Erotic adventures of the mind

DIANA SCHAUB

IN THE FINAL LINES of *Love and Friendship*,† Allan Bloom tells the story of a lecture at which students unveiled a banner declaring "Great Sex is better than Great Books." Bloom's response: "Sure, but you can't have one without the other." To be humanly satisfying, the intercourse of bodies depends on the activity of the mind or soul or imagination.

The adjective which usually accompanies sex today, especially on college campuses, is "safe" not "great." While the counselors mean "safe" to be taken in a physical sense, Bloom is more struck by the preoccupation with psychic safety. Condom or not, modern couplings are self-protective: the very casualness of it all is indicative of timidity and an unwillingness to hazard serious engagement. Longing, devotion, sacrifice, danger have disappeared and with them has gone amplitude of soul, the full sweep that connects the depths of our being with the heights.

With the natural lines of communication between the low and the high severed (by debunkers like Freud and Nietzsche), eros undergoes a kind of detumescence. The lower end of the erotic experience has become "sex," a physical act stripped of its emotional meaning, and thereby rendered thin and flat and scientific (alternatively, sex may be livened up by brutality to become "screwing"). The upper end of the erotic experience is no longer recognized as such. The great books are read either as unconscious manifestations of their authors' neuroses or as power plays by dead white European males. There is now no point of contact between the real concerns of individuals (who in their untutored way continue still to seek human connection) and the academic theories foisted upon them.

It is this "fall of eros" which Bloom addresses. If *The Closing of the American Mind* diagnosed the problem, *Love and Friendship* delivers the cure. It is not an institutional cure—not, for

†*Simon & Schuster. 590 pp. $25.00.*

instance, a proposal for a Great Books curriculum. It is instead a very personal witness of the place a few select books assumed in Bloom's own life and self-understanding. There are long essays on Rousseau's *Emile* and Plato's *Symposium*, with shorter essays on Stendhal's *The Red and the Black*, Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, Montaigne's "Of Friendship," and five Shakespeare plays (*Romeo and Juliet, Antony and Cleopatra, Measure for Measure, Troilus and Cressida*, and *The Winter's Tale*). Bloom conveys very palpably the excitement these books can offer, the kinds of questions they raise, the insights they prompt. While Bloom's involvement with these books is intense and long-standing, it is not exclusive; he invites the reader to a ménage à trois. The sentimental education one experiences is a refutation of all the fiddlers and debasers.

This is not to say that Bloom's interpretations are always persuasive. Despite his penetrating criticisms of Romanticism, and the psychological acuity he demonstrates in uncovering romantic illusions, there is, in Bloom, an irrepressible, almost swooning self-identification with figures like Julien Sorel and Emma Bovary. Moreover, he believes that their creators identified with them as well: "Julien seems to represent the fantasy life of Stendhal, what this unprepossessing writer would like to have been like"; "Emma and Flaubert are full of longing for ideals that cannot be.... They share defeat." However, even taking the full measure of the artist's hatred for the bourgeoisie, why must that lead either artist or audience to embrace the defective, alienated beings that the bourgeoisie extrudes? Indeed, one objection against the bourgeoisie might be that all it produces in reaction is the anemic and febrile Emma. Alternatively, one might, like Bloom, acknowledge the essential identity of Flaubert and Emma, but, unlike Bloom, see it as grounds for aesthetic and moral criticism. Henry James is a reliable guide here.

> Our complaint is that Emma Bovary, in spite of the nature of her consciousness and in spite of her reflecting so much that of her creator, is really too small an affair.... [Flaubert's] "gift" was of the greatest, a force in itself, in virtue of which he is a consummate writer; and yet there are whole sides of life to which it was never addressed and which it apparently quite failed to suspect as a field of exercise. If he never approached the complicated character in man or woman—Emma Bovary is not the least little bit complicated—or the really furnished, the finely civilized, was this because, surprisingly, he could not? *L'âme française* at all events shows in him but ill.... This touches on the strange weakness of his mind, his puerile dread of the grocer, the *bourgeois*, the sentiment that in his

> generation and the preceding ... sterilized a whole province of French literature. That worthy citizen ought never to have kept a poet from dreaming.

Stendhal, Austen, Flaubert, and Tolstoy are all read in the rather broad wake of Rousseau. None of them, with the exception of Tolstoy, is held to be an unadulterated Rousseauan, but Rousseau's influence, even when his ideas are being rejected or corrected, is insisted upon. Bloom's familiarity with Rousseau is intimate and immensely fruitful. The most absorbing of the short essays in Part I covers perhaps the least likely of Rousseauans, Jane Austen.

