

## I. A SEMINAR ON PURLOINED LETTERS

Matthew Sharpe

### OVERTURE

Let us begin with two images.

First image: after his \* emigration to the United States, Leo Strauss is said to have warmed to only few of the cultural artefacts in that country's profuse mass culture. One of these was the popular television program Perry Mason. Perry Mason's eponymous hero was a detective and defence attorney. Mason specialised in defending accused murderers, expert in proving their unlikely innocence by impugning another in court, who would duly confess. Strauss' sympathy with Perry Mason, it is noted, reflects his wider love of the detective genre. The detective genre in fact stands as an incisive metaphor or model for what Leo Strauss remains most (in)famous, certainly in the academic world. We mean his claim to have discovered that all great philosophers up to Machiavelli, and beyond, wrote esoteric texts. (CCS 3; LSDS) On their surface, there is a "salutary" message, tailored to edify and appease the moral, political, and metaphysical opinions of the authors' day. However, if we learn to read these texts carefully or as a sleuth might, a different, esoteric or hidden set of meanings opens up before our prying eyes. Strauss was far from dissuading the comparison between his mode of reading and that of a detective—a comparison made first by his lifelong friend, Alexandre Kojeve, in their exchange concerning Strauss' *On Tyranny*. Strauss' method is like to that of a detective, Kojeve sallied. But in the texts that Strauss discusses, we have no direct access to the confession of the guilty. (OT 136 n.) Near the heart of Strauss' programmatic essay 'What is Political Philosophy?', Strauss for his part directly compares Hobbes and Machiavelli, the two figures he at different periods believed founded the grand intrigue or "conspiracy" modernity (TOM\*), to characters from one of modernity's greatest literary detective stories: "If you wish, you may compare Hobbes to Sherlock Holmes and Machiavelli to Professor Moriarty", Strauss opines. "For certainly Hobbes took justice much more seriously than Machiavelli had done." (WPP 48)<sup>1</sup>

Second image: in 1966, when French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan was persuaded to publish a collection of his writings from the previous three decades, he chose to open the *Écrits* (after a short 'Overture') with an adapted transcript. The transcript (dating from 1952-3) was from a seminar on a famous, modern detective story. The story is Edgar Allan Poe's *The Purloined Letter*. In Poe's story, Lacan ventures to see represented, as in a

“fable”, the truth of Freud’s enigmatic notion of the compulsion to repeat (Wiederholung). (SPL 6/10) “The Purloined Letter”, Lacan claims, “demonstrates in a story the major determination the subject receives from the itinerary of a signifier” (SPL 7/12): hence the heart of Lacan’s own reclaiming of “the meaning of Freud”. (FT 334/401) The fact that Poe’s story is a fable, Lacan adds, “even has the advantage of manifesting symbolic necessity all the more purely”. (SPL 7/12) As we will repeatedly see, this fable has more resonances in Lacan’s thought, and for us, than this. On the one hand, Poe’s story indeed turns around a ‘letter’, one whose content is an unknown X, whose secret promises to cipher the hidden desire of the matriarchal figure in the tale—the desire of the mother is one pivot in Lacan’s post-structuralist reconstruction of Freudian thought. On the other hand, this matriarch in “The Purloined Letter” is no lesser figure than the Queen. The drama is hence one of the highest political rank. Its stake is Basileia, the authority of the Throne. (SPL 11/17; cf. SA#) And it is a Minister or royal advisor—whose very name, D-, as well as his action, anticipate the detective Dupin with whose “genius for solving enigmas” (E 10/16) Lacan identifies the psychoanalyst—who in the first narrated scene has the presence of mind to filch the letter from before the unseeing eyes of the cuckolded King.

