THE HIGHER YEARNING

Bringing eros back to academe

By Cristina Nehring

"God is my witness that if Augustus, Emperor of the whole world, thought fit to honour me with marriage . . . it would be dearer and more honourable to me to be called not his Empress but your whore." So wrote a student to her teacher in the twelfth century—so, that is, wrote Héloïse to Abelard, after their consignment to separate monasteries.

They are brave words these: brave in that they spurn respectability; brave in their renunciation of all worldly advantage. But they are brave, too, because they reveal the erotic fire that can flare within a pedagogical relationship—and they suggest the power, the pride, and the courage that such fire can confer.

Then, as now, sex in the classroom was taboo. Then, as now, the participants were punished: the medieval professor castrated, his student shamed; both dispatched to monasteries. And then, as now, the net gain to thought and instruction was inestimable.

Héloïse and Abelard's love was reckless at the outset. It was consummated and exuberant. The two were discovered in bed together; they sang songs to each other in public; they generated and ignored gossip; they made love in the corners of convent cafeterias. But if the sexual passion between the teenage Héloïse and her thirty-eight-year-old philosophy tutor lasted only a couple of years, the intellectual passion it spawned lasted a lifetime. Abelard was sixty-three when he died, and until the end of his days he wrote letters to his absent Héloïse, and she to him. They are letters of philosophical argument; they are sermons; they are hymns; they are biblical commentaries; they are declarations of love—they are also one of the most moving bodies of prose in medieval literature. A love that, at its origin, was pure lust for Abelard became the occasion for his greatest literary accomplishment. A love that for Héloïse was an act of godlessness became the incentive for theological meditation of an order unrivaled by any female cleric of the period.

But it is not only reckless—nor even consummated—love that generates such feverish achievement. More often than not, it is, as Saint-Exupéry once said, "in a love that vainly yearns from behind prison bars you have perchance the love supreme." More often than not, it is in a shy and repressed passion—a passion, for example, such as that shared by Martin Heidegger and Hannah Arendt—that we find the source of greatest creativity. Heidegger wrote to his young Marburg freshman in stilted and longing tones, as she did to him; he did not leave his wife for her, nor did she shirk her suitors for him. Their love was secretive and circumscribed, and yet not the less generative for that. It inflamed her interest and launched her career in philosophy; it gave him the provocation he needed to do fresh work at a moment when he felt his theories going stale. It was the beginning of a dialogue that transcended decades and world wars, national, religious, and moral boundaries. For all the limitations of their relationship, and for all Heidegger's now famous limitations as a human being in World War II Germany, the chemistry between him and Arendt fired and informed their greatest work.

Much the same could be said of Auguste Rodin and Camille Claudel, Paul Verlaine and Arthur Rimbaud, Socrates and his many, changing, loving pupils. Teacher-student chemistry is what

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sparks much of the best work that goes on at universities, today as always. It need not be reckless; it need not be *realized*. It need not even be articulated, or mutual. In most cases, in fact, it is none of these. In most cases, academic eros works from behind the scenes. It lingers behind the curtain and ensures that the production onstage is strong. It ensures that the work in the classroom is charged, ambitious, and vigorous. In most cases, it would be counterproductive for it to emerge, itself, into the limelight. That said, it occasionally does. And *when* it does, it must not be criminalized. For the university campus on which the erotic impulse between teachers and students is criminalized is the campus on which the pedagogical enterprise is deflated. It is the campus on which pedagogy is gutted and gored. This, unfortunately, is the scenario that confronts us today.

Once upon a time "sexual harassment" on campuses meant the exchange of grades for sex—academic for erotic favors. Thanks, in part, to the war waged by feminists for twenty-five years, such tawdry practices are now all but defunct. A professor who "harasses" students today, in the sense most people outside the Ivory Tower still associate with "sexual harassment," is as self-destructive as a suicide bomber, and almost as rare. But the war has proceeded anyway. In fact, the conquering army has mushroomed, the propaganda multiplied, and the target expanded beyond recognition. The unacknowledged casualty of this campaign has been pedagogy.

Sexual harassment is to America's contemporary college system what atheism was to Shakespeare's England: the charge you throw at whomever you want to hurt when you can't think of anything else. Harassment can now be "environmental," "secondhand," and "third-party"—all of which essentially means it can be victimless. Or, more precisely, the victim can be identified and spoken for by someone else, even against her will. It can consist of a word (say, "dear," addressed to a student); a lesson plan (a survey of Greek sculpture); a look, compliment, witticism, flirtation gone sour, or consensual love reinterpreted in the cold hard light of its demise. It can consist of a consensual love in *full bloom*, provided someone can be found to make a fuss.

