

A SYMPOSIUM ON ALLAN BLOOM'S  
*THE CLOSING OF THE AMERICAN MIND*

*Prefatory Notes from  
Old Deerfield*

THE AIMS OF EDUCATION should be sacred to anyone who is concerned with the order of civilization. Ever frail and vulnerable, these aims have been dangerously undermined in more recent years. Clearly there is a crisis at all levels and spheres of education, even as the stream of diagnoses and prescriptions has been unending. My own longtime witness to the swiftly changing conditions of instruction permits me to speak here from the crucible of experience. Indeed, it seems only yesteryear that I first entered the classroom—I was barely into my twenties—and had in fact absolutely no courses in education, or even practice teaching, let alone state certification. It appears that the authorities who had appointed me to teach humanities in a small high school in a town in eastern Massachusetts were willing to waive specified requirements in my case. That was a fortunate decision on their part for even then I had no intention whatsoever of subscribing to the fiats and nonsense emerging from departments and schools of education. The art of teaching, I have always believed, transcends and perhaps even contravenes the educational methodologies that are characteristic of and consonant with social engineering in its total process, whether in theory or in practice.

Although I possessed no education course credits, I did possess an inherent allegiance to the humanistic purposes and meaning of education. I suspect that it was this that, in my early years of apprenticeship, led me almost instinctively to subscribe to a motto that none of my

students was permitted to forget: "Observe, without labor nothing prospers." The admonishing words belonged to Socrates, I was proud to point out, and *not* to John Dewey and his disciples. That motto, I recall, sparked the aspirations of my young charges, though many of my colleagues and superiors seemed altogether indifferent. And labor we did, teacher and pupils alike, even as I myself came in time to appreciate the sharp relevance of T. S. Eliot's words—they can be found in his 1950 lectures on education given at the University of Chicago, the text almost simultaneously printed in the now defunct journal *Measure*: "I have never worked in a coal mine, or a uranium mine, or in a herring trawler; but I know from experience that working in a bank from 9:15 to 5:30, and once in four weeks the whole of Saturday, with two weeks' holiday a year, was a rest cure compared to teaching in a school."

All the excitement and ambition and challenge of my formative teaching years were brought back to me with full nostalgic force during a recent walking tour of Old Deerfield, Massachusetts, located in the Connecticut River Valley. On an early Sunday evening, at the very end of May, an old friend, John Lee, and I walked "The Street" of this historic town. It was warm, and fragrant, and so quiet that one could almost hear the muffled cries of the Pocumtucks, ranking among the "Great Indians" and the original native owners of Deerfield, nearly annihilated in 1664 by the Mohawks. We gazed at some of the magnificently restored houses—The Old

Manse, the Asa Stebbins House, the Allen House, as well as the Brick Church, and admired in particular the majestic old doorways. The whole scene took us back suddenly to a mid-eighteenth-century frontier settlement, once the farthest wilderness post of the American colonists.

Somehow, then, we had been almost magically transported back into an early time, in terms of our wonderment not only at the incredulously fused aesthetic and antiquarian qualities of Old Deerfield, but also at the surrounding vista of rich farm fields and wooden hills (with their resplendent and overarching oaks, sycamores, maples, beeches, and hemlocks). The countryside was deeply etched by browns and greens and darkening blue colors and glorious hues, the dusk adding to the stillness and aura of the time of day and season when past and present coalesce mysteriously to evoke "a New England symphony," so to speak. A local poet captures the scene I am trying to convey here—the restrained rhythms of life with its inherent archetypal history and order and continuity—when he writes: "The old names are here, / And the old forms / Not alone of doorways, of houses. / The light falls the way the light fell, / And it is not clear / In the elm shadows, if it be ourselves here, / Or others who were before us." And one thinks, too, of the inscription on an ancient gravestone in The Old Burying Ground: "Your eyes are upon me, and I am not."

Our walk also led us to exploring the beautifully sprawling grounds extending far back, deep from "The Street," and containing the main buildings of Deerfield Academy, established in 1797 and originally devoted to "the instruction of Youth, and the promotion of piety." The motto of the academy is "Be worthy of your heritage," words that an increasingly pluralistic society, now identified with a multiplying *Untermensch*, hardly appreciates or honors any more. One very impressive building particularly attracted my friend and myself, and that was the Frank L. Boyden Library (bearing the name of the Academy's legendary head-

master during the years 1902-1968, and the subject of John McPhee's enchanting biographical essay *The Headmaster* [1966]). It was the interior life of the library, another dimension of holy ground, that now arrested me most, exciting and heightening my vocational commitment and seeming to encapsulate all at once my long, long years as a teacher—a *paedagogus* as that remarkable early Father of the Church, Saint Clement of Alexandria, uses that no longer hallowed word.

