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Bloom on Books, Reading, and the Determination of Greatness: A Critique and an Alternative

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ABSTRACT: The place of the canon in institutions of higher education has been a matter for considerable debate in recent years. While there are important variations between different conservative positions in the battle over university reading requirements, many traditionalists assume that texts should be selected purely on the basis of their literary or philosophical merit, and that some people are able to objectively distinguish "Great Books" from those of lesser value. This paper concentrates on Allan Bloom's version of this thesis. Bloom suggests that "writers of quality" know other writers of quality. The author argues that Bloom's analysis is premised on a problematic theory of legitimization, a flawed conception of greatness, and a restrictive view of possibilities for reading at the university level. An alternative position – one based on the Freirean view of critical reading – is advanced.

KEYWORDS: Allan Bloom, Paulo Freire, Great Books, critical reading.

In recent years, the traditional conception of a liberal education has come under sustained attack from feminists, postmodernists, deconstructionists, and Marxists, among others. Where in the past core courses based upon the reading of *Great Books* may have been widely accepted as a worthwhile part of any university education, today both the provision of such programmes and the books read within them have become matters for considerable debate. Battles over the canon have, in the United States at least, proceeded hand in hand with wider conflicts over political correctness and multiculturalism. Many conservatives assume that a book's value (and hence its right to be included in a core curriculum) is tied, in some way, to the notion of intrinsic merit. Great books, for the traditionalist, transcend time, space and context: they are *always* great, whether being read by the nobility in medieval Europe or by working class youths in 20th century America. It is often taken for granted, moreover, that there is, or can be, substantial agreement over which books are worthy of classic status – provided people are sufficiently well qualified to make judgements of this kind. There are different variations on this theme among the myriad conservative defences of a traditional Great Books curriculum, but most assume that some books have an

intrinsic value, and that some people are able to objectively distinguish great texts from others of lesser value. While I shall concentrate here on Allan Bloom's version of this thesis, some of the critical points raised below are arguably applicable to many other traditionalist positions as well.

Bloom's work has served as a pivotal reference point for both defenders and critics of Great Books programmes. *The Closing of the American Mind* (1988), first published in 1987, became a national bestseller in the United States. In part a treatise on the virtues of the traditional canon in higher education, *The Closing of the American Mind* also provides a history of philosophical ideas and a hard-hitting polemic on the state of contemporary cultural and social life in the North America. Scholars from every major academic discipline have responded to Bloom's book. Support for the major concerns expressed by Bloom has been forthcoming from many conservatives, but *The Closing of the American Mind* has also attracted vigorous criticism – principally, though not exclusively, from liberals and radicals. Bloom has subsequently published two further books: *Giants and Dwarfs* (1991a), a collection of earlier essays, and *Love and Friendship* (1993), completed shortly before his death in 1992. This paper analyses Bloom's ideas on reading and books. Bloom's view of philosophical and literary greatness provides the initial focus. Beginning with a quotation from a key essay on the study of texts in *Giants and Dwarfs*, I attempt to demonstrate that Bloom's stance on the determination of greatness is philosophically flawed. I argue that Bloom's prime criterion in selecting texts for a Great Books programme is premised on a problematic theory of legitimation, giving rise to a correspondingly restrictive view of possibilities for reading at the university level. The Freirean notion of critical reading is investigated as an alternative to Bloom's ideal.

Bloom on Philosophical and Literary Greatness

Bloom's position on philosophical and literary greatness is neatly captured in an essay first published in 1980, "The Study of Texts." Bloom (1991a) claims, with regard to the "relatively small number of classic books" (p. 303) by philosophers, that

[this is] a list established not subjectively by means of current criteria, but generated immanently by the writers themselves. I argue that there is a high degree of agreement among the writers themselves as to who merits serious consideration. The writers of quality know the writers of quality. (p. 303)

I want to comment in some detail on Bloom's reasoning here. Simply put, it appears as if Bloom knows which texts are philosophical classics because those who have written them know what makes a book great and identify others of similar greatness in their own works. The greats, then, know who the greats are.

This leaves Bloom with something of a problem. If it is *only* great writers who know which books are worthy of serious study, then presumably Bloom must consider himself among the greats. The argument here might proceed in this manner: an author may lay claim to his or her own greatness, or may promote the greatness of another, but in order to distinguish genuine geniuses from charlatans, a certain level of greatness on the part of the person making this judgment is necessary. The detection of true greatness, thus, requires true greatness.