BLOOM'S TASTE in Shakespeare runs to the tragic. He provides essays on all the plays with eponymous love pairs: *Romeo and Juliet*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Troilus and Cressida*. The only comedy he discusses, and that a dark one, is *Measure for Measure*. If, as Bloom says, our prospects for a serious education of the sentiments depend on our ability to cleave to Shakespeare, one might have expected more attention to those plays in which we are given guidance in the civilized, or artful, reconciliation of eros and *nomos* (that is, love and the law). Despite Bloom's enraptured accounts of star-crossed couples, the desirability of you-and-me-against-the-world loves is open to debate. Both *Measure for Measure* and *The Winter's Tale* reveal possible agents (namely, fear and religion) in the domestication of desire, but Bloom might have indulged us by presenting one of the many comedies in which conjugal love is vindicated in a distinctly more imitable fashion. Perhaps this is really just a fond wish for one or two more Bloom essays on Shakespeare.

As with the essays in Part I, the Shakespeare section is rife with the observations of a lifetime of study; there is much to be learned and much to be challenged. This is a book that, in its own exuberance, calls forth a matching exuberance in the reader. The boldness of the readings does not aim to overpower, but to elicit a response, and especially to elicit a longing to return to the originals.

More interesting perhaps than any single chapter, and the delights or dilemmas thereof, are the questions raised by the book's overall motion, which is clearly meant by Bloom to be an ascent. He begins by reviving the most serious erotic teaching of recent vintage—that of Rousseau and his Romantic descendants. Beginning from sex, Rousseau arrived at love, via the route of imaginative idealization or sublimation. With the proper sex edu-

cation, natural man—solitary, desiring, self-regarding—can become marriageable man. The gap between self and other can be bridged. Rousseau clearly follows Hobbes in assigning priority to the bodily pleasures and pains and in making reason subservient to the passions. One consequence of this demotion of reason is the loss of any independent, higher ground for friendship (friendship, unlike romantic love, does not have "a natural organ of satisfaction"). In Rousseau's radical reconstruction of love, friendship becomes strictly ancillary to romance—every lover needs a confidant. Friendship, particularly same-sex friendship, becomes conspiracy (the ever-suspect "night out with the boys") rather than communion (or *synousia*, being together). At best, love and friendship might be conjoined in the perfect marriage, although, as Bloom notes, conjugal friendship is a rather different thing, based on complementarity rather than likeness, and overwhelmingly concerned with a joint endeavor rooted in necessity, namely, the cares of the household, including children.

Problematic as Rousseau's project may be (on both the love and friendship scores), the collapse of this grand illusion—"the harmonious union of sexual desire with love, marriage, and friendship"—has consigned us to our present loveless and friendless state. The attempt to construct a space for profound human connection upon the solitary premises of modernity has failed. Bloom's sympathetic survey of the ruins is meant to convince us of the need to look elsewhere.

In Shakespeare, Bloom finds a truer, more natural account of erotic phenomena. The variety of erotic (and by extension domestic or familial) possibilities is shown to be linked to the variety of regimes and religions (East and West, pagan and Christian, ancient and modern—they're all there). Women in particular are presented by Shakespeare in manifold glory, from the matron Volumnia to the temptress Cleopatra to the redemptive Hermione. Shakespeare's globe, unlike our current carnival of multiculturalism, develops our powers of judgment along with our powers of appreciation. Our eyes are opened to the permanent love of the beautiful underlying the variety of human types and forms of love. In both this section's opening and closing paeans to Shakespeare, Bloom argues that Shakespeare's comprehensive naturalism may be our deliverance. It is not that Shakespeare himself had any such plans: "Shakespeare has no project for the betterment or salvation of mankind." His superiority consists in his forswearing of didactic intent. Lacking a theoretical framework, Shakespeare is faithful to the things themselves. He is a true recorder of the human experience, and hence

ever fresh.

Inasmuch as Shakespeare does not, like Rousseau, leave us unsatisfied, we are perhaps not compelled to seek the arms of the ancients. Indeed, one might argue that Shakespeare seems to transcend the ancient/modern distinction and moreover, that he, as much as Plato, meets Socrates' demand, at the end of the *Symposium*, for a poet who can combine tragedy and comedy. Accordingly, in order to get to Plato, Bloom inserts a curious and unnumbered chapter entitled "Interlude on Two Strange Couples: Hal and Falstaff, Montaigne and La Boétie." The interlude is about friendship, a subject little mentioned until this point. Falstaff is treated as a comic reprise of Socrates, with Prince Hal in the role of Alcibiades. The teacher/student relation (as well as the ruler/ruled relation) is an example of a friendship between unequal partners. Montaigne and La Boétie, by contrast, are an example of philosophic friends—full equals, sharing in the pursuit of truth. (Not even the Platonic dialogues provide this; in them, we see Socrates' pedagogy—his intercourse with unequals—but we never see him in conversation with Plato.) For Montaigne, Love and Friendship is more accurately Love *or* Friendship. Erotic love and brotherly love (*philia*) are both great goods, but not necessarily compatible. As Bloom says: "In order for there to be friendship, there needs to be a rare leisure, and in addition, the institution of marriage has to have a limited status unlike our imperial version of marriage and the family." One must choose, or if not choose, then at least be clear about the rank-ordering of one's affections. For Montaigne, the involvement with La Boétie was exclusive and all-engrossing, far outweighing his marriage. He clearly considers the conversation of like-minded individuals to be superior to the congress of bodies.

