

THE GHETTO OF WRITING: ESOTERICISM AND FEAR IN POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

By

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A DISSERTATION PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

2010

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For Snieds

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I owe a tremendous debt of gratitude, and more tangible substances to a host of people whose polymorphous assistance was simply indispensable for the completion of this project. I have been fortunate to have many excellent teachers: Leslie Paul Thiele, Daniel I. O'Neill, J. Samuel Barkin, Ido Oren, Philip Wegner, Thomas Biebricher, Badredine Arfi, and others. Their mentoring and commitment to their respective crafts has provided me with a standard of excellence by which I will continue to measure my academic career, and many other facets of life. I would also like to thank Shadia Drury, Daniel Kapust, William Altman and Alan Gilbert for their insightful comments on my project. To my colleagues, Ty B. Solomon, Kuniyuki Nishimura, Hans Erskine Schmeisser, and Jay Maggio, I am grateful for having had the opportunity to bore you, at length, with my numerous rants and disorganized musings. This project is the fruition of your suffering. Each letter is a monument to the anguish you endured. I would also like to thank Suzi for the small burden she assumed in agreeing to leave friends and career behind so that I might indulge my selfish pursuits. I imagine she now knows more about Leo Strauss, Plato, and Jacques Lacan than she ever wanted. Thanks are simply insufficient with respect to my parents, Sheldon and Nancy Walsh. I will probably never work as hard as they have, but I will always try. Their support, both material and spiritual, has been unconditional. Finally, but not insignificantly, I must thank my cats, Heston and Olivia, and the dearly departed Bob, for interjecting calm into the incessantly turbulent maelstrom of human labor.

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Abstract of Dissertation Presented to the Graduate School
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Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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May 2010

Chair: Leslie Paul Thiele
Major: Political Science

Leo Strauss precludes the possibility that the most important philosophic teachings occur exoterically. He tells us that political philosophers, and in particular, ancient political philosophers such as Plato, discovered the truths not of their own time, but for all time. Crucial meaning, truth for the authentic philosopher, is to be found only esoterically. True philosophy, therefore, occurs in the space “between the lines” and it is only the authentic philosopher who can recognize and uncover the hidden truth. Why does political philosophy seek out this cryptic space and where does this journey lead? Recent studies have suggested that, for Strauss, there are numerous reasons for a political philosopher to write esoterically. In this essay, I argue that there is but one necessary reason for esoteric writing. For Strauss, that reason is fear; philosophy, according to Strauss, is driven between the lines by the fear of persecution. Moreover, I argue that the fear of persecution compels political philosophy into a metaphorical space where meaning is confined on all sides. The space “between the lines” is walled in by the positive demarcation of exoteric print. If fear compels the political philosopher to write “between the lines,” then the effort to avoid persecution abandons political philosophy into an impoverished, isolated space, a ghetto of writing.

CHAPTER 1
I CANNOT TELL YOU THAT I HAVE A SECRET

Introduction: Hemoglobin For the Blood Libel

Not long before I began my reading of Leo Strauss I received in the mail, unsolicited, a copy of a book, for lack of a better term, entitled *The Enemy Unmasked*. The cover art depicted a fantastic scene of men, women, and children, all of whom were Caucasian and Christian, scrambling through the chaotic streets of a burning, crumbling, and presumably American, city. Buildings were collapsing. Fire and smoke filled the skies. A towering, shadowy figure loomed ominously, expressing a grim countenance as though the entire scene was the product of his diabolical machinations. If Black Sabbath had made a video for “Electric Funeral,” I could imagine this cover would have aptly served as the concept art.

Of course, the *Enemy Unmasked* was not meant as a work of heavy metal fiction. Rather it was published to warn us all, if we are all good Christians who deserve to be warned, that within our society a nefarious fifth column is feverishly laboring toward the demise of all that is good. The author begins by offering us an incentive to heed his words, “The United States of America is at the brink of total collapse.” Certainly, doomsday prognostications are not exactly novel. The author of *The Enemy Unmasked*, apparently concerned with offering something new to the racist propaganda literature, envisioned a twist on a classic: the catastrophic end of the world would be ushered in by the nefarious schemes of Jesuits manipulating Jews. The Rothschilds, whom we are told are actually secret Jesuits, manipulated Karl Marx into writing *The Communist Manifesto*, spreading strife and turmoil into the world. Countless other Jews and Jesuits

posing as Jews do the malevolent bidding of their sinister Jesuit masters as the world marches toward destruction.

Surely, this is all the height of stupidity. After reading the drivel of *The Enemy Unmasked*, and becoming thoroughly amused for some time, I mocked it, wondered why my monthly stipend from the International Zionist Conspiracy Front had yet to arrive...and turned to read Leo Strauss's *Persecution and the Art of Writing*. Early within the text, Strauss writes that, in order to avoid being persecuted for heterodox opinions, philosophers have adopted a strategy of writing esoterically, hiding their true meaning within an ironic subtext. He notes:

That literature is addressed, not to all readers, but to trustworthy and intelligent readers only. It has all the advantages of private communication without having its greatest disadvantage – that it reaches only the writer's acquaintances. It has all the advantages of public communication without having its greatest disadvantage – capital punishment for the author.
(Strauss 1952, 25)

It becomes problematic to dismiss as idiocy the unsupported supposition that there is an insidious cabal of privileged initiates to a secretive, arcane society when that is essentially the condition Strauss describes and, more importantly, *prescribes* as authentic philosophy.

This is not to suggest that the philosophy of Leo Strauss *caused* Martin Luther's *The Jews and Their Lies*, *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* or *The Enemy Unmasked*, Henry Ford's *The International Jew* or countless other dim and anti-Semitic conspiracy theories which circulate with great regularity.¹ Leo Strauss did not cause the Iraq War in

¹ Luther (2004, 21) characterizes the schools of the Jew as "a Devil's nest" where lies and blasphemy "are practiced in the bitterest and most poisonous way as the Devils do themselves." *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (Marsden 2006,103) explain "In order to effect the destruction of all collective forces except ours we shall emasculate the first stage of collectivism – the universities, by reeducating them in a new direction. Their officials and professors will be prepared for their business by detailed secret programs from which they will not with immunity diverge, not by one iota." Finally, lauded American

order to defend Israel and his acolytes are right to be indignant about insinuations to the contrary. However, the secretive nature of Straussian philosophy enables and contributes to the kind of conspiratorial mentality founded on delusions of politically manipulative secret societies. For example, Catherine and Michael Zuckert (2006, 12) assail the accusations of Lyndon LaRouche that Straussians have exerted a powerful, hidden influence over American foreign policy as the “Internet postings of this fringe, if not quite lunatic, political group.” Joshua Muravchik (2004, 245) concurs, and describes LaRouche as a “crackpot political agitator.”

A psychiatric professional is better qualified than I am to properly assess the state of Lyndon LaRouche’s mental health. However, there are elements of Strauss’s thought that readily enable the delusions of lunatics or crackpots. Agitators do not have far to look in Strauss’s writings to find fuel for their nonsense. Strauss (1959, 221) explicitly states that the aim of philosophy is to work in secret in order to change society. Moreover, the great preponderance of human beings are uninspired, foolish, and must have the truth hidden from them (Strauss 1952, 59 and Strauss 1939, 535). It is, in a sense, ironic that Strauss, who argued that philosophers would resort to writing secretly in order to elude the intolerance of the vulgar masses, appears to have been oblivious about the dangers of explicitly disseminating the sort of ideas that would lend themselves to a persecutor’s delusion. Strauss’s writing stirs the ire of those he might have considered philosophically intemperate. If Strauss was writing esoterically, he did so very poorly.

industrialist Henry Ford (2004, 8-9) fumes that “Jewish secret societies” have exerted their influence to use immigration as a subterfuge for an “invasion” that “is thinly cloaked with sentiment – ‘these people are fleeing from persecution.’”

Esotericism, despite what Strauss claims, is not a viable strategy to defend against persecution. At any rate, such masterful writing has not been proven to exist. Rather, the *theory of esoteric writing* that Strauss promotes is a defense against the irrelevance of the political theorist. The philosophers of antiquity did not write in the manner Strauss describes out of a fear of persecution. Many political theorists of today subscribe to the theory Strauss offers them because it gives them the opportunity to feel special in the context of modern life that seems to have so little regard for the value of the humanities and philosophy. While I share their concerns, I cannot share their reaction. Rather than harboring the key to some arcane, clandestine, and more perfect science, esotericism is a bloody spectacle of flagellants; the esotericist scourges himself, claiming the sacred right of persecution in order to earn a hallowed place by the master's throne. But, like the flagellants of the Middle Ages, the esotericist does more to spread disease than to ward it off.

How does fear enter the scene of political philosophy? The Straussian narrative of philosophic writing is deeply concerned with fear. For Strauss, the philosopher responds to fear by means of secrecy. Accordingly, Strauss maintains that thinkers stretching back at least as far as Plato have sought to preserve themselves through writing esoterically. Indeed, Plato figures prominently into the Straussian narrative as a philosopher who sought to avoid persecution through esotericism. But then it seems, despite what Strauss suggests, there are moments when Plato is willing to assume profound risk exoterically. How can we understand the different uses of fear between Plato and Strauss? I argue that while for Plato the confrontation with fear inaugurates the moment of the political, for Strauss fear leads to an apolitical segregation of

philosophy and politics, a ghetto of writing that is the consequence of a discursive pathological perversion.

By perversion, I mean to suggest that Strauss establishes rules, in this case rules for what constitutes authentic philosophy, and subsequently flirts with violating those rules. The French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan describes perversion as a call for limits on *jouissance* (enjoyment) whereby the subject both desires an object and is repulsed by it. Lacan (1992, 232) suggests, "It is at the moment when these things are possible but wrapped in the injunction 'Thinking about them is prohibited.'" The subject seeks something to limit its pursuit of enjoyment, but only to push against those limits. Perversion is the attraction to an object that the subject understands to be repulsive. Importantly, Sigmund Freud (1962, 26) teaches us that perversions are ubiquitous; the characterization of Leo Strauss's discourse as perverse is not a mark of shame. We are all perverts to the extent that we all bear perversions. It is only when the object of perversion excludes the normal object of desire that a perversion has reached the severity of becoming pathological (Ibid, 27).² It is to the extent that Strauss refuses the exoteric as the place of philosophical truth, and contends that the esoteric is exclusively where the highest truths are to be found that Straussian perversion is pathological.

Political philosophers are often confronted with the problem of danger, both to themselves and within their conceptual schemes. Secrecy has sometimes emerged as a means to mitigate the perils that arise between philosophy and politics. Immanuel Kant (1991, 115), for example, suggested the philosopher should be permitted to write

² To further illustrate this point, Freud would suggest that all sexual activity beyond that engaged in for reproductive purposes is perverse. To the extent that a specific form of non-reproductive sexual behavior excludes the 'normal' variety of activity, the perversion has become pathological.

anonymously, and consult in secret with the political powers of a cosmopolitan state in order for the state to be protected from the embarrassment of consulting its own subjects on the ways of governance. Strauss, conversely, remained unconvinced that a non-philosophic elite of society could be trusted. It was imperative that the secrets of philosophy had to remain guarded. Then again, Strauss tells us not the content of those secrets, but that the secret itself exists. What does this strange act reveal?

(The Pervert Says) I Have Something *Special* to Show You

There lives no man who at some period has not been tormented, for example, by an earnest desire to tantalize a listener by circumlocution. – “Imp of the Perverse”
(Poe 2000, 349)

What does it mean to tell the world about the existence of a secret? The very notion of proclaiming the existence of a secret strikes at a tension, a fierce nervousness, or an unbearable anxiety. To have a secret is to possess some special insight that must remain concealed. But the possession of that insight is no longer concealed; when the existence of a secret is made public, then the public knows at the very least that you have a secret. To divulge the existence of a secret is to reveal that there is something that cannot be revealed. Indeed, the pervert says, “I have something special to show you,” but the gesture is only perverse insofar as the disclosure is forestalled, postponed indefinitely. Once the disclosure is made the pervert has to find new limits to challenge.

Edgar Allen Poe exemplifies this tension in “The Imp of the Perverse.” It is a tension in the sense of being pulled in antipodal directions. Before we even understand his deeds may have been nefarious, the narrator bemoans his suffering:

It follows, that the desire to be well must be excited simultaneously with any principle which shall be merely a modification of combativeness, but in the case of that something which I term perverseness, the desire to be well is

not only aroused, but a strongly antagonistical sentiment exists. (Poe 2000, 348)

Pulled in opposite directions, the narrator struggles with this torment. He has done something, something awful, some horrible crime. He knows, earnestly, that it was a horrible crime. A sense of propriety tells him that what he did was awful; no one can know this heinous truth. But, then there is the other voice, the one pulling him, gnawing at him to *speak*. Despite the gravity of the secret, the temptation is too great:

The impulse increases to a wish, the wish to a desire, the desire to an uncontrollable longing, and the longing (to the deep regret and mortification of the speaker, and in defiance of all consequences) is indulged. (Ibid, 349)

The narrator struggles for control. He claws at the discipline to remain silent, but the effort is futile. Indeed, the effort is perverse:

One day, whilst sauntering along the streets, I arrested myself in the act of murmuring, half aloud, these customary syllables. In a fit of petulance, I remodelled [sic] them thus: 'I am safe – I am safe – yes – if I be not fool enough to make open confession!' (Ibid, 352)

Perhaps the same nature that drove him to crime in the first place now drives him to test the limits of what can be said in reference to the crime publicly. His doom is not merely confined to the precise nature of his crime. Instead, Poe shows us that it is enough to know that a crime, *any crime*, has been committed. There, in the identical space of locution is the rule and its violation. The narrator tells us precisely what it is he is prohibited from doing by performing the prohibited act. There can be no clearer confession than admitting the need to confess. There can be no less secretive act than the declaration of the existence of a secret. Even the volume with which he whispers is perverse: "Half aloud" – quiet shrieking – muted bellowing – silently deafening. It is the consummate failure of restraint. The rules succumb to perversity.

I cannot tell you that I have a secret. I have already told you there is a secret of which you must not know. The crime, which we later discover is murder, is not what makes the narrator perverse. Murder begets murderers; perversity begets perverts. The problem the narrator is forced to confront is the relationship between secrecy and disclosure. It is clear enough that his torment is characterized by two mutually opposing desires: the first is the desire to keep a secret, including the preservation of the secret itself as a secret, while the second is the compulsion to disclose his deed. Is it a matter of conscience, a relentless bout of guilt, as is often the case with Poe's tales? It seems that, for the pervert, this is not the motivation. Recall that the narrator takes some pleasure in assaulting his listener with circumlocution – babble, excessive verbosity, profuse jargon, too many words. It is pleasure that he regrets. Above all it is recognition that the narrator desires. Without telling us what he has done, he is compelled to tell us that he has done something. He speaks prohibited words in order to be recognized, in order to be regarded and appreciated for his deeds. The pervert struggles with the tension between secrecy and disclosure, desperately wanting the security of secrecy and the recognition of disclosure.

Platonic Spit

To be secretive may not necessarily be dishonest, but is clearly a tactic designed to circumvent the hazards of honest speech. The commitment to honesty can exact a demanding price. On occasion the intended listener may be receptive to criticism. Other, less enjoyable circumstances may find a listener hostile. When hostile listeners possess violent powers, the honest speaker can be in a precarious position. Erasmus tells us the king can excuse the stinging words of a fool since the fool is hidden beneath the veneer of lunacy. He says:

They can speak truth and even open insults and be heard with positive pleasure; indeed the words which would cost a wise man his life are surprisingly enjoyable when uttered by a clown. (Erasmus 1993, 57)

The madman has his tactic for honest speech. What about the philosopher? If the madman amuses the king, the philosopher succeeds only in enraging him. Philosophers do not have the luxury of lunacy. Philosophers cannot elude the gravity of their words. How then do philosophers confront the obligation to speak or write honestly when persecution is an omnipresent hazard?

In various works such as *Persecution and the Art of Writing, What is Political Philosophy?*, and *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, Leo Strauss explains that philosophers have written esoterically to avoid persecution. It is in the space of ironic subtext where the most important truths known to philosophy can be found. These truths are heterodox, and sometimes even dangerous to those opinions held by society. The philosopher, according to Strauss can rely on the fact that most men are careless readers. The inferior abilities of the vulgar mean that the truth can be hidden in plain sight without detection by these men of lesser minds. Since the most important truths are written esoterically, these are also the truths most likely to incur some form of persecution. Strauss suggests persecution can be anything from the mild, such as social ostracism, to the severe, such as torture and death. Consequently, for Strauss, fear motivates the philosopher to hide their ideas and thoughts that might lead to persecution.

Within the Straussian narrative of political philosophy, Plato occupies a crucial role. In Strauss's view, Socrates, the teacher of Plato and the primary character in Platonic dialogues, is the first political philosopher (Strauss 1964, 19). Since Socrates is thought to have never written a word of his own, Plato, therefore, is the first writer of

political philosophy. This is not merely a literary honorarium paid by Strauss to an ancient who inadvertently stumbled backwards into greatness. Instead, Plato sits at the apex of the great tradition of political philosophy. Strauss argues that the political philosophy of Plato and his contemporaries remains far superior to any subsequent works in the field:

Compared with classical political philosophy, all later political thought, whatever else its merits may be, and in particular modern political thought, has a derivative character. (Strauss 1959, 28)

Plato is the progenitor of the entire written tradition of political philosophy, the earliest times of which marked the zenith of its excellence, a time when practitioners were masters of both “political theory and political skill” (Ibid, 28). Their misguided modern progeny bisected those two mutually constitutive elements of political philosophy and have steadily declined in one or the other ability over the centuries. Given the fundamental role assigned to Plato by Strauss, the incorporation of esotericism as a strategy against persecution would legitimate the practice as essential for authentic political philosophy. If the classical version is the height of political philosophy, and Plato wrote esoterically to avoid persecution, then the height of political philosophy is esotericism.

On numerous occasions, however, Plato assumes a dangerous tone within his writings, exoterically. He insults the political authorities. He insults the masses of Athens. He insults sacrosanct rituals, poetry, and democracy itself. Plato savagely denounces the institutions of the city in which he dwelled. Democracy is anathema, a system wherein the caprice of every individual is brought to bear as a tyrant over the whole. Democracy is a savage, thoughtless horde whose individual members are disposed to do not what their souls have best fitted them to do, but whatever fancy

appears most desirable at the moment. Those who vie for positions of power within democracy are self-aggrandizing charlatans, imposters who feign the virtues of leadership. Those who let themselves be ruled by counterfeit rulers, as citizens of democracy are apt to do, are insipid and thoughtless. Plato does little to hide his disdain beyond assigning it to characters who are readily assumed to represent their author. If the use of characters in dialogues was meant to insulate Plato from accusations of heterodoxy, it was a weak effort. No one would be misled that the excoriating remarks assigned to Socrates emanated from Plato's pen. Writing in dialogues hardly succeeds in displacing the author from blame by the vulgar if the vulgar are led to believe that the most incendiary character is the one who most clearly represents the author. Yet Plato is not the ignorant fool or madman unaware of the dangers posed by slinging such abuses. His is the city that exiled Thucydides, prosecuted Aristophanes, and, most critically, executed Socrates. Platonic diatribes were recognizably dangerous. Characters in dialogues such as *Gorgias* and *Meno*, acknowledge the possibility "that in this city anything may happen to anybody" (Plato 2004, 127).

Thus we are confronted with an inconsistency: the historical narrative of political philosophy Strauss describes suggests that ideas likely to engender persecution were sheltered in esotericism, but Plato does not murmur dissent half-aloud; his attacks on his contemporaries, statesmen and poets, are often driven by seething clarity. How can we understand these two encounters with fear in political philosophy? Where does fear take us in the works of Strauss and Plato? Again, I argue that Plato confronts fear, harnesses it and incorporates into his work as the inauguration of the political. For

Strauss, the philosopher shrinks from fear, and flees to the presumed safety of a literary ghetto. Perversion is the architecture for the ghetto of writing.

There have been numerous works devoted to both the hagiography and vilification of Leo Strauss. The hagiographies qualify as such insofar as they are willing to ignore Strauss's trysts with fascism and lend esotericism an *a priori* status that is both ethical and socially beneficial. Arthur Melzer (2006, 280) writes "the issue is not whether one *likes* esotericism but whether, in fact, it did exist." Melzer and others, such as Catherine and Michael Zuckert, Steven Smith, Thomas Pangle, and Michael Frazer, in what is perhaps the ultimate irony in an interpretive theory of irony, argue that esotericism, the theory designed to mask the true meaning of a philosopher, is actually a tool for teaching. Esotericism is a pedagogical strategy, we are told, because it must serve to "lure students away from mass culture and lead them down the long road to the philosophical way of life" (Frazer 2006, 52) These charitable visions of Strauss's thought are certainly inventive. They also seem to forget or omit some important contradictions to that representation. Despite these late reappraisals, esotericism is pedagogy that deliberately refuses to teach and remains inextricably associated with fear.

Opponents of Strauss, in their earnest attempts to attend to the problems posed by his thought, have often confronted esotericism from a disadvantage or, in certain instances, avoided it entirely. Anne Norton (2004, 30) makes the convincing argument that the Straussian fanaticism for canonical texts, "ancestor worship," as she calls it, generally results in curiously bad readings of anything else. Shadia Drury has, persuasively, engaged in a fierce struggle with Straussians such as Steven Smith over

the legacy of Leo Strauss. She rightfully rejects Smith's claim that Strauss could be considered a friend of liberal democracy. However, her own esoteric reading of Leo Strauss has led to claims about Strauss that seem exoterically untenable, and too quickly cede the point that esoteric writing as Strauss envisions is possible. Likewise, Nicholas Xenos (2008, 28) says, "it is easily conceded that some writers have engaged in the practice of esoteric writing." My work proceeds from the position that, for Plato, it is not at all clear that such writing is possible. Instead, I want to ask what is revealed in Strauss's projection of esotericism onto Plato's writing. If, by taking risks that could have resulted in persecution, Plato did not write in the manner that Strauss proposes, what are the consequences for Strauss's discourse? In the end, the most serious critique of Straussian esotericism we are left with in this regard is George Sabine's brief suggestion that it is an "invitation to perverse ingenuity" (Sabine 1953, 220). More must be done.

I do not deny esotericism or esoteric writing. It is, however, something markedly different than a masterful strategy by flawless writers. Esotericism is the consequence of limitations in language. Disciplines such as philosophy pertain to abstract topics and often employ technical jargon most people have little training in. Beyond even insular verbiage, words are often ambiguous and writing confounds our best efforts of mastery. This unavoidable problem, also found in Plato's thought, gestures at the tragic nature of writing. For Plato, the nature of esotericism, far from a strategy of deliberate precision, was the unavoidable tragedy of orphaning words into a world where they are disinherited from any support by their respective progenitors. Writing is a helpless orphan.

Esoteric writing and esoteric reading follow, not from the precision of meaning so perfectly articulated that it can be sutured neatly into ironic spaces, but from the very imprecision that plagues every author, every text, and every word. I treat esotericism as the central issue in this analysis of fear in political philosophy. I treat esotericism as the essential premise in Straussian thought. Esotericism is Strauss's epistemology, ontology, and methodology. Through esotericism, Strauss tells us how he knows what he claims to know, the nature of human being, and his approach to those subjects. It is the means by which Strauss can generate claims of knowledge about the history of political philosophy. It is, he tells us, a fact, an existent feature that distinguishes the philosopher from the vulgar. Additionally, it is a technique of reading and writing, an approach to understanding political life.

Opponents of Strauss, with their varied approaches, have not addressed esotericism as a discursive object. Rather than mount an assault through tactics against which Strauss is ill-equipped to respond, these critiques have been waged to a stalemate on Strauss's own ground. What is needed is an approach that ignores the intended content of the Straussian narrative, that disregards whatever it is that Straussians think they are doing. What is needed is an approach that treats Strauss and his thinking as a discourse whose functions and effects are steeped in narrative and whose artificial origins are nothing more than retroactive projections designed to conceal some pathology. To address esotericism as a discursive object is to formulate its position, its significance, what it addresses, and, most importantly, *what it seeks to cover up*. Toward this end, the confrontation with Straussian esotericism will deploy elements from Lacanian psychoanalysis. Critiques of Strauss and Straussians have

been insightful and helpful, but the approach I employ, inspired by the psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, and Bruce Fink, addresses pathologies of discourse.

Among theories of discourse, psychoanalysis offers a systematic approach to explicating the particular elements within a discourse, their arrangement and relationship to one another, as well as their functions and pathologies. Psychoanalysis yields illuminating results because of its attentiveness to pathologies of discourse. As a conceptual framework, psychoanalysis therefore asks what it is the Straussian discourse of esotericism tries to accomplish. Psychoanalysis asks what the Straussian discourse of esotericism is trying to recover. What unity is it aiming to retrieve, and how it is that this Straussian task can be achieved? Lacanian psychoanalysis provides the means to ask how it is we can understand the discourse of Straussian esotericism.

The stakes of this struggle against Straussian thought are especially high. Esotericism amounts to a code of conduct for philosophers. It concludes that, above all, the philosopher is most capable of managing political affairs and since most men are little more than intolerant brutes, the secret manipulation of politics is permissible. Whether or not Strauss or his students have directly influenced foreign policy, I find disturbing parallels between Straussian thought and the trend of neoconservatism that has recently gained a foothold in American politics. Drury, Norton, Xenos, and others recognize this, and I consider this effort to be complementary with theirs.

Having died in 1973, Strauss is at the center of a fiercely contested debate and I know from personal experience that it is easy to become embroiled in the maelstrom and its invective. Let me be clear: I do not seek the vilification of Leo Strauss. His theory of esoteric writing, and the politics that emerge from his thought are deeply flawed. Yet,

his account of positivist political science and its refusal to accept its complicity in reproducing the world is an important admonition on political responsibility. His numerous commentaries on the history of political thought are often insightful, sometimes weird, but always fascinating. In short, Strauss is not the devil. Rather, I take exception with his theory of esotericism and its attendant politics. Esotericism abdicates the responsibility of philosophy to teach, to disseminate, to make each life worth living through self-examination. Esotericism suggests that only some can comprehend the truth of philosophy and the rest are to be distracted with less important matters. Combined with the stark lessons of politics promoted by the Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt, esotericism contributes to a dangerous paranoia.

Insofar as the students of Strauss have entered political life, the teachings of Strauss have permeated government. Kenneth Deutsch and John Murley (1999, xiv) have enumerated dozens of students of Strauss who have been appointed to policy-influencing positions in the federal government of the United States. It has been suggested that one student of Straussian teaching sits on the bench of the Supreme Court of the United States (Drury 1997, 3). No student of Strauss, no matter how close, is the perfect executor of Strauss's thought. Strauss cannot be blamed for the Iraq War and the other, numerous blunders committed by the administration of George W. Bush. But esotericism is situated at the center of a deeply elitist vision of politics that has influenced exponents of neoconservatism and its policies (Weinstein 2004, 204). The struggle against Straussian esotericism is the struggle against allowing government to become susceptible to this pernicious influence.

Finally, as philosophers, we are confronted with the responsibility of justice. We are responsible to challenge the injustices of racism, blithe dogmas, and malignant conspiracy. Straussian thinking is insidious fuel for this folly. Straussian esotericism was conceived as response to the problem of persecution.³ At the risk of constructing a poor intellectual biography, we might understand and even sympathize with Strauss to some degree, concerning the development of a philosophy of esotericism. Strauss emerges as a prominent intellectual figure after fleeing Nazism. Such experiences would have been profoundly formative and, undoubtedly, esotericism emerges as a response.

But is it the right response? Jacques Lacan, in his examination of Poe's "The Purloined Letter" describes how each character refuses to admit his crime has been uncovered:

For this technique might finally be qualified as political, distributed as it is here among three partners, the second believing himself invisible because the first has his head stuck in the sand, all the while letting the third calmly pluck his rear. (Lacan 2006, 10)

It is the *politique l'autruche* (the politics of the ostrich). Political theory, in its Straussian variant, has buried its head rather than confront the scourge of persecution. Strauss persuades himself that he is insulated while standing out in the open, yet the persecutor is still able to bite him on the ass. This pretense of invisibility is a refusal to take responsibility. This refusal is what compels Strauss to rely on esotericism. Esotericism becomes the cure to persecution. The problem is that it cannot nor will it be the cure to persecution. A perusal through any number of racist-conspiracy texts reveals a common denominator – somewhere out there, we suspect, is a sinister cabal of elites, many of

³ Strauss and Straussians maintain that esotericism has already been there, and Strauss merely uncovered it and relayed his findings to the rest of us. Perhaps, but no other philosopher of esotericism has given us the rules of this technique.

whom are probably Jews, plotting to take control of politics. Straussian thought creates a culture on which the germs of ignorance can be sustained. Straussian thought creates a secretive elite, intimately concerned with deception and political power. Conceived as the cure for persecution, the practice of esotericism can only provide illusory protection, hiding in between the lines, as it simultaneously engenders ignorance and suspicion. Esotericism sustains the persecution it seeks to remedy.

Encounters with fear and the responses that have been developed reflect the character of political philosophy. My argument is that Strauss's response to Nazism is the wrong response. To flee persecution is the right of an individual, but philosophy is afforded no such sanctuary. Philosophy is not permitted the luxury of safety, even if philosophers, because they are humans before they are philosophers, sometimes are. Instead, a vision of philosophy that employs secrets to manipulate politics plays into the hands of persecutors and their delusions of mysterious, scheming cabals. Thus, it is crucial that the doing of philosophy should be conducted under the premise, "it is not hard, men, to escape death, but it is much harder to escape villainy. For it runs faster than death" (Plato 1998, 93). Esotericism cannot protect the philosopher, and philosophy must have better aims than lending a pretense of relevance to an academic.

(Revealing) The Outline of Perversion

Perversion is always on the brink of revealing itself, perpetuating itself by challenging the rules. If the rules are violated, new rules must be erected in their place to become the new limits of perversity. Here, at this space, in this moment, we are still just bothering the rules. I have yet to reveal the substance of enjoyment, but I promise, I will.

Subsequent chapters will explore the nature of esotericism and where it leads in Strauss's thought, the meaning of fear in Plato's writings, the psychoanalysis of both Strauss's and Plato's respective discourses, a theory of international politics that emerges from Strauss's discourse, and a theory of persecution that draws on both Strauss and Plato.

In the second chapter, "The Two Cadavers of Political Philosophy," I offer an account of the bodies and spaces created by Leo Strauss's theory of esoteric writing. I explore, in depth, what is meant by esotericism, as well as its rules and uses. Esotericism serves as a line of demarcation that distinguishes the space and body of the philosopher from those of the vulgar. This chapter is guided by the question, where does Strauss's theory of esoteric writing lead? Strauss precludes the possibility of the most important philosophic teachings occurring exoterically. Rather, crucial meaning, truth for the authentic philosopher, is to be found only esoterically. True philosophy, therefore, occurs in the space "between the lines." Esoteric technique pushes philosophy beyond exoteric signifiers, into the space between them. The esoteric, then, is surrounded on all sides by the impositions of exoteric print, walled up, surrounded and encased. Philosophy is driven into this space by fear. Strauss understood that reading "between the lines" was metaphorical, and indeed, he succeeded in inhabiting a metaphorical space: the ghetto of writing. Fear compels Strauss to create a segregated space for philosophy. I argue that, far from offering liberation to philosophy, esotericism is a form of confinement. The conditions of this metaphorical ghetto will be further explicated. I wish to ask what connections, if any, exist between Strauss's cultural identity, and the establishment of the metaphorical ghetto. The Jewish heritage I share

with Strauss is filled with the specter of the ghetto. The philosophic heritage I share with Strauss is filled with the specter of hemlock. How have these features come together to create a philosophy of the ghetto, what are the conditions of this ghetto, and what are its functions?

In the third chapter, “Storming the Metaphortress,” I use Strauss’s thought as a point of departure for more fully investigating the concept of persecution. It is a problem that perennially plagues political life and Strauss is one of a very few writers to directly address the subject. He writes extensively on the problem of persecution and its effects on political philosophy. However, very little is said, by Strauss or anyone else for that matter, on the meaning of persecution. While I disagree with Strauss in reference to esoteric response against persecution, he offers several important insights into how we can understand this phenomena and how its manifold forms pose a recurring problem in politics. In the end, and with Strauss’s help, I find persecution is an act of tyranny, embodied in the expression of power, which results in injustice.

Plato recognizably incorporates risk into his dialogues. In “The Apology of Socrates,” the eponymous protagonist is given the opportunity to propose a counter-penalty just after his conviction.⁴ He suggests that he should be given free meals in the Prytaneum, a hall of honor normally reserved for military and Olympic heroes (Plato 1998, 90). It is a scandal, an affront to the city. Socrates, as has been argued, purposefully mocked the city as the penultimate act in securing his own death (Stone 1988, 186). If it is true that Socrates said those words and garnered the death he desired, then his risk was minimal, for he spoke those words but once and was slain for

⁴ Plato reports the events of the trial in a decidedly different fashion than Xenophon, Still, both authors describe the jury as being incensed by Socrates proposal.

it only once. Meanwhile, it could be said that Plato insulated himself effectively against persecution. After all, it is the characters and not the author who speak the scandalous words. Plato, however, put those same words *into writing*. He took the same epithet his master used to incense the jury, resurrected it, and made it permanent. Even if Plato disagreed completely with the positions of the characters in his work, it is Plato for whom the risk was greatest.

In the fourth chapter, "To Orphan the Words," I will examine episodes such as the Prytaneum passage in *The Apology of Socrates*, the Ship of Fools and Cave Allegories from *The Republic of Plato*, and other episodes from Platonic dialogues. All of these represent instantiations of fear, moments where a protagonist character must respond to the threat of violence. Each, through exoteric speech, is a moment where Plato assumes a dangerous tone in his writings. Each of these, and other passages in Plato's writings, indicate a confrontation with fear. If Plato takes overt political risks in his writing, then the fear of persecution cannot be his primary concern. Instead, I argue that Plato's greatest fear was of abomination against nature, the fear that the wrong men would exert influence in society, the vulgar would become teachers, and, when combined with the ambiguities of language, philosophy would then be imperiled. For Plato, Straussian esotericism would amount to a form of silence that would contribute to this abomination and the endangerment of philosophy. Instead, his dialogues, with their diatribes against the politically powerful, create an open space of critique, an agora of writing.

Why, for Strauss, the ghetto of writing, or more acutely, what does a psychoanalysis of Strauss's discourse reveal? The same question will be asked of

Plato: how does he arrive at his agora of writing? In the fifth chapter, “Esotericism: The Highest Stage of Perversion,” I will argue that both Strauss and Plato generate perverse discourses. Plato struggles, and fails, to restrain his own *eros*, while Strauss establishes and violates the rules of secrecy. For Strauss, persecution becomes a sustaining force within his discourse. It is needed to perpetuate the narrative of Straussian thought. In other words, the theory of esotericism *desires* persecution and flirts with divulging itself in order to call forth a persecutor who will enforce the law and limit its pursuit of enjoyment.

While Freud and Lacan are careful to tell us that not all perversion is pathological, we can discern the pathology within the Straussian narrative. This chapter will present the Lacanian methodology for psychoanalysis and outline the concept of perversion. Quite often, Lacan’s teachings are mired in anecdotes, rants against the French psychoanalytic establishments, rants against his various nemeses, and a generally intricate algebra. In short, Lacan is definitely esoteric in his own way. Still, despite suggesting that it should take a reader of his works ten years to truly understand him, it is fair to say that Lacan wanted his readers to understand him, and, accordingly, his methodology will be presented as clearly and accurately as possible in order to understand the discourse Strauss creates and the symptoms of its perversions.

Lastly, Catherine and Michael Zuckert rightfully point out that Leo Strauss died long before the Iraq War and even before the ascent of neoconservatism. To blame Strauss for the follies of neoconservatism, they say, is unfair. Indeed, Leo Strauss never wrote an explicit theory of international politics. Given, however, that neoconservatives such as Kenneth Weinstein and Joshua Muravchik actively point to Strauss as a major

influence on their thinking, we are justified in asking what a Straussian theory of international politics might look like. If politics are being influenced by a political philosophy of the ghetto, what are the consequences for those politics? In the sixth chapter, "Persecution Among Nations," I draw on the central themes of Strauss's thought to articulate a theory of international politics. Esotericism and the influence of Carl Schmitt figure prominently into Strauss's thought. The perversity of esotericism and the bellicosity of Schmitt's concept of the political combine to produce a set of paranoid politics. While I argue that Strauss's thought cannot be reduced to neoconservatism, they do indeed tend to share some policy positions and characteristics.

Concluding Remarks: Privileged Persecution

Esotericism attempts to conceal one writer behind another, dispassionately pretending to discover long buried truths – Strauss behind Plato, as though the strategy was indeed conceived by Plato and not by Strauss who merely reports the objective condition of reality. The aim of this essay is to examine the implications of fear in political philosophy. I arrive at a reversal of George Sabine's famous declaration that Strauss's theory of esoteric writing represents "perverse ingenuity." Not that Sabine was incorrect. Rather, from my perspective, esotericism represents ingenious perversity. His thought indicates the extent to which the fear of persecution can affect a profoundly insightful and creative mind. Strauss leaves us valuable insights and arguments, but the project of giving them proper consideration must take esotericism into account in advance. It is also the point from which the evaluation of any politics inspired by Strauss's thought must proceed.

Plato was careful in showing us that Socrates only responded to the unfounded claims of wisdom made by others. Anne Norton recounts for us that students of Strauss

used to roam the halls at the University of Chicago, bursting into seminars and lectures taught by behaviorists and demanding philosophical justifications for their teachings. What courage. Recently, we might find that same attitude permeating the halls of government, with the same noxious combination of elitism and persecution. Consider the comments of Peter Berkowitz who extols neoconservatism, saying, “There is nobility and hard-headed realism in the stand that neoconservatives took in their support of Operation Iraqi Freedom” (Berkowitz 2008, A11). Nobility indeed. It seems the dreadful demands of nobility, with the continuous obligation to manufacture new justifications for the wars they created, are such that the nobles are often called away from serving on the front lines. They are sorely missed.

For their part, actual realists, at least in the field of International Relations, have taken strong and understandable exception to the association of their moniker with neoconservative politics. Stephen Walt, for example, writes that the neoconservative influence on American foreign policy has produced “disastrous results” and been “consistently wrong.” Neconservatives, Walt maintains, “extol the virtues of American hegemony and believe that others states will welcome U.S. leadership so long as it is exercised decisively” (Walt 2008, www.nationalinterest.org/Article.aspx?id=19672). The lines between neoconservatism and realism have become blurred, and the realists have undeservedly suffered.

At the same time as he announces its noble virtues, Berkowitz also complains, “‘Neoconservatism’ has come to stand for all that has gone wrong in American foreign policy over the last seven years” (Berkowitz 2008, A11). The neoconservatives, it

seems, are a persecuted nobility. Deserved criticism, however, is surely different than persecution.

The argument about esoteric writing concerns more than just the reputation of International Relations scholars. At stake in this debate is the character and disposition of American government, especially with regard to its foreign policy. The neoconservative movement owes at least some of its inspiration to the thought of Leo Strauss. For that reason it becomes pertinent to examine the monument to Strauss's thought, his discourse, and scrutinize its pathologies. The consequences will affect how we think about the conduct of philosophy and politics, whether we interpret the Socratic axiom that the unexamined life is not worth living to mean that every life has a right to be examined, or, instead, consign philosophy into a space of privileged persecution, the ghetto of writing

CHAPTER 2
THE TWO CADAVERS OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY: ESOTERIC STRATEGY AND
THE MURDER OF SOCRATES

Introduction: Who is Political Philosophy?

The object of this chapter is to identify the bodies and spaces created by Leo Strauss's theory of esoteric writing. Esotericism, envisioned by Strauss as deliberate and masterfully secretive writing by philosophers used to avoid persecution, delineates categories among human beings, as well as a set of metaphorical demarcations within literature. In terms of bodies, Strauss's esotericism imposes a set of criteria that must be met in order for an individual to be considered a philosopher. Straussian esotericism struggles over the body of the philosopher, and the body of work that comprises philosophy. In addition to bodies, esoteric writing also generates a set of spaces within the topography of writing. Strauss considered the conflict between philosophy and tradition to be represented by two historically prominent cities, Jerusalem and Athens. Jerusalem is the space of tradition and law. Athens is the space of philosophic inquiry. Understood through his discourse of esotericism, Strauss considered neither Jerusalem nor Athens fully satisfactory. Tradition and law are veils for the truth as understood by philosophy. Athens, however, was too open of a city, too free with its inquiries. Anyone could come to Athens and speak with great freedom. Through his vision of esoteric writing Strauss chooses a different space, a secluded space, a ghetto. Strauss chooses a literary environment that is besieged by tradition and law, but is walled off in order to generate a hidden discourse. Strauss chooses to relocate Athens and its activities to Prague.

In his appraisal of modern democracy, Leo Strauss declares, "We are not permitted to be flatters of democracy precisely because we are friends and allies of

democracy” (Strauss 1968, 24).⁵ The flatterer is a false friend. Indeed, Aristotle (1998, 205) notes that a “flatterer is a friend in an inferior position, or pretends to be such and to love more than he is loved.” Friends, owing to the care and concern friendship demands, are obligated to keep one another from harm and help each other whenever possible. A genuine friend cannot let his or her comrade succumb to vice without protest, even at the cost of insult or offense. Shadia Drury (2007, 4) adopts a skeptical stance in regards to the authenticity of Strauss’s friendship with liberal democracy. She notes that Strauss’s thought is devoid of “the slightest sympathy or respect for the most minimal claims of liberalism.” In essence, she understands Strauss to be dissembling. Strauss, according to Drury, is writing esoterically.

By questioning his stated commitment to liberal democracy, Drury raises a problem for any reader of Leo Strauss. Strauss is someone who tells us that authentic political philosophers have written esoterically; political philosophers conceal their real views. Drury’s doubt of Strauss’s friendship highlights the importance of considering the possibility that Strauss also wrote esoterically. We cannot even begin to examine Strauss’s thought without first considering the prospect that what appears to be his thought might actually be a subterfuge designed to mislead certain readers.

Did Leo Strauss write esoterically? I want to address two theses in order to situate my own position. I maintain that Strauss did not exoterically reveal the classical secrets of esotericism. His numerous, insightful, peculiar, and often interesting expositions of political philosophy are not, in fact, the highest truths he suggested were hidden in the

⁵ Strauss (1968, 5) avers that the conjunction of liberalism and democracy, which he refers to as “democracy as it is” and “modern democracy,” ought to give way to an ideal form of democracy as it was “originally meant.” This decidedly non-liberal democracy would “found an aristocracy within democratic mass society (Ibid: p. 5).”

great works of antiquity. I also contend that the question about whether or not Strauss himself writes esoterically must necessarily remain unresolved. Put simply, there is just no way that I can know. Consequently, I treat the works of Leo Strauss exoterically.

Firstly, I disagree with the thesis that Strauss “brought into the open” the deeply hidden secrets of ancient philosophy in an overt fashion (Zuckert and Zuckert 2006, 128). If Strauss truly believed that secret writing was necessary to protect philosophers and society and if he explained to any literate person how to find and unlock the secrets of the past, or explained the content of those secrets, then he would be endangering both philosophy and society, according to his own principles. If that were the case, Strauss would be betraying the philosophers who supposedly entrusted him with their highest secrets. Importantly, Strauss would not merely be a traitor to those he considers the greatest minds – Plato, Aristotle, and so forth; Strauss would be a traitor to the philosophers of the future, those philosophers yet to come whose esoteric, heterodox secrets he would be revealing in advance. The philosophers of the past no longer need to be concerned about persecution. It is the philosophers of the future that Strauss would imperil if he revealed the magician’s tricks. Importantly, Strauss appears to reject the possibility of openly revealing what has been encrypted. Discussing the esotericism of Moses Maimonides, Strauss (1952, 57) writes, “For the explanation of secrets is, as he asserts, not only forbidden by law, but also impossible by nature: the very nature of the secrets prevents their being divulged.”

Secondly, how are we to know that Strauss is writing esoterically? If we conclude for example, that for Strauss “Thrasymachus is Plato’s real mouthpiece” then we are forced to examine how those conclusions are reached. Strauss never openly states that

“Thrasymachus is Plato’s real mouthpiece” (Postel 2003, <http://www.informationclearinghouse.info>).⁶ On the other hand, his “friendship” for liberal democracy is rightly discerned as false, a thin veneer disguising disdain. But there, Strauss essentially tells us of his distaste for “democracy as it is” as he promotes democracy as it ought to be.⁷ A reader of Strauss has every reason to believe that he has nothing but scorn for “modern democracy” because he does nothing to hide it. His derision of liberal democracy is exoteric. Drury is right to point out that, frankly, Strauss’s contempt for modern, liberal democracy is just plain obvious.

The question remains, however, as to whether or not Strauss writes esoterically. If he does not explicitly state that Thrasymachus, and not Socrates, is the advocate of Plato’s true thought, are we to conclude that this is what Strauss *really* thinks? I do not see how we can arrive at that conclusion. If any part of Strauss is to be taken seriously it is that a philosopher will conceal the truth when its open dissemination might become a source of danger. Openly espousing views considered distasteful or unpleasant by the masses would be unsafe, according to Strauss. Such views, therefore, will be necessarily concealed. If it were true that Strauss believed Thrasymachus is the true protagonist of Plato’s seminal dialogue on justice, it would undoubtedly be controversial, but it would hardly be dangerous. Indeed, I suspect the reaction of most people to this discovery would be to ask who Thrasymachus is. This means, however, that Strauss would have no compelling reason to conceal this view about Thrasymachus, if it was his

⁶ Importantly, Drury (2005: p. lix) tells us that while Strauss is an esoteric writer, she does not apply any hermeneutic method he espouses to his own work. This, of course, makes good sense because any method exoterically represented would also necessarily be misleading. In this sense, I agree with Drury that we are best served examining Strauss, not in any imagined silences, but “in the lines.”

⁷ A question emerges, and will be addressed in Chapter Five, as to just how democratic this ideal democracy would be, given the centrality of an integral aristocracy.

actual view. Society is already confronted by the thesis of Thrasymachus, that justice is nothing but the advantage of the stronger, given its exoteric representation in *The Republic of Plato*.

For these reasons, my point of departure is that Strauss did not reveal the secrets of esotericism. If Strauss wrote esoterically, then he is deliberately trying to conceal his thought from someone like me. My answer, then, to the question of whether or not Leo Strauss wrote esoterically is that I cannot know for sure. In any event, I maintain that Strauss did not reveal the secrets of ancient philosophy exoterically. The thesis that Strauss is writing esoterically already cedes the critical point that the kind of esoteric writing he describes is feasible. I will not cede that point. Writers from Plato to contemporary authors have all been vexed by problems of precision and meaning. While Strauss tells us that the greatest minds have constructed a grammar that is both secret and unambiguous to those who can detect it, words have a tendency to elude the grasp and defy the intent of any author. Did Leo Strauss write esoterically in the manner he attributes to other philosophers? The point is really that *Plato* doubted such writing was possible.

Interestingly, Shadia Drury reads Leo Strauss as though he wrote esoterically, but refuses to apply Strauss's own 'method' for reading him. Of course, this makes good sense given that anything Strauss divulges about esotericism in an exoteric manner should be disregarded as nothing more than an exoteric diversion. For this reason, I choose not to read Strauss esoterically at all. He is responsible for his exoteric writing at least to the degree that anyone can be responsible for writing. The truth is that Strauss's exoteric discourse is just as important as the irresolvable mystery of any esoteric writing

he may have constructed. The exoteric discourse has important implications and we ought to see what effects are generated by this discourse.

The concern of this essay, therefore, is not in attempting to decipher what Leo Strauss really, *really* believed but what he wrote. If there is an esoteric subtext in Strauss's writing, then, provided it was effectively composed, it is intended to remain beyond the grasp of lesser minds. Trying to uncover such a subtext is, therefore, necessarily precluded. Instead, I consider Leo Strauss to be one of the most lucid writers in the history of political thought. His prose is clear; his meaning tends to be straightforward. Unusually, he presents us with language that is quite clear in reference to the subject of obfuscation. Strauss exoterically tells us about esotericism. Accordingly, it is what he said exoterically, and not what he may have said esoterically that is the object of this essay.⁸ Crucially, Strauss (1952, 36) tells us that what a philosopher writes exoterically is a "popular teaching of an edifying character." In other words, exoteric writing is supposed to be morally appropriate. If this is the case, then we are permitted to examine Strauss's exoteric text in order to evaluate its capacity to instruct readers morally or foment harmful political pathologies.

But who, or perhaps more precisely, what, is Leo Strauss? I say 'is' and not 'was' because although Leo Strauss died in 1973, the corpus of his voluminous and profound work in political philosophy persists. Strauss is not merely an individual who lived, worked, and died. Rather, he is part of a narrative that far exceeds the unknowable, unmediated truth of the man. Strauss's discourse does not belong to an archaeological

⁸ If we presume that what is said esoterically to be the opposite of what is said exoterically, and if we presume Strauss wrote esoterically, then if Strauss writes esoterically about esotericism we must presume that he meant the opposite of what he says about esotericism. This would undoubtedly result in a logical paradox.

expedition; and though we can try to understand it through Strauss's correspondence and claims about intention, these insights and exhortations do not sit outside of the discourse.⁹ We elaborate Strauss as we read his text, writing Strauss as we read Strauss. Still, this relationship is not one that puts Strauss's writings at the disposal of our caprice. The ambiguity of language is not tantamount to the malleability of language. To reverse Heidegger's formulation, language is at home in us.¹⁰ In a strange dialectic, we often think of language as our instrument when we are instead the instruments of language; the master becomes the slave yet again. We give life to language; discourse sustains itself through us in a vampiric symbiosis. Strauss the man may be gone, but Strauss persists through discourse.

