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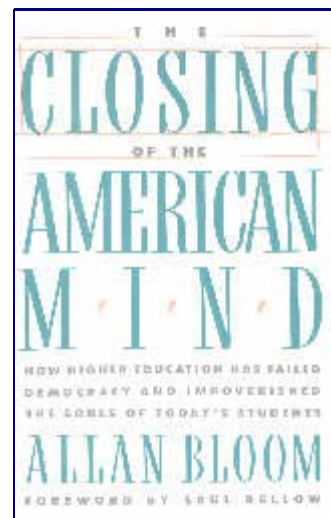
***A READER'S JOURNAL***  
**The Closing of the American Mind**

by

Allan Bloom

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Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©1999



This book contains a comprehensive exposition of Allan Bloom's views on education and expands on the view he expresses in his long introduction to Jean-Jacques

Rousseau's [Emile or On Education](#). One need only read "Emile" to discover the truth of Bloom's statement that a reading of original texts allows one to form a vital understanding of issues that a reading of shallow rehashes of such texts does not. Bloom discusses in this book two types of Openness, how he proposes to re-invigorate college curriculum, and how his suggestion to use original texts [Great Books] is vilified by the Three great parts of the University today, Natural Sciences, Social Sciences and Humanities.

A paradoxical aspect of Bloom's book is that he deals with two forms of *openness* and goes on to show how what is called *openness* in the first form actually amounts to a "closing of the mind". Here are two kinds of openness and the effects that Bloom says each has on students:

**I. Openness of indifference** — humbling of intellectual pride; be whatever you want to be.

A. Stunts students' desire for self-discovery by making all endeavors of equal value.

B. Leads to the abandonment of their requirements to take languages and study philosophy of science

C. Activates their *amour-propre* — self-love or esteem based on others' opinions (polls)

D. Teaches them a loose interpretation of documents such as the Constitution, a waffling philosophy based on "it all depends".

E. Closes them to doubt about so many things impeding progress. (page 42)

**II. Openness to the quest for knowledge and certitude** — history and cultures as examples

A. Encourages students to want to know what things from history and culture are good for them, what will make them happy.

B. Activates their *amour-soi* - natural and healthy self-love or esteem arising from within oneself independent of the opinions of others.

C. Teaches them a close interpretation of the Constitution — "government of laws" D. Teaches them that a true openness means a closed-ness to all the charms that make us comfortable with the present.(page 42)

How does one question this Openness I, *amour-propre*, which is based on a philosophical premise that is recursive, that develops its own proof out of itself?

**[page 39] This premise is unproven and dogmatically asserted for what are largely political reasons. History and culture are interpreted in the light of it, and then are said to prove the premise.**

This is the Great Closing that Bloom promises in the title of his book:

**[page 34] Actually openness [ Openness I ] results in American conformism - out there**

**in the rest of the world is a drab diversity that teaches only that values are relative, whereas here we can create all the life-styles we want. Our openness means we do not need others. Thus what is advertised as a great opening is a great closing. No longer is there a hope that there are great wise men in other places and times who can reveal the truth about life — except for the few remaining young people who look for a quick fix from a guru. . . . None of this concerns those who promote the new curriculum.**

Note: this is the debate that has been raging in Congress for the past 12 months: the opponents of presidential removal taking the Openness I or *amour-propre* position, and the supporters of president removal taking the Openness II or *amour-soi* position. Opponents say it makes no difference whether he committed these "trivial" acts of perjury and obstruction of justice and the supporters say the certitude of justice requires that commission of the acts of perjury and obstruction of justice require an accounting no matter who does it. The enormous public debate has as its basis these two issues of openness that Allan Bloom wrote about in the middle 1980's and published in this book.

The meanings of the two forms of self-esteem are taken from Bloom's Introduction to his translation of *Emile*, the famous book by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, where, on page 11 he explains what he means by *amour-propre* and contrasts it with *amour-soi*. Again one is struck by the poll-based self-esteem arising from others that the opponents of the president's removal tout so highly, which contrasts dramatically with the self-esteem based on the interpretation of the Constitution of the supporters of removal.

