THE CLOSING OF THE AMERICAN MIND and THE TRIAL OF SOCRATES

Allan Bloom
Little, Brown New York
1988 382 pp., $5.95 paperback

I. F. Stone Simon and Schuster
Boston 1987
270 pp., $18.25 paperback

University of Chicago Professor Allan Bloom presents the self-directed learner with what might be an unanswerable dilemma. On the one hand, he seems to argue, in his book, The Closing of the American Mind, that one of the reasons why American higher education is in such a sorry condition is because we have abandoned the great books, Plato, Aristotle, Rousseau, et al, at least in part because the writers were either too white, too male, too Western, or simply irrelevant to these changing times in a multi-cultural world.

Indeed, that has been the criticism that is most often leveled against Bloom--that his yearning for a more reverent reading and study of the masters reflects a kind of elitism, or anti-democratic tendency. But in this, his work has been grossly oversimplified and misunderstood. It is not a simple return to the great books that he argues for. Nor does he even endorse a general reading of these works--not for everyone, in any event.

On page 344, he argues, "I am perfectly well aware of, and actually agree with, the objections to the Great Books cult. It is amateurish; it encourages an autodidact's self assurance without competence...it engenders a spurious intimacy with greatness, and so forth."

At a conference in Minneapolis in November of 1987, I asked Bloom what alternatives, then, are left to adults who are not associated with a university?

He laughed. "I taught adults for years," he said. "I love adults. I hope to become one myself."

Still laughing at his own remarks, he continued: "There are times that are critical times for education. My father used to say between the years of puberty and adultery. It's a little like physical training. Even though the desire has come upon me, I can't be Arnold Schwarzenegger."

Finally serious, Bloom said he had no answer to the question, that youth brings with it a certain "flexibility of the soul," and while it is wonderful when people wish to continue their education through self-directed reading, "it is only a useful lifetime habit if one has begun young."

Bloom's message has been muddied in part because the people who should read and passionately argue about his theses--teachers--have largely ignored what Bloom has had to say. And those who haven't ignored the message have linked him with another, very different, work--that of University of Virginia Professor E. D. Hirsch, whose Cultural Literacy, was published at about the same time, the summer of 1987, and the two books have frequently been reviewed in tandem, as if they covered the same ground from different perspectives.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Hirsch starts out with the premise that knowledge can be good for everyone, that, in fact, if Americans had a better grounding in the classic texts of Western civilization and the English and American traditions of political philosophy, they would become better and more informed voters. And our society would be much improved.

With Bloom the message is very different. Yes, the great books can be valuable. But only for the right people, and only under the correct circumstances.

To achieve the debate in the educational community that is so badly needed, we would be better off considering Bloom in conjunction with another book--I. F. Stone's

The Trial of Socrates.

This is a work by a self-professed amateur. Stone, a journalist who published the investigative journal, "I. F. Stone's Weekly," considers one of the hallowed texts of Plato's work, "The Apology of Socrates," from a decidedly non-reverential viewpoint.

Bloom's thesis has to do with relativism of values. He argues in favor of the sort of timeless truths that Plato wrote about, and he rejects what he regards as a descent into moral relativism that he traces to the time and writings of Nietzsche. It is an old arguement. Is there a universal truth; are there fixed values which remain the same regardless of culture and other circumstances? This was argued in the time of Socrates and Plato and well before their time. Are we to believe Heraclitus, that all is motion? Or was Parmenides right when he argued that change is merely an illusion? Are we to be relativists or absolutists?

In the century after Heraclitus and Parmenides debated the issue, one segment of a school of philosophers took things a step further. These were the Sophists. Although at the time of Plato and Socrates, the term sophist meant teacher in general (Socrates himself referred to as a sophist) there was also a specific meaning to the term--in its most extreme form, it amounted to a kind of relativisitc thinking that called into question the prevailing authority. Such thinking attacked the basic underpinnings of the Greek polis, and came to be regarded by some as dangerous. The two most famous attackers of the Sophists (and defenders of the authority of timeless truths) were Socrates and Plato.

What were these ideas which were so dangerous? Here is an example from a work entitled, Against the Schoolmasters, by Sextus Empiricus:

"There was a time when the life of man was disorderly and bestial and subject to brute force; when there was no reward for the good and no punishment for the bad. At that time, I think, men enacted laws in order that justice might be absolute ruler and have arrogance as its slave; and if anyone did wrong he was punished. Then, when the laws prohibited them from doing deeds of violence they began to do them secretly. Then, I think, some shrewd and wise man invented fear of the gods for mortals, so that there might be some deterrent to the wicked even if they did or said or thought something in secret . . . With such fears did he surround men, and by means of them he established the diety securely in a place befitting his dignity, and quenched lawlessness."

