

in the eyes of God is the act of anything but a deeply silly woman. And Ellie's silliness reflects back badly on Delia, who otherwise would stand a better chance of winning our sympathy for her own desertion. In the end, the novel suffers fatally from the fact that her desertion is really the only interesting thing about her. It is not enough.

With her husband, Sam, with Mr. Miller, and even with the young man in the supermarket, she is always ready to receive the impression of some more dominant personality, and act a wifely part. The fact that her family is not even sure what color her eyes are is meant to be an indication of their coldness and lack of interest in her, but their indifference is partly the product of her own indefiniteness. Like so many of Miss Tyler's characters, there is an elusive quality to Delia, a sense that she will forever be looking for the character she means to enact, rather than, like most of us, enacting it.

This is not necessarily a bad thing in itself, and it is to Delia's credit that she has a certain sense of irony and self-detachment. When she cashes her first paycheck in Bay Borough—the first paycheck of her life, really—"She carried her head high and set her feet down with precision. She might have been the heroine in some play or movie. And her intended audience, of course, was Sam." But not enough is made of this self-awareness, and her inner life is too random and unfocused. It is all right to have a merely instinctive heroine, but then the author has to show us what the heroine's own thoughts and words are incapable of showing.

We know, for instance, that Delia reads a book a day—many classics, some trashy romances. But she might be reading the newspaper or the Bible or the Marquis de Sade—or filing her nails—for all the impression that they make on her. She left home partly because one week's messages on her answering machine could as easily have been another's; but even in her supposed independence she slips back into old routines, finding herself a year later at the same beach reading the same novel as she was when she walked out on Sam.

This would be fine if the intention were satirical, but Anne Tyler is not a satirist. Her specialty is compassion and understanding, and in her greatest

novels these qualities are displayed on something like a heroic scale. But in *Ladder of Years* they are stretched too thin. Delia sits up in bed late one night listening to jazz on the radio.

Lots of lonesome clarinets and plinkety-plonk pianos, and after every piece the announcer stated the place it was recorded and the date. A New York bar on an August night in 1955. A hotel in Chicago, New Year's Eve, 1949. Delia wondered how humans could bear to live in a world where the passage of time held so much power.

They can bear it because they *have* to

bear it. It's the "human" condition. And, by the way, Delia's one too.

If you are going to try to evoke pathos, you should try it with something a little more specific than the universal lot of mankind. Otherwise you fall into glibness and sentimentality and, well, cuteness. It's like feeling sorry for someone because she has only ten fingers and ten toes. Anne Tyler has been seduced by her own generosity of spirit into taking on too banal a subject, unworthy of her powers. But her powers are still great, and they make even this book never less than readable. □

LOOKING BACK

Strauss and the Religion of Reason

HADLEY ARKES

HE WAS a small man, with a small voice; in fact, he had to be fitted with a small microphone so that his voice could be heard from the well of the large lecture room. His students seemed to be cast as gentle, solicitous giants, helping to fit him with the cord and microphone. He would be attached then to a tape recorder, which would take down everything said in the next hours. In fussing over him, his students would look like nothing so much as sons. Every gesture implied a reverence for the father they were attending, who was not of course adept at handling mechanical things, like microphones. The one device he would handle, however, was his cigarette holder. He would fix the cigarette in the holder, and occasionally he would pause in his exploration of a text as he took a long draw on the mouthpiece. The interruption seemed to mark a deeper pause, to prolong his meditation on the passage in the text, and so it worked, overall, to enhance the effect. It also introduced accents of silence, set off against that slight voice, from the small frame, moving slowly, in a talmudic style, line by line, to extract from the text every shade of meaning and intention.

That was how Leo Strauss appeared on the first day I saw him, at the University of Chicago. I was 22, a first-year graduate student, and he was a

legend to be fathomed. He had come to America as a refugee from Hitler's Germany. When the Nazis took power, Strauss was in Paris, on a grant, working on medieval Jewish and Islamic philosophy. He had come from an observant Jewish family, and his first book was on *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*. The themes contained in that book would move him along several paths. One led to Hobbes and the problem of natural rights; others to Zionism and Jewish philosophy. In 1938 he managed to gain an appointment to the New School for Social Research, where he remained until he was drawn to the University of Chicago in 1949.