Bloom's comments in several texts suggest, however, that he did not place himself in the same company as Plato or Shakespeare or Rousseau. In his translation of Rousseau's *Emile*, for example, Bloom (1991b) states:

The translator of a great work [such as the *Emile*] should revere his text and recognize that there is much in it he cannot understand. His translation should try to make others able to understand what he cannot understand, which means he often must prefer a dull ambiguity to a brilliant resolution. He is a messenger, not a plenipotentiary, and proves his fidelity to his great masters by reproducing what seems in them to the contemporary eye wrong, outrageous, or incomprehensible, for therein may lie what is most important for us. (p. vii)

Elsewhere, in *Love and Friendship*, Bloom (1993, p. 31) says of the novelists and philosophers he discusses: "I believe the writers whom I interpret in this book are much more intelligent than I am and probably know the questions better than I do." If this is the case, another possibility is that so long as Author B regards Author A as great, and Author C likewise holds Author B in similar regard, we can be sure that Author A *is* great. This does not mean that Author B must agree with Author A, or Author C with Author B. As Bloom points out, respect for an author is frequently evinced through criticism; Hobbes's critique of Aristotle, thus, "shows us that Aristotle is the man to attack" (Bloom, 1991a, p. 303). Hence, we can be certain that Plato is among the greats, inasmuch as his ideas have been thoroughly considered by Aristotle, who has in turn been carefully studied by Aquinas. This is a process where Author B's judgements about Author A are legitimated through Author C's assessment of Author B. By the same logic, of course, Author C's authority to judge must also be determined by a further author (D); so too with Author D, Author E, *ad infinitum*.

But note that if this line of argument is carried through to its logical conclusion either we have to declare Bloom himself among the greats (or at least *a writer of quality*) after all, or we end up going around in circles. If an author's greatness is established by someone in a later period seriously engaging his or her work, then as the path of legitimation is followed up through history, eventually the present day is reached. The line of great philosophers considered by Bloom extends from Plato and other early Greeks through to Heidegger. Heidegger, Bloom (1988, p. 144) pronounces, is "a really serious thinker, Nietzsche's heir."

Each of the thinkers in this path of greatness must, by Bloom's own reasoning, have been legitimated by another great philosopher grappling with his or her ideas. Yet who is to judge Heidegger worthy of consideration for greatness if (chronologically) he is the last among these thinkers? It must, if it is Bloom's comments with which we are dealing, be Bloom himself.

It might be suggested that Bloom is simply reflecting prevailing philosophical opinion as to the worth of studying Heidegger. Yet, this runs counter to the very thrust of his argument. For Bloom's point is precisely that contemporary trends in philosophy (and in other fields such as literary criticism) are merely passing fads; the truly great thinkers and really big questions and ideas, he wants to say, have largely been ignored or inadequately engaged (cf. Bloom, 1991a, p. 345). Indeed, if there is one criterion which Bloom would almost certainly *not* accept as a legitimate basis for determining greatness, it is current professional opinion. This point is given quite explicit expression in *Love and Friendship*, where, in commenting on recent approaches to literary study, Bloom notes:

All I can say here is that since I was a young man and a student in Europe, I have paid serious and sustained attention to the sources of these views: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Lacan, Foucault, Levinas, Lyotard, Deleuze, and others whose names it is now so fashionable to throw around. I am persuaded that all their theories, in the form that they have come to the United States, are nothing but a fad that will pass, one can only hope before they have done too much damage to the study of literature. (Bloom, 1993, p. 31)

Bloom does not explicitly state that no one other than the greats will know who the greats are, but he does imply that one must be at least a writer of quality in order to make this form of judgement. While he does not claim to be among the greats himself, Bloom must concede that he believes he knows who the greats are (otherwise he could not be sure that the last in the line of great thinkers was great); it follows, if the implication just noted is correct, that he must consider himself a writer of quality.