Relativism, then, is not something invented by Nietzsche to plague modern America. It is an ancient debate made fresh by Bloom as a partisan against the present-day Sophists.

Bloom attacks those who disagree with him in the same way that his mentor Socrates attacked the Sophists of his time. It is because of the jaundiced view of the Sophists that was held by Socrates and later by his student Plato, that what little we know of Sophist philosophy today is negative. The very word connotes a charlatan, someone who uses cleverness rather than truth to prove a point.

But what is truth? Is there some unchangeable measure of truth that has existed from time immemorable, or is truth itself relative, as the Sophists contended? This is the central question that Bloom raises, and it is of vital importance to the very teachers who have ignored Bloom in favor of the more genial but far less challenging Hirsch.

Writing in the early part of the 20th century, American historian and social critic Henry Adams (whom Bloom dismisses as a "crank") wrote this now-famous comment about teachers:

"A parent gives life, but as parent, gives no more. A murderer takes life, but his deed stops there. A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops."

The statement could be taken up by every school board at budget time, or every teachers' union at contract negotiation times. And it is truly an affirmative statement on the important role that teachers play.

But that is not what Adams meant. His statement continues on a much more difficult level:

"A teacher is expected to teach truth, and may perhaps flatter himself that he does so, if he stops with the alphabet or the multiplication table, as a mother teaches truth by making her child eat with a spoon; but morals are quite another truth and philosophy is more complex still. A teacher must either treat history as a catalogue, a record, a romance, or as an evolution; and whether he affirms or denies evolution, he falls into all the burning faggots of the pit. He makes of his scholars either priests or atheists, plutocrats or socialists, judges or anarchists, almost in spite of himself. In essence incoherent and immoral, history had either to be taught as such--or falsified.

Anyone who would teach truth, in this line of reasoning, would have to either admit that it is unattainable, or lie. Here, without Nietzsche, is an example of where we went wrong, in Bloom's view. And perhaps it is an example of why the easiest way to deal with an uncomfortable opposing argument is to dismiss the arguer as a crank.

This is what Bloom does with Stone. Asked to write a review for the Washington Post Book World, Bloom spent more time attacking Stone, himself, admittedly with some wit, and less time dealing with the uncomfortable view that perhaps Socrates was killed because the upper-class youths that he gathered around himself were sympathetic toward, and in a few examples actually responsible for, bloody anti-democratic insurrections that left thousands of Athenians dead.

Stone, who re-learned ancient Greek in order to study the sources first hand, begins his study with this question: How could Athens, the most democratic of ancient societies, abandon its convictions of free speech and put to death one of its most outstanding philosophers and free thinkers?

As Stone put it: "How could the trial of Socrates have happened in so free a society? How could Athens have been so untrue to itself? I could not defend the verdict when I started and I cannot defend it now. But I wanted to find out what Plato does not tell us, to give the Athenian side of the story, to mitigate the city's crime and thereby remove some of the stigma the trial left on democracy and on Athens."

What Stone finally concluded, after exhaustive reading of the original texts (and reading them in the same way he had earlier studied government documents looking for news stories), was that there were political ramifications to the trial of Socrates.

Specifically, Socrates was put to death because of Athenian suspicions about his sympathy toward anti-democratic persons and movements.

Indeed, the pupils Socrates surrounded himself with were talented youths from the most prominent and wealthy families of Athens. They were the ancient eqivalent of the students that Allan Bloom teaches at the University of Chicago.

Stone's argument that the trial was essentially political is not a new one. In an article in the November, 1983, issue of Political Theory, Gregory Vlastos of the University of California at Berkeley deals directly with such implications.

Although Vlastos' point is that these arguments are misplaced, he provides considerable historical background for Stone's effort.

There was, in fact, a wide popular perception in Athens at the time that would directly support Stone's thesis.

Consider this quote from Aeschines "Contra Timarchum": "Men of Athens, you executed Socrates the sophist because he was shown to have educated Critias, one of

the Thirty who subverted democracy."