That first form of openness, the openness of indifference or *amour-propre*, is at the root of the wave of relativism that swept into university campuses in the 1960's, actually broke down the doors, occupied administrative offices, and held professors at gunpoint. This openness is a relativism that says "all endeavors are of equal value" — that the study of Shakespeare equal, eg, to the study of how hummingbirds fly.

Using these concepts of *amour propre* and *amour soi* of Rousseau, Bloom shows that this relativism is based on a self-esteem that comes from others' opinions, a poll-based self-esteem. So that what determines the curriculum is what's popular and easy to understand currently in society.

The other kind of *openness* he talks about is an openness to study historical and cultural texts and material in their original form, and to be open to develop one's own thoughts from them rather than accepting at first glance, without questioning, the opinions of so-called experts in the field in their textbooks, which may be scholarly but necessarily shallow rehashes of the original texts. Only by such independent and internal self-assessment can one arrive at *amour soi* — a self-love and esteem that comes from within oneself rather than from others opinions.

How does Allan Bloom say that we might re-invigorate the college and university curriculum? He suggests that a return to the use of original texts and materials is key. To assign students Dante's "Inferno" rather than a synopsis of classical poems to read. To read Shakespeare plays, not a critical review of his plays. To read Machiavelli, Hobbes, Kant, Freud in the original and to form one's own judgments as what are the important questions and what the answers to these questions are for oneself. That method can have the salubrious effect of actually leading the students to discover a great value, a vital understanding that can only come from directly confronting the authors in their original words in context, and from that discovery to create a royal road to future learning in their students hearts.

Bloom gives the reader one caveat: that we should avoid the mistake of the Great Books Groups who tend to treat the Books like dollars in a bank account where the goal is to get as many dollars in it as possible. The goal should be rather to emphasize as the goal the reading and questioning that arises during the reading — the process is what's important, not how many Books one reads.

During the decades of the 60's and 70's the onslaught of relativism was led by the Humanities professors because their fields lacked the objective criteria of the natural and social sciences. The other two fields were less affected by the revolution of relativism, but became alienated from the reading of the Great

Books or original works of famous authors in their fields.

The Natural Sciences saw reading of the original works of natural scientists as a matter of mere historical interest, better suited for electives in the humanities, if a student were to choose one. With the increased specialization, however, fewer students took such electives. Besides that, their professors told them or implied by the disdain in their tone of voice that such electives were a waste of time and were an unnecessary detour on the way to a career in science.

The Social Sciences felt a bit threatened by the original texts because these Great Books were teaching many of the same subjects as they were, but in a way that allowed the students to think independently of what their professors would like them to. So the Social Scientists' attitude was that original texts were mostly irrelevant to any practical application, and if one wanted to study them, one should do so on one's own time. The Social Scientists' offered instead composite courses, trendiness, mere popularization and a lack of substantive rigor, all of which led Bloom to claim:

**[page 340] The so-called knowledge explosion and increasing specialization have not filled up the college years but emptied them.**

Meantime the natural sciences and the social sciences were still able to demonstrate a usefulness for their fields and stayed on track, a track that became more rigid and narrowed in focus, leading to careerism, producing a technological automaton rather than a whole human being. But the social sciences were not out of the woods because in their zest to get the facts that would characterize a true science they were seduced by the siren song of their agenda and led into making the facts fit their agenda rather than fostering an agenda which fit their facts.

**[page 354] Hobbes said if the fact that two and two makes four were to become a matter of political relevance, there would be a faction to deny it.**

This may sound farcical, if it weren't so true today. One need only look at the events surrounding the presidential impeachment and Senate trial to find ample examples of such denial. Bloom says that "all parties in a democracy are jeopardized when passion can sweep the facts before it." [page 355] Who would have thought the crimes of perjury and obstruction of justice would not add up to a crime that would remove an elected official from office?

Humanities professors had an unexpectedly tepid reaction to the Great Books that provide the very basis of the humanities. And indeed some professors are strong supporters of these classics, but some humanities disciplines are "crusty specialities" that would prefer to avoid the classics in their natural state. Other disciplines want to join the natural sciences and feel a need to overcome their "mythic past" as represented by the classic works that are their very foundation. As a result, humanities professors often attack the learning provided by the Great Books, but such attacks stem from the shallow teaching of scholarly rehashes of the Great Books, rather than the "vital, authentic understanding" that can come from a direct reading and studying of the original books. Thus the Humanities whose curriculum stems from the Great Books tended to downplay the GB's — a criticism that was based more on the shallowness of scholarly rehashes of GB's than the GB's themselves. A common question of professors and students alike was, "Of what relevance is Shakespeare and Milton to current problems of the world?"