Who, then, is to rule on Bloom's ability to evaluate greatness? By Bloom's own logic, for his judgments to be authenticated another writer of quality must seriously engage his work. In this respect, Bloom finds some support for his position: respected scholars from a multiplicity of disciplines and diverse political perspectives have commented in detail on his work. That many have been critical in their assessment strengthens rather than weakens the case for Bloom: rigorous and reflective criticism, as much as well-reasoned praise, confirms the worth of confronting a given text or author. This line of reasoning is consistent with the view expressed by Bloom in his statement about Hobbes's critique of Aristotle. Yet Bloom seems reluctant to apply the same principles when commenting on thinkers other than those he regards as greats.

For example, in commenting on Stanford University's "Cultures, Ideas and Values" programme, Bloom (1989) dismisses Frantz Fanon as an "inferior and derivative thinker," unworthy of attention but for the fact that he happens to be the "ideologue of currently popular movements" (p. 369). Fanon, despite his "racism and incitement to terrorism" is part of the new curriculum because "as a black Algerian ... he fit[s] Stanford's job description" (pp. 368-369). Notwithstanding his obvious disagreement with Fanon's ideas, with this form of outright rejection Bloom is surely contradicting the processes of affirming greatness he espouses with regard to Plato, Aristotle, Rousseau, Hobbes, Locke, and others. Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1967), many would argue, has attained the status of a classic. Its influence in political philosophy – especially among Third World thinkers – has been considerable. Even if Bloom were to question the value of *The Wretched of the Earth* for Western philosophical thought, he would have to admit that a number of noted philosophers from the First World have addressed the book respectfully and seriously (including, for instance, Jean-Paul Sartre in a "Preface" to the text). In seeking a more plausible explanation for Bloom's contempt of Fanon, the tables can be turned: presumably, the only reason Bloom sees nothing of value in Fanon's work is that Fanon's politics do not comfortably mesh with his own.

The problems here, though, go beyond apparent contradictions in Bloom's application of his principles for ascertaining greatness. If the only, or even the *prime*, criterion for determining Author A's greatness is a pronouncement to this effect by another author (B) who has in turn been deemed great by a further author (C), the number of books on Bloom's list of classics will have to increase dramatically. All major fields of study are now replete with authors who have been exalted for their achievements by their peers; in the domain of philosophy alone, the number of books to which someone has in one way or another referred to as great is likely to run into the hundreds if not thousands. This clearly goes beyond what Bloom intended in his comments. On the Bloomian view, the number of thinkers who are themselves great and who confirm the greatness of others by dealing with their ideas in a great book is, and always will be, relatively small (cf. Bloom, 1991a, p. 29). Yet, this line of justification is not inconsistent with Bloom's reasoning about writers of quality engaging other writers of quality.

The whole process of legitimation through the declaration of greatness by others ends up being a dead end, for at the end of the day a further person who has the credentials of greatness is needed to confirm someone else's greatness. Thus, even though Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* has attracted extensive comment from great thinkers of varying political persuasions – which, by Bloom's logic, gives legitimacy to his declarations of the greatness of others – the greatness of commentator 1 must be confirmed by commentator 2, who must

in turn be legitimated by commentator 3, and so on. Legitimation can never be complete because the last person in the chain always requires someone else to give legitimacy to their comments.

The Importance of Tradition

Two other possible lines of defence are open to Bloom. First, it may be the case that the worth of Author A's work is confirmed when *many* writers of quality seriously engage it. It is not enough, then, for Author A's work to be seriously considered by Author B; there must be further accomplished authors (C, D, E) who are doing the same as B. Hence, Heidegger's greatness is revealed by the many appraisals – both critical and approving – of his ideas by respected thinkers over the past few decades. Yet, the same might be said of Fanon, whom Bloom denigrates as a racist ideologue, or of any number of key feminist thinkers (about whom Bloom has nothing kind to say). Even where Bloom concedes that another philosopher's work has been highly influential, he sometimes seems unwilling to admit him or her to the company of greats – unwilling, that is, if the thinker's ideas conflict with his own. (See, for example, Bloom's comments on John Rawls: 1988, pp. 30, 229; 1991a, pp. 315-345.)