A glance at the policy statements of America's universities reveals definitions striking in their amorphousness. Harvard's guidelines forbid "jokes, questions, or suggestions" that might be construed as carrying sexual meaning, as well as "personal attention by an instructor" when "inappropriate." Wellesley College outlaws all "inappropriate social invitations." (One wonders how the hopeful suitor can know if a woman will deem his suggestion "appropriate" until he makes it, by which point it may be too late; she may already have filed charges.) Antioch College mysteriously condemns any behavior that "emphasizes the gender" of a person, and, in a clause that may prove the first in legal history to make loquaciousness a punishable offense, prohibits "irrelevant comments."

But if official policy statements are fuzzy, unofficial texts given students by a university's "sexual-harassment officers" and ombudsmen are usually fuzzier still—and more misleading. Take that old standby of harassment seminars, Billie Dziech and Linda Weiner's 1990 *The Lecherous Professor*. In training its readers to recognize common types of predatory instructors, it describes "the public harasser," whom one may readily identify by the fact that he "dress[es] up or down," and, moreover, "seldom employs standard academic vocabulary." As if this description did not cast its net wide enough, the book proceeds to warn us of the *equally* dangerous "private harasser," who (guess what?) "dresses conservatively" (not "up or down") and, indeed, "often adheres to academic stereotypes" of the very kind the *public* harasser would spurn. In the unlikely event that we cannot find enough faculty members to damn via these diagnostics, the next section offers a catalogue of personality profiles to put us on especial guard. It lists every imaginable character from "The Counselor-Helper" (who wins you to his vicious ends by niceness) to "The Intellectual Seducer" (who undoes you by his intelligence). In fact, the only professorial type conspicuously absent from this colorful gallery of closet criminals is the one we might call "The Unpleasant Idiot." If an instructor is both stupid

Illustrations by Jen Renninger

and hostile, apparently, we can trust him—and only then.

Were people immune to self-pity and self-dramatization, immune to greed, and unperturbed in the face of romantic rejection, these texts might not work the damage they do. But give a group of indifferently successful individuals of either sex a glass through which to view themselves as very important victims, limited in their success not by the modesty of their own talents but by the ubiquitous insidiousness of the "system," and chances are good they will learn to use it. Mix in the resentment of a relationship gone awry, or a relationship desired but never obtained, and you begin to understand the source of a good number of sexual-harassment charges. Add to this a potent financial bait (women have reaped considerable rewards through harassment suits in which the burden of disproof was on the defendant and institutional sympathy entirely with the accuser), and the attraction of such charges becomes still clearer.

> *If you wish to be applauded at an educational convention, vociferate sentiment platitudes about the sacred rights of the child, specifying particularly his right to happiness gained through freedom.*
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> —**WILLIAM C. BAGLEY** (1935)

Such a case was the one brought by Michelle Gretzinger a few years ago against Ramdas Lamb, religious studies professor at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. Trained and tutored by the "student advocate" on her campus (who introduced her to, among other texts, *The Lecherous Professor*), Gretzinger accused her former favorite teacher of nothing less than "serial rape." According to her testimony, he repeatedly forced her to accept rides from him to her apartment, where he then proceeded, time after time, for a month, to rape her. Yet Gretzinger had continued to show a pronounced personal fascination with Lamb throughout the period during which he was supposedly raping her, to enroll in elective classes he taught, to participate in extracurricular activities he led, and to hang around his office using his computer. Despite all this, the case proceeded. It proceeded for three and a half years, buttressed by letters of support from such vocal feminists as Michele Paludi, who, with no direct knowledge of the parties involved, proclaimed the "patterns" involved to be typical of real harassment. It generated roughly 2,000 pages of legal transcripts and won Gretzinger a large check. The only thing atypical about the case is that Gretzinger's charges were sufficiently extravagant that they could be—and ultimately were—proven false. The $175,000 settlement given her by the university was in compensation for the "delays in her case"—not in response to the justice of her charges. It was shown, in fact, that it was physically impossible for her to have seen Lamb on many of the dates in question. But what, one wonders, would have happened if he *had* spent all that time in her apartment, without this signifying the least romantic interest? Or what, to court blasphemy, if the two had actually *had* a flirtation? What if Gretzinger's oft manifested devotion to Lamb was what it appeared to be—an attempt to seduce him—and he had responded to it, and, say, kissed her in her apartment? Still no hanging offense.

