

ALLAN BLOOM
THE CLOSING OF THE AMERICAN MIND

University students: are we lovers anymore?

Eros

[p.132] This is the campus sexual scene. Relativism in theory and lack of relatedness in practice make students unable to think about or look into their futures, and they shrivel up within the confines of the present and material *I*. They are willing to mutter the prescribed catechism, the substitute for thought, which promises them salvation, but there is little faith. As a very intelligent student said to me, “We are all obsessively going to the well, but we always come up dry.” The rhetoric of the campus gays only confirms this. After all the demands and the complaints against the existing order – “Don’t discriminate against us; don’t legislate morality; don’t put a policeman in every bedroom; respect our orientation” – they fall back into the empty talk about finding life-styles. There is not, and cannot be, anything more specific. All relationships have been homogenized in their indeterminacy.

The eroticism of our students is lame. It is not the divine madness Socrates praised; or the enticing awareness of incompleteness and the quest to overcome it; or nature’s grace, which permits a partial being to recover his wholeness in the embrace of another, or a temporal being to long for eternity in the perpetuity of his seed; or the hope that all men [p.133] will remember his deeds; or his contemplation of perfection. Eroticism is a discomfort, but one that in itself promises relief and affirms the goodness of things. It is the proof, subjective but incontrovertible, of man’s relatedness, imperfect though it may be, to others and to the whole of nature. Wonder, the source of both poetry and philosophy, is its characteristic expression. Eros demands daring from its votaries and provides a good reason for it. This longing for completeness is the longing for education, and the study of it is education. Socrates’ knowledge of ignorance is identical with his perfect knowledge of erotics. The longing for his conversations with which he infected his companions, and which was intensified after his death and has endured throughout the centuries, proved him to have been both the neediest and most grasping of lovers, and the richest and most giving of beloveds. The sex lives of our students and their reflection on them disarm such longing and make it incomprehensible to them. Reduction has robbed eros of its divinatory powers. Because they do not trust it, students have no reverence for themselves. There is almost no remaining link visible to them between what they learn in sex education and Plato’s *Symposium*.

Yet only from such dangerous heights can our situation be seen in proper perspective. The fact that this perspective is no longer credible is the measure of our crisis. When we recognize the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium* as interpreting our experiences, we can be sure that we are having those experiences in their fullness, and that we have the minimum of education. Rousseau, the founder of the most potent of reductionist teachings about eros, said that the *Symposium* is

always the book of lovers. Are we lovers anymore? This is my way of putting the educational question of our times.

In all species other than man, when an animal reaches puberty, it is all that it will ever be. This stage is the clear end toward which all of its growth and learning is directed. The animal's activity is reproduction. It lives on this plateau until it starts downhill. Only in man is puberty just the beginning. The greater and more interesting part of his learning, moral and intellectual, comes afterward, and in civilized man is incorporated into his erotic desire. His taste and hence his choices are determined during this "sentimental education." It is as though his learning were for the sake of his sexuality. Reciprocally, much of the energy for that learning obviously comes from his sexuality. Nobody takes human children who [p.134] have reached puberty to be adults. We properly sense that there is along road to adulthood, the condition in which they are able to govern themselves and be true mothers and fathers. This road is the serious part of education, where animal sexuality becomes human sexuality, where instinct gives way in man to choice with regard to the true, the good and the beautiful. Puberty does not provide man, as it does other animals, with all that he needs to leave behind others of his kind. This means that the animal part of his sexuality is intertwined in the most complex way with the higher reaches of his soul, which must inform the desires with its insight, and that the most delicate part of education is to keep the two in harmony.

I cannot pretend that I understand very much of this mystery, but knowing that I do not know keeps me attentive to, and far from the current simplification of, the phenomena of this aspect of our nature that links the highest and the lowest in us. I believe that the most interesting students are those who have not settled the sexual problem, who are still young, even look young for their age, who think there is much to look forward to and much they must yet grow up to, fresh and naïve, excited by the mysteries to which they have not yet been fully initiated. There are some who are men and women at the age of sixteen, who have nothing more to learn about the erotic. They are adult in the sense that they will no longer change very much. They may become competent specialists, but they are flat-souled. The world is for them what it presents itself to the senses to be; it is unadorned by imagination and devoid of ideals. This flat soul is what the sexual wisdom of our time conspires to make universal.

The easy sex of teen-agers snips the golden thread linking eros to education. And popularised Freud finishes it for good by putting the seal of science on an unerotic understanding of sex. A youngster whose sexual longings consciously or unconsciously inform his studies has a very different set of experiences from one in whom such motives are not active. A trip to Florence or to Athens is one thing for a young man who hopes to meet his Beatrice on the Ponte Santa Trinità or his Socrates in the Agora, and quite another for one who goes without such an aching need. The latter is only a tourist, the former is looking for completion. Flaubert, a great expert on the fate of longing in the modern world, sends his awestruck Emma Bovary to a ball at the estate of decadent aristocrats where she sees: [p.135]

...at the head of the table, alone among all of these men and women, bent over, his full plate with his napkin knotted around his neck like a child, an old man ate, letting drops of gravy trickle from his mouth. He had bloodshot eyes and wore a little pigtail fastened with a black ribbon. It was the Marquis' father-in-law, the old Duc de Laverdière, the former favorite of the Comte d'Artois at the time of the hunts at the Vaudreuil home of

the Marquis de Conflans, and who had been, it was said, the lover of Queen Marie-Antoinette between M. de Coigny and M. de Lauzun. He had led a wild life of debauch, full of duels, wagers, abducted women, had devoured his fortune and terrified his whole family. A domestic, behind his chair, speaking loudly into his ear, named the dishes for him to which he pointed while stuttering. And constantly Emma's eyes, of their own accord, returned to this old man with drooping lips as to something extraordinary and august. He had lived at court and slept in the bed of queens.