Bloom is more likely to support the view that tradition ought to be the arbiter in assessing greatness. Repeated references to a philosopher's work over the course of time become the key here. Plato, then, emerges as a giant among thinkers given the enormous influence he has exerted over the entire history of Western philosophy. Fanon's influence, by contrast, is (Bloom might argue) but a temporary phenomenon in an unenlightened age. This still leaves Bloom with problems. For a start, the way in which tradition impacts upon or reinforces the greatness of an author is not clear. Is the worth of Plato's work more assured than that of Nietzsche given its longevity as part of the Western philosophical tradition? Bloom says nothing about how many years need to pass for a text to become cemented in tradition; nor does he provide adequate grounds for delineating between works within a given tradition as regards their value. Moreover, the "last in line" difficulty surfaces again. Bloom declares Heidegger a really serious thinker, yet there is no tradition building on Heidegger's work to which Bloom refers as evidence of Heidegger's greatness. The philosophical merit of Heidegger's work must be assessed by Bloom himself, or by other contemporary theorists. Heidegger, then, is the latest really serious thinker in a long tradition of greats, yet the only assurance we have that he deserves to be placed in that tradition must come from those who have not been confirmed as part of the tradition. This, at the very least, places greater uncertainty over Heidegger's legitimacy as one of the really serious thinkers than exists with those who come before him in the tradition.

Bloom is highly selective in who he includes as part of the philosophical tradition he alludes to. Before this problem can be addressed, however, some attention must be paid to the question of exactly what this tradition *is* for Bloom. It might be claimed that in recommending a Great Books programme, Bloom is simply commenting on the worth of certain books within a specialized field of study (e.g., the Western tradition of political philosophy). Even a cursory reading of Bloom's work, however, lays this hypothesis to rest. For Bloom, there are not multiple lists of classic texts, varying according to one's theoretical perspective or the social context within which reading takes place; rather, there is one (more-or-less finite) set of Great Books – a collection of philosophical and literary works – which should be read by all serious scholars from any discipline or area of study seeking the best that has been written on the human condition. In *The Closing of the American Mind* Bloom (1988) makes the astonishing claim that “with the possible exception of Weber and Freud, there are no social science books that can be said to be classic” (p. 345). This may come as something of a surprise to the thousands of scholars who have been influenced by Durkheim (in sociology), Skinner (in psychology), or Levi-Strauss (in anthropology), to name but a few. As for natural scientists, Bloom believes they simply proceed happily with their own work, largely independently from those squabbling over the canon and the politics of education elsewhere (see pp. 345, 356-358). The list of classic texts, one gathers from Bloom's essays and books, is to be principally drawn from a select, small group of philosophers and novelists: those “who know the questions” (Bloom, 1993, p. 31) and address “the order of the whole of nature and man's place in it” (Bloom, 1988, p. 372).

As to who is on this list of greats, Bloom is at once lucid and ambiguous. To judge by many of his statements, whole groups of writers can immediately be eliminated, including the majority of women authors. Jane Austen appears to be the only female novelist consistently accorded the status of greatness in Bloom's work (a chapter is devoted to Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* in *Love and Friendship*: see Bloom, 1993, chapter 3); among philosophers, women hardly rate a mention (see further, Roberts, 1995). References to books by ethnic minorities, Third World writers, and non-Westerners seldom appear in Bloom's writings. Even within Bloom's specialist area – the Western tradition in political philosophy – there are some striking omissions: Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man*, for example, seems to have been completely forgotten. Jaffa, among others, draws attention to similar oddities with respect to literature: “There is not,” he notes, “a single reference to Cooper or Hawthorne or Emerson or Whitman or Howells. Nor any to Dreiser or Sinclair Lewis or Edith Wharton or Willa Cather Above all, there is nothing about Melville or Mark Twain!” (Jaffa, 1989, p. 135). Some of the thinkers to whom Bloom directly or by implication assigns the status of greatness include Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, and

Nietzsche. Yet even here there is much room for ambiguity, especially in *The Closing of the American Mind*, for given that Bloom fails to cite his exact sources it is not always clear which texts by these authors are truly classic and which are perhaps of more marginal interest. Plato's *Republic* is certainly on the list, but what of all the other dialogues; what, indeed, of the much debated Platonic letters? Machiavelli's *The Prince* is referred to frequently by Bloom, but far less is said about the *Discourses*. Certain individual authors similarly remain in an ambivalent position. Bloom acknowledges Marx's influence on occasion, but appears reluctant to accord him the same respect he reserves for others he truly reveres on his list of greats (e.g., Plato and Rousseau). In his tribute to Alexandre Kojève, for instance, Bloom (1991a, p. 272) comments: "it is precisely Marx's failure to think through the meaning of his own historical thought that proves his philosophical inadequacy and compels us to turn to the profounder Hegel."