What happened during the Sixties is that the belief that no real standards existed outside of the natural sciences led to the "debauching and grade inflation" of the humanities and social sciences while the natural sciences remained largely intact. The humanities professors led a revolt that unfortunately redounded to their own near demise. The result for the Humanities professors has been less than a propitious one:

**[page 352] The lack of student interest, the near disappearance of language study, the vanishing of jobs for Ph.D.'s, the lack of public sympathy, came from the overturning of the old order, where their place was assured. They have gotten what they deserved, but**

**we have unfortunately all lost.**

**[page 353] Humanists ran like lemmings into the sea, thinking they would refresh and revitalize themselves in it. They drowned.**

**[page 19] The teacher . . . must constantly try to look toward the goal of human completeness and back at the natures of his students here and now.**

Thus Bloom says teachers must, like Janus, look in two directions: into the present to assess the natures of their students and into the future to the goals of human completeness. One key seems to me from where do the teachers get the goals? From the students who are just becoming aware of their life's goals or from historical and cultural achievements as embodied in traditional curriculum? The other key is how shall the teacher to assess the natures of their students. By asking the students what they think they are capable of or interested in? Or by applying standards proven over the years to stretch students beyond their own perceptions of what they are capable of?

Bloom says on page 20 that the teacher should be like a midwife — someone who assists Nature in the birth of a robust child. The educated adult is not created by the teacher any more than the midwife is responsible for the creation of the baby whose birth they assist in.

For teachers to challenge students today with Openness II (*amour-soi*) concepts is to expose themselves to having the question thrown in their face, "Are you an absolutist?" And the question will be hurled with the same indignation as "Are you a racist?" or "Are you a bigot?" The attitude is one of: anyone with strong opinions, whether justified or not, is a "true believer" and is therefore a real and present danger to the student and the entire culture.

Bloom says on page 27, "But when there are no shared goals or vision of the public good, is the social contract any longer possible?" How did we evolve or devolve to such a state? Bloom says that this state of affairs was foreshadowed when we attempted to get religious sects to adhere to the tenets of the Constitution by relegating religion to the "realm of opinion as opposed to knowledge." (page 28) Once this drastic change in epistemology was accomplished, it was a simple process to extend that same way of thinking to all beliefs, including the beliefs that supported traditional curriculums.

One foreshadowing of this switch from the traditional strictures of Openness II or *amour-soi* to the unfettered license of Openness I or *amour-propre* in our socio-political milieu came when Oliver Wendell Holmes cited the standard of "clear and present danger" to replace any principled approach to determining whether a given behavior is acceptable in our society. Again, the impeachment/removal debate of 1998 and 1999 reflects a deep debate over whether we will become a country that makes decisions based on this "imprecise and practically meaningless standard" or not. Bloom calls that a folly.

**[page 30] This folly means that men are not permitted to seek for the natural human good and admire it when found, for such discovery is coeval [existing over the same time period] with the discovery of the bad and contempt for it. Instinct and intellect must be suppressed by education. The natural soul is to be replaced with an artificial one.**

Gertrude Stein says in her *Everybody's Autobiography*, "To me when a thing is really interesting it is when there is no question and no answer, if there is then already the subject is not interesting and it is so, that is the reason that anything for which there is a solution is not interesting **that is the trouble with governments and utopias and teaching**, the things not that can be learnt but that can be taught are not interesting."