In the light of these eikoi alone, someone might say: it is perhaps surprising that no one to date has thought to consider in the same purview the works and teachings of the two contemporaries, Jacques Lacan and Leo Strauss. The images, and the shared identification of Lacan and Strauss with sleuths to which they point, point also to a series of more substantial comparisons. In the sole reference either man makes to the other, Lacan directs his students to Strauss’ 1948 work *Persecution and the Art of Writing* in his programmatic piece on the linguistic structure of the Freudian unconscious, “The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious”:

It’s worth taking the time to read a book in which Leo Strauss, from the land that has traditionally offered asylum to those who have chosen freedom, reflects on the relations between the art of writing and persecution. By honing in on the sort of connaturality that this art has to this condition, he allows us to glimpse something that imposes its form here, in the effect of truth on desire. (ILU 412)

The reader of Lacan, certainly, cannot but help being struck by the resonance with the primary processes Freud attributed to the unconscious, of many of the techniques Strauss attributes to the “forgotten art of writing” he discerns first in the medieval thinkers Maimonides, Farabi and Halevi, then the ancients and the moderns. (FAW\*) Freud had

explicitly modelled his understanding of the psyche around political metaphors. The unconscious consists of wishes and beliefs that have been repressed as by a “censor”, since they oppose the ego’s official or public self-image. To interpret dreams, and to understand their mechanisms, one should look to the model of a political author or cartoonist who strives to publicly express officially contraband opinions. (\*) Just so, Strauss first presents the necessity for esoteric writing on the basis of official “censorship”, and the need of philosophers to avoid persecution. (PAW\*) The “poetic and dialectical” techniques (PAW\*) these great writers have used are there to avoid said censorship, so as to indicate their true beliefs to careful readers only, with “hints” (PAW\*, 63), through “blunders”, “contradictions”, “slight omissions or additions”, “insignificant variations”. (PAW 64, 63\*) Freud had taught that the truth is only ever mis-dire, as Lacan would put it (OSP\*), half-said in “flashes” (cf. PAW 66; XI 131/143), exceptional slips, symptomatic actions, dreams, the ravings of the mad, wishes or views projected on to others, the play of wit and jokes. Just so, Strauss comments that his hypothesis “would then be good reason for our finding in the greatest literature of the past so many interesting devils, madmen, beggars, sophists, drunkards, epicureans and buffoons.” (PAW 36) What again must we say of the attention Strauss asks us to pay to “ambiguous words” like “rank”, “virtue”, “secret” (PAW 57). “tyranny” (OT 75-77), “the wise” (PAW 72), “moderation”, or “courage” in revered thinkers, if they are not that they are precisely what Freud calls condensations: words in whose double address Lacan spies the “creative spark” of metaphor? () When Strauss insists that an author may conceal his true opinion by placing it in inconspicuous places, as if coincidentally, in the central part of a work or chapter, or the central place in lists (PAW 24, 185\*), in “interruptions” (eg: PAW 61), “digressions” (\*), not to say in the mouths of “disreputable characters” (PAW 36; TOM\*), is he not pointing to the same mechanism Freud had differently termed “displacement”, the principal means of distortion in the dream? Does not Freud’s unlikely insistence, most broadly, that nothing in the psyche is without reason—down to the most seemingly incidental slip (PED\*)—not remind the modern reader of Strauss’ equally unlikely postulation of a “logographic necessity” in great texts (PAW \*; CM \*): namely, a supposition that “every word” (PAW 64), title, chapter heading, example and ordering of examples in a great writer like Maimonides, Farabi, Machiavelli, Spinoza, or Plato is necessarily placed exactly where it is in the whole? Lacan for his part suggests directly that the defences of analysts represent nothing so much as the rhetorical devices of the classical authors whose forgotten arts of writing Strauss retrieved:

Periphrasis, hyperbaton, ellipsis, suspension, anticipation, retraction, negation, digression, and irony (Quintilian’s *figurae sententiarum*), just as catechresis,

litotes, antonomasia, and hypertosis are the tropes, whose names strike me as the most appropriate ones with which to label these mechanism. (E521)

The reader might even be forgiven for suspending her bemusement, as she notes the comparable, apparently “superstitious” significance both Strauss and Lacan (the latter via Freud), attribute to numbers in philosophical texts and the life of the psyche. (PAW 63, \*; WPP, \*, TOM 51; cf. Freud PEL\*; FFS223/269)<sup>2</sup>

Then there is the phenomenon of the reception of the two figures’ thought. Few figures in the contemporary academy so divide readers as Leo Strauss and Jacques Lacan. On Strauss’ death, students spoke exuberantly and reverently of the intellect, character, and teaching of the man, even comparing him to the Socrates of the *Phaedo*. (refs) “One day it shall be said that the greatness of Heidegger consists in having made Leo Strauss possible”, claims Emile Fackenheim. (\$) Similarly, on Lacan’s death, his students eulogised this “aristocrat of the mind”, a “modern Socrates” ... (egs and refs). According to Jacques-Alain Miller, whereas lesser figures’ names will fade, it is reasonable to suppose that Lacan’s will continue to be spoken of for centuries. (ref.)

