreasonable to expect that reason will be the most forceful determinant in the lives of most people. Despite Bloom's frequent assertion that his approach to the problems of life is in accord with the demands of "nature," reason is not an innate but an acquired trait; a child's entry into this world is not marked by a demand for metaphysical truth, but rather by a cry for physical sustenance. This preoccupation with physical survival and well-being retains its priority throughout the lives of most people. The Romans used to have bread and circuses; the Americans now have Social Security and TV—both high-priority items.

In occasional moments of soulful meditation, even Bloom recognizes that philosophy, glorious as it is and as profoundly as it may analyze "the permanent questions," cannot really address (let alone solve) the "burning questions" which each generation must face. He admits, for example, that Socrates tended to ignore the passions and so he writes, "The poet, not the philosopher, can treat the passions that are dangerous to philosophy, which Socrates had to his great cost ignored." Bloom claims that since man's greatest fear is that of death, for Socrates the great task of philosophy was "learning how to die." But, surely, Eros is a more compelling source for maintaining one's vitality (and even "relevance") than that of Thanatos, as Bloom himself avers in other parts of the book. And, most significantly, when towards the very end of his book Bloom nostalgically recalls the days when Plato and his students used to discuss "the permanent questions," he writes that "this playful discussion took place in the midst of a terrible war that Athens was destined to lose, and Aristophanes and Socrates at least could foresee that this meant the decline of Greek civilization." Having a "playful discussion" while one's civilization is collapsing does not sound like wisdom—either Socratic or non-Socratic.

Illusion Two. Bloom believes that a fusion of an aristocracy of the mind and spirit and a democracy of government can coexist symbiotically. This fusion is a consummation devoutly to be wished, but it remains an illusion nevertheless. Throughout his book, Bloom breathes the rarefied air of an elitist ambience. He admits in his preface that most students will be satisfied with attending to their personal needs and the requirements of their professions and their families, but "a small number will spend their lives in an effort to be autonomous. It is for these last especially, that liberal education exists." At the end of the book he defines "a true liberal education" as one that "puts everything at risk and requires students who are able to risk everything." Yet, as he himself recognizes, most students are not "risk takers." No wonder that Bloom has taught only at "elitist" institutions like Yale, Cornell, the University of Paris, and especially the University of Chicago. He says that his study is based on "thousands of students of comparatively high intelligence, materially and spiritually free to do pretty much what they want with the few years of college they are privileged to have—in short, the kind of young persons who populate the twenty or thirty best universities." But if his expectations are not realized even at the University of Chicago, how can they possibly be fulfilled at a college in Peoria? No wonder that at the end of the book he admits that the kind of soulful friendship which existed between Plato and Aristotle (and as apparently exists between Bloom and Saul Bellow, who wrote the foreword to the book) "includes only a few," the blessed few who defy the temptations of the "self-contradictory simulacra of community" and who seek answers to the "permanent questions."

Bloom would also like the aristocracy of a "true liberal arts education" to influence and enhance the workings of democracy. One of the great influences on his thinking has been Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, which "taught me the importance of the university to democratic society" and "gave voice to my inchoate

sentiments." He learned from Tocqueville that "the great democratic danger . . . is enslavement to public opinion." But democracy is based on public opinion; and the majority (be it right or wrong, tasteful or tasteless) has its way—so long as it is in accordance with the Constitution and its amendments as interpreted by the Supreme Court. Bloom fails to recognize that the real erosion of standards in our college system began not with the 1960s (as he claims in one of his most forcefully written chapters in Part Three), but with the end of World War II, when the G.I. Bill enabled hundreds of thousands of students to enter college. Inevitably, the greater the quantity, the more likely the deterioration of quality. What happened was that there was then less quality education for more students. But more opportunities for more students do promote the physical, the economic, and, yes, even the cultural well-being of more citizens.

It may well be true that the "great questions that must be faced if one is to live a serious life: reason-revelation, freedom-necessity, democracy-aristocracy, good-evil, body-soul, self-other, city-man, eternity-time, being-nothing," are not the chief preoccupations of most students (Have they ever been?). But Bloom admits that "Democracy took away philosophy's privileges, and philosophy could not decide whether to fade away or to take a job." That is why the subtitle to Bloom's book—*How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students*—is misleading. It should be, more accurately, *How Democracy Has Adversely Affected Higher Education*. Nevertheless, if democracy is indeed "a government of the people, by the people, and for the people," then increased opportunities for higher education offered to the masses since the end of World War II have benefited our democratic system. Whether these increased educational opportunities have benefited the perpetuation of the aristocracy of the intellect and the soul is another matter. Undoubtedly, higher education has benefited democracy but has failed aris-

tocracy. Perhaps Bloom has forgotten that Plato's *Republic* is not a democratic but rather a utopian proposal—and *Utopia* in Greek means "no place."

