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# The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly in Amerika's *Akadēmia*

William K. Buckley

I am not moralizing.

Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* 22

To pass from the overheated Utopia of Education to the realm of teaching is to leave behind false heroics and take a seat in the front row of the human comedy.

Jacques Barzun, *Teacher in America* 17

Their world was also my world, their difficulties my difficulties, and if they were going to connect the world of the novels with their world, I had to acknowledge the same or similar connections.

Wayne Burns, *Journey through the Dark Woods* 115

"I am just an American Jewish kid," Allan Bloom has said, "to whom the ideas of great thinkers were made available, but I fear that the opportunities I had will no longer exist" (Interview). There can be no doubt that Bloom means what he says here, and, in fact, there can be no doubt that we know him to be a scholar who passionately loves the great books. But surely he is being modest when he says that he was just a kid "to whom the ideas of great thinkers were made available." *The Closing of the American Mind* has won the Jean-Jacques Rousseau Prize in Geneva, and Bloom's analysis of our "spiritual malaise" has been read in this country by probably half a million people. He has attracted congratulatory raves from the Right and bitter denunciations from the Left. The *National Review* has devoted its annual campus issue to him (where Hugh Kenner hopes for big sales of the book), while *Harper's* has Benjamin Barber proclaiming that Bloom has written "one of the most profoundly anti-democratic books ever" (62). Bloom is too complex, however, for either the Right or the Left to adopt him as their Jeremiah. He is not the academy's ayatollah. Tongues are not cut out from students' mouths at the University of Chicago for uttering Western "liberalisms." Nor is he the Frankfurt

School sociologist, although many of his comments on American culture can be traced to the influence of this school. He dismisses thinkers like Marcuse and Adorno quickly and without any discussion. That he is no "liberal" may, at first glance, seem obvious, with his offhanded pan of Freud, Marx, and the social sciences. That he is a "conservative" may be strongly argued, since he is codirector of the John M. Olin Center and says things like "stu-

dents . . . no longer have any image of a perfect soul" (67) and modern American political thought has betrayed the original intentions of the "Founders" (31; see also Bork). What makes *The Closing of the American Mind* more controversial than E. D. Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy*, and less likely to be adopted wholeheartedly by either Left or Right, is its sharper criticisms of American democracy. And to many of those criticisms we can say yes:

1. Students "live comfortably within the administrative state that has replaced politics" (85)—yes.
2. "[P]assionlessness is the most striking effect . . . of the sexual revolution" (99)—yes.
3. Students are "full of desperate platitudes about self-determination. . . . [T]his is a thin veneer over boundless seas of rage, doubt, and fear" (120)—yes.
4. "There is a whole arsenal of terms for talking about nothing—caring, self-fulfillment, expanding consciousness" (155)—yes.
5. "The humanities are like the great old Paris Flea Market where, amidst masses of junk, people with a good eye found castaway treasures that made them rich" (371)—yes.
6. The humanities "suffer most from democratic society's lack of respect for tradition and its emphasis on utility" (373)—yes.
7. "American life-style has become a Disneyland version of the Weimar Republic for the whole family" (147)—perhaps.
8. "Historicism and cultural relativism actually are

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a means to avoid testing our own prejudices” (40)—yes.

Yet there is much in the book to which I can respond no:

1. America has no “deep necessity” to read its own authors (54)—no. What of Cooper, Twain, Crane, Whitman, Melville, and Hawthorne? If not found in high school courses—and most are—then they are found in required college courses.

2. Rock music ruins the imagination of students and makes it difficult for them “to have a passionate relationship to the art and thought . . . of liberal education” (79)—no. My students have always reacted passionately to the books I teach—from Rousseau to D. H. Lawrence. They use rock music to escape from their passions.

3. Kids don’t have “prejudices against anyone” (89)—not where I teach. Judgments about race, sex, and religion are strong and deep here, and they don’t spring from what Bloom calls “aristocratic” sentiments “within the democracy” (89).

4. “Freud and D. H. Lawrence are very old hat” (107)—not for my students, no matter where I have taught. Both still outrage.

