

ALLAN BLOOM

LOVE  
&  
FRIENDSHIP

BY THE AUTHOR OF

The Closing of the American Mind

Written with the erudition and wit that made *The Closing of the American Mind* a #1 best-seller, *Love and Friendship* is a searching examination of the basic human connections at the center of the greatest works of literature and philosophy throughout the ages.

In a spirited polemic directed at our contemporary culture, Allan Bloom argues that we live in a world where love and friendship are withering away. Science and moralism have reduced eros to sex. Individualism and egalitarianism have turned romantic relationships into contractual matters to be litigated. Survey research has made every variety of sexual behavior seem normal, and thus boring. In sex education classes, children learn how to use condoms, but not how to deal with the hopes and risks of intimacy. We no longer know how to talk and think about the peril and promise of attraction and fidelity.

What has been lost is what separates human beings from beasts—the power of the imagination, which can transform sex into eros. Our impoverished feelings are rooted in our impoverished language of love. To recover the danger, the strength, and the beauty of eros, we must study the great literature of love, in the hope of rekindling the imagination of beauty and virtue that fuels eros. We must love to learn, in order to learn to love again.

Like *The Closing of the American Mind*, this is an exhilarating journey of ideas in search of the truths that great writers and philosophers have offered about our most precious and perilous longings. *Love and Friendship* dissects Rousseau's invention of Romantic love, meant to provide a new basis for human connection, amid the atomism of bourgeois society, and exposes the reasons for its ultimate failure. Bloom tells of the Romantics' idea of the sublime and Freud's theory of sublimation. He takes us into the universe of Shakespeare's plays, where love is a natural

*(continued on back flap)*



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*Shakespeare's Politics* (with Harry V. Jaffa)

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# Love and Friendship

Allan Bloom

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SIMON & SCHUSTER    *New York    London    Toronto    Sydney    Tokyo    Singapore*



SIMON & SCHUSTER  
Simon & Schuster Building  
Rockefeller Center  
1230 Avenue of the Americas  
New York, New York 10020

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Designed by Liney Li  
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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Bloom, Allan David, 1930–1992

Love & friendship / Allan Bloom.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Love in literature. 2. European literature, Modern—History  
and criticism. 3. Shakespeare, William, 1564–1616—Criticism and  
interpretation. I. Title. II. Title: Love and friendship.

PN56.L6B56 1993

809'.93354—dc20

93-1380

CIP

ISBN 0-671-67336-X



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Before his death on October 7, 1992, Allan Bloom completed the final revision of this book. Tim Spiekerman, Christopher Nadon, and Christopher Lynch assisted him during the writing and revision. In revising it he had the benefit of comments on a previous draft from Saul Bellow, Werner J. Dannhauser, Charles H. Fairbanks, Hillel G. Fradkin, Pierre Hassner, Steven J. Kautz, Edward O. Laumann, James H. Nichols, Jr., Donna Orwin, and Nathan and Susan Tarcov. Over the previous twelve years he taught with Saul Bellow all the novels and plays discussed in this book and often remarked on how much he learned about them from this experience. A timely grant from the Earhart Foundation made possible preliminary work on Rousseau's *Emile* in the summer of 1985. Generous support from the John M. Olin Foundation for the University of Chicago's John M. Olin Center for Inquiry into the Theory and Practice of Democracy made possible a leave of absence in 1990–1991 during which he wrote the first draft, and supported the author's work in other ways. The staff of the Olin Center, first Judy Chernick and Terese Denov, and later Stephen B. Gregory and Anne Gamboa, patiently and meticulously processed this book with the assistance of Marian Felgenhauer.