Contextualising Canons

Bloom attacks others for preferring certain texts on political or ideological grounds, yet fails to turn this logic back upon his own views. While acknowledging the importance of a sense of history, Bloom's account of the Great Books tradition appears strangely *ahistorical*. Questions about literary and philosophical greatness have never found uniform answers, and there has, correspondingly, never been agreement – *even among traditionalists* – over which books ought to be classified as true classics. As Gerald Graff observes, teaching Shakespeare, that most revered of figures in literary circles, was once regarded as a daring move (quoted in Atlas, 1989, p. 24). Bloom (1991a, p. 303) laments the current lack of interest in Xenophon, attributing this to the "limitations of our views;" earlier thinkers such as Rousseau and Machiavelli, he suggests, were more enlightened. Yet, as has been noted elsewhere (Roberts, 1995), Bloom seems unable, or unwilling, to concede that equally limiting views may have excluded many women, ethnic minorities, and others from the traditional canon.

How might Bloom respond to this charge? One answer may lie in *Harold Bloom's* epic work, *The Western Canon* (1994). Harold Bloom, like Allan Bloom, is concerned to defend the idea of a canon of great books against the onslaught of contemporary literary theory. In a sweeping study of 26 writers from across the ages, Bloom speaks of canonical works surviving "an immense struggle in social relations." Aesthetic value, for Bloom, "emanates from the struggle between texts: in the reader, in language, in the classroom, in arguments within a society" (p. 38). Great writers, Bloom claims, are immortal. Of these writers, Shakespeare occupies a supreme position. Shakespeare's plays bring to life characters who encounter universal elements in the human struggle. In Shakespeare's characters, readers "behold and confront their own anguish and their own fantasies" (p. 39). In

attempting to pinpoint the characteristics of greatness in the authors he studies, Bloom concludes: "the answer, more often than not, has turned out to be strangeness, a mode of originality that either cannot be assimilated, or that so assimilates us that we cease to see it as strange" (p. 3). While works such as *The Divine Comedy*, *Paradise Lost*, *Peer Gynt*, and *Ulysses* have a certain "uncanniness" in common (i.e., they make readers "feel strange at home"), Shakespeare, uniquely, frequently creates the opposite impression: he makes readers feel "at home out of doors" (p. 3). For Harold Bloom, as for Allan Bloom, canonical works have universal human significance and are timeless in their value.

Jane Tompkins (1985), in her study of American fiction from 1790 to 1860, poses a powerful challenge to this notion of literary merit. Against the view that books attain the status of classics when they withstand the test of time, transcending the social circumstances under which they are authored and read, she argues:

A literary reputation could never be anything but a political matter. My assumption is not that "interest and passion" should be eliminated from literary evaluation – this is neither possible nor desirable – but that works that have attained the status of classic, and are therefore believed to embody universal values, are in fact embodying only the interests of whatever parties or factions are responsible for maintaining them in their preeminent position. Identifying the partisan processes that lead to the establishment of a classic author is not to revoke his or her claim to greatness, but simply to point out that that claim is open to challenge from other quarters, by other groups, representing equally partisan interests (pp. 4-5).

Calling for a redefinition of literature and literary study, and employing Harriet Beecher Stow's *Uncle Tom's cabin* as an example, Tompkins maintains that novels should be studied not because they escape the limitations of their context but precisely because they convey the temper of a given historical moment (p. xi). Tompkins argues that Hawthorne's work might have gained less recognition under different circumstances, while other books – for example, Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* – ought to have received greater attention from the literary establishment. Her point is that claims to greatness are always *contestable*, politically constituted, and historically situated. Women have been under-represented in the canon not because their work has been inferior to that of men, but because critics have been unable to step outside their social milieu in making pronouncements about literary value.