Yet he would have been doomed, his case patently unwinnable. Distinctions between rape and romance would have gone out the window: they would have been impossible to make, and nobody would have been interested in making them anyway. A man who had studied to be a monk in India before joining a theology department in the United States would have stood forever condemned as a "serial rapist," and Gretzinger would have received hundreds of thousands of dollars more than she already did as reparation for her trauma.

Had she been smarter, Gretzinger would have made her charges smaller. She would have complained, as did the accusers of New Hampshire art professor Leroy Young, of a lunch to which she had been taken "against her will." Or she would have reproached her professor, as they did theirs, for a compliment on her blazer, a pat on her shoulder that she had found disconcerting. Simplest of all, she could have decried the "hostility" of the "environment" created by Lamb's hugging of other people, as did a library staff member at another university in a sexual-harassment suit against a more experienced colleague around the same time. Had she done this, Lamb, like Young, like the librarian, would probably have been dismissed from his position on the spot. Gretzinger's comparative failure owed only to the fact that she grabbed too many cookies and got her hand stuck in the jar. Had she realized how very few cookies she actually needed to get fat rewards for her efforts, her success would have been perfect.

My own success would have been perfect had I elected in the last few years to sue my fiancé, a professor at the university where I am completing a doctorate, for our relationship. In fact, the suit was very nearly made on my behalf, and against my will. When his superiors learned of our relationship, the wheels of justice and punishment began, immediately, to turn. No matter

that I had never taken a class with him, or that I worked in a different department; no matter that we had met off-campus, or, most importantly, that I did not feel in any shape or form harassed by him. Nobody cared. My view of the matter was declared "irrelevant." As a graduate student, I was presumably too "disempowered" to judge of my own abuse. Deans wrote letters; chairs made calls; hiring committees were warned of the "seriousness of the offense"; jobs were threatened—and I went unconsulted.

The point about such cases (among which the Lamb and Young examples are formidably documented in Daphne Patai's study of the "sexual harassment industry," *Heterophobia*) is not their individual injustice, however astonishing. It is the pervasive climate of fear on which they depend and which they continually aggravate. In our enlightened contemporary university, men walk on eggshells and women run from shadows. Every gesture is suspect: if a colleague compliments you on your dress, it smacks of sexism; if a professor is friendly, he is readying you for future sexual abuse. There is no kindness so innocent that women educated in the "patterns" of harassment cannot recognize it as an instance of the newly identified activity experts refer to as "grooming" the victim for the kill. Academic encouragement, easy jesting, an affectionate epithet—all of what used to be the currency of good fellowship as well as teaching—have become cause for vigilance, fodder for complaint, the stuff of suits.

One of the oddest developments in this story is that a movement such as campus feminism, which began with the aim of giving women more power—more faith in their own resources; greater enfranchisement, sexuality, and independence—has ended by infantilizing them to this extent, sensitizing them to slights they never felt, making them alternately ridiculous (Gretzinger) and irrelevant (me) in their own sexual-harassment tales, and training them to see themselves as resourceless victims of resourceful men. It has ended by teaching them to run to their elders and fear the dark; to distrust male appreciation and demonize male attraction—to revert, in sum, into the shrinking, swooning, sex-spooked maidens we thought we'd left behind in a darker age.

To say this much, bizarrely, is to be tarred with the wide brush of conservatism, no matter how liberal you fancy yourself to be. Academe has no other explanation for your failure to fear the great male sex god and to demand all possible protections against him. Daphne Patai, ten-year veteran of women's studies at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, finds herself vilified by her liberal colleagues following the emergence of *Heterophobia*. The well-known lesbian critic Elaine Marks finds herself "isolated in women's studies" and branded a "closet conservative" for

THE PURPOSE OF THIS chapter has been to explain some of the responsibilities of the secondary school brought about by present gravely uncertain national and world conditions:

1. The majority of young men will undergo a period of military service, following their high-school years. These youth should be:
   a. Made aware of the vital need for their sacrifice and led to feel both a sense of duty and a sense of honor in their task
   b. Helped to feel that during their absence the home, school, and community have a continued interest in them
   c. Assured that their service is appreciated and that provision for their future education or work has been made.