One effect created by Strauss's writings on esotericism is the generation of a hard dichotomy distinguishing those with philosophic temperament from those without. In essence, through the vehicle of esotericism, Strauss is telling us who is qualified to be a philosopher, and who is disqualified. At stake in this is a struggle over two cadavers. The first is the body of the philosopher. The question of who can be a philosopher is at issue in the confrontation with Strauss's thought. The second cadaver is the body of Socrates and the legacy of the Socratic tradition. We argue over the body of the man in order to characterize the body of his work.

Of course there is another sense in which we can ask the question, who is Leo Strauss? This form of the question aims at articulating a vision of Leo Strauss in relation to the subject of political philosophy and the political philosopher. In a broad sense,

⁹ Rather, as Roland Barthes (1977, 148) might say, the unity of the text "lies not in its origin but in its destination."

¹⁰ Heidegger (1993, 398) notes "Thus we are within language, at home in language, prior to everything else."

Strauss describes rules for understanding and interpreting texts of political philosophy stretching back to antiquity. In a narrow sense, and as an explicit consequence of this hermeneutics, Strauss describes rules and criteria for what it means to be a political philosopher. Thus, we are brought to the first cadaver, the body of a political philosopher: who can be a political philosopher?

Out of a healthy sense of modesty, Strauss might deny that he was one of the greatest thinkers, a member of a pantheon of intellectuals unrivalled in wisdom. By his criteria, the great minds are “those teachers who are not in turn pupils” (Strauss 1968, 3). It seems reasonable enough that Strauss considered himself a pupil when he suggests “we do well to take as our model that one among the greatest minds who because of his common sense is *the* mediator between us and the great minds” (Ibid, 6). This mediator is none other than Socrates. Strauss establishes that, unlike Socrates, he has had teachers and is a pupil, and, accordingly, he does not think of himself as one of those scarce examples of the greatest thinkers. This sense of humility is pervasive in Strauss’s thought. He cannot consider himself a philosopher, in the strongest sense of the term. Wisdom, the kind of knowledge philosophy seeks to obtain “is inaccessible to man” (Ibid, 7). Most people who claim to be philosophers, Strauss tells us, are not. He solemnly concludes “we cannot be philosophers, but we can love philosophy; we can try to philosophize” (Ibid, 7).

Now, from this proposition, we are led to an uneasy syllogism. Philosophy is the love of wisdom. For Strauss, wisdom is inaccessible to human beings.¹¹ Therefore, there can be no philosophers who are wise and are human. The troubling implication of

¹¹ Provided “man” was not meant to be gender specific.

this syllogism is that either those who Strauss considers to be the greatest thinkers were not human, if they were philosophers, or there simply are no philosophers, only neophytes who aspire toward philosophy. There seems to be no reason to conclude that Strauss identified Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, or others among the greatest thinkers as superhuman; on the other hand they were philosophers. Leaving these exceptional few aside, it seems that being a philosopher is an elusive goal. Because of the nature of philosophic knowledge, we can never truly *be* philosophers. Instead, we are always struggling at being philosophic.

What Strauss seems to miss however, is that philosophy is the love of wisdom. It is not the comprehensive possession of wisdom nor is it the love of the love of wisdom. Philosophy is not in love with itself; it loves wisdom, something it does not fully possess. As Socrates says in *The Symposium*, "Surely it's not just probable but necessary that desire is directed at something you need and if you don't need something you don't desire it" (Plato 1999b, 34-35). A person does not need to possess perfect philosophic knowledge in order to be a philosopher. In fact, that might very well exclude them from the category of philosophers. Despite his contention that we cannot truly be philosophers, and despite his disavowal of being a philosopher, Leo Strauss was a political philosopher.

Leo Strauss was born September 20, 1899 in the German town of Kirchhain. He came from an Orthodox Jewish family that cultivated "an atmosphere of strict observance" (Zank 2002, 3). Strauss was, by all accounts, an excellent student as a youth and had a prodigious appetite for reading at an early age, especially for works of Plato. Zionism occupied much of Strauss's early writings. During the period of his

advanced education Strauss found himself interacting with some of the influential figures in German intellectual circles. Ernst Cassirer would serve as Strauss's dissertation adviser. He would eventually learn from Martin Heidegger, and, through Heidegger, Strauss encountered other prominent scholars such as Hans Georg Gadamer and Karl Lowith. Strauss was living abroad on a fellowship during the rise of the Third Reich. He was able to secure academic positions in the United States, eventually becoming the Robert Maynard Hutchins Distinguished Service Professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Chicago. He died in 1973, having published nearly two-dozen books and numerous scholarly articles.

Regardless of whether or not he considered himself one of the greatest thinkers, Leo Strauss was a political philosopher. This seemingly obvious assertion has profound implications. Political philosophy, for Strauss, is different from other kinds of activities. An individual can have an expert understanding of sport, without ever having been an athlete. There are excellent coaches of professional football who were mediocre players, as well as some who never actually played professionally.¹² There is an industry of gamblers who understand every facet of football, and yet most of these gamblers have probably never played at any serious level. We often accept the idea that one can be a food, literary, or film critic without being a producer of such arts. In brief, there are many endeavors where a person can intellectually appreciate the activity or product without having ever been an active producer in that field. For Strauss, philosophy is a very special vocation; one must be a philosopher to understand philosophy. Strauss (1989, 68) explains that philosophers are a unique species, and the

¹² For example, Vince Lombardi and Bill Walsh (no relation) never played professional football; Don Shula's professional career as a player was decidedly unremarkable.

difference between a philosopher and the person who has not been trained, or cannot be trained “is a difference not of degree but of kind.” Strauss elaborates:

For it is that experience which leads in a straight way to the distinction between the two groups of men, the philosophic men and the unphilosophic men, and therewith to the distinction between the two ways of presenting the truth. (Ibid, 69)

There is no such thing as an expert spectator. If an individual is not, by nature, a philosopher, that individual cannot understand philosophy. Conversely, those who do understand philosophy are, by nature, philosophers. Strauss tells us, in no uncertain terms, not only that he has a keen and precise understanding of philosophy, but that so many others are charlatans masquerading as philosophers. Only a philosopher can understand a philosopher, and Strauss tells us, that while the secret of philosophy has lay dormant for generations, he has solved its riddle.

For Leo Strauss, the vicissitudes of persecution have an intimate relationship with the conduct of philosophical reading and writing. Indeed, persecution can be found at the origins of the Straussian narrative of political philosophy and persists in conditioning all of its subsequent episodes. Strauss assures us that political philosophy begins and remains a story of fear. We find the death of Socrates at its origin. For fear that fear should ever escape the calculations of philosophical writing the second cadaver, the corpse of Socrates, is dug up, reanimated like some hapless ghoul, and endlessly put to death. Straussian philosophy celebrates Socrates’s death more than his life to remind the philosopher of the threats he or she faces. Esotericism is the fear of hemlock. That innocuous leaf stands as a symbol for the dominance of vulgarity over virtue, irrationality over reason, and the masses over the enlightened few. Hemlock stands for the threat of persecution that philosophers must face in order to become philosophers.

How then does Leo Strauss confront this fear of persecution? What are the effects of Strauss's strategies of philosophic writing and reading? And what is done with the two cadavers in this confrontation with fear? In this essay I will present Strauss's understanding of esotericism in political philosophy. I will demonstrate the relationship between esotericism and authentic philosophy and situate this relationship within a historical narrative of declining virtue. Esotericism has manifold uses, but there are three clearly discernible functions for secretive philosophical writing: pedagogy, protecting society from harm, and avoiding persecution.¹³ In the following essay, I will articulate Leo Strauss's discourse of esotericism. Much scholarly research – often polemical - has been devoted to Strauss. I have benefited greatly from the labor of others. But rather than attempt to position myself as a partisan, I have attempted to deploy this literature only when it has represented a concise clarification or an unwarranted deviation of Strauss's thought. It is Strauss's discourse, after all, that is the most pressing issue here.

In the following section I will discuss why Strauss asserts esotericism is used. What are its functions? What are the reasons to write esoterically? I will demonstrate that, although there are varied functions for esotericism, these ancillary motivations emerge only after the philosopher has been confronted by persecution. Fear is the primary cause of esotericism. In the second section, I will delineate the rules of esotericism. How is esotericism carried out? Finally, I will ask: what are the consequences of an esoteric strategy that is initially motivated by the fear of

¹³ Arthur Melzer (2007, 1015) identifies four uses, including the promotion of a "positive political scheme." Although I would not dispute its inclusion, it is also not clear that, as a motivation, its inclusion warrants analysis as a category distinct from those more clearly identified by Strauss.

persecution? I will argue, regardless of its claims to objectivity, or its intentions, that the Straussian form of esotericism succeeds not in preserving the philosopher from persecution, but in exacerbating that persecution. Esotericism creates a ghetto of writing.

Armored Saints, Secret Gifts

Niccolo Machiavelli, a political philosopher all-too familiar to Strauss, remarked that “all armed prophets were victorious and the unarmed came to ruin” (Machiavelli 1979, 95). Philosophers, it seems, are not always prophets. Nevertheless, according to Leo Strauss, they have often forged and hammered their own suits of armor. Why? Western philosophy emerges in ancient times, in pre-liberal societies absent any guarantees to freedom of speech. Philosophy flourished in Athens, which, despite its massive dependence on slavery and total exclusion of women from political life, is often considered the birthplace of democracy. Democratic Athens fostered the beginnings of philosophy and defined tyranny as a crime (McGlew 1993, 185).

And yet, democratic Athens sent Thucydides into exile. It banished Xenophon. Democratic Athens prosecuted Aristophanes for mocking officials in the play *Babylonians* (Atkinson 1992, 56). Worse still, this least bad regime, as Aristotle described it, tried and executed the most important figure in Western philosophy. Democracy killed Socrates. It is this event, the trial of the unrepentant and indignant philosopher, his condemnation, and partaking of the poison chalice that stands as the master signifier in the discourse of political philosophy. It is the specter of hemlock that bedevils philosophy, standing as a persistent reminder of the hazards that face its practitioners. Socrates, Strauss tells us, is the first to broach the question “what is political?” thereby earning our acknowledgement as the “founder of political philosophy”

(Strauss 1964, 19). Consequently, political philosophy begins traumatized by persecution.

Persecution, Strauss explains, is a persistent, if not always consistent or homogenous, fact of philosophic life. Indeed, the emergence of political philosophy coincides with the emergence of the persecution of philosophers. Over time, political philosophy suffers a decline: once the conjunction of political theory and skill, political philosophy suffered a schism at the beginning of modernity (Strauss 1959, 28). For Strauss, the advent of modernity, with the arrival of Machiavelli, signaled the end to classical concerns about virtue. Modernity begins with the Machiavelli rejection of morality, with an act of blasphemy. Machiavelli, Strauss tells us, “compels the reader to think the blasphemy by himself and thus to become Machiavelli’s accomplice” (Strauss 1958, 50). This disunity has left modern political philosophy as little more than a “derivative” shell of its former whole (Strauss 1959, 28). Modernity, therefore, marks a gradual rift between a science of politics and an increasingly marginalized field of morality and normative concerns. In Strauss’s estimation, political philosophy during antiquity was the combination of political science and moral philosophy. Now, Strauss laments, “Today, political philosophy is in a state of decay and perhaps putrefaction, if has not vanished altogether” (Ibid, 17). Corresponding to the decline in the substantive quality of political philosophy, persecution likewise began to diminish. From its zenith in antiquity, persecution gradually ebbed as modern liberal societies ascended (Ibid, 33). Political philosophers found themselves with greater latitude than their antecedents to freely express themselves. It is only now, Strauss warns us, that persecution is beginning to ascend once again.

I do not use the term “Straussian” without severe discomfort. James Coustoupoulos notes (in a review of Anne Norton titled “How *Not* to Write a Book”), for example, that the use of ‘Straussian’ to describe a student of Strauss might apply to Allan Bloom or Joseph Cropsey, but not to Harvey Mansfield who identifies himself as a Straussian. The use of genealogical characteristics to identify an individual as a Straussian is often more than imperfect. As Costopoulos (2005, 271) notes, when considering who to include as a Straussian “the one thing we most need, is the What.” I have no interest in crafting the kind of meticulous, and impossible, genealogy that no one could consider troublesome, contentious, or controversial. Again, esotericism is the crucial subject, not who was actually in a lecture hall with Leo Strauss. Esotericism is the What. Therefore, a Straussian, in this essay, is one who finds the presentation of esotericism, as given by Leo Strauss, unproblematic, or even benign, and affirms it as a positive political practice. This is the most prominent characteristic of a Straussian. Specific political views may vary, and the degree to which we attempt to identify individuals based on political views can have all of the unfortunate characteristics of a witch-hunt and I am not interested in conducting a witch-hunt. If there is such a thing as a Straussian, it is made possible by this central tenet of esotericism. This hermeneutic base is what gives Straussian thought its coherence. Analogous to Straussians, so-called “Derrideans” might very well disagree with Derrida’s specific political conclusions, as “Foucauldians” might disagree with Foucault. Nevertheless, deconstruction provides the coherence to Derridean thought, just as genealogy does for Foucauldian thought. Without esotericism, Straussian thought is not nearly as unique; by extension, without esotericism, Straussians are not nearly as unique. Some who have assumed the

position that esotericism as Strauss describes it is beneficial have appeared to suggest that persecution is but one cause among several, no more or less important than any other.¹⁴ But, as Strauss insists that we become careful readers, we are reminded to follow his own discourse closely.

Political philosophers, according to Strauss, do not choose esotericism in order to teach. Rather, they choose esotericism in order to live, adjusting the secrecy of their writings to suit their pedagogic preferences only after achieving some measure of security for their lives. As Strauss notes in his introduction to *Persecution and the Art of Writing*:

But the success of Plato must not blind us to the existence of a danger which, however much its forms may vary, is coeval with philosophy. The understanding of this danger and of the various forms which it has taken, and which it may take, is the foremost task, and indeed the sole task, of the sociology of philosophy. (Strauss 1952, 21)

The danger is persecution. It is coeval with philosophy. The danger threatens the existence of philosophy.

Straussians are correct that security is not the only reason esotericism is used, but to suggest it is not the essential reason, for Strauss, is incorrect. Stating in unambiguous terms, Strauss declares:

Persecution gives rise to a peculiar technique of writing and therewith to a peculiar type of literature, in which the truth about all crucial things is presented exclusively between the lines. The literature is addressed not to

¹⁴ Again, Arthur Melzer (2007, 1015) suggests philosophers have written esoterically “for one or more of the following reasons.” Michael Frazer (2006, 36) argues “there is a critical difference between an esotericism arising from a necessary gap between society and philosophy and an esotericism arising only from the contingent fact of persecution.” Steven B. Smith (2006, 165) writes “there is also a philanthropic dimension that regards discretion as the highest form of social obligation.” The implication is that a philosopher has a variety of causes that might lead to esoteric writing.

all readers but to trustworthy and intelligent readers only. (Strauss 1952, 25)¹⁵

Persecution gives rise... Persecution is the genesis of esotericism. All other considerations emerge only after the philosopher has been compelled to write secretly in order to ensure his or her safety. Again, Strauss posits persecution, not as one motivation among many for concealing one's true thoughts; it is *the primary* reason to conceal:

For the influence of persecution on literature is precisely that it compels all writers who hold heterodox views to develop a peculiar technique of writing, the technique which we have in mind when speaking of writing between the lines. (Strauss 1952, 24)

Persecution gives rise... This merits further examination. Strauss never says teaching or education give rise to esoteric writing. Nor does he say protecting society gives rise to esoteric writing. Only persecution *gives rise*. Syllogistically, this means that esoteric writing only rises after the threat of persecution appears. As Strauss avers:

If it is true that there is a *necessary* correlation between persecution and writing between the lines, then there is a necessary negative criterion: that the book in question *must* have been composed in an era of persecution, that is, at a time when some political or other orthodoxy was enforced by law or custom. (Ibid, 32)¹⁶

Strauss continues discussing esoteric writing by saying, "This literature is then essentially related to a society which is not liberal" (Ibid, 36). There is, then, a necessary relationship between persecution and esoteric writing, and there is no necessary relationship between esoteric writing and teaching or protecting society.

¹⁵ I have added the emphasis to this passage. As I will employ this same passage at different points later on for different purposes, it will appear again with different emphases added.

¹⁶ Emphases added.

Not only is the relationship between persecution and esoteric writing necessary, it is also primary. The story of *Persecution and the Art of Writing* is not the story of a peculiar technique of teaching or politeness towards those of inferior opinions. It is the story of how political philosophy can survive. It is a story of a survival technique that explains how Plato “avoided the conflict with the vulgar and thus the fate of Socrates” (Ibid, 16).¹⁷ It is fear that compels esoteric writing. Strauss argues, “the exoteric teaching was needed for protecting philosophy. It was the armor in which philosophy *had to appear*” (Ibid, 18). One does not generally need armor to teach unless one is already afraid. Political philosophy did not have to teach esoterically, it did not have to protect society at all, but political philosophy must nonetheless appear in armor; it “had to appear” in armor if it wished to live. Education does not compel concealment, nor does protecting society. Education and society are ancillary matters of concern. Before any other issue arises, prior to esotericism, there is fear. It is fear that compels the philosopher.

The Secret Classroom

To be fair, there are indeed other uses for esotericism, and Strauss (1939, 535) maintains that to presume philosophers only have in mind the immediacy of their own safety would “betray too low a view of the philosophic writers of the past.” Instead, Strauss explains that political philosophers are faced with a dilemma: the greater the extent to which they attempt to preserve their own lives, the more they destroy themselves as philosophers. In other words, a philosopher could easily protect him or herself from persecution for heterodox views: say nothing at all; remain silent; feign only

¹⁷ Furthermore, it is not “the conflict with the vulgar *or* the fate of Socrates” it is avoiding the conflict with the vulgar **and** the fate of Socrates.

the endorsement of orthodox views. The consequence of this would be the extinction of philosophy, which, like any other tradition, demands dissemination to others. How can one teach the taboo?

In order to recruit future philosophers, without becoming endangered, the philosopher will write in such a way as to avoid the ire of the unphilosophic while attracting the attention of those with the potential to assume the mantle of philosopher. Esoteric works are not designed so much as exchanges of communication but as means to surmount the problem of teaching secretly. Strauss explains:

Those to whom such books are truly addressed are, however, neither the unphilosophic majority nor the perfect philosopher as such, but the young men who might become philosophers. (Strauss 1952, 36)

The perfect philosopher already understands the highest truths. It is the nascent philosopher, the embryonic philosopher to whom the secret writing is addressed. In this manner, the philosopher can visit the agora surreptitiously. He or she can “go to the market place in order to fish there for potential philosophers” without appearing to corrupt the youth (Strauss 1959, 125).

Esoteric Heroism

By not appearing to corrupt the youth, by remaining esoteric, the philosopher produces an additional, useful function: protecting society from the harmful effects of philosophy. Strauss maintains:

Philosophy or science, the highest activity of man, is the attempt to replace opinion about all things by knowledge of all things; but opinion is the element of society; philosophy or science is therefore the attempt to dissolve the element in which society breathes, and thus it endangers society. Hence philosophy or science must remain the preserve of a small minority, and philosophers or scientists must respect the opinion on which society rests. (Strauss 1959, 221)

In other words, esotericism offers yet another secret gift: it relieves society of the disruptive effects of philosophy. For example, Strauss concludes that, despite what is given exoterically in Plato's *Crito*, Socrates had not "accepted seriously the view that justice is identical with obedience to the laws of the city, regardless of the justice of the laws" (Strauss 1939, 520).¹⁸ The exoteric fashion in which Socrates' thoughts are conveyed would suggest that he did consider obedience to be equivalent to justice. Strauss argued that even if a philosopher is critical of society, the manner in which that criticism takes shape must proceed with caution:

But being educated and therefore desiring not to offend others, they hide their laughter as well as they can from the uneducated. That is to say, an educated man will utter his ridicule of the lack of education, or barbarism of a given man or city or nation, only in the absence of the uneducated. In other words, a good satire on the barbarism of a given man or city or nation will be inaccessible to the superficial reader. (Ibid, 530)

Philosophers can, indeed should, hold contravening visions of society from the majority, but must remain silent, at least in public, as to the true nature of their views.

Machiavelli, a figure maligned by Strauss (1958, 1) as a "teacher of evil," earns his characterization precisely because he exoterically undermines the moral foundations of society. Indeed, in a truly insightful moment, Shadia Drury (2005, 117) notes that while Strauss finds Machiavelli's teachings "repugnant, evil, irreligious, diabolical and dangerous" he never finds them to be wrong. What Machiavelli is ultimately guilty of, as one of my teachers has suggested, is giving the secrets away while the kids were still awake. As Strauss states:

Thus philosophy, which is essentially incompatible with acceptance of the gods of the city, was as such subject to persecution. Philosophers had

¹⁸ See also Plato (1998c, 110): Socrates speaking from the point of view of the laws states, "And when he does not obey, we say that he does injustice in three ways."

therefore to conceal if not the fact that they were philosophers, at least the fact that they were unbelievers. (Strauss 1939, 534)

The kind of exoteric teaching Machiavelli so readily disseminates potentially undermines the moral fabric of society, precisely by claiming there is no moral thread binding it together. It concomitantly exposes philosophy as bearing antithetical principles to those generally held by society.

Careless Readers

Philosophy is a powerful ichor - it can be an intoxicant and it can just as easily be a lethal poison. We can understand esotericism, according to Strauss, as a socially responsible, indeed a morally mandatory, practice. Esotericism appears as a form of furtive generosity. It teaches, secretly. It renders society safe from intellectual catastrophe, in secret. Esotericism is the presentation of gifts from an armored saint.

But, how can it work? On what principle does esotericism succeed in safeguarding the philosopher, inculcating potential philosophers, and preserving society from its radical influences? If esotericism is the means to propagate the tradition, then philosophy endures on what amounts to a simple cosmological premise: the world is populated largely by vulgar, dim-minded people. Harsh? Perhaps, but the essence of the axiom belongs to Strauss:

Esotericism, one might say, is based on the assumption that there is a rigid division of mankind into an inspired or intelligent minority and an uninspired or foolish majority. (Strauss 1952, 59)

Now, Strauss, perhaps uncomfortable with the stark nature of his own assertion, wonders whether or not the boundary between these two groups is impermeable. He asks if “freedom of will” might lend itself to “transitions of various kinds between the two groups” (Ibid, 59). What seems to be clearly drawn from his conclusion is that the group

coextensive with the intelligent minority will always be the philosophers while the foolish majority will always be non-philosophers. As Strauss explains:

The fact which makes this literature possible can be expressed in the axiom that thoughtless men are careless readers, and only thoughtful men are careful readers. (Strauss 1952, 25).

Indeed, philosophers must rise from the ranks from the non-philosophers, but they can do so only insofar as they were always already philosophers-to-come. That such individuals could traverse the border suggests they were potential philosophers who simply lacked the right credentials and training. Conversely, that a philosopher should descend into the mire of the unphilosophic, suggests he or she was never an authentic philosopher in the first place.

Esotericism succeeds by dissembling its true meaning beneath an exoteric veneer. At that surface level, the philosopher faithfully genuflects to the conventional orthodoxy. He or she might bury the true intent of the text within a morass of “technical terms...and attach undue importance to insignificant details.” But, within this unremarkable filler, Strauss tells us, secrets await:

Only when he reached the core of the argument would he write three or four sentences in that terse and lively style which is apt to arrest the attention of young men who love to think. (Ibid, 24)

But, even here, it is not the truth that is laid out explicitly for the reader. It is only a hint that something other than the boring tedium of orthodoxy awaits the intellectual archaeologist. Strauss maintains that the philosopher must continue to write ‘between the lines’: “For the burden of proof rests with the censor. It is he, or the public prosecutor, who must prove that the author holds or has uttered heterodox views” (Ibid, 26). The censor is the representative of orthodox views. Philosophy attempts to replace this orthodoxy, and thus the philosopher is the representative of heterodox view.

Esoteric writing, therefore, succeeds in protecting the philosopher from persecution because a censor, who is by definition of being a censor, not a philosopher, cannot discern the philosopher's true intent, even if that censor may be clever enough to detect anomalies within the work. Secondly, esotericism succeeds in recruiting future generations of philosophers because its devices capture their attention while escaping the attention of the dimmer majority. Finally, it succeeds in protecting society for much the same reason – most readers are simply too foolish or negligent to detect the truth.

Describing the ancients who mastered the art of esoteric writing, Strauss avows:

By making the discovered truth almost inaccessible as it was before it had been discovered, they prevented – to call a vulgar thing by a vulgar name – the cheap sale of the formulations of the truth – nobody should know even the formulations of the truth who had not rediscovered the truth by his own exertions, if aided by subtle suggestions from a superior teacher. (Strauss 1939, 535)

One who could discover the truth by his or her own exertions is already in essence, if not in refinement, a philosopher. The cosmology of exotericism is bifurcated into the realm of sublime and subliminal truth, wherein dwells the philosophers and their potential acolytes, and the realm of vulgarity wherein graze the bulk of humankind.

Arthur Melzer (2006, 1016) explains it is not whether one likes esotericism but whether or not it really exists. Indeed, he admits that most people will not approve of it. Denying esotericism, of course, places the skeptic into the undesirable condition of possibly being unphilosophic. Straussians can always rely on the argument that those who deny esoteric writing are unable to see esoteric writing, as Straussians clearly can. Perhaps because I do not wish to have my intelligence called into question, I will not deny esotericism. I will argue, however, it is not at all what Strauss has imagined.

Guide for the Vexed: The Rules of Esotericism

In some ways the cosmology of esotericism resembles political life in ancient Athens. A small minority of the privileged is surrounded by a mass of those who are dispossessed of their rights. While slaves and women were denied the same rights as men, I would argue that, provided it might actually possess any in the first place, esotericism denies the preponderance of human beings its right to the truth, which is as essential as any other political right. The resemblance, however, ends (or begins depending on your assessment of Athenian politics) with the political nature of esotericism. While disenfranchising so many, the privileged interior of Athenian society was, ultimately, democratic. Esotericism is in no way a democratic experience.

In Strauss's vision, esoteric writing is a line of demarcation between philosophy and the vulgar. Importantly we should recall this most fundamental premise:

Persecution gives rise to a peculiar technique of writing and therewith to a peculiar type of literature, in which *the truth about all crucial things is presented exclusively between the lines*. (Strauss 1952, 25)

Thusly, the peculiarity of the type of literature indicates the placement of truth – *between the lines*. Literature that does not posit truth in this manner is categorically dissimilar; literature that posits truth exoterically is not philosophy. We should recall that political philosophy suffered a decline, beginning with Machiavelli in the sixteenth century. Political philosophy in increasingly liberal societies was subjected to less persecution, and was, therefore, increasingly exoteric. The apex of philosophy, coinciding with the apex of persecution, is to be found at the origins, with the ancient Hellenistic thinkers. At the time of the greatest persecution, philosophy was also at its height, according to Strauss. Esotericism disappears as persecution disappears (Strauss 1939, 535). This means that esoteric writing increases as the possibility of persecution increases.

Modern writers, especially those “after about the middle of the seventeenth century” were able to write with an increasingly brazen spirit (Strauss 1952, 33-34). Given that they could afford to write more exoterically, modern writers, Strauss is telling us, must have needed to contend with less persecution than their ancient antecedents. Modern philosophy is also, largely, a decline from the ancients because, for Strauss, “It follows that classical political philosophers see the political things with a freshness and directness which have never been equaled” (Strauss 1959, 27). So the narrative Strauss presents of the relationship between persecution and philosophy demonstrates a correlative decline: as persecution decreases, the need for esoteric writing decreases, but the quality of philosophy also declines. Still, at any given moment, persecution is present albeit in different degrees of severity. Since the literature Strauss is referring to is philosophy, esotericism is the defining characteristic of philosophic literature: that which is not esoteric cannot be considered proper philosophy.

Importantly, esotericism, for Strauss, cannot be confused with any of the varieties of postmodern interpretation. Reading ‘between the lines’ is hardly an invitation to a hermeneutics of polysemy. As Strauss (1959, 68) declares: “The philosophers of the past claimed to have found the truth, and not merely the truth for their times.” Recalling that “political philosophy will then be the attempt to replace opinion” with knowledge, esoteric reading is not a democratic encounter with the text, but an authoritarian dictum issued by an author from long ago who possessed a superhuman mastery of writing.¹⁹ While arguments may persist over what is actually there, between the lines, ultimately, Strauss assures us, there is only one correct answer. There have been some awkward

¹⁹ I will address this point in greater detail in chapter four.

attempts at drawing similarity between postmodern ideas and Straussian thought, but the notion of a common ground is illusory.²⁰ Strauss forbids, in no uncertain terms, the possibility of multiple interpretations. A text does not possess truths; it is endowed with a singular, correct truth, which its author understood as eternal.

Since the object of esotericism is restricted to a singular, univocal truth, its methodology cannot resemble the least bad regime either. Straussian methodology cannot be a democracy, it must bear resemblance to a well-ordered soul; esotericism must have rules.²¹ What are the rules of Strauss's esotericism? Firstly, Strauss tells us that reading between the lines is not an arbitrary technique. Rather the text will issue a demand to the reader when it is appropriate. Thus, Strauss (1952, 30) admonishes that "reading between the lines is strictly prohibited in all cases where it would be less exact than not doing so." But, when would it be appropriate to do so? When will the attentive reader know the text is offering a hint? Precisely, Strauss says, when we think the author has made what we would regard as an error. When something strikes the reader as formally or grammatically wrong, it is a sign, not of error, but of precision:

If a master of the art of writing commits such blunders as would shame an intelligent high school boy, it is reasonable to assume that they are intentional, especially if the author discusses, however incidentally, the possibility of intentional blunders in writing. (Ibid, 30)

Strauss (1939, 503) reiterates this point, that errors in classical texts are mere subterfuge for literary scheming when he remarks of Xenophon that "any hypothesis is preferable to the assumption that he used a literary device awkwardly." The same holds

²⁰ See Norton (2004, 31) and Drury (1997, 117). Both authors note the bizarre manner in which Straussian and postmodern modes of thought appear to resemble one another. Such resemblances are ultimately, and thoroughly, superficial.

²¹ Unlike variants of postmodern hermeneutics, Straussian esotericism does not permit readers to indulge in the play of texts that may result in numerous readings.

true for Maimonides whose “instances of apparently bad composition are so numerous” that they are a sign of a supremely masterful mode of esoteric text (Strauss 1952, 61). Lastly, Strauss tells us that anomaly in Platonic writing is the supreme example of esoteric writing:

Nothing is accidental in a Platonic dialogue; everything is necessary at the place where it occurs. Everything which would be accidental outside of the dialogue becomes meaningful within the dialogue. (Strauss 1964, 60)

Genius, then, will only be confused for error by those who are supposed to be confused. Genius will only be confused with error by those who are unable to recognize genius.

The second rule of esoteric reading is that the literary work must be understood as a whole, and individual tracts or statements within the work must be brought into context with surrounding passages and the work as a whole (Strauss 1952, 30).²² Strauss explains that readers are:

Not entitled to delete a passage, nor emend its text, before one has fully considered all reasonable possibilities of understanding the passage as it stands – one of these possibilities being that the passage may be ironic. (Ibid, 30)

Thirdly, it is an error, according to Strauss, to presume that the views of the author are coextensive with those expressed by a specific character, or even by all the characters within a text (Ibid, 30). This rule has profound implications, particularly for Platonic dialogues. Convention holds that, for the most part, Plato speaks through the character of his teacher, Socrates. Strauss, by invoking this rule displaces the author from his presumed spokesperson.²³ In this way, a philosopher such as Plato can always insulate

²² There is a peculiar analogy here between Strauss’s assertion that a text must be understood in its entirety and Georg Hegel’s (1977: p. 11) famous proclamation that the True is the whole. In both cases it seems that spirit, either of a text or of world history, is only revealed through totality.

²³ Pangle (2006: p. 59) suggests the effect of this reorientation has disturbed so many scholars because “it explodes much of their lives’ work.” It has led Shadia Drury (Postel 2003,

himself, according to Strauss, because the incendiary thoughts of a character, such as his mentor Socrates, the Athenian Stranger of *The Laws*, or the Eleatic Stranger of *Statesman*, are nothing more than the words of an outrageous fictive character.

Then there is the numbers game, the question of numerology. Strauss is often associated with the idea that the great works of political philosophy were constructed according to a numerological code. As Shadia Drury (1997, 60) notes, “Strauss is notorious for attributing significance to the number of the chapters in Machiavelli’s *Prince* and to Locke’s habit of numbering the paragraphs of his *Two Treatises*.” Kim Sorenson (2006, 24), affirming his vision of Strauss’s method, writes, “that numerology, with its religious or Cabalistic stress upon reading between the lines and diving the significance of numeric patterns, would seem to be an important way to uncover the true meaning of a text.” There are a multitude of problems associated with applying numerology to the study of political philosophy. Where, for instance, is the key generally required to validate decryption? How could any philosopher ever understand another without a genius for mathematics? Encryption is not terribly difficult. Decryption, especially across space, time, and culture, is more than most philosophers would probably have time, ability, and energy to do. More importantly, if numerology is central to esotericism, it becomes unclear as to how Strauss understood this approach. In his essay “How to Study The Guide of the Perplexed,” he is clearly paying special attention to chapter headings and their corresponding numbers. If there is a numerological method involved, that is not at all made clear. Additionally, it is even less clear, if there

<http://www.informationclearinghouse.info>) to make the claim that “Strauss argues in his book *The City and Man* (pp. 74-5, 77, 83-4, 97, 100, 111) that Thrasymachus is Plato’s real mouthpiece.” Strauss, however, does not make any such argument explicitly. Without such an overt affirmation, to suggest Plato’s views are identical with those of Thrasymachus is as untenable according to Strauss’s rules as suggesting they are identical with Socrates, or Glaucon, or, for that matter, Euthyphro.

is a method, that it could be applied outside of the works of Maimonides. Though perhaps not inconceivable, it would seem difficult to suggest there was an encryption code common to Moses Maimonides, a medieval Jewish scholar, and Plato, an ancient Greek thinker. In any event, if Strauss has the numeric code or codes, he seems to have been reticent in publicizing it.

The final rule of esotericism is that quantity is not an indicator of the truth. Indeed, just the opposite may be true. As Strauss (1952, 73) explains “secrecy is to a certain extent identical with rarity; what all people say all the time is opposite of a secret.” Moreover, he tells us there is “no better way of hiding the truth than to contradict it” (Ibid, 73). Most of what occurs within a text is exoteric filler designed to lure the inattentive reader away from the truth, while strategically depositing markers intended only for the astute and trustworthy. There is a unity of function and procedure, as Strauss explains:

Only a minority of readers will take the trouble of keeping firmly in mind the results of all chapters and of adding them up. Only a minority of readers will admit that if an author makes contradictory statements on a subject, his views may well be expressed by the statements that occur least frequently or only once, while his view is concealed by the contradictory statements that occur most frequently or even in all cases but one; for many readers do not fully grasp what it means that the truth, or the seriousness, of a proposition is not increased by the frequency with which the proposition is repeated. (Ibid, 184)

Esotericism can succeed, according to Strauss, because inattentive readers leave a space, for philosophers and those they wish to recruit, to privately communicate in the open. In some respects, it resembles the anecdote of a German spy living in London during the Second World War. When neighbors, curious as to why a man of his age was not in military service, asked what he did for a living, he would respond “I’m a spy.” No one believed him.

Ghetto Master: The Rise of Persecution Politics

Persecution gives rise... What does it mean that persecution is fundamental to Strauss's understanding of esotericism? Where does this Straussian form of esotericism lead us? Where does it take political philosophy? In a letter Strauss wrote to Karl Lowith in 1933, as Nazi policies against Jews were beginning to take effect, he argued that any response to the injustice of Hitler's regime had to proceed on the basis of fascist principles. The fact that Jews were being persecuted was not an excuse to lapse into liberalism. "To the contrary," Strauss tells Lowith:

Only from the principles of right, that is from fascist, authoritarian and *imperial* principles, is it possible with seemliness, that is, without resort to the ludicrous and despicable appeal to the *droits imprescriptibles de l'homme* [inalienable rights of man] to protest against the shabby abomination. (Strauss 2009, 82)²⁴

The problem, for Strauss, was not fascism, but that the particular, anti-Semitic expression of fascism that Nazism embodied. It happened to be unfavorable. Beyond even this promotion of fascism, Strauss continued, "There is no reason to crawl to the cross, neither to the cross of liberalism, as long as somewhere in the world there is a glimmer of the spark of *Roman* thought. And even then: rather than any cross, I'll take the ghetto" (Ibid, 82). Strauss's preference for the ghetto over the cross is revealing. The cross is expressive. Jesus was displayed openly, and hence the crucifix becomes a visible sign of anguish. This is precisely the aspect of the cross that Strauss finds

²⁴ "The Letter," was originally published in German under the following citation (Strauss, Leo. 2001. *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 3. Ed. Heinrich Meier. Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler). To my knowledge, the letter exists in the English language nowhere in its entirety outside of Horton's translation. Nicholas Xenos (2004) offers a slightly different translation of certain excerpts, though they are hardly more flattering. For instance, Xenos' translates Strauss to say, "And moreover, better than any cross is the ghetto." Ultimately, the rarity of this essay in English is curious, given its seemingly enthusiastic endorsement of fascism, its utter disdain for the concept of inalienable rights, its total contempt for liberalism, and its promotion of the ghetto.

abhorrent, the idea that one can appeal to rights that supercede the state by pointing to a sign of universal equality, in the case of liberalism, or brotherhood, in the case of Christianity. The ghetto, Strauss's express preference, is the negation of the cross. Rather than display the agony of human beings, ghettos conceal the suffering of those inside. Faced with the equally distasteful alternatives of liberalism on the one hand and misguided fascism on the other, Strauss advocates a third option, that of the ghetto. It is the space of the ghetto that becomes uniquely important for the philosopher as preferable to the various imperfect political regimes of the vulgar.

Now, Strauss laments that in the pre-modern world philosophy maintained a claim to universalism while politics always pertained to the particular. While philosophy could speak to principles that transcended both space and time, politics was always the politics of an specific entity whose space was delimited and whose mortality was given. Strauss tells us this formulation has been, unfortunately, reversed. Politics are now what occupy the universal, and philosophy, with its historicist proclivities can no longer address the transcendental. Strauss, describing the universalism of politics, argues:

Political philosophy has lost its credibility in proportion as politics itself has become more philosophic than ever in a sense. Almost throughout its whole history political philosophy was universal while politics was particular. Political philosophy was concerned with the best or just order of society which is by nature best or just everywhere or always, while politics is concerned with the being and well-being of this or that particular society (a polis, a nation, an empire) that is in being at a given place for some time. Not a few men have dreamt of rule over all human beings by themselves or others but they were dreamers or at least regarded as such by philosophers. In our age on the other hand politics has in fact become universal. Unrest in what is loosely, not to say demagogically, called the ghetto of an American city has repercussions in Moscow, Peking, Johannesburg, Hanoi, London, and other far away places and is linked with them; whether the linkage is admitted or not makes no difference. (Strauss 1983a, 29)

The strategic esotericism imagined by Strauss is an effort to reclaim the lost mantle of universalism for philosophy. It is a rejection of the particularity of historicism and a strategy to seize the seat of modern universal power – the ghetto. The form of esotericism Strauss envisions transports philosophy out of the possibility of existing exoterically. It is relocated, instead, into the space between the lines, a space between the formidable walls of the printed word. From here, philosophy can assume its lost legacy. From here philosophy can influence politics.

Let us imagine the kind of space Strauss creates for political philosophy. Esotericism as a technique pushes philosophic discourse beyond the level of exoteric signifiers, and into a space enveloped by those signifiers. Philosophy is pushed away from maintaining even a tenuous link with the exoteric sign. Philosophy is pushed toward a void. Esoteric teaching resides in a metaphoric space that exists between the lines. It is surrounded by the high walls of exoteric orthodoxy. Philosophy is compelled into a blank space, surrounded on all sides by the imposing presence of exoteric print. And it is the fear of persecution that inaugurates this exodus, the flight from signification. Within this space of esoteric technique, philosophy finds itself the sole, homogenous occupant of an enclosed discursive district. Though philosophers are by no means of the same mind, there is but one kind of subject occupying this terrain, and that is the philosopher. Surrounded on all sides by the opulence of signifiers, philosophy languishes in its bleak environs, wasting away in the ghetto of writing.

A ghetto is a zone within society where the persecuted are sent. In this regard, the ghetto is distinguished from a prison, which is an institution where the prosecuted are sent. The ghetto is unlike other spaces in society where one might find a concentration

of a given group. It is not merely a quarter or neighborhood, and, indeed, it is more than a slum. The ghetto is distinguished from such places by its walls, walls that are forced upon their residents (Borchsenius 1960, 20). Poul Borchsenius tells us:

The ghetto was a home; a refuge, over the centuries, for an alien and hostile world outside...The ghetto was the scene of hope and of despair; its weathered walls bore witness to tears and supplication, but also, and far oftener than we are inclined to think, to both wit and mordant satire. (Ibid, 16)

The ghetto is a place of strange sanctuary brought on by persecution. It is a dangerous refuge built from the warped timber of antinomy.

Even if the ghetto is a place of wit, satire, and irony, the ghetto of writing is a peculiar place in its effort to demarcate, not one ethnicity from another, but philosophy from vulgarity. This dyad, formed along the axis of sacred/profane, creates a profound crisis for Strauss's esotericism that ultimately upsets its claim to specifically political philosophy. If politics is concerned with the various categories of power, then the political is the space where those categories are contested. The political is a space of struggle, distinguished, though perhaps not discretely, from war: the degree to which parties involved can agree on the terms of struggle, hence the legitimacy of the other parties, is the degree to which politics are present; conversely, the degree to which the parties involved dismiss the legitimacy of the other party is the degree to which the condition resembles war.

While war is not necessarily apolitical, Straussian esotericism denies the legitimacy of its opponent. According to Strauss (1959, 125), the conflict between philosophy, the camp to which he clearly feels he belongs, and society is inevitable. Because the philosopher holds heterodox views, and tries to instruct nascent philosophers into the way of heterodoxy, the philosopher is a subverting influence.

Moreover, philosophy is the effort to replace opinion, the element of society, with knowledge. Society, of course, has no say in the status of its opinions. It maintains no right to keep its opinions, to enjoy the humanity of being flawed should its opinions turn out to be erroneous. Society is not called upon to defend its views. Rather, esoteric philosophy surreptitiously examines society from afar, and attempts to impose knowledge. Society cannot speak for itself because, if we follow Strauss, its views are already wrong, merely opinion in the shadow of philosophic knowledge. As Strauss tells us, society is no position to validate its own views:

If principles are sufficiently justified by the fact that they are accepted by a society, the principles of cannibalism are as defensible or sound as those of civilized life. (Strauss 1953, 3)

Later he maintains, "If there is no standard higher than the ideal of our society, we are utterly unable to take a critical distance from that ideal" (Ibid, 3). Something other than society must decide what is in the best interests of society. Philosophy assumes that role, and assumes it in such a manner that society is excluded from the decision making process by means of esoteric writing. The legitimacy of society as capable of discerning its own values is completely denied. Straussian esotericism is apolitical.²⁵

The effect of Strauss's esotericism is to place political philosophy in a literary ghetto that negates the possibility of an agonistic politics. Far from political, the relationship is alternately persecutory and conspiratorial. The vulgar, supposedly, desire the persecution of the heterodox philosophers, while the philosophers attempt to manipulate the opinion of the vulgar from behind their walls. Strauss describes a relationship whereby philosophy and vulgarity have no common ground. Philosophers,

²⁵ The act of excluding society can certainly be understood as political, but esotericism remains an effort to expunge political relations between philosophy and society.

because of the inaccessible nature of their art, occupy a world the vulgar are unable to comprehend. All that remains between the philosophic and the vulgar is a rift between two despised adversaries who do not view one another with legitimacy. Philosophy regards the vulgar as holders of mere opinion, intellectually incapable of comprehending the truth. The vulgar, in turn, regard the philosopher as dangerous purveyors of heterodoxy. Indeed, this is precisely the situation from which Strauss cautions us that persecution will inevitably arise.

Since the role Strauss has set for political philosophy is to replace the opinion of the highest things with the knowledge of the highest things, the relationship between philosophy and society is necessarily asymmetric – it is not even hegemonic; a true hegemon is discernible, esoteric philosophy is invisible. Society is not coequal with philosophy in this relationship; society, and its vulgar constituents are not permitted to question the role or substance of philosophy, while philosophy burdens itself with that task. Because philosophy is moved into the ghetto of writing, beyond the purview of the vulgar, the relationship is moved out of the political. In other words: Strauss offers us a series of assumptions about the essence of human nature, which are then obscured behind problems of hermeneutics. A whole series of political practices, whereby political philosophy reserves the right to manipulate society from afar, emerge from this obfuscation. Regardless of whether or not these practices are subject to dispute, those original premises of human nature are safely entombed behind the walls of the ghetto, segregated from examination or challenge. And again, if one criticizes the presentation of esotericism as Strauss sees it, the automatic response can always be that the critic simply lacks the intellectual tools to understand the presentation. Therefore, the

fundamental problem of Straussian esotericism is that it is an effort to place political philosophy into the universal position of the ghetto where it can manipulate politics from afar and effectively close down the political. Strauss engenders a hermeneutics that are decidedly apolitical. Esotericism is the last political gesture Strauss makes, a foreclosure that irrevocably divides the philosophic from the vulgar, before sealing philosophy into an apolitical ghetto of writing.

Concluding Remarks: The Specter of Hemlock

It cannot be said with any certainty that Leo Strauss wrote esoterically. If discernible evidence existed that sufficiently demonstrated an esoteric subtext, it would be, of course, exoteric. Esoteric writing, by its nature, attempts to elude observation. But the position that Strauss does not seem to have been an esoteric writer does not lend itself to the opposite thesis, that Strauss was the harbinger of a “new kind of enlightenment” (Zucker and Zuckert 2006, 134). Strauss does not teach what is hidden between the lines “freed from its exoteric accoutrements” (Ibid, 134). To do so invites persecution, but also means to deliberately choose exposing society to the corrosive element of philosophy. To teach what is hidden between the lines is to bring philosophy and the city into contact. Strauss advises us the heterodoxy that earns a philosopher persecution is a powerful elixir society cannot safely consume. Introducing that poison openly would be terribly destructive. Strauss could not write esoterically, nor provide us, exoterically, with the great secrets of antiquity. The substance of his writing is something else, a special kind of exotericism, something between esoteric and the revelatory. He offers us interesting and insightful interpretations of great texts, though not with the secrets he has supposedly uncovered.

Who, then, are the philosophers? If we listen to Leo Strauss, then we can never really know. Philosophic wisdom is inaccessible to the vulgar. Only philosophers can discern the writing that is peculiar to philosophy. Even if individuals proclaim themselves philosophers we may only trust or dismiss the assertion. The non-philosopher can suspect heterodox opinion, and this may be enough to incur persecution, but if we are to adhere to Strauss's understanding of the philosopher, suspicion of unconventional views does not mean one has uncovered a philosopher. We must *know* that individual holds authentic philosophic wisdom, wisdom that is inaccessible to the vulgar. Likewise, even an individual who fancies himself or herself a philosopher must come to accept the possibility that they too are actually vulgar. They must accept the possibility that they have not found the true, univocal truth behind the exoteric façade; instead, they have wandered through layers of subterfuge to some diversion of orthodoxy.

Now, it could be argued that, because Straussian thought represents an elitism, the destination for esotericism is not a ghetto, but a luxurious estate. The metaphor of the estate gains traction when one considers that the dweller of a ghetto is compelled by persecution to reside in that unpleasant place, while the philosopher *preempts* persecution; the philosopher avoids persecution by writing esoterically. Moreover, an estate is quite often a place surrounded by high walls.

While this metaphor is indeed apt, I suggest the ghetto is more accurate. There is no necessary correlation between feelings of elitism and locale: the dwellers of a ghetto can and have considered themselves the chosen few, made holy by their suffering. We might recall Nietzsche's (1989, 26) demonstration that while, at one time, "the noble,

powerful, high-stationed and him-minded, who felt and established themselves and their actions as good,” this vision of the good was ultimately supplanted:

The wretched alone are the good; the poor, impotent, lowly alone are the good; the suffering, deprived, sick, ugly alone are pious, alone are blessed by God, blessedness is for them alone – and you, the powerful and noble, are on the contrary the evil, the cruel, the lustful, the insatiable, the godless to all eternity; and you shall be in all eternity the unblessed, accursed, and damned! (Ibid, 34)

Secondly, the move to esotericism, even if preemptive, is still a response to persecution, a response to the specter of hemlock. It is not necessarily the political philosopher who dwells in a ghetto. It is political philosophy that is compelled into a ghetto. In hopes of avoiding his or her own persecution, the philosopher banishes philosophy into this space between the lines. This philosopher may indeed live quite comfortably, and prosper as an elite; philosophy is left to wither in the ghetto of writing. Philosophers who might follow the strategy of Straussian esotericism persecute their own art. Straussian esotericism describes a privileged ghetto where the persecuted elite can find refuge for its art. It is a space for the trustworthy and the intelligent, a space from which those with knowledge can rectify the opinions of the untrustworthy and unintelligent. Esotericism brings philosophy to a gilded ghetto.