The author's executors, Hillel G. Fradkin and Nathan Tarcov, were left with the tasks of responding in his place to the editing of Simon and Schuster's Robert Asahina (whose work on *The Closing of the American Mind* Allan Bloom greatly admired and appreciated) and supervising the completion of the notes by Christopher Lynch and Paul Ulrich. Susan Tarcov assisted them at every stage. Queries were

answered or emendations offered by Peter Ahrensdorf, Alice Behnegar, Nasser Behnegar, Janis Freedman Bellow, Saul Bellow, Adam Breindel, Joseph Cropsey, Werner J. Dannhauser, Charles H. Fairbanks, Borden Flanagan, François Furet, Robert T. Gannett, Victor Gourevitch, Bette Howland, Steven J. Kautz, Christopher J. Kelly, Marilyn Klein, Mark Kremer, Catherine Lynch, Jonathan Marks, Arthur M. Melzer, Christopher Nadon, Peter Nichols, Clifford Orwin, Donna Orwin, Marc F. Plattner, Anne Ruderman, Richard S. Ruderman, David Schaefer, Diana Schaub, Joel Schwartz, Andrew Sloniewsky, Astrida Tantillo, William Thomson, Richard L. Velkley, Kenneth Weinstein, and Michael Z. Wu.

Hillel G. Fradkin  
Nathan Tarcov  
Chicago, March 1993



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*To Michael Z. Wu*

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## INTRODUCTION: *The Fall of Eros*

This book is an attempt to recover the power, the danger, and the beauty of eros under the tutelage of its proper teachers and knowers, the poetic writers. Against my will I have to use the term "eros," in spite of its alien and somewhat pretentious Greekness as well as its status as a buzzword since Freud and Marcuse. There is an impoverishment today in our language about what used to be understood as life's most interesting experience, and this almost necessarily bespeaks an impoverishment of feeling. This is why we need the words of old writers who took eros so seriously and knew how to speak about it.

The word "love" now applies to almost everything except the overwhelming attraction of one individual for another. And sex is a timid pseudoscientific word that tells us only that individuals have certain bodily needs. There is an appalling matter-of-factness in public speech about sex today. On television schoolchildren tell us about how they will now use condoms in their contacts—I was about to say adventures, but that would be overstating their significance. On talk shows young collegians tell us about how they decide whether they have been raped in their various encounters. There is nothing about this of the now impossible complaint about outraged virtue. Sex is spoken about coolly and without any remains of the old puritanical shame, as an incidental aspect of the important questions of disease and power. The sexual talk of our times is about how to get greater bodily satisfaction (although decreasingly so) or increasingly how to protect ourselves from one another. The old view was that delicacy

of language was part of the nature, the sacred nature, of eros, and that to speak about it in any other way would be to misunderstand it. What has disappeared is the risk and the hope of human connect- edness embedded in eros. Ours is a language that reduces the long- ing for an other to the need for individual, private satisfaction and safety.

Isolation, a sense of lack of profound contact with other human beings, seems to be the disease of our time. There are great indus- tries of psychotherapy that address our difficulties in "relation- ships"—that pallid, pseudoscientific word the very timidity of which makes substantial attachments impossible. This way of describing human connection begins from the tentativeness of our attachments, the alleged fact that we are naturally atoms wanting to belong to clusters without the wherewithal to do so, a situation that would, at best, make contractual relations possible. This abstract term puts citizenship, family, love, and friendship under the same makeshift tent and abstracts from their very different foundations and de- mands. Yet one has to have a tin ear to describe one's great love as a relationship. Did Romeo and Juliet have a relationship? The term is suitable only for expressions like "they had a relationship." It be- tokens a chaste egalitarianism leveling different ranks and degrees of attachment. "Relationships" are based on "commitments," as in "I'm not ready to make a commitment." It is a term empty of con- tent, implying that human connectedness can arise only out of a motiveless act of freedom. It reeks of Sartre's *No Exit*—"Hell is— other people."<sup>1</sup> It is this contemporary condition that led me once to describe us as social solitaries. I meant by this not that we have attained the condition of solitary self-sufficiency that Rousseau so vividly characterized and Kant, looking to Rousseau, calls the very model of the sublime, but that we are lonely while living in society, with all the social needs for others yet unable to satisfy them.

Nevertheless the most insistent demand nowadays of people in general, and young people in particular, remains human connection, a connection that transcends the isolation of personal selfishness, and in which the thought of oneself is inextricably bound up with the thought of another. Politically, the demand for human connection is to be found in the quest for community, which is something other than a collection of liberal individualists. There is a lot of serious thought and some action dedicated to this goal (though it is probably impossible given the structure of our society and its basic principles), but there is practically no attempt to build upon eros, the one natural inclination, always present in every society and beyond particular



social or political principles, that links us indisputably. There is much lamenting about the collapse of the family, but practically no attempt to revive the romantic rituals that once led to it and underlay it. We witness a strange inversion: on the one hand, the endeavor to turn the social contract into a less calculating and more feeling connection among its members; on the other hand, the endeavor to turn the erotic relation into a contractual one. The characteristic modern way of describing human relations as those between self and other appears to have dug an unbridgeable chasm between the two.