Barbara Herrnstein Smith (1988) also mounts a strong case against traditionalist conceptions of objectivity in the determination of literary value. She argues that matters of value are always contingent upon a whole range of contextual factors. Smith begins her insightful book, *Contingencies of Value*, with

the case of Shakespeare's sonnets, noting the marked variations in perceptions of their literary value over the centuries. Shakespeare's own ambivalence toward the sonnets was mirrored in the treatment they were afforded by publishers, readers, and critics as time went by. The suppression of the original Quarto edition of the poems was followed by their republication 30 years later, and by a subsequent roller-coaster ride in the hands of the literary establishment (see pp. 3-4).

Reflecting upon her initial disdain for anthologies, Smith observes:

The recommendation of value represented by the repeated inclusion of a particular work in anthologies of "great poetry" not only promotes but goes some distance toward *creating* the value of that work, as does its repeated appearance on reading lists or its frequent citation or quotation by professors, scholars, critics, poets, and other elders of the tribe; for all these acts have the effect of drawing the work into the orbit of attention of potential readers and, by making the work more likely to be experienced by all, they make it more likely to be experienced as "valuable." (p. 10)

Smith highlights the link between value and visibility. Judgements about a book's worth, she argues, depend crucially, though not exclusively, on the recognition it receives from members of an evaluative community. For Smith, literary value is "radically relative" and therefore "constantly variable;" it is not, however, merely "subjective" (p. 11). Smith's relativism is grounded in the notion of contingency: value, in her view, is "a changing function of multiple variables," but it cannot be reduced to simply whimsical personal preference (p. 11). There is a certain regularity to some of the variables at any given moment in history: these patterns provide parameters within which literary judgements can be made. Nevertheless, the range of variables that may influence an evaluation of literary greatness is such that dramatic shifts in opinion can occur over time. As Stanley Fish (1980) points out in his influential book, *Is There a Text in This Class?*

While there is always a category of things that are not done (it is simply the reverse of flip side of the category of things that *are* done), the membership in that category is continually changing. It changes laterally as one moves from subcommunity to subcommunity, and it changes through time when once interdicted interpretive strategies are admitted into the ranks of the acceptable. (p. 344)

Smith maintains that when we refer to a book as "great" (or "good," or "bad," or "middling"), we typically imply that the work is great *for* something and thus *as* something, for a specific group of people, under particular conditions (1988, p. 13). Rejecting positions which locate invariances in literary value in either universal human traits or the "nature" (structure) of the works themselves, she argues:

With respect to value, everything is always in motion with respect to everything else. If there *are* constancies in literary value, they will be

found in *those very motions*: that is, in the relations among the variables.

For, like all value, literary value is not the property of an object *or* of a subject but, rather, *the product of the dynamics of a system*. (p.15)

I want now to extend these ideas, and further develop my critique of Bloom, via the work of well-known Brazilian educationist, Paulo Freire. Employing a series of contrasts with Freirean theory, I suggest that (Allan) Bloom's ideal of a Great Books programme –which, for him, should form the basis of university study – is premised on a flawed view of the reading process.

An Alternative to Bloom: Freirean Critical Reading

At the heart of Freire's approach to reading is a dynamic linking of *word* with *world* (see further, Peters & Lankshear, 1994). Just as words in the conventional sense can be read and written, so too, for Freire, can we talk of reading (interpreting) and writing (transforming) the world. The ultimate text to be read and written is social reality itself. The relationship between word and world is integral to the Freirean notion of critical literacy (Roberts, 1996a). At the most basic level, Freirean critical literacy implies an attempt to *engage* the ideas presented in texts. Reading critically involves asking questions, posing problems, and evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of an author's arguments. It demands an effort to get beneath the surface of what an author is saying, probing layer after layer of meaning, while at the same time striving to maintain a global view of a book's structure and aims. Freirean critical literacy necessitates the adoption of a restless, curious, investigative stance in the act of reading (see Freire, 1985, pp. 1-4). At a second level, critical reading entails relating the material in one book to ideas presented in other texts, and placing an author's work in its social context (compare, Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 133; Dillon, 1985, pp. 18-19; Horton & Freire, 1990, p. 31). Freire speaks of texts providing the basis for critical reflection on social practices and structures past and present, actual and ideal, in both the reader's own society and in others. For Freire, true reading is at once, and always, also a process of writing or rewriting (see Escobar, Fernandez & Guevara-Niebla, with Freire, 1994, pp. 64-65). In interpreting, engaging, rethinking, reworking, and applying ideas in texts, we rewrite the object of our investigation. Texts, like human beings (and knowledge) in Freirean theory, are thus always in a state of "becoming" (cf. Freire, 1972, on the ontological vocation of becoming more fully human). At a third level, texts, if engaged critically, can be brought to bear on the lived struggles and activities of daily life, such that reading and writing become acts of resistance in the process of social transformation. This is the process of rewriting social reality through critical, dialogical praxis: collective reflection and action on word and world (Roberts, 1996b).

