

**Educating Caliban:
Bloom's Frustration with the American Natural Savage**

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*Prospero, you're a great magician:
you're an old hand at deception.
And you lied to me so much,
about the world, about myself,
that you ended up imposing on me
an image of myself:
underdeveloped, in your words, undercompetent
that's how you made me see myself!
And I hate that image...and it's false!*

Une Tempete -Act 3, Scene 5

Allan Bloom, in part one of *The Closing of the American Mind*, describes the young American university student as a “natural savage.” Bloom initially viewed these “children of Caliban” as clean slates awaiting his teacher’s chalk.

I used to think that young Americans began whatever education they were to get at the age of eighteen, that their early lives were spiritually empty and that they arrived at the university clean slates unaware of their deeper tires and the world beyond their superficial experience.¹

His traditional thoughts appeared “perennially fresh” due to the students’ lack of exposure to the cultural heritage and literary tradition from which these thoughts had been drawn. The students appeared willing to embrace Bloom’s “grand ideals,” seeing them not as outdated tradition, but as needed furnishings for their unfurnished soul. For a moment it appeared Bloom had found his perfect student - a generation of Eliza Doolittles to his Professor Higgins. With their charming simplicity and *tabula rasa* state, these students differed from their European counterparts. If the young Americans were children of Caliban, then the European’s had Miranda as their mother.

¹ Allan Bloom, *Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 47.

Unlike the American students, Bloom observed that the Europeans had a cultural and literary framing that began in childhood. By the time they were ready to attend university, the European students already possessed an intellectual framework for constructing reality and filtering the everyday problems they faced. Speaking of the French, Bloom selected two authors who formed a dualism for French thought.

Descartes and Pascal are national authors, and they tell the French people what their alternatives are, and afford a peculiar and powerful perspective on life's perennial problems. They weave the fabric of souls.²

Bloom observed of the French, as well as Europeans in general, that “... their self-knowledge was mediated by their book learning and that their ambitions were formed as much by models first experienced in books as in everyday life.” This however was not true of Americans.

The lack of American equivalents to Descartes, Pascal, or, for that matter, Montaigne, Rabelais, Racine, Montesquieu and Rousseau is not a question of quality, but of whether there are any writers who are necessary to building our spiritual edifice, whom one must have read, or rather lived with, to be called educated, and who are the interpreters and even makers of our national life.³

The principle of self and the influence that literature has on self-knowledge and identity is one that hits at the heart of Bloom's thought. While Bloom would not concede that the savage state is one to be maintained, it did provide him the opportunity to enlighten the American students with a previously unexplored body of knowledge that had become recognized by some European students as tired tradition. If the whole world was America's bookshelf, Bloom was ready to make a few reading recommendations. So, like an aging high school football player, Bloom had found a new generation of students who had yet to hear his heroic stories of points scored and victories won.

² Ibid., 52.

³ Ibid., 53-54.

Caliban Rebels

Like many civilizing efforts, Bloom's attempts hit a snag. Bloom found that the same savage-like qualities that were the source of his late-fifties and early-sixties students' openness to perennial ideals were the same qualities that would allow his late-sixties students to reject those ideals for less "honorable" ones. He began to rethink his original "clean slate" metaphor realizing that the students of the late fifties and early sixties weren't as blank as he originally considered. Bloom thought he was educating the natural savage, but even his late-fifties and early-sixties savages knew something of the King's English.

I had not, however, paid sufficient attention to what students actually used to bring with them, the education that was once in the air that helped launch them. Most students could be counted on to know the Bible, that ubiquitous source of the older traditions ... Most students also participated in a remarkably unified and explicit political tradition that possesses one writing known to everyone and probably believed by most, the Declaration of Independence.⁴

This underlying framework, while not as deep and complete as that of the European students, did provide a framework that appeared to be completely lacking in the spiritual fabric of his late-sixties students.

