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Sphinx with a Secret: Leo Strauss's 'Persecution and the Art of Writing'

Thomas Meyer

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. That literature is addressed, not to all readers, but to trustworthy and intelligent readers only. ...

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. ...

[If] an able writer who has a clear mind and a perfect knowledge of the orthodox view and all its ramifications, contradicts surreptitiously and as it were in passing one of its necessary presuppositions or consequences which he explicitly recognizes and maintains everywhere else, we can reasonably suspect that he was opposed to the orthodox system as such....

Being a philosopher, that is, hating 'the lie in the soul' more than anything else, he would not deceive himself about the fact that such opinions are merely 'likely tales,' or 'noble lies,' or 'probable opinions,' and would leave it to his philosophic readers to disentangle the truth from its poetic or dialectic presentation. ...

An exoteric book contains then two teachings: a popular teaching of an edifying character, which is in the foreground; and a philosophic teaching concerning the most important subject, which is indicated only between the lines.¹

On 6 December 1939, Union College in Schenectady invited Leo Strauss, a visiting lecturer from Middlebury College, to present a paper. This provided the occasion for his lecture with the title 'Persecution and the Art of Writing'.²

In November 1941, Strauss published an entirely revised version of the lecture in the journal *Social Research* which in 1952 – slightly modified – became part of the monograph *Persecution and the Art of Writing*.³ Only a few days before Strauss first gave his lecture in Schenectady, he had learned that the synagogue in his German home town had been destroyed during the ‘Kristallnacht’ pogrom on 9 November 1938. Although, after 1945, Strauss considered over and over again supplementing his article with new insights gained through his study of Islamic-Jewish medieval philosophy, he never accomplished the task. However, his central argument set a key problem for subsequent interpreters of past political philosophy – how to understand texts composed to evade or negotiate conditions of censorship or persecution.

The central argument in ‘Persecution and the Art of Writing’ can be summarized as follows. In one way or another, any form of government persecutes independent, i.e. philosophical, thinking, since politics takes authority and common sense as the markers of truth, directing philosophers towards popular, edifying arguments. But the writing of such exoteric books for the purpose of educating young men, i.e. for potential and not for fellow philosophers, opens up a space for free thought without destabilizing a wider audience. The education of ‘young men ... is the only answer to the always pressing question, to the political question par excellence, of how to reconcile order which is not oppression with freedom which is not license’ (37). Being as old as philosophical thought itself, this knowledge leads to a specific ‘art of writing’ that contains both an exoteric, public message for the masses and an esoteric message ‘between the lines’ for the few, the philosophers. Persecution and censorship have never been and will never be able to punish this specific ‘art of writing’ because the esoteric message is only accessible to the uncorrupted philosopher (26, 35).

Strauss argues that true philosophers, from Anaxagoras to Kant, often lived in relatively liberal societies, while still facing sterner forms of censorship than the ostracism of public opinion (33). However, Strauss notices a significant shift in the ‘art of writing’. While up to the middle of the seventeenth century, the distinction between ‘the wise’ and ‘the vulgar’ was commonly regarded as ‘a basic fact of human nature’ which could never be subjected to popular education, Enlightenment philosophers believed they could encode messages in between the lines that could evade overt censorship while being accessible enough to reach the masses (33–34). Philosophical thought, so Strauss argued, started to undergo a process of progressive assimilation to mainstream thought and to submit to the developments of political change.

Another, parallel process intensified the formation of the fundamental gap between the 'Ancients' and the 'Moderns'. The emergence of a new rationalism, aligned with the knowledge of the natural sciences, generated new hermeneutic approaches in philosophy. Thus, precision and coherence became the new measure of philosophy (33–34), while the traditional exoteric-esoteric divide became increasingly neglected as an optional hermeneutic procedure for interpreters. Mostly due to the rise of liberal societies, the original meaning of the 'art of writing' faded more and more into oblivion and finally led to the disentanglement of the traditional correlation between exotericism and esotericism. Strauss named this process 'historicism', exceeding hereby the common understanding of the term.

Constitutive for Strauss's concept of historicism is the shift from pre-modern censorship to modern self-censorship. He regards classical censorship as the reaction to obvious transgressions of ruling norms. Challenged by authors who developed techniques of 'hiding' the actual message 'between the lines', the classical censor took philosophers and the content of their texts seriously. In contrast, the archetypal 'historicist' takes the view that esotericism is a form of speculation that derives from an irrational weakness of the mind. The historicist takes over the role of the classic censor by choice and assumes that precision and coherence provide the only tools for falsifying or verifying any proposition. Any saying has to be stated in such a way that it can be proven. These assumptions cause a certain scholarly behaviour that seeks to explore the philosophical arguments as actual facts, to remove ambivalences in statements, to harmonize contradictions and to explain certain philosophies in history through the given political and social circumstances under which they were developed. Since these hermeneutic categories follow primarily historical and only secondarily analytical principles, philosophy itself becomes a matter of history.