The de-eroticization of the world, a companion of its disenchantment, is a complex phenomenon. It seems to result from a combination of causes—our democratic regime and its tendencies toward leveling and self-protection, a reductionist-materialist science that inevitably interprets eros as sex, and the atmosphere generated by “the death of God” and of the subordinate god, Eros. It is summed up in debased and ridiculous fashion when the young women entering Smith College are told that lookism is included among the currently recognized vices along with racism, sexism, and homophobia. Yet eros begins, sad but true, in preferences founded in the first place on what is seen with the eyes, founded on ideals of bodily beauty. Nobody serious ever suggested that this is where it ends, but if this essential beginning is suppressed, farewell eros. A good education would be devoted to encouraging and refining the love of the beautiful, but a pathologically misguided moralism instead turns such longing into a sin against the high goal of making everyone feel good, of overcoming nature in the name of equality. (As though Americans already had an overdeveloped taste for the beautiful and a capacity to discriminate among its kinds!) Love of the beautiful may be the last and finest sacrifice to radical egalitarianism.

Perhaps a way to begin investigating the fall of eros would be to take a glance at that great work which influenced Americans so profoundly, the Kinsey Report.<sup>2</sup> It rose in the American sky like a comet, giving comfort, consolation, and encouragement, as well as a lot of exciting detail about what everyone else does, to people who guiltily thought they were alone in doing these things. Open and broad public discussion of the diversity of sexual practices in America was unusual in 1948, so the Kinsey Report was satisfying to people who wanted to talk or think about their private sexual lives but did not have the nerve to do so. There was some attempt to make it a scandal, alleging perversity or unhealthy prurience in its authors. But this is America, and the purity and objectivity of science cannot be tainted by the attacks of moral and religious fanatics. The attacks



on Kinsey's good faith met a response something like "This man is a scientist!"—meaning that his objectivity put him beyond all such complaint. Kinsey was the truth, and we had to face it, which was not too difficult for most people to do.

Kinsey himself was a big, hearty, crew-cut man, a paragon of American virtues. He allegedly studied sex as he had also studied wasps. A scientist does not have to tell us why he does what he does, what his private motives are; he looks for truth in many areas and adds his research to the store of knowledge. He does not have a moral agenda, and he necessarily abstracts from questions of good and bad, which are the themes of subjective moral prejudice. He just tells you the facts, and you can do whatever you like with or about them.

In fact, Kinsey very obviously did have a political intention, though not one stemming primarily, or even at all, from personal and perverse self-interest. He really was a scientist in a certain decayed Enlightenment tradition that told him that science would ultimately make men happy. He believed that the statistics would speak for themselves and show everyone that there is an astonishing diversity of sexual practices, and that the official versions, which told us that the great majority of people did and should satisfy themselves essentially in monogamous marriages, were untrue. Such a statistical approach would have the effect of saying that the practices being studied are real and the moral judgments about them are mere prejudices, particularly prejudices of religion, still understood at that time to be the great enemy of science. At the time there was a whole system of guilt and extreme social stigma, as well as laws in many places that prescribed prison sentences for solitary masturbation, adultery, homosexuality, and even acts between married couples in the privacy of their own bedrooms that deviated from the purpose of producing children. Kinsey appears to have believed that these constraints caused immeasurable suffering and loss of legitimate pleasure. Kinsey thought both that it would relieve men's guilt if they recognized they were part of a great public and that lawmakers would then be influenced to wipe away archaic laws. Kinsey made the move from the fact of promiscuity to its legitimacy. Everybody does it, "so it does not mean that I am a bad person." He clearly believed that what men actually do is natural and that the constraints are merely the vestiges of a Puritan heritage. It was all very simple and simpleminded.