The basic prescription from Allan Bloom is that we put back some of what the 60's radicals removed in their haste for revolution and change. That, instead of revolution, we need evolution to a broad-based curriculum and that does not necessitate that we throw out the essentials of an education in the classics of culture and literature. That we must study wholes, not just bits and pieces of classics regurgitated in

textbooks, but complete works of classical authors in context. That we must read original texts in order to achieve a vital, living understanding of the issues that form the background of our current world. That our understanding of these issues is every bit as crucial for future success as any career-specific training. The alternative is not to be savored:

**[page 337] The practical effects of unwillingness to think positively about the contents of a liberal education are on the one hand, to ensure that all the vulgarities of the world outside the university will flourish within it, and, on the other, to impose a much harsher and more illiberal necessity on the student - the one given by the imperial imperious demands of the specialized disciplines unfiltered by unifying thought.**

Instead of a unified scheme of liberal education, we find no organization, no "tree of knowledge", "no vision, no set of competing visions of what an educated human being is." Students in the face of a bewildering array of choices are left "dispirited", unable to make a reasonable choice. There is no hint of "great mysteries", "new and higher motives", and that human life might be improved by what he is about to learn. To counter this decisional malaise Bloom suggests that we develop models for a unified use of university resources so that, with the proliferation of current curriculum, the student has a glide path to an education rather than a tortuous random walk through a 400 page catalog.

All of these things together can only be implemented if there is a vision from the top. Only with such vision stemming from the university hegemonies can there be a re-focusing on the vital aspects of a university education. Only then can a liberal education in the classical sense arise once more.

Bloom sees that one form of *openness*, relativism or *amour-propre*, really amounts to a "closing of the American mind". He suggests that one way of re-invigorating the college curriculum is by adding back a study of the Great Books and classical authors whose books fell into disuse during the 1960's. With this kind of refocusing of educational resources and re-direction of college students he expect that students will come to understand that before one can really experience the thrill of liberation, one has to have something to really believe in. That experience of really believing can come whenever a student fully studies classical authors in their original works, and after fully believing in what they've read, learn to question and evaluate the beliefs those original authors held as self-evident to them.

Bloom sees that one form of *openness*, relativism or *amour-propre*, really amounts to a "closing of the American mind", and that the radicals who promote great plans to equalize economic and social opportunities are doomed to failure. It was a similar closing of the French people's mind that allowed popularly-supported paid vacations to become more important than national defense.

**[page 239] As an image of our current intellectual condition, I keep being reminded of the newsreel pictures of Frenchmen splashing happily in the water at the seashore, enjoying the paid vacations legislated by Léon Blum's Popular Front government. It was 1936, the same year Hitler was permitted to occupy the Rhineland. All our big causes amount to that kind of vacation.**

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**[page 239] We are like ignorant shepherds living on a site where great civilizations once flourished. The shepherds play with the fragments that pop to the surface, having no notion of the beautiful structures of which they were once a part. All that is necessary is**

**a careful excavation to provide them with life-enhancing models. We need history, not to tell us what happened, or to explain the past, but to make the past alive so that it can explain and make a future possible. This is our educational crisis and opportunity.**

This metaphor reminds me of one crafted by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry in his [Wisdom of the Sands](#) (Original title in French: *Citadelle*).

**[page 19] Thus men destroy their best possession, the meaning of things: on feast days they pride themselves on standing out against old custom, and betraying their traditions, and toasting their enemy. True, they may feel some qualm as they go about their deeds of sacrilege. So long as there is sacrilege. So long as there still is something against which they revolt. Thus for a while they continue trading on the fact that their foe still breathes, and the ghostly presence of the laws still hampers them enough for them to feel like outlaws. But presently the very ghost dissolves into thin air, and then the rapture of revolt is gone, even the zest of victory forgotten. And now they yawn. On the ruins of the palace they have laid out a public square; but once the pleasure of trampling its stones with upstart arrogance has lost its zest, they begin to wonder what they are doing here, on this noisy fairground. And now, lo and behold, they fall to picturing, dimly as yet, a great house with a thousand doors, with curtains that billow on your shoulders and slumbrous anterooms. Perchance they dream even of a secret room, whose secrecy pervades the whole vast dwelling. Thus, though they know it not, they are pining for my father's palace where every footstep had a meaning.**

In the radical fervor of the 60's, great buildings of curriculum were torn to the ground, and now students and professors alike have begun once more picturing that great house, their father's university, "where every step had a meaning."

Bloom says that as a young teacher at Cornell he debated a professor of psychology who bragged about how he removed prejudices from his students. Bloom told the professor in rebuttal that he *created* prejudices in his students, beliefs that they could someday with work and diligence transcend.

In short, Bloom says, "One has to have the experience of really believing before one can have the thrill of liberation." That may indeed be the kind of "liberation" that is at the very root of what we mean by "liberal education."