5. Heidegger’s revolt against Aristotle and Plato and the decision by German universities to serve “German culture” spelled death for reason and introduced nihilism into American higher education—provocative but reductive. The “Nietzscheanization of the Left” has been shown by Wilhelm Reich to be only one manifestation of a much broader phenomenon: all mass psychologies, whether Left, Right, or center, are based on organized mysticism, repressive idealisms, and politically staged events. The nihilism I feel in my students as they struggle to respond to Céline or Lawrence is really the hard and angry reaction to the most repressive aspects of idealism in their lives.<sup>1</sup> Nihilism is pleasure anxiety, the energizing core of patriarchal religions, and it was precisely this kind of anxiety that Hitler and Lenin counted on in setting up their governments (Reich shows us in *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* certain pamphlets distributed to German students in the 1930s that are full of religious mysticisms, silly patriotic ideals, references to Nietzsche, and careful recognitions of sexual repressions and how students might satisfy them in order to be more effective and obedient servants to the fuhrer figure). Nihilism in America is not the revolt against Aristotle and Plato but the manifestation of inner struggles against what can be a ruthless economy. Far from projecting what Bloom calls an “am-

biguous image” (297), the natural sciences in our American universities actually tap into the full emotional content of political mysticisms and exploitive economics in order to forge whatever economic and military policy is deemed expedient.<sup>2</sup>

6. Our students are free to read “in any way they please” (374)—not in my classes; nor was I ever allowed to read this way in the classes I attended at college in the 1960s and 1970s. And my colleagues today do not let this happen in their classes.

7. The “fate of freedom in the world has devolved upon our regime. . . . [T]he fate of philosophy in the world has devolved upon our universities” (382)—let’s just say that these statements are a little self-conscious.

More tempestuous than Hirsch’s *Cultural Literacy* and more ambitious than Barzun’s *Teacher in America*, *The Closing of the American Mind* remains, curiously enough, too much the general swipe—despite the lengthy descriptions of American life in part 1. Sometimes the book is the leisured and cranky lament, characteristic of the small-town editorial page; in other places it is the thick treatise. What makes *Closing* so popular, however, is that it just might be the last and most eloquent twentieth-century protest against the scientific discoveries of the nineteenth century. And in its genuine pain at seeing the mute and brutal reality of things surround culture, “as the puppet-show of fancy was surrounded by the inn,” as Ortega y Gasset called it (144–45), the book becomes more howl than argument, more condemnation of history than level-eyed tangle with fact. Bloom’s complaints are not new: we read much the same in Veblen, Marx, Freud, Marcuse, and Adorno and in the essays by our colleagues in the last issues of *Profession* (in *Profession* 87 Wayne Booth’s “Reversing the Downward Spiral: Or, What Is the Graduate Program For?” divides us with more compassion into the “Ancients” and the “Mods”). What is new, however, is how we come to know Bloom’s views. Through his commonplace dichotomies we come to see his vision of our *akadēmia*; by his clear view of the “good” and his descriptions of the bad and ugly, we come to see our post-Socratic Amerika.

### **The Good (The True Socratic Teacher Who Fights with Right Reason the Culture of Relativism)**

It is difficult to discover just what Bloom means by “the good,” a phrase that appears with regularity

in his book as the offered cure-all for our pursuit of nihilism. That's because in true Socratic fashion Bloom refuses to be specific about "things of Being." Perhaps the good is the "fulfillment of the whole natural human potential" (37). But what is that? Perhaps it is the United States, which, he says, is one of the "highest and most extreme achievements of the rational quest for the good life according to nature" (39). Sweden, France, and England would disagree. We can guess with relative accuracy that the University is a good if it provides a place where Reason can be contemptuous of public opinion. More likely, however, the good are only those males who do *not* live "off the gradually dying energy provided by the original philosophic dynamos" (311), males who still believe with Plato that eros leads to philosophy, which in turn leads to "the rational quest for the best regime, the *one* good political order vs. the plurality of cultures" (305). Now this quest for the "*one*" good political order goes far beyond any of the blueprints for literacy drawn up by Hirsch or Paulo Freire. To discover what kind of males pursue the best regime, and what political order they want, we must finally turn to Plato's *Republic*—especially since Bloom admits that the *Republic* is "*the* book on education" for him (381).