What seems striking, in retrospect, is that the oddities or contrasts that were evident at once to me as an unconstructed youth could still mark the dominant lines of the reaction to Strauss more than thirty years later: How was it that this small, unprepossessing man should set off such large passions, and arouse such fierce hatred, in the academy? Of course the answer in brief—and in full—was that he set himself against the moral relativism of the age.

His devoted student Harry Jaffa has written that Strauss's distinct mission was to restore both reason and revelation against the tendency of modern science to deny them both. Against the insistence of social science that moral propositions cannot be knowable in the way that scientific propositions are, Strauss sought to restore the convic-

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tion that we can indeed have rational knowledge of right and wrong. And against that tendency in modernity to proclaim that God was dead, Strauss sought to reassert the tradition of revelation. There were two strands of ancient wisdom that moved him to return to the classics, to the beginning of political philosophy in Plato and Aristotle, and to the ancient sources of law as they could be found in the Hebrew Bible. Against the claims of modernity, he would return to Athens and Jerusalem.

That he would be taken as the adversary of modern relativism, and its political doctrines, should occasion no surprise. It would be a matter merely of truth in labeling. What is remarkable is the kind of unmeasured attack he was able to inspire only recently, on the part of a young writer in the *New York Times* at the end of November, after the conservative victory at the polls. Strauss was caricatured as "unapologetically elitist and anti-democratic," as a philosopher hostile to the "Enlightenment presumption that all men are created equal." He was described as deeply resistant to all change, a man who regarded "the status quo as an expression of divine will." Strauss seemed to be tagged with responsibility for every retrograde sentiment that liberals attach to conservative militancy. Students of Strauss wondered just where, in Strauss's writing, one might find support for any of these positions attributed to him. I do not recall any passage in which Strauss sought to summon a resistance to any change in our legal arrangements or social policies. For that matter, it would be hard to find any passage in Strauss dealing with any current issue in our politics.

But most bizarre of all is the attack on Strauss for being an enemy of the Declaration of Independence. Strauss's most important book, *Natural Right and History*, begins with the Declaration, precisely because the Declaration reflected an older tradition that spoke seriously of moral "truths" grounded in the nature of human beings. For Strauss, the Declaration marked an understanding, on the part of the American Founders, that connected them to the classics and to the Biblical tradition. To speak, after all, of universal and enduring truths was to recall a Lawgiver, a universal God, who was the author of a universal moral law.

These things would be known instantly to anyone who had the remotest acquaintance with the writings of Strauss and his students. The writer in the *Times* had been liberated from any encumbrances of that kind.

But why a need to sound the alarm now, more than twenty years after the death of Strauss? The most gifted students of Strauss's students, his academic grandchildren, have been blocked out of the most prestigious universities, by a system of political screening as forbidding as any blacklist. The influence of Strauss in the academy has never seemed to be at lower ebb. And yet, what sets off the alarms now is that Strauss and his followers have affected the understanding, and the furnishings of mind, of the conservatives who have been taking power of late.

There have been students of Straussians, like William Kristol and Paul Wolfowitz, and others who had themselves studied with Strauss, like Michael Uhlmann and Angelo Codevilla, who have put their impress on policy through their posts in the government. There are others, like Clarence Thomas, who have studied political theory with Straussian friends. But then there is the deeper problem, which dare not speak its name: the Straussians may supply a direction to Republican leaders precisely because the teachings of Strauss are far more in accord with the sentiments of that broad public which has brought forth now a conservative majority. Strauss recognized, with the classics, that the "multitude," the people at large, are not philosophers. But he appreciated Machiavelli's sense that the people at large are conservative in their reflexes. They have an attachment to the things that are familiar and ancestral; and at the same time most people, anchored in the world, are not moral relativists.