Political philosophy is brought to its ghetto by one act of persecution because, ultimately, it is this singular event that reminds political philosophers of the danger inherent to their craft. It is unquestionable that there have been many philosophers who have suffered great persecution, but it is one example that surpasses them all – the death of Socrates.

Political philosophy does not travel into a ghetto freely – it is condemned unto it by its own progenitor. Political philosophy is sent into the ghetto of writing so that its author,

the philosopher, can distance himself or herself from association with its heterodoxy. Socrates stands out as the individual for whom philosophy and the philosopher occupied the same space, and he suffered persecution as a consequence. This is why the ritualized execution of Socrates remains crucial for the narrative. Socrates is exhumed repeatedly, reanimated through apotheosis, and made to die all over again so that Strauss's exhortations of esotericism bear the quality of a master myth. Socrates is the subject of the only holy day in political philosophy, an endless day of deicide when philosophy gathers to celebrate and kill its god. It is the badly abused corpse of Socrates that permits Strauss's esotericism to begin with that the ritual preamble, "persecution gives rise..."

Athens versus Jerusalem: it is a theme that occupies some of Strauss's middle years. For Strauss it is the conflict that arises between philosophy and the law, criticism and tradition. It is also noteworthy as the two cultures that directly influence Strauss's discourse. Yet, even as the nature of Jerusalem was not always compatible with Athens, it was still better than Rome. As Strauss suggests:

The precarious status of philosophy in Judaism as well as in Islam was not in every respect a misfortune for philosophy. The official recognition of philosophy in the Christian world made philosophy subject to ecclesiastical supervision. The precarious position of philosophy in the Islamic-Jewish world guaranteed its private character and therewith its inner freedom from supervision. (Strauss 1952, 21)

It seems, then, there is one other, intervening city that can form an amiable relationship between Athens and Jerusalem. Walls often engender privacy, and it seems that the walls of a ghetto are needed to keep philosophy and tradition at peace with one another. It seems, then, that between Athens and Jerusalem, Strauss demands that we leave room for Prague.

CHAPTER 3
STORMING THE METAPHORTRESS: A POLITICAL THEORY OF PERSECUTION

Case for the Persecution

Meletus, the son of Meletus, of Pittea, impeaches Socrates, the son of Sophroniscus, of Alopece: Socrates is guilty, inasmuch as he does not believe in the gods whom the city worships, but introduces other strange deities; he is also guilty, inasmuch as he corrupts the young men, and the punishment he has incurred is death. (Diogenes Laertius 1901, 72) – Verbiage of the indictment against Socrates

Reports on the first, and perhaps most important, trial in philosophy are missing a crucial component. In “The Apology of Socrates,” Plato omits any case for the prosecution. While the dialogue enshrines the accusations levied against Socrates, the supporting arguments and evidence are not provided. Unlike Plato, Xenophon’s account begins *before* the actual trial, retelling conversations in which Hermogenes fruitlessly attempts to convince Socrates to construct a defense. Yet, similar to Plato, Xenophon then omits the case of the prosecution, and simply recounts his version of Socrates’ defense.

There were, in fact, arguments made on behalf of the prosecution (Colaiaco 2001, 15). This was the normal procedure. Plato, at least, was aware of these arguments because he “attended and followed the proceedings closely” (Ibid, 16). Yet those arguments are almost completely omitted from the extant accounts of the trial. While history acknowledges that the first political philosopher would also become the first known person in Athenian history to be condemned for denying the gods of the city and corrupting the youth, the chain of reasoning that ultimately persuaded the jury to find in favor of conviction remains unavailable to us.²⁶

²⁶ Colaiaco, 2001: p. 16

Perhaps the omission on the parts of Plato and Xenophon was deliberate. Perhaps, that is, they felt the case of the prosecution was unworthy of being dignified with a full account. Yet, for Plato at least, the dialogues of Socrates are replete with characters of exaggerated qualities; he could have easily amplified his case against the prosecutors and for Socrates by transforming them into caricatures as he had done with so many others.²⁷ Instead, Meletus, the most vocal of the prosecutors, only responds to a few Socratic interrogatives, while his collaborators, Anytus and Lycon, are virtually silent.²⁸ Perhaps Plato wished to avoid antagonizing these men who had, after all, successfully condemned Socrates. But, according to Diogenes Laertius, another philosopher, Antisthenes, easily disposed of at least two, and the most prominent, of the prosecutors:

He appears to have been the cause of Anytus's banishment and Meletus's death. For having met with some young men of Pontus, who had come to Athens, on account of the reputation of Socrates, he took them to Anytus, telling them, that in moral philosophy he was wiser than Socrates; and they who stood by were indignant at this and drove him away. (Diogenes Laertius 1901, 220)²⁹

Moreover, Xenophon cites the death of Anytus, the most prominent of the prosecutors, in his version of the trial, suggesting it was written after Anytus could pose any credible threat (Stone 1988, 180).

²⁷ See, for example, Nehamas (1998) who argues that Euthyphro's stupidity must be an exaggeration on the part of Plato. I would add that the characters of Polus and Callicles, from *Gorgias*, though distinct from one another in intellect, are also strikingly immature.

²⁸ I.F. Stone (1988, 174-175) points out that Anytus was a prominent Athenian citizen and general who also appears in Plato's *Meno*, where he issues a thinly veiled threat to Socrates. I will return to the nature of this threat later when I discuss the politics of persecution.

²⁹ There is a second version regarding the fate of Anytus in which he is sent to exile by Athens, unable to find refuge. He arrives at Heraclea, only to be stoned to death by the residents who were "furious over the execution of Socrates" (Stone 1988, 176).

If anything, the accounts of the trial by Plato and Xenophon demonstrate that the prosecutors were hardly to be feared, and that Socrates was his own worst enemy. The fact that Socrates was convicted is not a testament to the supreme skill or fearsome political power of Meletus, Anytus, and Lycon. Rather, his conviction better supports the contention by Xenophon (1990, 49) that “Socrates was so arrogant in court that he invited the jurors’ ill-will and more or less forced them to condemn him.” Socrates did far more to convict Socrates than his errant prosecutors. Plato would have known this.

Regardless of why both Plato and Xenophon neglected, deliberately or otherwise, to include the arguments of the prosecution, their omission imposes a serious constraint on the reader. Miles Burnyeat argues:

Plato’s writing in the *Apology* in the form of a defence speech by Socrates puts the reader – any reader – in the position of juror. To read the *Apology*, whether in ancient times or today, is to be challenged to pass judgment on Socrates. (Burnyeat 2002, 134)

Burnyeat offers a keen insight. Plato summons the reader for jury duty to decide the guilt or innocence of Socrates. Yet, at the same time, Plato sabotages the trial. In order to be effective and just, a contemporary juror must have access to all of the available evidence. For whatever reason, Plato withholds that evidence. Burnyeat (2002, 135) contends that the evidence against Socrates is presented in Aristophanes “Clouds”, though he also characterizes this presentation of Socrates as a “caricature.”³⁰ But with the actual argument of the prosecution is not presented, at least not within the pages of “The Apology of Socrates,” no jury of readers could reach a conclusion satisfactorily.

³⁰ Incidentally, Burnyeat concludes that we can affirm that Socrates was guilty of the charges against him, though undeserving of death. While I am apt to agree with this position, any such verdict can only be the result of taking the wider catalog of Socratic dialogues into consideration. The evidence, when strictly confined to “The Apology of Socrates” is insufficient and inconclusive.

Through the writings of both Plato and Xenophon, it could be concluded that Socrates gave an unsatisfying defense during the trial, but that does not necessarily lead to the presumption that the arguments of the prosecution are compelling. In effect, what Plato offers the readers of “The Apology of Socrates” are a series of charges without corroborating evidence. In other words, with the absence of supporting arguments, the charges can only appear unsubstantiated and baseless. As far as the reader of the dialogue can perceive, the case for the prosecution becomes little more than a legal pretext for false accusations; rather than a case for the prosecution, it becomes a *case for the persecution*. That is to say, absent evidence and argument to support the accusations, the trial of Socrates appears as an unjust, tyrannical attack against the freedom of inquiry.

Deeply influenced by the trial of Socrates, the tribulations of other philosophers, and the events of his own life, Leo Strauss would write, two and a half millennia after the death of Socrates, that philosophers have concealed their true views in order to avoid persecution. Given the heterodox nature of their knowledge, philosophers such as Plato would write esoterically, hiding their highest truths “exclusively between the lines.” This technique of secret writing would allow philosophers to communicate with each other while avoiding the “foolish majority” of mankind and the cleverer but immoral censor of a hostile regime. The specter of persecution, Strauss says, “gives rise” to esoteric writing.

The details of Leo Strauss’s biography gesture toward a curious aporia in his political thought. Strauss (1997a, 312) recounted that, at the age of six, he met survivors of a recent Russian pogrom who had come to his father’s house. In adulthood,

he was keenly aware of anti-Semitism in Germany, and ultimately went into exile to avoid it. As a refugee in the United States, Strauss found himself in a different kind of exile; here he was marginalized by his heterodox views of political philosophy. In a letter to Karl Lowith in 1946, Strauss writes:

As you can see from my handwriting, I am not at all well. One grows older and older, and nothing gets finished. Life here in this country is terribly hard for people like me. One must struggle for the most modest working conditions, and one is defeated in every battle. I would like to print my study of Socratic politics, which you mention. But it is impossible to print it here. If I had time I would translate it back into the original language and try to have it published in Switzerland. Here, what does not fit the pattern is lost. (Strauss 1983b, 105)

Because of his ethnicity, and because of his political philosophy, Strauss's life was replete with struggles. Strauss was familiar with persecution, and it is not terribly surprising to see why he might write *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, ultimately arriving at some of its controversial tenets. What is surprising, however, is the prominent lacuna of persecution itself. Strauss vividly details an art of writing, and suggests its motivation is persecution. Yet, a formal, theoretical treatment of persecution itself remains strangely absent.³¹ This is particularly vexing, again, given Strauss's personal familiarity with this deeply political phenomenon. Despite the profound relationship between persecution and philosophic writing he imagines, and despite the personal role persecution played in his own life, Strauss only considers the concept coincidentally. By that, I mean to say that Strauss only describes the effects of persecution, the influence it has on philosophers and their writing. The meaning of persecution remains unexplored.

³¹ It should be noted that the lack of any formal discussion relating to persecution is not peculiar to Strauss. Almost nowhere is it afforded a formal theoretical treatment.

What is persecution and what can we learn from Leo Strauss about this important political concept? The aim of this chapter is to offer a theory of persecution based, in part, on the conceptual traces offered by Strauss while using the trial of Socrates, an event all-too familiar to Strauss, as evidence. Again, Strauss offers us a vision of the effects of persecution. This essay seeks to use those effects in order to address the concept of persecution directly. However, I depart from Strauss with regard to the politics of persecution. Strauss supposes there are certain requirements that must be met before persecution can take place. It is because of these demands on a potential persecutor that esoteric writing can succeed. Confining my argument largely to the trial of Socrates, I will argue against the necessity of these requirements.

In the following section, I will elaborate on the concept of persecution, partly using Strauss's thought. Next, I will present the persecutions of Socrates, in the works of Plato and Aristophanes, in order to demonstrate that Strauss's proposed requirements do not always constrain the persecutor; rather, they can become yet another tool of persecution. Finally, I will discuss the politics of persecution by identifying the dynamics of two principal persecutors that Strauss identifies, the censor and the mob. I argue that persecution is an act of tyranny, the political tool *par excellence* of the vulgar, which results in injustice. Esotericism succeeds, according to Strauss, because it establishes barriers between the heterodoxy of a philosopher and the vulgar mob, or censor of a despotic regime. Before they can initiate persecution, the mob or censor are obligated to surmount those barriers and produce proof that the philosopher is a holder of heterodoxy. Strauss presumes too much on behalf of the unjust. Accordingly, I suggest that Strauss inadvertently reverses the literary strategy of Plato and Xenophon by

presuming the need for evidence; persecution, for Strauss always adopts the form of prosecution.

The Bastard of Heterodoxy

In the essay, "Why We Remain Jews," Strauss (1997a, 315) offers a simple answer to the question of how Jews can avoid discrimination: avoid being recognized as a Jew. The logic is simple enough. Discrimination is based on differences, and if the outward differences are concealed, then putting discrimination into practice is made more difficult. To avoid appearing as a Jew, Strauss suggests a list of possible techniques: "The most well-known of such techniques are mixed marriages, changes of name, and childless marriages" (Ibid, 315). However, Strauss acknowledges that these are individual remedies, which do not address the endemic problem of discrimination against a people. Not everyone is apt to have a childless marriage, which, at any rate, hardly addresses discrimination in an appropriate fashion.

Indeed, the problem of the childless marriage is the same problem faced by philosophy. Whereas individual Jews can opt to have childless marriages in order to go unrecognized and avoid discrimination, this tactic would present Jews as a whole with extinction. For the same reason, philosophy cannot afford to give up its practice of midwifery. If the effort to avoid persecution leaves philosophers completely silent, then philosophy faces extinction. The philosopher needs to communicate in order for philosophy to propagate itself. Persecution, for Strauss, has the effect of compelling esoteric writing, a means for philosophers to avoid maltreatment, while simultaneously permitting the birth of new thought.

Strauss offers us several important insights into the nature of persecution. First among these is that persecution is a consequence of heterogeneity. Persecution is in

fact and in deed a phenomenon that appears across history and toward different objects of scorn. It can pertain to race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and creed. The narrower focus of Strauss's inquiry concerns a particular expression of persecution against what he calls "free inquiry." As Strauss states:

Nor should we overlook the fact, not sufficiently stressed by all authorities, that religious persecution and persecution of free inquiry are not identical. There were times and countries in which all kinds, or at least a great variety of kinds of worship were permitted, but free inquiry was not. (Strauss 1952, 33)

While Strauss understands the persecution of religion and free inquiry as different, both arise as a consequence of difference in views, or heterodoxy.³² Indeed, the attack on philosophers by the vulgar appears because philosophy is understood to oppose the tenets of orthodox religion.

Thus philosophy, which is essentially incompatible with acceptance of the gods of the city, was as such subject to persecution. Philosophers had therefore to conceal if not the fact that they were philosophers, at least the fact that they were unbelievers. (Strauss 1939, 534)

In this sense, philosophy is subject to mistreatment because religious and philosophic persecution is conflated, by which I mean that philosophers would be persecuted, according to Strauss because of their stances relative to religion, because they were "unbelievers." The free inquiry of philosophy, according to Strauss, is in opposition to the religious orthodoxy of the city. Hence, the philosopher, in reference to religion, holds differing views from those of the city. Those views may amount to atheism or perhaps a different religion, but, in any event, the city reacts to them with hostility. Therefore and in spite of the fact that not all differences are persecuted, heterogeneity is necessary for

³² Generally speaking, a person is not persecuted for the reason of holding the same view as their persecutor.

persecution. Importantly, I want to stress that heterogeneity does not necessarily result in persecution, nor should it. But for Strauss, persecution does not exist without heterogeneity.

The second feature of persecution Strauss discusses lies in its effects; persecution often causes fear. Fear is not a requirement to be persecuted, though the specter of suffering persecution will often cause fear. History is replete with instances of martyrs who, outwardly at least, seemed unafraid of the consequences for expressing unconventional views. Despite their courage, or indifference to suffering, they were harassed, tortured, and sometimes killed for their beliefs. Such cases are remarkable, and, quite often, exceptional. Socrates, according to the accounts of Plato and Xenophon, seemed unafraid of death. Can it still be said that he was persecuted? The answer is yes; persecution is essentially unfair treatment, regardless of whether or not one is afraid of it. As Strauss (1952, 34) notes, philosophers “were convinced that philosophy as such was suspect to, and hated by, the majority of men.” Put into action, the hostility of the vulgar majority poses a peril to the philosopher. While Strauss (1939, 535) believes philosophers of antiquity felt it was their moral obligation to keep the truth from the vulgar majority, the specter of persecution makes it “a matter of fear and safety.” Most of us would fear harassment, torture, and death, even in the service of our most cherished ideals. It is not at all clear when or if fear will be produced. This may be a function of the actual treatment that can be expected, and individual tolerance for suffering. Nevertheless, persecution, however it is ultimately expressed, is something that often engenders fear.

While fear is not a requirement for persecution, it is a requirement for esoteric writing. Esoteric writing is a product of the fear that one's heterodox views, if discovered, will lead to maltreatment. Strauss notes;

For the influence of persecution on literature is precisely that it compels all writers who hold heterodox views to develop a peculiar technique of writing, the technique which we have in mind when speaking of writing between the lines. (Strauss 1952, 24)

No one writes esoterically until they first fear persecution. Then it becomes a matter of compulsion. The fear of persecution compels not merely some writers, but all writers with unconventional views, to conceal their true thoughts for fear of reprisal. As Strauss (1952, 25) says, "persecution, then, gives rise to a peculiar technique of writing."

Although the relationship between persecution and esotericism is necessary, it is not direct. Persecution is the necessary cause of esoteric writing. No philosopher *needs* to write esoterically until presented with the problem of a hostile society or regime. But, in itself, persecution cannot cause esotericism until fear sufficiently motivates those who are being persecuted. For example, if *Gorgias* and *Meno* are to be believed, Socrates was warned about incurring the wrath of his enemies. According to Strauss (1966, 314), Aristophanes' "Clouds" is at least in part a warning to Socrates to conduct himself more discretely lest he suffer harsh consequences analogous to the immolation of the Thinkery.³³ Despite these warnings, despite, that is, the threat of imminent persecution, Socrates, according to Xenophon (1990, 46), concluded that "the time had come to die." Socrates was unafraid, according to these reports, and, therefore, was unmoved to

³³ Specifically, Strauss says, Aristophanes "ridicules Socrates, not for trying to keep his teaching secret from the uninitiated, but for his ineptitude in this respect."

modify his approach to philosophy. Plato, on the other hand, considered the philosopher in a Greek city to be in a “grave danger” (Strauss 1952, 21). As Strauss explains:

The difference between the way of Socrates and the way of Plato points back to the difference between the attitude of the two men toward the actual cities. The crucial difficulty was created by the political or social status of philosophy: in the nations and cities of Plato’s time, there was no freedom of teaching and of investigation. Socrates was therefore confronted with the alternative, whether he should choose security and life, and thus conform with the false opinions and the wrong way of life of his fellow-citizens, or else non-conformity and death. (Strauss 1952, 16)

Socrates chose the danger of non-conformity. For Strauss (Ibid, 21), it was “the art of Plato” that arises as a reaction to that danger. So, whereas Socrates was unmoved by fear, in Strauss’s estimation, Plato clearly was.

Finally, we can learn from Strauss that persecution is always embedded in practice. It is always expressed through some kind of activity that assumes the character of maltreatment. Strauss (1952, 32) asserts, “The term persecution covers a variety of phenomena, ranging from the most cruel type, as exemplified by the Spanish Inquisition, to the mildest, which is social ostracism.” Firstly, it needs to be emphasized that persecution “covers a variety of phenomena.” In other words, it is never to be found independently from other activities, such as those mentioned by Strauss: ostracism, torture, execution – persecution can only appear in conjunction with some practice. Even if we can imagine persecution in its most abstract, ideal form, we cannot claim that persecution occurred if there was not an act of ostracism, physical violence, or other, similar deed. Secondly, Strauss, it seems, begins with what he sees as the “most cruel” type of persecution, execution, and ends with what is more commonplace and tolerable, ostracism. Esotericism is conceived of as a technique to elude the “greatest disadvantage – capital punishment for its author” (Ibid, 25). The range indicates

frequency beginning with what Strauss saw as the most pressing problem for philosophers, the cruelty of torture and death, and ascending toward social ostracism, which philosophers are forced to contend with more frequently. Regardless of what form it embodies, persecution must be provided some corporeal form in order to be practiced.

In summation, we can learn from Leo Strauss that heterogeneity is a necessary element of persecution, with heterodoxy as the necessary element in the persecution of free inquiry. Moreover, persecution often causes fear, and, finally, persecution is always embedded in practice. I will now turn to the trial of Socrates in order to advance the concept of persecution beyond the point where it has been left by Strauss.

The Mistrials of Socrates: Persecution in the Writings of Plato and Aristophanes

What does the trial of Socrates teach us about the nature of persecution? In particular, I want to suggest it demonstrates for us that Strauss thinks too highly of a persecutor, that he gives the persecutor too much credit for adhering to legal principles and the immutability of law. In fact, the trial of Socrates demonstrates that a critical component of persecution is its unjust nature. Accordingly, persecution is not necessarily bound to conform to law, morality, or rules. I examine the trial in the context of its precursory conversations detailed in Plato's *Meno*. Then I compare the Platonic account of the trial with another narrative in which Socrates suffers persecution, Aristophanes' *Clouds*.

While *Meno* is not an indictment, it is the only extant literature in which the most prominent of Socrates' accusers, Anytus, is given voice.³⁴ He is praised by Socrates as

³⁴ Again, Meletus speaks briefly in "The Apology of Socrates," and he is mentioned in "Euthyphro." Lycon never speaks.

a man of good family, good judgment, and a “modest citizen with no arrogance.” There is nothing outwardly ironic about that characterization. Socrates enlists Anytus to aid in the discussion he and Meno are having concerning whether or not virtue is teachable. Socrates contends that virtue cannot be taught, and in this sense, while it does not seem that he describes his future prosecutor ironically, his *use* of Anytus is quite ironic. Again, the question at hand concerns if virtue can be taught. Socrates asks Anytus the following: “Please help us, Anytus – Meno, who is a friend of your family, and myself – to find out who may be the teachers of this subject” (Plato 1956, 144). Subsequently, their conversation goes nowhere beyond a transparent threat made by Anytus against Socrates. In other words, Anytus is asked to instruct Socrates and Meno on the subject, to teach them about who can be teachers of virtue, and ultimately teaches them nothing. The use of Anytus is ironic because it is meant to show us that not only is virtue unteachable, but even teaching who the teachers of virtue are cannot be taught.

Anytus does not teach about virtue or about who the teachers of virtue are. Instead, he becomes angered by Socrates’ insistence that “there turn out to be neither teachers nor students of virtue, so it would appear that virtue cannot be taught” (Ibid, 152). *Meno*, it appears, is set after *Gorgias*; Socrates refers to Gorgias as “nearly seventy when he died” (Ibid, 146). In *Meno* he states that there are “plenty of good statesman here in Athens,” something he explicitly denies in *Gorgias*, when he claims, “we know of no one who has been a good statesman in this city” (Plato 1956, 148 and Plato 2004, 120). Instead, he appends his remark saying that, while there are indeed good statesmen, there are no teachers of virtues such as the manly art of politics (Plato 1956, 148).

For his part, Anytus takes this as an assault on the goodness of Athens. He joins the conversation late, after Socrates has already declared himself to “share the poverty of my fellow countrymen in this respect, and confess to my shame that I have no knowledge about virtue at all” (Ibid, 115).³⁵ Nevertheless, he instinctively seems to recognize that Socrates’ musings are critical against the character of the city. Anytus questions Socrates’ patriotism, asking, “Would you deny that there have been many good men in our city?” (Ibid, 148) Again, Socrates responds that there have been good men, but no teachers of virtue. Socrates then attempts to expound upon this discrepancy by pointing to several prominent citizens, men of good repute, who have had lackluster sons.³⁶ The response does little to exonerate Socrates from Anytus’ charge of harboring unpatriotic sentiments. Ominously, Anytus states:

You seem to me, Socrates, to be too ready to run people down. My advice to you, if you will listen to it, is to be careful. I dare say that in all cities it is easier to do a man harm than good, and it is certainly so here, as I expect you know yourself. (Plato 1956, 150)

The passage could be interpreted as a warning that Socrates runs the risk of harming others with his inquiries. It could also, and concomitantly, be interpreted as a risk that those inquiries of Socrates run the risk of inviting harm onto himself.

Anytus offers us an important insight concerning persecution: harming an individual, which Plato’s Socrates understood as an act of injustice, is easier than doing good for someone (Plato 1945, 14). Why would it be more difficult to practice acts of

³⁵ This occurs at line 71B. Anytus “has just sat down beside us” at line 90A

³⁶ Aristotle (1991, 178) famously describes the sons of Socrates as exhibiting “foolishness and dullness.” Xenophon (1990, 49) also offers evidence that the pattern of prominent fathers with foolish sons characterized Anytus whose own son became a drunk who was “utterly worthless to his country.” Given that his son was, at some point, under the tutelage of Socrates, this may have been another motivation for Anytus to dislike the philosopher.

goodness than harm or injustice? In Platonic thought, good is the apex of knowledge. Few can traverse the difficult passage from the lowest to the highest forms of knowledge. But this is a metaphysical response, and Anytus offers us a decidedly political proposition. *In all cities*, he says, harm is easier to visit upon a man than good. Hence, in political life, wherever there are politics, persecution, which is injustice, is easier to carry out than prosecution, which Socrates would understand as correcting a malady in the soul. In *Gorgias*, he states:

On the other hand, Polus, my opinion is that the wrongdoer, the criminal, is miserable in any case, but more miserable if he does not pay the penalty and suffer punishment for his crimes, and less miserable if he does pay the penalty and suffer punishment at the hands of gods and men. (Plato 2004, 47)

Prosecution is concerned with what is right. It means having foreknowledge of what is right and arriving at a fitting punishment. As a contrapositive, persecution is not concerned with what is right, and is not bound by the need to arrive at a fitting punishment because there can never be a fitting punishment for meting out injustice. Acts carried out in the interest of perpetrating injustice are always inappropriate.

Consequently, persecution is not subject to the same rigors as prosecution. The Platonic and Xenophonic accounts of Socrates' persecution are situated in a legal context, a trial. Anytus, Meletus, and Lycon use the trial as a crass instrument to harm Socrates. But did this persecution have to take shape in the form of a trial? Crito, for one, seems to be doubtful. He complains to Socrates that the lawsuit against him could have been prevented (Plato 1998c, 103). If the enemies of Socrates had been thwarted in their legal efforts, if, that is, Socrates had acted with greater "manliness" as Crito would have preferred, and blocked the indictment against him, would that have effectively eliminated all avenues of attack against Socrates? Not at all. In fact, the

persecution of Socrates, imagined by a different author is just as easily situated in an illegal context as it is in a legal context.

Aristophanes occupies a powerful role in Leo Strauss's political thought. He is a teacher to Socrates, even if the student is slow to digest the lessons (Strauss 1966, 6 and 312). He also teaches us something important about the nature of persecution. Like Plato, Aristophanes constructs a vision of Socrates suffering persecution. In *Clouds*, written more than two decades before the events of *The Apology*, Socrates is presented as a ridiculous, naturalist philosopher. He conducts outrageous experiments in his "Thinkery" and professes firstly to "tread on air and contemplate the sun" (Aristophanes 1998, 124). Importantly, he is also a sophist (Ibid 160).³⁷

For a price, the Aristophanic Socrates agrees to teach the foolish and immoral Strepsiades how to use the power of sophisticated speech for the purpose of evading debts incurred by his profligate son. In essence, Aristophanes presents us with a bifurcated vision of Socrates, a naturalist philosopher and a sophist combined into one person. It is a man who is genuinely at odds with himself, pulled in different directions. His naturalism is concerned with what is true about the universe, while his sophism rejects the possibility that truth exists for man. This Socrates' philosophy is irreconcilable with his politics. At one moment he earnestly declares "ethereal vortex" is the ordering principle of the universe (Ibid, 131). However ridiculous its guise, it is the assertion of a naturalist pointing out the facts. Later, Socrates introduces the impressionable Pheidippides to the Just Speech and the Unjust Speech from whom the young man will learn to aid his father, Strepsiades, in evading the family debts. Socrates

³⁷ Socrates declares that he will teach Pheidippides to be a sophist and accepts a gift for teaching Pheidippides.

does not guide Pheidippides in discerning between the two speeches. He merely arranges for their introductions and departs. So seductive are the teachings of the Unjust Speech that they persuade even the Just Speech to abandon its life of austerity and moderation.

In the end, the teachings of Socrates, although successful in helping Strepsiades shirk his obligations to his debtors, bring the foolish man to ruin. Although he was unable to properly learn the Unjust Speech, Pheidippides excels at it. Consequently, their family is destroyed as the young man no longer feels obligated to follow tradition. Strepsiades blames Socrates despite having repeatedly implored him to teach Pheidippides. In a fit of rage, he summons Xanthias, his slave and instructs him to go to the Thinkery and destroy its roof. As his commands are being obeyed, Strepsiades calls for another slave to bring him a torch, which he uses to set the Thinkery ablaze. A student emerges to protest, saying, "You'll destroy us, you'll destroy us!", to which Strepsiades responds, "Yet, that's the very thing I do wish for." When Socrates himself emerges and demands to know what Strepsiades is doing, the old man replies, "I tread on air and contemplate the sun." He replies by mocking the foundational premise of Socrates' naturalism. This act of mockery conjoins the violence of burning down the Thinkery with the trouble caused by Socrates' philosophy. It is an act of persecution, an attack against heterodoxy. At the closing of the story, The Thinkery burns to the ground while Strepsiades and Xanthias pursue Socrates and his students to an uncertain end.

The fate given to Socrates is that of unjust man receiving injustice at the hands of another unjust man, Strepsiades. Socrates is unjust because he allows injustice to be taught. Strepsiades is unjust because he desires to learn injustice. In this sense, I agree

with Strauss (1966, 46), who states, “A just man would never have thought of ruining Socrates because he would not have any dealings with Socrates, and hence would never have acquired knowledge of Socrates’ lack of piety and justice.” In the end, Strepsiades wants revenge over the calamity for which he is partially, if not largely, to blame. He identifies Socrates’ teachings, the science of the Thinkery, as the source of his troubles, and it is worth noting that he first attacks the edifice, and not the man. It is only after the physical school has been burned away that he pursues Socrates.

Aristophanes was a conservative thinker. He warns us, and perhaps the real Socrates, about the dangers of introducing novelties and dislocating the foundations of tradition. Similar to Plato and Xenophon, he calls the reader to sit in judgment of Socrates. Unlike the disciples of Socrates, Aristophanes gives us a clear case to be made against the philosopher. Still, this is no prosecution. *Clouds* does not represent an effort to reach a just solution or right punishment because there are no just individuals anywhere in the story. Socrates is never given justice. After all, he is dealt with by Strepsiades, a man who refused to learn anything from the Just Speech. Moreover, he is only partially versed in the Unjust Speech. Put differently, Strepsiades only has knowledge of injustice, and it is incomplete knowledge at that. Strepsiades cannot even do justice to carrying out injustice. And it is Strepsiades, a man who does not understand Socrates’ teachings, along with Xanthias, a slave who knows nothing about Socrates whatsoever, who burns down the Thinkery.

The school is destroyed and Socrates is assaulted by ignorance. It is an attack on heterodoxy by men who do not fully understand what they are attacking but attack it nonetheless. They are not restrained by uncertainty. They are not hindered by an

incomplete knowledge concerning the depth of Socrates' impiety. It may, in fact, be worse than they suspect. Doubt, or the possibility of insufficient evidence, is no concern. The persecutors eagerly proceed on the basis of incomplete knowledge, fragments and shadows of understanding.³⁸

From Aristophanes, then, we learn several important points about the nature of persecution. Strepsiades and Xanthias were not compelled to read esoterically or submit to rigorous criteria of evidence and proof. They proceeded from ignorance, one partial, the other total. As a fool and a woeful student, Strepsiades could only guess that Pheidippides represented the perfection of Socratic teaching and its caustic influence. And how do Strepsiades and Xanthias proceed? They do not confine themselves to taking legal action. Aristophanes, having endured two separate lawsuits in his own lifetime, was keenly aware of the Athenian courts. His narrative, however, does not end with Socrates being prosecuted. Rather, his school is burned down and he is chased, presumably out of town. Strepsiades attacks him for his thinking outside of the law. The attack is both persecutory and illegal. Aristophanes teaches us that persecution need not confine itself to the use or misuse of the law. Persecution can be found in the law as well as outside of it. Had Strepsiades simply stormed into the Thinkery and stabbed Socrates to death, it might have set a different and decidedly uncomedic tone, but there is little legal difference between murder and arson.

Another important lesson we can draw from *Clouds* is hidden in the character of Socrates. Again, he has two vocations, naturalist philosopher and sophist. We might

³⁸ Pheidippides may represent the perfection of Socratic training, but without the actual knowledge of Socrates' teaching, Strepsiades is in no position to assert the certainty of this. He can only assume his son's impiety is the necessary consequence of the Thinkery's heterodoxy.

conclude that Aristophanes fundamentally misunderstood the activity of Socrates. The comic-poet mistook Socrates for a sophist, when this was clearly not the case. Regardless of whether or not the characterization of Socrates is an error, we can still impute a powerful lesson. Both philosopher and sophist can be persecuted. It does not make a difference if one actively subscribes to the idea of the truth or practices a mercenary skill that affirms little more than can be measured by man. All that is needed to persecute is the suspicion, no matter how ignorantly conceived, of some form of heterodoxy. Between the Platonic account of the trial of Socrates, and Aristophanes' *Clouds*, we see that persecution can be either lawful or lawless, easier than justice to practice, and indifferent to the peculiarity of vocation or activity. Rules are unnecessary. All that seems to be necessary, the lowest common denominator between the various persecutions Socrates suffered, are unjust individuals exercising power on ideas they find distasteful.

The Politics of Persecution

Persecution, according to Leo Strauss, is the tool of the vulgar. Accordingly, it is the tool of those, by his own estimation, who are ruled by immoderate souls and imperfect knowledge of virtues, including justice. Philosophers, who act from the knowledge of justice, do not persecute the vulgar. Rather, it is those who are hurt by the unpleasant truths who would seek to retaliate against the purveyors of pain. Truth is, apparently, never unpleasant to the philosopher. It is the vulgar, those who cling to opinion, that are hurt by truth. Yet the philosopher, who, by definition for Strauss, is moral, never persecutes. Only the vulgar persecutes.

Strauss imagines that, at least in a legal context, persecution cannot proceed until certain requirements have first been met. Esoteric writing can succeed in safeguarding

a philosopher because it prevents a vulgar mob, or the censor of a despotic regime, from producing proof that the author of a philosophic text rejects the prevailing orthodoxy. Certain standards of evidence have to be met on the part of those subscribing to orthodoxy before action can be taken against a philosopher. Strauss explains:

Another axiom, but one which is meaningful only so long as persecution remains within the bounds of legal procedure is that a careful writer of normal intelligence is more intelligent than the most intelligent censor, as such. For the burden of proof rests with the censor. It is he, or the public prosecutor, who must prove that the author holds or has uttered heterodox views. In order to do so he must show that certain literary deficiencies of the work are not due to chance, but that the author used a given ambiguous expression deliberately, or that he constructed a sentence badly on purpose. That is to say, the censor must prove not only that the author is intelligent and a good writer in general, for a man who intentionally blunders in writing must possess the art of writing, but above all that he was on the usual level of his abilities when writing the incriminating words. But how can that be proved, if even Homer nods from time to time? (Strauss 1952, 26)

What is it, then, that Strauss is demanding of a persecutor? Strauss insists, repeatedly, that what is needed is "proof." Before they can act against the philosopher, a censor or public prosecutor must have evidence sufficient to constitute proof. Without it, the censor is thwarted.

Of course the production of such proof for an intelligent censor, and certainly for a vulgar mob, is impossible. Indeed, Strauss (1952, 7-8 and 1959, 223) explains that the majority of scholars, those who have devoted considerable time and energy toward interpreting philosophic texts, have failed to detect the subterfuge of esotericism. If such attentive readers are fooled, then the inattentive and immoral are fully barred from decrypting the secret truths. In effect, Strauss is demanding that the vulgar mob or the immoral censor become a philosopher, or at least have the interpretive skills of one, before they can act on their intolerance. In order to know that a philosopher holds

forbidden views, the orthodox must first discover those views, and for Strauss the only avenue for doing so, decrypting esoteric writing, is effectively closed to all but genuine philosophers. The vulgar are, by definition, inattentive readers. The censor is, by definition, less intelligent than the philosopher whose secrets he or she is trying to uncover. Esotericism succeeds, according to Strauss because the difference between the philosopher and the non-philosopher “is a difference not of degree but of kind” (Strauss 1989, 68).

Again, referring to the frustrations a censor will have in attempting to confirm that a philosopher holds heterodox views, Strauss asks us, “But how can that be proved, if even Homer nods from time to time?” The question, really, is not as to *how* that can be proved, but *why* it must be proven. Strauss asserts that the mob and the censor lack the talents of a philosopher. Yet, despite their vulgarity and hostility to the truth of philosophy, he still assigns the enemies of philosophy with the ethical commitments of a philosopher. Despite, that is, being vulgar and immoral, the mob and the censor are somehow committed to the earnest discovery of proof.

By establishing these requirements, Strauss presumes far too much of the unjust. Firstly, Strauss seems to presume that the context for legal procedure in which an inquisition is taking place is an enlightened society in which the law is inspired by justice. Yet it seems just as likely in a society where heterodoxy is a punishable offense that the law could have no real tether to justice, but would simply be another expression of the “interest of the stronger.” For example, in totalitarian states, the very regimes Strauss is considering in *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, the façade of legal procedure is constantly propped up. Stalinist and Nazi regimes, divided as they were by

ideology, seem strangely united in their use of trials to purge political opponents. Trials would be little more than formality, one stop on the way to the bloody, bullet-ridden preordained conclusion of the firing squad wall. Such persecutions can be fully legal, keeping in accordance with established law. Yet no one of good sense would for a moment conclude that such trials were fair.

I would argue that the censor or the public prosecutor, even in a society with a sophisticated legal system, is not always bound by rigorous standards of proof. Indeed, sometimes a censor will abide by high evidentiary standards, but we cannot presume that all censors, or all regimes for that matter, attend to the same scruples. Censors acting within a legal framework are not necessarily committed to high standards of evidence. Censors are not philosophers. They do not need to adhere to the strict rules of esoteric reading that Strauss proposes. Instead, the censor has his or her own calculus, potentially bearing a much lower threshold for action. *Persecution is an act of tyranny*. It is the tyrannical act of a vulgar mob or the regime of a despot. As such, it is not bound, at all times and in all places, by necessary standards of evidence, legal procedure, or morals. By its very nature, persecution is unjust and does not submit itself to the standards of right. There is no such thing as a just persecution. As Strauss tells us:

Tyranny is defined in contradistinction to kingship: kingship is such rule as is exercised over willing subjects and is in accordance with the laws of the cities; tyranny is such rule as is exercised over unwilling subjects and accords, not with laws, but with the will of the ruler. (Strauss 2000, 68)

Laws can be unjust, and just laws can be subverted. As Plato shows, laws can easily become the instrument of tyranny. In *The Republic of Plato*, Thrasymachus advises us that justice, and the corresponding laws and rules of the city, are “nothing but the

interest of the stronger party” (Plato 1945, 18). He emphasizes that the laws which arise, merely reflect that interest and so “a democracy makes democratic laws, a despot autocratic ones, and so on” (Ibid, 18). Inversely, in *Gorgias*, Callicles explains:

Conventions, on the other hand, are made, in my opinion, by the weaklings who form the majority of mankind. They establish them and apportion praise and blame with an eye to themselves and their own interests, and in an endeavor to frighten those who are stronger and capable of getting the upper hand they say that taking an excess of things is shame and wrong, and that wrongdoing consists in trying to have more than others. (Plato 2004, 67)

Interestingly, Socrates refutes Callicles’ claim by applying the logic of Thrasymachus. He points out that since the majority of mankind subjugated those who Callicles claims are strong, it must actually be the majority that is stronger. Hence, Socrates concludes, “Then the laws imposed by the majority are laws imposed by the stronger” (Ibid, 74). However, the existence of laws does not preclude the capriciousness of tyranny. Laws can be used, by the despot or the mob, to satisfy desires rather than promote the good.

Understanding persecution as an act of tyranny, by a despot or a mob, lends itself to some important conclusions. Returning to *Meno*, Anytus issued his threat to Socrates, warning that carrying out acts of injustice, harming man, was always easier than doing good. In Plato’s dialogues, it is easier because doing harm is always unjust, and injustice is not bound by the stringent moral and epistemological requirements of practicing justice (Plato 1945, 14).³⁹ *Persecution is always unfair or unjust treatment. It is easier to practice than justice; while virtue requires knowledge, vice can be both deliberate or inadvertent. For Plato, one must know what justice is in order to practice it.*

³⁹ Specifically, Socrates advises Polemarchus, “So if the just man is good, the business of harming people, whether friend or not, must belong to his opposite, the unjust.”

Vice, however, can be a product of deliberate action or ignorance.⁴⁰ Moreover, persecution is easier because, as a variety of injustice, it is not necessarily fettered by rules. In fact, the violation of rules can be the practice in which persecution is embedded. For example, the Committee on Un-American Activities helmed by Senator Joseph McCarthy was deemed to be unconstitutional only after years of systematically abusing the law. Evidence against communist infiltrators was fabricated or non-existent, and yet thousands of lives were ruined (Stone 2005, 1395).⁴¹

Persecution can occur officially, as in the case of a trial. It can also occur outside of a legal framework. History bears the mark of this sad distinction. The pogroms of Russia, which Strauss became familiar with at an early age, provide an example. Additionally, the history of the United States demonstrates both examples with blacks, women, homosexuals, and others suffering persecution in the legal context of courtrooms and at the hand of lynch-mobs. It can therefore occur officially or unofficially, within the confines of the law, outside of the law, or by subordinating the law into a vehicle for injustice.

In *Meno*, Anytus gestures to another important characteristic by pointing out that it is easier to do harm than it is to do good *in all cities*. For Strauss (1968, 14), “Philosophy can then live only side by side with the city.” It is not a true citizen of the city, which is, instead, the realm of orthodoxy. Conflict between philosophy and the city,

⁴⁰ Euthyphro acts viciously out of ignorance. He wants to act rightly, but is mistaken about its nature. Callicles and Polus deny the good itself.

⁴¹ Robert Maynard Hutchins, who recruited Leo Strauss to the University of Chicago, reported that, because of the Committee on Un-American Activities, “the entire teaching profession of the United States is now intimidated” (Stone 2005, 1400). As an interesting aside, Stone (Ibid, 1398) also tells us that at the height of the “Red Scare,” Florida Congressman George Smathers, for whom the University of Florida libraries are named, defeated Claude Pepper in an election by calling him “Red Pepper.”

says Strauss (1959, 125), is inevitable. Persecution, however, does not emerge from the element of philosophy, since, for Strauss, philosophers are wise and do not act unjustly. Rather, persecution emerges from the city, the element of the orthodox, in a vulgar reprisal against “him who pronounces the unpleasant truths” (Strauss 1952, 36). *Persecution is the political tool par excellence of the vulgar.* It is the manner in which vulgarity asserts itself over its political adversaries. I do not wish to insist, as Strauss seems to, that persecution is always directed from the unjust toward the just. As Aristophanes’ *Clouds* demonstrates, the unjust may lash out unfairly against other perpetrators of injustice.

Esoteric writing, the response Strauss identifies as the choice of philosophers who wish to preemptively avoid persecution, offers little immunity. It is an impotent fortress of language, irony, and metaphors – an excessively sophisticated metaphortress that forgets its enemy does not apply the same conventions of war. In some ways esotericism is reminiscent of the French Maginot line constructed on the frontier with Germany prior to World War II. The Maginot Line took a decade to complete; its elaborate construction stretched for miles, and was equipped with numerous defensive provisions and garrisons. It was, perhaps, the most sophisticated static defense Europe had ever seen. When the Germans invaded France in 1940, they simply went around it. Accordingly, the vulgar have no obligation to meet lofty standards of proof, or conjure up any evidence whatsoever. Evidence is a tool of knowledge. In Strauss’s understanding, knowledge is the element of philosophy or science; opinion is the element of the city (Strauss 1959, 221). Opinion, not knowledge, and suspicion, not proof, are enough to give life to persecution. Witch-hunts have no need of real witches.

Concluding Remarks

I should truly be a fool, Callicles, if I didn't realize that in this city anything may happen to anybody. But of this at least I am sure, that, if I am brought to trial on a charge involving any of the penalties you mention, my prosecutor will be an evil man, for no honest man would prosecute an innocent party. (Plato 2004, 127)

-From Gorgias

Persecution is an act of tyranny, the political tool *par excellence* of the vulgar, which results in injustice. Leo Strauss teaches us some important elements pertaining to persecution. It begins with heterogeneity, and in the case of the persecution toward free inquiry, it begins with heterodoxy. The basic condition of persecution is that some difference must be identified, be it some feature such as race or sexual orientation. In terms of the persecution of free inquiry, the species of difference is *doxa*. Secondly, persecution often causes fear. I would agree with Strauss that most people are averse to becoming objects of persecution. It is unpleasant. Thirdly, Strauss identifies that persecution always appears embedded in action, which he identifies in a range from capital punishment to social ostracism. Persecution must, therefore, be a description conjoined to some activity, no matter how subtle or spectacular.

I disagree with Strauss that a persecutor, someone acting unjustly, is committed to adhering to justice, the rule of law, or the discovery of evidence and "proof". A persecutor is already unjust. It has no requirement to meet the evidentiary standards that Strauss imagines are needed in legal procedure. Persecution is an act of tyranny and laws can easily be abused. The censor and the mob do not need to prove anything beyond a reasonable doubt. That, after all, is the standard for liberal societies. The illiberal censor and the vulgar mob need only suspect the philosopher subscribes to heterodox positions in order to persecute. Plato and Xenophon demonstrate this with

their accounts of the trial of Socrates. They omit the case of the prosecution and, along with it, anything resembling evidence and proof. What remains is a case of persecution in which the apparatus of law is unjustly brought to bear on Socrates. Plato and Xenophon show us that persecution can appear in the guise of prosecution. Likewise, Aristophanes, with *Clouds*, offers another narrative of Socrates suffering reprisals for his heterodoxy. Strepsiades and his slaves persecute Socrates outside of the confines of the law, and they do so out of ignorance. None of his persecutors understand the nature of Socrates' views. Only Pheidippides truly knows the nature of Socratic teachings, and he is not among the persecutors. Whether actual prosecutors in the narratives of Plato and Xenophon, or vulgar members of the mob in Aristophanes' play, none of Socrates' persecutors submit to any kind of rigorous process of discovery or standard of evidence.

Strauss, contradistinctively, imposes mandates of evidence and proof before a censor can act. Likewise, out of the context of legal proceedings, he presumes that esotericism will deceive the vulgar and insulate the philosopher. Aristophanes, Plato, and Xenophon show us that a persecutor's lack of scruples leave him or her free to circumvent or misuse the law. Inversely, Strauss imposes exacting standards of proof, which he presumes will obstruct the persecutor. So, whereas for Plato and Xenophon the expurgation of evidence leaves behind a mutilated prosecution that can only be read as persecution, Strauss mistakenly imagines that esotericism creates such an effective labyrinth as to hinder persecution with the rules of prosecution. There is no reason to believe the censor and the mob will subscribe to the rules Strauss imposes, and, in fact, every reason according to Strauss, to believe that they will disregard those rules.

Because of his commitment to the imperviousness of esotericism, for Strauss, persecution becomes virtually indistinguishable from prosecution.

I have emphasized that persecution is a tyrannical act, meaning it is always unjust and immoderate. Accordingly, there are no necessary, trans-historical rules for persecution. It can be done with evidence or without, by a mob or a despot, in the context of legal proceedings or in their absence. By its nature, persecution is unjust. It is the political tool *par excellence* of the vulgar. When persecutors restrain themselves out of respect for the rules by providing evidence of an actual transgression, then we can no longer justifiably suggest that we are referring to persecution. Respect for the rules, evidence, and the truth are, after all, what distinguishes the persecutor from the prosecutor.

As I turn to consider Plato's encounter with fear, this reflection on persecution becomes important. My argument is that Plato, as demonstrated by his writings such as *Meno*, understood the arbitrary and capricious nature of persecution. He witnessed it first hand in the trial of Socrates. Armed with this sober knowledge, Plato, had he primarily feared persecution, would have found Strauss's theory of esoteric writing insufficient protection against an Athens that had already demonstrated its capacity for injustice.

CHAPTER 4
TO ORPHAN THE WORDS: THE PLATONIC TRAGEDY OF ESOTERICISM

Introduction: The Reflections of Fear

For Leo Strauss, fear dictates not merely what an author of political philosophy writes about, but how he or she writes. I will make the argument immediately, and perhaps in concurrence with Strauss that what an author fears can be a strong influence on the manner in which they write. However, for Strauss (1952, 25), the fear of persecution will compel the writer of political philosophy to hide his or her meaning esoterically, to convey the most important, heterodox truths “exclusively between the lines.” Writers of political philosophy, and in particular ancient authors such as Plato were disposed to esotericism, according to Strauss (1952, 16, 18, 21, 33, 121n77 and Strauss 1989, 68, 69 and Strauss 1939, 535 and Strauss 1959, 136, 137).