Conservative reviewers of such as Sidney Hook, a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, and Bloom, himself, have savaged Stone for his viewing of ancient political and philosophical issues through our own recent experience.

Their reviews are angry.

In the January 20, 1988, Wall Street Journal, Hook writes:

"Stone, the well-known radical journalist, has undertaken the task of solving the paradox of why Athens, the cradle of Western democracy, condemned Socrates to death. He learned Greek, read widely for many years, and offers a solution he is convinced solves the problem that has baffled professional classicists, historians and philosophers for almost 2,400 years. Mr. Stone is certainly to be commended for resuming his general education in Greek culture and history, for showing that it is never too late for a mature man to learn. His achievement is somewhat marred by the display of the spirit of Little Jack Horner, so proud of some of his magical feats of philological analysis that he can't help strewing the pages of a popular books with recondite Greek words. But this touch of pedantry is a common and forgivable offense in autodidacts . . ." He concludes his hostile and condescending review with the remark that "Mr. Stone's jeering remarks about Platos' philosophical doctrines are those of a cultural philistine."

Blooms seems to take the most offense at Stone's criticism of Socrates' philosophic detachment. When Athens was threatened by a right-wing revolution, Socrates did not leave the city as many other democrats did. He simply went home. To Stone, that detachment represents a silent complicity in anti-democratic events. To Bloom, it is an example of the philosophic detachment, and that is why he believes it so important that universities function as privileged bastions for the wise elite.

Wrote Bloom:

"This is a lesson for today about the relation between thought and society. Stone reinvents the past in order to excise Socrates' great cautionary voice. Stone must assert the most implausible things about Athens to make it work. Wrenching Pericles' phrase about Athens being the school of Hellas out of its context in Thucydides, he teaches that Athens was probably the openest society ever to exist, a participatory democracy of almost perfect equality and freedom, possessed of a philosophy, pre-Socratic, of course, identical in content and force with that of the Enlightenment. Athens is the philosopher; Socrates the seat of prejudice.

"Here Stone really is an investigator, not however a reporter but an employee of the House un-Athenian Activity Committee . . . The beady-eyed, mean-spirited prosecutor is alert to the inconsistencies that more friendly observers tend not to notice. There is something fishy about Socrates and his story. He does not tell the whole truth; and the prosecutor, obsessed by state security and loyalty, sees this. But he takes seriously only that part of the accusation which says Socrates corrupts the youth. He interprets that charge as meaning that Socrates' students conspire against the city. He steadfastly, obstinately, refuses to take seriously the charge of impiety, the primary charge against Socrates . . .

"Socrates asserts that every society, always, has fundamental prejudices or myths, necessary to its existence and about which it cannot tolerate serious doubt. But it is precisely such prejudices that philosophy must test, if philosophy is to be a liberation. This means the philosopher always has an uneasy relation to civil society. Stone cannot endure this assertion . . . . He exemplifies the prosecutor, lurking in all of us, who accuses Socrates in the name of state security."

Turning I. F. Stone into an agent for state security is a remarkable feat of sophistry, in the Platonic sense of that term.

But more than likely, Bloom's real animousity toward Stone's book is that it

runs counter to the way in which he believes the classics should be read.

In The Closing of the American Mind, Bloom argues that we should read the classics as texts in themselves, raising only the questions that those tests raise, outside any context we might impose based on our own experiences.

But then what is the purpose of the classics? Why would such works survive thousands of years if they spoke only to the political context of their times? And if Bloom is right, then there is little point for the commom man to read such works. That, at least, would explain his unconcern for any but the most privileged and talented in a handful of elite institutions.

And it would explain Bloom's disregard for autodidacts--those who attempt to understand the world through their own self-directing reading, without the benefit of a University of Chicago professor at their elbow. This is a fundamental difference between Bloom and Hirsch, and it is why these two books have less to do with one another than a casual reading might suggest.

Hirsch, for his part, acknowleges that American democracy depends upon an educated society--not just the few, but everyone. While many critics have taken issue with Hirsch's list of what comprises cultural literacy--the fact that it is dominated by Western culture and ignores the broad intellectual history of the world, including the rich Indian and Chinese philosophy and the heritage of Islam and other non-Western religions. We can argue about the list. There is no suggestion in Hirsch, as there is in Bloom that such knowledge is most properly held by an elite.

Stone, the ultimate autodidact, is subjected to Bloom's most withering criticism. Is it because of what he says or what he represents?

Richard Mial