Both men, certainly, have an almost unique, eccentric place in the modern academy: that of creating schools of self-professed acolytes, students, or disciples devoted to comprehending their work, and extending their programs. These schools seem in some ways more akin to ancient, initiatory philosophical or religious schools, than to modern university scholarship. (Milner\*) Like all great teachers, if not prophets, we will see how either Lacan or Strauss knew how to use the boldest and most seductive rhetoric in debunking opposed intellectual trends: for Strauss, contemporary political scientists and the social sciences more generally; for Lacan, the spokespersons of post-Freudian variants of psychoanalytic teaching and practice, and the ‘human sciences’ more widely. Surely in part because of this rhetoric, Straussians and Lacanians are regularly accused by outsiders of engendering dilettantism, obscurantism, sectarian closed-mindedness, elitism, and the most “perverse” of reading and intellectual devices. (refs\*) One could be tempted, in a spirit of levity, to apply the terms or characterology of a sociology of sects to categorise Strauss’ or Lacan’s respective receptions. Such a characterology would begin from repeated splits within the ranks, for instance of East and West coast Straussians, or Millerian and non-Millerian Lacanians. It would pass via chosen legatees (Joseph Cropsey or Jacques-Alain Miller, Lacan’s son in law—and we recall that the dying Freud gave seven rings to his closest associates); to rumours of the most exceptional practices of the master

(of Lacan, towards his analysands and as master of his school; of Strauss, towards and of his students). (refs) There are the 'outed', disenchanted former insiders (Anne Norton for Strauss, or with qualifications, Stanley Rosen and even Lawrence Lampert; mutatis mutandis Marcel Marini and Marie Pierrakos, Lacan's former stenographer). Fifthly or rather first, there are the almost ritually denounced outsider-debunkers who, moved by something which might be inscrutable if it were not simply low, fail to understand at all: Shadia Drury and Nicolas Xenos for the Straussians; Sokal and Bricmont for Lacan.<sup>3</sup>

### OF IMPOSSIBLE PROFESSIONS

In his late work, "Analysis Terminable and Interminable", Sigmund Freud famously claimed that there were three impossible professions. (Freud 1937, 248) To teaching and governing—incidentally the two lasting preoccupations of one Leo Strauss—Freud added psychoanalysis. The following lecture series aims at what must seem to some listeners, if it is not a more simple exercise in futility, to be a fourth, impossible profession. It aims to present a comparative, scholarly work on the thinking of Leo Strauss and Jacques Lacan. We must state at the outset that we in no way want to deny or cover over the profound differences in the two men's thinking. There are profound differences in the theoretical origins, aims, objects, and ends between Strauss' work, and that of Lacan: Strauss the self-professed scholar who could but aspire to philosophise; Lacan the self-professed anti-philosophe who could but aspire to be equal to the revolution in thought he discerned in Freud. The difficulties in intelligently presenting such a lecture series are almost too numerous to number.

First and foremost, Jacques Lacan and Leo Strauss were immensely cultured, learned men. Strauss' learning is legendary. Part of the reason he was so misunderstood, even ridiculed, by his contemporaries, Rosen comments, was because he knew so much more than they did. (ref) Leo Strauss' oeuvre unfolds in a series of readings of Hesiod, Thucydides, Plato, Aristotle, Farabi, Averroes, Avrannel\* and Avicenna, Halevi, Maimonides, Spinoza, Lessing, Machiavelli and Nietzsche. Lacan for his part reminds prospective analysts that Freud had prescribed "the history of civilisation, mythology, the psychology of religions, literary history, and literary criticism" for his ideal Department of Psychoanalysis. (FFS 238/288; cf. FFS 244/295) To this list, Lacan adds in his famous "Rome discourse", analysts worthy of the name should add "rhetoric, dialectics in the classical sense this term takes on in Aristotle's Topics), grammar, and poetics" (FFS 238/288); then linguistics, anthropology, philosophy, game theory and related species of mathematics. (236, 237) Lacan's