2. For youth still in school, a pre-service orientation program, adapted to individual capacities, should be set up to include special instruction in:
   a. Mathematics and science
   b. Mechanics and electronics
   c. Communication
   d. Skills leading to self-reliance and health in emergencies
   e. Ethical and moral conduct under military conditions
   f. The location, background, and culture of foreign peoples.

3. The impact of the current uncertain times upon young women should be recognized by home, school, and community. The school should:
   a. Give thoughtful and sympathetic personal guidance which takes into account the emotional and psychological factors which affect girls in such times
   b. Help young girls to recognize and value their responsibilities in the struggle between democracy and totalitarianism
   c. Enable girls to prepare themselves in vocational skills as well as in homemaking and cultural fields
   d. Expand the curriculum in vocational areas of the type needed by girls.

4. All youth in the school should be:
   a. Given a better comprehension of social, economic, and political problems confronting the United States and other nations
   b. Taught history and world affairs in terms of the effect of men, movements, and events upon the struggle for human liberty
   c. Helped to realize that to preserve freedom in America this nation must defend it in all parts of the world and lend support to its increase among peoples everywhere.

5. The responsibility for youth adjustment and education should be shared by the school, home, and community more greatly than hitherto. The school should take the initiative in bringing about closer cooperation between these agencies. The armed forces have a dual responsibility: to encourage youth to complete their secondary-school education and to enhance the educational value of their service in uniform.

—EDUCATIONAL POLICIES COMMISSION, NATIONAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION OF THE UNITED STATES AND THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS
Summary of "In this Uncertain World," Chapter 2 of Education for ALL American Youth: A Further Look (1952)

trying, however vainly, to temper her department's rhetoric of victimization.

Were the rhetoric of the sexual-harassment authorities pursued with any consistency, it would deepen the rift between *classes* and between *races* just as fast as it has, in effect, restored the rift between the sexes. For what is the main trope of

university harassment discourse? "Power differential." Under no circumstances, we hear with metronomic regularity, may we countenance a "power differential" in intimate relationships. A teaching assistant not only *should* not but *cannot* give consent to a union with an assistant professor, suggests Billie Dziech, speaking for the consensus of harassment experts in the *Duke Journal of Gender Law and Policy* (1999). Chief among the reasons "for America's exacerbated confusion about 'consent,'" she explains patiently,

> is the nomenclature. . . . In Latin "consent" or "consentire" means "to feel with." Since the subordinate in a relationship between unequals cannot "perceive with" the same status, authority, and knowledge as a manager or teacher, he or she cannot engage in genuinely consensual interactions.

To reduce the benighted public's confusion, we should henceforth refer to such relationships not as *consensual* but, in Dziech's words, as "'submissive' or 'acquiescent,' as affairs in which one party succumbs to authority and then remains silent because he or she cannot consent *or perceive it in precisely the same way* as the superior" (italics added). The implications of this assertion are jarring. What relationship—what subject—is *ever* perceived "in precisely the same way" by two different, thinking individuals?

The crackdown on power differentials in student-professor (or senior colleague-junior colleague) relationships presupposes a power-balance in *non*-pedagogic relationships that is completely fictitious. Where, one might ask, are the symmetrical relationships? If a student falls in love with a lawyer, is that more symmetrical? Should we outlaw relationships between students and nonstudents too? What about between good students and bad students? Rich students and poor students? Were we honest about our disdain for power imbalance we would have to legislate as emphatically against discrepancies in cultural, economic, and racial clout (to give a few examples) as against those in professional clout. It would be well-nigh impossible because of the endless and conflicting ways in which power manifests itself once we relinquish a simplistic model. (If there is "power" in academic rank, for instance, there is power in youth too—in physical attractiveness, in energy. There is power, even, in yet-to-be-fulfilled promise—power in *time*.) To the extent that such legislation succeeded, it would be a disaster—a reactionary dystopia, a hierarchical hell to which the way had been paved with liberal intentions.