Beyond that, those moral sentiments of the public gain a further support from the fact that most Americans are religious. Whose teachings, then, are the American people likely to find more resonant with their own beliefs? The teachings of Strauss, or the doctrines of those liberals and postmodernists in the academy who hold that God is dead, that there is no "nature" or truths about nature, including the nature that distinguishes men from women, and sexuality from homosexuality? Hence the irony that may func-

tion now as political camouflage: no one is more contemptuous of the public, of its intelligence, its piety, its moral and political reflexes, than the liberals now dominant in the academy. Liberal critics accuse Strauss of the heresy of elitism, of aversion to the multitude, and yet Straussians would be far more likely than their liberal adversaries to affirm Bill Buckley's maxim: Straussians *know* that they would rather be ruled by the first two hundred names in the Boston telephone directory than by the faculty of Harvard.

But how comes it that a young man safely insulated from any knowledge of Strauss's writing should nevertheless deliver such emphatic judgments on the meaning of Strauss's work? Literary detectives who cast their eyes about might notice a striking similarity between the diatribe leveled at Strauss and the charges that are developed at length by Professor Stephen Holmes of the University of Chicago in his recent book, *The Anatomy of Anti-liberalism*.

Apart from the charges echoed in the *New York Times*, Holmes adds the sting of another. Behind the close reading of the Bible and the intense study of Maimonides, Holmes finds more than the evidence of doubt, or of a philosopher caught between Athens and Jerusalem. Without any direct personal knowledge of Strauss, Holmes is nevertheless sure enough to declare that Strauss was, in plain truth, an atheist. But more than that, a man with "a total cynicism about religion." Without a trace of equivocation, he attributes to Strauss this sentiment: "that most people are not merely inferior to the philosophical supermen. Their lives are utterly valueless and unjustifiable unless they serve to make philosophers more comfortable and se-

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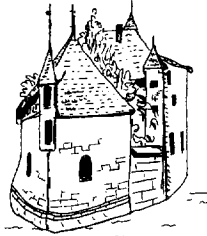
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cure." This audacious, mean sentiment he is willing to ascribe without the aid of a single citation to anything in the writings of Strauss that could justify this attribution. And yet, this challenge to produce the source would be treated by Holmes as disingenuous: For after all, did Strauss himself not teach about the art of "writing between the lines"?

Parts of Strauss's teaching were indeed held back or concealed in layers of reticence and indirection. In the style he described in *Persecution and the Art of Writing Between the Lines*, the writer who seeks to mask a subtle or complicated teaching may use the device of writing things that appear, on the surface, to be plainly contradictory. The more discerning reader will spot the contradiction, and take it as a signal by the writer to look more closely. At the center of *Natural Right and History*, Strauss remarks on some rather harsh, inconvenient truths that it will be hard for a democracy to acknowledge—namely, that it may require methods not strictly in accord with the rules of constitutionalism to deal with the most "unscrupulous and savage" enemies of free government. But then Strauss quickly adds, in a telling passage, "Let us leave these sad exigencies covered with the veil with which they are justly covered."

What part of his own teaching did Strauss conceal from public view with the deft placing of veils? It is a curious, revealing sign that critics such as Stephen Holmes notice this caution in writing, and then leap to the inference of a dark purpose that cannot be expressed. Yet they do not seem to consider the possibility that this holding back on the part of Strauss may reflect what was called, in the Declaration of Independence, a "decent respect for the opinions of mankind." Rather than showing a contempt for the public, this reserve on the part of a philosopher may reflect a proper caution about the things that philosophers may claim to know. There are many subtleties packed into the words "All men are created equal," but as Mr. Strauss seemed to understand, it was not prudent for the philosopher to inquire with a merciless honesty into the doubtful assumptions tucked away in that proposition, the proposition that Lincoln described as the father of all



principles among us. A philosopher who saw the world rightly could never seriously hold that all men were born with equal aptitude, say, for brain surgery, for physics or philosophy. Nor could he say that everyone was born with equal aptitude for rendering justice or reasoning about matters of right and wrong. But as Strauss wrote, even the best of societies may be sustained with conventions that will not withstand a rigorous examination. The philosopher plays with a kind of political dynamite if he takes the risk of dislodging people from the wholesome prejudices, or the useful conventions, that support their own freedom.