There may have been a bit of playing the *beau rôle* in Kinsey's talking about what is shocking to most men without any pathos of

shock. But, in general, I believe that his motives were good and that he was not deriving some private kick from his researches. Both science and society were meant to benefit from what he did. He surveyed a broad panoply of sexual acts from masturbation to homosexuality and even intercourse with animals (an activity engaged in mostly by farm boys in that period), and found that there were a surprising number of people who had participated at least once in them, and a smaller number, although surprisingly large, who found their specific preference in one or another of them. The gentleness of his approach is striking. There is hardly any reference to sadism and masochism, and he did not formulate questions about incest, intercourse with children, or other similarly shocking behaviors. His bias toward gentle and harmless sex, which ought to be able to name itself, is revealed here. The brutal and dangerous temptations are excluded from study, although they too take place. Another startling aspect of Kinsey for a contemporary reader is his stark elitism—the lower classes do not know how to do it and have no imagination. Only the educated can liberate themselves from mythology and can think through the differences between plain and fancy sex.

Kinsey's approach shows much of what is typical in the modern treatment of what were once erotic phenomena. In the first place, it both reveals and strengthens Americans' reliance on public opinion. Look at Gallup before you leap! This approach thereby gives more support to timidity in an arena classically reserved for the daring. It attempts to render conventional what always had a refreshing element of violation of convention and of reliance on one's inner demons. Kinsey never enters into the psychological effects of various sexual preferences or, most important, the ways in which they promote or detract from truly human union on all levels. He rather caters to the public taste for a respectable way of talking about sex and the need for confirmation of one's tastes. He uses public opinion to influence public opinion about sexual matters.

The Kinsey Report appeared pretty early on in our polling madness, which now appears to be the only element in decision making, transcending all questions of good and bad, prudent and foolish. It was significant both because it was early on and because it touched on the most intimate parts of a man's or woman's life. Kinsey contributed to the reduction of eros to sex, a view from the outside utterly destructive of what one feels on the inside. This perspective, of course, does not remain confined to the laboratory, but becomes everybody's way of looking at it.

When the Kinsey Report came out, I was seventeen years old. At

one of those bohemian parties that took place in the environs of the University of Chicago, a rather seductive lady—from my point of view very old, at least thirty—said to me, “You are at the peak of your sexual potentiality.” She was referring to Kinsey’s discovery that seventeen-year-old males had more orgasms daily than any other age group. I began to wonder what I had to do in order to keep up with the norm. Kinsey’s counting contributed to a certain mathematical reductionism. Such an enumerating of the variety of taste may even encourage people to acts that did not originally tempt them, just to keep up with the Joneses. It tells them to go ahead with what they desire because it is the common human practice. But it does not encourage people to think about what they desire and its consequences. The great disservice done by the school that Kinsey represents is to make it unnecessary to think about or discuss the meaning of one’s desires on their own level, not shorn of the hopes and fears and infinite ramifications by which they are naturally accompanied. As a corollary to this, Kinsey and his compeers take away the very language that makes a truly scientific self-examination possible. Any good novelist can teach us more that is true about the meaning of our desires than can any of these amateurish scientists.

Kinsey notes that devout Jews and Christians do much less out of wedlock than do the less devout. But he does not reflect on this fact or ask about how much of sexual behavior is a matter of will and education. He probably thinks that such abstinence is archaic, and that he presents the nature of sex stripped of the prejudices that frequently accompany it. Whether or not he was entirely aware of it, he was an advocate of a scientific version of the distinction between convention and nature and firmly planted himself, as his natural science dictated, in nature’s camp. He can protest as much as he likes that his work has no normative implications, but the presentation of some kinds of facts necessarily carries a morality with it. If someone tells you that sex is pleasant, that there is a wonderful variety of ways to have it, that there is no rational basis for inhibition, and that practically everybody does it, what implications for action do you suppose follow? It is one thing to be a virgin because God commands it and love and respect depend upon it, and another to say it is just a matter of choice, some do, some don’t. Inasmuch as there is a positive drive to have sexual satisfaction, virginity becomes an empty heroic pose. Kinsey really knew all this because, in a very good-hearted way but without much refinement of taste, he wanted to help people out.