One of the astonishing strengths of love and sex is that it *can* make boundaries between people so easy to break. It can glide, smiling, around social, vocational, and linguistic roadblocks; it can disarm difference, banish history, slice through power divides. It can ease the passage into another culture, mind, generation, or world. As was discovered by Jane Gallop—who seduced her professors as a student and her students as a professor (for which she was accused of sexual harassment in 1992 with far more reason than most)—sex is a great "leveler." As suspect as Gallop may be in her egotism and promiscuity, in this she is right. Sex is a great leveler, and not just in the bedroom. The most surprising thing you learn when you fall in love with a sage or a student, a prince or a pauper, is not that you can sleep with him but that you can talk with him. This is something understood—unexpectedly, perhaps—by Philip Roth. The highly cultured hero of his new campus novel, *The Dying Animal*, may have been "inaccessible to [his student lover] in every other arena" but the sexual when they first met—so he says, and, given his general misanthropy, this is probably true. But for all the ways in which their liaison is compromised, what the mannerly Cuban coed and the transgressive Jewish pundit discover is that they can actually talk to each other. The same is true of the cleaning woman in Roth's previous novel, *The Human Stain*, who

discovers that she can arouse the college dean mentally as much as physically. He can confide in her more than he ever could in his yuppie kids and bookish colleagues. She finds in the privileged, overeducated septuagenarian her first playmate, the first person she can tease and trust.

Legend has it that love is blind. And lust is blind. Just sometimes, though, they are clairvoyant. They take the glaze from our eyes. They prompt us to look through the odd, unfamiliar exterior of our neighbors and detect a familiar soul, a soul with which, to our surprise, we can communicate. Indifference and industry have made more men blind than eros. If Cupid wears a blindfold now and then, Mammon wears a hood.

It is not that anyone is clamoring for free-for-all faculty-student sex, no one except, perhaps, Professor Gallop, who—seizing her gender for a shield—declares that "graduate students are [her] sexual preference" and seems to proposition as many of them as she can. In the vast majority of cases, erotic energy does better work when channeled and curtailed than spilled. In the vast majority of cases, students and teachers should *not* sleep with each other, if you ask me. Not for the reasons often cited—not because of power differentials and disillusion with authority and lifelong trauma, which occur no more or less in these than in other relationships—but because it would very quickly become dull and sap away too much energy. When a student has a crush on a teacher, it is a powerful and productive thing: she or he works much harder, listens far more voraciously, appropriates, in many cases, the teacher's intellectual enthusiasms. The student becomes a sponge for knowledge. When a teacher has a weakness for even one student in a lecture hall, the whole class benefits: she or he speaks with far greater care, switches from autopilot to real-think mode, and (with luck) even looks forward to reading papers.

One of the least disputed objections to classroom erotics is that they constitute, in the words of harassment author Leslie Pickering Francis, a "distraction from teaching, learning, and research." Nothing could be further from the truth. To say that chemistry between a student and a teacher distracts from learning is like saying that color distracts from seeing. It does not distract; it enlivens, enhances, intensifies: it fixes the gaze. It gives teeth to the eyes, a digestive tract to the brain.

I will go out on a limb and admit that if crushes between students and teachers could have been prevented when I was in college, I would never have made it through. The fact that I graduated summa cum laude is testimony to the number of crushes that sustained me, that kept me edgy, and eager, and engaged. At the beginnings of quarters I shopped around for teachers to have a crush on, and it was a sad term, a long term, when I found none. I tried. I fanned the flame of minor lights—knowing full well that if I could not generate at least a little heat my mind would freeze.

This used not to be as shocking a confession as it seems today. Passion and pedagogy were not always expected to keep such separate quarters. Read about the nineteenth-century American Transcendentalist Margaret Fuller and you will hear that her students—albeit female—loved her ardently and wrote her love letters. Socrates' students loved *him* ardently, and regularly attempted to seduce him. It is only in our own period—or especially, at least, in our own period—that teaching is required to be sterile before it can be viewed as respectable.

I do not advocate making a habit of sleeping with professors, but then I would not advocate making a habit of sleeping with plumbers, or re-

> *Negro students cannot be excused for shoddy performance* because *they are Negro. To do so makes more rigid and intolerable the pathology, injustices, and distinctions of racism. There can be no double standards in education, no easy alibi.*
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> —**KENNETH B. CLARK** (1965)

altors, or artists either. I do advocate the exception. If a professor and student fall in love mutually—and let us admit that there are more occasions for this to occur than exist for a professor and a plumber—then there should not be a law or code or set of mores to stop them from giving that love an opportunity to succeed. It may not: as the new campus moralists observe, "the vast majority of students who enter into affairs with their lecturers . . . do not subsequently report that they were glad to have had the experience. Quite the contrary." *Most* relationships don't succeed—most *non*-faculty-student relationships don't succeed, if by success we mean that they go on forever. And when people come out of them, they unfortunately do not often "report that they were glad to have had the experience" either—at least not right afterward. Divorce courts are full of people who say the opposite. We do not, therefore, outlaw marriage.