Strauss interprets this procedure as an act of self-censorship. Thus, the importance of every single analysis derives from the historical narrative which it is considered to be a part of. Hereby, the construction of 'continuities' or 'fissures' helps to generate a history of philosophy that may be regarded as having lasted from Plato to Heidegger.⁴ The 'importance' of one particular philosopher will be judged according to the impact he allegedly had on the history of philosophy. Categories such as 'progress or decline' (29) define the capability of specific philosophies in the present, and modern philosophers create narratives intended to verify their own positions by overcoming the philosophies of the past as 'failures'. It is obvious that radical historicism applies structures of thought we are acquainted with through Hegel. Unknowingly, those modernists keep

up with Hegel's system and its immanent philosophy of history that eventually intends to justify the very possibility of the absolute.

The kind of self-censorship advanced by those thinkers follows a dangerous path. Here Strauss points to two things: they marginalize the actual hazards pre-modern philosophers had to struggle with, and thereby, against their own intention, harshly separate thought from reality. Philosophical thought becomes a matter of history and history is understood philosophically. This self-contained system of history has lost any connection to reality. Furthermore, the radical philosopher-historicists overestimate themselves and do not assume responsibility for the catastrophes they have generated. In their reckless attitude, the historicists suppose that they are able to understand the philosophers of the past better than they have understood themselves. The result of these false assumptions is that historicism with its immanent tendency towards radicalization leads to nihilism. It is here that Strauss encounters Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger – both classified by Strauss as radical historicists.⁵

The extent to which Strauss considered his own analysis to be valid becomes more visible when we consider that he republished his text on 'Persecution and the Art of Writing' without notable modification in 1952 at the initial height of the Cold War. This highlights the fact that already, in 1941, when he published the text for the first time, he argued likewise against National Socialism and communism, which he regarded as different but consequent outcomes of the same nihilism. Obviously, the political circumstances in 1952 gave him no reason to revise the argument.

Strauss develops his major argument by stating a process that emerges in a modern sense of superiority. The process unfolds through the abandonment of classical censorship, leads to performing self-censorship and finally ends up in nihilism. Strauss's major argument holds together the various lines of arguments that structure 'Persecution and the Art of Writing'. I will give one example to illustrate. The radicalization of censorship due to the emergence of self-censorship grounds the interrelation Strauss establishes between the anonymous historian of religion who lives under conditions of tyranny in Strauss's own times (24–25) and Friedrich Schleiermacher's interpretation of Plato (28). The historian of religion who has to adhere to a 'government-sponsored interpretation of the history of religion' uses the tools of esoteric writing and leads the reader – an 'intelligent young man' – through complicated ways of understanding (24–25). Slowly and by degrees, the latter will be able to comprehend that the central passage of the studied work makes a stand

against the totalitarian state in a much more radical sense than any direct attack from a liberal point of view would be able to do. The historian of religion had to be a philosopher in order to write an exoteric book with an esoteric message which as such could be understood only by a future philosopher – the 'intelligent young man' – while looking back on the historical episode. Strauss sees in Schleiermacher's interpretation of Plato the anti-thesis to the scene roughly described here. Schleiermacher paved the way for a new and integrative understanding of Plato's doctrine and prevented future philosophers from gaining access to Plato's esoteric teachings. Schleiermacher, therefore, marks the beginning of historicism.⁶

'Persecution and the Art of Writing' is – as any text of Strauss – an autobiographical text. To Strauss, authors who have practised the classical art of writing have always been writing about themselves in the most non-personal way. The philosophies of Plato and Socrates are even presented in the form of intellectual biographies which the authors stage as drama or comedy while ironically re-defining these genres. A philosopher who is not able to say 'I' or to speak out of his own experiences fails to transmit 'education' because his sayings lack orientation as well as persuasive power. Strauss does not refer here to the modern, overcharged and self-authorized concept of the 'I' but rather to the natural way to say 'I' which everybody does and nobody can avoid. But also the latter 'I' has to step back in favour of a more general idea which all philosophers in all times have been highly committed to: the idea of a good life. This form of self-censorship is a task for the philosopher who subordinates himself to a more general idea and thus exposes himself to the danger of free and independent thought. This alternative type of censorship is opposed to the concept of self-censorship promoted by radical historicism.

We are confronted here with a twofold contradiction. In the first place, we have to identify the contradiction between Strauss's fundamental diagnosis that his own times do not produce philosophers in the classic sense of the word, i.e. philosophers who master the art of exoteric-esoteric writing, and the very existence of our anonymous historian who breaks the rule Strauss himself had established. Furthermore, we have to take seriously the contradiction between the autobiographical features of true philosophy and the fact that a neo-romantic prototype of the biographical paradigm has become in modernity the key par excellence to decode past and contemporary philosophies.