In this essay, I argue that Plato’s fear was not that he would be persecuted for being revealed as a holder of heterodox views. The Platonic fear is, above all else, the fear of abomination, the fear that the wrong men will gain influence through teaching and politics, thus subordinating the Good under the tyranny of the vulgar. Indeed, for Plato the kind of esoteric writing Strauss describes, whereby philosophers only communicate with other philosophers or nascent philosophers, is not only inaccurate, it is vicious. Esoteric writing as a strategy to avoid persecution would breed abomination because it presumes that the best would communicate only with each other leaving the ignorant under the sway of the vulgar. The problem of persecution, for Plato, arises after abomination; it is after the wrong men gain influence through teaching and politics that philosophy is imperiled by its critical disposition. In the second part of the essay, I will demonstrate Plato’s exoteric assaults on the elites, institutions, and orthodoxy of his

contemporaneous Athens. My argument in demonstrating these numerous and often scathing examples of risk is that Plato was not crippled with the fear of persecution. Yet, if the fear of persecution was not his primary concern and political theory is always motivated, to some degree, by fear, what was Plato afraid of? In the third part of the essay, I will describe Plato's frustrations with language, and the difficulties of teaching. In the fourth section I argue that the imperfections and ambiguities of language lead to a fear of abomination, a fear that less than the best of men will gain influence over moral teaching. It is when the wrong men gain influence, as teachers and politicians, through the silence of the best that philosophers risk persecution. It is this fear that categorically rejects the validity of esoteric writing as a strategy to avoid persecution. For Plato, esotericism is not a strategy; esotericism is a tragedy, an unavoidable facet of the human condition in which the problem of imperfect writing is inescapable.

It is true that Plato's writing was esoteric. However, the meaning of esotericism is radically different for Plato than Strauss suggests. For Strauss, esoteric writing implies godlike precision in the manipulation of language. Apparent errors and contradictions within the writings of antiquity are, according to Strauss, the signs of a strategically placed code written by one philosopher and meant exclusively for other philosophers. It is a writing that has been made deliberately esoteric. Philosophic writing, however, is often technical. It employs verbiage that tends to be uncommon outside the discipline. Philosophy addresses subjects that generally tend to be the exclusive purview of the discipline and other specialized, cognate fields.⁴² Despite the best efforts of philosophy to convey its principles, the vernacular of the discipline compels us, against our wishes,

⁴² Metaphysics, for example, might also be a field of consideration for theology, but outside of these disciplines, even the term 'metaphysics' is not exactly general knowledge.

to write esoterically, to write in a manner that is not always easily accessible to every literate person. Often times, philosophic writing is inadvertently esoteric.⁴³

Plato's esotericism, as he acknowledges, is the result of a pedagogical technique, irony, which is employed to circumvent the ambiguities and imperfections inherent in language. Plato recognized that, beyond the specialized lexicon of the philosopher, language itself poses problems for writing. It is the ambiguity of language that portends possibilities for the misuse and abuse of philosophy. Because the written word cannot defend itself in the absence of its author, and because meaning is so often nebulous within writing, Plato wrote dialogues, the content of which was sometimes ironic. The problem of language is what creates the need to mind the vulgar, those who lack good character and would abuse philosophy. Because philosophers lack a language that can avoid ambiguity and misunderstanding, the activity of philosophy can be misunderstood and abused. This essay, therefore, is guided by a simple question: if not persecution, then what was Plato afraid of? Strauss insists that political philosophers resort to esotericism as a strategy to avoid persecution. It stands to reason, then, that a political philosopher will avoid writing, exoterically, the kinds of inflammatory opinions that might provoke an adverse reaction by a tyrant, regime, or population.

If a deliberate strategy of esotericism is the standard procedure by political philosophers to avoid persecution, Plato, it seems, did not conform himself. At various and indeed numerous instances in all stages of his dialogues, Plato writes exoterically what could only be described as statements fraught with peril. That is to say, early,

⁴³ Other writers are deliberately unclear, though not to avoid persecution. Sturrock (1979, 16), for example, writes of Jacques Lacan, "The French in which he writes is of high idiosyncrasy, its syntax being deliberately contrived in order to exemplify rather than explicate the linguistic operations of the unconscious." Sturrock (Ibid, 16) goes on to typify structuralist and post-structuralist writers as consciously attempting to "undermine the authority" of clarity in writing.

middle, and late Platonic dialogues all contain clearly inflammatory statements that had the potential to arouse the ire and reprisals of the powerful. Plato is often cryptic and ironic, generally obfuscating a clear thesis. But what is interesting about his ambiguity is that when it counts most, when the risk could be greatest, the bite of Plato's gadfly is anything but numbed.

Platonic writings contain multiple dimensions for exploration. Plato, especially in the earlier writings, is very much a biographer of his mentor, Socrates. Yet, even these early dialogues are productions authored by Plato. The characters within them, even Socrates, are not the unfiltered reflections of the genuine individuals. The "Socrates" of the dialogues is always Plato's Socrates; he is always a character, authored by Plato. It is Plato who is responsible for what that character says and how that character acts. It is the character of Socrates who tends to be labeled as the "gadfly" of ancient Athens, but, regardless of how faithfully Plato attempted to recreate his teacher, 'Socrates' is always a literary figure. Plato sharpens the mandibles of the gadfly.

We can, therefore, argue about what the nature of justice truly means according to Plato, but there would seem to be little disagreement over the conclusion that he felt the statesmen of his time, the people with the power to prosecute, persecute, and execute, were unqualified and unfit to hold political power. If a writer is genuinely concerned about persecution, from a regime or an uncultivated mob, he or she will not exoterically insult the elites, the institutions, and the orthodoxy of a polity. Plato does all of these things.

If Strauss is correct then, in order to avoid persecution, the heterodox man, the philosopher, must be at least slightly cleverer than the orthodox man, the censor or the

man of the mob. As Strauss (1952, 26) says, “For the burden of proof rests with the censor. It is he, or the public prosecutor, who must prove that the author holds or has uttered heterodox views.” The philosopher, according to Strauss (Ibid, 30), can insulate himself or herself behind mouthpiece characters, and then defer responsibility by suggesting the characters do not represent his or her actual views. In fact, Strauss (1959, 136) tells us, that the techniques of esoteric writing became so successful that a political philosopher could safely afford the luxury of occasionally writing some heterodox passage exoterically, and it would be assumed by an unreflective audience to not actually be the view of the author. Instead, because the author had developed a reputation for ironic subterfuge, it would simply be overlooked and the political philosopher would remain insulated.

This assumes too much about the mindset of the orthodox man, and, accordingly, I reject this premise. The sort of regime or society that is prone to persecution need not prove beyond the shadow of a doubt, or even a reasonable doubt, that a work of political philosophy contains heterodoxy. Persecution, in fact, requires a far less stringent threshold than even a reasonable doubt. Depending on the regime or the society, all that matters is the insinuation of doubt.

Strauss argues that esotericism effectively insulates a philosopher, shrouding him or her behind exoteric armor that effectively prevents those of orthodox views from concluding with any certainty that a philosopher holds dissenting views. A persecutor, however, is not necessarily bound to follow the hermeneutical rules Strauss imagines. The censor or the mob, provided they feel obligated to do so, *may* follow certain laws that demand a sufficient evidentiary body before acting against a heterodox thinker. But

following the law or the Straussian rules of hermeneutics is not a necessary condition for persecution. Even if laws are in place, as they were in Athens, to focus grievances into a court system, there is no guarantee that dissenting views will be met by individuals or groups governed by a duty to produce high standards of evidence pointing to the existence of deviant views. The censor need not assume the same moral framework as the philosopher. He does not need to *prove* the existence of heterodoxy in order to persecute. In order to have cause for persecution, the orthodox man or men need only *suspect* difference of opinion. That is enough.⁴⁴

It is also peculiar to presume that insensitive readers will take the time or give consideration to the nuances of authorial voice. Strauss assumes a despotic regime or parochial mob might be confounded, for example, by Plato's use of characters to

⁴⁴ This begs the question, that I addressed in Chapter 3, what is persecution? I would agree with Strauss that the trial of Socrates was an act of persecution. But it is not that the trial ended in execution that gives it the character of being persecutory. The trial of Aristophanes, for example, which ended without penalty, is also persecution. So what I want to suggest here is that the persecutor, be it an individual or mass, the person the philosopher is trying to avoid, is not bound by the high-minded morals of the philosopher. By necessity the censor and the philosopher are of a different moral framework. Strauss is making an ahistorical argument about the usefulness of esotericism. At the risk of being anachronistic, it may be helpful to use the example of Stalinism, an example Strauss would have been familiar with. The Stalinist regime is not bound by a moral framework that compels the production of proof of subversion. One need only be suspected of holding heterodox views in order to be the subject of grave persecution. Clearly, this would be a different set of matters in Plato's Athens. However, the litigious nature of that city meant that heterodox or inflammatory views could be sufficient grounds for a lawsuit, which, although not as stark as Stalinist persecution, is still persecution. Or, the case of Salman Rushdie is also useful. *The Satanic Verses* is populated with characters, none of whom can be definitively declared as being identical with the views of their author. That hermeneutic conundrum did not prevent an interminable call for Rushdie's death by the Iranian state. Finally, in a liberal society, I would argue that even when the state refrains or assumes a subdued role, the mob can still be just as effective at persecution. And, indeed, it is hard to imagine a mob convening to parse out the author from his or characters in order to glean which are the actual views. The point is that writing esoterically does not confound a persecutor because a persecutor is, by his or her or its nature, already subject to less stringent moral and ethical standards. If Strauss (1952, 36) tells us that the mistake of the vulgar is to confuse the thoughts of an edifying character as being identical with the author then the vulgar will presume that the inflammatory statements Socrates makes belong to Plato. The vulgar, if they cannot equate the author with a character, would also not have the time or ability to discern the author from a character. That is a feature of literary criticism. If, as Strauss says, "careless readers" make this esoteric technique possible, then we are dealing with precisely the kind of people who are prone to making such mistakes. This position would be somewhat reasonable given both the fact that Plato was Socrates' student, and, again, that we do not find identical verbiage from the character of Socrates in Xenophon's writings.

embody certain viewpoints. If Socrates, or the Eleatic stranger, or a sophist says something scandalous, then proving the views are identical with those held by Plato would be a difficult task. Indeed, that task has been difficult for classicists, political philosophers, and other academics. Strauss is warning those readers not to make the mistake of the layman in assuming Socrates speaks for Plato. But if careless readers make esoteric writing possible, they also render it useless as a protection against persecution. A careless reader, a layman, ostensibly the same sort of person who would be among the persecutors, will be the sort that is not interested in a nuanced reading that suggests a disjuncture between Plato and his characters. The point is that they are *his* characters. Indeed, it is difficult to prove that the characters in a Platonic dialogue are the ambassadors of the author. Conversely, it is equally difficult, if not more difficult, to prove that *they are not*. Socrates is a creation of Plato, and Socrates says some fairly risky things. Plato does nothing to insulate himself by using characters to voice different views. If anything, he insults the elites, the institutions, and orthodoxy from a wider range of perspectives calling those things into question from multiple points of view. In the end, however, all the insults are traceable to one man, one author, just one writer named Plato.

Strauss tells us that the vulgar reader does not exert the same care or attentiveness in reading as the philosopher. If this view is true then it is also incompatible with the notion, also forwarded by Strauss, that esotericism succeeds because certain standards of proof are required prior to persecution. On one hand we are told the vulgar will mistake the views of an author as being identical with those of a main character, such as Socrates. This is how Plato supposedly insulates himself. On

the other hand Strauss assures that the vulgar are not philosophic. For Strauss, this means that the vulgar are content with what they believe, are of untrustworthy character, and are not interested in delving deeper into matters they already they understand. Using Socrates cannot guarantee a defense for Plato precisely because the vulgar do not care if they are wrong in their reading. The views Strauss provides are incompatible because they amount to saying that the vulgar are, in fact, vulgar in their reading of Plato and others, making simple childlike mistakes, but they are not vulgar in their propensity to persecute, having suddenly been confounded by the nuances of intricate hermeneutic conundrums. If we are to understand individuals and groups as vulgar, then it stands to reason that they are vulgar in relation to both their reading and their moral character. The vulgar may indeed reduce Plato's views to being coextensive with that of Socrates. But a necessary condition of vulgarity is indecency, and, accordingly, vulgar persecutions are not bound to follow rules, either of the city or of philosophy. A writer is, therefore, responsible for his or her characters. The fact that a persecution does not occur does not (*post hoc ergo propter hoc*) mean that an author was successfully insulated by the characters of a text.⁴⁵

The Inscription of Peril

*It is for us, then, as founders of a commonwealth, to bring compulsion to bear on the noblest natures. They must be made to climb the ascent to the vision of Goodness, which we called the highest object of knowledge; and, when they have looked upon it long enough, they must not be allowed, as they are now, to remain on the heights, refusing to come down again to the prisoners or to take any part in their labors and rewards, however much or little these may be worth. (Plato 1945, 233) –From *The Republic of Plato**

⁴⁵ It may simply indicate a more tolerant audience than Strauss envisions. It might also mean that the persecutors got distracted or forgot who it was they had set out to persecute. Strauss assures us that the vulgar are unintelligent, after all.

For interpretations of Plato's Allegory of the Cave, emphasis is often placed on the tragic encounter between the philosopher and the layman. In the allegory, a group of prisoners has been chained to a wall in a cave all of their lives. Their bonds are configured in such a way as to permit a view to only what is directly ahead. Behind and above the prisoners are people carrying objects in front of a fire. The fire projects the shadows of the people and objects onto the wall before the prisoners who, because this is the only reality they have ever known, believe the shadows and the sounds they associate with the shadows to be reality. In time, the shackles for one of the prisoners come loose and he slowly makes his way up a path that leads out of the cave. At the beginning of his journey he sees the people carrying objects and the fire, and realizes the shadows were never real. As the journey progresses he discovers new, and higher kinds of knowledge until, after finally leaving the cave, he comes to understand the good. Following these discoveries he returns to relate to the other prisoners what he has discovered. Unfortunately, since this knowledge upsets everything the other prisoners have ever believed, they are most displeased. They scoff at the enlightened man and, if they could, they would kill him.

The freed man represents a philosophically minded individual, while the others represent the vulgar, non-philosophic, citizens of Athens.⁴⁶ The Allegory of the Cave can be interpreted as representing the irreconcilability of philosophy and politics, to demonstrate that philosophy, with its corrosive knowledge, cannot coexist on an open

⁴⁶ Rosen (2005, 170) disagrees with the interpretation of the cave as a city, as he argues the cave is without custom, and is only a world of shadows. While this interpretation is interesting, it neglects the customary nature of being a prisoner. The cave, as a metaphor, does not have to recreate, only represent, a city. In this sense, I agree with Strauss (1964, 125) when he states, "the city can be identified with the Cave."

and honest level with politics.⁴⁷ But this emphasis on the violence of the cave causes another equally important event within the allegory to become obscured: the philosopher must go back into the cave.

While Strauss (1964, 124) takes the position that “only the non-philosophers could compel the philosophers to take care of the city,” the character of Socrates states that he and his interlocutors founding the kallipolis must compel the philosophers to return (Plato 1945, 233-234).⁴⁸ They are not permitted the luxury of a life experiencing the Good, an experience that their philosophic souls desire above all else. Why is this? Why do the founders wrest philosophers away from the Good, and force them back toward the hazard of death in the cave?

The answer is that, for Plato (1987a, 106), in order to be a philosopher one must risk. One definition forwarded in *Laches* is that courage is “knowledge of what is fearful and what is encouraging.”⁴⁹ This is not to suggest that a philosopher is always and forever engaging in foolhardy behavior, incessantly challenging all that is fearful. Leaping from a cliff onto jagged rocks, for instance, is not a risk; it is just stupid. Indeed, Plato understood, similarly to Aristotle, that courage was to be found between two extremes. The Eleatic Visitor of *Statesman* declares, “The point is that all branches of knowledge are very careful to avoid exceeding and falling short of due measure” (Plato 1995, 43). Courage, then, as a form of knowledge, evaluates the nature of risk.

⁴⁷ Allan Bloom (1991, 408), for example, calls the union of philosophy and politics “a shotgun wedding.” Strauss (1964, 125) concurs, arguing that the specter of violence against the freed prisoner demonstrates that “philosophy and the city tend away from one another in opposite directions.”

⁴⁸ Bloom’s translation of *The Republic of Plato* concurs with F.M. Cornford’s and Desmond Lee’s on this matter.

⁴⁹ This definition is not fully endorsed as the dialogue arrives only at the conclusion that all the discussants need to ponder the matter further. Yet it remains a viable definition, one that Socrates treats with merit, even if it is incomplete.

Yet risk must be taken. The philosopher must go back into the cave in order to become a philosopher. In the dialogue *Euthydemus*, Socrates castigates those who mock philosophy, saying:

They regard themselves as very wise, and reasonably so, since they think they are not only pretty well up in philosophy but in politics. Yes, their conceit of wisdom is quite natural because they think they have as much of each as they need; and keeping clear of both risk and conflict they reap the fruits of wisdom. (Plato 1993, 64).

What can we learn from this passage? This type of person Socrates refers to, the type that occupies a “no-man’s land between the philosopher and the statesman” is neither a philosopher nor a statesman (Ibid, 64). While they presume a novice understanding of wisdom or the political arts, they fail to become either a philosopher or a statesman.

This is not merely because of their insufficient technical knowledge in either craft.

Rather, the man of the “no-man’s land” cannot become a statesman because he avoids conflict. Conflict, then, is essential to the activity of the statesman. Even more pertinent, the man of the “no-man’s land” cannot become a philosopher because he avoids *risk*.

Risk, according to Plato, is essential to the activity of the philosopher. Part of the reason why those who mock philosophy are rebuked, in addition to intellectual laziness, is because they risk nothing. The freed prisoner, the individual who has spent time experiencing the Good, must return to the cave in order to exceed simply being a philosophic soul. In order to be a philosopher, the freed prisoner must travel back into the cave, to teach and take risks.

How, then, does Plato take risks? He assumes a posture of risk in his own writings by attacking the elites, institutions, and orthodoxy. First, and foremost, Plato excoriates his contemporaneous statesmen. On the most general level, he denies that any good

statesmen in Athens have ever existed. In *Gorgias*, for example, Socrates reminds the brutish Callicles:

It seems then that what we said before is true, that we know of no one who has been a good statesman in this city. You admitted that there is none now living, but declared that there had been such in the past and selected these four men. But now it appears that they were not better than the men of our time...(Plato 2004, 120)

Incompetence, then, is the greatest common denominator for Athenian statesmen. All statesmen, living or dead, at the time of the dialogue were inept. Now, regardless of whether or not this was the prevailing opinion among the people, it would be truly curious for the politicians to have regarded a prognosis of ineptitude with good humor. The nature of Plato's assault on the statesman, general and relatively civil in *Gorgias*, was contemptuous in other works. In *Statesman* he refers to the eponymous title character in decisively derogatory terms:

We should not think of them as statesmen, but as practitioners of sectarian politics. They are agents of a massive sham and are no more than shams themselves; they are supreme imposters and illusionists, they out-sophist the sophists. (Plato 1995, 73)

These "pseudo-statesmen" are thus regarded as essentially deceptive. They obfuscate their own lack of skill, pretending to be masters of the political art. Without genuine virtue, all the statesmen are left with is oratory ability. This is an ability that, for Plato, "isn't a fine or honorable pursuit" (Plato 2004, 30). Thus, by presenting the statesman as inept, ignorant of the true skill of statecraft, and equating them with sophists and orators, Plato has made the claim that the statesmen of his day are dishonorable.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Allen (2000, 60) argues that "honor was the prize at stake in any Athenian contest." Honor and dishonor were profoundly important in Plato's Athens and challenges to honor were sufficient cause for legal action and punishment.

Rather than having genuine knowledge of how the state should function, the statesmen resorted to rhetorical trickery and oratorical wit to secure their positions. Thusly, Plato accuses the statesmen of being not merely incompetent, but also entirely self-interested. He furthers this accusation with the Allegory of the Ship, found in Book Six of *The Republic of Plato*. In the allegory, Socrates describes a ship owned by a powerful man burdened by poor sight, poor hearing, and a propensity to drink. Though they lack the skill of navigation the sailors employed on the ship attest to having the skill, or, swear that such a skill is unknowable. They fetter the shipowner and quarrel amongst themselves, arguing about who should control the helm (Plato 1991, 168).

It is clear from the Allegory of the Ship that Plato detests the sailors. They are fools. They are deceivers and their efforts can result only in the imperilment of the ship. Worse still, the sailors are unjust because they keep the person who truly does have the skill of the pilot from doing his or her job. If justice, for Plato, is when each member of a society “keeps to its own proper business in the commonwealth and does its own work,” then the sailors, unfit to pilot the ship, radically upset the natural order of things (Plato 1945, 129). The sailors, worst of all, are unjust. And, if there is any room for ambiguity concerning whom the sailors are supposed to represent in the allegory, Plato acts to make himself clear, writing, “You’ll make no mistake in imagining the statesmen now ruling to be the sailors we were just now speaking of” (Plato 1991, 169). The statesmen are quarreling, treacherous, and unjust deceivers. Their incompetence is only amusing from afar. In a world populated by the Persian Empire, and, nearer to home, a Spartan polis only recently victorious in the Peloponnesian War, incompetence would be a cause for alarm. Thus, in addition to being typified as dishonorable, the statesman are

so thoroughly bankrupt in their abilities to properly lead the state so as to be dangerous to the city.

It remains unclear whether any statesmen, poets, or sophists read Plato's works while he was living, but that is beside the point. They could have. They might have. Then, Plato could have or might have found himself in trouble. He took a risk. Why was it a risk for Plato to insult the political class of his day? Referring to the possibility of being "dragged into court," Socrates notes in *Gorgias*, "I should truly be a fool Callicles, if I didn't realize that in this city anything may happen to anybody" (Plato 2004, 127). Given the litigious nature of Athens, the answer is that there is always some chance in addressing the powerful in an insulting manner. The trial and execution of Socrates demonstrates the profound risk posed by perceived insult. If, however, one forwards the argument that upbraiding the Athenian power elite did not actually constitute a risk, then persecution itself becomes a meaningless motivation for writing esoterically.

In the notoriously litigious atmosphere of Athens where lawsuits and ostracisms were familiar to political life, Plato did not limit his attacks to the statesman; he had harsh words for the sophists as well. The sophists were often employed as tutors of various skills including martial arts, mathematics, and rhetoric (Waterfield 2000, xxviii). Originating largely with Plato, the surviving descriptions of the sophists tend to portray them as "mercenary, and as unconcerned with either logical truth or psychological benefit" (Ibid, xv). Despite these characterizations, there were sophists who were prominent, well-regarded, and influential within the circles of Athenian power. They offered lectures and seminars, as well as private instruction, and some found wealth from their pursuits, both within Athens and in other Hellenic cities (Dillon and Gergel

2003, xiii). The sophists were no outcasts when Plato, though the character of Socrates, describes the paid teaching of rhetorical skills as “something which isn’t a fine or honorable pursuit,” and nothing more than “pandering” (Plato 2004, 30). Indeed, Plato’s Eleatic Stranger taxonomically organized the sophists in the genus of “appropriating, hunting, animal-hunting, land-lubbing, human-hunting, private-hunting, cash-making, sham-teaching expertise – amounting to a hunt for wealthy and well-known youths” (Plato 1996, 23). Thus, Plato castigates the sophists as charlatans while the wealthy are their marks, gullible rubes preyed upon with false promises of knowledge in exchange for money. Regardless of the veracity these characterizations represent, Plato insults the wealthy and their tutors, all in one stroke.⁵¹

Institutions are not spared Plato’s derision either. Given the trial and execution of Socrates, Plato held an understandable grievance against the court system. Yet, the expression of this grievance takes the form of an insult. In *Gorgias*, Socrates reflects on the possibility of being prosecuted for corrupting “younger people by reducing them to a state of helpless doubt.” He notes that the jury system relied, not on experts and wise individuals, but on any male citizen. Such men were not experts in justice, and thus Socrates laments:

So because what I say on any occasion is not designed to please, and because I aim not at what is most agreeable but at what is best, and will not employ those ‘niceties’ which you advise, I shall have no defense to offer in a court of law. I can only repeat what I was saying to Polus; I shall be judged like a doctor brought before a jury of children with a cook as prosecutor. (Plato 2004, 128)

The citizenry of Athens are compared to children; the trial system itself is a farce. Plato goes further by using the platform of Socrates’ own trial. In the standard Athenian trial,

⁵¹ Plato, the son of Ariston, was also from a wealthy and old Athenian family.

when a guilty verdict had been reached, the prosecutor proposed a penalty to the jury, and in some cases the convict was permitted to offer a counter-proposal penalty. Meletus, the poet and prosecutor of Socrates, argued that Socrates deserved death for corrupting the youth and impiety. Socrates, in his counter-proposal, argues that due to the nature of his crimes, “There is nothing more fitting, men of Athens, then for such a man to be given his meals in the Prytaneum” (Plato 1998a, 90). That assertion was scandalous. The Prytaneum was “the ancient and sacred hearth of the city” (West 1998, 21). Its space was “reserved for Olympic victors, outstanding generals, and other public benefactors, and representatives of families whose ancestors had performed great deeds for the city” (Ibid, 21). To suggest that a criminal penalty, particularly in the case of capital crimes, was an outrage, and perhaps the fact that Socrates was condemned to death by a wider margin of jurors than had actually convicted him in the first place owes to this slander.

The point to be made by the outrage of the Prytaneum is not necessarily in relation to Socrates. It is, however, directly in relation to Plato. Those words are *Plato’s words*. Plato inscribes them and immortalizes them.⁵² Socrates, if he said them at all, spoke those words but once. Plato took the same insult to the sacred institution of the Prytaneum and enshrined it into writing. So, if Socrates angered the jury with his speech, Plato assumes a different risk, extending the words of Socrates by making them permanent. The barb of the Platonic gadfly endures to sting again and again. Socrates can only insult the Athenians once. Plato insults them forever.

⁵² Indeed, beyond Plato, there is no real indication that Socrates ever said those precise words. Xenophon (1990, 46) also reports the trial of Socrates. His account only attests that Socrates refused to offer a counter-penalty and “forbade his friends to do so either.”

Along with the judicial system and the sacred hearth of Athens, Plato refuses to spare its entire political apparatus. He excoriates democracy. Insofar as both establishing a democracy and conducting its business reflect the will of its people, Plato argues that democracy encourages an excess of liberty to the degree that parents behave like children, children refuse to obey authority, and slaves consider themselves as equals to citizens. The idiocy of democracy is laid bare:

The very dogs behave as if the proverb 'like mistress, like maid' applied to them; and the horses and donkeys catch the habit of walking down the street with all the dignity of freemen, running into anyone they meet who does not get out of their way. (Plato 1945, 289)

It is a criticism of actual democracy and a castigation of the soul of the democratic individual.⁵³

Plato also savages Athenian orthodoxy. In his last dialogue, *The Laws*, Plato, through the character of the Athenian Stranger, would admonish that the laws of Magnesia should never be changed except under direst circumstances and only through unanimous, democratic procedure (Plato 1975, 251). Prior to this, in *The Republic of Plato*, every manner of orthodoxy is attacked. The myths, fables, and stories common to Athenians are deemed unsuitable for Plato's kallipolis. Consequently, "most of those stories now in use must be discarded" (Plato 1945, 69). Likewise, poetry, the ancient art of Homer, Aeschylus, and Euripides must be banished (Ibid, 339). In *The Republic of Plato*, Adeimantus considers apostasy and heresy in the same speech:

But suppose there are no gods, or that they do not concern themselves with the doings of men; why should we concern ourselves to deceive them? Or, if the gods do exist and care for mankind, all we know or have ever heard

⁵³ S. Sara Monoson (2000, 237) makes a compelling argument that Plato's contrasting of "the claims of democratic legitimacy and philosophic truth" have tended to obscure his support for democratic practices, including "frank speech."

about them comes from current tradition and from the poets who recount their family history, and these same authorities also assure us that they can be won over and turned from their purpose by 'sacrifice and humble prayers' and votive offerings. (Ibid, 51)

Again one of Plato's characters assumes a stance that is hostile to orthodoxy.

Adeimantus, in his argument that injustice might be profitable, suggests the gods do not exist, and thoroughly mocks the poets and religious authorities. He calls into question the validity of their claims to authority. Plato, therefore, presents himself as opposed to the orthodoxy of the city. It is unsatisfactory and unsuitable, not only for philosophers, but for the best regime. In fact convention is portrayed as such an impediment that virtually no one in Plato's Athens is considered suitable for living in a just state. Because convention and orthodoxy are so inadequate, Athenian adults are told by Plato that, in order for the just city to exist, they must all be sent into exile (Ibid, 262).

What becomes clear from these examples is that, in his writing, Plato is motivated by something other than fear of persecution. He slings abuses and insults, openly, brazenly at statesmen, sophists and teachers of rhetoric; the judicial system of Athens, its sacred places and its system of government; and, finally, the orthodoxy and convention of the city itself. Those who would persecute such insults might not bother agonizing themselves with worrying about whether this or that character in a Socratic dialogue was really the mouthpiece of Plato. They could simply go and persecute Plato. For example, the most vocal of Socrates' prosecutors, Meletus, is by no means a philosopher. The limited arguments by Meletus that appear in "The Apology of Socrates" are visibly flawed and inconsistent. In nearly every respect, his prosecution is a persecution and the jury is probably moved to conviction more by Socrates' own intransigence and arrogance than by the unpersuasive arguments of his accusers.

Nevertheless, sound logic, reason, and a concern for truth are not qualities possessed by those who bring Socrates to trial. Even if they had been unsuccessful, Meletus, Anytus, and Lycon, are able to persecute Socrates through the law. His indictment alone is persecution.

This dynamic of persecution is presented within Plato's dialogue. Plato recognizes the disadvantage philosophy suffers against persecution and he repeats this point, that the persecutor is not bound by the moral imperatives of the philosopher, in *Gorgias*, when Socrates states that he would have no defense in a court of law. He compares his prosecutor to a cook, and cookery, in *Gorgias*, is presented as a dishonorable practice because it pays no attention to the true interests of its object (Plato 2004, 128). The tactics of the dishonorable are not restricted to the tactics of the honorable.

If Plato had been preoccupied with the fear of persecution, he would have refrained from insult. His work, suggests different motivations. Put simply, for Plato, there are greater concerns than mere survival. In *Gorgias*, Socrates beseeches Callicles:

But I beg you, my friend, to reflect whether nobility and goodness may be something different from keeping oneself and others alive, and to consider whether a true man, instead of clinging to life at all costs, ought not to dismiss from his mind the question how long he may have to live. Let him leave that to the will of God in the belief that the women are right when they tell us that no man can escape his destiny, and let him devote himself to the next problem, how he can best live the life which is allotted to him, and whether he will achieve this by adapting himself to the constitution of the state in which he happens to live. (Ibid, 114)

Surely, survival is important, but it is not the only concern of the political philosopher.

The first concern is to live the best possible life in conjunction with the political exigencies of his world. That is why the freed prisoner, the philosophic soul, must go

back into the cave. The philosophic soul must take risks in order to become a philosopher. The fear of persecution does not motivate Plato's writing. But what does?

The Words Escape Me: Plato and the Problem of Language

In the Seventh Epistle, Plato directly addresses the question of why he has chosen to forego the treatise in favor of the literary form of dialogue.⁵⁴ Outwardly, the choice of dialogue seems awkward for two reasons. Firstly, dialogue is often the choice of the poets such as Aeschylus, Euripides, Sophocles, and Aristophanes. In the final book of *The Republic of Plato*, poetry is banned from the kallipolis for its distortion of reality (Plato 1945, 333). Secondly, dialogue is perhaps an opaque means of conveying messages that might be important. For example, explaining that philosophers must be king in order for each individual to live in harmony with his or her own soul would seem sufficiently important that it could be directly, and seriously embodied within a sober treatise, rather than in the more playful environs of a dialogue. Plato concurs when he says:

If I thought it possible to deal adequately with the subject in a treatise or a lecture for the general public, what finer achievement would there have been in my life than to write a work of great benefit to mankind and to bring the nature of things to light for all men? (Plato 1989, 1589)

Had it been feasible, then, Plato would have chosen the treatise in lieu of the dialogue.

For these reasons, the choice of dialogue as the medium for writing might seem questionable, and it is just that question that Plato responds to in the letter.

⁵⁴ There is, of course, some dispute over the authenticity of all the purportedly Platonic Epistles. I concur with Morrow (1935, 17-18), however, that most of the letters, and especially the Seventh is authentic. Morrow reasons that while arguments have been made that there were incentives to forge letters in the early Middle Ages, the Seventh Letter is mentioned in Xenocrates just after the death of Plato. Past that point, the sort of doubt that would challenge the authenticity of the Seventh Letter could apply just as easily to *The Republic of Plato* or *The Laws*.

So, why does Plato write in dialogic form, or, perhaps more pertinently, what can we learn from Plato's use of dialogic form? What makes the treatise unfeasible or, at least, inadvisable? In examining that question, the Seventh Letter confirms the problem of language exemplified in dialogues such as *Cratylus*, *Euthydemus*, and *Phaedrus*. Put simply, the problem is that words have no necessary connection to the ideas they represent. In anachronistic terms, signifiers have no necessary relationship to the signified.⁵⁵

At the outset of *Cratylus*, the character of Hermogenes encapsulates the problem. He refuses to believe that names bear any relationship to the things they represent beyond convention. In fact he firmly declares, "I believe any name you give a thing is its correct name" (Plato 1998b, 2). The entire dialogue is set into motion by this problem of polysemy. Early in the dialogue Socrates tries to correct Hermogenes by suggesting that names do indeed have a natural relationship to the things they represent. Moreover, he supposes that an object or idea must be thoroughly examined in order to determine what its proper name is, and that only an expert in such matters can perform this activity (Ibid, 17). However, by the end of the dialogue, this position has been thoroughly complicated. In order for the expert rule-setter to name objects, he would need names for other objects. For example, if a rule-setter examined a four-legged, mammalian, canine and, in his expertise determined this object was to be called 'dog' he would have to already possess the notions of legs, mammals, and canines. The conclusion Socrates ultimately reaches is that there is a "civil war among names, with

⁵⁵ Plato is no postmodernist and I have no intention of casting him as such. He philosophizes both essentialism and a hierarchical metaphysics. I also have no intention of describing Plato as primitive or in error relative to any postmodernist.

some claiming that they are like the truth and others claiming that *they are*" (Ibid, 92). Socrates postulates that even if names have a natural relationship with the objects they represent, they do not have a *necessary* relationship. Some names do not represent reality, and there is no way to discern which do and which do not.

In *Euthydemus*, the problem explodes into a profound political problem. In this dialogue, two sophists demonstrate a frightening form of logic. In one particularly startling passage, the sophist Dionysodorus is able to effectively argue that a companion of Socrates, Ctesippus, is the son of a dog:

You will admit all this in a moment, Ctesippus, if you answer my questions, said Dionysodorus. Tell me, have you got a dog?

Yes, and a brute of a one too, said Ctessipus.

And has he got puppies?

Yes indeed, and they are just like him.

And so the dog is their father?

Yes, I saw him mounting the bitch myself, he said.

Well then: isn't the dog yours?

Certainly, he said.

Then since he is a father and is yours, the dog turns out to be your father, and you are the brothers of puppies, aren't you? (Plato 1993, 50)

Much of the sophistic logic proceeds in this fashion. It is replete with fallacies of reason, but its syntactic logic is, nevertheless, formidable.⁵⁶

The problem of language becomes especially acute in *Phaedrus*. Socrates notes that written texts remain dependent upon their authors (Plato 2005, 63). When the texts

⁵⁶ "Since he is a father and is yours, he is your father" is logically consistent, and I will argue, represents the danger of vulgarity.

are examined for their meaning they are compelled to defer back to the author for explanation and clarification. As Socrates notes:

And when once it is written, every composition trundles about everywhere in the same way, in the presence both of those who know about the subject and of those who have nothing at all to do with it, and it does not know how to address those it should address and those it should not. When it is ill-treated and unjustly abused, it always needs its father to help it; for it is incapable of either defending or helping itself. (Ibid, 63)

By itself, a text cannot clarify ambiguities; it cannot explicate the intent of an author; a text cannot interpret itself. Once the author is gone, the text is an orphan. It is abandoned into the world without an authoritative voice to lend it validation. Only its interlocutors are left to defend or deride it.⁵⁷ Once written, a text is out of the author's hands.

In *The Seventh Letter*, Plato concisely summarizes the problem by referring to “the inadequacy of language” (Plato 1989, 1590). This inadequacy is the very thing that should keep an “intelligent man” from trying to convey his thoughts in a treatise. For, while language is inadequate, ambiguous, and amorphous, it is also permanent. Plato thus laments the intractability of writing. It is unalterable, and so long as the medium of writing, the pages of a text, remain, the written word is enduring. The signification of the words is by no means constant, however, as Plato notes:

Names, I maintain, are in no case stable. Nothing prevents the things that are now called round from being called straight and the straight round, and those who have transposed the names and use them in the opposite way will find them no less stable than they are now. The same thing for that matter is true of a description, since it consists of nouns and of verbal expressions, so that in a description there is nowhere any sure ground that is sure enough. (Ibid, 1590)

⁵⁷ Likewise, Roland Barthes (1977, 148) tells us “a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination.”

The written word, then, lingers on after the author, but offers no dynamism on behalf of its creator. The written word cannot restrict the expansiveness of interpretation. Rather, without a living, breathing author to explain his or her texts, the written word is a source of “complete perplexity and uncertainty” (Ibid, 1590).

Thus we are confronted by a Platonic theory of language, an early semiology. Language itself is unstable. Names have no necessary connection to the objects and essences they are purported to represent. Writing, and in particular philosophic writing, therefore, is an activity demanding extraordinary care. The written word is particularly susceptible to the inadequacy of language because of its permanency. Provided the material medium of the writing survives, a written text can be in places an author cannot, either in multiple locations where the author is not present, or surpassing a long-deceased author in time. Because the text can exist where the author cannot, in multiple places or in near immortality, it is born an orphan with language as its orphanage. The text is compelled to explain itself without recourse to a clarifying authority. And, as Plato concedes, in every respect and in every instance, it fails this task.

The Error of Strepsiades: The Form of Abomination

The mere act of dying has no terror for anyone who is not completely without sense and manliness; it is wrongdoing that is to be feared; for to enter the next world with one’s soul loaded with wrongdoing is the ultimate of all evils. (Plato 2004, 129)

From Plato’s Gorgias

There are greater evils than dying. There are things to fear in this world that eclipse death. Socrates explains that to stand at the threshold of a completed life with a polluted soul is the worst of all possible fates. Yet, if one soul stained with pollution is

among the most evil of conditions, then it stands to reason that a polity of polluted souls is even worse.

Given the problem of language, Plato's fear is that the unqualified, given enough skill with rhetoric, could gain influence over the polis. Language presented Plato with a problem: words could be misunderstood. Indeed, the prevailing condition of language is that words are often misunderstood. It was the inadequacy of language, not the fear of persecution that compelled Plato to write ironically. Plato's irony is a complex response to the complex problem of teaching through the inadequate means of writing. The written word cannot comprehensively encapsulate the tangled, unruly, and complicated nuances of the human condition with simplicity. Writing was a problem that needed to be surmounted. It needed to be surmounted because of what Plato actually did fear – abomination. It is this fear, the fear of abomination against nature, which would exclude the possibility of writing esoterically as a strategy.

The fear of abomination was, for Plato, more than a mere possibility. It was a reality of everyday life, and it was a particularly acute problem in democracy. In such a regime, Plato felt “every man will arrange his own manner of life to suit his pleasure” (Plato 1945, 282). No singular formulation of the Good holds authoritative sway in democracy. Individuals are ultimately bound only to follow what they understand as good. Plato's confrontation with democracy and his reputation as an unapologetic opponent of democracy are problematized by an assertion in the last of his dialogues, *The Laws*. In his earlier writings, Plato ridiculed states that were intransigent in regards to changing their laws.⁵⁸ Yet, in *The Laws*, the Athenian Stranger implores his

⁵⁸ Compare *The Republic of Plato* (line 426c: “You will find something very like those invalids in some states with a bad form of government, which forbid their citizens, under pain of death, to make any radical

interlocutors that, once written, the laws of a state should never be changed. Still, there is a proviso to this mandate. The laws of a state are nearly immutable, except in the case of a unanimous *democratic* decision (Plato 1975, 251). In other words, the laws can be changed if there is a vote on the matter and every member of the society agrees to the decision.

On one hand we can regard this late turn toward democracy as a cynical exception. Such an argument would maintain that Plato truly despised all forms of democracy and only allowed this one deviation because he knew full well that a unanimous decision was almost entirely impossible. On the other hand, it is strange to support the notion of Plato's anti-democratic zeal by appealing to a decidedly democratic impulse in his thinking. Unanimous democracy is not merely democratic, it is the most democratic possibility within the concept of democracy; and Plato endorses it.⁵⁹

The confrontation with democracy, alternating between condemnation and hesitant endorsement, provoked a problem for Plato. If the best of men do not have a mandatory influence on the character of society, then a strong possibility remains for lesser men to exert their own influence. The problem resonated as a fear for Plato. It was a fear of the unqualified holding sway in public life, a fear of the vulgar gaining influence where they had no business, and, above all, a fear that the Good should be subordinate to anything else.

change in the constitution.”) with *The Laws* (line 772: “They must assume the rules are immutable.”). Furthermore, Cairns (1942, 362) adds it is apparent that the earlier Plato “preferred the adaptable intelligence of the all-wise autocrat to the impersonality of the general rule of law.”

⁵⁹ See for instance (Wolff, 1971, 23): “Under unanimous direct democracy, every member of the society wills freely every law which is actually passed. Hence, he is only confronted as a citizen with laws to which he has consented.”

This fear, expressed repeatedly in Plato's dialogues, is best captured in a passage from *The Laws*. Considerable time is devoted to the nature of education in Magnesia, the city meticulously constructed during the course of the dialogue. At one point, the Athenian Stranger and Cleinias discuss the pedagogical value of art such as dramatic theater. The Athenian notes that certain qualities are important for judges of such art. In particular, he points out that a judge must have "high moral standards" and "a discerning taste" (Plato 1975, 94). Clearly, these attributes are important because, as the Athenian points out, the role of a judge is to promote and reward art with the highest moral content in order to cultivate virtue. The pedagogical value of art is its ability to guide the public in being able to discern morality from immorality.

Discerning is a function of reason. It is an ability one has as a result of reason, which is the principle virtue of the philosopher. However, the Athenian points out that, in this case, it is equally important that a judge possess another necessary quality of the philosopher; a judge must have courage. It is not enough to simply have reason, to be able to discern between high and poor quality art. Why? Because a judge must teach, and teaching, for Plato, requires courage. As the Athenian notes, a teacher must say what is right regardless of not only public sentiment to the contrary but the danger that accompanies heterodoxy:

A judge won't be doing his job properly if he reaches his verdict by listening to the audience and lets himself be thrown off balance by the yelling of the mob and lack of training; nor must he shrug his shoulders and let cowardice and indolence persuade him into a false verdict against his better judgment. (Ibid, 94)

The Athenian excoriates procedures for judging art and athleticism in Sicilian and Italian states, where winners were decided, not by the best of men, but by a show of hands.

The effect of letting the mob decide the winners of artistic competitions is devastating; it

undermines the pedagogical value of art. How? If popular sentiment and fear figures into a judge's decision, then a judge's decision is little more than reflection of the values held by the mob. Virtue, for Plato, is never a characteristic of the many, but is rather the excellence of the few, which should act as an example for the many.⁶⁰

If the judge allows fear to color his decision then the masses, which are, by definition, lacking virtue, decide what is to be taught through art. Composers of drama will, according to the Athenian, begin tailoring their works in order to win. They will produce works that will reflect the vulgar tastes and not strive toward the virtuous. So, rather than the virtuous artists crafting, through competition, increasingly virtuous works designed to teach the masses, an abomination against nature occurs: The vulgar teach the virtuous. A fearful teacher allows the masses to dictate what is to be taught. As the Athenian states, if the masses are allowed to gain sway through fear it is the virtuous men who will be subordinated, "the result is that in effect *they* are taught by the audience" (Ibid, 95).

There can be nothing worse for Plato. This is his greatest fear. It is the fear of abomination, the fear that the virtuous would be silenced by the vulgar leaving the ignorant under the sway of those unsuited to teach. It is this fear that is precisely the reason why Plato could not afford to write esoterically in the way that Leo Strauss suggests. Why? For Strauss the strategy of esoteric writing allows the philosopher to communicate with other philosophers, and especially nascent philosophers, while circumventing the scrutiny of the censor and the mob. The most important truths of the philosopher, according to Strauss, are written "exclusively between the lines." The

⁶⁰ For example, see Republic (1945, 125). The wisdom of the few serves as the surrogate moderation for the immoderate multitude.

consequence of such writing, for Plato, would mean that the truth held by the philosopher, would never reach beyond the philosopher. The wisest could not teach those who are in need of wisdom. They would simply remain ignorant, or worse.

All of this is predicated on a dichotomy, created by Strauss, that divides the set of readers between two starkly opposed groups. On one hand are those who possess sufficient philosophic temperament; these are the readers who can recognize the cues of an esoteric subtext and are capable of learning the corrosive substance of philosophy. On the other hand are those who lack the sufficient philosophic temperament; these readers belong to the vulgar masses. They are incapable of recognizing an esoteric subtext because they are careless readers. Moreover, for Strauss, the vulgar is characterized by a deficiency of intelligence and morality. Esotericism succeeds, Strauss (1952, 59) explains, “based on the assumption that there is a rigid division of mankind into an inspired or intelligent minority and an uninspired or foolish majority.” The world of human beings is divided into a dichotomous taxonomy. Esoteric writing is addressed “not to all readers, but to trustworthy and intelligent readers only” (Ibid, 25). By logical extension, esoteric writing is meant to elude unintelligent or untrustworthy readers. Those who are able to detect esoteric writing and read between the lines are both intelligent and trustworthy. They are sufficiently endowed with reason and good character. The greater majority of human beings, the vulgar from whom the highest truths must be hidden, are unintelligent and do not have good character. The vulgar are precisely the people from whom philosophic knowledge must be segregated.

Through the lens of esotericism, any further distinction to humankind is compelled to collapse back into dichotomy.⁶¹ Because of its dichotomous nature, esotericism reduces any distinctions that might arise from society or politics into two irreducible, natural categories.⁶² A social distinction arises to intervene between the natural categories of the philosopher and the vulgar in the form of “the gentleman.” Unlike the philosopher or the vulgar, whose attributes are provided by nature, the defining characteristic of the gentleman is wealth, and leisure time (Strauss 1968, 11).

As Strauss (2000, 42) explains, “In common parlance, ‘gentleman’ designates a just and brave man, a good citizen, who as such is not necessarily a wise man.” But just as quickly as this category emerges, it dissolves with respect to esotericism, which succeeds on the basis of a rigid division that differentiates between those who are both intelligent and decent, from those who are either unintelligent or indecent. The gentleman just described is the gentleman of “common parlance.” In other words, this is the gentleman as conceived in the realm of society, which is characterized by opinion. The gentleman, as understood by the philosopher, which is characterized by knowledge, is something entirely different. Here, Strauss (2000, 42) explains, “In the Socratic meaning of the term, the gentleman is identical with the wise man.” Therefore, according to the philosopher, whose knowledge exceeds the opinion of common

⁶¹ Following Strauss’s portrayal of Platonic texts, there is no reason to presume that Strauss believed Plato was sincere in establishing a tripartite social structure in *The Republic of Plato*. The division of society into rulers, auxiliaries, and craftsmen is carried out exoterically by Socrates, which, for Strauss, could easily indicate views that are inconsistent with the author’s genuine attitudes.

⁶² Consider, for instance, Strauss’s (1963, xvii) words from “How to Begin to Study *The Guide of the Perplexed*,” where he states, “The *Guide* contains a public teaching and a secret teaching. The public teaching is addressed to every Jew including the vulgar; the secret teaching is addressed to the elite.” Esotericism only leaves room for two varieties of human being.

parlance, the gentleman is the philosopher, both decent and intelligent. Strauss leaves little doubt that he concurs with the Socratic version, when he states:

We have suggested that the ultimate justification for the distinction between gentlemen and non-gentlemen is the distinction between philosophers and non-philosophers. If this is true, it follows that by causing the purpose of the philosophers, or more generally the purpose which essentially transcends society, to collapse into the purpose of the non-philosophers, one causes the purpose of the gentlemen to collapse into the purpose of the non-gentlemen. (Strauss 1968, 19)

However, from the theory of esotericism, which asserts that only the intelligent and decent will be able to detect and understand the concealed subtext of a writing, even the gentleman of common parlance descends into the “uninspired or foolish majority” (Strauss 1952, 59). He lacks wisdom, and therefore, the ability to read esoterically. Esotericism collapses the world into two categories because it consists solely of two categories, an exoteric and an esoteric text and the rigid division that delineates the two. There is no separate, third category in Strauss’s theory for a middle ground. Seen through the lens of esotericism, a human being is either capable or incapable. There may be decent but dimmer gentlemen that the philosopher can ally with against the indecent, but they nevertheless belong to the foolish majority.