THIS INTERLUDE, with its glimpse of the teacher and the friend, leads us on to Plato and that most famous account of a drinking together (*symposium*) that became a talking together about the meaning of being together (*synousia*—which like our word "intercourse" has both an intellectual and a sexual meaning). The *Symposium* is the Greek version of wine, women, and song: namely, wine, boys, and speeches. This matter of boys is a serious one, which Bloom treats forthrightly and at length. Man/boy love was conventional, although not altogether legal, among the Greeks, and was thus the unavoidable beginning point of a discussion about love. But as always when Socrates is present, the conventional opinions about things are transcended in the course of the dialogue. Bloom reveals the deficiencies in the

defenses of pederastic practice offered by two of the speakers, Phaedrus and Pausanius. Yet, Bloom also quite emphatically declares that pederasty "has a certain connection with philosophy." Indeed, when he contrasts the Greek way to the Biblical way, Bloom speaks of homosexuality, politics, friendship, and philosophy as forming a cluster of interrelated ideas and practices essentially invented by the Greeks and opposed to the parallel cluster of heterosexuality, family, law, and religion among the Jews. The contest between Athens and Jerusalem begins, or so it seems, in sexual preference. Heterosexual desire finds fulfillment in the family, supported by the law, which is derived ultimately from God. Homosexual desire, in its distance from the family, is connected to the *polis* or city. The republican form of rule in the Greek cities arose in opposition to the patriarchal rule in the family or clan. Friendship also, as a freely chosen connection, exists in a kind of opposition to the given relations of the family. It is possible only after the advent of the city. So too philosophy:

> For the Greeks, who, for the sake of political and intellectual freedom, questioned the family and even the law, precisely those desires and yearnings that collide with the family and the law become the core of Eros, which in turn metamorphoses into the passion for free self-discovery.

While the arguments of "vulgar pederasty" are inadequate, Bloom insists that there is a divination of the truth in the positions of Phaedrus and Pausanius. Accordingly, he says of teaching that: "It is a very high vocation, but one that begins with what is thought to be a low one, the desire to possess bodies." Speaking of Socrates and his pupils, he insists on "his real attraction, beginning with their bodies but ending with their souls. Only the man practiced in the first powerful attractions that begin with the body will be capable of this transition." Bloom's rendition of the teacher reminds one of Rodin's statue of Balzac, which beneath the encompassing bronze cloak, unbeknownst to the onlookers, has the great author grasping his erect penis. Just as Rodin believed sexual energy to be the primal source of artistic creativity, Bloom seems to argue that sexual desire is the primal source of tutorial interest in the young. I'm not convinced. It's like saying that incest is the spur to parenting. Incest may well be a natural desire, but admitting that does not require us to hold that fathers and mothers engage in child-rearing out of sublimated incestuous desires. Similarly, instead of pedagogy arising out of pederasty, pederasty can be recognized as a natural temptation, but nonetheless, a distraction from or distortion of true

pedagogy. The first law of the family, the one that makes the family possible, is the proscription against incest. The first law for teachers, the one that makes education possible, is the proscription against pederasty. This, after all, is what Alcibiades gives such eloquent testimony of. It was the beautiful Alcibiades who sought unsuccessfully to seduce the wise Socrates. It is not virtue that bows to loveliness, but the reverse. The neediness of the teacher is for receptive minds, a need quite distinct from that for a receptive body.

IT SEEMS TO ME that Bloom in the end cannot shake his long discipleship to Rousseau. He has Plato doing what Rousseau was unable to, constructing the high out of the low, and doing so by "beginning with the real bodily sexual attractions of individuals for one another." But if the sublime really exists, we don't need sublimation. One can see both high and low, see the place for both, even see the way individuals might need to be led from one to the other, without deriving one from the other. Instead of arguing for pederasty as the spur to philosophy, why not instead say that the Greek practice of pederasty made it more difficult to understand Socrates, that is, to understand the possibility of an independent eroticism tied to speeches? To put this in the terms of the *Symposium*, it seems to me that Bloom confounds the Aristophanean longing for erotic union, here and now, with Diotima's erotic longing for immortality, realized through pregnancy, real or spiritual. Man and woman through their coupling produce a child in whom their own being is commingled and continued. Analogously, the teacher's congress is with the truth; the truth is one's other half, not the student. The student is the spiritual heir of that ongoing union, who will in turn seek to wed with truth and continue the generations.

Quarrels and cavils aside, one cannot but be charmed by this book. Allan Bloom talks with us about the most important things: the love of one's own, the love of the beautiful, the love of the good, families and lovers and friends, all of the delights, dangers, and difficulties of human connection. He shows how the quest for self-knowledge can truly be the erotic adventure of a lifetime.