Within the various reading rooms of the library one could see young students solitarily reading, writing, thinking—studying, for it was final examination week. I found the expressions on the lean, handsome faces of these students especially revealing—expectant, anxious, questful, serious, fascinated, radiant—as they pursued their particular study, poring over books, turning over pages quietly and sometimes almost exultantly, as if to say that that idea had been finally understood, or that problem solved, or that issue placed in perspective. Here they were, these schoolboys, preparing themselves for the future in the spirit of that "reverent discipline" that for me best defines the mission of humane studies. And as I studied the faces of these students, now engaged in their great adventure in learning, and in what should be a great expedition of truth, I reflected cursorily on some of the fundamental educational questions that we have to confront: What is the ultimate purpose of education in a modern society? What standards of excellence are required if we are not to slide into the pits of mediocrity? What are the basic subject-areas, the core-curricula, that we need to implement if we are to be able to connect with a common body of knowledge as a repository of ethical values and moral virtues that identify first principles? What should we do to resist and contain the vast and ugly programmatic encroachments that, like creeping armies of darkness, produce huge educational waste lands? At what point, precisely, are we to demand, as we must, that the idea of education

must ultimately embrace the idea of transcendence? And what criteria, finally, define and preserve, in continuity, all that which makes us worthy of our heritage?

Answers to these questions have been sadly elusive. Indeed, these questions have too often been subordinated to crudely empirical considerations, to quantitative patterns of thought, and to all those spurious strategies and collectivisms that displace our sacred patrimony. Who and what, I kept asking myself, should be our educational paradigms, as my friend and I departed in awe from the Academy's library, leaving behind us those aspiring adolescents to whom the future belongs and on whose strong shoulders the mantle of leadership will someday fall. Spiritual and visionary paradigms, one inescapably discovers, give way to a relentless, surging decadence in the entire realm of education. And an all-encompassing failure of nerve seems to besiege leaders of education, even as wanton curricular dismemberments at major institutions like Stanford University underline, symptomatically, the bureaucratic betrayal of educational principles. This betrayal is in essence the demonic triumph of all those modern gnosticisms that have come to embody the ant-heap of modern civilization.

In vain does one look today among our educational chieftains for the kind of wisdom that a Simone Weil imparts when she asserts that the central duty of those who teach the young (and in effect act as spiritual guides) is to establish as clearly as possible the correspondence between the attitude of the intelligence and the position of the soul. That all-important correspondence has been scorned in the modern age. In the entire debate over the direction that education is to take, if it is to go beyond the confines of immanentism and nominalism, I have yet to hear words from our "enlightened" educational reformers that echo this one noble sacramental sentence with which Simone Weil concludes her celebrated essay "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God":

"Academic work is one of those fields containing a pearl so precious that it is worthwhile to sell all our possessions, keeping nothing for ourselves, in order to be able to acquire it."

My reference here to Simone Weil in fact reminds me that we have in recent decades abandoned sacred texts, classical and biblical, in educational instruction and experience. We arbitrarily restrict ourselves to only a sense of the moment or to revisionist (and often impious) exercises that vulgarize ancient texts and writers. The movement away from and even the blatant hostility to any value of tradition has been swift and aggressive. The legacy of Western civilization, its teachings and traditions, is the single most disastrous victim of the disorientation that characterizes modern thought. In the process first principles of education are being steadily sabotaged in the name of the idols of the marketplace, even as we seek to placate those who would build a citadel of egalitarianism (in the guise of Equal Employment and Affirmative Action) in the educational establishment.

Thus, in the American university, my own discipline of English studies now becomes more and more a trivialized and fragmented amalgam of Marxist literary theory, gay studies, feminist literature, Third World literature, sports culture, film, fantasy and science fiction, and whatever literary fad that happens to come along. No critical centrality of life and thought, no "poetics of value," is venerated. At Duke University, for instance, one professor teaches an English course on writers and movie makers of the American West, asking the same questions of Zane Grey and Louis L'Amour that scholars ask about Shakespeare; the movies include *Stagecoach*, *The Wild Bunch*, *E. T.*, and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. Another luminary at Duke uses Shakespeare to show how seventeenth-century English society mistreated women, the working class, and minorities; this critical emphasis is called the "New Historicism," which purports to show power relationships between elites and the oppressed and scorns

making eternal judgments. And so it goes, the sabotage in Durham.

There is still one other emblematic instance of disorientation in the humanistic disciplines that needs to be cited: the Presidential Address of 1986, entitled "The Triumph of Theory, the Resistance to Reading, and the Question of the Material Base," delivered to the Modern Language Association of America, by J. Hillis Miller, now Distinguished Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of California, Irvine, formerly at Johns Hopkins and Yale—and one of the founding theorists of deconstructionism. It is neither a critically honorable nor distinguished address and is in fact a symptom and portent of erosion in the academy, what Edward Shils has recently correlated with "the antinomian world view" that sprang up in the 1960s. Miller is speaking, at one point, of the shift to history—the history that Jacques Barzun rightly says has transformed into retrospective sociology—and politics in English departments and goes on to state:

By "theory" I mean the displacement in literary studies from a focus on the meaning of texts to a focus on the way meaning is conveyed. Put another way, theory is the use of language to talk about language. Put yet another way, theory is a focus on referentiality as a problem rather than as something that reliably and ambiguously relates a reader to the "real world" of history, or society, and of people acting within society on the stage of history.