SOCRATES. [E]ducation is not truly what some of its professors say it is. They say they are able to put knowledge into a soul which hasn't got it—as if they were putting sight into blind eyes.

GLAUCON. They do say so.

SOCRATES. But our argument points to this: the natural power to learn lives in the soul and is like an eye which might not be turned from the dark to the light without a turning round of the whole body. The instrument of knowledge has to be turned around, and with it the whole soul, from the things of becoming to the things of being, till the soul is able, by degrees, to support the light of true being and can look at the brightest. And this, we say, is the good?

GLAUCON. We do. (126)

Now, at last, we are close to understanding. To be able to turn people around in just *this* way, an efficient and powerful political structure is necessary.

SOCRATES. So we who are designing this state will have to force these naturally best minds to get what we have said is the greatest knowledge of all, to go on up till they see the good, and, when they have seen enough, we will not let them do as they do now.

GLAUCON. What is that?

SOCRATES. They may not keep to themselves up there, but have to go down again among those prisoners and take

part in their work and rewards, whatever these may be.  
GLAUCON. Then are we to wrong them by forcing them into a worse way of living when a better one is within their power?

SOCRATES. Are you keeping in mind, my friend, that this law of ours is not to make any one group in the state specially happy, but the state itself? Everyone is to give to all the others whatever he is able to produce for the society. For it made these men so, not to please themselves, but to unite the commonwealth.

GLAUCON. I see. I was overlooking that.

SOCRATES. But note, Glaucon, there will be no wrong done to the philosophers in this. We have just arguments to give them when we force them to become guardians. (127–28)

Now we see, clearly, the good: the state itself. And it was Plato's devotion to this goal that drove him to say "we will keep a sharp eye on these makers of stories" (49). What would a Platonic state do with William Blake, Céline, or Allen Ginsberg? It would not let them "do as they do now." The pursuit of the good, therefore, is that focusing of the ancient "sharp eye" on the dangers that the imagination poses to the ideal state or the ideal university. Zamiatin's *We* pointedly describes the phenomenon:

REJOICE!

For from now on we are *perfect!*  
Until today your own creation, engines, were more perfect than you.

WHY?

For every spark from a dynamo is a spark of pure reason; each motion of a piston, a pure syllogism. It is not true that the same faultless reason is within you?

The philosophy of the cranes, presses, and pumps is complete and clear like a circle. But is your philosophy less circular? The beauty of a mechanism lies in its immutable, precise rhythm, like that of a pendulum. But have you not become as precise as a pendulum? . . .

Yes, but there is one difference:

MECHANISMS HAVE NO FANCY.

Did you ever notice a pump cylinder with a wide, distant, sensuously dreaming smile upon its face while it was working? Did you ever hear cranes that were restless, tossing about and sighing at night during the hours designed for rest?

NO!

Yet on your faces (you may well blush with shame!) the Guardians have more and more frequently seen those smiles, and they have heard your sighs. And (you should hide your eyes for shame!) the historians of the United States

have all tendered their resignations so as to be relieved from having to record such shameful occurrences.

It is not your fault; you are ill. And the name of your illness is:

FANCY. (166)

### The Bad (Sometimes the Masses Awash with Opinions and Sometimes Intellectuals Who Deny Man "Eternity")

The mass-minded American student is an easy individual to condemn. As an obvious target, his mind is so weak that it neither recognizes the attack on it nor allows space for such a critique to thrive. Even those of us who think we are free from the diversity of propaganda discover that our ideas have not escaped the power of its reductive force. That's why teaching is such hard work. The crowd out in front of us must fight the swallowed-whole notions of its culture if it is ever to break free and really read a great book—and so must the teacher fight. It's easy, then, to use Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* to attack what we already know: that the American mind is conformist. It is much harder to analyze the effects of our conformity, which seem to interpenetrate our very analysis of it. Even Bloom has been bamboozled by the media's hype of the sixties as the so-called decade of revolution. Our language has been so thinned out by a consumer economy, so absorbed by the black hole of propaganda, that words like *revolution* can now be used to sell dishwashing liquid. That's why Bloom's "report from the front" (22) will be used and popularized according to the needs of a well-oiled state. Surely Bloom realizes that, true to Tocqueville's descriptions, *Closing* will be shelved as just one more opinion and that the economic, business, and military interests of an industrialized nation will quietly and efficiently use his ideas in any way that it wants and then jettison them from the arranged public climate when they are no longer expedient. Marcuse's "Beyond Tolerance" gives us detailed and effectively reasoned descriptions of this aspect of democracy.