The philosopher does no violence to his calling when he begins with a decent respect for common opinion, for there are also many things in Heaven and earth that the philosophers may only dimly suspect. In "Liberal Education and Responsibility," Strauss reflected on the hubris of those writers, in the nineteenth century, who fancied that education would take the place of religion and morality. Strauss condensed the argument to a few examples that were sufficient in themselves to disappoint the claim: "Karl Marx, the father of Communism, and Friedrich Nietzsche, the stepgrandfather of fascism, were liberally educated on a level to which we cannot even hope to aspire." The lesson drawn by Strauss was "that wisdom cannot be separated from moderation and hence . . . wisdom requires unhesitating loyalty to a decent constitution and even to the cause of constitutionalism."

The American republic was the example, par excellence, of that moderate regime enhanced by a decent constitution. And among the things that made the American republic new under the sun was that it was the first regime, in a civilized country, in which Jews and Christians could meet on the plane of a common citizenship. But Christians and Jews could share that ground of citizenship only if there was nothing in the laws that favored Christianity over Judaism. Indeed, the laws would have to be purged of any traces that might accord to Christianity, or to religion, a pre-eminent respect.

Under the terms of this political settlement, there would be tolerance for religion, but religion would be radically

diminished in its standing. Strauss understood with a penetrating gravity just what was taking place here in the creation of a liberal democracy, for the alternatives had been crystallized sharply by Spinoza: the ground of the law, and of a common citizenship, would not be found in revelation or religion, but in a universal, "rational morality." But under these conditions, Jewish life could not be the same because Jewish "law" would no longer be law in the strictest sense. The Mosaic law might be followed among Jews, but it would no longer be what it was—not merely a code for all of those who attached themselves to Judaism, but a doctrine that could be imposed with the authority of law. By the logic of liberal democracy, the Mosaic law had to be displaced, decisively, as a governing doctrine. But what was held out to Jews now was the blessing of liberal society, a society in which "Jews and Christians can be equal members."

Strauss would never conceal from himself, in a benign haze, just what was being denigrated or lost in this arrangement of the modern, liberal regime. Still, Strauss seemed to appreciate the American achievement as a wonder of moderation. That "mixed" achievement, that splendid modesty of a moderating Constitution, was part of what Strauss had in mind when he remarked that the American Founders had built on "low but solid ground."

The American regime might have been a modest achievement, but for Strauss it deserved to be celebrated and revered, even by the religious. For this republic under law seemed to offer the best practicable arrangement for preserving the freedom of religion in the modern regime.

And in fact, this point must be made in drawing the proper lines between Strauss and his adversaries: Strauss's reticence, his scheme of holding back, was governed finally by his commitment to constitutional government and the American regime. His overriding political motive was to avoid dislodging from the public the opinions that sustained this decent regime. In a striking contrast, his critics trumpet their commitment to democracy and equality, while they make it their mission to deny every moral premise that supports, in the public mind, the rightness of a "government by consent."

Strauss's critics might have misread him on a critical point precisely be-

cause they did not pay attention to what was so evident on the surface: Strauss held back from claiming a superiority for the philosophers precisely because the philosophers were too quick to dismiss the claims of revelation. They began by putting their main trust in their intellect, and by treating with dubiety the ancestral teachings drawn from revelation. That ordering was implicit, for example, in Spinoza's new Bible science, in the willingness, as Strauss said, to read the Bible as we would read any other book. Strauss complained that Spinoza had put the Old and the New Testaments on the same plane, treating them as documents, or teachings, of equal value. But when the attempt was made in this way to find the thread that linked these two traditions, that common thread turned out to be, as Strauss said, "rational morality."

And yet, in Strauss's classroom there were Catholic priests, along with Jews from the Orthodox to the irreligious. What connected everyone in that room was the interest in standing against the current culture with its variants of moral relativism. But that is to say, what connected the Christians and Jews in that room was the religion of reason, or "rational morality."