Strauss developed a systematic interest in how contradictions were conceptualized and dealt with in classical and medieval philosophical texts. Maimonides' theory of contradictions in the *Guide for the Perplexed*, especially,

became the object of Strauss's investigations.⁷ He demonstrates very convincingly that the classical and medieval authors neither intended to overcome censorship nor discussed problems in order to find the one and only solution for a specific problem. In fact, they aimed to name and to isolate contradictions which as such would fully explain the complex nature of the problem itself. Strauss teaches that not coherence but truth is the criteria of philosophy and that truth may take various forms. To follow the truth does not mean to resolve contradictions but to comprehend them as part of the truth. In 'Persecution and the Art of Writing', Strauss justifies his doctrine of contradictions by alluding to that of Xenophon twice in different contexts (26, 30).⁸ At the end of his essay, Strauss claims that 'order which is not oppression' and 'freedom which is not license' (37) is brought into being on the very basis of open questions and intrinsic contradictions. When philosophers harmonize or dissolve contradictions, they conceal systematically the intrinsic meaning of 'order' and 'freedom'. However, the esoteric task of the true philosopher is to disclose/expose such concealments.

With these insights in mind, I return to the two major contradictions in Strauss's own argument in 'Persecution and the Art of Writing'. The philosopher who practises the esoteric art of writing acts beyond, and is superior to, the general business of philosophy that unfolds from censorship to self-censorship. This philosopher type aims to establish a 'truly liberal society' (36) and applies the technique of exoteric-esoteric writing against the prevalent tendency. The parable told by Strauss through the teacher-student relationship between the historian of religion and the 'intelligent young man', as well as Strauss's analysis of Schleiermacher's interpretation of Plato, indicate the possibility of undermining the fundamental conditions of modernity within modernity itself. To establish an essential bond between the philosopher's autobiography and his very thought means to abrogate censorship and self-censorship. And taking into account that political things are natural things and vice versa, this bond emerges as a genuine political bond. Strauss's authorities for these assumptions are none other than Plato and Aristotle (22, 32–36; 28, 33).

When Strauss republished 'Persecution and the Art of Writing' in the book *Persecution and the Art of Writing* alongside texts on Maimonides, Yehuda Halevi and Spinoza, the essay was put in a new context and asks for a new reading. This reading reveals that the book *Persecution and the Art of Writing* is an answer to Harry Austryn Wolfson's research in the field of Jewish philosophy. Wolfson (1887–1974), the first chairman of a Judaic Center in the US, argues for an evolving continuity in religious philosophy from Philo to Spinoza. Like Strauss, Wolfson developed a complex theory of exoteric-esoteric

writing. Wolfson had studied in a *yeshiva* in the small Lithuanian town of Slabodka and the traditional East-European Jewish learning had a lasting effect on his thought in general and on his theory of esoteric writing in particular. According to Wolfson, Jewish self-censorship began with the destruction of the second temple and is not a symptom of decline but rather the reaction to an entirely hostile environment that had forced the Jews to transfer their oral teachings into writing. Wolfson argues that transferring the Jewish teachings into scripture necessitated developing a repository of exoteric and esoteric techniques of writing.

At this point the philosophies of Strauss and Wolfson start to conflict with each other: Strauss disputes the possibility of being an orthodox Jew and a philosopher at the same time (32). He argues that Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed* is based on that insight and caused his preliminary decision to write the book exoterically as a Jewish book and esoterically as a philosophical book. Wolfson, on the other hand, held the view that there is no need to take a side about Maimonides' initial decision. He valued Maimonides' art of writing precisely because of the fact that traditional esotericism had allowed him to remain an orthodox Jew while philosophizing. The second point of conflict between Wolfson and Strauss arises out of two opposing notions of censorship. While Strauss thinks that a philosopher is an atheist, Wolfson argues that the philosopher could be Christian, Jewish or Muslim. *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, the book as well as the article within the book, was written to put the rule to the test that the true philosopher has to capture the chance of the good life, i.e. to live according to the natural order and not according to a particular law.

Strauss's introduction to the *Guide for the Perplexed*, edited together with Shlomo Pines, presented in the first part a plan of the *Guide* that was published there for the first time and republished as a separate article in a *festschrift* for Wolfson.⁹ This plan was intended to convince Wolfson that the *Guide* could be read and understood as a text written from an atheistical point of view. Wolfson's understanding of the *Guide* as a Jewish book, in both its exoteric and esoteric reading, corresponds to Strauss's concept of self-censorship. Strauss's philosophical reading of the book demonstrates how Maimonides succeeded in overcoming self-censorship and giving esotericism a philosophical meaning. Wolfson never accepted Strauss's challenge, and none of his many publications even notes Strauss's theses.

'Persecution and the Art of Writing' is a constructive enigma. Only very randomly is it a guide to the exoteric or exoteric-esoteric character of Strauss's

own writings. While *Thoughts on Machiavelli*¹⁰ and *Socrates and Aristophanes*¹¹ are definite examples of the exoteric-esoteric genre, Strauss's late writings on Xenophon and Plato create some doubt about his intentions. Strauss's essay and book *Persecution and the Art of Writing* keep alive the discourse about the options and dangers of conceptualizing exotericism and esotericism in general. Can we expect more from a sphinx with a secret?