Others see only a repulsive old man, but Emma sees the *ancien régime*. Her vision is truer, for there once really was an *ancien régime*, and in it there were great lovers. The constricted present cannot teach it to us without the longing that makes us dissatisfied with the present. Such longing is what students most need, because the great remains of the tradition have grown senile in our care. Imagination is required to restore their youth, beauty and vitality, and then experience their inspiration.

The student who made fun of playing the guitar under a girl's window will never read or write poetry under her influence. His defective eros cannot provide his soul with images of the beautiful, and it will remain coarse and slack. It is not that he will fail to adorn or idealize the world; it is that he will not see what is there.

A significant number of students used to arrive at the university physically and spiritually virginal, expecting to lose their innocence there. Their lust was mixed into everything they thought and did. They were painfully aware that they wanted something but were not quite sure exactly what it was, what form it would take and what it all meant. The range of satisfactions intimated by their desire moved from prostitutes to Plato, and back, from the criminal to the sublime. Above all they looked for instruction. Practically everything they read in the humanities and social sciences might be a source of learning about their pain, and a path to its healing. This powerful tension, this literal lust for knowledge, was what a teacher could see in the eyes of those who flattened him by giving [p.136] such evidence of their need for him. His own satisfaction was promised by having something with which to feed their hunger, an overflow to bestow on their emptiness. His joy was in hearing the ecstatic "Oh, yes!" as he dished up Shakespeare and Hegel to minister to their need. Pimp and midwife really described him well. The itch for what appeared to be only sexual intercourse was the material manifestation of the Delphic oracle's command, which is but a reminder of the most fundamental human desire, to "know thyself."

Sated with easy, clinical and sterile satisfactions of body and soul, the students arriving at the university today hardly walk on the enchanted ground they once did. They pass by the ruins without imagining what was once there. Spiritually detumescent, they do not seek wholeness in the university. These most productive years of learning, the time when Alcibiades was growing his first beard, are wasted because of artificial precociousness and a sophistic wisdom acquired in high school. The real moment for sexual education goes by, and hardly anybody has an idea of what it would be.

Reciprocally, the university does not see itself as ministering to such needs and does not believe the mummies on display in its museums can speak to the visitors or, horrors, go home to live with them. The humanists are old maid librarians. As I reflect on it, the last fertile moment when student and university made a match was the fling with Freud during the forties and fifties. He advertised a real psychology, a version of the age-old investigation of the soul's phe-

nomena adjusted to the palate of modern man. Today one can hardly imagine the excitement. What a thrill it was when my first college girlfriend told me that the university's bell tower was a phallic symbol. This was a real mix of my secret obsessions and the high seriousness I expected to get from the university. High school was never like this. It was hard to tell whether the meaning of it all was that I was about to lose my virginity or to penetrate the mysteries of being. An admirable confusion. At last everything was on the table. The dirty things had disappeared from the philosophy of the *mind*, and Freud promised to restore the *soul* and take seriously what happened in it. He fancied himself a new and truer Plato and allowed us to praise Plato again as Freud's precursor.

But it turned out to be psychology without the *psyche*, i.e., without the soul. Freud just did not give a satisfying account of all the things we [p.137] experience. Everything higher had to be a repression of something lower, and a symbol of something else rather than itself. The best Freudian vision could for man's real intellectual longings was *Death in Venice*, clearly not a very rich row to hoe for the finer spirits. Aristotle said that man has two peaks, each accompanied by intense pleasure: sexual intercourse and thinking. The human soul is a kind of parabola, and its phenomena are spread between its two foci, displaying their tropical variety and ambiguity. Freud saw only one focus in the soul, the same one as the brutes have, and had to explain all psychology's higher phenomena by society's repression or other such versions of the Indian rope trick. He really did not believe in the soul, but in the body, along with its passive instrument of consciousness, the mind. This blunted his vision of the higher phenomena, as is apparent from his crude observations about art and philosophy. It was not merely sexual satisfaction students were seeking, whether they were aware of it or not, but knowledge of themselves, and Freud did not provide it. People found that Freud's "know thyself" led them to the couch, where they emptied their tank of the compressed fuel, which was intended to power them on their flight from opinion to knowledge. "Know thyself" did not mean to Freud knowing man's place within the order of the whole of things. It is long since that academic psychology has had any appeal for students who have a philosophic urge. Freudian psychology has become a big business and entered into the mainstream of public life with a status equal to that of engineering and banking. But it has no more intellectual appeal than they do. We must look elsewhere for ourselves.

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