Illusion Three. Like Miniver Cheevy, Bloom yearns for the past. He yearns for the days when women catered to their uxorial and maternal obligations. He even misses the days when soulful courtship reigned. Passion has been replaced by passionless sex, and Bloom seems devastated. Similarly, he is both saddened and infuriated that the psychiatrists began to flourish both numerically and financially. According to Bloom, it is the utilitarians, the pragmatists, and the value-neutral scientists who have brought today's generation to its abysmal state of ethical and aesthetic barbarism. And chief among these sinister influences have been the philosophers whom he discusses in the chapter called "The German Connection." Some of them, to be sure, had some excellent ideas; unfortunately, when these ideas were transferred to American shores, the ideas were often corrupted or misunderstood. Hence, German thinkers like Nietzsche, Max Weber, Kant, Hegel, and Freud (towards whom he has an outstanding animus) have largely contributed to the erosion of standards in both the arts and in ethics. Nevertheless, given whatever influence the Germans may have had, equal attention must be paid to some American thinkers. It is inconceivable that Emerson is never even mentioned by Bloom. John Dewey is mentioned three times in a pejorative way. By contrast, Martin Heidegger is brought in over twenty times, and one chapter is even called "From Socrates' *Apology* to Heidegger's *Rektoratsrede*." Certainly the speech that Emerson gave at Harvard University—the Phi Beta Kappa address in 1837 and appropriately called "our intellectual Declaration of Independence" by Oliver Wendell Holmes—deserves the same respect that Bloom accords to the Rector's speech that Heidegger delivered at Freiburg University when Hitler came into power in 1933. Bloom is justifiably fond of Plato's Allegory of the Cave; but he himself may be suffering from one of

the Idols of the Cave that Francis Bacon describes.

Bloom's yearning for the restoration of the past is thus another of his illusions. The Bourbons will not be restored, nor will the Kaiser and the Czar. Women will not go back to the days when they were confined to the home, nor will college students return to chivalry, to soulful courtship, and to sexual fidelity. It may be true that women's liberation has caused deterioration of the traditional nuclear family and that the sexual revolution has "condomized" sex relationships, but, alas, the clock cannot and will not be turned back—at least, not completely. It is salubrious to be reminded by Bloom that the present is not permanent or the best and that the new is not necessarily better, but important as it is to remind ourselves of the wisdom of Socrates, it is also vital to recognize King Canute's observation that one can't turn back the tide. The best that can be done is to try to swim in it—and survive—and strive for more health-inducing waters. Sensing the inadequacy of merely finding fault with the present, Bloom writes, "I am not arguing here that the old family arrangements were good or that we should or could go back to them. I am only insisting that we not cloud our vision to such an extent that we believe that there are viable substitutes for them just because we want or need them." This kind of statement, I believe, is not Socratic wisdom but futile sophistry.

Illusion Four. Considering the fact that Bloom advocates the self-discipline taught by the ancient philosophers and the supremacy of soul over body, it is surprising that some of his favorite characters in literature are those who yielded to their passions. He admires Socrates for freeing himself from Achilles, but he writes later: "Achilles is perfection, what most men can only dream about being, and is therefore their superior and properly their master." He quotes a passage from Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* where Emma admires a senile duke who had been, according to stories told about him, "the lover of Queen Marie-Antoinette between M. de Coigny

and M. de Lauzun. He had led a wild life of debauch, full of duels, wagers, abducted women, had devoured his fortune and terrified his whole family." Despite his undisciplined behavior and his repulsive appearance, Emma admired him because she saw in him the "*ancien régime*." Emma's vision, Bloom writes, is "truer" than that of those who found the old duke repulsive because "there really was an *ancien régime*, and in it there were great lovers. The constricted present cannot teach it to us without the longing that makes us dissatisfied with the present. Such longing is what students most need, because the great remains of the tradition have grown senile in our care." Now it is true that both Homer's Achilles and Flaubert's Emma Bovary had passion, but I believe that John Millington Synge's *Playboy of the Western World* offers the reader a truer perspective than Bloom implies on the gap that exists between the passion found in literature and the truth of reality. Falstaff would not be so funny if he were one's father—or one's next-door neighbor.

It is the failure to grasp reality that is really the chief defect in Bloom's book. And yet he must know that the word *reality* comes from the Latin *res*—meaning "fact, thing." Philosophy and literature deal with concepts and representations of reality—not quite the same thing. Of course, "man does not live by bread alone," and without spirit (or soul), as Joseph Heller in his *Catch-22* reminds us, "Man is garbage." Bloom, however, is sometimes not aware of the facts of existence, and his vision thus becomes visionary.

In one of his more autobiographical moods, Bloom writes, "The substance of my being has been informed by the books I learned to care for. They accompany me every minute of every day of my life, making me see much more and be much more than I could have seen or been if fortune had not put me into a great university at one of its greatest moments." In this passage Bloom unwittingly reveals two of his book's weaknesses: First, he fails to consider adequately that were it not for

Fortune, a very fickle lady, he would not have been so fortunate as to receive his sublime education. This intrusion of Fortune into Bloom's life pretty well destroys his thesis that we all must and can rise above the limitations imposed by our environment. Secondly, he admits that his life has been pre-empted by books and thinking about them, but at the same time he fails to pay attention to that old adage that experience is a better teacher.

In his sadly neglected masterpiece, *Walden*, Thoreau also tells us of his great admiration for Plato and Homer and the

other ancient classics—read in their original language. But he goes on to write, "I did not read books the first summer; I hoed beans." Bloom would have gained a greater knowledge of himself, and the world, had he similarly hoed beans, built himself a cabin, spent time in jail—as did Thoreau. Then his book would not simply have reinvestigated the "permanent questions," but would also have examined the universal problems, with knowledge and some badly needed compassion.

—Milton Birnbaum