The upshot was that sex became behavior, a part of the then new



behavioral sciences, which made the distinction between fact and value. Their practitioners thought that, once liberated from values, they could produce a true science of man. When you see in the *New York Times* a picture of two smiling fifteen-year-olds emerging from their high school displaying the condoms that were distributed to them, you fear that "behavior" is the only thing that counts now, and that we are so far away from natural intimacy and all the complex things that surround it that it is hardly worth trying to discuss love and eros anymore with such pupils. Everything is so routine and without mystery.

But the question remains whether it is possible to study man, as opposed to the other animals, without taking account of will, reason, and imagination. These are the distinctively human faculties that allow sex to actualize itself as eros in human beings. Animals have sex and human beings have eros, and no accurate science is possible without making this distinction. Kinsey pays no attention to the fact that animals, although they indulge themselves whenever they can, have a much smaller range of sexual desires, almost exclusively directed toward procreation. The strange variety of human sexual desires points toward an indeterminateness that requires molding for a truly human life. It is comparable to the indeterminateness in human beings requiring politics, which the brute animals have no need of. One cannot ignore man's imaginative and rational contribution to his own formation, which is absent in the other species. As Aristotle says, the political community comes into being for the sake of life, but its end is the good life, a goal that was not evident in the first impulses.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, coupling begins in sexual desire, but has as its end love. The various kinds of love affairs, like the various kinds of political orders, are human beings' often inept attempts to realize inchoate potentialities that are specific to man. Without examining the ends that these associations aimed at, no one can give an adequate account of them.

Still, what Americans wanted was respectable public talk about sex and liberation from old constraints that had become too painful to endure. Yet in America, imprisoned eros turned for liberation not to a romantic literature but to scientific reductionism. This turn expressed an overpowering urge, more important than any desire for real satisfaction, to make various kinds of sexual expression conventional. Everyone must be brought out of whatever closet he was forced to hide in before gratification will be possible; it fits perfectly our system of delayed gratification, which says that fun is for later. Compare this with Stendhal's Julien Sorel (whom I shall discuss

later), who had no desire or need to make adultery respectable and was totally dedicated to his private relations with the two women he was deeply engaged with. The turn to science is connected with a longing to simplify and domesticate the raging and chaotic feelings within us. Kinsey, and most of those who teach us about sex, can tell us nothing about the arts of love or seduction, and nothing about the delicate interplay of giving one's body to someone else in such a way as to gain trust and respect. For Kinsey a description of sex is no different from a description of eating habits, and the object of desire is essentially indifferent, except for the platitudinous and abstract rules that stem from a democratic society. Kinsey instead established the grounds for the endless and empty demands for sexual "rights" and for the utterly unerotic movements generated to further those rights. On the whole, scientific sexology has done us much more harm than good, when one balances its contribution to doing away with harsh and unfeeling laws against a loss of the human perspective on eros.

Kinsey shared the stage with the much more interesting Freud, with whom he had in common only the public discussion of sex. As Kinsey made sex matter-of-fact and simple, Freud made it omnipresent and complex. The two together appealed to contemporary taste in these questions, making sex pervasive at the same time as easy to go public with. The enduring appeal of Freud, even to sophisticated people like Jacques Derrida, is the license he appears to give for talking endlessly about sex in relation to all things. He brings an unbeatable combination of sex, science, and the promise of being well-adjusted.

Of course, reading Freud is the most unerotic experience one could imagine. Hardly a page or a line of Freud could arouse erotic excitement in any normal reader. Can one really discuss eros without arousal? Freud does not appear to have been a very sexy man, and he brought a grim and brutal view of man and society to his treatment of sex. It is all unmasking and showing the miserable effects of sex on our souls. In Freud, sex is the most important thing in our lives, but it is certainly not a beautiful one. The sex life of civilized man, as opposed to that of the other animals, is complex and interesting, but not precisely attractive or the kind of thing one would write poetry about. Freud inherits the same kind of distinction between nature and society as does Kinsey, but with a much less smiling view of the kind of satisfactions possible in society. His nature is what Hobbes described, where men are engaged in a war of all against all for survival,<sup>4</sup> and society is a way of palliating that war



bought at the cost of all kinds of repressions. Sex in the state of nature is brutish and essentially uninteresting. It becomes interesting in society because of what society does to it. And what society does is to distort it, repress it, and thereby extend it as an intruder into all areas of life. Freud remained throughout his life an unquestioning prisoner of natural science's unerotic view of nature. Eros is a by-product of society, which is necessary, but society is in no way an object of desire and joy.