For Plato, there is greater natural variegation among readers than Strauss allows for. There are different aptitudes for different philosophic questions, problems, and styles of writing and reading. Of course there are those who are philosophers and those who are not, but even among those who could be described as non-philosophers, they all cannot be described as entirely unphilosophic, lacking any interest or talent for profound questions. Indeed, Plato (1989, 1591) believed that in order to be a philosopher, one must be intelligent and have an aptitude for the subject. But those qualities are not necessarily required to learn from a philosopher. In *The Symposium*,

Plato presents three different groups: the wise, those with right opinion, and the ignorant (Plato 1999b, 40). Those with right opinion include philosophers such as Socrates, but others are within their ranks. The god Love is named as a lover of wisdom. Despite being immortal, the god is not wise, and desires wisdom. We also see other humans who are not philosophers within the ranks of those with right opinion. Plato is careful to show us that the poets Agathon and Aristophanes accompany Socrates throughout the dialogue. Unlike a foolish interlocutor, like Euthyphro who abruptly breaks off his conversation with Socrates when he feels threatened, the two poets continue conversing with the philosopher until exhaustion overtakes them. It is not temperament they lack, but, perhaps, only stamina. They share a love of wisdom with Socrates, though they are not philosophers; they are poets. The wise are primarily gods, but mortals can also be wise. Diotima of Mantinea is named as a wise person by Socrates. She is not a lover of wisdom because she already possesses wisdom. Finally, there are the ignorant, those who have neither right opinion nor the love of wisdom.⁶³

By setting the standard as the ability to recognize esotericism in Plato and others, Strauss narrows the definition of what it means to be philosophic to include only readers who share his vision of reading. In fact, Plato understand a greater diversity among human beings.⁶⁴ Plato may not have thought it possible to teach the vulgar, but there are other sorts of human beings than simply philosophers and the vulgar. On this matter Plato is quite clear: the vulgar are not identical with the ignorant. Vulgarity describes the

⁶³ The tripartite depiction of humanity is repeated in the earlier dialogue "Lysis." Both gods and men are said to be capable of true wisdom. The intermediaries between the wise and the ignorant are the lovers of wisdom (Plato 1987c, 152).

⁶⁴ Nicholas Xenos (2008, 80) also notes a similar problem in Strauss's reading of Baruch de Spinoza. As Xenos explains, the vulgar, which Strauss identifies with the many, "is constituted by a very small minority of readers of Latin within a small minority of readers of any kind in seventeenth-century Netherlands."

lack of good character in an individual. Ignorance describes a state of limited knowledge. There can be highly educated, and intelligent vulgar individuals just as there can be men who desire good character but are ignorant as to why they ought to act the way they do. Plato was aware of these subtle shades in human character. He does not divide the world into simple binary oppositions. Accordingly, Callicles is a brutish man, but a clever man. His arguments in *Gorgias*, that natural right is the entitlement of the strong to take what they can from the weak, exemplifies the phrase “vulgar display of power.” But he is no fool. His wits, although inferior to Socrates, are sufficient to make his sheer moral bankruptcy a source of danger. Inversely, Euthyphro presents himself as a truly ignorant man, someone who simply does not know better than to think himself wise. At the same time, he also understands himself to be a highly moral and pious man. Regardless of whether or not Euthyphro turns out to be a moral, the sincerity of his desire to be moral is indisputable.

The characters Plato presents us with do not represent a discrete opposition between two monolithic groups. It is not a world populated by rigid divisions. Rather, Plato’s characters are complex because the truth of the world is complex. The human condition is complex, and, indeed, Plato was complex, not merely in his writings but in his own human frailty. Sometimes, Plato banishes the poets. Yet, he also writes in the idiom of the poets, dialogue. Sometimes, Plato castigates democracy. Yet, he also endorses its most pronounced form. Sometimes, a man can change his mind.

Strauss is right that Plato saw some people as lacking the proper temperament to practice philosophy. He also saw some people as lacking the proper temperament to learn what philosophers might teach them. But that does not necessarily equate to a

secret masterful writing, nor does it equate to rigid division of humanity with the vast majority of human beings unteachable. To prevent the fear of abomination from becoming realized, Plato sought to address the literate who were not yet wise, but not vulgar either. In other words, Plato wanted to address those of right opinion, the lovers of wisdom, as well as the ignorant. The entire Socratic project is designed to show those who currently see no need for wisdom, those who have no love for wisdom, that they are mistaken in their views. Euthyphro is an exceptional failure. Other dialogues demonstrate the Socratic encounter with wisdom that turn out quite differently.

I also suggest that Plato did not merely espouse the indoctrination of right opinion for the vulgar and critical thinking for the philosopher. Even if philosophy is not available or feasible to everyone, the philosophic spirit is, nevertheless, a crucial element of the human condition. Whether they are the words of Socrates or Plato, one of the most memorable lines from “The Apology of Socrates” is the ethos of philosophy: “the unexamined life is not worth living.” Examination and contemplation, the philosophic spirit in varying degrees, is important for all people. Not all people are bound to be philosophers, but the kinds of activities that predominate philosophy are useful to all. If the worst of all evils is to die with a polluted soul, and the unexamined life is not worth living, then a silent philosopher, who fails to teach and disseminate the philosophic as an individual experience of self-examination, even if in varying degrees, permits the worst of all evils to flourish.

If the philosophers fail to teach the masses, then the inadequacy of language contributes to an even more serious, twofold problem. First, orators, rhetoricians, sophists, and poets, those according to Plato who misrepresent reality, could just as

easily gain sway over the masses, and hence the government of a democracy if words have no necessary connection to the ideas they represent. If the Good is not apparent to all, then the vulgar have no means to discern between the philosopher and the sophist. Indeed, the character of Strepsiades in Aristophanes' play *The Clouds* is a powerful example of this problem. Strepsiades' desire to make the weaker speech the stronger and use sophisticated rhetoric to erase his debts is but one good among many. It is a vision of liberalism that precedes Bernard de Mandeville's musings:

Thus vice nurs'd Ingenuity,
Which join'd with Time and Industry,
Had carry'd Life's Conveniencies,
It's real Pleasures, Comforts, Ease,
To such a Height, the very Poor
Liv'd Better than the Rich before,
And nothing could be added more. (Mandeville 1997, 28)⁶⁵

Without an authoritative notion of the good to guide him otherwise, Strepsiades' nefarious scheme is not only permissible it is successful.⁶⁶

The second problem is the misapprehension and abuse of philosophy by the vulgar. I refer to this as the Error of Strepsiades. I assume here that, in fact, Leo Strauss

⁶⁵ In the view of Leo Strauss, the action of Strepsiades is meant to point out a warning to Socrates. For Strauss, Aristophanes meant to warn Socrates that he was indistinguishable to the vulgar who lacked the conceptual tools necessary in order to discern what Socrates actually was, a philosopher, from just another sophist. Hence, the deliberate distortion of Socrates, as a sophist, in *The Clouds*, is meant to advise Socrates to take better care of his public persona. I find this interpretation intriguing and compelling, given Aristophanes' interactions with Socrates in Plato's *Symposium*. It remains, however, unconvincing if it is meant to suggest that Socrates actually learnt to conduct himself esoterically from Aristophanes.

⁶⁶ Strepsiades, despite the limited education he receives from Socrates, and the repercussions that follow from the transformation of Pheidippides, does, in fact, succeed in his plan to defraud his creditors by using sophistic speech.

is correct in his interpretation of Aristophanes' *The Clouds*. That is to say, Aristophanes deliberately distorts the image of Socrates and portrays the philosopher as the antipode of philosophy. Socrates, in "The Clouds", is an eccentric apostate. Worst of all, he is portrayed as a sophist. Socrates promises to make the weaker speech the stronger, telling Strepsiades, "You will become a smooth, rattling, fine-as-flour speaker" (Aristophanes 1998, 126). It is a sentiment that is derisively echoed in "The Apology of Socrates" (Plato 1998a, 66).⁶⁷ It suggests that, for a substantial fee, one can learn the art of rhetoric and persuasion from Socrates. It alludes to a version of Socrates who is not at all concerned about the Good and the True, but rather, to a distortion of Socrates as a mercenary of oration. Strauss tells us that this is a warning by Aristophanes to his friend Socrates. It is a warning that the vulgar masses, embodied in the buffoon Strepsiades, cannot tell the difference between Socrates and a brutish sophist like Callicles. The Error of Strepsiades then, is to presume that philosophy is another weapon in the arsenal of rhetoric; it can be purchased and employed with very little effort. The Error of Strepsiades presumes one need not suffer the toil of learning philosophy beyond its formal methods, because, like sophistry, philosophy presumes no truth beyond its formal methods.⁶⁸

Plato lacked the means to teach the masses literally, nor could he rely on manipulating the politically powerful to manipulate the masses toward the right order.

⁶⁷ Thomas West (1998, 17) argues that the text of the defense suggests that Plato was responding to the presentation of Socrates in "The Clouds."

⁶⁸ Strauss (2000, 42) also demonstrated concern about this misunderstanding when he wrote, "The fate of Socrates showed that those who do not understand the nature of wisdom are apt to mistake the wise man for the sophist." The solution he imagines for Plato, which Plato rejects, refuses to address that misunderstanding. The silence of esotericism leaves the confusion of the vulgar intact. Moreover, if Strauss (Ibid, 42) is sincere in holding the view that esotericism is how philosophers circumvent "the distrust of the wise," then he deliberately exacerbates the problem by revealing the existence of esotericism, a form of secret writing philosophers hold in common against the masses.

Platonic writing is not, as Leo Strauss suggests, strictly a coded language of supreme precision crafted by one philosopher and meant exclusively for other philosophers. Plato argues that such writing is impossible. If he dismisses the possibility of writing about “serious realities,” it is because they are nowhere in his writing at all. This does not mean that Plato creates one layer of text and then perfectly hides his real meaning behind it in such a manner that only expert readers will uncover it. Writing, in which Plato recognizes no necessary relationship between names and concepts, or signifiers and signified, prevents the sort of precision demanded by that kind of strategic, Straussian esotericism. Indeed, the disjuncture between signifiers and signified:

Makes the reality that is expressed in words or illustrated in objects liable to easy refutation by the evidence of the sense. The result of this is to make practically every man a prey to complete perplexity and uncertainty. (Plato 1989, 1590)

Certain truths are simply too perplexing for words, which cannot be made precise enough to convey literal meaning. Writing with such precision that meaning is conveyed perfectly by secrecy and contradiction is not a talent Plato claims for himself. He denies that he could do better than produce “envy and perplexity” and seems skeptical that anyone could. These “serious realities” as Plato calls them, which we ought to note are not necessarily the same as “highest truths” as Strauss calls them, are not deliberately made inaccessible to some men, while remaining accessible to others within some highly ordered, multi-dimensional labyrinth of Plato’s writing. They are absent.

If language prevents teaching the masses in a literal fashion, attempts to redress the problems of politics by accessing the politically powerful are just as unlikely for Plato. The good king is identical with the philosophic king in the taxonomy of regimes represented in *The Republic of Plato*. The only good monarch presented in Plato’s

seminal text is necessarily a philosopher. Diametrically opposed to the philosopher-king is the tyrant, which Plato discovered through experience is as unreliable and dangerous as the masses. The disastrous failure to teach Dionysus, the ruler of Syracuse, to establish a polity based on the principles of philosophy instead taught Plato the dangers of introducing idealist principles to existing politics. A ruler who had demonstrated an interest in philosophy, extended an invitation to Plato as an advisor, and projected the appearance of interest in virtue, turned out instead to be nothing more than a tyrant. For his several efforts to bring about a just constitution at Syracuse, Plato was repeatedly detained and found himself in “real personal danger from the hostility of Dionysus’ barbarian body-guards” (Taylor 1937, 8). It would be the one and only foray into practical politics for Plato. The lesson was clear: if the mob persecuted Socrates, it only took one man to persecute Plato. The best regime could not be achieved through addressing the politically powerful.

Plato could not afford to be silent for fear of abomination, but neither could he attempt to convey the workings of philosophy in writing. He could not opt for quietism, nor could he hope to teach the masses philosophy because the inadequacy of language, which made the masses susceptible to the skilled tongue of the sophist, would likely lead them to misapprehend the true nature of philosophy. Plato averred that philosophic training took time and patience:

Acquaintance with it must come rather after a long period of attendance on instruction in the subject itself and of close companionship, when, suddenly, like a blaze kindled by a leaping spark, it is generated in the soul and at once becomes self-sustaining. (Plato 1989, 1589)

Those without the proper philosophic temperament would be too hasty and unwilling to put in the necessary time. Philosophy would simply be seen as one more form of fancy

rhetoric. Indeed, becoming a philosopher is not a possibility for most people, according to Plato.

In the linguistic environs where the Truth and the Good fail to present themselves explicitly to every individual, and are instead confounded by the ambiguous nature of language, Plato is confronted with two interrelated problems. First, the vulgar are beset by perplexity and confusion. Those skilled in rhetoric, but not experienced in the nature of virtue and the Good can easily gain influence over the masses and, in a democratic society, government. Secondly, because language is inadequate, it is practically impossible to directly convey the essence and substance of philosophy in writing. Plato cannot train the masses, regardless of individual temperament, to become philosophers through writing. The masses themselves misapprehend the true nature of philosophy and, mistaking it for another art of rhetoric, commit the Error of Strepsiades: misunderstanding what philosophy is, they abuse it and endanger it.

The inadequacy of language, therefore, amplified a fear of abomination in Plato. It was the fear that the wrong men would gain influence, and that the love of wisdom would be corrupted to become just another love of power. And it was precisely because of this fear that Plato would be ethically opposed to writing esoterically in the manner imagined by Strauss. Plato sought to communicate and teach those with right opinion, and even the ignorant with potential for good moral disposition. Dialogues that clearly demonstrate the ethos of philosophy, if not discoveries about the most serious realities, are the idiom Plato chose to address this fear. Rather than treatises, Plato chose a literary form that addresses the complexity of political life and the diversity of human beings. Already inexpressible through writing, already supremely difficult to grasp, the

truth had no need of concealment. Dialogues, then, address the expressible truth and make the case for philosophy in contrast to the rhetoricians, sophists, and orators.

The fear of persecution was not a primary concern for Plato. Indeed, the fear of death was unmanly, cowardly, and rendered meaningless by attacks on the political class, institutions, and orthodoxy. The fear of death is unbecoming of a philosopher. Nietzsche (1990, 44) lashes out with the argument that “Socrates wanted to die.” That is debatable, but it seems entirely clear that Socrates, as presented by Plato, held no fear of death. The final words of his trial further indicate ambivalence to death. Addressing the jury, Socrates declares, “But now it is time to go away, I to die and you to live. Which of us goes to a better thing is unclear to everyone except the god” (Plato 1998a, 97). But more importantly, the substance of Plato’s fear precluded the very possibility of esoteric writing in the manner Strauss describes.

Strauss tells us that esoteric writing is designed to allow the philosopher to circumvent relaying his most important truths exoterically. The philosopher will write in such a manner that the vulgar will only see the exoteric text, replete with orthodox principles the philosopher does not really believe. Meanwhile, the philosopher is able to esoterically relay his actual views, which are necessarily heterodox, to his intended audience, other philosophers, and even more importantly, nascent philosophers. This kind of strategic esoteric writing, the kind imagined by Strauss, creates a closed circuit between philosophers, excluding non-philosophers.

The fear of abomination meant Plato could not afford to write in such a manner. A fear of persecution would lead teachers to subordinate the good in favor of vulgarity. The masses, and not the best of men, would decide what was to be taught. In such an

environment, sophists and poets could just as easily gain influence. The truth of the philosopher would never come to light. Indeed, a fear of persecution would beget persecution. In the Allegory of the Ship from *The Republic of Plato* the sailors who represent unfit politicians are always “ready to cut to pieces” the man who says the true art of piloting is teachable. They reject that there is such an art and reserve violence as a tool for their own advantage. These sailors are vulgar; in order to seize power, in contravention to the Good, they resort to immoral means. Yet, at this point, Plato shows us that the sailors are still in competition with the true pilot. At this point in the allegory, the sailors and the pilot are struggling to reach the mind of the shipowner. Eventually, the sailors are able to succeed because the tools of vulgarity are alluring, whereas the virtue of the true pilot is austere:

Enchaining the noble shipowner with mandrake, drink, or something else, they rule the ship, using what’s in it; and drinking and feasting, they sail as such men would be thought likely to sail. (Plato 1991, 168)

It is only *after* the shipowner has been subdued by the sailors that the true pilot is imperiled. Having seized control, the sailors then persecute the true pilot who “they blame as useless” (Ibid, 168). When the vulgar statesmen have succeeded in persuading and enthralling the minds of the ignorant it is then that philosophy is at greater risk for persecution. For Plato, this is not a moment of resignation into a secluded ghetto of writing. His characters choose one path, constructing a city of perfect justice that ultimately fails. Plato chooses a different path, criticizing the powerful, writing dialogues, and teaching readers. Politics remains a manifold field of struggle over the categories of power waged between the virtuous, the vulgar, the ignorant, and the various shades and gradations in between.

A philosopher who does not teach the masses, by virtue of quietism, allows a world of abomination to emerge where vulgarity and viciousness are dominant. The strategically esoteric philosopher, through his silence and secrecy, permits the conditions of a world that are fundamentally hostile to any form of heterodoxy. For Plato, the fear of persecution is a consequence of abomination. The fear arises when the philosopher is silent, the unfit are permitted to teach, and the ignorant mistake the nature of philosophy. Strategic esotericism creates its own persecution. Fortunately, the esotericism of Leo Strauss was not the esotericism of Plato. If Strauss imagines an esoteric strategy, Plato is confounded by an esoteric tragedy. We ought to note that Plato, unlike Strauss, never says the truth ought to be hidden. He considers it his duty to speak the truth. He laments, in fact, that he cannot say more and say it more clearly. Esotericism is a tragic, unavoidable aspect of the human condition. Meaning secretes itself, despite our best efforts to beat words into submission and force them to say what we want. They resist us, passively using our own force to trip and defeat our best laid plans.

Concluding Remarks: The Agora of Writing

Above all other things, Plato feared the abomination against nature. Because language is wrought with ambiguity it is inadequate. Because language is inadequate, confusion remains a persistent condition of political life. This problem meant that Plato could ill-afford to follow a strategy of secretive esoteric writing. If by ingenious design, as Strauss suggests, Plato spoke only to other philosophers and to nascent philosophers then his fear of abomination would be realized. If the philosopher remains silent about the truth, then the vulgar are effectively led by the sophistic principle that there is no greatest good, and that the only good that can truly guide a person is

individual caprice. Teaching, as Plato feared, would no longer originate with the best of men toward those who had not yet discovered philosophy for themselves. Rather, the vulgar, unfettered by the moral conviction of a philosopher, through the use of corruption or intimidation, would teach the wise to pander to them.

To refrain from teaching the vulgar compromises the philosopher. Such silence permits, without protest, pandering. This was a vile form of degradation for Plato. In *Gorgias*, Socrates castigates pandering as being little more than an ability to manipulate people (Plato 2004, 30). He goes on to explain why it is such a wretched activity:

The difference is that pandering pays no regard to the best interests of its object, but catches fools with the bait of ephemeral pleasure and trick them into holding it in the highest esteem. (Ibid, 32)

Pandering is presented as the opposite of philosophy because it disregards the truth and what is good in deference to what is expedient and lucrative. To refrain from teaching the vulgar is to quietly condemn while publicly condoning one of the most reprehensible activities.

On one hand, therefore, Plato was compelled to write and to teach philosophy, to take risks, and reach not only other philosophers, but also those whose lives needed philosophy the most. On the other hand, Plato was confronted with the problem of trying to convey the truth through a language that was always inadequate. Directly trying to discuss certain subjects would only lead to confusion. Moreover, any attempt, through writing, to explain or teach the ways of philosophy would invariably lead to confusion and the abuse of philosophy. But, again, Plato could not risk silence if he wanted to avoid abomination. Plato was compelled by the fear of abomination to write. Truth had to be taught and philosophy had to be defended, if not to the vulgar then to those with right opinion and the ignorant.

Platonic writing has a lively tenor, replete with risk and insults against the powerful forces of its day. Through writing, a form of communication that Plato himself understood as practically immortal, and, with its words orphaned into the world by an absent procreator, incapable of defending itself, he openly insulted powerful forces in Athens. Statesmen were savagely attacked for their incompetence and dishonesty. Institutions, such as the hallowed Prytaneum, the Athenian judicial system, and democracy itself, are slighted in varying degrees of severity. Finally, the orthodoxy of Athens, in the form of its religious mythology, poetry, views on gender relations, and general convention are continuously affronted. Far from seeking a safe route to preserve himself from persecution, Plato risked offending nearly anyone.⁶⁹

Plato's insults are not aimless epithets. They accomplish something meaningful because while he is unable to offer treatises on the truth or the practice of philosophy due to the inadequacy of language, Plato is able to offer a negative appraisal of his contemporaneous politics, and our own. His insults serve a purpose, a purpose beyond humiliating the demagogues. His insults inaugurate a profoundly political moment. They negate the premise that politics as they exist are satisfactory. They point to a statesman who only simulate qualifications and to a political system that promotes the lowest common denominator.⁷⁰ They gesture toward thinking beyond the slavish adherence to

⁶⁹ Given that nearly everyone is to be exiled in his ideal city. Monoson (2000, 52) notes that frank speech was generally limited to engagements with close associations. Athens, during the time of Plato, had free speech relative to other Hellenic polities, but was by no means a place of unlimited freedom in speech. There was, she points out, a law against slander. That being said, attacks on the powerful and orthodoxy were not unknown. Given both the litigious nature of Athens, and the occasionally fatal consequences of that litigiousness, along with laws to curtail speech, insulting the powerful was a genuine risk.

⁷⁰ Compare Plato's assessment that democracy foments aimless capriciousness with Thomas Carlyle (1965, 214) who says, "Democracy, which means despair of finding any Heroes to govern you, and contented putting up with the want of them." And, despite his lifelong struggle against Plato, Nietzsche (1989a, 176) agrees that democracy leads to the "mediocritization of man."

dogma, orthodoxy, and convention. In other words, Plato's writing, far from being a secretive code that only other philosophers could detect, was meant for all. The fear of abomination compelled Plato to inaugurate political philosophy into writing.⁷¹ His writing was meant for all, but remained anti-democratic in substance. How is that possible?

Plato's fear led him to create an agora of writing. In Athens, the agora was a space for economic and political assembly. It was a place of exchange, not beyond rules and power, but accessible to at least those who lived in Athens and were privileged enough to be citizens. What kind of space, then, does Plato create with his assault on the powerful? He creates a space without privileges for the powerful. I do not mean to suggest that he creates a democracy, although the space that results may accommodate democratic practices.⁷² The dominant character of the agora is its accessibility. It is open, and all who enter it are subject to viewing. His insults bring criticism to bear on the otherwise unassailable. The agora is a space of contestation where we are compelled to confront one another and ourselves. We are exposed; our views and the vision of ourselves as viewed. We are exposed to insult in the agora, in the sense that our flaws and pomposity are visible to the eyes and vulnerable to the wit of others. Conversely, as the agora is a place of exchange, others are brought under our gaze and criticism. And, as a place of exchange, the agora is not simply a space where personal flaws are taken to task. The agora is where purveyors come to flog their various wares. In other words, the agora Plato gives us is a place where ideas are meticulously examined for merit.

⁷¹ While I agree with Strauss (1964, 19) that Socrates is the first political philosopher, Plato, as I am sure Strauss would agree, is the first to bring political philosophy into writing.

⁷² Again, in this sense, I concur with Monoson that "frank speech" is a democratic practice, even if it is not attached to a democracy.

Plato might not have thought it possible to teach the vulgar, but he addresses them nonetheless. Moreover, through his writing, he permits himself and philosophy to be addressed by the vulgar. In *Gorgias*, Callicles characterizes the philosopher as an overgrown child who deserves whipped for his unmanliness. Such a person is ridiculous and impotent, he says:

As I said just now, such a person, however great his natural gifts, will never be a real man; shunning the busy life of the heart of the city and the meetings in which, as the poet says, 'men win renown', he will spend the rest of his life in obscurity, whispering with three or four lads in a corner and never saying anything independently or of sufficient importance for a free man. (Plato 2004, 70)

In many ways, this passage is the inversion of the various insults Plato's Socrates slings at statesman. The insult is not slung by Callicles; it is slung by *Plato's* Callicles, and it is worth noting that none of Plato's other characters actually respond directly to the insult. This is indicative of the agora of writing. One has to be prepared, not only to criticize others, but to be criticized as well.

Plato's fear of abomination inaugurates political philosophy into writing. The fear that the worst of men would gain influence compelled him to speak to the vulgar as plainly as the inadequacy of language would allow. His writing opened an agora where he implored the vulgar to realize that the prevailing condition of politics was substandard. His mockery of others, far from a silent, strategic esotericism, was a profound risk. Rather, the tragedy of esotericism, the unavoidable inability to surmount the limitations of the written word, compelled Plato to face the fear of abomination. His choice to teach, even if ironic, subtle, playful, and perhaps even purposefully obfuscating was, nevertheless, a ruthless assault on orthodoxy. Indeed, his attack on orthodoxy is an attack on democracy, and I make no arguments to the effect that Plato

is a democrat. Rather, human beings are diverse as a whole, and the individual can also be a diverse community of impulses, drives, desires, and beliefs. Plato was not a democrat; he attacks it wholeheartedly, yet he demonstrates democratic tendencies more than once in his writings.

It would be hasty to conclude that Plato was the bravest of writers. More to the point, however, is that he did abide by an ethic of speaking the truth. In the course of adhering to that ethic, sometimes with varying degrees of success, he took risks inconsistent with a deliberate strategy of protecting himself from persecution through secret writing. He was not the esoteric writer Leo Strauss envisioned. Plato did not conceal himself from dangers. Instead, he took risks that contested conventional politics, and introduced political philosophy into writing. He also confronted another danger, the danger of miscommunication in writing. Plato summoned the courage to teach, despite his considerable trepidations over the deficiencies of the written word. Ultimately, the fear of abomination was too great to allow persecution or miscommunication to force him into seclusion. Plato's fear, therefore, brings us to a place of agonistic contestation where we are compelled to stare into the flaws of others and bear the sting of their insults. Plato beckons us to the agora of writing.

CHAPTER 5
ESOTERICISM: THE HIGHEST STAGE OF PERVERSION

Introduction: The Great Wink of the Philosophers

In one of his earlier essays, “The Spirit of Sparta, Or a Taste of Xenophon”, Leo Strauss (1939, 503) tells us that anything is preferable to the idea that Xenophon, or the other great writers of antiquity committed mistakes in their work. Rather, we are told, the kinds of embarrassing grammatical and formal errors, the kind Strauss (1952, 30) tells us would “shame an intelligent high school boy,” are actually signs of exacting and meticulous precision. It is those false errors, deceptions designed to throw off careless readers, which should lead careful readers to believe there is an intricately designed esoteric subtext. The errors of great writers are not at all errors. The errors of great writers are a surreptitious wink.

The assertion that the greatest thinkers make no errors is not an argument. It is a wish. Strauss gives us no reason to believe that such a preference corresponds with the truth beyond the fact that the great writers were great. We may very well want Xenophon and Plato to be flawless, but that does not make it so. I will respond, to the idea that the greatest writers were beyond flaw in their literary efforts with a proposition of my own: great writers are capable of great mistakes; even the highest minds are flawed, and though we may wish that our philosophic heroes are impervious to errors of logic, grammar, and reason, they are fallible, they are sometimes inattentive, and they are sometimes in error.

Bruce Fink, a psychoanalyst in the Lacanian tradition, advises us to pay attention to those unusual assertions that make their way into a discourse. They can be telling, esoteric in their own way, esoteric beyond the control of the author. They are

unavoidable. But if we pay attention to Strauss's seminal piece on persecution, we are led to wonder – why do the grammatical anomalies of Xenophon and others “shame an intelligent high school boy?” Why do errors become strategic?

As that question is addressed, a scene from *The Republic of Plato* draws our attention and inspires another question. Why does Socrates speak to Thrasymachus? The sophist, Thrasymachus, bursts into the conversation with violence and intimidation, clearly in no mood to entertain the peculiar technique of Socratic reasoning. Yet, the preponderance of themes discussed during the founding of the just city arises as a consequence of addressing Thrasymachus. In other words, this wild, rather vulgar man inspires much of the dialogue.

Two problems guide this essay. Firstly, rather than accept the possibility and probability that even the greatest thinkers in political philosophy were capable of mistakes, Leo Strauss concludes that what are commonly regarded as inconsistencies and errors in the works of Plato, among others, are actually deliberate cues to an esoteric subtext. Strauss (*Ibid*, 25) tells us that writers such as Plato hid their true thought “exclusively between the lines” in order to avoid persecution, leaving only strategically placed errors as a clandestine sign of their underlying heterodoxy. The sufficiently clever and philosophically-minded reader will recognize that something is amiss and philosophy can propagate itself safely beyond the persecutory clutches of the orthodox. But what is Strauss doing in all of this? By his own account, here is a secret that has succeeded across time and in both decidedly illiberal and strongly liberal regimes.⁷³ Esotericism, according to Strauss, is a technique that has allowed

⁷³ The success of this technique is somewhat disputable given that many of those Strauss identifies as practitioners, thinkers such as Spinoza, Locke, and Voltaire, did suffer persecution. Strauss, of course

philosophers to circumvent the sharp repression of the censor and the blunt intolerance of the vulgar. Importantly, Strauss is telling us of its existence. He is revealing the existence of a secret. Without divulging its content, he gestures us toward the secret.⁷⁴ Strauss is revealing that there is something that cannot be revealed; *a secret exists*. Strauss deposits political philosophy into a ghetto of writing, an apolitical environment surrounded on all sides by exoteric print. How does Strauss arrive at this ghetto? Why does Strauss's technique of writing advocate a regimen of concealment?

Secondly, Plato deliberately contrasts the violence of Thrasymachus with other Socratic interlocutors in a meaningful way. Euthydemus, Dionysodorus, Protagoras, and Gorgias are all antagonists, but are quite often polite and engaging. Even the brutish Callicles, while morally degenerate, is not violent. Thrasymachus bursts into the dialogue of *The Republic of Plato* with frightful violence, instilling terror in Socrates, and then is virtually muted for the remainder of the text. Plato creates a text motivated by the fearful confrontation between Socrates, the embodiment of reason, and Thrasymachus whose bestial rage identifies him with a kind of madness. How does Plato arrive at the agora of writing, a space of confrontation, not necessarily democratic, but without privilege where subjects are brought under critical gaze? Why does Plato's technique of writing demand dialogue?

Strauss reveals there is something that cannot be revealed. Plato creates a confrontation between reason and *eros*. How can we understand these confrontations

acknowledges this, but it nevertheless invites the assessment that if such writers did make use of esotericism in the way that Strauss describes, then they were not particularly good at it.

⁷⁴ Whether or not the contents of interpretations like the *City and Man*, *Socrates and Aristophanes*, *Spinoza's Critique of Religions*, and other works, represent the exoteric presentation of esoteric thought, or if they are *also* esoteric works by Strauss is a matter of rather fierce debate. Again, I take the position that if Strauss is writing esoterically, then there is simply no way we can know for sure.

with fear in political philosophy? Put simply, they are perversions. In this essay, I argue that we can understand the relocations of political philosophy for both Leo Strauss and Plato as forms of perversion. They are, however, decidedly different expressions of the perverse. Leo Strauss creates a discourse of pathological perversion designed to perpetuate the fear of persecution. It is a perversion predicated on the reproduction of persecution; it is a love of persecution. Plato, contradistinctively, creates a perversion that is non-pathological. Plato creates a perverse parrhesia: a dialogue that bothers the limits of ethically frank speech.

In this essay, I will examine the respective confrontations with fear in the discourses of Leo Strauss and Plato, and characterize their responses as perversion. First, I will elaborate the nature of perversion and its relationship to discourse through Lacanian psychoanalysis. Next, I will offer an account of Straussian esotericism as a form of pathological perversion whose effect is the reproduction of philosophy through fear. Thirdly, I will describe the Platonic confrontation with fear, primarily in *The Republic of Plato*, as a form of perversion, albeit a non-pathological variety. Plato's perversion attempts to prop up the Law in order to generate dialogue and critical examination; it is a perverse parrhesia, but not a pathological parrhesia.

Both Plato and Strauss write esoterically, but they do so for drastically different reasons. For Plato, esoteric writing is an unavoidable consequence of the ambiguities in language. For Leo Strauss, esoteric writing is a deliberate strategy primarily employed to avoid persecution. Plato's irony is deliberate; his esotericism is inadvertent.

At this point, a joke from *The Benny Hill Show* will preface an important point. The scene depicts a Scandinavian couple in bed preparing for a night of passion. The

woman turns to the man and says, “Hurt me, Sven! Hurt me!” The man shrugs, turns to her and says, “Okay, your dog is dead.” The example illustrates the relationship between suffering and enjoyment. The woman deliberately interjects suffering into her satisfaction. At the same time, her desire is frustrated by the partner who seemingly misunderstands what it is she is trying to communicate. Strangely enough, it could be said that he precisely understands what she wants.

Beyond that, the scene illustrates a formal theme relevant to this essay. This essay deploys psychoanalytic terms for a reading of Plato and Strauss. Psychoanalysis can yield illuminating results because of its attention to pathologies of discourse. While it is informed by Lacanian thought this is not a Lacanian essay. By Lacanian thought, I refer to a tradition of psychoanalysis that mostly originates with Sigmund Freud, finds its fulcrum in Jacques Lacan, and extends to Bruce Fink. There are many interpreters and arbiters of Lacan’s thought. I have deliberately narrowed this axis of psychoanalysis to Freud, Lacan, and Fink. I do so because Fink’s writing, exposition of Lacan, and improvements are indispensably accessible. Many, if not most Lacanian works, including Lacan’s own works, are unnecessarily evasive, frustratingly unclear, and sometimes just plain unhelpful. In some ways, Lacanians succeed at esotericism in a manner that would inspire envy in Straussians.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ For instance, on Lacan’s written style, Fink (1997, 220) says, “The ambiguities in Lacan’s speech and writing are often very deliberate. Wholly un-American in spirit, Lacan’s motto might well have been: ‘The more ambiguous and polyvalent, the better.’ Many will find that approach unpalatable, and a reflection of French intellectual snobbery – which is true, no doubt, at least in part.” Elsewhere, Fink (1995, 150) essentially says that reading Lacan’s writings is useless unless the reader already understands his thought. Lacan (1998, 26) tells us that his main written work, *Écrits*, was “not meant to be read.” There is perhaps a distinction to be made in admitting it was not meant to be read from the assessment undoubtedly made by many frustrated readers that *Écrits* was not *fit* to be read.

Accordingly, it would be more accurate to characterize my approach to psychoanalysis as informed by Fink, than Lacan. In turn, however, I am not interested in letting Lacan, or Lacanianism, dictate the terms of the essay. The abuse or misuse of terminology has been avoided wherever possible. It is, however, ridiculous (perhaps even hysteric) to grasp for something like “orthodoxy” from a thinker, like Lacan, who argued “that every real signifier is, as such, a signifier that signifies nothing” and “misunderstanding is the very basis of interhuman discourse” (Lacan 1993, 185 and 163). Understanding, then, is the abnormality. Misunderstanding is the prevailing condition of discourse. That is not to say I am proposing interpretive anarchy. Rather, I concur with Lacan that there are limits to accuracy and to grasp desperately beyond those limits is an exercise in the deepest futility. Quite differently, the point is, as Fink inspires, considering what kind of productive discussions can emerge from a discursive approach.

Kill Your Idols: The Discursive Genesis of Perversion

There is perversion, and there are perverts. Perversion is not restricted to overtly sexual activities. Perverts, therefore, are not, solely speaking, sexual deviants. Rather, perversion is a relationship to *jouissance*. As a central concept in Lacanian thought, *jouissance* might be understood by tracing its conceptual roots. Sigmund Freud tells us that, due to the exigencies of scarcity, human beings sublimate the unrestricted pursuit of pleasure. In order to procure essential material needs governed by the reality principle, human subjects are compelled to suppress the pleasure principle to at least some degree. Civilization, therefore, makes demands on how its constituents express desire.

A subject is called into existence by language, oftentimes before there is even an existing human being. Prior to the appearance of a physical person, a space in discourse in terms of names and relationships has already been reserved. The relation of son, daughter, brother, sister, niece, nephew, or, perhaps, orphan await the arrival of a subject to inhabit those positions. The subject that emerges is split between the mythical, pre-linguistic human being and language. Consequently, Jacques Lacan tells us that desire is not endogenously derived from atomistic, unified individuals. Rather, desire is “the desire of the Other” (Lacan 1998, 38). We can read this to mean that others are desired, but the essence of Lacan’s meaning here refers to the big Other, the complex aggregation of language and law. Desire stems from the Other because the Other, delineated out of language, is lacking.⁷⁶ The subject is less a thing, than it is a relationship between ego and this Other. As Bruce Fink explains:

The subject (\$) is split between ego and unconscious, between conscious and unconscious, between an ineluctably false sense of self and the automatic functioning of language in the unconscious. (Fink 1995, 45)

The Other is the ineffable, unconscious law that provides the contours and limits for desire. The subject is constituted by the Other, and thusly, by the lack in the Other. Subjects and their discourses are inherently desiring. Discourse is regenerated by the desiring subjects it has created. The subject, constituted by lack and propelled by desire to achieve wholeness, is always engaged in discourse and, inadvertently, renews the big Other. Language, then, is a substance of the intersubjective relations that constitute

⁷⁶ Fink (1995, 30) explains that language is “untotalizable.” In other words “the set of all signifiers does not exist.” The Other is always lacking, and inasmuch as the subject is constituted by the Other, the subject is also lacking. Desire is the effort to address this lack.

discourse. The big Other is the spirit of law and alterity that lurks within language and discourse.

Once called into being as a subject by discourse, there is no relief, no outside or Archimedean point from which discourse can be escaped. A subject is a discursive subject. Concerning any extra-discursive reality, or what he calls “the real state of affairs,” Freud avers:

We have no hope of being able to reach the latter itself, since it is evident that everything new that we have inferred must nevertheless be translated back into the language of our perceptions, from which it is simply impossible for us to free ourselves. (Freud 1969, 53)

Brought into subjectivity by language and discourse, the subject, so long as it is a subject, remains in discourse. To paraphrase Louis Althusser (2001, 115 and 119), there are no subjects except by and for discourse, and we are always-already subjects.

Now, the subject is compelled by civilization to give up the unrestricted pursuit of pleasure, and it is further compelled by language to abandon pre-linguistic unity. The subject is constrained and split by the big Other. What remains in the absence of unfettered lusting and mythical unity is *jouissance*. Bruce Fink (1995, 60) describes *jouissance* as sense of “excitement, whether correlated with a conscious feeling of pleasure or pain.” *Jouissance* is a sensual substitute for the lost feeling of unity and wholeness, the split posed by subjectivity. It can be framed in terms of enjoyment or pleasure, but it can equally manifest itself as discomfort or pain. *Jouissance*, then, is a sense of satisfaction derived from dissatisfaction (Fink 1997, 8). At the same time as it is satisfaction derived from dissatisfaction, it is also presents itself to the subject as “the suffering that he derives from his own satisfaction” (Evans 1996, 92).

Again, the subject is not permitted to pursue its desires in an unrestricted fashion. There are limits to *jouissance*. As the Law, it is the big Other that governs over *jouissance*. The operation of intervening between the subject and the pursuit of *jouissance* is accomplished through a crucial signifier, the *Name-of-the-Father*. Lacan elaborates on the nature of this primordial signifier:

It is in the *name of the father* that we must recognize the basis of the symbolic function which, since the dawn of historical time, has identified his person with the figure of the law. (Lacan 2006, 230)

It is this signifier that prohibits incest, for example. The *Name-of-the-Father* is the signifier that provides limits to *jouissance*.

In the case of a hypothetical, prehistoric family that Freud describes, a powerfully imposing father articulates the law; he maintains exclusive sexual privileges to the females of the clan. His sons, however are desiring subjects, and they seek to usurp the benefits enjoyed by the father. They band together, slay the father, and, subsequently, cannibalize his corpse. Now, there is nothing to stand between them and the females of the clan. The potential for enjoyment is feasibly unrestricted. But the consumption of the father was not simply the physical cannibalizing of his body. As Freud tells us the symbolic remnants of the father assumed greater authority than the living actual father had maintained. The signifier of the father took power over the patricidal sons:

They revoked their deed by forbidding the killing of the totem, the substitute for their father; and they renounced its fruits by resigning their claim to the women who had now been set free. (Freud 1950, 143)

The law set forth by the father, curtailing the sexuality of the sons was more powerful than the living father had been.

The *Name-of-the-Father* works to accomplish this task. It is the crucial, primal signifier that sets limits to the pursuit of *jouissance*. It is a force of prohibition that

intervenes between the subject and its pursuit. So, as Lacan says, in order to prevent the unrestricted pursuit of desire:

There has to be a law, a chain, a symbolic order, the intervention of the order of speech, that is, of the father. Not the natural father, what is called the father. The order that prevents the collision and explosion of the situation as a whole is founded on the existence of this name of the father. (Lacan 1993, 96)

If this law is absent, if the subject is never confronted by the prohibitive force of the *Name-of-the-Father*, then the subject has no barrier to its pursuit of jouissance. The result is psychosis (Fink 1997, 79). But what if this signifier of prohibition is not denied to the subject? What if it is instead present, but weak? What if the *Name-of-the-Father* is impotent? This is the genesis of perversion. When the *Name-of-the-Father* has been inadequately established, when the prohibitive force of law is weak, the subject is prone to perversion. Lacan explains:

The real father, if one can try to reconstitute it from Freud's elaboration, is properly articulated with what only concerns the imaginary father, namely the prohibition of jouissance. (Lacan 2007, 137)

The *Name-of-the-Father* is a signifier; it can be associated with an actual person who happens to be a father, or a mother, a more diffuse entity such as society.⁷⁷ In all cases, it is a signifier that acts to restrain the subject. If the Other is law, the *Name-of-the-Father* is the first commandment.

In Freud's savage family, the power of the law was firmly established long after the actual father was dead and eaten. The *Name-of-the-Father* persisted so strongly that the sons carried on as though the tyrannical father was still alive. However, had the tyrant-father meekly imposed his rules while he was alive, the sons might have indulged

⁷⁷ Accordingly, the original French terminology, *nom-de-pere*, also translates to mean "noun of the father."

in incest or engaged in other prohibited acts. Incest, in itself, is not perversion. Again, restricting perversion to sexual activity misses its fundamental dynamic. Instead, perversity could be identified in *bothering the prohibition*.

Perversion arises when the *Name-of-the-Father* has been instituted weakly. Bruce Fink (1997, 172) explains, that in lieu of this ineffectual prohibition, the subject has yet to surrender the claim to pleasure. There has been no effective force to compel the subject to yield. Yet the subject is vaguely aware that there are limits because the law has been meekly stated. Having encountered only a weak instantiation of the law, the pervert invokes rules and prohibitions in order to bother them. As Fink (Ibid, 165) suggests, “perversion involves the attempt to prop up the law so that limits can be set to jouissance.” But this attempt to erect law is met by unfettered jouissance; the pervert is barely restrained by law in the search for enjoyment. Perversion represents a clash between opposing forces within the subject: “The pervert’s will to jouissance (pursuit of satisfaction) encounters its limit in a law of his own making – a law he makes the Other lay down, stipulate, mandate” (Ibid, 192). In perversion, jouissance pertains to the rules more than to the substance of any given act. Freud (1962, 27) clarifies the relationship between perverse jouissance and the rules, when he states, “In the majority of instances the pathological character in a perversion is found to lie not in the *content* of the new sexual aim but in its relation to the normal.” Perversity, then, refers to how the law itself is regarded as an object of jouissance for the subject. As mentioned earlier, perversion is a unique relationship between the subject and jouissance. The uniqueness of this relationship is when jouissance is not derived from the act in itself, but how that act tests the limits of the law. The pervert wants both to call the law into being, and, at

the same time, to test its limits. In effect, the pervert says: someone stop me.

Perversion, therefore, is a means to *enjoy* the rules, so to speak.

Now, when we bandy about terms like ‘perversion’ and ‘pervert’ there is undoubtedly the stigma of something unseemly. After all, Freud (Ibid, 27) tells us that perversion appears when feelings of “shame, disgust, horror or pain” have been overwhelmed by desire. However, while shocking, instances “of licking excrement or of intercourse with dead bodies,” do not constitute the majority of perversity (Ibid, 27). In fact, the irony is that most human behavior includes perversion to some extent. It would probably be considered unusual to find an instance of a human being without any perversions (Freud 1966, 322). Indeed, Freud cautions us against castigating perversion:

No healthy person, it appears, can fail to make some addition that might be called perverse to the normal sexual aim; and the universality of this finding is in itself enough to show how inappropriate it is to use the word perversion as a term of reproach. (Freud 1962, 26)

Perversions ought not to be thought of as inherently immoral or pathological. A handshake can be a perversion, if one enjoys it enough; so can a kiss, a hug, or a treatise on Plato.

So while the great preponderance of human behavior can be, to a limited extent, perverse, there is a distinction to be drawn, as already mentioned, between perversion and the pervert. In other words, there is relatively harmless, innocuous perversion that we all enjoy, and then there is pathological perversion. These differences are not ‘natural.’ That is to say, there is no natural difference between a kiss and licking excrement or intercourse with dead bodies. They all deviate from what Freud calls the “normal sexual aim.” All are perversions. We may find kissing, for example,

reprehensible and disgusting, but this a moral or social judgment, and not a scientific fact. Rather, for Freud, pathology is a function of exclusivity: “If, in short, a perversion has the characteristics of exclusiveness and fixation – then we shall usually be justified in regarding it as a pathological symptom” (Freud 1962, 27). In order to be diagnosed as pathological, a perversion must be so extensive as to exclude what is otherwise regarded as conventional activity.

From this point of departure, the discourses of Plato and Leo Strauss can be examined more methodically. Perversion, again, is the attempt by a subject who is nearly unrestricted in its pursuit of *jouissance* to prop up the law. It is a collision of law and unfettered desire. Perversion becomes pathological when it excludes the otherwise conventional.

A Philosopher Is Being Beaten: The Straussian Love of Persecution (*Philo-Diognos*)

In one of his case studies on perversion Sigmund Freud describes how different patients shared the same troubling fantasy: although variations occurred, the patients uniformly fantasized that, somewhere, a child was being beaten by a father. The fantasizing subject was never in the position of the beaten child; it was always another child (Freud 1963, 103). Within the fantasy, the father who beats the child assumes an erotic component in relation to his punitive power. The fantasized father props up the law, though not on the fantasizing subject. Rather, the subject enjoys the law giving power of the father from a distance. Instead of actually constraining the subject, the power of law and rules becomes a perverse object to enjoy.

This is the case with Leo Strauss’s discourse of esotericism. In Strauss’s fantasy, we find a lawgiving figure, the persecutor, beating a philosopher into submission. The

philosopher, of course, is not Strauss. He merely enjoys the scene, with its prohibitive paternal power, from a distance. Strauss's strategy of esoteric writing, which deliberately segregates the orthodoxy of society from the heterodoxy of philosophy, confines political philosophy into a ghetto of writing, but why? Why does Strauss's discourse conclude inauspiciously? It is a discourse of perversion that creates rules in order to bother them; Strauss's discourse eroticizes rules.

Master Signifier – Fear of Persecution

The motive force of the Straussian discourse is the fear of persecution. It is the necessary condition for esoteric writing. Fear is situated, almost behind the scenes, acting as the guiding principle for desire. For Strauss, fear, as it pertains to esotericism, is necessarily the fear of persecution. The master signifier of the discourse is the fear of persecution. It stands undisputed in its power. The master signifier maintains a structuring role in discourse. It essentially orders the discourse into a coherent system. It acts as master, sitting beyond question, identifiable, but unfamiliar to the subject (Fink 1995, 77). Its power, as the power of a master, is given as obvious.

