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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 legitimation, 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 defenses 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.