Bloom advocates the closest possible reading of philosophical books. Texts such as Machiavelli's *The Prince* must, he suggests, be analysed word-by-word, line-by-line (Bloom, 1991a, p. 306). Unless a reader "takes pencil and paper, outlines, counts, stops at everything, and tries to wonder" (p. 307), he or she may miss the most obvious points in an author's argument. Freire, too, clearly wants students to read slowly and carefully. The critical reader penetrates beneath the surface appearance of words, stops to ponder the meaning of passages, questions assumptions and arguments, and relates ideas in the text to the wider (con)text of their social world. The emphasis in Freire's work is on quality rather than quantity, on in-depth analysis in place of superficial skimming or "reading for entertainment," on structured and rigorous investigation over directionless spontaneity (see Freire, 1983, p. 9; 1985, pp. 1-4; Freire & Shor, 1987, pp. 83-85; Roberts, 1996c).

Yet, there are also important differences between the two thinkers over the question of what a serious reading entails (see further, Roberts, 1993). In an often-quoted passage, Bloom (1988) recommends:

Reading certain generally recognized classic texts, just reading them, letting them dictate what the questions are and the method of approaching them – not forcing them into categories we make up, not treating them as historical products, but trying to read them as their authors wished them to be read. (p. 344)

This proposition is, from a Freirean point of view, problematic at a number of levels. First, Freire's theory of literacy suggests that the construction of categories for interpreting texts is not merely acceptable, but unavoidable. Reading, Freire has repeatedly stated, can never be a neutral process. (For an extended defence of this position, see Freire & Macedo, 1987.) All forms of literate activity presuppose certain assumptions about human beings and the world. When facing a text, then, categories for making sense of that text – for rendering it meaningful – are always already in place. We can attempt to alter these categories by tackling the text from different angles, by engaging in dialogue with others about the ideas presented in the text, or by rereading the text following further study of other books. But we cannot avoid some form of categorization (compare also, Rorty, 1989, pp. 100-101).

Freire would also question Bloom's suggestion that books themselves should dictate what the questions are. From a Freirean point of view, Bloom has only told half the story here. Freire would be happy to admit that books can, in one sense, ask questions of us: they can challenge us by raising questions we had not previously pondered, by posing problems we had not anticipated in addressing a particular issue, by taking a perspective we had not hitherto considered in relation to a given theme, and so on. But these challenges are only made possible by the presence of an active *Subject* confronting the text in a curious, investigative,

reflective way (Freire, 1985, p. 2). In order for texts to dictate questions, then, we must first ask questions of the text – or at least, *address* the text in a particular manner. For Freire, the relationship between text and reader is reciprocal and interactive, but it is the critical human Subject who is ultimately in control (as far as this is possible). For Bloom, it is the other way around: the text, in effect, authors – that is, shapes, or forms – the reader.

For Bloom, meaning resides in the text, awaiting its unveiling by readers – some of whom will unlock the code to that which is hidden, others of whom will not. Freire's stance is more complicated. Freire, like Bloom, talks of texts having a deeper meaning – of something hidden beneath the surface (see, for instance, Freire, 1985, p. 111). He stresses the importance of grasping the soul of words, and of seeking the underlying significance of texts (compare, Freire, 1983, p. 8; 1985, p. 2; Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 45). He does not, however, believe that texts have a fixed, unitary meaning. For Freire, meaning is generated through dialogue and human practice. This does not mean we should lapse into an "anything goes" position on the reading of texts: some readings – those which are critical, holistic, contextualized, and dialogical – are better than others. On a Freirean view of critical literacy, the reader strives to understand the essence, or the *raison d'être*, of a text, while nonetheless being aware that through the very process of reading, the object of study changes.