Strauss (1939, 535) tells us that it would be a mischaracterization of past philosophers to presume they wrote esoterically “merely for fear of persecution or violent death.” Indeed, fear is not the only reason philosophers write esoterically, but, also according to Strauss, it is the necessary reason. Philosophers may write esoterically for a variety of reasons, but only *after* they fear persecution.⁷⁸

Desire is directed in the service of this fear, which mandates action; philosophers must heed the fear of persecution. To ask why is to be ridiculous. One does not

⁷⁸ Strauss (1939, 535) notes that the technique disappears simultaneously with “the disappearance of persecution.” Fear, therefore, creates a need that politeness and education do not mandate.

question why one ought to avoid persecution; instead, the fear of persecution justifies itself – *it speaks for itself*. Strauss does not explain why a philosopher ought to avoid persecution; the fear it generates is self-evident. That we tend to associate persecution with unpleasantness, does not necessarily equate to an *a priori* statement of truth that all persecution should be avoided. Many, perhaps most people, find pain unpleasant and seek to avoid it; others actively seek it out. Likewise, there are compelling arguments that suggest Socrates actively sought out a conviction and sentence of death at his trial.⁷⁹ The man who Strauss (1964, 19) describes as the “founder” of political philosopher may have sought out the ultimate form of persecution. Yet, for the Straussian discourse, persecution is the necessary condition for esoteric writing:

If it is true that there is a necessary criterion between persecution and writing between the lines, then there is a necessary negative criterion: that the book in question must have been composed in an era of persecution, that is, at a time when some political or other orthodoxy was enforced by law or custom. (Strauss 1952, 32)

Given that fear is the necessary condition for esoteric writing, the entire Straussian discourse is arranged around this master signifier. All the other terms within the discourse are put into motion and compelled to respond to this master signifier.

Signifying Battery – The Rules of Esotericism

The fear of persecution within the Straussian discourse evokes rules. This master signifier dictates what is and is not permissible. It mandates behavior relating to philosophic writing and reading in the form of rules. These rules comprise esotericism. Consequently, the exigencies of persecution, which cannot be questioned or negotiated,

⁷⁹ I.F. Stone (1988, 186) tells us that Socrates’ speech was so outrageous that it stands as evidence of a “determination to die.” For more on this necessary condition we might take note of Strauss’s (1939, 534) verbiage when he claims “philosophers *had* therefore to conceal” that they were heterodox versus the fact that they “*desired* to communicate their views.” One is necessary; the other is not.

demand that a writer of heterodox views follow certain procedures. He or she must dissemble and dissimulate. The writer of a dialogue will deploy a safe, “edifying character” to the foreground in order to distract the censor and the vulgar reader. An esoteric writer must make strategic use of contradiction and deliberate errors, infrequently interjecting the truth into a text and then denying that truth. Strauss (Ibid, 73) assures us “there probably is no better way of hiding the truth than to contradict it.”

Readers of esoteric texts are also assigned rules that complement those given to writers. A reader may never presume the thoughts of a character within a text are identical to those of its author (Ibid, 30). Likewise, an astute reader should take note of mistakes or apparent contradictions, which are not the sign of error, though they are meant to appear as such to the vulgar reader. Instead, what seems like error is, in fact, the truth.

In relation to the fear of persecution, the rules of esotericism comprise the system of signification, or what Lacan calls “the battery of signifiers” (Lacan 2007, 13). This system is the set of signifiers brought into coherence by the master signifier.

Esotericism, as articulated in the Straussian discourse, makes no sense without the fear of persecution. Again, there is no need for the adoption of rules pertaining to secretive writing and reading if there is no need to be secret. The fear of persecution produces the need that allows the rules of esotericism to make sense.

The Subject – Philosopher

The fear of persecution and the rules of esotericism both relate to a specific subject of the discourse. It is not the vulgar reader or the censor that needs to fear persecution, and neither of these figures is meant to know or follow the rules of esotericism. Instead, the subject of the Straussian discourse of esotericism is the

philosopher. It is the philosopher, the person of heterodox views, who is compelled by the fear of persecution into a system of rules that govern writing and reading. The philosopher is the subject within the discourse. Again, the subject is a relation within discourse; it is a position split between the false being of the ego and the law and lack within the big Other. The philosopher is the subject for whom the master signifier and the signifying battery are meaningful.

Object (a) and Phallus – Gaze of the Persecutor/The Knowing Vulgar

Persecution leads to fear, but what causes persecution? For the Straussian discourse, the cause of persecution, indeed, the cause that brings desire into being, is embodied by the knowing vulgar, the vulgar who knows. The cause itself is ineffable, perhaps most closely expressed as a loss of identity. When the vulgar knows what the philosopher knows, then the philosopher and the vulgar are identical. This sameness is best represented by what I call the “knowing vulgar.” It is this vulgar person who has discerned the heterodoxy of the philosopher that is the object of aversion for the Straussian discourse. The philosopher desires above all to suppress the knowing vulgar, to keep it from coming into being because of the threat it poses to identity.

It is the gaze of the other, the vulgar man that evokes desire within the philosopher. The gaze of the other is what Lacan calls the *objet petit a*, or object (a). Lacan defines this concept as the unpronounceable cause of desire. He further explains that object (a) is:

The partner of this ‘I’ that is the subject, the subject of any sentence that constitutes a demand, is not the Other, but that which is substituted for it in the form of the cause of desire – that I have diversified into four causes, insofar as the cause is constituted diversely, according to the Freudian discovery, on the bases of the object of sucking, the object of excretion, the gaze, and the voice. (Lacan 1998, 126)

Strictly speaking, object (a) is not an object. It is not a thing the subject desires. Rather, as Bruce Fink (1995, 60) suggests, it is an “instrument” that causes the subject to desire. This instrument, however, has no physical being. The gaze of the other cannot be seen.

Likewise, the knowing vulgar is a specter that represents the gaze of the other. The cause of desire in the Straussian discourse of esotericism is the idea that this other, this vulgar person, will be able to cast its gaze on the true science of philosophy. Philosophy, Strauss (1959, 221) tells us, is the effort to replace the opinion of things with the knowledge of all things. It is a unidirectional epistemology. The philosopher is permitted access to both knowledge and opinion. Access to both is needed precisely because the philosopher must replace opinion with knowledge. The vulgar man, in keeping with this model, is not permitted access to knowledge, only opinion. Strauss (1952, 59) maintains that esotericism succeeds precisely because there is a “rigid division” between the intelligent, philosophic minority, and the foolish, vulgar majority. Gradually, what the vulgar man believes is replaced by what the philosopher knows, but without access to the science of philosophy, these new ideas do not become what the vulgar man knows. Rather the vulgar man only believes that which the philosopher knows. If the vulgar man truly *knew* then the rigid division between the philosopher and the vulgar would collapse.

The elements and action of the Straussian discourse of esotericism all serve to emphasize the power of rules. For Strauss, we struggle merely to be philosophic, wisdom itself being inaccessible to human beings. As he says “we cannot be philosophers, but we can love philosophy” (Strauss 1968, 7). This is no longer the love

of wisdom, philosophy; rather, this is the love of the love of wisdom. Loving the act of loving wisdom supplants the goal of ascertaining wisdom. Procedures of philosophy become the focus as the possibility of actually philosophizing is excluded. Because of this insistence on the preeminence of rules, Strauss has constructed what Lacan calls a “University Discourse.” Through the configuration of the four elements – master signifier, signifying battery, subject, and object (a) – different patterns of discourse emerge. Lacan outlined four such patterns of discourse: the Master’s Discourse, the University Discourse, the Hysteric’s Discourse, and the Analyst’s Discourse. Each pattern, because of the unique arrangement of its elements, represents a different dynamic. The Hysteric’s Discourse, for example, eroticizes knowledge, while the Master’s Discourse emphasizes the continuation of order.

The University Discourse elevates rules. Each element in the discourse – master signifier, signifying battery, subject, and object (a) – is placed into one of four positions. In the case of the University Discourse, the master signifier occupies the position of Truth. So, the master signifier (S_1), which brings the discourse into order, is placed in a position of unquestionable knowledge. Its status as an undisputed signifier is further enhanced in this location. The signifying battery (S_2) is located in the Agent position. From this position the signifying battery, the rules of the discourse, is the primary actor, and it acts upon object (a), which is located in the Other position. The occupant of the Agent position acts on the occupant of the Other position in order to generate the occupant of the Product position, which in this case is the subject split by the big Other ($\$$). To summarize, in the University Discourse, the master signifier (S_1) from its Truth

position compels the signifying battery (S_2) to act on object (a) in the Other position in order to generate the split subject (\$) in the Product position.

<i>Agent</i>		<i>Other</i>
S_2	→	(a)
S_1		\$
<i>Truth</i>		<i>Product/Loss</i>

Figure 5-1. Lacan's University Discourse⁸⁰

Applied to the University Discourse, Strauss's presentation of esotericism exemplifies the dynamic of elevating rules. The master signifier (S_1) is the fear of persecution. From its Truth position, where it remains unchallenged, this fear compels the elaborate system of rules, the signifying battery (S_2) that encompasses Straussian esotericism to act upon the occupant of the Other position. In that position is the object (a), the cause of desire, most closely identified with the gaze of the other embodied in the knowing vulgar. Esoteric rules act upon this other to ensure that it is excluded, that it cannot come into being. There must be no knowing vulgar. The esoteric must remain the privilege of the philosopher. Therefore, the esoteric signifying batter, the position of Agent, acts on the Other, the knowing vulgar that does not yet exist, in order to keep it from coming into being, thus ensuring the production of the split subject (\$), the philosopher.

⁸⁰ I have found these charts, first created by Lacan but more fully explained by Bruce Fink, helpful in visually conceptualizing Lacan's discourses. I present them, not to perpetuate another kind of esotericism, though that may be unavoidable. Instead, I present them in the hope that they will help clarify a theoretically intricate concept in a space that is compelled to deal with these concepts quickly. Books could be devoted to analyzing the discourses. The business of dealing with fear in political philosophy does not afford that sort of time.

<i>Agent</i>		<i>Other</i>
(S ₂)		(a)
rules of esotericism	→	the knowing vulgar
fear of persecution		philosopher
(S ₁)		(\$)
<i>Truth</i>		<i>Product/Loss</i>

Figure 5-2. Straussian Discourse of Esotericism

The Love of Persecution

The University Discourse highlights the dynamic within Straussian esotericism that emphasizes the primacy of rules. Rules of reading and writing bifurcate the world between philosopher and the vulgar, between those with access to the most important truths, and those who lack such access. Rules are the agent in this system, and the rules of esotericism intervene between the unquestioned truth that persecution must be feared and the cause of desire embodied in phantasmal force of the vulgar gaining insight into philosophy. The rules intervene to keep that phantasmal knowing vulgar from becoming a reality while concomitantly calling forth the gaze of a persecutor. It is the rules themselves that keep the specter of persecution alive.

The rules of esotericism are inherently predicated on secrecy. As Strauss repeatedly states, the exoteric is the public, edifying teaching while the esoteric is “secret teaching.” What does the Straussian discourse of esotericism do? It tells us there is a secret teaching. It proclaims: “I have a secret.” It reveals that there is something that cannot be revealed. It establishes rules for secret reading and writing and then calls attention to the existence of those rules. No differentiation is made between philosopher and the vulgar or the censor. Strauss exoterically states there is a

secret teaching. Even the vulgar and the censor can discern what is being said about true philosophic writing.

These are not Plato's rules. Strauss's discovery is Strauss's invention. Plato is not the author of *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, or anything like it. Nowhere does he delineate the conventions for reading and writing found in Strauss's works. Strauss establishes the rules of esotericism, and then Strauss bothers those rules. The Straussian discourse of esotericism is a discourse of perversion. The rules are set up and, by the very act of setting up the rules, they are immediately bothered. By telling us the rules of esotericism, exoterically, Strauss pushes the limits of the rules. He makes them an object of perverse enjoyment. The rules themselves become the source of *jouissance*. In effect, Strauss is saying, 'I cannot tell you that I have a secret.' This is not necessarily a matter of contradiction or inconsistency. In any event, the appearance of a contradiction within Strauss's writings may be deliberate, as he tells us that such aberrations are the sign of a premeditated strategy. The object here is that the effect of disclosing the existence of secret rules is a perversion.

Bruce Fink reminds us that perversion is an attempt to prop up the law, to establish limits to the pursuit of *jouissance*, when the primordial signifier, the *Name-of-the-Father* has been weakly instantiated. The pervert wants the other to say no because enjoyment is derived from challenging that prohibition. Strauss's esotericism effectively removes almost all sources of prohibition. Because it relies on the idea that there is a rigid, dyadic division between philosophers and non-philosophers, challenges to Straussian esotericism are undermined before they even materialize. Dissenting against esotericism invites the obvious reply that the dissenter lacks the intellectual capability to

see the truth. Opposition means that the opponent cannot read between the lines.

There is only one source that can act to establish the fundamental prohibition, and that is the persecutor. Only the persecutor can say 'enough'. Only through persecution can the limits of revealing esotericism be reached. Strauss has extended an invitation to be persecuted. The discourse of esotericism asks for a persecutor to come forth. But, at the same time, the perverse nature of the discourse refuses to submit to that *Name-of-the-Father* precisely because the rules of esotericism demand a retreat from the kind of exoteric writing which would provoke a confrontation.

So, by exoterically revealing secret teachings, Strauss toys with summoning a persecutor, a metaphorical brick wall that would put an end to any further exoteric revealing. He only toys because the rules of esotericism do not permit him to go further.⁸¹ The exoteric revealing lures a persecutor, it dares one to come forth, but cannot ensure that one will come forth. The rules of esotericism are designed to weaken the prohibitive power of a persecutor. They are designed to elude and circumvent the persecutor by preventing the appearance of the knowing vulgar. Strauss challenges the persecutor to prop up the law but prevents either the persecutor or the law from becoming instantiated.

Freud reminds us that we are all, originally at least, polymorphously perverse. Children are not yet bound by the conventional restrictions of sexuality and express the pursuit of pleasure with fewer restrictions than adults. Even adults, however, exhibit perversions in the most seemingly innocuous behavior. Not all perversions are pathological. Freud tells us that a perversion is only pathological when it completely

⁸¹ Again, the pervert has limits, even if they are weakly defined by the *Name-of-the-Father*. In this manner, the pervert is distinguished from the psychotic, who has no limits whatsoever.

excludes the conventional. If, he says, a perversion supplants the conventional, if 'it ousts them completely and takes their place in *all* circumstances – if, in short, a perversion has the characteristics of exclusiveness and fixation – then we shall usually be justified in regarding it as a pathological symptom" (Freud 1962, 27).

The Straussian narrative of esotericism is a pathological perversion. Rules of reading and writing that Strauss reveals do not occur alongside the conventional aim; they completely substitute for that aim. The algorithm of contradictions and errors that presuppose a secret code is not one alternative for reading among many. It is the sole, unequivocal truth. Indeed, Strauss (1952, 25) declares that, in philosophic writing, the "truth about all crucial things is presented exclusively between the lines." The possibility of significant truth being presented by a philosopher exoterically is excluded. Again, the philosophers of antiquity "teach the truth exclusively between the lines" (Strauss 1939, 521). Truth cannot be found in exoteric print, which Strauss acknowledged is the conventionally understood location truth:

For many readers do not fully grasp what it means that the truth, or the seriousness, of a proposition is not increased by the frequency with which the proposition is repeated. (Strauss 1952, 184)

The conventional aim is to seek meaning in what is written exoterically, not between the lines, or in contradictions, or in dissembling.

Strauss's pathological perversion goes so far as to suggest that when there is evidence of exoteric truth, it is only because the exoteric dimension has been converted into an esoteric dimension. For example, Strauss claims that Plato wrote so allusively:

It became a matter of very common, nay, universal knowledge that Plato was famous for speaking or writing in the manner indicated. Hence when he expressed a thought without any concealment, as he sometimes did, his readers or hearers assumed that in these cases too his speech was allusive

and expressed something different from, or opposite to, what it explicitly and unambiguously said. (Strauss 1959, 136)

In other words Plato was so often esoteric that he could afford to occasionally write the highest truths exoterically because no one would believe he was being sincere. There is a certain oddity in suggesting a “universal knowledge” that Plato wrote esoterically. The implication is that even the vulgar understood this, thereby entirely negating the usefulness of the exoteric façade. If it is universally known that Plato meant other than what he wrote exoterically, then he would have nothing to use for concealment in the first place. The effect, on Strauss, of identifying even exoterically presented truth as actually being esoterically concealed truth is that the exclusion of any possibility for exoteric truth is comprehensive. Strauss is telling us that even when it appears there is exoteric truth, it is, in fact, esoteric truth.⁸²

Through the attempt to establish rules of secrecy that it simultaneously bothers as it reveals those rules, Straussian esotericism excludes the possibility of exoteric truth,

⁸² Though Strauss essentially leaves the issue of exoteric-esotericism at that, Daniel Tanguay expounds on the concept by suggesting that esotericism is “very often found on the surface of the text.” If we are to believe Tanguay then the object of esotericism is not to secrete the truth from the inattentive, unintelligent and immoral reader, but from the attentive reader. In other words, if Tanguay is correct then esotericism hides the truth from the intelligent, those who would actually look for secrets, and makes it perfectly accessible to the vulgar. However, I reject this proposition. Rather than a supremely “artful” tactic of writing, as Tanguay (2007, 4-5 and 83) describes, it is a form of self-confirming assertion. Plato and others write in a manner that is inconsistent with esotericism. Plato, in particular, writes, on occasion, dangerously and this presents a profound problem for the validity of Strauss’s esotericism. The only way to preserve that validity is to imagine that the exception is a mutated form of the rule. The dangerously spoken truth is now a cleverly hidden secret because the vulgar are so thoroughly fooled by Plato’s literary wiles as to not even notice the truth when it appears plainly. This assumption of exoteric-esotericism, which Tanguay eagerly subscribes to, is perverse and inconsistent. The truth is now inaccessible to the clever man, and accessible to the dim-minded. But, according to the proposition, the dim-minded will not notice the naked truth because they are confounded by the knowledge that Plato writes esoterically. The knowledge that Plato writes esoterically, that is, the knowledge that allows Plato to write the truth exoterically on occasion and have it remain hidden, would necessarily equate to the knowledge that Plato had something to hide, that he was *heterodox*. Therefore, if we admit that Plato could write the truth exoterically and have it remain hidden, then we admit that Plato’s heterodoxy was already widely known. In any event, Tanguay’s thesis, that esotericism hides the truth from the attentive reader, seems inconsistent with Strauss’s assertion that esotericism hides the truth from the inattentive.

excluding the conventional aim of writing and reading. The rules make use of a spectral persecutor, calling it forth just enough to persuade philosophers toward esoteric writing, suppressing the vulgar reader who would know the secrets of philosophy. Straussian esotericism effectively reproduces the philosopher by inventing an essential difference between the philosopher and the non-philosopher. It establishes, not simply a rigid division, but a rigid hierarchy in which the identity of philosophy is made discernible.

Persecution recreates the philosopher. Hang out the banner of persecution as motivation – after all, *they* killed Socrates – and show each initiate the blood of the martyred philosopher. Socrates died once. He drank hemlock one time and passed into legend. Straussian esotericism has a decidedly anthropological function. In order to provide for the recreation of philosophers, it establishes limits that delineate the initiated from the vulgar. No real philosopher, according to this discourse, can exist outside of the rules of esotericism. All subjects outside of those rules are nothing more than the vulgar. The fear of persecution creates the philosopher using the rules of esotericism. Therefore, the fear of persecution, the master signifier, is indispensable to the reproduction of philosophers. The death of Socrates is enjoyable. He died one time, drank one cup of hemlock, but in order to recreate philosophy his persecution must be endlessly invoked. The spectacle of his death must recur without pause for every new philosopher to see. Drag this one philosopher from his grave like some morbid performer; kill Socrates again and again – and new philosophers will assume their place in a discourse of pathological perversion. In order to become a philosopher, one must first be persecuted. That is not to say one necessarily must be tortured. It is to say that one must live in fear of the vulgar, which are presumed to persecute the holder of

heterodoxy. Persecution must be sustained. It must be present at all times as something to be feared. Thus, persecution becomes something desired, something *loved*. Philosophic truth, meanwhile must be hidden away, repelled. The Straussian discourse does not create a lover of wisdom, a philosopher; rather, it creates a lover of persecution, the *philo-diogmos*.

Error and The Privilege of Humanity

The production of a persecuted philosopher through a pathologically perverse discourse of esotericism is accompanied by several philosophic problems. Firstly, Strauss undermines the complexity of philosophy by establishing the truth as simple to understand. Secondly, Strauss deifies writers of antiquity such as Plato, refusing to allow them the privilege of error. Thirdly, Strauss betrays the Socratic tradition by suggesting the greatest minds are teachers but not concurrently pupils.

Ultimately, the fear is of that vulgar who knows, the one who has figured out the secrets. Despite the “rigid division of mankind into an inspired or intelligent minority and uninspired or foolish majority,” the knowing vulgar is a real possibility for Strauss (1952, 59). Despite, that is, the fact there is a “distinction between the two groups of men, the philosophic men and the unphilosophic men,” there remains the possibility that those unphilosophic men can learn the secrets of the philosophic men (Strauss 1989, 69).

And they can learn these secrets, Strauss tells us, with little effort:

By making the discovered truth almost inaccessible as it was before it had been discovered, they prevented – to call a vulgar thing by a vulgar name – the cheap sale of the formulations of the truth – nobody should know even the formulations of the truth who had not rediscovered the truth by his own exertions, if aided by subtle suggestions from a superior teacher. (Strauss 1939, 535)

In other words, Strauss is telling us that nobody should come to understand the truth without struggling for it. The nobility of this gesture is also matched by the puzzling implication that the truth can be ascertained *without struggle*. For Strauss, it becomes necessary to hide the truth because it is already easy to understand. The truth is simple enough for the vulgar to comprehend, and so the philosophers must deliberately obfuscate the truth. For Strauss the truth is not difficult; it was made difficult. What, then, is the consequence of truth that has not been made difficult, truth that has been made accessible? Philosophers are only as special as their ability to suppress the truth. If the truth can be understood by the vulgar, if its formulations can be cheaply sold, then the philosophers is not any more decent or intelligent than the vulgar in regard to the truth. The only superiority the philosopher can genuinely claim is the ability to conceal and confuse the vulgar. The philosopher is an abusive lover of wisdom, a jealous lover who secludes *sophia*.

Strauss, however, is wrong. The truth is not easy, nor is it the purview of any special group who may erroneously feel entitled to restrict its sale. Indeed, the truth is very complicated and needs no special cryptography to confound the best of minds. Genuine wisdom is elusive and evades the most strenuous efforts of the best writers to capture it in words.

Great men make great mistakes. Leo Strauss was also a great man making a great mistake. In the process of trying to deify his philosophic idols, he effectively tried to turn himself into one as well. By refusing to permit Plato and others the privilege of being human, of being able to make the mistakes that mortals are entitled to make, he set himself up as one who knows the mind of perfection. Only a mind of equivalent

intelligence can understand the secrets. As Strauss (1959, 224) tells us, “Things which are true of the highest intellects are wholly inapplicable to others.” Plato wrote the highest truths “exclusively between the lines.” If Strauss can recognize this, then those truths must be comprehensible to Strauss. Strauss must therefore have a mind at least close to that of Plato, who according to Strauss, at any rate, is does not produce written error

Nothing is accidental in a Platonic dialogue; everything is necessary at the place where it occurs. Everything which would be accidental outside of the dialogue becomes meaningful within the dialogue. (Strauss 1964, 60)⁸³

Because of the “rigid division” only a philosopher can understand a philosopher.

Wishing Xenophon and Plato made no mistakes, wishing that every contradiction and grammatical error in Maimonides is a sign that genius lurks beneath does not make it true. No such person exists who has that sort of mastery of language. There is no cryptographer who can author or decipher a code that results in meaning without ambiguity. To read any aberration in a text by writers who did not subscribe to our system of grammar, who did not have the benefit of editors and peer review, or the Modern Language Association handbook, ignores the heterogeneity of thought and form. It ignores the diversity of philosophy and philosophic writing. “Strangeness” is not a sign that philosophers are winking (Strauss 1963, xxviii). It was a sign that they lived in an alien culture. “Strangeness,” errors, and contradictions in writing do not denote, in fact, homogenous thinking between philosophers across time. Rather, they denote strangeness, errors, and contradictions and instead of trying to conform all of

⁸³ Plato, Strauss (1939, 535) tells us, is among the great pantheon of writers who do not err.

philosophy to one intellectual stance on writing, we ought to appreciate the diversity of idiosyncrasies and errors. They are, after all, what makes a philosopher a human being.

Strauss (1968, 3) tells us there is something essentially different about the greatest minds, “those teachers who are not in turn pupils.”⁸⁴ It is a vexing statement, one that is certainly at odds with Socratic thought, and, at the very least, the history of philosophy. The statement immediately, and almost certainly by accident, excludes Plato and Aristotle from being among the “the greatest minds.” Plato, of course was the pupil of Socrates. Aristotle, in turn, was a student at Plato’s Academy. Even Socrates could be called into question as one of the greatest minds for two reasons. First, he claims to have learned from Anaxagoras (Plato 1999a, 53). Secondly, he asks an obviously inferior man, Euthyphro, to become his teacher (Plato 1998d, 45).⁸⁵ If the mark of the greatest minds is that they are teachers but never pupils, then there are no greatest minds. But teaches have indeed been pupils, and teachers who are the greatest minds were pupils concurrent to being teachers. Socrates was a lover of wisdom, which means he did not have wisdom but desired it. He was a teacher but also a student.

Strauss thoroughly betrays the Socratic principles he purports to hold with such thoroughgoing reverence. A pupil is someone who seeks learning. One only stops being a pupil if one lacks the desire for knowledge, either because he or she already

⁸⁴ The sense of superiority that informs Strauss’s thought is reflected in his adjoining consideration that “teachers are not as easy to come by as farmers” (Strauss 1968, 3). It may be the case that *good* teachers are not as easy to come by as teachers and *good* farmers are not as easy to come by as farmers. However, it would actually seem to be easier in terms of technical knowledge, physical requirements, and resources to come by teachers than farmers. Clearly Strauss considers the act of teaching to be better than the act of farming.

⁸⁵ Did Socrates know in advance that Euthyphro lacked the knowledge of piety? Was his gesture to learn the wisdom of Euthyphro an act of mockery? Perhaps, but learning the foolishness of another is still acting as a pupil.

possesses knowledge or is entirely averse to its acquisition. Socratic principles reject the disjuncture between being a teacher, even if one is among the greatest minds, and being a pupil. Far beyond the inconsistency of postulating teachers who are never pupils, Straussian esotericism aims at creating the conditions to allow initiated philosophers to avoid being pupils. Those with the secrets to esoteric writing need not be sullied by having to learn from those without. They can simply teach, if they choose, and how they choose. They can feel, at least, as though they are among the greatest minds. If Strauss understands esotericism to arise out of a fear of persecution, becoming a means to speak to the trustworthy, it becomes, in his hand, a tool of disdain, a means of speaking to the desirable.

By proposing to have the secrets, and including the imperative of persecution, Strauss creates a sense of being special. After all, he confidently tells us “the secret teaching is addressed to the elite” (Strauss 1963, xvii). Straussians, those who subscribe to the notion of esotericism invented by Strauss, are the privileged acolytes of a superhuman mind. The Straussian wants to be the one for whom the secret teachings of the highest truths are addressed, an elite. Esoteric writings are “addressed not to all readers but to trustworthy and intelligent readers only” (Strauss 1952, 25). A Straussian, one who believes in the validity of Strauss’s claims on esotericism, must therefore presume himself to be not only sufficiently intelligent, but also sufficiently moral. To believe that one is the reader to whom ancient wisdom has been addressed is to hold oneself in the highest regard, as a peer of the greatest minds in both intelligence and decency. Yet, at the same time, the discourse of esotericism demands the adherent to experience persecution – a persecuted elite. Through esotericism Strauss creates a

distinction for the importance and relevance of the philosopher, and a Straussian is one who clings to that distinction because it is all that separates them from the “uninspired foolish majority.”

Summation

In this section, I have argued that the Straussian discourse of esotericism is a pathological perversion that elevates the rules, and then bothers those rules by revealing the existence of a secret writing. It plays with the specter of persecution in order to suppress a knowing vulgar from into existence. Esotericism becomes necessary because, for Strauss, the truth is easily comprehended and cheaply sold. In order to recreate philosophy, to give it identity, and reproduce its practitioners, the rules of esotericism must be adhered to. Strauss is elevated to become a peer among the peerless, master of masterful writing within the master art of political philosophy. His disciples, whoever they are, become able to bemoan the persecution they do not suffer and enjoy the privilege they have not earned. They are lovers of persecution, *philos-diogmos*, not lovers of wisdom.

Tomorrow’s Justice: On the Taming of Thrasymachus

It is sometimes said that Plato never speaks in his own voice in his dialogues. Rather we read through Socrates, Glaucon, Thrasymachus, and various other figures. Strauss (1987, 33) explains this view: “We must then say that Plato never speaks to us in his own name, for in his dialogues only his characters speak.” There is a certain truth to this proposition. Plato, of course, never appears directly in any of his dialogues.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ We could speculate that it is Plato who is conversing with Aristodemus at the beginning of *The Symposium*, but this is impossible to verify.

There is also the matter of the various Platonic epistles. However, there is not universal agreement on which, if any, of the letters attributed to Plato are authentic.

If the epistles are discounted, then it seems that Plato never did write in his own voice within the various dialogues. In one sense, this claim is true: there is no character named Plato.⁸⁷ On the other hand, the notion that Plato does not write in his own voice within the dialogues is misleading. When we read a Platonic dialogue we read nothing but the voice of Plato. Every word of a Platonic dialogue is a Platonic word, a word written by Plato. Even if he was merely transcribing what had been said by others, it is Plato who writes. Glaucon, as far as we know, did not coauthor *The Republic of Plato*. Everything said in a Platonic dialogue is said by Plato. Every thought in a Platonic dialogue passed through Plato's mind. When we ask, "for which character did Plato have the greatest affinity or sympathy in terms of views?" we ask a tempting and reasonable, but oversimplified question, and indeed Strauss is right to point out that we ought not to presume Plato and the character of Socrates are identical or coextensive in philosophical perspective.

Strauss is also right to identify the prominence of one character in particular in *The Republic of Plato*. Without Thrasymachus, Strauss insists, "there will never be a just city" (Strauss 1964, 123). For Strauss (Ibid, 123), Thrasymachus represents the art of persuasion and it is this art, he says, that philosophy will need "to bring about the needed change on the part of the city."⁸⁸ Philosophy will need persuasion in order to

⁸⁷ Then again, even if there were a character named Plato, we would still have to show that the character Plato was representative of the thinker and author Plato.

⁸⁸ It is not clear at all that Socrates or Plato would agree, given that Socrates, in *Gorgias*, identifies persuasion with oratory, which is not at all a form of *techné* (art), but is instead a dishonorable semblance of art. Persuasion is pandering.

transform a city that exists merely in speech to a functional city that practices perfect justice.

Strauss is right about the importance of Thrasymachus, but his focus tends toward the epilogue of justice. That is, Strauss is concerned with Thrasymachus after Socrates and his interlocutors have fully articulated the structure and plan of the kallipolis, and the two men, Socrates and Thrasymachus, have reconciled (Plato 1945, 207). As an orator, Thrasymachus will represent the plan to the people, who he will presumably persuade to go into exile leaving behind only their children for the philosophers to indoctrinate.

Whether or not Thrasymachus, or someone like him, would perform such a function, he does explicitly fulfill another role on Plato's behalf. Thrasymachus is the last preliminary discussant, the last of three interlocutors to offer a definition of justice; he is the last person to speak with Socrates before the construction of the just city begins in earnest. Glaucon and Adeimantus engage Socrates more thoroughly in the actual conversation, but they do so by initially endorsing the challenge set by Thrasymachus. Glaucon, after all, says to Socrates:

There was no need, I think, for Thrasymachus to yield so readily, like a snake you had charmed into submission; and nothing so far said about justice and injustice has been established to my satisfaction. (Ibid, 43)

Glaucon invites Socrates to address the assertions of Thrasymachus. Indeed, Glaucon finds concordance with Thrasymachus' view that injustice is more profitable than justice.⁸⁹ The conversation continues and the just city is built because of the foundation established by Thrasymachus. Others will continue to build on what he has started.

⁸⁹ Glaucon offers the story of the Ring of Gyges to support the profitability of injustice. The story is an account of a shepherd who comes to possess a ring that grants its wearer invisibility. He uses this new

It is Thrasymachus, therefore, who sets the construction of the just city into motion with his challenge to Socrates. He may be important to the political philosophers' project at the end of the dialogue, but he is also crucial to its inception. But what is the nature of his challenge to Socrates? What is its character? Of course *The Republic of Plato* begins with Socrates discoursing on the nature of justice with an older man, Cephalus, his son Polemarchus, Thrasymachus, and the brothers of Plato, Glaucon and Adeimantus. Cephalus and Polemarchus offer their own definitions of justice, which Socrates dismantles. Cephalus states that justice is speaking the truth and repaying debts. Socrates considers this and replies that it could not be just to return a weapon borrowed from a friend who had gone mad in the intervening time. The repayment of debt, in that case, would be harmful, and therefore unjust (Ibid, 7). Polemarchus invokes the traditional Greek definition of justice, likely attributed to the poet Simonides, when he claims that justice is to render each man his due. Polemarchus elaborates, saying that to render each his due means helping one's friends and harming one's enemies (Ibid, 9). Socrates responds by noting that justice is the peculiar excellence of human beings. Therefore, it can never be just to harm an enemy, for to do so would mean to make him or her less human, and ultimately less just. It cannot be just to make something less just.

It is at this point that Thrasymachus intervenes. The reason of the philosophic speech is sharply contrasted by the character of this intervention, which is wild and explosive. After concluding his discussion with Polemarchus, Socrates recounts:

power to seduce the Queen and seize the throne. Appropriate to this essay, we ought to be alerted to the seductive power of invisibility. Equivalent to secrecy, invisibility in the allegory of the Ring of Gyges permits the shepherd to express tyrannical tendencies.

All this time Thrasymachus had been trying more than once to break in upon our conversation; but his neighbors had restrained him, wishing to hear the argument to the end. In the pause after my last words he could keep quiet no longer; but gathering himself up like a wild beast he sprang at us as if he would tear us in pieces. Polemarchus and I were frightened out of our wits, when he burst out to the whole company. (Ibid, 15)

The stately poise of the philosopher collapses as Thrasymachus is no longer able to restrain himself. Socrates describes him “like a wild beast.” But Thrasymachus is not a wild beast; he is a human being without restraint, the antithesis of reason. For the purposes of this moment in the dialogue, in juxtaposition with the embodiment of pure Socratic reason (*logos*), Thrasymachus is the embodiment of unbridled *eros* (desire).

Thrasymachus is introduced into the dialogue as a source of bestial madness. He is the complete inversion of the philosophic soul, in which Plato tells us reason uses courage to instill moderation over *eros*. With Thrasymachus, *eros* is not simply unrestrained; *eros*, in this moment of the dialogue, is the ordering principle. Passion is not merely uninhibited; it is in charge, actively suppressing reason. His rage commands reason. He angrily demands that Socrates dispense with the intricacies of reason. “I want a clear and precise statement; I won’t put up with this sort of verbiage,” he says after berating Socrates and Polemarchus as imbeciles (Ibid, 15-16). His demand for precision is a demand for a visceral response that brings the complexity of Socratic reason to an end. The wild emotional state of Thrasymachus is putting demands on Socratic reason.

The character of Thrasymachus’ intervention is animal rage. What, then, is the consequence for Socrates? Fear is the consequence. First, he says “Polemarchus and I were frightened out of our wits” (Ibid, 15). The power of Thrasymachus’ *eros* is sufficient to displace even Socrates, albeit only temporarily, from his own capacity for reason.

Fear supplants reason in both Socrates and Polemarchus.⁹⁰ Socrates, however, provides a more detailed account of this fear:

I was amazed by this onslaught and looked at him in terror. If I had not seen this wolf before he saw me, I really believed I should have been struck dumb; but fortunately I had looked at him earlier, when he was beginning to get exasperated with our argument; so I was able to reply, though rather tremulously. (Ibid, 16)

Socrates evokes the Greek superstition that if a wolf lays eyes on a person first, that person will lose the ability to reason. He is terrified by Thrasymachus, the wolf. He loses his ability to reason, and only gradually is able to reassert his discipline. Accordingly, his first words are delivered while trembling with fear.

It is perhaps because of this fear that the response to Thrasymachus' assumes an unsteady disposition. When Thrasymachus asserts that justice is nothing but the interest of the stronger, the response Socrates musters is incomplete. The argument Thrasymachus offers has two dimensions: it suggests that justice is conventional and practical. It is conventional in the sense that those with power supply the meaning of justice in order to suit their preferences. At the same time, suggesting justice is nothing but the interest of the stronger also retains a practical dimension insofar as laws are constructed in order to secure those preferences. Socrates focuses almost exclusively on the practical application of Thrasymachan justice, and ignores or misses the conventional dimension.

The disparity between the concept of justice and the failure to embody it in practice is best expressed by Polemarchus when he states that Thrasymachus, "said

⁹⁰ It is noteworthy that Socrates, the embodiment of reason is overwhelmed by fear, but it is equally noteworthy that Polemarchus, whose name means "warlord" and may signify courage, is also temporarily cowed by Thrasymachus.

that what is to the interest of the stronger party is right; and, after making both these assertions, he admitted that the stronger sometimes command the weaker subjects to act against their interests” (Ibid, 20). As Socrates points out, sometimes the schemes of the stronger go awry, or they misunderstand what is in their best interests, ordering the weaker to act against those interests. Socrates focuses on this latter aspect, and though he lures Thrasymachus into arguing on those grounds, it misses the most insidious point. The devastating assertion Thrasymachus makes, even if inadvertently, is the conventional argument. Socrates may refute Thrasymachus, to some degree, by pointing out that the machinations of the stronger do not always succeed, but he never directly addresses the idea that justice is nothing more than a signifier whose signification is unfixed.

This incompleteness is, in part, why thinkers as diverse as Leo Strauss and Janet Coleman respectively describe the Socratic response to Thrasymachus as poor. Because the discussion of justice is “treated in a bantering and hence unjust manner,” Strauss (1964, 85) characterizes Socrates’ argument as almost “inexcusable.” Coleman points out that none of Socrates’ interlocutors are particularly persuaded by his refutation. She points out that in addition to the protracted speech of Thrasymachus, “We are also shown Socrates having achieved a not very convincing victory with his elenctic question and answer” (Coleman 2000, 90). By not directly addressing the conventional nature of justice, Socrates gives an incomplete response. I suggest that it is because of fear. Strauss (1964, 77) suggests that Socrates only pretended to be afraid. Stanley Rosen (2005, 39) claims, “I think Socrates was afraid, although not to the extent that he claims.” Strauss gives us no reason to believe Socrates was pretending,

and Rosen's assertion of exaggerated fear is not at all clear.⁹¹ Instead, I conclude the fear expressed by Socrates is sincere. Indeed, the encounter with Thrasymachus is so startling that Socrates abandons the Elenchus altogether, foregoing his favored method of dialectical reasoning in favor of direct exposition.

I do, however, agree with Rosen that it is what Thrasymachus represents that is terrifying to Socrates, but not merely as it pertains to justice. Thrasymachus represents the antithesis of Socrates; he represents *eros* – the bane of reason. Socrates does not address the conventional dimension of Thrasymachus' argument because Plato dreads the larger problem that it represents, the problem of language. In his "Seventh Letter," Plato describes "the inadequacy of language," referring to how the names and descriptions given to certain things today can, tomorrow, be given to their opposites (Plato 1989, 1590). What is called straight today can just as easily be called round tomorrow. Provided the interest of the stronger changes, what is at present considered unjust can become tomorrow's justice. For an idealist such as Plato, linguistic instability is a fearful problem because it corrupts all earthly matters, including politics.

Thrasymachus, however, is not immune to the linguistic influenza that he carries. Eventually, he comes under the spell of Socrates' *logos* (reason), and is himself lost in the ambiguity of words. He permits his argument to wane along with the decline of his *eros*. Thrasymachus represents brute force, desire, and unreason. He represents *eros*. He also represents the ambiguity inherent to language and the risks it poses in the hands of the vulgar. Socrates avoids the conventional nature of Thrasymachus'

⁹¹ Rosen does not explain why he thinks Socrates is exaggerating, only that Socrates is not afraid of Thrasymachus the man, but what Thrasymachus represents. Therefore, Rosen's assertion addresses the object of Socrates' fear, but not the intensity of that fear, which I take to be genuinely stated if only because Socrates gives us no reason to doubt it in the first place.

argument. Likewise, Thrasymachus seems to misunderstand himself and Socrates. He loses track of his own argument as Socrates gradually wrests the dialogue away from him through reason. In this respect, the just city emerges from the fear introduced by Thrasymachus. Its principles of justice, which require that *logos* instrumentally deploy *thymos* (courage) to rule over *eros* stem from the frightful confrontation between Socrates and Thrasymachus.

Whereas Strauss responds to the fear of persecution by creating rules of reading and writing, Plato responds to the fear of abomination by creating rules of justice. If the discourse of Leo Strauss attempts to summon a persecutor to set limits to *joissance*, the discourse of Plato attempts to summon a ruler. The Name of the Father is weakly instantiated in Plato's discourse as well. How can we see evidence of this? Socrates is a plaything. The master, the giver of philosophy, is a toy for Plato. Socrates, unlike the compelling power of the Name of the Father, is malleable; in the early dialogues he assumes a voice professing ignorance and skepticism, while in the middle and later dialogues he possesses all kinds of knowledge. In "Euthyphro," for example, he offers no hint of understanding piety, rejects any definition of piety that is forwarded, and yet in *The Republic of Plato* confidently arrives at the conclusion that justice is when each order "keeps to its own proper business within the commonwealth" (Plato 1945, 129). The different versions of Socrates are the voice of different characters created by Plato.

The primordial signifier that Socrates should seemingly represent actually becomes an instrument for Plato. Instead of acting as the Name of the Father, Socrates becomes a signifier of perversion. Again, perversion is an attempt by a subject for whom the Name of the Father has been weakly instantiated to prop up the law, to bring

about limits to *jouissance*. With the tool of Socrates, Plato is quite literally attempting to establish *nomos* (law) in the form of the city and its rules to contain *eros*. Socrates becomes a device in the struggle against Thrasymachus. Thrasymachus poses fear not just for Socrates, but for Plato as well. As a combination of vulgarity and ambiguity, he represents the fear of abomination. As a consequence of the ambiguities in language the concerns of philosophy, including the activities of philosophy itself, cannot be conveyed in words. Most closely identified with the immoral character from Aristophanes' "Clouds", the Error of Strepsiades arises because of the problems of language and results in the inability of the ignorant to discern between philosophy and sophistry. Yet, the philosopher cannot afford to conceal philosophic teachings from the ignorant for fear that if the vulgar would exert influence. The fear of abomination is exactly this fear of the wrong teachers, such as sophists and orators, gaining influence. Through Socrates and his confrontation with Thrasymachus, Plato confronts the Error of Strepsiades. Rules are created specifically for the purpose of bringing *eros* under the control of *logos* through law. Courage intervenes between the two precisely because of the fearful threat posed by *eros*.

To gain some perspective, we ought to ask what it is we are describing in the dialogue between Socrates and Thrasymachus. Is this an actual conversation between two men? In fact, the dialogue is nothing of the sort. This is an insight that Leo Strauss (1968, 7) keenly points out when he says, "The greatest minds utter monologues even when they write dialogues." *The Republic of Plato* is not an actual conversation between several men. Rather, it is the written work of one person, Plato. The *eros* of

Thrasymachus is generated by Plato, as is the *logos* of Socrates.⁹² The struggle between Thrasymachus and Socrates, between *eros* and *logos*, is not between two autonomous human beings out in the world. It is a struggle between two opposing forces, *jouissance* and *nomos*, within the same discourse created by Plato. It is Plato's *logos* which struggles with Plato's *eros*, and it is Plato attempting to call forth the Law, in the form of laws decreed by a true ruler, to suppress *jouissance*. So, it is Plato using Socrates in order to prop up the Law to attack his own fear, the Error of Strepsiades that is embodied in the form of Thrasymachus.

Plato attempts to prop up the law in order to restrain *jouissance*, and position reason over bestial rage. But Plato's discourse, analogous to the one Strauss creates, is perverse. It creates rules to give limits to *jouissance*, but, ultimately, *jouissance* is directed at the rules. Plato creates rules in order to bother them. The entirety of the just city is predicated on the subordination of *eros* to *logos*. Wisdom must rule over appetite and desire in order to create a condition of moderation and, thereby, justice. As the dialogue in *The Republic of Plato* nears its end, the entire project of the just city is revealed as unlikely, if not impossible:

I understand, said Glaucon: you mean this commonwealth we have been founding in the realm of discourse; for I think it nowhere exists on earth.

No, I replied; but perhaps there is a pattern set up in the heavens for one who desires to see it and, seeing it, to found one in himself. But whether it exists anywhere or ever will exist is no matter. (Plato 1945, 320)

Eros prevails in the political struggle for justice. The soul of the philosopher may be properly ordered, and justice may have been shown to be more profitable than injustice,

⁹² I would contend the same is true even of the earlier dialogues which are regarded as more authentically Socratic. Those dialogues can be more authentic in representing Socrates, and yet, concurrently, the Socrates of those dialogues are still the literary productions of Plato.

but the city in speech with its numerous rules cannot temper the power of *eros*. It declines due to the fallibility of its rulers, who make mistakes in reference to reproduction and breeding; their mistakes concern the subject of *eros*, which ultimately supplants any remnant of the philosophic aristocracy. Whereas philosopher kings ideally ruled the city, meaning *logos* used *thymos* (courage) to rule over *eros*, the collapse of the just city finds a tyranny in which the deliberate expression of one man's *eros* subordinates all virtues. It is the rule of Thrasymachus. More specifically, it is the rule of Plato's Thrasymachus. Plato calls forth a ruler to constrain the *eros* he projects, and then compels that ruler to fail.

From this, however, it is inappropriate to conclude that Plato's perversion is pathological. Arising from the fear of abomination represented by Thrasymachus, Plato perversely establishes rules of justice that are then bothered by the victory of *eros*. The result is not pathological however, because the treatment of justice conforms with the normal aim. If the conventional view held by the Greeks was to render each its due, then both Socrates and Thrasymachus, *logos* and *eros*, are given their due. Socrates extols the benefits of virtue, yet Plato does ultimately present Thrasymachus as victorious. Whereas Strauss completely excludes the possibility the highest truths in exoteric writing, Plato acknowledges that reason can never eliminate desire. Indeed, his various treatments of love in *The Symposium* suggest that reason itself is an erotic pursuit, an expression of desire. As Diotima explains to Socrates:

Looking now at beauty in general and not just at individual instances, he will no longer be slavishly attached to the beauty of a boy, or of any particular person at all, or of a specific practice. Instead of this low and small-minded slavery, he will be turned toward the great sea of beauty and gazing on it he'll give birth, through a boundless love of knowledge, to many beautiful and magnificent discourses and ideas. (Plato 199b, 48)

Plato tries to set limits to *eros* but never fully excludes it. Rather, it is reshaped and redeployed to conform to the demands of *logos*. However, it seems that *logos* is compelled to conform to the insatiable demands of *eros*. Given the harm that it poses to the soul, injustice cannot be more profitable than justice, and yet we are driven by desire, by *eros*, to preclude the possibility of achieving politics beyond a struggle over the meaning of justice. Justice is good, but we are limited by our erotic impulses to struggle over its representation in language.

Master Signifier – The Fear of Abomination

Like Strauss, Plato constructs a discourse that is preoccupied with rules, a University Discourse. Justice, again, is when the various orders of society keep to their proper business, or when individuals do what nature has best fitted their souls to do. Given the central role that Thrasymachus plays in initiating the development of the just city, fear again stands as a motivating force. Plato's discourse is motivated by the fear of abomination, the fear that the wrong teachers and the worst impulses will gain influence over politics and society; the fear of abomination is the master signifier. The fear of abomination goes unquestioned. The entire society imagined in *The Republic of Plato* is predicated on every individual, and, therefore, every social class doing what nature has best fitted its soul to do. No character in this dialogue asks why one ought to conform to nature. The folly of acting against nature is simply given as evident. Since understanding nature requires *logos* reason must conquer desire. Thrasymachus, whose animal rage temporarily confounds the reason of Socrates, represents abomination.

Signifying Battery – The Rules of Justice

In order for each soul to do what nature has fitted it to do, an elaborate, indeed, an impossible, set of rules must be followed. A form of limited communism is practiced with tradespeople and farmers permitted to own personal items, while members of the military and ruling classes are to share not only tools, shelter, and food, but spouses and children as well; families are communal. The education of the military and ruling class, the Guardians, is extensive, lasting for decades. The rules of justice require rigorous training for the body and mind. Moreover, for the just city to exist a system of eugenics is introduced for breeding rulers of the highest caliber. Only the best may breed and only under optimal conditions. The rules are designed to produce a true ruler and put an end to the problem of language because it is the true ruler, the philosopher king, who has experienced the Good, understands it, and can order politics according to it while circumventing the need to explain it to less philosophic minds.

Object (a) – Gaze of the True Ruler

Justice is not the greatest knowledge in Platonic philosophy. Justice is unique among virtues because it is beneficial in itself, but it is also instrumental. Justice can bring about the Good. An orderly soul, in which all three elements – wisdom, courage, and desire – are arranged properly is fit to rule. This true ruler, the philosopher-king, is able to conceive the highest of all knowledge, and the best of all things, the Good. It is this ineffable, elusive goal that, if obtained, ends desire in Platonic thought. Philosophy, the love of wisdom, lacks wisdom, which is the knowledge of beautiful things. The beautiful things are good. To have this knowledge would effectively end philosophy and, in Plato's view, since all lesser desire is effectively renounced by the philosopher, desire itself would cease (Ibid, 40). The lover of wisdom is not wise, but desires wisdom and

that desire is caused by the inexpressible other, the Good. Only the true ruler can institute the law, bring about the good, and, therefore, return the lacking philosopher to a sense of wholeness.