The greatest learning experiences, for me, were almost always the greatest personal experiences. It is hard to know which came first:

interest in what was said or interest in the sayer. Does my passion for Renaissance love poetry come from my passion for the stubborn, fiery man who insisted on teaching it in a freshman composition class designed around "accessible" essays on abortion and multiculturalism? Or did my passion for him grow out of the poetry? At the risk of my not-yet-established reputation as a serious Renaissance authority, I would have to say: the former. The personal fascination came first: I loved my teaching assistant before I loved Shakespeare; I worshiped the saint before the god. But whatever the case, I am now a believer. I have had thirteen years to recant, and haven't. My interest has only become deeper and more prolific; like the faithful of any creed, I have found more and more reasons to approve my choice and revel in the unforeseen mysteries of my religion. It seems to me that the notion of pure, unhampered choice—in profession, academic specialization, or hobbies, for that matter—is hollow. We grow interested in what we open ourselves to. Within the limits of our temperament and talent, we get a lot from the pursuits to which we *give* a lot. And we give a lot to the causes that boast the best solicitor. There are exceptions, to be sure. But this is a rule.

I learned about more than Renaissance literature from the man I loved as a freshman. Contrary to popular opinion, the relationship did not reinforce my student sense of inferiority; it eliminated it. As much as I admired my teacher, I also found I could talk with him; I had something to offer him that had nothing to do with the old clichés of youth and beauty. Or if it had to do with them, then long live mixed motives, for they certainly were not the most important or lasting cause of our understanding—an understanding that has grown over the last decade and sparked a vivid and voluble literary correspondence. The relationship enfranchised me intellectually; it gave me a voice, and faith in it. And it did this even though, at the outset, it also drew me into the goofiest excesses of adolescent adoration. It drew me to abandon my slot at a top university in order to trek across the country to an obscure one, at which my teaching assistant had just accepted his first professorship. It prompted me to fake an interest in that school's religious affiliations while working a job as a live lingerie model in a shady local bar to pay my increased private-school dues. It also led me to flee the lightest coffee invitation from my idol. It was not until I returned home (my funds ran out; my talents as a model were limited) that our conversations really began. But even this—the experience of following my heart, however on the surface, vainly—was good for me. It made the love poems I was reading real, immediate, and practical. It was the laboratory component of the Amorous Theory I was assimilating.

All is fair in love and war; people must take their chances, and students are no exception. University students are not children, and *women* are not children, though to hear harassment officers talk one would think so. They are also not desireless deadwood; they do not drift about aim-

I AM A FIRM BELIEVER in the principle of universal, public, democratic education. I believe that publicly financed education from the nursery school through the highest levels of graduate and professional instruction is essential to American democracy as we know and value it. I have no sympathy whatever with anyone who proposes to cut school appropriations in such a way as to limit educational opportunity or to impair the quality of instruction. I believe in doing away with every barrier that race, religion or economic status interposes to prevent any American from pursuing to the highest levels any form of study for which he has the intellectual capacity, the desire and the will. I believe, finally, in academic freedom. I conceive it to be the scholar's duty to resist every effort to stifle the free and responsible investigation and discussion of public issues. And I stand ready to oppose to the uttermost any group that seeks to limit or pervert the curricula of schools and colleges in order to impose upon them their own narrow and dogmatic preconceptions concerning matters that are properly the subject of free inquiry.

The great issue today is not whether the American school system ought to be democratic—of course it ought. The issue is whether the school system ought to be *educational*. . . . [I]f the public-school system ceases to be educational, can it possibly avoid being antidemocratic as well? . . .

An increasing number of public-school administrators and educational theorists today refuse to define the purposes of the school in terms of intellectual training or of the recognized disciplines of science and scholarship. In my own state a publicly supported Illinois Secondary School Curriculum Program has circulated a series of questionnaires purporting to ask citizens, teachers and pupils what they "think is the job of the secondary school." History, mathematics, science and foreign languages are nowhere mentioned, hence no one is permitted to suggest that training in these fields might be even a part of "the job of the secondary school." Instead the school is supposed to be concerned with a pot-pourri of 55 "problems of high-school youth," in which "the problem of acquiring the social skills of dancing, playing party games, doing parlor stunts, etc." is given just as much emphasis as "the problem of acquiring the ability to study and help solve economic, social and political problems." The educators never tell how the school is going to give its students the latter . . . .