Here, then, in Miller's words we have it all in a nutshell, not only the rampant deconstructionism in the academy, but also the gobbledygook of language and thought that tells us so much about our present situation, and especially about the atrocities of language and thought that I myself as a university teacher have striven these many years to teach my thousands of students to avoid at their peril. To read Miller's address ultimately reminds me, too, of those young students at Old Deerfield, with all their youthful

intellectual enthusiasm, yearnings, and hopes—and, alas, of their coming fate in the deceitful hands of J. Hillis Miller and the nationwide gang movement of "New Pragmatists." Clearly, "the Americanization of the human mind," as Gottfried Dietze shows in his essay, can be a fearful fate!

The aims of education, I said at the start of these prelusive remarks, should be sacred, and to our frequent dismay we find that they are not. Irving Babbitt, at the turn of the century, wrote with courageous conviction regarding deteriorating educational standards in *Literature and the American College* (1908), as did several decades later such penetrating critics as Bernard Iddings Bell in *Crisis in Education* (1949), Gordon Keith Chalmers in *Republic and the Person* (1952), and Russell Kirk in *Academic Freedom* (1955). The two last-named books, published by the indomitable Henry Regnery, and marking my own first appearance in print as a reviewer, have had an impact on me of enduring power in the increasing struggle with ideas and visions in our time. Though each of these four books was favorably received, not one of them was given the attention it deserved. Curiously that kind of dramatic attention has had to wait for the appearance of Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), to which the following symposium is devoted. Here there is no need to cite Professor Bloom's credentials and experience as a university teacher, writer, and translator of Plato's *Republic* and Rousseau's *Emile*, or to describe in detail the content of his book and its explosive ramifications, or to delineate the meaning of its contribution. All that is done with diversified, concentrated energy and critical acumen by the symposiasts (each appearing in alphabetical order).

In the main, the purpose of this symposium is that of estimating the overall value of *The Closing of the American Mind* in relation to conditions not only within

higher education but also within the whole realm of education. It may well be said that Bloom's book is perhaps not worthy of having an entire symposium devoted to it; that there are, indeed, some very severe and disquieting limitations which ultimately diminish the book's value and are best summed up by Stephen J. Tonsor when he observes in his essay: "Bloom is a man of the Enlightenment sentimentalized by Rousseau." (Here it should not go unnoticed that in 1987 Bloom was awarded the Prix Jean-Jacques Rousseau by the city of Geneva, Switzerland.) But it is precisely the essential limitations of Bloom's book that need to be scrutinized if one is to see more comprehensively and probe more deeply the crisis of American education. How, in short, are we to go beyond a diagnosis of a nihilistic university system and also beyond a prescribed curriculum constructed, say, around the Great Books? That is a question that the symposiasts choose to face, even as some of them remind us that we must move beyond a secular gnosticism, and certainly beyond those techniques that Babbitt equates with the "vulgarly humanitarian," if we are to resolve the educational problems, and violence, we face. In a large and necessary sense this is exactly what the symposiasts are urging in this issue of *Modern Age*. For they see and invoke a world that is morally and spiritually structured around a nucleus of great, transcendent principles.

At the very moment of this writing in the central library of a good-sized New England city, I find that there are several circulating copies of Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* but not a single book by Richard M. Weaver or Eric

Voegelin. That grim bibliographical phenomenon should emphasize for us the need to appraise what Bloom has to communicate to us, but also and above all the corollary corrective need to supplement our reading of Bloom with a reading of sapiential thinkers who inspire us to see our educational problems in both temporal and eternal dimensions, as well as to alert us to insidious gnostic fallacies. "If one tries intellectually," Max Weber warned in 1918, "to construe new religions without a new and genuine prophecy, then, in an inner sense, something similar will result, but with still worse effects. And academic prophecy, finally, will create only fanatical sects but never a genuine community."

In encouraging us to consider critically the limitations and defects of *The Closing of the American Mind*, these symposiasts also encourage us to consider primary values that are ignored, derided, or even silenced by the cherubim of intellect. In modern education, as in the whole of modern society and culture, a sense of meaning and sacredness has been surrendered. The consequences of this surrender are far-reaching and even irreversible. As Eugene Ionesco has eloquently emphasized just recently: "Man without God, without the metaphysical, without transcendence, is lost." An imperial rationality, no less than "the imperial self," has steadily dislodged the historical, prophetic, and transcendental *pneuma*, as the symposiasts in the following pages variously remind us. In a manifestly profane era, to cite Samuel Johnson's words, "Men more frequently require to be reminded than informed."

—George A. Panichas