Subject – The Perverted Parrhesiastes

If Strauss creates a persecuted philosopher to inhabit the space created in his discourse, a persecuted philosopher to dwell in the ghetto of writing, Plato creates a deformed speaking philosopher to walk within the agora of writing. Plato creates a perverted parrhesiastes, a subject committed to an ethic of frank speech, yet constrained by the inherent ambiguities in language. Again, in Lacan's discourse of the University, the master signifier motivates the signifying battery to act on the object (a) in order to produce a split subject. From its position of truth, the master signifier remains beyond question. The signifying battery, the apparatus of rules, does the work in relation to the object cause of desire. The effort of the discourse is the production of a subject. This gives the University Discourse its reproductive character.

Leo Strauss (1968, 7) tells us that "all Platonic dialogues are between a superior man and men inferior to him." This seems to make little sense in light of Strauss's claim that all of Plato's dialogues are, in fact, monologues. However, I want to suggest that it only becomes contradictory if we presume Strauss to mean that the dialogue between a superior and inferior man is what goes on within the dialogue. Instead, the monologue occurs between Plato and the reader.⁹³ The subject produced by Plato's confrontation with the fear of abomination is a speaker torn by an obligation to communicate the truth

⁹³ Even if the reader immediately or ultimately engages in a dialogue with the text, I concur with Strauss that Plato's sought to address his readers, using dialogues as monologues.

while constrained by the frustrations of language. The subject of Plato's discourse is a perverted parrhesiastes because Plato's discourse is a perverse parrhesia.

Parrhesia is the ancient Greek term for an ethical commitment to speak the truth even under the threat of persecution. It was an ethic that demanded speaking the truth, or, put differently, "it meant speaking one's mind, that is, frankly saying what one thinks, and especially uttering a deserved reproach" (Monoson 2000, 52). Quite often, parrhesia could be blunt; the truth is not always pleasant to endure. There are, therefore, two fundamental elements of parrhesia: "criticism and truth-telling" (Ibid, 53). The parrhesiastes was a "person who spoke without reservations, ornament, or regard for personal safety" (Markovits 2008, 66).

Plato's voice, the monologues that emerge from his writings is not parrhesia in this truest sense. It tests the limits of ornament in its ironic dissembling. It struggles to escape reservations. Plato's writings consistently attack the ineptitude of his contemporary statesmen, hallowed institutions, and orthodoxy. Yet those writings are cowed by language. Plato's parrhesia is perverse. On the one hand he tells us, "Now it is my duty to tell the truth and put up with the possibility that someone may, when he hears what happened, be contemptuous of my philosophy and give credit for intelligence to the tyrant" (Plato 1989, 1586-1587). Yet, on the other hand, Plato also writes, "For this reason no serious man will ever think of writing about serious realities for the general public so as to make them a prey to envy and perplexity" (Ibid, 1591). Plato's parrhesiastes is perverted because his parrhesia is confronted with the problems of language. His parrhesiastes *wants* to speak the truth but is prohibited from doing so. The perverted parrhesiastes is an individual committed to speaking the truth, but lacks

the language to articulate it. He or she is a philosopher who loves the Good, wants to express it, but is limited by an imperfect grammar.

In turn, imperfect grammar complicates communication with those who are not trained to think philosophically or familiar with the often technical argot of philosophy. It is clear enough that Plato believed some lacked the necessary intellectual or moral aptitude for philosophic inquiry. Possessing superior intelligence and keen memory “are equally powerless to aid the man who has not an inborn affinity with the subject” (Ibid, 1591). However, this dearth of talent does not mean that the philosopher ought to refrain entirely from communicating with such people. If we look carefully at Plato’s comments from “Letter VII” it becomes clear that he prohibits writing for the general public in a fashion that would foment “envy and perplexity.” Writing for the general public *writ large* is not prohibited. In another passage from “Letter VII,” he writes:

I do not however, think the attempt to tell mankind of these matters a good thing, except in the case of some few who are capable of discovering the truth for themselves with a little guidance. In the case of the rest to do so would excite in some an unjustified contempt in a thoroughly offensive fashion, in others certain lofty and vain hopes, as if they had acquired some awesome lore. (Ibid, 1589)

The attempt to disseminate certain knowledge is impossible, as Plato explains, “for there is no way of putting it in words like other studies” (Ibid, 1589). Any attempt to surmount this obstacle necessarily fails, and those who lack certain qualities would be confused, perplexed, and envious because of their deficiencies coupled with the nature of language. However, Plato also identifies another group, those would become contemptuous and offensive – the vulgar. Whereas the first group is merely confused, the vulgar, because they also lack the right temperament and because they are decidedly immoral, respond with hatred. Certain knowledge cannot be shared with the

whole of mankind because it cannot be written at all. In fact, they cannot even be written for the disciple. There is no secret code, no “science in writing” (Plato 2005, 63).⁹⁴ A disciple can only succeed in comprehending the illegible truths if he or she has the proper qualities and “a little guidance.” I suggest this means personal, face-to-face instruction. Plato’s disparagement of writing in favor of speech is well known:

And when once it is written, every composition trundles about everywhere in the same way, in the presence both of those who know about the subject and of those who have nothing at all to do with it, and it does not know how to address those it should address and those it should not. (Ibid, 63)

Disciples, therefore, have the advantage not only in terms of aptitude, but also in terms of personal interaction. The highest truths can only be reached through schooling wherein the ambiguities of language can supposedly be surmounted through guidance. The general public, which can only access philosophic thought through texts, is denied this advantage.

With its various impediments, language exacerbates the deficiencies of those not disposed toward philosophic pursuits. It also means that unpronounceable truths are inaccessible to those without instruction. Plato’s perverse parrhesiastes is bounded by these problems. The inadequacy of language is not the only problem, but it is the most pervasive. It amplifies the difficulties in sharing certain knowledge with those who lack the proper temperament, rendering the process a certain failure. Even the person with the right qualities, the authentic philosopher, requires instruction on such matters. The perverse parrhesiastes is obligated to speak the truth, “to spare no detail of absolute

⁹⁴ Socrates states that the man who believes in such a science in writing is full of simplicity and would be really ignorant.

truth and beauty,” but becomes restrained in the parameters of action by his or her own rules of parrhesia (Plato 1975, 217).

Plato’s Discourse of the Academy

The fear of abomination and the rules of justice act on the idea of a true ruler to create a perverted parrhesiastes. Considered in the format of Lacan’s University Discourse, the master signifier (S_1), which, for Plato, is the fear of abomination, occupies the position of truth. The signifying battery (S_2), which are the rules of justice, act on behalf of the master signifier from the agent position. They act on the object cause of desire (a), the elusive gaze of the true statesman, the philosopher-king. It is an activity of questioning in order to see what this Other wants. Above all else in Platonic discourse is the Good, and only this true statesman understands the Good. Unlike the philosopher who merely desires it, the statesman has the Good. The philosopher wants to understand what the Good is, and therefore to learn what the true statesman knows. The fear of abomination, which is conditioned by language, influences the questioning activity: some things are beyond the power of language to express. Accordingly, the subject (\$) that is produced by the master signifier’s use of the signifying battery to engage object (a) is a perverse subject. Plato produces a subject who sets rules to frank speech then challenges those rules boldly and dangerously. Plato’s discourse produces a perverse parrhesia and perverted parrhesiastes.

<i>Agent</i>		<i>Other</i>
(S_2)		(a)
rules of justice	→	philosopher-king
fear of abomination		perverted parrhesiastes
(S_1)		($\$$)
<i>Truth</i>		<i>Product/Loss</i>

Figure 5-3. Plato’s Discourse of Justice

Summation

Strauss is right to alert to us to the prominence Thrasymachus assumes after the just city has been established. The sophistic talent for pandering is what would be needed to transform the city in speech to the city in practice. Thrasymachus is also important for the terror he strikes in Socrates and Polemarchus, terror that propels the construction of the just city. We are compelled to remember that the *eros* represented by Thrasymachus and the *logos* represented by Socrates belong to Plato. It is Plato's bestial rage that is addressed by Plato's contemplative reason. Accordingly, Plato tries to set limits to his own *jouissance*. He plays with Socrates as a means to address his own *eros*, but the law fails and *eros* ultimately triumphs as the just city, the paragon of reason, falls to tyranny. The consequence of Plato's confrontation with the fear of abomination is that rules aimed at understanding the desire of the Other, the true statesman, succeed in producing a perverse parrhesiastes, a bold and dangerous speaker of irony.

Concluding Remarks: Grammar of the Soul

The political theorist George Sabine succinctly described his disdain with the conclusions Strauss reaches in *Persecution and the Art of Writing*. Sabine (1953, 220) wrote, "Whether this provides a workable rule for historical interpretation or an invitation to perverse ingenuity is to my mind questionable." Sabine's insight and characterization are apt. His conclusion, however, does not address the genuine pathological condition within Strauss's discourse. The narrative of persecution and esotericism, a narrative that supposes perfect precision in writers of antiquity, a narrative that supposes it can reveal the existence of secrecy and remain secret, is a discourse of ingenious perversity. Sabine's formulation highlights the degree to which ingenuity has been

perverted. The focus of this essay has been the extent to which ingenuity has been deployed for the benefit of perversity. Strauss's thought is clearly ingenious. Somewhere along the way that ingenuity produced pathological perversion.

Perversion, Bruce Fink tells us, is an attempt to prop up the law after the *Name-of-the-Father* has been inadequately instituted. The *Name-of-the-Father* is the primordial signifier that sets limits to the jouissance (enjoyment) of a subject. A pervert has very weak limits to jouissance and tries to summon some force to set rules for it, but, because it has such weak limits, the pervert proceeds to bother the rules it demands. In perversion it is the rules themselves that become an object of enjoyment. Sigmund Freud assures us that we are all perverted to some extent or another and that there is no distinction in perversity between a kiss or, as he says, licking excrement. The distinction in character arises when the perversion excludes the "normal aim." When perversion eclipses even the possibility of normal activity, then the perversion is pathological.⁹⁵

By suggesting that Plato, arguably the most important writer in Western philosophy, constructs a perverse discourse, the possibility arises that Western philosophy itself has been colored by perversity. This remains a possibility. It is important, however, to remember that Strauss's perversity is distinguished from Plato's by its pathological character. Strauss excludes the possibility of the normal aim of

⁹⁵ It may be instructive to compare obsessive behavior with pathological perversion. The obsessive subject attempts to exclude all other activity in the fixation on one particular preference. For example, an obsessive subject might fixate on cleaning. Consequently, he or she might spend an inordinate amount of time cleaning. In distinction, pathological perversion means to perform a certain activity in a way that excludes its normal aim. A pervert might take particular enjoyment in shaking hands. While the normal aim of a handshake is salutatory, the pervert fetishizes the act of handshaking, thereby pushing the limits of what can be appropriately enjoyed. The *pathological* pervert might exclude completely the normal function of the handshake as a greeting and perform the act purely for sexual enjoyment.

writing. Good The highest truths, according to Strauss, can only be found between the lines, and are never identical to the exoteric text. Plato makes no such comprehensive claim in regards to the suppression of *eros*. Eventually, *eros* triumphs in its struggle against *logos*. Even the extended discussion of love in *The Symposium* finds the philosophical fascination with forms to be a love of wisdom. Plato's struggle, even as it attempts to prop up the law in an effort to institute restraint, never fully excludes intellect or desire, and, accordingly, avoids the pathological character of Strauss's esotericism. For Strauss, the product of his perverse discourse is a philosopher who fetishizes persecution. For Plato, the product of his perverse discourse, is a perverted parrhesiastes – someone whose fetish both valorizes and undermines and the speaking of truth .

In the end, Plato and Strauss struggle with different perversions because they proceed from different understandings of fear. Strauss fears the knowing vulgar, the uninitiated, unphilosophic man who comes into possession of secret truths, truths that must be secreted because they are easily understood. Because truth is simple enough to be fully revealed for Strauss it must be concealed from the untrustworthy. The fear of persecution propels Strauss's discourse toward a literary ghetto and then populates it with persecuted philosophers. Because truth is complex and can never be fully revealed for Plato, its misunderstanding and abusive manipulation by the untrustworthy must be prevented. Plato fears that fears the Error of Strepsiades - that the vulgar will misconstrue and abuse philosophy as just another form of rhetoric, as Strepsiades does in Aristophanes' "Clouds." The problem for Plato is reducible to neither language nor the soul. Rather, it is both. For Plato, the soul of language is ambiguity. This complicates

the problems posed by the language of the soul, which, in some cases, is a Babel of vulgarity. However, to be esoteric as Strauss describes, to avoid teaching exoterically in order to fully conceal philosophy from the vulgar would lead to abomination; the wrong teachers would gain prominence. The fear of abomination ushers Plato's discourse toward a literary agora and then populates it with perverted parrhesiastes, speakers confounded by the problem of language yet obligated to an ethic of frank criticism.

Because of its pathological character, the perversion of Strauss's discourse is plagued by problems. Given that Strauss professes to promote the Socratic tradition, the problems that arise are problems inasmuch as they conflict with that tradition. Strauss undermines the nature of philosophy, which is the love of wisdom. By suggesting that the truth must be hidden so that no one who has not earned it will gain it cheaply, Strauss tells us that the truth is easy to understand, and must be made difficult to obtain. In essence, philosophy is not the love of wisdom, it is the possession of wisdom, and those who possess it must hide it from those who have not earned it. Secondly, by refusing to allow Plato and other great writers of antiquity permission to err, Strauss deifies those writers and himself. In one respect, he refuses to let them be great, for those who are incapable of error cannot be measured by the greatness of their writing. In the Straussian narrative, everything in a Platonic dialogue is deliberate; there are no accidents (Strauss 1964, 60). Hence, everything is deliberate, and even those things that appear to be accidental are, in fact, purposeful. The greatness of a human is measured in its capacity to struggle toward an ideal of perfection while hopelessly mired in the guarantee of failure. Those who are already perfect have nothing to struggle for and nothing to overcome. Those who are incapable of

imperfection have nothing to overcome, save perhaps the limits of perfection, and cannot be called great for simply exercising perfection. For the perfect writer to write perfectly is hardly great, it is simply the necessary and sufficient condition for perfection.

Furthermore, by arguing that the greatest minds were never pupils, Strauss fully betrays the Socratic tradition he professes to promote. At every turn, Socrates presented himself as a pupil. If we cannot believe Socrates when he presents himself as a perpetual student, then philosophy is nothing, *nothing*, but a lie. If we cannot trust in the wonderment that characterizes Socrates during even his most didactic moments, then there is simply no coherence to any narrative of philosophy. It is wonderment, a sense of awe, which characterizes the love of wisdom. Those who have wisdom are not puzzled by it. Neither are those who have no interest in pursuing wisdom. It is awe at the vastness of ignorance that the philosopher experiences most acutely.

There is a qualitative distinction to be made between the perverted parrhesiastes generated by Plato's discourse and a more conventional parrhesiastes. The perverted parrhesiastes struggles to speak frankly through the ornate apparatus of irony. Propelled by the ethic of frank speech, the perverted parrhesiastes is concurrently troubled by the inadequacy of words to fully express ideas and the potential political dangers that arise from the ubiquitous nature of miscommunication. In the process of creating this tormented subject, Plato asks us to consider what government would be like if *eros* was brought under the control of *logos*. He gives us a blueprint in *The Republic of Plato*. Many have found the mechanics and working of the just city to be perverse, often without the aid of Freud, Lacan, and Fink. Perhaps tellingly, Strauss

never asks us to consider what a government would look like if it were influenced by his vision of esotericism. It is time we considered just that.

CHAPTER 6
PERSECUTION AMONG NATIONS: A MANUAL FOR PERVERSE GOVERNMENT

Introduction: The Ghost Writer of Chicago

Leo Strauss never wrote an explicit theory of international relations. Nor did he ever explicitly craft a foreign policy guide. Despite this, there has been intense debate concerning the influence Strauss's thought has exerted on practical politics, and, in particular, American foreign policy. Opponents of Strauss assert that the architects of the Iraq War were, to one degree or another, students of his. They maintain that, at the very least, philosophic inspiration for the war can be traced back to Strauss. Supporters of Strauss suggest that if blame is deserved for the Iraq War, then it ought to be focused on those individuals who actually promoted and planned it. Leo Strauss, they maintain, had nothing to do with it. After all, Leo Strauss was never visibly occupied with practical politics. If those purported to be students of Strauss felt compelled to start a war with Iraq, they did so without their teacher's stated approval.

Much of this debate focuses on the influence Strauss may have exerted through his teachings and indirectly, through the teachings of his students onto a specific segment of the American ideological spectrum, the neoconservatives. Shadia Drury (1997, 3) points out that "Strauss's students and their students have occupied important positions in the Reagan and Bush administrations and continue to play a significant role within the Republican party." The list of names is impressive; it includes ambassadors, national security advisors, prominent speechwriters, and even one Supreme Court Justice. Likewise, Anne Norton (2004, 19) warns that Straussians "have come more firmly and more visibly to power. They are especially prominent in defense and intelligence." During a period between at least 2004 and 2006 a website,

www.straussians.net, offered a lengthy list of Straussian-influenced academics and teachers. The spirit of innocently identifying Straussians in government was apparently also behind the decision by Kenneth Deutsch and John Murly (1999, xiv), the editors of an anthology sympathetic to Strauss entitled *Leo Strauss, the Straussians, and the American Regime*, to provide an extensive register of Straussians who have assumed “responsible positions in Washington.” Nicholas Xenos (2008, 9) notes how Straussians often represent themselves as persecuted, reporting that the website, *straussians.net*, described itself as part of a “wonderful and persecuted academic movement.” Xenos goes on to comment, “I do not know of any other persecuted movement that publishes a list of its members anywhere, much less on a website” (Ibid, 9).

Defenders of Strauss have responded to claims that link his thinking to disastrous trends and policies in American government with a simple, but effective, point of disputation: A student of Strauss is not the same as Strauss himself. Indeed, those portrayed as students of Strauss are sometimes more than once removed from his classroom.⁹⁶ In any event, even a perfectly trained disciple, not even a student, but a *disciple*, is not a wholly reliable mouthpiece for the teacher. To say that students of Leo Strauss influenced American foreign policy does not suggest that Leo Strauss himself crafted American foreign policy.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ The often-maligned Paul Wolfowitz studied as an undergraduate under Allan Bloom. He took two graduate courses with Leo Strauss (Weinstein 2004, 205). In all of this debate about the influence of Strauss, it is unclear as to what constitutes the sufficient threshold for influence. Was taking two graduate courses with Strauss sufficient to completely enthrall a person and transform him or her into an unquestioning minion?

⁹⁷ Beginning with Aristotle and Plato, the history of philosophy is replete with students who sharply opposed the doctrines of their teachers.

In any case, there is little in the way of comprehensive intellectual homogeneity or widespread conformity among Strauss's students.⁹⁸ Catherine and Michael Zuckert, argue against the representation of Straussians by certain media outlets as a legion of thralls, mindless zealots following the instructions of their deceased master. They insist that that no such cult of Straussians implementing the will of Leo Strauss exists (Zuckert and Zuckert 2006, 24). Thomas Pangle (2006, 4) characterizes Straussians as "diverse intellectuals and academics." Likewise, Steven Smith (2006, 4) tells us that "Straussians might be either liberal or conservative, although there was a bias toward those who sought to anchor their policies in a reading of the principles of the American founding." There is a greater diversity among Straussians than is sometimes allowed for by critics.

Pronouncements of who is and who is not a Straussian tend to be haphazard, and, I would add, potentially dangerous. Trying to discern who is and is not a Straussian bears all the signs of conspiratorial paranoia, and, at the minimum, feeds into the Straussian desire for persecution. My definition of a Straussian is one who subscribes to Leo Strauss's hermeneutic of esotericism. Put briefly, Strauss's vision of esotericism entailed the notion that political philosophers, especially ancient political philosophers, concealed the highest truths "exclusively between the lines" in order to avoid persecution. Only those of sufficient philosophic temperament, meaning only those of the greatest intelligence and moral decency, would be able to discern the esoteric truth

⁹⁸ One might respond that all of Strauss's students seem to uniformly agree that Strauss was a great man, but this assessment is neither remarkable nor peculiar to Straussians. John Gunnell (1985, 339), for instance, writes "Leo Strauss was the greatest writer of epic political theory in our century." Even if one is not a Straussian, given the scope of Strauss's work and the power of his thinking, it is hard to dismiss Gunnell's thought as hyperbole.

from the exoteric diversion. A Straussian not only considers the existence of this mode of writing plausible, but also advocates it.⁹⁹

However, operating from this definition it is still especially difficult to ascertain the influence of Leo Strauss on American foreign policy by trying to link Strauss and his teaching with specific individuals. Does Paul Wolfowitz, for example, actively subscribe to the notion of esotericism, and in a manner that precisely conforms to the thought of Leo Strauss? We could always ask, but if the responses were negative, would we even believe the respondents? Esotericism tends to provoke the conspiratorial imagination, and this is precisely the tendency I argue we ought to guard against.

If we are prevented from assigning Leo Strauss blame for the Iraq War because the links between him and the architects of that war remain unclear, then we are compelled to more closely and directly examine Strauss's thoughts on international politics. If Leo Strauss never wrote an explicit theory of international relations, then we ought to see what, if any, theoretical contributions Strauss might offer in terms of the politics among nations. What would a Straussian theory of international politics look like? Even if Strauss did not explicitly write about the subject, his political philosophy contains elements that easily translate into international politics. This essay proceeds from the premise that, in this instance, the supporters of Strauss are right: just because there appear to be numerous biographical links between the architects of the Iraq War, erosion of constitutional rights, policies validating torture, domestic surveillance, and Leo Strauss, we cannot presume Strauss promoted, advocated, or would have

⁹⁹ Nicholas Xenos might be an example of how those two positions concerning esotericism, acknowledgement and advocacy, are not inextricably linked. Xenos, writing in *Cloaked in Virtue*, admits the possibility that esoteric writing as Strauss describes has existed to at least some degree. He does not appear, however, to countenance its use in contemporary politics.

endorsed any of these policies. Nevertheless, the elements of a theory of international relations exist within Strauss's writings. This essay will attempt an articulation of precisely that, a Straussian theory of international politics.

Methodology and the Centrality of Esotericism

Any discussion of Leo Strauss is compelled to confront his theory of esotericism. Strauss (1952, 25) argued that philosophers have concealed their true views, hiding the highest truths "exclusively between the lines" in order to avoid persecution by the vulgar. Efforts to describe the political views of Strauss compel us to consider whether or not he was also writing between the lines. Shadia Drury has expounded on the political ideas of Leo Strauss, but she does so by treating Strauss as an esoteric writer, although she displaces Strauss from the esoteric method he exoterically describes.¹⁰⁰ Drury is right to be suspicious of what Strauss has to say about his esotericism. She cannot safely presume that what he says exoterically about esotericism is the truth, and has no reason to conclude that the method he announces exoterically is sincere. He may be writing between the lines about writing between the lines. Moreover, if Strauss tells us that what is written exoterically is a deception, then we are led to a paradox of infinite regress, because exoterically divulging a deception might very well be a deception in which case we ought to disbelieve what he is saying. Nicholas Xenos (2008, 28) concedes to Strauss that the esoteric writing he describes is possible. Furthermore, he notes that authorial intention is supremely important to Strauss (Ibid, 71).

¹⁰⁰ This strategy makes perfectly good sense since, following Strauss, we have no reason to trust anything an author says exoterically.

My construction of a Straussian theory of international politics will proceed along different methodological lines than Drury or Xenos. Many writers have explored the political ideas of Leo Strauss. This essay is specifically oriented toward understanding how Strauss's thought addresses international politics, or the relations between states, transnational organizations and institutions, as well as nations and cultures.

Furthermore, although different approaches can be uniquely productive, I am not guided by an interest in what Strauss intended, but the discursive effects of what Strauss wrote. Accordingly, my treatment of Strauss's political ideas will consist solely of what he says within the lines and not between them. As such, I do not read Strauss as a deliberately esoteric writer; this essay focuses strictly on what appears exoterically.¹⁰¹ Moreover, I recognize that I am, in some respects, the co-author of this theory of international politics. Using elements of Strauss's own thought, my purpose is to construct a theory of international politics and consider what kind of foreign policy might reasonably emerge from those basic philosophic premises. Exploring the possibilities of a Straussian international relations theory is a crucial political extension of his discourse on writing. In effect, by articulating a Straussian theory of international politics, I am asking where esoteric writing leads in terms of its political effects. From this vantage, we can also explore the tendency or extent to which neoconservative thought and its policies may have been influenced by Strauss's thinking.

Importantly, I proceed from the premise that Strauss's discourse of esotericism is perverse. It describes rules of secrecy only to concomitantly bother those rules by

¹⁰¹ I distinguish a deliberate kind of esotericism, a Straussian esotericism that involves masterful subterfuge by a philosopher seeking to address only an intelligent and moral audience, from linguistic esotericism, a Platonic esotericism that bemoans the inadequacy of language and the inevitable tragedy that inevitably leads to ambiguity in writing.

presenting them exoterically. In the first section, I will outline the basic philosophic premises that inform a Straussian theory of international politics. Accordingly, I identify three salient features of Strauss's thought. First, what I call the "value imperative," the feature of Strauss's thought that facts must necessarily give way to normative evaluation, serves as the foundation upon which successive ideas are placed. Secondly, esoteric politics are influenced by the friend/enemy distinction impressed upon Strauss by the work of Carl Schmitt in his work *The Concept of the Political*. The third fundamental premise of Straussian thought emerges in what he calls "the crisis of the West," which is the loss of a political *telos* brought on by the heterogeneity of liberalism. In the second section, I will arrange these basic premises into a theory of international politics by outlining the theoretical prescriptions that follow in Strauss's writing. The third section considers the kind of foreign policy that might emerge from a Straussian theory of international politics. I argue that a philosophy based on Straussian esotericism leads toward a politics of persecution and the cultivation of the discursive structure that sustains persecution, paranoia. At the level of philosophy, Strauss's esotericism is a pathological perversion.¹⁰² Applied to the arena of international politics, Strauss's esotericism lends itself to a government of paranoia.

¹⁰² I have argued in previous chapters that esotericism, as described by Strauss, represents a perversion because Strauss creates rules about secrecy and then bothers those rules. Following the definition provided by Sigmund Freud, and expanded upon by Jacques Lacan and Bruce Fink, perversion amounts to an effort by a subject to bring forth rules in order to gain enjoyment by bothering those rules. Again using Freud's concept, the perversion Strauss creates is a pathological perversion because it presents the truth "exclusively between the lines." For Freud, perversion is manifold and ubiquitous in human interaction. Pathology is a function of fixation and exclusivity. When a perversion excludes "the normal aim" (Freud 1962, 27) it has the characteristic of being pathological.

Athens Against Jerusalem: The Premises of Straussian Political Discourse

To restate briefly, three essential premises inform what could be called a Straussian theory of international politics: the first is what I term “the value imperative”; the second is the friend/enemy distinction assimilated from the Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt; and the third is what Strauss calls “the crisis of the West.” Other themes discussed by Strauss will be addressed but I identify these three premises as foundational because they condition the prescriptive aspects of Strauss’s thought. These premises act as a foundation; they are the laws of reality that must be observed, and it is in the course of those observations that later prescriptions can be developed accordingly.

The Is and the Ought: The Value Imperative

The most essential premise of Strauss’s thought is what I call the value imperative. It is the most essential premise because it is the necessary condition for what Strauss calls “man.” The value imperative is that congenital aspect of the human condition that leads to politics. Human beings are always compelled to evaluate the facts of the world. No encounter with the world can be left simply as ‘is’; rather, every encounter or experience is evaluated, appraised, and judged on the basis of what ‘ought’ to be.

Strauss was a persistent critic of positivism and contemporary social sciences, which he accused of abdicating the responsibility to make judgments in lieu of pursuing a purely scientific, purely nomothetic enterprise. In his estimation, positivist social science has so thoroughly adopted the philosophy of the natural sciences as to abandon the quest to improve the human condition:

This is, indeed, the core of modern science, of modern social science as it has finally developed in the last two generations: the distinction between facts and values, with the understanding that no distinction between good or bad values is rationally possible. Any end is as defensible as any other. From the point of view of reason, all values are equal. (Strauss 1972, 224)

In one of his more lively and scathing critiques, Strauss accuses behaviorist political science in particular of adopting the pretenses of objectivity, and he warns that there are genuine risks arising from that kind of activity:

Only a great fool would call the new political science diabolic: it has no attributes peculiar to fallen angels. It is not even Machiavellian, for Machiavelli's teaching was graceful, subtle, and colorful. Nor is it Neronian. Nevertheless one may say of it that it fiddles while Rome burns. It is excused by two facts: it does not know that it fiddles, and it does not know that Rome burns. (Strauss 1968, 223)

Adopting the posture of a value-free positivism is, firstly, a sham given that it always already promotes positivism as a worthwhile value; secondly, by refraining from taking a moral stand the positivist invites a form of radical cultural relativism in which "only factual judgments, not value judgments, can be true or objective" (Ibid, 220). For Strauss, this is a crippling problem. As he explains, "If principles are sufficiently justified by the fact that they are accepted by a society, the principles of cannibalism are as defensible or sound as those of civilized life" (Strauss 1965, 3). The point Strauss makes through the example of cannibalism is that apparatuses of contemporary social science have adopted a philosophy of science that increasingly bankrupts society of its values and strips it of the possibility for navigating by a moral compass.

The value imperative is, therefore, best expressed in Strauss's (1968, 215) words, "The Is necessarily leads to an Ought, all sincere protestations to the contrary notwithstanding." This means that facts, "the Is" as Strauss calls them, compel us toward thinking normatively. Political life is not value neutral. Critical to this premise is the "necessary" character of facts leading to value distinctions. Strictly speaking, for Strauss, there can be no such thing as humanity without the Is leading to an Ought. As he says:

Agreement at all costs is possible only as agreement at the cost of the meaning of human life; for agreement at all costs is possible only if man has relinquished asking the question of what is right; and if man relinquishes that question, he relinquishes being a man. (Strauss 2007, 118)

Without the normative question, “what is right?” there simply is no such thing as “man.” Confronted by the exigencies of reality, the facts as they appear, posing the question of “what is right” becomes compulsory. Even the positivist chooses positivism as the answer to the question of what is right, or how one ought to act in the conduct of social inquiry. It is imperative that we apply value distinctions to facts. The question is not *if* value will be applied but *how*.

Warring Cultures: The Friend/Enemy Distinction

It is no secret that Leo Strauss was strongly influenced by the work of Carl Schmitt. Strauss effectively endorses and elaborates on Schmitt’s seminal work, *The Concept of the Political*, in notes written in reference to that text. Much of his other writings concur with the principles expressed within Strauss’s notes on *The Concept of the Political*. Even polemically opposed figures such as Shadia Drury and Steven Smith agree on the importance of Schmitt’s writings to Strauss. Smith (2006, 61) declares, “It was from Schmitt that Strauss learned that conflict, not just between individuals, but between states and peoples, is the core of political life.” Anne Norton (2004, 40) describes Strauss’s reading of Schmitt as “more than sympathetic.” Shadia Drury (1997, 23) concurs when she explains that Strauss shares Schmitt’s view on “the fundamental distinction in politics.”

That fundamental view is the “friend/enemy distinction.” It is fundamental in the sense that it serves to configure subsequent views on political philosophy. First, Strauss identifies what Schmitt means in defining the political as a unique category: “In taking

his bearings by this general relationship, Schmitt defines 'the distinction between friend and enemy' as the specifically political distinction" (Strauss 2007, 103). The political, therefore, consists of identifying friend from foe and the struggles emerging from those relationships. Politics, according to this understanding, are an expression of the demarcation between friends, those bound to varying degrees by a common purpose, from enemies, those who are in opposition. As Strauss (1959, 80) maintains, "Political life is characterized by conflicts between men asserting opposed claims." Conflict is the essence of politics. Consequently, for Strauss, without conflict, there are no politics. He comments, "The political is thus not only possible but real; and not only real but also necessary. It is necessary because it is given in human nature" (Strauss 2007, 110).

Proceeding from Strauss's position, human nature is essentially political, and the political is essentially conflictive. It follows that human nature essentially strives for identifying friends from enemies, and carrying on struggles based on those delineations. Human nature, for Strauss, is characterized by perpetual conflict; if we imagine the most savage form of conflict, a group of friends can exterminate all of their enemies, only to find new enemies that emerge from within the group of friends. Fundamentalisms of every sort often exemplify this sort of behavior as they fight external heretics at the same time as the purity of the movement demands warring against those perceived as internal apostates. Certainly for Strauss, this dynamic is not restrictive to fundamentalists; it is representative of humanity itself.

Again, the friend/enemy distinction informs the larger scope of Leo Strauss's political philosophy. The friend/enemy distinction, in its most basic form is shapeless, with the potential for manifold adversarial relations. However, while there are a variety

of temporal friend/enemy configurations – warring cities, states, gangs, alliances, and so forth – for Strauss, there is one transcendental and essential friend/enemy division among humankind, the philosopher and the vulgar. The distinction between the philosopher and its enemy, the vulgar, precedes nations, cultures, and ideology. It transcends time. It is the fundamental friend/enemy distinction of humanity. Ultimately, Strauss tells us, that this most essential bifurcation of human nature is the basis upon which conflict will arise.

For Strauss, a philosopher can be distinguished from a vulgar person through his or her ability to read. “Thoughtless men are careless readers,” he says, “and only thoughtful men are careful readers” (Strauss 1952, 25). From this hierarchy of reading abilities, Strauss (Ibid, 59) concludes that there is a “rigid division of mankind into an inspired or intelligent minority and an uninspired or foolish majority.” The intelligent minority is comprised of philosophers, while the foolish majority is populated by the vulgar. The philosopher and the vulgar are essentially different, or, as Strauss (1989, 68) explains, “The difference between the beginner and the philosopher (for the perfectly trained student of Plato is no one else but the genuine philosopher) is a difference not of degree but of kind.” Strauss (Ibid, 68) identifies “the beginner” as subscribing to “vulgar or political virtue only, a virtue based not on insight, but on customs or laws.” Thus, the vulgar is a careless reader, different in kind from the superior reader who is a philosopher.

To reiterate, Strauss describes a “rigid division of mankind.” The difference between philosophers and the vulgar is ahistorical; it transcends nationality and time. It is the first conflict, and it is a perpetual conflict. As Strauss (1959, 125) notes, “the

conflict between the philosopher and the city is inevitable.” He therefore presents us with two opposing political camps. Strauss identifies philosophy by associating it with the city of Athens. He identifies tradition and law, the orthodoxy that constrain the vulgar, with the city of Jerusalem. In other words, Strauss (1997b, 377) portrays two opposing “*cultures*,” Athens, with its philosophic culture, and Jerusalem, with its culture of tradition and law, as the most fundamental conflict.¹⁰³

All the hopes that we entertain in the midst of the confusions and dangers of the present are founded positively or negative, directly or indirectly on the experiences of the past. Of these experiences the broadest and deepest, as far as we Western men are concerned, are indicated by the names of the two cities Jerusalem and Athens. Western man became what he is and is what he is through the coming together of biblical faith and Greek thought. (Ibid, 377)

In certain ways, the use of these cities to represent the different camps of philosophy and vulgarity could be considered strange. Athens, after all, executed Socrates, the very man Strauss identifies as the first political philosopher. It is a city that Plato repeatedly castigated on numerous grounds. Although Athenian democracy fostered philosopher, that patronage was not without restriction. Likewise, Jerusalem itself was hardly a regime of pure vulgarity. Jerusalem is not Gomorrah. As Strauss (Ibid, 378) notes, “The peculiarity of the Hebrews is the utmost honoring of mother and father.”

However, key to the construction of the two metaphors are the respective constituencies involved. Despite its questionable history in this regard, Athens is meant to represent the philosopher. Jerusalem represents tradition and the law. But who is it that is governed by tradition and law? For Strauss, it is certainly not the philosopher. In

¹⁰³ Strauss explicitly refers to the different units as cultures. We might also recall Steven Smith’s (2006, 61) assertion that “It was from Schmitt that Strauss learned that conflict, not just between individuals, but between states and peoples, is the core of political life.”

his essay, "How to Begin to Study *The Guide of the Perplexed*," he explains that a genuine philosopher is not bound by particular authority. Rather, the activity of the philosopher consistently works to undermine authority:

The addressee of the *Guide* is a man regarding whom it is still undecided whether he will become a genuine man of speculation or whether he will remain a follower of authority, if of Maimonides' authority. He stands at the point of the road where speculation branches off from acceptance of authority. (Strauss 1963, xix)¹⁰⁴

Who is it that is governed by law and tradition? Given that esotericism bifurcates human nature, we are left with only one logical candidate: the vulgar. Strauss situates speculation as opposite to authority. Tradition and law are non-speculative and Strauss (1952, 36) characterizes the non-speculative as a "slumber of those who cannot see the wood for the trees." The law is not *for* the philosopher, as Strauss explains:

Yet the Law whose secrets Maimonides intends to explain forbids that they be explained in public, or to the public; they may only be explained in private and only to such individuals as possess both theoretical and political wisdom as well as the capacity of both understanding and using allusive speech. (Strauss 1963, ixv)

Jerusalem itself is not unrestricted vulgarity, but Jerusalem, with its moderating laws and traditions, is meant to represent the culture of the vulgar. The meeting of Athens and Jerusalem is the fundamental political event, and it is marred by conflict, with each culture posing "incompatible claims" (Strauss 1997b, 380).

Since the conflict between the nations of the philosopher and the city, between the two cultures of Athens and Jerusalem, is unavoidable, the friend/enemy distinction presents what Strauss calls "the dire emergency." In his notes to Schmitt's *The Concept of the Political*, Strauss (2007, 112) tells us that the man who affirms the concept of the

¹⁰⁴ It is also worth recalling Strauss's (1959, 221) view that philosophy works to change the element of society, opinion, with knowledge of the highest things.

political recognizes man's inherent dangerousness. Recognizing man's dangerousness means admitting that responding to enemies takes precedence over responding to friends because the consequences for disregarding enemies is far graver than disregarding friends (Ibid, 104). Accordingly, the man who affirms the friend/enemy distinction is always attuned to what Strauss calls "the dire emergency," which, for Strauss (Ibid, 104) refers to war "not merely within an 'autonomous' region – the region of the political – but for man simply."¹⁰⁵ The dire emergency refers to war as it pertains to human beings killing one another. Thus, the dire emergency can be constrained by geographic conflict, such as war between states, but it is in no way necessarily restricted by geography, ideology, or any other temporal characteristic.

The friend/enemy distinction, which is constitutive of the political, is irreducible beyond the conflict between the philosopher and the vulgar. Put simply, because of the "rigid division" because they represent difference in kind, the philosopher and the vulgar will always be enemies. Because they are always enemies, and because the eruption between the philosopher and the city is "inevitable," it follows from Strauss's thought that there is continuous possibility for dire emergency, the possibility for real physical killing in the conflict between philosopher and vulgar man.

Crisis of the West

Humanity is political, for Strauss, and the political indicates fighting. Strauss explains that while the political is an essential condition, not every political arrangement accepts this. Some forms of political organization attempt to suppress, or outright deny,

¹⁰⁵ While Schmitt refers to war as "the most extreme possibility" arising from the friend/enemy distinction, he never refers to it as "the dire emergency." It is clear enough that he has in mind the extenuating circumstances in which a state would be compelled to suspend law, but Strauss gives it a name.

the necessity of fighting.¹⁰⁶ Rather than embrace the political, contemporary politics attempt to suppress the dangerousness of man. In particular, he accuses liberalism of struggling against the political by attempting to abolish that most extreme expression of politics, war. He states:

He who affirms the political as such respects all who want to fight; he is just as tolerant as the liberals – but with the opposite intention: whereas the liberal respects and tolerates all ‘honest’ convictions so long as they merely acknowledge the legal order, peace, as sacrosanct, he who affirms the political respects and tolerates all ‘serious’ convictions, that is, all decisions oriented to the real possibility of war. (Ibid, 120)

Liberalism, like positivism, too readily concedes the possibility of identifying and pursuing an objective good. Although liberalism, similarly to positivism, implicitly asserts itself as the greatest good, it is the greatest good that refuses the possibility of a greatest good. In Strauss’s estimation liberalism emasculates and pacifies man; it tries to nullify conflict by permitting the pursuit of individual conceptions of good in place of identifying an arch-good, such as the pursuit of virtue. By attempting to prevent disputes, and hence conflict, over an arch-good, liberalism steadily depoliticizes society, robbing man of “dangerousness,” and ultimately leading to a neutered condition whereby “man ceases to be human” (Ibid, 112 and 110).

Hence, liberalism replaces the unity of a society oriented toward the dire emergency with the permissiveness of plural goods. In a liberal democracy, individual urges were politically guaranteed, meaning political deliberations, such as voting, were left to the caprice of the individual. For Strauss (1972, 222), this meant, “The sovereign consists of the individuals who are in no way responsible, who can in no way be held responsible: the irresponsible individual.” Rather than express a unified, teleological

¹⁰⁶ The liberal suspension of a *sumum bonum* is clearly what Strauss has in mind.

direction, politics in a liberal society are merely the aggregation of irresponsibility. Society has no direction beyond the momentum generated by individual decisions that agree with each other by happenstance. The consequence for Strauss is what he calls “the crisis of the West.” As he explains:

The crisis of the West consists in the West’s having become uncertain of its purpose. The West was once certain of its purpose – of a purpose in which all men could be united, and hence it had a clear vision of its future as the future of mankind. We do no longer have that certainty and that clarity. Some among us even despair of the future, and this despair explains many forms of contemporary Western degradation. (Strauss 1964, 3)

Strauss (Ibid, 3) tells us that the West, fuelled by the hubris of modern thinkers, dared to imagine “a society superior in truth and justice to the society toward which the classics aspired.” This was the modern project. Against the view of the ancients, who held the inherent inequality of human beings as irrefutable, the modern project “would necessarily be the progress toward a society embracing equally all human beings: a universal league of free and equal nations, each nation consisting of free and equal men and women” (Ibid, 4). Regardless of the fact that he does not identify one proponent of this view, Strauss assures that the modern project, particularly in the form of liberalism, failed in the worst way. It was not simply unsuccessful; it was actually injurious:

By teaching the equality of all values, by denying that there are things which are intrinsically high and others which are intrinsically low as well as by denying that there is an essential difference between men and brutes, it unwittingly contributes to the victory of the gutter. (Strauss 1968, 222)

Liberalism and its accomplices, positivism and historicism, have robbed the West of its purpose.¹⁰⁷ This aimlessness has had the consequence of the West “becoming completely bewildered” (Strauss 1964, 3). In practical terms, Strauss was concerned that this left the West in a defenseless posture against its enemies. At first, he says, Westerners, under the thrall of liberalism, were unable to discern the regime of the Soviet Union as anything other than a coequal pursuit of good. Liberalism demanded that Stalinism ought to be regarded as just one more pursuit of the good:

For some time it appeared to many teachable Westerners – to say nothing of the unteachable ones – that Communism was only a parallel movement to the Western movement – as it were its somewhat impatient, wild, wayward twin who was bound to become mature, patient, and gentle. (Ibid, 4)

Eventually, Strauss tells us, the West largely came around to recognizing the brutality and tyranny of the Soviet Union. One might even argue that this recognition fueled the West with purpose, for a time. Yet, the premise remains that, because of liberalism and its accomplices, the West will endure a perpetual threat of crisis. Without the clear unanimity of direction afforded to illiberal societies, the West will constantly risk aimlessness, drifting, and bewilderment. Unable to expediently recognize the dangers posed by its enemies, the West will always be at a disadvantage.

Summation – Culture Wars

I characterize three premises discussed by Leo Strauss as fundamental to his political philosophy: the value imperative, which is the necessity that human beings normatively assess their world; the friend/enemy distinction, which, for Strauss, directs

¹⁰⁷ Historicism is the name Strauss gives to the idea that a thinker, such as Plato, can only be understood in context of his or her historical context. Historicism assumes that, as historical circumstances change, the validity of past philosophic ideas wanes.

politics toward a dire emergency between the philosopher and the vulgar; and the crisis of the West, which denotes the erosion of common purpose in the aftermath of liberalism. The problem arises, not in the subscription to any one particular premise. Rather it is the combination, like so many individually inert household cleaners that when improperly mixed together become noxious. Considered in combination, these premises begin to reveal a clear international orientation within Strauss's thought.

Crisis of the Best and the Reformulation of Internationality

Since the conflict between the philosopher and the city is always "inevitable", the possibility for the dire emergency always exists between them. In effect, the combination of the value imperative, the friend/enemy distinction, and the crisis of the West, amounts to a *crisis of the Best*. The philosopher faces a dire emergency in its confrontation with its enemy, the vulgar, who is morally adrift, purposeless and bewildered in the wake of liberalism. The dire emergency portends the extinction of the philosopher because the three great evils – positivism, liberalism, and historicism – threaten the relevancy of the classical philosopher who champions the idea of universal, transcendental virtue.

The basis for a theory of international politics is formed out of these three premises. The consequence of these premises is to reformulate the landscape of internationality. For Strauss, cultures not necessarily states determine schisms and conflicts. He is describing an interminable conflict between the two most essential divisions within politics, the philosopher and the vulgar. It is an unending war between two camps, two cultures, *two nations*. The meaning of culture for Strauss is coextensive with that of a nation; they are not identical in meaning, but when Strauss refers to "Athens" or "Jerusalem" he is referring to people who are "different in kind." The nation

of Athens has its own distinct culture, and assuredly, its own distinct politics. The differences between the two cultures are not merely cultural, they are political, and hence their relationship is *international*.

Next Year in a Strange Jerusalem

Again, the conflict between philosopher and vulgar is the “broadest and deepest” conflict which has constituted the West (Strauss 1997b, 377). It is a primordial feature of humankind.¹⁰⁸ Subsidiary to this dire emergency is the crisis of the West, the aimless drift brought on by liberalism that leaves the West defenseless in its confrontation with the East. Hence, the nation of Athens is dually threatened. It is first directly threatened by the vulgarity of Jerusalem, and then indirectly threatened by Jerusalem’s bewilderment, lack of purpose, and indecisiveness in warding off Eastern threats to the West. As Strauss laments:

Today, so far from ruling the globe, the West’s very survival is endangered by the East as it has been since its beginning. From the *Communist Manifesto* it would appear that the victory of Communism would be the complete victory of the West – of the synthesis, transcending the national boundaries, of British industry, the French Revolution and German philosophy – over the East.. We see that the victory of Communism would mean indeed the victory of originally Western natural science but surely at the same time the victory of the most extreme form of Eastern despotism. (Strauss 1964, 3)

Athens is, therefore, besieged by forces that are both internal and external to the culture of the West. Again, the division is ultimately reducible to the conflict between philosopher and vulgar because, ultimately, it is the immoral and unintelligent nature of the vulgar that threatens the philosopher.

¹⁰⁸ Strauss characterizes the conflict between philosopher and vulgar as fundamental to human nature, but he situates that conflict largely in terms of Western civilization.

In response to the looming threat posed by the vulgar, the crisis of the Best, strategies arise to respond to this dire emergency, albeit subtly, from within Strauss's thought. These are rules that govern the nation of philosophers, the culture of Athens. They are the rules of an Athenian government.¹⁰⁹ In the end, however, they call for the relocation of Athens to another city, Prague. The admixture of the value imperative, the friend/enemy distinction, and the crisis of the West lead to three prescriptions for the nation of philosophers: esotericism, universalism of thought, and what I call the 'tyranny of virtue.'

Catherine and Michael Zuckert (2006, 121) assert that Leo Strauss merely explains esotericism, factually and objectively; they assure us the thesis of esotericism is "not a prescription for writers living today." This appears to be false. Strauss offers what can only be a clear prescription when he states:

Exoteric literature presupposes that there are basic truths which would not be pronounced in public by any decent man, because they would do harm to many people who, having been hurt, would naturally be inclined to hurt in turn him who pronounces the unpleasant truths. (Strauss 1952, 36)

Unless Strauss believed that decency was just as good as indecency, this statement is prescriptive. Furthermore, in another discussion of esotericism, Strauss explains the harm that openly pronouncing philosophic truths would inflict on orthodoxy.

Consequently, he says, "Hence, philosophy or science must remain the preserve of a small minority, and philosophers or scientists must respect the opinions on which society rests. To respect opinions is something entirely different from accepting them as true" (Strauss 1959, 222).

¹⁰⁹ It will become abundantly clear that the sovereignty of Jerusalem is highly tenuous.

Even beyond the Zuckerts' strikingly positivist portrayal of Strauss as a historian merely uncovering objective truth, a portrayal Strauss sometimes cultivated, is the underlying prescriptive verbiage concerning esoteric writing. Esotericism is prescribed based on the following syllogism: Philosophy is good; esotericism is necessary for philosophy to survive persecution; therefore, esotericism is good (Strauss 1968 6).¹¹⁰ Brute force is of no use to the philosopher when confronting the dire emergency. The vulgar are too many for the direct application of force. Esotericism, secret writing in which a philosopher hides "the highest truths exclusively between the lines," bears the advantage of permitting communication among the trustworthy while avoiding the notice of vulgar or the censor of a hostile regime. Esoteric writing allows the philosopher to avoid the dire emergency by propagating the nation of Athens. It allows the philosopher to reach the nascent philosophers of the future.