E. D. Hirsch's solution to our illiterate conformity is to require that all our students know "what literate Americans know" (146), and what literate Americans know he provides in a lengthy, alphabetically arranged list of facts, ideas, names, and books (e.g., "Adonis," "adrenal gland," "adrena-

line," etc. I note with surprise that Blake is on the list but not Ginsberg, "adultery" but not "alcoholism," Dickens but not Hardy, "circumcision" but not "circulation"; see also Scholes's responses to the list). Hirsch's plan is to teach the list not "as a series of terms, or a list of words," but as a "vivid system of shared associations" (127): all to bring us close to the "Ciceronian ideal of universal public discourse—in short, achieving fundamental goals of the Founders at the birth of the republic" (145). This sort of sloganeering reminds us of Bloom; Bloom's solution, however, is more radical: we must tell the student "what he *should* study" (338). And that "*should*," of course, means studying not the "multiversity smorgasbord," the traitorous social sciences, or the big bad MBA programs but a completely interrelated system of disciplines that will satisfy our need for what Bloom calls "high-level generalism" (343). I think he means that liberal education must go back to discussing "a unified view of nature and man's place in it" (347). I can't believe that our place in nature is *not* being discussed at schools across the land—given the American love for sweeping pronouncements. But Bloom is convinced that the bad is "cultural relativism," which "succeeds in destroying the West's universal or intellectually imperialistic claims" (39); that Marxism, Freudianism, and behaviorism (presumably the work of B. F. Skinner) are abstractions not grounded in experience; and that the growth of these relativisms is destroying the university by destroying high-level generalisms. I find it baffling that Bloom condemns Marx and Freud, these high-level generalists whose first analyses of "the mob" have helped him come to the conclusions he has reached. Moreover, what could be more grounded in experience than the descriptions found in Freud's "Infantile Sexuality" or Marx's "Estranged Labour" or Skinner's "What Is Man?"? Only Charles Darwin was more worried about our place in nature.

The bad is not the mob waiting to tear down the walls of the university but the efficient removal of our individuality by institutions that find it necessary to anchor their policies in political idealisms—this is the real cause for our modern feelings of alienation. The "antidote" is not "the heroic—Homer, Plutarch" (256), as Bloom says it is, or a more clever way of feeding state lies to children. Prince Hal's pursuit of the heroic led him back to the Inn, where Falstaff waited with a mug of ale and a speech on missing limbs. Surrounding the Ideal, always, is the Inn, *Don Quixote* keeps tell

ing us, and the Inn offers itself as a refuge for those battered by the high expectations of civilization. Perhaps our universities should offer a haven, too, to those who feel battered.

Wayne Burns's *Journey through the Dark Woods* is probably the most remarkable autobiography ever penned by a college teacher, and I offer a quote from it now as a response to Bloom's Platonic solutions to our academic problems. Both Burns and Bloom have looked at the same problems, and they even say similar things about American life, but where Bloom says, with Plato, "Till philosophers become kings . . . only then will this our republic see the light of day" (*Republic* 97), Burns, after giving us remarkable political and social observations of the university from 1940 to 1980, says something quite the opposite:

I don't think you can speak of the survival of education or society apart from the survival of individuals. For my part I feel no concern for the survival of even . . . the university, except in so far as it sustains and nourishes individual students and teachers. . . .

To ask, or to demand, or to expect that a University of some 30,000 students can be humanized is to me sheer naiveté. And to persist in this demand or expectation is sheer folly, and can only lead to still further institutionalization of students and teachers alike. (195–96)

I believe I did, in my undergraduate classes, manage to combine theory with practice in such a way as to deepen, without restricting, their responses to the novels. But in the process I ran into unforeseen consequences, since I found it impossible to effect the combination without having my theory of fiction turn into a theory of life. I didn't want that to happen, or at least I didn't want it to happen in the way it often did happen. For I had no lust for power, no desire to become some kind of guru. The most I wanted to do was provide the students with a way of understanding fiction that was also, as I believed it had to be, a way of understanding life in all its dismaying complexity.

