
to a national interpretation of the social order—was what allowed the peculiarly modern arrangements of power and production to come about.

Corroborating Greenfeld's thesis, Gordon Wood, in *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (1992), shows that the civic ideology of the Founding Fathers transformed America from a feudal land to a modern state. And in fact America is Greenfeld's example of a benevolent nationalism, a nationalism that is "civic" rather than "ethnic." In the early American republic, she argues, nationalism did not need to rely on ethnic appeals (as it would in Russian and Germany) but could identify itself with universal Enlightenment principles of citizenship. Yet today America is preoccupied with ethnic questions in ways it never was before. Indeed, on the eve of the 21st century, America is itself uncertain what it is: a model for the world's future, or the heir to a decaying mythology from a more fortunate past.

Arts & Letters

THE SIXTIES: The Last Journal, 1960–1972.
By Edmund Wilson. Ed. by Lewis M. Dabney.
Farrar Straus. 968 pp. \$35

When Alfred Kazin published *On Native Grounds* (1942), a study of American literature, he was invited to the home of Edmund Wilson. Amid formalities and drinks, Wilson's then-wife, novelist Mary McCarthy, let Kazin know that contemporary criticism was her husband's property. For all the presumption in such a remark, Edmund Wilson (1895–1972) possessed the intelligence, range, and determination to be *the* American critic. He wrote copiously about everything, from Civil War literature to the Iroquois. He was also the author of fiction, poetry, plays, and, not least, a 3,310-page journal.

Wilson kept this journal for 60 years, using as models the stylistic precision of Flaubert and the Goncourts, the expository thoroughness of the historian Macauley, and the revealing personal intimacy of Boswell. Readers entering into it will find themselves backstage among a goodly portion of the makers of 20th-century American literature. For example, Wilson describes a dinner

at the White House in 1962 at which Tennessee Williams misbehaves, André Malraux waxes pompous, and John Kennedy tells yet another assemblage that the White House has never seen so much talent together except when Jefferson dined alone.

As well as retailing gossip and wide learning, Wilson's journal may also provide an answer to why his works are less read today. Even Wilson's best books often seem motivated by an interest somewhat extrinsic to the subject, above all by social and political concerns that now seem outdated. Read today, many of Wilson's pronouncements sound strange, such as his comparison of Lincoln's keeping the Union together to Lenin's great achievement of "binding Russia, with its innumerable ethnic groups scattered through immense spaces, in a tight bureaucratic net."

But the journal itself is usually intimate rather than didactic, and here, rather than in his novels and plays, Wilson creates his most indelible character. How revealing the old seducer is, even poignant, when he describes himself resting his head in a woman's lap and yet so deaf that, when she utters an endearment, he has to lift himself up and "put my ear to her mouth and ask her to repeat it." These journals could well carry some 1960s-style title like "Eros versus Death," as Wilson—resembling an enormous bald frog, aging, his health failing (his exercise regimen was confined to downing strenuous quantities of alcohol)—records his heroic struggle to live a full life both off and on the page. His productivity during the final decade, from *Patriotic Gore* (1962) to *Upstate* (1971), was by any standard impressive. The last journal entry is dated July 11, 1972. The next morning at his desk, attached to an oxygen machine, he was found dead at his worktable.

MOZART AND THE ENLIGHTENMENT:
Truth, Virtue, and Beauty in Mozart's Operas.
By Nicholas Till. Norton. 371 pp. \$29.95

For contemporary audiences, Mozart's operas too often pass in a blur—a most pleasurable blur, to be sure. One opera seems much like another because there is so little intellectual engagement with the matter of each opera, with its libretto,

its words. The dramatic action is usually dismissed as too trivial and contrived to warrant close attention, the words serving as little more than an excuse for the music. Isn't the music the point?

Well, not entirely. Or so argues Till, who has staged Mozart's operas at the Glyndebourne Festival, and who proposes to understand Mozart by explicating the texts of the operas. To do so, he examines the intellectual currents that ran through 18th-century Europe and places Mozart firmly in their grip. Although Mozart did not write his own librettos, he chose them with great care, and he inadvertently commented upon many of the moral and political debates of the age as he emended the librettos to his liking.

By attending to seemingly inconsequential aspects of the 18th century, Till provides greater insight into Mozart than do more ambitious studies such as Norbert Elias's *Mozart: A Study in Genius* (1991). Till brings up the 18th-century marriage contract, for example, to show its relevance to *The Marriage of Figaro*. Mozart composed during a time when contractual agreements had assumed a novel and distinctly modern character. Once traditional bonds were loosed, contracts became an essential prop for saving society from dissolution. Marriage in bourgeois society was, Till notes, the central nonpolitical contractual institution of the new order, and *The Marriage of Figaro* celebrates its ability to mediate conflicting interests among the individual, the family, religion, and the state. In contrast to the luminous universe of *Figaro* is the dark world of *Don Giovanni*, where the contractual agreements and promises that sustain society are no longer respected. Giovanni, who makes a point of breaking promises, is a harbinger of chaos, a destructive force who embodies all of the more profound social contradictions underlying the Enlightenment. He is freedom become license, and it is Giovanni's contempt for the marriage contract that finally rouses the



statue of Commendatore to action.

About other seemingly small details within Mozart's operas—the confusions of identity, the disguises, and the incongruous, harmonically skilled servants—Till is consistently acute. After reading *Mozart and the Enlightenment*, an opera lover may return to Mozart eager to hear as well what prompted the composer to set each particular text. Till knows the full range of scholarship about Mozart, yet in one respect he is not only unacademic but refreshingly old-fashioned. He writes, without apology, of faith, moral passion, and spiritual growth. No skeptic's quotation marks hedge the *beauty*, *truth*, and *virtue* in his title. Nor did they in the composer's art.

LOVE AND FRIENDSHIP. By Allan Bloom.
Simon & Schuster. 590 pp. \$25

Allan Bloom (1930–92) is known most widely for his best-selling diatribe, *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987), but the University of Chicago philosopher enjoyed a somewhat quieter reputation as an outstanding teacher. *Love and Friendship* suggests why. While the polemical edge that marked his best seller is not absent here, *Love and Friendship* is much more a teacher's book, in the best sense. It is a deeply learned and strongly opinionated exploration of what our finest poets, novelists, and philosophers have said about the subject of love and friendship and of the force that drives both—eros.

Or at least once did. Bloom, in his feisty introduction, argues that eros is now a much diminished thing, thanks in part to the triumph of scientific-reductivist ideologies (such as Freudianism and, more recently, "Kinseyism") and assorted degradations of the democratic dogma.

To show how powerful a force eros once was, Bloom conducts a reverse-chronological tour of its place in the Western imagination. He begins with the foremost thinker of early modernity, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose notions of sublimity, combining the "purest longing with the fullest bodily satisfaction," provided the basic text of Romanticism. To be sure, Bloom notes, this ideal of the sublime could not survive the skepticism of the modern age: "The high began to appear to be merely moralism, whereas the