Bloom criticized the universities and their lax attempts at constructing a truly liberal education as one of the reasons why the disillusioned students sought political venues in response to the failed promises of post-Sputnik science and the lack of substance offered by the universities needed to fulfill the students' intellectual longings. This, combined with the state of the reduction of power in the American family and the increase of power in the media, appeared to Bloom to be a spiritual bleeding and a land of wasted opportunities. In many ways, Bloom

⁴ Ibid., 54.

saw that a critical moment had been lost and it would take more than setting the feast to entice the students to dine at the table of his grand ideals.

Caliban Has No Master

The charm had gone. No longer did the young American university students resemble Shakespeare's Caliban; they had simply become cannibals.

Today's select students know so much less, are so much more cut off from the tradition, are so much slacker intellectually, that they make their predecessors look like prodigies of culture. The soil is ever thinner, and I doubt whether it can now sustain the taller growths.⁵

Bloom had lost the ability to scribble his story on the students' slates, but maybe Bloom didn't take his analogy far enough. Perhaps the reality is not that the slate is clean, but that there is no slate at all. Maybe the modern student is not the object that receives the action, but the subject that performs it. We are not the song to be penned by wise ancient men, but the composer.

This would mean that America is the stage on which individual Gesamtkunstwerks are performed, not a national Gesamtkunstwerk to be performed by the individuals. To quote Arthur O'Shaughnessy, "We are the music makers, we are the dreamers of dreams." We are the opera and in the pages of our score, we bring together the rich and complex patterns from various tonal structures and musical traditions. We, in our flesh, provide the unification of ideas that could never find unity in any one culture or tradition. We are post-denominational, poly-societal, and even genetically multi-cultural. We are everyone's son, yet no one's father.

Conclusion

In the end, the lack of a cultural and literary meta-narrative revered by Bloom as a quality in the American university student is the same quality that provides openness to a truth that transcends culture and nationality. This means that the truths we desire the students to hold must

⁵ Ibid., 51.

be able to defend themselves against competing ideologies. No longer can we isolate the student from the competing beliefs, for as Bloom observes, media has brought that very world into our homes. No longer can we expect the mature men and women in this country to believe our ideologies, just because we told them to from the authoritarian perspective of church, family, or country. But instead our truths must stand the test, not only of time, but of life experience. By this we will find the true perennial truths. Not because they have been presented as such, but because they transcend and endure. Bloom's need to defend, promote, and label his ideas as enduring and perennial, denies the power in the ideas themselves. Bloom treats his perennial truths as annuals - planting them over and over instead of simply allowing them to bloom each season thus proving their true nature. The fact that one plants the same flower over and over again in the same spot does not make the flower an annual, it simply reveals the preference and diligence of the gardener. If Bloom's grand ideals do contain the long-lasting relevance and power that he proclaims, then let them speak for themselves, just as any product in the free and open marketplace of the mind.

Bloom shows his lack of understanding or perhaps his penchant from hyperbole by concluding that "nobody believes that the old books do, or even could, contain the truth." Maybe it is true that nobody believes that the old books contain **The Truth**, but do they believe that the old books contain truth? And if they do, is it possible to pull from various cultural and literary traditions to form a new framework that reflects humanity as a whole. Is it possible to be both Cartesian and Pascalian?

Bloom's closing comments in *The Clean Slate* seem to summarize his underlying frustration when he says, "It is much more difficult today to attach the classic books to any experience or felt need the students have." Perhaps this has less to do with the belief that relevant

personal truth can be found in classic books and more to do with the method by which these truths are taught and literature is portrayed. Bloom seems to suffer from the same colonial tendencies as did many of the early explorers and missionaries - the imposition of a foreign framework. In doing so, Bloom has fallen into a form of educational colonialism. Perhaps the real comparison is not that the American university student is Shakespeare's savage Caliban, but that Bloom is Shakespeare's colonialist Prospero.