Yet if I wasn't forcing I was inevitably persuading. I couldn't do anything else. In consciously setting myself up as the teacher as revolutionary, committed to helping the students who wished to follow the novelist as revolutionary wherever he might lead, I had, in effect, committed myself to going places with students that teachers do not ordinarily go. In asking them to be naked I had to be naked too; or more accurately, I had to be naked first, since I, as the teacher, couldn't ask them to do what I had not yet done. I couldn't, in other words, ask them to make connections I hadn't made. (114–15)

### The Ugly (The Nihilists—Dangerous Souls to the Body Politic)

BLOOM. Isn't it true that under your powerful influence the German university abandoned reason when it began to attack Socrates himself?

NIETZSCHE. That may be so, but a philosopher—as you have said—should not have any allegiance to institutions. I place myself outside *akadēmia*, as did Socrates.

BLOOM. But you have destroyed the tragic sense of life, the noble instincts. You have cut the common thread linking us to the real Greece.

NIETZSCHE. Indeed. But what is the real Greece?

BLOOM. It is reason itself, and reason is now rejected by philosophy itself. Your opinions are separated from knowledge, and, as Plato said, they are therefore "ugly things" [*Republic* 115].

NIETZSCHE. Wasn't it reasoning that led me to my reasonings? My ugly things?

BLOOM. Yes, but your disciple Heidegger has betrayed the spirit of philosophy and put the university at the service of German culture. And now the very idea of the university in America is close to being destroyed as a result.

NIETZSCHE. Then he must assume responsibility for his own reasoning.

BLOOM. And you must assume yours!

NIETZSCHE. Indeed, I do. Which is?

BLOOM. You have attacked the ideal state.

WOODY ALLEN. Could I break in here? Where is the ideal state?

BLOOM. In our noble instincts.

ALLEN. My mother once told me that my Aunt Gladys had noble instincts and that's why she never got married. She spent her whole life ogling ideal women in the Sears *Catalog* and eating chocolates.

BLOOM. You are trivializing, as usual! And you are not very amusing either. Both you and Nietzsche have lost true inner-directedness.

ALLEN. I'm sentimental, for Christ's sake! about my old neighborhood! and 1940s big band music, delicatessens, food, smells, really attractive women! That's nihilism?

BLOOM. Yes. You give us nihilism as something we want to feel cozy about.

ALLEN. That's what I'm showing in my movies! Everyone wants me to be serious. Nobody wants me to be funny anymore!

KARL MARX. None of you have got it yet. If our ideas are ugly, gentlemen, then they reflect the ugliness of those in power. Professor Bloom, you remember the discussion between Socrates and Thrasymachus over the keepers of the sheep?

BLOOM. I do.

MARX. And do you remember that Thrasymachus's point was that "justice is simply what is to the

stronger man's profit"? [*Republic* 26]

ALLEN. Sounds like my agent.

BLOOM. I do.

MARX. And that the unjust man will always outdo the just man, especially where money is concerned?

BLOOM. Yes.

MARX. And that injustice will often get more for one man than justice will get for another?

BLOOM. Yes.

MARX. Well?

BLOOM. Well, what?

MARX. Don't you see the irony?

BLOOM. We must still define justice according to all things good and unchanging.

MARX. Who must?

BLOOM. The philosophers, the true guardians of the state.

MARX. And I'm not a philosopher?

BLOOM. No. You are an economist.

MARX. And you?

BLOOM. I am a philosopher, and I am in "love with knowledge of the unchanging" [*Republic* 102]. And even though all of you may be philosophers in one degree or another, your natural science and your historicism are destroying the academy. There is no common concern and search for the good today. We must, like all those men in the Platonic dialogues, think together for the establishment of the true republic.