Ancient views of politics taught that man's nature has an impulse toward society and that society is not necessarily a maiming or division of man but potentially his perfection. Similarly, the ancients believed that eros is a natural longing for the beautiful, which, given the complexity of man and of things, can be damaged and misled but is in itself a perfection of human sociability by way of the passions. Nothing like this is present in Freud. He popularized the Greek word *Eros*, but this was probably only an aspect of Viennese bourgeois pride in German classical *Bildung*, the *Bildung* ridiculed by Nietzsche as mere gilding on the cage of modern mediocrity. Freud failed completely in establishing a real distinction between sex and eros, although his good sense accorded him a protean view of the effects of sex on the soul, effects that are absolutely inexplicable on the basis of his underlying philosophy.\*

Still, Freud, unlike Kinsey, enters into real interior experience, talks about what it means to people, and is concerned with the different kinds of sexual gratification in relation to the whole person. He has no difficulty whatsoever with talking about good and bad sexual wishes and expressions, although he hides his moralism and makes it less interesting by speaking instead of healthy and sick. Like the doctor he was, he begins from the sick, and it is difficult to tell whether the healthy is anything other than the absence of the unhealthy. It is certain that society is merely a bleak necessity to which man must adjust, but which is no fulfillment for him. The real satisfactions of eating, sexual intercourse, and sleeping are rooted in low nature, which is not yet human and gone forever. The higher things, the civilized ones, the vocations of citizen, doctor, father, and

\* Marcuse, the other writer who contributed to making eros an almost unusable word for serious conversation, only went Freud one better by promising polymorphous delight once Freud's moralism was shorn away. History was making it possible to have satisfactions like the first natural ones, not embellished by civilization, and Marcuse thereby achieved the goal, so pervasive among intellectuals of this century, of wedding the two great forces, Marx and Freud.<sup>5</sup>

all the rest, have no natural support, and are secondary expressions. So why should one want them, since they provide only secondary satisfactions and are attained only by terrible wounds to man's nature?

Freud tried to encourage people to look at themselves and to take their inner life seriously. But his psychology causes men and women not to take their real experiences seriously but rather to look beneath them to motives that their psychoanalytic therapists teach them to look on as the real causes. Thus the independence and the charm of what they actually feel, think, and do is drained away. For Freud practically everything has become sexualized, and men learn to see sexual motives behind tastes and activities where they would never have thought to look for them in the past. A statesman or an executive who undergoes psychoanalysis or who gets caught up in psychoanalytic theory cannot take his activities on their own level but only as the complex result of lower or more primitive causes. Such people get into the bad habit of being ironical about what they do in life, for it must always be interpreted in terms of other things for which it is only a cover-up. In an age where men and women are more and more actors and role players, this habit only reinforces their inability to *be* something, totally. Constantly looking at one's motives in this way is demystifying and furthers rationalizing calculation. This is peculiarly deadly to love, where being serious about the reality of the perfection imagined in another is essential to self-forgetting in passionate concern with that other.

Freud is a good example of the impossibility of moving from lower to higher in the study of psychology. His education and his taste compel him to take account of great works by writers and painters in order to produce a psychology worthy of its name. This distinguishes him from Kinsey or typical American practitioners of the behavioral sciences who are not aware that they must discover adequate psychological explanations for the high in man, partly because they do not recognize that there is anything high in man. However, dragged down by the leaden weight of his interpretive framework, when Freud actually goes to work on these sublime products of genius, he falls ridiculously beneath their level, interpreting their works mostly in terms of the materials derived from psychosexual deviations.<sup>6</sup> The surface is dissolved, and the depth and beauty of the work itself are reduced to its boring components. Listen to Mozart and then see what psychoanalytic interpreters do to his work. You have to have become very perverse (in a nonpsychoanalytical sense) to think such interpretations tell us anything about