The philosopher must go to the market place in order to fish there for potential philosophers. His attempts to convert young men to the philosophic life will necessarily be regarded by the city as an attempt to corrupt the young. The philosopher is therefore forced to defend the cause of philosophy. (Strauss, 1959, 125)

Thus, esotericism, secret writing, emerges as a strategy for the nation of Athens to elude the persecution of the vulgar, whose orthodoxy the philosopher contravenes.

The second prescription for the nation of Athens that follows from Strauss's premises is establishing the universalism of thought. This is a direct response to the crisis of the West, and to the failed attempts by liberals to establish a world-state.

¹¹⁰ Strauss (1968, 6) describes philosophy as the quest for "knowledge regarding the most important, the highest or most comprehensive things." Strauss (1952, 18) also explains exoteric teaching was necessary. Finally, he concludes, "Exoteric literature presupposes that there are basic truths which would not be pronounced in public by any decent man, because they would do harm to many people who, having been hurt, would naturally be inclined to hurt in turn him who pronounces the unpleasant truths" (Strauss, 1952, 36).

Strauss notes that universal politics, embodied in the idea of world-state, is impossible.

He explains:

The universalism of the city (as distinguished from the desire for a limited goal like the rule over Sicily) is doomed to failure. It points to a universalism of a different kind. (Strauss 1964, 228)

Political rule, indicated by the city, is particular. For Strauss (1983, 29), politics has been the domain of a particular city or polity. The attempt to establish a universal polity is an attempt to produce a universal-particular. The universalism of the city, he argues, is a “sham” (Strauss 1964, 228). Strauss rejects the possibility for a practical expression of this sham universalism when he claims, “For the foreseeable future there cannot be a universal state, unitary or federative” (Ibid, 5). Instead, he contrasts the sham universalism of the city with the “genuine universalism of understanding,” which he also calls “the universalism of thought” (Ibid, 228).

World politics cannot be subsumed under the banner of one state or one society precisely because the city is the domain of the vulgar. By its nature, vulgar politics will always be inferior since the vulgar are inferior. Universalism of thought, unlike the universalism of the city, is genuine. If the world cannot be ordered by a ‘homogenous state,’ it seems feasible for Strauss that world can be ordered philosophically. Vulgar politics remain particular. Differences remain among particular political units, such as states. But the universalism of thought is genuine. Strauss (1959, 11) asserts that the mission of “political philosophy will then be the attempt to replace opinion about the nature of political things by knowledge of the nature of political things.” The knowledge of political philosophy “was concerned with the best or just order of society which is by its nature best or just everywhere or always” (Strauss 1983, 29).

The final prescription for the nation of Athens is what I call the tyranny of virtue. Esotericism explains how philosophers act, namely, in secret with regards to their enemies, the vulgar. The universalism of thought describes the aim of a philosopher, to subdue the vulgar under the knowledge of philosopher, which is valid in all places at all times. The tyranny of virtue is the name I give to the character of the Athenian regime. For Strauss (2000, 68), “tyranny is such rule as is exercised over unwilling subjects and accords, not with laws, but with the will of the ruler.” There is no more applicable description for the philosophy that acts in secret to manipulate the affairs of vulgar politics. It is a tyranny. The question of how philosophers confront their own affairs is not addressed, but presumably it is superior to the manner in which the vulgar deal with each other. Rather the subject for Strauss is an international relationship between Athens and Jerusalem. Since, the vulgar are inferior, or “lower” as Strauss also calls them, they cannot discern what is best within their own disputes (Strauss 1968, 12 and 1959, 80). As Strauss (1959, 80) says, “The conflict calls for arbitration, for an intelligent decision that will give each party what it truly deserves.” Again, the vulgar belong to that “foolish majority” they cannot arbitrate on the basis of anything greater than opinion (Strauss 1952, 59). The solution is obvious: “The umpire par excellence is the political philosopher. He tries to settle those political controversies that are both of paramount and of permanent importance” (Strauss 1959, 81). Strauss (Ibid, 120) elaborates by telling us the philosopher “will therefore not engage in revolutionary or subversive activity. But he will try to help his fellow man by mitigating, as far as in him lies, the evils which are inseparable from the human condition.”

Crucial to all of this is that nobody in particular asked the philosopher for help. Strauss knows this. Help in alleviating the vulgar nation from evil is not requested; it is imposed. The vulgar neither want nor apply for the help of the philosopher because, “The distrust of the wise, which proceeds from lack of understanding of wisdom, is characteristic of the vulgar, of tyrants and nontyrants alike” (Strauss 2000, 42). The vulgar, as might be expected of an enemy nation, distrusts the philosopher. In fact, the vulgar goes so far as to hate the philosopher. Strauss (1968, viii) mocks the purported pluralist component of liberalism, arguing that while it is permissive of trivial kinds of diversity, such as “language, folk songs, pottery, and the like,” its breadth of tolerance is not extended to the philosopher. He states:

But absolute tolerance is altogether impossible; the allegedly absolute tolerance turns into ferocious hatred of those who have stated most clearly and most forcefully that there are unchangeable standards found in the nature of man and the nature of things. (Ibid, 63)

The philosopher is misunderstood, distrusted, and hated. The philosopher is not asked to act as arbiter of disputes, but does so anyway. In other words, for Strauss the true philosopher is always opposed to liberalism and is hated for it.

Of course, Strauss (1959, 221) tells us that the philosopher must “respect the opinions on which society rests.” It is apparent, however, that this respect is only granted insofar as the replacement of vulgar opinion with philosophic knowledge is carried out surreptitiously. The help of replacing opinions in the first place is unasked for, and yet imposed. The two nations, Athens and Jerusalem are in conflict, not in covenant. “Philosophers are not as such a constituent part of the city,” Strauss (1968, 14) explains. Because of their difference in kind, the philosophers and the vulgar “cannot have genuinely common deliberations” (Ibid, 14). In fact, “philosophy can then

live only side by side with the city” (Ibid, 14). There is no law between the two nations of Athens and Jerusalem. Philosophy imposes itself on the vulgar, and it does so against the will of the vulgar who distrust and despise the philosopher. It is a tyranny of virtue, and it remains an open question as to what the content or substance of virtue actually is, or if the philosophers genuinely have it.

Summation: The Relocation of Athens

The implication of Strauss’s thought is that the foundation for international politics is not between states, but between the nations of Athens and Jerusalem. All human beings occupy one of those two cities. Consequently, the concept of the international is reformulated to consider this most fundamental distinction among human beings. There are but two essential nations for Strauss, philosopher and vulgar, Athens and Jerusalem. The conflict between them is the most primordial example of international relations.

Three premises led to three prescriptions. The value imperative, the friend/enemy distinction, and the Crisis of the West prompt three strategies in Strauss’s thought: esoteric writing, universalism of thought, and the tyranny of virtue. If those prescriptions are combined together to address the dire emergency posed by the crisis of the West, a decidedly unflattering theory of international politics emerges. The nation of Athens must act secretly against its enemy, the nation of Jerusalem, to tyrannically manipulate a universality of purpose. Esotericism provides the medium of secrecy, allowing philosopher to communicate and propagate. The universality of thought provides the aim of secrecy, to supplant the cacophony of liberal opinion with homogenous philosophic knowledge that is true across space and time. The tyranny of virtue describes the character of the philosophic regime. The vulgar will receive the

universality of thought, even if esoterically, whether or not they consent to it. Indeed, it seems doubtful in Strauss's mind that they will consent to it.

The philosopher is not a tyrant, even if tyrannical means are used. After all, Strauss (2000, 67) explains, "One might think that the natural teacher of the tyrannical art would be a great tyrant; but preservation of tyranny and correction of tyranny are two different things." He does not rule openly over the city of the vulgar. Rather, the philosopher manipulates the affairs of the city from afar, insulated by walls. The philosopher does not reside in the court of the king, nor even, as Strauss says, within the city. City and philosopher coexist, albeit in conflict, "side by side." The philosopher is a dweller of ghettos. Esoteric writing demands that philosophy is written "exclusively between the lines." Philosophy begins from within a discursive space that is surrounded on all sides by the walls of exoteric print. It is secluded, segregated even, from the hostile influence of the vulgar, who are the occupants of the city beyond. Again, Strauss (1983, 29) notes that "throughout its whole history political philosophy was universal while politics was particular." He goes on to say:

In our age on the other hand politics has in fact become universal. Unrest in what is loosely, not to day demagogically, called the ghetto of an American city has repercussions in Moscow, Peking, Johannesburg, Hanoi, London and other far away places is linked with them; whether the linkage is admitted or not makes no difference. Simultaneously, political philosophy has disappeared. (Ibid, 29)

The ghetto is the seat of universality, and philosophy must come to occupy that seat if the tyranny of virtue is to be successful in its instantiation of the universality of thought. Esoteric writing positions philosophy into a ghetto, and the distrusted, hated philosopher operates through the medium of esotericism, the ghetto of writing. The philosopher creates a ghetto in order to carry out the substitution of society's opinion with

philosophy's knowledge. In other words, Athens, the nation of philosophers, does not merely present itself openly to Jerusalem, the nation of vulgarity. To present oneself to an enemy that is overwhelmingly superior in numbers would be foolish. Concealment is the tactic of the outgunned. It is also the tactic of the philosopher and the tyrant, both of whom tend to be outnumbered.¹¹¹ Philosophy thusly hides behind walls to do its work. Strauss (1952, 18) explains that esoteric writing, "was needed for protecting philosophy. It was the armor in which philosophy had to appear." From this it becomes apparent that Athens is not to be abandoned as during the Persian invasion of Greece. Such, after all, is a conflict within the vulgar nation. Rather, Athens is to be relocated behind the walls of the ghetto. Athens is relocated to Prague. Hence, the political philosophy of Leo Strauss lends itself to a theory of international politics whereby esoteric writing is employed for the purposes of tyrannically imposing universalism of thought.

Pathologies of Secret Politics

The purpose of this section is to examine the pathologies of the secret politics that emerge from Strauss's political philosophy. Again, I proceed from the premise that Straussian esotericism, the theory of reading and writing that informs much of Strauss's political philosophy, is a perversion. It reveals the existence of what is supposedly prohibited from revelation. Secret writing begets secret politics, and those politics are predicated on sustaining persecution. In terms of pathology, as understood through Lacanian psychoanalysis, the secret politics of Leo Strauss are motivated by the discursive use of persecution and result in the condition of paranoia.

¹¹¹ It is interesting to note that Strauss (2000, 70) claims "It is hardly necessary to say that the tyrant's refraining from openly taking responsibility for punitive action does not bespeak a particular mildness of this rule – nontyrannical rulers take that responsibility without any concealment because their authority deriving from law is secure." Tyranny, like philosophy, has an esoteric component to its work.

The centrality of esotericism in the political philosophy of Leo Strauss visibly indicates the crucial importance of persecution. The vulgar distrust the hated philosopher whose knowledge is “essentially incompatible with the gods of the city” (Strauss 1939, 534). Persecution is not the only reason a philosopher writes esoterically, but it is the primary reason. It is the first tactic the philosopher uses to address the dire emergency. Hence, Straussian politics are based on persecution. Straussian politics need persecution in order to be sustained. In the absence of the threat of persecution, there is simply no need to write esoterically. A philosopher may choose to write esoterically, but in the absence of persecution it is no longer a matter of necessity.

The need for persecution, the need, that is, to sustain persecution in order to maintain the validity and usefulness of secret writing encourages the generation of paranoid politics. What is paranoia?¹¹² Freud (1989, 94-95) tells us that paranoia is a condition of delusions in which “the primary symptom formed is distrust (sensitiveness to other people). In this, belief has been withheld from a self-reproach.”¹¹³ Paranoia, therefore, is a disorder in which the subject experiences delusions that arouse deep suspicion against others, and refuses self-reproach, or criticism. In a particularly acute form of paranoia, what Freud and Lacan refer to as “persecutory paranoia,” distrust assumes the form of feeling threatened with persecution by others. We might

¹¹² In one sense, asking the question itself is a paranoid act, as Lacan (1997, 177-178) asserts that knowledge belongs to the “primitive paranoid dialectic of identification.” It is also worth noting that paranoia, for Lacan, belongs under the larger rubric of disorders called psychosis. Freud does not categorize paranoia as a form of psychosis and, given the stigmatic attitudes generally attached to the term psychotic, I will limit my discussion to what is discernibly paranoia.

¹¹³ For Freud, the etiology of paranoia is the effort to repress homosexual urges. However, Lacan rightly dismisses this as an insufficient explanation. Nevertheless, I am specifically interested in what paranoia looks like, and not its etiological states.

understand this kind of paranoia as primarily characterized by the delusion “they’re out to get me.”

The delusion of persecution that engenders paranoia resembles unrequited love. The paranoid subject thinks he or she ought to be loved by the persecutors, but complains that this is not at all the case. Instead, as Freud explains, those who suffer persecutory paranoia:

Cannot regard anything in others as indifferent, and into their ‘delusions of reference they, too, take up the smallest possible indications which these others, strangers, offer them. The meaning of their delusion of reference is that they expect from every stranger something like love; these ‘others’ show them nothing of the kind, however – they laugh to themselves, fiddle with their sticks, even spit on the ground as they go by – and one really does not do these things while anyone in whom one takes a friendly interest is near. (Freud 1963, 153)

The paranoid subject thinks he or she deserves love, but instead perceives indifference or disrespect. Acts of indifference are perceived the paranoid as slights, signs of persecution. Acts that are not even directed at the subject are imagined to be an expression of hatred the persecutor feels for the subject. Every absence of the sign of love is figured into the delusion of persecution as the presence of a sign of hate. Lacan explains that the transformation of indifference to hatred in the subject’s discourse is key to paranoia: “The double reversal, *I do not love him, I hate him, he hates me*, undoubtedly gives us a clue to the mechanism of persecution” (Lacan 1993, 90). Neutrality quickly turns to enmity and then to the presumption that the enmity is mutually held. The subject goes on to imagine enemies are conspiring to do him or her harm.

The delusional aspect of paranoia centers on the imaginary form of the persecutor. In other words, the paranoid animates a spectral persecutor through discourse above and beyond any actual persecutor. As Lacan explains:

In effect, this *he* is multiplied, neutralized, emptied, or so it seems, of subjectivity. The persecutory phenomena takes on the character of indefinitely repeated signs, and the persecutor, to the extent that he is its support, is no longer anything more than the shadow of the persecutory object. (Ibid, 90)

Any actual persecutor, if one every existed, is replaced with an imaginary doppelganger. It may be based on an actual person or group, but the delusional character of paranoia means that it no longer matters what the actual person or group does. They become an object within the paranoid's discourse. The paranoid subject imagines the activity of the persecutor.

Concurrent with imaginary persecution, Freud also points out the strong tendency of paranoid subjects to project imaginary order onto the world. Paranoid narratives conceive elaborate systems where none exist. He suggests that this behavior is common to all human beings to some extent as we try to make sense of the world. However, as he notes, "The construction of systems is seen most strikingly in delusional disorders (in paranoia), where it dominates the symptomatic picture" (Freud 1950, 95).

Importantly, the importance of imaginary relations means that one could genuinely be disliked and yet still be paranoid as well. That someone hates me does not necessarily equate to the elaborate sinister machinations I might imagine they are scheming against me. It also means, as Bruce Fink points out, that paranoia is particularly difficult to diagnose. As he says, we cannot automatically conclude that a subject is paranoid "just because a patient complains that someone is trying to do him or her harm" (Fink 1997, 96).

With respect to this difficulty, I wish to point out that deeply paranoid characteristics emerge from Leo Strauss's theory of international politics. Paranoia is a condition in which the subject imagines that he or she is the object of hatred by others.

The paranoid subject distrusts those subjects and experiences delusions that the others want to persecute the subject. Accordingly, the subject projects signs of systems onto the world.

Again, Strauss's politics are predicated on the friend/enemy distinction, which, at its core, divides humankind into the philosopher and the vulgar. We can surmise that the vulgar *should* love the philosopher because, in regards to most important respects, the philosopher is better. The philosopher is intelligent and decent. The vulgar is less intelligent and indecent. The philosopher has knowledge. The vulgar merely has opinion. Despite these superior features, Strauss tells us that the vulgar "distrust the wise" (Strauss 2000, 42). This, in turn, leads the philosopher to distrust the vulgar. After all, the point of esoteric writing is to preserve the true thoughts of the philosopher for the sake of "trustworthy and intelligent readers only" (Strauss 1952, 25). It necessarily follows that some readers are untrustworthy and unintelligent. The philosopher indulges in secrecy because of distrust. And, despite the love the vulgar ought to have for the philosopher, Strauss (1968, 63) asserts that the vulgar maintain a "ferocious hatred" for the wise. Consequently, the philosopher must always act with some measure of secrecy because the danger of persecution, "however much its forms may vary, is coeval with philosophy" (Strauss 1952, 21).

We may grant the point that philosophers have been the objects of injustice.¹¹⁴ That specific philosophers may have suffered specific injustices is quite apart from the idea that "the vulgar," a subject truly emptied of subjectivity, share a uniform distrust, in

¹¹⁴ This is a generous concession in some cases given that the paragon of persecution, Socrates, can be said under some interpretations to have done everything possible to provoke his prosecution, conviction, and penalty.

addition to a uniformly “ferocious hatred,” of the wise, as Strauss suggests. The great preponderance of human beings with all of their manifold variety and differences are subsumed as singularly driven by the repulsion of heterodoxy. The vulgar is an imaginary persecutor. It exists nowhere outside of the delusion within Strauss’s discourse. To be sure, there are immoral, unjust, and even untrustworthy individuals who would persecute those of different opinions, but such persons can be precisely identified rather than abstractly feared as consisting of nearly all humankind. Moreover, the paranoid has a strong tendency to project systems onto the world. Strauss tells us there are signs everywhere in the writing of political philosophy. We must be vigilant in looking for such signs as when “the author used a given ambiguous expression deliberately, or that he constructed a certain sentence badly on purpose” (Strauss 1952, 26). Errors and contradictions are the sign of the most elaborate and ingenious system of writing, a system designed purely to elude the untrustworthy persecutor.

Summation – International Paranoia

Strauss’s political philosophy, largely informed by his theory of esotericism is perverse. When combined with elements such as the value imperative, the friend/enemy distinction, the crisis of the West, his prescriptions for international politics, which include esotericism, applying a universalism of thought through a tyranny of virtue, becomes decidedly paranoid. Since Strauss (1968, 3) tells us that true philosophers are “extremely rare,” the enemy, which is the vulgar, must be comprised of the overwhelming majority of humanity. It is this enemy, embodied in the idea of Jerusalem, who distrusts and ferociously hates the nation of Athens. The nation of vulgar men, are united in their desire to persecute the nation of philosophy.

All of this amounts to a paranoid theory of international politics. The enemy is regarded as an essentially contemptible foe worthy of fighting because that enemy is filled with an unjust hatred. Using secret signs that are hidden where other, lesser minds see error, the philosopher ought to attempt to instill a universalism of thought in order, which will provide vulgar society with purpose and abate the crisis of the West, the dire emergency that threatens philosophy. Because the vulgar occupies the role of enemy, an entity for whom the philosopher is basically at war, there is no common accord of law. A tyranny of virtue is permissible.

Concluding Remarks: If a Train Leaves Chicago...Does It Arrive in Washington, D.C.?

Strauss's theory of esotericism is perverse; Straussian politics are paranoid. Still, supporters of Strauss are right; he is not identical with, or responsible for, the neoconservatives. Yet, with regard to international politics, the sorts of policies and prescriptions some neoconservatives advocate seem quite similar to the sorts of positions Strauss takes. For instance, Strauss was thoroughly skeptical about the efficacy of international organizations such as the United Nations. He warns against taking such a federation "too seriously" noting that to defer to the authority of such organizations is to assume that "all present boundaries are just" (Strauss 1964, 6 and 7). That sentiment can be compared to the position taken by the neoconservative Irwin Stelzer, who, arguing against the Wilsonian idea that democracy could be spread through international organizations, says:

Neocons disagree. They would make democracy possible by deposing dictatorial regimes that threaten American security and world order – using military force if all else fails; they would follow regime change with nation-building; and they would rely on varying 'coalitions of the willing', rather than on the United Nations. (Stelzer 2004, 9)

Margaret Thatcher (2004, 92) apparently concurred when she wrote, “The international bodies, in which our hopes were reposed anew after 1989 and 1991, have given us neither prosperity nor security.” Another neoconservative, John Bolton, who actually served as United States Ambassador to the United Nations during the Bush Administration, went so far as to suggest that, “ten floors of the Secretariat building could be lopped off without being missed” (Hoge 2006).

Secrecy is nothing new to government. But, as Strauss, explaining the medieval philosopher Moses Maimonides, tells us, a secret is impossible to divulge: “For the explanation of secrets is, as he asserts, not only forbidden by law, but also impossible by nature – the very nature of the secrets prevents their being divulged” (Strauss 1952, 57).¹¹⁵ Philosophers, again according to Strauss, will employ secrecy in order to avoid persecution. And what does he tell us about the history of this relationship between secrecy and persecution? He says:

But a glance at the biographies of Anaxagoras, Protagoras, Socrates, Plato, Xenophon, Aristotle, Avicenna, Averroes, Maimonides, Grotius, Descartes, Hobbes, Spinoza, Locke, Bayle, Wolff, Montesquieu, Voltaire, Rousseau, Lessing and Kant, and in some cases even a glance at the title pages of their books, is sufficient to show that they witnessed or suffered, during at least part of their lifetimes, a kind of persecution which was more tangible than social ostracism. (Ibid, 33)

Now, as Daniel Kapust has pointed out to me, if all of these writers use esotericism, as Strauss suggests they did, and they were all persecuted, then we are led to the conclusion that “they were not very good at being esoteric.” Strauss inasmuch as he can be called a Straussian belongs to what Xenos (2008, 9) reported as “a wonderful and persecuted academic movement.” Strauss’s own biography, his flight from Nazi

¹¹⁵ This is one reason why I do not believe Strauss exoterically reveals the secrets of esotericism.

Germany, suggests he experienced persecution. Although I do not read Strauss esoterically, he certainly wrote about esotericism in such a way as to compromise the secrecy of its existence.¹¹⁶ In other words, as Catherine and Michael Zuckert (2006, 128) note, Strauss was not particularly esoteric about esotericism.

Just as the relationship between Strauss and the neoconservatives is complex, so too is the relationship between neoconservatism and the Bush Administration. Peter Berkowitz, writing in *The Wall Street Journal*, argues:

For starters, it's worth noting that the president, vice president, secretary of defense, secretary of state and the national security adviser all lacked neoconservative roots. And insofar as neoconservative thinkers influenced Iraq policy, the problem was not with neoconservative principles, but the failure to fully appreciate the implications of those principles. (Berkowitz 2008)

In other words, the idea to invade Iraq, which is consistent with neoconservatism, was fine, but the idea was poorly executed. However, Max Boot (2004, 21), another neoconservative, states, "The ambitious National Security Strategy that the administration issued in September 2002 – with its call for U.S. primacy, the promotion of democracy, and vigorous action, preemptive if necessary, to stop terrorism and weapons proliferation – was a quintessentially neoconservative document." For the purposes of this argument, I consider "vigorous action" to include secret prisons and torture, and I consider "preemptive action" to include the waging of a fraudulent war. Moreover, while William Kristol agrees with Berkowitz that the war in Iraq was badly executed, the notion of "regime change" is entirely consistent with neoconservative thinking (Kristol 2004, 76). In short, suggesting that the Bush Administration lacked a proper pedigree is reasonable, but the relationship between neoconservative thinking

¹¹⁶ Again this is the basis of Straussian perversion.

and implemented policies such as preemptive military action, unilateralism, and regime change, are clear enough.

Accordingly, we might complain that the neoconservative-influenced Bush Administration saw a tremendous increase in governmental secrecy, but this would be misleading. After all, the dirty tricks and lies pertaining to the war in Iraq and its fraudulent justifications, the secret prisons in distant lands, the use of torture in interrogations, and the espionage and electronic eavesdropping on American citizens have all been revealed to us. Of course, I do not suppose that the Bush Administration and its neoconservative thinkers particularly wanted any of those activities to come to light.¹¹⁷ Hardly flattering, they present the image of a brutish, immoral, and despotic regime. Still, whether through leaks of conscientious insiders or the diligence of some journalists, all of those activities did come to light, which suggests that the neoconservatives, like Straussian thought, displayed a proclivity toward mismanaging secrets. Therefore, we might further conclude that another commonality between Straussian thought and neoconservatism is the perverse use of secrecy. Neither Strauss, nor the neoconservatives are particularly adept at employing the most effective of all tactics of concealments, keeping the secret itself a secret. Everyone knows what Strauss has to say about secrecy because his writing is unconcealed in its disposition. Likewise, the neoconservative-influenced Bush Administration appeared unable to hide the existence of its secrets: Everyone knows that intelligence relating to Iraq's weapons capabilities and links to terrorism were doctored in order to support a war of regime change; everyone knows about the secret prisons; everyone knows about the torture

¹¹⁷ Even if they deliberately leaked such activities, it would suggest a curious mismanagement of public image.

(PBS 2006; Priest 2005; Suskind 2006, 76). Just as with Strauss's esotericism, we may not know the actual contents of the secrets, but we know that they exist. In fact, the only genuine difference may be in favor of the Bush Administration, which actually maintained real secrets, as opposed to Strauss who injected illusory secrets into the writings of the past.

Abram Shulsky also writes on the merits of Strauss's thought in the intelligence world that shapes American foreign policy. He, and co-author Gary Schmitt, an Executive Director at the Project for the New American Century, note that Strauss's "ability to concentrate on detail, his consequent success in looking below the surface and reading between the lines" are important to understanding and analyzing political life, in which "deception is the norm" (Schmitt and Shulsky, 1999, 407 and 410). Incidentally, Abram Shulsky is identified as the leader of a "special team" set up in the Pentagon by Paul Wolfowitz to conduct intelligence analyses of Iraq's ties to terrorism and weapons capabilities independent from those at the Central Intelligence Agency (Mann 2005, 75). Additionally, Shulsky was responsible for directing "the writing of Iraq, WMD, and terrorism memos" (Packer 2005, 108).

Kenneth Weinstein, another neoconservative, actually argues that Strauss would have supported the cause of the Iraq War. Strauss, he tells us, would have demanded the United States take a stand against the tyranny of Saddam Hussein (Weinstein 2004, 206). It is a case of the value imperative shaping policy. Weinstein also insists that Strauss would have supported the idea of regime change (Ibid, 206). Again, the influence of the universalism of thought is evident. Whereas genuine imperialism attempts to extend the universalism of the city, which Strauss opposed, regime change

attempts to impose a uniform idea of politics across borders. Finally, Weinstein (Ibid, 206) tells us that Strauss would have supported the war because “liberal democracies need to act, as it were against character and be constantly vigilant.” In other words, liberalism needs to be made to act contrary to its own “character” and become proactive in its own defense. Virtue, in the neoconservative vision, takes precedence over one’s own character, just as in the tyranny of virtue constructed by Strauss. So Straussianism is not neoconservatism. They just appear awfully similar in their conclusions.

No government is ever the perfect expression of an ideology. So, for example, no liberal democracy represents the truest vision of liberalism or democracy. The tyranny of virtue, like Plato’s *kallipolis*, is largely a city in speech. To be more precise, Strauss’s polity is a city *within* speech, hidden between the lines as it were. Still, just as Plato’s ideal city influenced politics to varying degrees in the generations that followed, Strauss’s thought has exerted its own practical sway. The concrete expression of this tyranny of virtue can be found in the footprint it has left, its traces, in contemporary American government. As Jacob Heilbrunn (2008, 93) claims, “But whether he intended it or not, Strauss had a huge impact on the neoconservative movement.” Consider, for example, George W. Bush’s address to the United States Military Academy at West Point in 2002. Bush, in assailing dictatorship and terrorism, states:

Some worry that it is somehow undiplomatic or impolite to speak the language of right and wrong. I disagree. Different circumstances require different methods, but not different moralities. Moral truth is the same in every culture, in every time, and in every place. (Bush 2002)

The similarities between Bush’s sentiments and those Strauss asserts in his writings are remarkably strong. Now, Heilbrunn (2008, 262) acerbically notes, “The only Strauss whom Bush and Cheney had probably ever heard of was the jeans maker Levi Strauss.”

The outward impression of George W. Bush as an incurious and provincial leader would seem to support this. However, simplistic predilections do not preclude the influence of Leo Strauss on the policies of Bush's presidency. Neoconservatives, the same individuals abundantly present in the Bush Administration, learned from Leo Strauss and his students. Furthermore, as Heilbrunn (Ibid, 262) states, "most of the themes pounded home by the neoconservatives would be adopted by [Bush and Cheney]." In the end, it is not clear what the ideal type of a tyranny of virtue would look like anymore than it is clear what Plato's ideal city might look like if it were perfectly imported into practice. Nevertheless, we can observe the traces of Strauss's thought and the deleterious conclusion of a tyranny of virtue to which it leads.

Given that much of the debate over the influence of Straussian thought on politics has focused on its relationship with neoconservatism, this essay has attempted to articulate a Straussian theory of international politics. The aim is to facilitate the independent evaluation of Strauss's thought as well as to provide the grounds for a comparison with neoconservative tenets. While I only explore the latter objective in a preliminary fashion, I have offered a more thoroughgoing analysis of Strauss's engagement with international relations. Because of his essential philosophic premises, Strauss reformulates the meaning of internationality. Politics are arranged along a friend/enemy distinction, and the most essential, irreducible such distinction is between the philosopher and the vulgar. These are the two nations which, for Strauss, naturally emerge from humankind. Moreover, the historic circumstances of that relationship has devolved into a crisis that can only be abated through deep literary secrecy in the form of esotericism, and applying a universalism of thought through the tyranny of virtue.

Strauss's political philosophy originates with esotericism, and his politics disembarks into a politics predicated on the imagination of a distrustful, hate-filled vulgar nation. Strauss leads us toward a deeply paranoid theory of international politics.

The debate over whether Strauss influenced the Bush regime is interesting and important but can divert us from another important question: do we want the sort of government and foreign policy that Straussian thought leads us toward? In response, we might conclude that the Straussians are right – Leo Strauss did not cause the Iraq War. Nevertheless, it becomes readily apparent that the choice between government comprised of neoconservative policies or policies influenced by Straussian thinking is a truly a matter of picking one's poisons. Furthermore, the Straussians are right that Leo Strauss was not a neoconservative and that no student of Strauss, or student of Strauss's students, is the perfect embodiment of his thought. Yet, the neoconservatives tend to share a number of important, though certainly not all, of his conclusions.

By his own standard, and despite his explicit distaste for tyranny, the interaction of Strauss's philosophers with the vulgar he perceives in the world constitutes a tyranny. It is not conducted by mutual accord. Indeed, the vulgar have no say in how it is the philosopher replaces the element of opinion with knowledge. Strauss assures us that the philosopher must respect the medium of society, but this is disingenuous. The opinion of society is precisely what is being disrespected. The vulgar have no say in the validity of their own opinions. Rather, what is being respected is order. The foolishness and error of the vulgar is only sustained inasmuch as it is required to keep vulgarity from descending into anarchy. The actual opinions are anything but respected. They are consistently mocked, derided, and labeled as inferior throughout Strauss's writings. The

manner in which the philosopher replaces the opinion of society, considerate as it may be of order, is not open for discussion. It is tyrannical.

Strauss alerts us to the need to be vigilant against the rise of tyranny. Yet he seems wholly unaware of the propensity within each of us to inhabit the role of the tyrant. His work stands as a caution against allowing a tyrant to take the throne. It inadvertently serves as a reminder that the tyrant can just as easily seize the locus of power within the soul as well as without.

CHAPTER 7
CONCLUDING REMARKS: THE HIDDEN HEART OF PHILOSOPHY

A wall never contributes anything to a town's health, and in any case is apt to encourage a certain softness in the souls of the inhabitants. It invites them to take refuge behind it instead of tackling the enemy and ensuring their own safety by mounting guard night and day; it tempts them to suppose that foolproof way of protecting themselves is to barricade themselves in behind their walls and gates, and then drop off to sleep, as if they were brought into this world for a life of luxury. It never occurs to them that comfort is really to be won by the seat of the brow, whereas the only result of such disgusting luxury and idleness is a fresh round of troubles, in my view (Plato 1975, 260).

-From Plato's *The Laws*.

Straussian esotericism begins by generating two bodies, the body of the philosopher and the cadaver of Socrates. Firstly, through its rules, it delineates who and what can be a philosopher, and, just as importantly, who cannot. Secondly, it establishes the persecution and execution of Socrates as the paramount event in his life and the history of philosophy. It exhumes the body of Socrates to parade it in a ghoulish parable that warns against the indiscretion of speaking freely. Esotericism ends by secluding truth behind the walls of exoteric print. The bodies it creates are delivered into a ghetto of writing. Esoteric writing, as Strauss conceives it, is an attempt to foreclose politics between philosophy and society. This is the cost for insulating the philosopher from the hostility and persecution of the vulgar.

Persecutors, however, are not necessarily bound to respect the intricate hermeneutics or high moral standards Strauss imagines are necessary for establishing the true nature of a philosopher's heterodoxy. The trials of Socrates teach us that persecution can occur within a legal setting or beyond. Within the legal setting, an episode of persecution can be restrained by law, or subvert the law for its own end. It is an act of tyranny that results in injustice. In the hands of the vulgar, it becomes the

political tool of vulgarity and, accordingly need not have any respect for the high-minded laws, morals, or hermeneutic concerns of the philosopher.

Plato was not primarily concerned about persecution. It was not his greatest fear. His writings attack powerful elites, cherished institutions, and the prevailing orthodoxy of his day. He gains little immunity for these attacks by writing dialogues. Strauss tells us it is a mistake to presume the main character in a dialogue speaks for the author. Yet most people conclude, rightly or wrongly, that Socrates speaks for Plato, and it is Socrates who marshals the attacks against Athens. Instead, Plato was deeply concerned about the possibility that philosophy would be misunderstood as just another brand of sophism. Saddled by the ambiguities in language, he was prevented from putting the highest truths into words, secretly or otherwise. Yet, he needed to speak and present the case for philosophy. This is because he feared, above all, that if philosophy were to become silent, the wrong men, the poets and sophists, orators and demagogues would gain or continue to exert power. Above all, Plato dreaded abomination against nature in which those unfit to steer the course of politics would wield influence. His solution to the problems posed by political life was to establish an agora of writing.

Strauss confronts the fear of persecution by claiming philosophers will write secretly. Yet he tells us this openly. He creates rules for secret writing, and subsequently bothers those rules by revealing their existence. For Jacques Lacan, this is the essence of perversion. Straussian thought attempts to prop up the limits to its own *jouissance* (enjoyment) in the form of a persecutor. At the same time, the rules of esotericism are designed to elude the persecutor's grasp. The rules are put in place to

set limits and then bothered in order to exceed those limits. Because truth is hidden “exclusively between the lines,” because, that is, the rules of esotericism preclude the possibility of any other mode for disseminating the highest truths, the perversion of Straussian esoteric writing is pathological. Plato, too, exhibits perversity in his writings. Socratic reason attempts to restrain the erotic combustibility of Thrasymachus. It is Plato’s effort to prop up the law in the form of Socrates, the embodiment of reason, against the manifestation of his own *eros*, Thrasymachus. In the end, the rules themselves, represented by the kallipolis, are brought down and defeated. Plato’s perversity tests the limits of ethical speech. His fear of abomination leads Plato to speak truth to power, albeit in a form that is ornamented with dialogue and irony. Plato’s discourse produces a perverted parrhesiastes.

Strauss’s discourse lapses into a pathological perversion because of its fixation on exclusive secrecy. The politics that might emerge from his political philosophy are deeply paranoid. A question remains as to whether or not we have seen the influence of unadulterated Straussian thought exercised on contemporary politics. Supporters of Strauss are right to be suspicious of claims that networks of philosopher-conspirators roam the halls of power. The evidence to support such concerns is as tenuous as the claims that secret conspiracies roam the pages of philosophy. Nevertheless, Strauss’s thought seems to have exerted some considerable influence on American foreign policy. We have probably not seen a Straussian government in its pure form, but that does not mean we have not seen reflections of its ugliness in trends and policies that continue to shape politics. Informed by the friend/enemy dichotomy at the root of Carl Schmitt’s concept of the political, and his own theory of esotericism, Strauss’s politics

reformulate the meaning of internationality. The most fundamental cultural divide is the division between philosophy and vulgarity. A Straussian theory of international politics considers the struggle between philosopher and vulgar as primordial. It imagines the philosopher as distrusted and fiercely hated by its enemies; the perversion within Strauss's political philosophy engenders a paranoid theory of international politics.

Somewhere during the course of this adventure I discovered that Leo Strauss was not a sinister malefactor scheming to dominate the world from his secret lair deep beneath the University of Chicago. Strauss was not my enemy. He was, in fact, a man who had suffered in life, written sometimes riveting, sometimes weird, and often interesting commentaries on political philosophy, and was simply someone with whom I had some serious disagreements. We ought to recognize that if Strauss generates a philosophic discourse that is pathologically perverse and a set of politics that are decidedly paranoid, his experiences sometimes account for those outcomes. Although his early writings demonstrate a profound elitism and occasionally entertain fascism, Strauss endured personal hardships that almost certainly shaped his political philosophy. He was a German Jew during the rise of Nazism. He was a refugee academic, both in the sense that he was displaced from his homeland, and, during the rise of behaviorism, his brand of political philosophy was not received with great enthusiasm. His letters to Karl Lowith reveal a man whose physical health suffered. Strauss might earn our empathy, if not our agreement.

There are important lessons we can learn from Leo Strauss. His return to the study of ancient thinkers demonstrates the expansiveness of what can be said in relation to politics. Strauss's perspective compels us to think more seriously about

whether or not we truly understand the progenitors of political philosophy. He beckons us to move beyond simply concluding that Aristophanes and Socrates were adversaries and consider what it is we might learn from a more complicated relationship that may have existed between comic-poetry and philosophy. His displacement of Socrates as the official mouthpiece of Plato, whether correct or not, affords more serious attention to the many interlocutors that appear in dialogues such as *The Republic*, *The Laws*, and others. Thrasymachus, Callicles, Protagoras; they are all Plato's mouthpiece to some degree.

Perhaps the most important lesson Strauss imparts is the value imperative, the requirement that we do more than simply observe and record our surroundings, but recognize our responsibility to normatively assess the condition of the world. Behaviorist social science sought to uncover value-free laws about politics similar to the manner in which sciences such as biology or chemistry attempted to objectively describe the natural world. Behaviorism is not the only symptom plaguing modernity. Prone to relativist epistemologies, historicism denied even the possibility of adjudicating between the validity of perspectives. The ability to determine good from bad, according to this view is merely an expression of power and not a genuine assessment on the objective condition of morality. Strauss was rightfully dissatisfied with the reluctance on the part of modern political science to normatively evaluate our world.

There are good reasons to read Leo Strauss. The problem remains, however, that Strauss's theory of esotericism undermines even the most important lesson we might learn from him. He implores us to surpass the modern tendency dispassionately to observe our world. Yet his theory of esotericism leaves truth sequestered with a

privileged few who are persistently threatened with persecution by the vulgar many. The aim of political philosophy is normatively to assess the world in which we live, and improve it, but the apolitical nature of esotericism renders this impossible; even from Strauss's perspective, truth can never see the light of day without the probability of persecution. From the standpoint of esotericism, no one is in a position to affect a positive change in the world: the vulgar are denied the truth, and the philosophers are petrified of politics.

Strauss demands that we do more than passively observe our world, but then, simultaneously, he obstructs any possibility for normatively engaging political life. The philosophers already have knowledge, which they conceal esoterically. They are determined to prevent "the cheap sale of the formulations of the truth" (Strauss 1939, 535). They go so far as to make "the discovered truth almost inaccessible as it was before it had been discovered" (Ibid, 535). In other words, philosophers have the truth, which they isolate behind exoteric walls. There is no reason for the philosopher to question the validity of the truth, because for Strauss (1968, 63), truth is predicated on "unchangeable standards found in the nature of man and the nature of things." The philosopher already possesses this knowledge. There is no need to question it, only hide it from the untrustworthy.

Then there are the young, curious minds, the nascent philosophers for whom esotericism acts as a lure. Their inquisitiveness has found them snared on a fishing hook. As Strauss (1959, 125) says, esotericism allows the philosopher to go out into the market "to fish there for potential philosophers." Any questioning the nascent philosophers do is not for the ends of critical evaluation, but to arrive at a previously

established conclusion. Nascent philosophers are indoctrinated, or, as Strauss (1959, 125) observes, the philosopher will “convert young men to the philosophic life.” Indeed, conversion is not always indoctrination, but when conversion assumes the form of a secret lure promising hidden truth, it bears many of the signs of a religious ritual. Finally, the vulgar many do not have the truth and are guided instead by “customs or laws” (Strauss 1989, 68).

Who is left to question? Who remains to evaluate the world normatively in any meaningful way? Indeed, in the Straussian narrative there is no room for such questioning. This is the consequence of the pathological perversion of his discourse in which truth is hidden “exclusively between the lines” (Strauss 1952, 25). With his theory of esotericism, Strauss persecutes philosophy and restricts the value imperative he exhorts as necessary. The vulgar question nothing, save perhaps the most enjoyable means with which to persecute their heterodox foes. The nascent philosopher is caught on the fishing hook of indoctrination; his or her questioning only leads to the quiet frustration of the fully-trained philosopher. Philosophers do not publicly evaluate politics for fear of persecution, and they do not evaluate the truth out of reverence for its unchangeable perfection. There can be nothing more useless than this vision of philosophy. Strauss presents us with a powerful, meaningful lesson. We ought to be dissatisfied with the politics of tyranny and our interpretations of important political concepts. But he undermines the possibility that any meaningful assessment can occur. He shuts down philosophy because of its potential to cause offense.

What, then, do we do with esotericism if it serves as an obstacle to seriously consider other, more useful ideas Strauss presents? It was, after all, not exactly a

marginal aspect of his work. Strauss seemed to consider it fundamentally important. We cannot simply ignore his thesis of esotericism, nor should we casually dismiss Strauss's work as wholly polluted. Strauss is still worth engaging, still worth considering, and in this respect Strauss is similar to other luminaries of political thought who made both great contributions and great mistakes.

If I often found myself castigating Strauss in terms embarrassingly excessive, the reason is his legion of worshippers. Strauss was guilty of turning men into gods. Plato and others could make no mistakes for him. Even Machiavelli seems to be described as a delinquent god, a Florentine Loki. Strauss's followers do much the same to Strauss. They refuse to allow him his humanity, with all its human idiosyncrasies, excesses, and even failings. My castigations are often in reaction to Strauss's unwarranted apotheosis at the hands of his fawning admirers. Their unstated claim to self-worth is inextricably linked to being in on the great esoteric wink of the philosopher gods.

Certainty is the scarcest commodity in philosophy. By extension, there is a surplus of uncertainty. Problems of knowledge, and their influence on politics, are sufficient to the degree that we hardly need the production of artificial uncertainty. Our ignorance is astounding enough. No one needs to add to it by suggesting philosophers are trying to fool us. Strauss tells us that the truth had to be hidden. Truth seems sufficiently elusive; no obstacles need to be placed in front of it. Moreover, there ought to be considerable misgivings concerning the idea that part of the activity of philosophers is to preserve truth for themselves. Socrates tells us that the aim of every art is the benefit of those for whom the art is practiced, not the profit of the practitioner (Plato 1945, 24). Medicine is

practiced for the sick, not the doctor. Ruling is practiced for the ruled, not the advantage of the ruler.

For the benefit of whom is philosophy practiced? Philosophy is the love of wisdom. Straussian thought seems to surmise a fiercely jealous lover who keeps wisdom all to itself. How we confront esoteric writing reflects our views on the task of philosophy. I want to suggest our love of wisdom ought to reflect more than our perverse fascination with our own sense of importance. Accordingly, I have suggested there are consequences for pursuing that troubling self-absorption. Firstly, the conjunction of secrecy, philosophy, and an academic or political elite, is conducive to the worst kinds of conspiratorial ignorance. Straussians might be right that there is no cult or insidious conspiracy to subvert government, but they can hardly be indignant or surprised by such assertions. Straussian thought foments that kind of conjecture. Secondly, Straussian esotericism propagates a twisted vision of philosophy, one in which secrets and persecution matter more than the love of wisdom.

I share Strauss's love of the ancients, of Socrates and Plato and those first philosophers. It is unfortunate, however, that Strauss's affinity for ancient thinkers leads him to reject the lessons they offer. Strauss did not believe Socrates in earnest when he famously insisted that his wisdom lay in his claim "that whatever I do not know, I do not even suppose I know" (Plato 1998a, 70). Strauss (1959, 38) considered this position to be facetious, saying, "Knowledge of ignorance is not ignorance." But Socrates did not consider himself ignorant in this regard, and he is admitting as much. This is not his claim to ignorance; it is his claim to wisdom. It is the proof that the Oracle of Delphi was correct in telling Chaerephon that there was none wiser than Socrates. Aside from that

one claim, however, Socrates professes to be utterly ignorant. He demonstrates this repeatedly, especially in the dialogues Plato is believed to have written earlier. Even if Socrates is disingenuous in his claim, his project is most distinctively characterized by its refusal to accept unfounded assertions as knowledge. Socrates, Plato's Socrates in particular, was deeply skeptical. He rejects Euthyphro's claims to have knowledge of piety, Cephalus' traditional definition of justice, the various definitions of courage proposed in *Laches*, and many other unwarrantedly confident claims to knowledge.

If Leo Strauss doubted that Plato and Socrates were sincere in their skepticism, then little seems to remain of philosophy at all. Despite his professed love for the ancients, Strauss makes the sorts of gestures that would doubtlessly have compelled Socrates to stop and question the basis of that certainty. How could Strauss so quickly and confidently arrive at the bifurcation of humanity into a "rigid division" between enlightened philosophic elite, and foolish vulgar majority? He offers no argument on behalf of this claim. Furthermore, how does Strauss come to the conclusion that Xenophon and others were "masters of the art of writing" or that Plato made no mistakes? These are significant assumptions that question Strauss's commitment to the depth of Socratic skepticism. Of course, by filtering it through his theory of esotericism, Strauss is able to play with the tenets of the Socratic project, and have them mean whatever he wants.

For Strauss, the philosopher hides the highest truths esoterically in order to avoid the untrustworthy. Plato is careful to show us, however, that Socrates never chooses his interlocutors. At the beginning of the dialogue *Protagoras*, Socrates holds the position that virtue cannot be taught. Protagoras, the eminent sophist, whose wealth depends on

the premise that virtue can be taught, disagrees. By the end of the dialogue, Socrates and Protagoras exchange positions. Socrates now believes virtue can be taught, while Protagoras is dissuaded of his earlier view. At the end of the dialogue, Socrates has come to interrogate the position he originally held. He effectively interrogates himself and discovers that what he believed originally was unfounded. Whether in the market place, or his own soul, Socrates never chose his interlocutors, and gave no indication that he selected them on the basis that they were fit to confront his truths.

For the benefit of whom is philosophy practiced? Perhaps not everyone is open to the experience of philosophy, but Socrates teaches us that it can potentially benefit everyone, and it might especially benefit those with unwarranted confidence in their own assertions. Socrates speaks to those Strauss would call untrustworthy: the violent Thrasymachus, the immoral Callicles, and the very same man who was the principal persecutor in the trial of Socrates, Anytus. Socrates offers to be Euthyphro's student in their conversation. He earnestly fulfills the role of student in his conversation with Protagoras. He learns from Protagoras and, concomitantly, Socrates becomes his own interlocutor as he examines and undermines the position he confidently asserted at the beginning of the dialogue. Socrates teaches us for the benefit of whom philosophy is practiced. It is practiced for the vulgar man like Euthyphro, the sophisticated man like Protagoras, and for the perfectly trained philosopher, Socrates.

Fleeing from persecution is an understandable reaction. It is ultimately a capitulation to fear. It may be shrewd to flee from persecution, it may be warranted and reasonable, and we ought not condemn the persecuted for fleeing. Still, it cannot be concluded that acting out of fear is a philosophic virtue. Philosophers have suffered and

we cannot fault Strauss, whose life bore genuine signs of persecution, for considering his encounters with fear in the return to ancient thought. But acknowledging the power of fear does not compel us to accept the transformation of fear into philosophic virtue. Esotericism is not the hidden heart of philosophy. Strauss's esotericism is a fundamental betrayal of what Socratic philosophy stood for, and what Socrates died for. Strauss prioritizes preserving one's life over curing the lie in the soul. When we value our lives above the stand against the injustices and tyrannies so often expressed through persecution, we might better preserve our lives, but I would suggest the exclusive obedience to that priority is what calls into question our commitment to the tradition of philosophy. When we hide in the ghetto of writing, a ghetto that no one forced us into, we betray Socrates and Plato, and many who followed them. We betray those who teach us to do more with political philosophy than subject it to the unyielding fear of persecution.

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