Bloom is a passionate thinker, reader, teacher, and idealist, who, like Plato, feels he is writing at a time when his country is doomed. These are reactionary times in Amerika, years in a decade marked by an age-old complaint hollered out by the editors of the inaugural issue of the *National Review*: We shall stand athwart history and yell "Stop!" Unlike E. D. Hirsch, Bloom reasons around history and back to the sweet dreams of an old Greek. *The Closing of the American Mind* is plagued by a generalized vision that sees only two kinds of American students and teachers: those who are subject to mob opinion and those who read and apply the classics. Bloom's proof for this division is to describe his students' behavior on one day in the 1960s, when they "looked down from the classroom on the frantic activity outside, thinking they were privileged" (332). In 1973, I had the opportunity to look down too, from an outside stairwell attached to a university library building, and I witnessed with detachment how a mob coiled itself up and then lunged into the closed front doors of an administra-

tion building. It was "Stop-the-War Day." I did not join the mob, nor did I feel superior. I went home and found myself reading Lucan's *Civil Wars* and Freud's "Group Psychology and Analysis of the Ego." There were many reactions that day, however, other than the mob's choice or my bookish one. A lot of teachers and students were in the library; a lot of students walked by the riot, on their way to work. Quite a few people stood around and cheered; some were even taking a nap in the sun on a grassy hillside overlooking the scene. The whole event was rich in irony—and had you witnessed that event from a great distance away, I have no doubt that you would have found it as ironic as Icarus's unnoticed fall in Breughel's painting. There were so many individualized actions that day, and individualized actions, anchored as they are in reality, are always in conflict with ideal prescriptions.

When Socrates tells Glaucon that justice is to be loved for itself, Glaucon responds, "But the masses, Socrates, don't think so. They put being just with hard work, as one of the things to be done only for what is to be got out of it, rewards and a good name" (33). Such realism is too much for Socrates. He responds that he is not "very good at learning such things" (33). Realism is, perhaps, too much for Bloom, as it is for most of us—as it was for Don Quixote. Like Husserl, who planned in *The Crisis of the European Sciences* to secure for eternity reason and truth against all doubt, so has Bloom planned, in *Closing*, to encase the imagination within prescribed consensus and to secure the university against change. But if it is true (and I think it is) that, as Wayne Burns says, our students' world is also our world and "their difficulties" are our difficulties, and if as teachers we acknowledge this, then and only then can we leave the "overheated Utopia of Education" and "take a seat in the front row of the human comedy" (Barzun 17).

It will always be difficult to teach well, to learn accurately; to read, write, and count readily and competently; to acquire a sense of history and develop a taste for literature and the arts—in short, to instruct and start one's education or another's. For this purpose no school or college or university is ever just right; it is only by the constant effort of its teachers that it can even be called satisfactory.

(Barzun xix–xx)

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> "Away from the animal; away from sexuality!" are the guiding principles of the formation of all human ideol-

ogy. This is the case whether it is disguised in the fascist form of racially pure “supermen,” the communist form of proletarian class honor, the Christian form of man’s “spiritual and ethical nature,” or the liberal form of “higher human values.” All these ideas harp on the same monotonous tune: “We are not animals; it was we who discovered the machine—not the animal! *And we don’t have genitals like the animals!*” All of this adds up to an overemphasis of the intellect, of the “purely” mechanistic; logic and reason as opposed to instinct; culture as opposed to nature; the mind as opposed to the body; work as opposed to sexuality; the state as opposed to the individual; the superior man as opposed to the inferior man.

How is it to be explained that of the millions of car drivers, radio listeners, etc., only very few know the name of the inventor of the car and the radio, whereas every child knows the name of the generals of the political plague?

Natural science is constantly drilling into man’s consciousness that fundamentally he is a worm in the universe. The political plague-monger is constantly harping upon the fact that man is not an animal, but a “zoon politikon,” i.e., a non-animal, an upholder of values, a “moral being.” How much mischief has been perpetuated by the Platonic philosophy of the state! It is quite clear why man knows the politicians better than the natural scientists: He does not want to be reminded of the fact that he is fundamentally a sexual animal. *He does not want to be an animal.* (Reich 339)

<sup>2</sup> See Reich, chapters 7 and 8.

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