the music itself, which opens out onto a higher real world that cannot conceivably be constructed out of Freud's childish building blocks. He cannot believe that there is such a thing as a natural writer, because his natural man has no such inclination. The writer must have been diverted from his natural satisfactions and sought to satisfy them in a socially respectable way, adding an erotic charm to things that have no real eros. I remember a bright student who summed it up very neatly for me almost thirty years ago. When he told me that a person has to be neurotic to create, I asked him why. "Why else would one create?" was the response. The very imagination of poets, which from their own point of view is a divination of the highest beings, to Freudians must be the same as or akin to the erotic dreams that express and repress the coarse sexual energies. It all goes downward. Freud's views on religious figures are shockingly crude and distort the phenomena for the sake of a theory, whereas the theory could be proved only by those phenomena. This theory is utterly inadequate to explain saints, artists, lawgivers, or even the scientists themselves who propound the theory. But people soon began to see the theory as the reality and to forget what does not fit the theory, just as economists have become persuasive about people's material motives although one has never actually met a person who cared only about maximization of profit. There is no reason to doubt Freud's genuine attachment to and pleasure in our artistic heritage. In his essay on Dostoyevsky, Freud exclaims that, before such greatness, psychoanalysis must lay down its arms.<sup>7</sup> But he cannot resist picking them up again almost immediately and using them to round up the usual suspects, in Dostoyevsky's case, his father. Thus, people who read Hegel are at the outset asking themselves what his sexual motives might have been and cease asking whether his infinitely richer account of the world around us is true. Pretty soon we become abstract in our very souls.

Freud's theory of sublimation is his desperate attempt to preserve the phenomenal richness of psychological life while remaining faithful to his clear and simple scientific reductionist causes. But it does not work. Even from the outset the higher psychological life has to be made much cruder and less ambiguous than it actually is in order to admit of modern scientific treatment. And then Freud is really unable clearly to distinguish unhealthy repression from healthy sublimation, unless it is by the degree of torment undergone and the social acceptability of the adjustment to it. He cannot explain what is sublime about sublimation, and the question that inevitably follows is, "Why sublimate? What is higher or better about sublimation?"



Why not try to do what comes naturally?" Sublimation collapses back into its primitive elements, like a great tower that has neither foundation nor purpose. Freud is not distinguished by subtlety or refinement in his study of the higher life, but that is nothing compared to what his legions of followers are now capable of. The literary theory called deconstructionism, which has unaccountably filled up the emptiness of its categories with Freudianism, deconstructs what were once thought to be great writers. This is revealing of the whole tendency of contemporary high cultural life: whether represented by natural science or deconstructionism, it can only deconstruct—it cannot construct or reconstruct. Eros has become only a fancy way of saying sex.

Kinsey and Freud, who seem so different, the one smiley and the other gloomy, the one dealing with behavior, no questions asked, the other concentrating on what he considers to be the deep and dark origins of behavior, actually begin from the same view of nature in which sex is mere sex. These two versions of that view have provided the frame for the way we talk and think about eros. Eros, in its Freudian version, is really all just selfishness and provides no basis for intimate human connection. At best it allows only a compromise that has nothing to do with the demands of love. Such theories make possible the repulsive speech, so open, so dull, so flat, about what used to be thought to be perhaps the most mysterious, exciting, and deepest animating force in man.

Yet simply put, human sex is inseparable from the activity of the imagination. Everybody knows this. The body's secret movements are ignited by some images and turned off by others. Ideas of beauty and merit, as well as longings for eternity, are first expressed in the base coin of bodily movements. A biologist can describe male erection and female readiness and tell us what bodily processes make them possible, but he cannot tell us when and by whom they will be set off. The truth of erotic arousal defies materialism. One sees action at a distance. And it is imaginative activity that converts sex into eros. Eros is the brother of poetry, and the poets write in the grip of erotic passion while instructing men about eros. You can never have sex without imagination, whereas you can be hungry and eat without any contribution of imagination. Hunger is purely a bodily phenomenon and can safely be left to the scientists, and now to the dieticians. But our sexual dieticians are absurd. The best you can do by neglecting or denigrating imagination is to debauch and impoverish imagination.