If the schools are indifferent to intellectual values, the only conclusion which the public can draw is that intellectual values are worth very little, and that the destruction of them—the suppression of freedom of thought, of speech, and of teaching—is the destruction of something expendable.

—ARTHUR E. BESTOR JR.
"Anti-Intellectualism in the Schools," The New Republic
(January 19, 1953)

Photograph courtesy University of Illinois archives

lessly until angled by a "Lecherous Professor." They are perfectly capable of finding a professor themselves and seducing *him*—in fact, I would guess, on the basis of admittedly anecdotal evidence, that this happens far more frequently than the reverse.

And why shouldn't it? At least since Socrates strode the Athenian agora, students have shown remarkable enterprise in ensnaring their teachers. Think of the handsome Greek, Alcibiades, in Plato's *Symposium*: "My eyes rain tears when I hear" Socrates' teachings, he confesses to us. "I have known in my soul, or in my heart, or in some other part, that worst of pangs . . . the pang of philosophy." Luckily for him, he fancies that his instructor already returns his affections. Indeed, he predicts "a grand opportunity . . . for I had a wonderful opinion of the attractions of my youth." Accordingly, "I sent away [my] attendant," and "thought that when there was nobody with us, I should hear him speak the language which lovers use. . . ." No luck. That day Socrates merely "conversed as usual," forcing his admirer to invite him into a more conducive setting: the gym.

> I challenged him to the palaestra; and he wrestled and closed with me. . . . I fancied that I might succeed in this manner. Not a bit. . . . I thought that I must take stronger measures. . . . So I invited him to sup with me . . . and when he wanted to go away I pretended that the hour was late and that he had much better remain. So he lay down on the couch. . . . I got up, and . . . crept under his threadbare cloak . . . and there I lay the whole night. . . . And yet, notwithstanding all. . . . O judges; for judges you shall be of the haughty virtue of Socrates—nothing more happened, but in the morning . . . I arose as from the couch of a father. . . .

It is not that Socrates was averse to relations with students; it was merely that he was no cheat: at the time, he was already sleeping with another one, Agathon.

Harassment specialists seem unable to believe that female students have the desire or enterprise of an Alcibiades. They do. And the position that they do not—albeit held, as it often is, by bedrock feminists—seems strangely sexist. Why should Greek men have initiative and eros, and American women none? Why should contemporary coeds emerge from a romantic encounter with a teacher—even, as a textbook on the subject tells us, "the most 'consensual' appearing"—with "devastation . . . real and intense" and "self-esteem" so shattered it demands "years of therapy and reconstructing," when nobody thinks for one moment that young men like Alcibiades or Agathon sustain incurable wounds? It is only women's experience that is assumed to be traumatic beyond comprehension or repair. It is only women who are taken to be as frail and faltering as they are devoid of lust and luster. Sexism can be paternalistic as well as aggressive (historically, it more often was), and this is sexism writ large, no matter who's spreading it.

Can it still bear saying that female students possess as much passion, resilience, imagination, and stupidity as their male counterparts, that they have as great a capacity for making mistakes and recovering from them, as well as from other people's, if necessary? They don't need to be patronized by legislation that treats them the way men did in the sixteenth century, carrying them over thresholds and proffering smelling salts during a storm. A bit of role-playing in gender relations is a pleasure—pretty nothings like flowers and gallantry can beautify life. But this is too much. It's bad for women, for men, and for the relations between them.

And it is bad for pedagogy. It's one thing to disarm a certain type of old-school professor who thought that his students' bodies (as well as their research and briefcase-toting services) were his birthright. It's one thing to discourage gross sexist speech and to counsel caution in the initiation of student-teacher relationships. But it is another to stamp out playful and affectionate discourse just because it carries a sexual innuendo and may even, on occasion, make us "uncomfortable." It is quite another, also, to try to ban professor-student relationships altogether. Knowledge is unremittingly personal: the best students fall in love with teachers; the most engaged teachers respond strongly—and variously—to students. The campus on which the chance of sexual harassment—of sexual "impropriety" between teachers and students—is eliminated is the campus on which pedagogy is eviscerated. It is the campus on which pedagogy is dead.