Bloom argues against treating books as historical products; Freire, by contrast, explicitly supports such an approach – or at least a variation on it. Freire states:

I cannot just suggest the students read Gramsci. I feel obliged to say something about the time and space of Gramsci. I cannot just translate Gramsci into Portuguese because in order to make this translation, it's necessary for me to understand the context in which he wrote and thought. (Horton & Freire, 1990, p. 32)

This issue needs to be understood in the light of a deeper difference between the two theorists on the relationship between word and world. For Bloom, reading the Great Books is a way to remove students from the world – from the accidental nature of everyday life. Where Freire posits an intimate intertwining of word with world, on Bloom's account of reading there is a separation between the two spheres. Bloom does not do totally divorce text from context. His reference in *The Closing of the American Mind* to students' lives being changed by a liberal education clearly establishes a link between reading and an anticipated new world of modified tastes, choices, and actions made possible by an encounter with the Great Books (see Bloom, 1988, p. 370). But Bloom never really engages the *political* links between texts and contexts. Unlike Freire, Bloom does not see reading as a potential element of political struggle or transformative social change. Indeed, he tends to regard protest movements, along with many other aspects of contemporary cultural life in the United States, with contempt. For Bloom, a Great

Books programme should enable the student to gain physical, as well as reflective, distance from such activities. The messy realities of daily life are a distraction for the student in Bloom's ideal: it is in reading classic texts by Shakespeare, Plato, and other authors that the most profound mode of being is to be found. This, in my view, seriously restricts possibilities for worthwhile study at the university level.

For Freire, popular liberation movements provide not only one domain to which a critical reading of texts might be applied (in informing the process of political struggle), but also a potentially fruitful source of insights in more deeply understanding the work of people such as Plato and Shakespeare. Bloom cannot treat the Great Books as historical products because to do so would be to call into question their timelessness and absolute value. From a Freirean standpoint, recognizing that books are shaped by the social and historical circumstances under which they are authored does not in any way reduce the potential value of reading classic texts. Freire would agree with Bloom that students may gain as much from reading Plato today as they might have 2000 years ago; he would argue, however, that acknowledging and investigating the influences on Plato's thought *enhances* rather than diminishes the possibility of this value being realized.

Literacy and liberation are inseparable for Freire. Liberation, on the Freirean view, involves active, reflective, dialogical struggle against oppressive social circumstances and ideas. Liberation is not (just) a state of mind or a matter of personal empowerment; rather, it necessitates a firm commitment to work with others in changing material as well as mental impediments to humanization. Liberation is a *process*, not a final product. Reading and writing are likewise ongoing activities. Books can be constantly rewritten as readers continue to engage them over the course of a lifetime. Reading and writing are never, despite appearances to the contrary, completely solitary processes. Even when we sit, seemingly in isolation from others, with a book for quiet study in an office, bedroom, or library we bring to the text assumptions, values, and ideas formed through social contact with others. In reading and writing, we act on both the text that is the book and the wider text that is the social world itself. Literacy and liberation both demand a restless, loving, critical stance in addressing problems, whether these are academic questions raised in (or in relation to) classic texts, or the pressing political issues of the day.

Conclusion

To conclude, from a Freirean perspective, no texts have an *a priori* claim to greatness. The worth of a book is determined not just by the text itself but also by one's *reading* of it. Freire does not believe that all books are of equal value. He

would be quite happy to admit that in seeking an understanding of capitalism, Marx is likely to have more to offer than many other theorists. Similarly, he would not want to suggest that there is no difference between, say, Tolstoy and a Mills and Boon romance novel as far as their treatment of love and human suffering is concerned. Some authors, Freire might say, deal with complex subjects in demonstrably deeper, more rigorous ways than others. Just as Freire encourages readers to probe textual passages in seeking new layers of meaning, so too might authors be evaluated and compared in terms of the extent to which they penetrate beneath surface appearances, challenge conventional wisdom, or add new insights to old problems. But the potential value of Tolstoy or Marx or Plato can only be realized when their work is read in a particular way. Value, for Freire, does not reside in the text as something which is absolute, timeless or ahistorical. Rather, it must, as it were, be created afresh with each successive *reading* of the text. Thus, for Freire, as for Smith and Tompkins, assertions about value must always be qualified. Given a substantive ethical position, it can be said that some texts are better than others, for particular purposes, in specific contexts, provided they are read in a certain way.

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