In a better world, sexual education would be concerned with the

development of taste. All the great lovers in literature were also lovers of tales and had their heads full of sublime rivals in their divine quest. The progress of civilization is intimately connected with the elaboration of erotic sensibility and a real examination of the delicate interplay of human attractions. But everything today conspires to suffocate imagination. There have been hardly any great novelists of love for almost a century. Scientific sex claims to tell us about the real thing. Reading classic books has become less and less of a taste among the educated, although cheap romantic novels, the kind that are sometimes stuck into boxes of household detergent, apparently flourish among housewives who haven't heard that Eros is dead. And now the most respectable authorities in the study of books tell us that their messages were always pernicious and sexist. There is practically nothing within our horizon that can come to the aid of ideal longing. Sure, you can be a romantic today if you so choose, but it is a little like being a virgin in a whorehouse. It just doesn't fit with the temper of the times and gets no support in the current atmosphere.

Talking about love has suffered the most. Eros requires speech, and beautiful speech, to communicate to its partner what it feels and wants. Now there is plenty of talk about relationships and how people are intruding on one another, and there is talk akin to discussions on the management of water resources. But the awestruck vision of the thing-in-itself has disappeared. It is almost impossible to get students to talk about the meaning of their erotic choices, except for a few artificial clichés that square them with contemporary right thinking. Out of self-protectiveness, no one wants to risk making arguments, as Plato's characters did, for the dignity of his or her choice and its elevated place within the whole of things. What one cannot talk about, what one does not have words for, hardly exists. Richness of vocabulary is part of richness of experience. Just as there is a disastrous decline in political rhetoric, rhetoric necessary to explain the cause of justice and form a community around it, so there is an even more disastrous decline in the rhetoric of love. Yet to make love humanly, the partners have to talk to each other.

Students, like many other Americans, have a tendency to leave their reflections on eroticism at "You've got a right to do anything in the privacy of your own bedroom." This is a decent liberal opinion adopted to protect people from the prying eye of the law or the disapproval of public opinion. It is indifferent to what is actually being practiced, whether it is vice or virtue. It is self-protective and makes sex boring, a harmless pursuit of taste, like choosing among



Baskin-Robbins' 31 flavors. One wishes that we Americans could develop formulas for tolerance that did not at the same time destroy private discrimination of good and bad, noble and base. Does tolerance necessarily require a relativism that goes to the depths of men's and women's souls, depriving them of their natural right to prefer and to learn about the beautiful? As always is the case with contemporary moralistic formulas, this one nourishes our easygoingness, our unwillingness to judge ourselves. Yet however uncomfortable such an activity is, those who are not willing to undertake it are depriving themselves of the transcendent pleasures of eros. It is difficult for me to understand how people can accept the trivializing formula that their sexual tastes don't do any harm, when they are talking about what is, or what should be, a thing so central to their hearts and so close to the very meaning of life that it could confer the greatest benefit.

But now there is a new illiberal tendency that strangely both contradicts and supports liberal tolerance and easygoingness: the imperial project of reform promoted by radical feminism. It wants to enter the bedroom and much more the psyche in order to alter male sexual taste and behavior. It is not so much acts but the meaning of those acts and the disposition of those who perform them that now count. The new discussion of male sexuality—for it is almost exclusively males who are the subjects of this—produces a distinctly unlovely vision of erotic relations. Male lust, male treatment of women as objects—in general, machismo—are the themes of this new sexual education. It is an education directed not to the sublime or sublimation, but to control. The object is not the relatedness of male and female, but liberation from male oppression, or nature's oppression, in order to provide women with power or choice, the great word of the movement, choice to make oneself whatever one wants to be, free from the patriarchal structures that are said to have kept even what appeared to be the freest women imprisoned. Male and female are no longer to be reciprocal terms, and the male habit of supposedly forcing women into such reciprocity is what must go. Of course, rape was always forbidden, and there was a codicil to the liberal formula that limited the right to do anything in your own bedroom to "consenting adults." But now we are alleged to have a much higher consciousness of what rape and consent mean. What used to be understood as modes of courtship are now seen as modes of male intimidation and playing on the weaknesses and anxieties of women.

The education of male sexual desire in the past was intended to make men into gentlemen, a term reciprocal to lady, a person whose

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