> *School has become the world religion of a modernized proletariat, and makes futile promises of salvation to the poor of the technological age. The nation-state has adopted it, drafting all citizens into a graded curriculum leading to sequential diplomas not unlike the initiation rituals and hieratic promotions of former times.*
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> —**IVAN ILLICH** (1970)

Is there a more quintessential pedagogic model in the history of Western civilization than Socrates and his pupils? The erotic and intellectual attractions between them fed, informed, and

contended with each other. To be sure, Socrates probably hurt some of his "young men," and they him. But was he a superior companion to non-students? Did he interact more sublimely with his lawfully wedded wife, Xantippe? If so, it doesn't come out in the *Dialogues*, in which she is dismissed as a shrew. One can't legislate against pain or against mistakes. In a time and place in which half of all marriages end in separation, can we really prohibit any love at all simply because it *might* end ill?

It is a part of our safety-obsessed culture that we try. In a country where we give children crash helmets with their tricycles (and kneepads with their strollers), perhaps it is no wonder that we give them *The Lecherous Professor* with their college admissions. Perhaps it is no surprise that we lament, with Leslie Pickering Francis, the possibility that they may not prove "rational consumers of romantic relationships in the way they might be rational consumers of products"; and that we consequently forbid them any romance with a teacher in which they are, to quote David Archard, another expert, "unlikely to be able to determine, for instance, how long it lasts"—as though one were *ever* able to "determine" how long a relationship lasts; as though lovers were supposed to be "rational consumers." Love is not *commerce*; a relationship is not a safety-tested Tonka toy—and any attempt to make it such is bound to be catastrophic. It leads, among other things, to the bizarre situation of our contemporary American society, in which we are in principle forbidden to have relationships not *merely* with our students (if we are teachers) and our teachers (if we are students) but also with our doctors, lawyers, counselors, therapists, deans, co-workers, clients, employees, or employers—virtually anyone, in fact, with whom we might come into natural contact in the course of everyday life. The result? We find ourselves driven in numbers to dating services and singles clubs, where we spend large amounts of money to meet normal people in abnormal and usually highly stressful contexts. We join volunteer organizations that feel like meat markets, as a majority of members look out more vigilantly for the available bachelor than for the nominal cause of the day. Artificial contexts provoke artificial behavior: we make ill-informed and hasty choices—dating, after all, is such a chore this way—and end up in marriages from which we soon ache to escape. If this is an overstatement, it is less of one than those we hear regularly from the sexual-harassment police.

Love comes in all shapes and colors and contexts, and, in the end, the attempt to regulate and injury-proof ultimately only cripples it and us. It is an irony that even while university bureaucrats are doing their worst to banish "power-imbalanced" relationships on campus, imaginative writers are representing such relationships with increasing frequency and eloquence. Indeed, if the 1980s and early '90s saw the renaissance of the "campus novel" with David Lodge, the first two years of this century have seen the rise of a genre still more specific, one we could reasonably call the "campus *sexual-harassment* novel," which foregrounds teacher-student (or teacher-staff) relationships. Alongside Roth's *The Dying Animal* and *The Human Stain* we have Francine Prose's *Blue Angel*, J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, Tim O'Brien's *Tomcat in Love*, John L'Heureux's *Handmaid of Desire*, Charles Baxter's *The Feast of Love*, and David Lodge's own *Thinks . . .*, to name only a handful. The couplings in these novels, as in life, are sometimes worse than others, and sometimes better: there are opportunistic ones like that in Prose's incisive *Blue Angel*, and there are unexpectedly strong, almost noble ones such as that in Roth's *Human Stain*. None, though, can be forbidden without violence to the human soul.

Should we have forbidden Camille Claudel and Rodin? Hannah Arendt and Martin Heidegger? Paul Verlaine and Arthur Rimbaud? Allan Bloom and his student lovers? Professor bell hooks and her student boyfriend? Héloïse and Abelard? To be sure, not one of these relationships, each initially pedagogic, was perfect (which is?), but all were spectacularly productive, revelatory, heated, and formative for both parties—in several cases, formative for Western culture and philosophy. The most beautiful and authentic and complex love poems I know were written by a teacher to his student. They were written by John Donne, in the early seventeenth century, to his employer's niece, with whom he eloped, and for whom he suffered loss of reputation, money, and career for the next quarter century. Not long after Donne penned these poems, John Milton—whose marriage sustained no similar power differential—drafted "The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce." ■

Education is a state responsibility which the legislature is good enough to let local smucks carry out so there will be someone to blame when things go wrong, as expected, between elections.

—WILLARD D. CALLENDAR (1991)