A friend once asked a venerable professor, who had known Strauss well, just "what kind of a Jew" Strauss was. And the response, after a thoughtful pause, was: "Strauss was the kind of Jew he thought Maimonides was." With its stylish, enigmatic turn, the reply concealed a melancholy answer. One accomplished scholar, who was very close to Strauss, is certain that Strauss's deep reading of Maimonides had brought him to a sobering conclusion that had to be guarded: namely, that Maimonides had reasoned himself away from his own belief in God. But when Strauss lectured, many years ago, at Amherst, a young professor of English reacted with disbelief. The lecture made sense, he said, only if Strauss believed in revelation. To which Strauss replied, "I'm a Jew." The young professor retorted, "But what does that mean—these days?" To which Strauss said, "That's not my problem." I relayed the story to Milton Himmelfarb, a learned man in all things Jewish, who had remarked that Strauss had not often been seen in the synagogue. He listened to this story and observed, "Well, it was Athens and

Jerusalem, wasn't it? His heart was in Jerusalem, his head was in Athens, and the head is the organ of the philosopher." And after all the shadings and turns in the argument, after all the ellipses and writing between the lines, that may be, in the end, the truth of the matter.

Strauss might have borne the reservations of a philosopher, but he was not going to build those reservations toward a decision to overthrow, on his own, the religion that had been handed down to him by his father, and by his father before him. Strauss would earnestly preserve his reverence, and that reverence might have been shown in his willingness, precisely, to mute or submerge his philosophic doubts.

But then too we must remind ourselves that the reverence for the ancestral could not involve, for Strauss, the suspension of moral judgment. For Strauss, the honoring of tradition meant the honoring of a legacy of serious reflection about the laws, about the things that were right and wrong. Strauss knew that the tradition of his fathers was—as he insisted at so many turns—a religion of reason. It was

plain even to the dimmest onlooker that Strauss stood against that tendency, diffusing itself through the academy, to reduce morality to conventions, or to the habits of the local tribe.

It is only with the character of the academy in our own day that a scholar who spent his life in this way could be accused of atheism by writers who readily sneer at God and religion. And it is only with the character of modern journalism that he could be accused of elitism by writers who sneer at the wisdom of the people. That they should level such charges at Strauss for trying to work through his perplexities without being flippant or scandalous; that they should accuse him, with his corpus of writing, of "cynicism," is a gesture that can spring only from men who are themselves no strangers to cynicism.

When we studied with Strauss, late into the winter afternoons, the concentration was riveting, the spirit pervasively religious. The text might have been drawn from Plato or Locke, but none of us doubted that the curriculum in which we were immersed now with our hearts was the religion of reason. □

FILM

Forget Paris, Come to Sorrento

JOHN SIMON

AH, THE romantic movie! It will, I trust, always be with us in one form or another, but it has been somewhat recessive of late. True, there is the unsatisfactory *While You Were Sleeping*, and *French Kiss*, which I haven't had the stomach to face. And now we have *Forget Paris*, whose premise is that though one glorious week in Paris can lead a couple to the altar, it cannot make them stick. Or can it?

This movie is produced, co-authored, and starred in by Billy Crystal, which already is too much of a not so good thing. He plays Mickey Gordon, a short but dauntless basketball referee who can stand up to the tallest guys and make his call stick—but a call is not a marriage. This in itself is a problem: a romantic film that dawdles over basketball to capitalize on the presence of actual basketball stars is obviously hedging its bets. If the thing is about romance, forget basketball. But okay.

We go first into screwball comedy, which *is* compatible with romance. Mickey, who has rightly hated his worthless just-deceased father, has undertaken, in an act of filial *pietas*, to take the coffin to Normandy and bury Dad, according to his wishes, among his fallen Army buddies. But upon arrival at the Paris airport, Dad is missing, coffin and all.

To help, in comes Ellen Gordon (Debra Winger), an official for the French airline that is Air France in disguise. The day Air France hires an American—and one whose French is as thickly accented as Miss Winger's—for such a job is hardly at hand. But okay, forget verisimilitude. The coffin is finally retrieved in Switzerland (cold storage?) and buried in a small Normandy churchyard. And who shows up to prevent Mickey from being the sole graveside mourner? You guessed it: Ellen. In this film, one or the other lover will always pop up where least