seminars and “Ecrits” are riddled with references to the most diffuse sources imaginable: from Parmenides, Plato and Aristotle, the Stoics, Saint Augustine and Thomas, to Hindu texts, Chinese hieroglyphics, ethnological and ethological researches, Pascal, Velasquez, Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Koyre, Kojeve and Heidegger; not to say topology, predicate logic, and the theory of knots. Some of the anxiety Lacan’s and Strauss’ works provokes surely comes from the fact that, to adjudge their claims, we would need to be someone near as conversant as they in these manifold fields. Yet most of us, very manifestly, can not be so. Indeed, it is one of the merits of their works—a merit which can also be a poisoned or blinding chalice—that it is through Strauss and Lacan that many students have been brought to read these distant resources, for whom they otherwise would have been dead letters.

Then we have to state here what the opening section already skirted: namely, the intensely political nature of debates surrounding Jacques Lacan, and more so Leo Strauss. Today, schools and circles teaching and practicing Lacanian psychoanalysis exist around the globe, everywhere from India and the far East to South America and Australia. Fierce debates exist within this community, particularly concerning the way Lacan’s mostly spoken teaching has been disseminated and edited, under the authoritative auspices of Jacques-Alain Miller. Lacan’s own career was of course characterised by a series of splits: his split from the IPP in 1953, then again from the SFP in 1963, to his final concluding, unilateral closure of the EFP in 1980. While non-Lacanian species of psychoanalytic thought are widely stagnating, practitioners of other strands of psychoanalysis continue to look at Lacan’s teaching, style, “intellectualism”, and recommended forms of analytic practice with great suspicion. Psychoanalysis per se continues to be seen by wide sectors of the community, including within the academy, as a species of quackery, more akin to religion than the science Lacan after Freud had hoped it might become.

Following 2001 and the advent of the ‘war on terror’ led by George W. Bush’s neoconservative administration, meanwhile, debates concerning the teaching of Leo Strauss have become the unlikely stuff of mainstream media and political intrigue, particularly in the United States. Leo Strauss, it is noted, for a brief period taught Paul Wolfowitz, a key architect of the ill-fated 2003 invasion of Iraq, to all appearances on grounds of a noble or political deceit. Strauss was a teacher of the self-professed godfather of American neoconservatism, Irving Kristol. (\*) The younger William Kristol, editor of *The Weekly Standard*, heads a list of influential neoconservative commentators and political agents, including Richard Perle, allied with the Bush regime, and associated with controversial think tanks such as the ‘Project for a New American Century’. (Norton

13-18; Mann, 25-29) Then there is Abram Shulsky of the 'Office of Special Projects', charged with finding the question-worthy intelligence concerning Saddam Hussein's Weapons of Mass Destruction. In \*, Shulsky claimed of his reading of Strauss that:

Strauss' view certainly alerts one to the possibility that political life might be closely linked to deception. Indeed, it suggests that deception is the norm of political life, and the hope—to say nothing of the expectation, of establishing a politics that dispenses with it is the exception. (Shulsky and Schmitt\*\*)

Responding to the avowed influence Strauss has had on these political figures, liberal critics have claimed not simply that Strauss' discovery of esoteric writing sanctifies to the neoconservative elites the political deceptions that led America to war in Baghdad. Leo Strauss is accused of sponsoring a secret teaching to his students, of tyrannical rule by self-professing "wise" leaders; of being a metaphysical nihilist who "cloaked" himself in the virtuous, but philosophically groundless rhetoric of "natural right" (\*); of politically justifying the subordination of US foreign policy to the prerogatives of Israel or its Right-wing party Likud (\*); hence of teaching an intellectually ungrounded elitism to "the young" of the next generation, and a "black reaction"\* against liberalism and modernity. These esoteric teachings are said to have licensed, albeit after Strauss own death, the Republicans' push towards the marked concentration of power in the hands of the American executive under President Bush, the political use of terrorism to justify the suspension of civil liberties, the cultivation of a pre-emptive militarism, a bellicose American imperialism, and the authoritarian undermining of the rule of law in the name of national security. In short, we are asked to consider whether Strauss' uncommonly bold thoughts on Machiavelli were not written from an esoteric identification with the infamous Florentine Secretary whose enigmatic smile covers Strauss' great work upon him:

If he is an unarmed prophet, or a captain without an army who must recruit his army by means of his books, he must first recruit the highest officers directly responsible to him and commissioned by him. Owing to 'the envious nature of men' he cannot expect to find his first adherents among the men of his own generation. He can come to his own only after the natural death of his generation, the generation of the desert, as it were. He must appeal to the elite among the coming generations. (TOM 168 [III, paragraph 58])

Central to such charges, and to the charges against Lacan, is the claim that Lacan and Strauss were not only discoverers of the esoteric arts of writing, or formations of the unconscious. They too practiced, or mimicked, these indirect, “parabolic or enigmatic” (PAW\*) modes of communication.

Lacan for one is known to anyone who has tried to read more than a soundbite of him as amongst the most extraordinarily difficult of authors. When Lacan hired a stenographer in the late 1960s to transcribe his spoken seminars, she was told humorously by the others: ‘Don’t go there, he speaks Chinese!’ (Roudinesco \*, 567) Lacan’s texts, we note, contain many of the features Strauss teaches that esoteric or careful writers have always used: enigmatic and parabolic sayings (PAW\*), (like ‘there is no Other of the Other’, ‘there is no sexual rapport’, ‘Woman does not exist’, ‘the unconscious is the discourse of the Other’, ‘the unconscious is ‘structured like a language’); prosopopeai (most famously and ironically, letting first “truth” herself (sic.), then a table and a lectern, address the audience in “The Freudian Thing” (\*)); ambiguous pronouns and genitives (\*); long and convoluted, winding sentences (\*); ambiguous terms—and a legion of neologisms—which condense different chains of inferences unknowable except to insiders (like ‘the signifier’, ‘the phallus’, ‘the Other’, ‘the subject’, and not least, the mathemes (S1, a, \$, I(O), etc.); not to mention his manifold metonymic allusions sans explication to classical myths, literature, Freudian case studies, and philosophy. (egs\*) Jean-Claude Milner’s *Oeuvre Claire* significantly contains an extended Introduction concerning Lacan’s esotericism, which he compares to that of Strauss—the only author I am aware to date who has done this. () Whereas the ancients of Strauss’ concern wrote esoterically, concealing their secret teaching to a spoken doctrine, Milner contends, Lacan’s spoken seminars are propaedeutic and more or less open. It is his written *Ecrits* that are esoteric. (Milner, \*) Certainly, the *Ecrits* opens famously with a reflection on the revered French adage: ‘The style is the man’. Lacan adds to this a reflection that is germane also to Strauss’ understanding of the way the different registers of great texts speak differently to the unwise many and the few: ‘the style is the man—if we simply add to it: the man one addresses.’ (O 3/9) The ‘Overture’ to the *Ecrits* closes by relating the undenied difficulty of the author’s own style to what “the audience to which they were addressed required”. To his new reader, “this reader being the reason that has been put forward to convince me to publish a collection of my writings”, Lacan closes as laconically: “I want to lead the reader to a consequence in which he must pay the price with elbow grease”. (E 4/9, 5/10)<sup>4</sup>

The question of whether Strauss wrote esoterically is more difficult to ascertain. Reading Strauss' work, indeed, one feels acutely the force of Lacan's adage that "the signifier represents the subject for another signifier". (\*) Strauss certainly "avails himself of the immunity of the commentator" (PAW \*) or the "historian", devices he sees (respectively) in Farabi and Maimonides, and Xenophon. Rarely if at all do we read in Strauss, directly, his own opinions:--and Strauss likewise draws our careful attention to the importance of philosophers' use of first person pronouns ('we' and 'I'), and the first person singular in particular. (TOM\*) All we have of the man himself is his written signifiers: the texts, if not the style.

As Catherine and Michael Zuckert have pointed out, there is a performative contradiction involved in attributing esotericism to Strauss. For Strauss, in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* and elsewhere, is surely the man who "outed" the secrets of esoteric writing. It would be enigmatic indeed if Strauss were then to practice the same secret means he had publicly broadcast. (ref.) Nevertheless, Strauss also comments in PAW that a person writes as they read, and that careful readers—of whom it cannot be easily questioned Leo Strauss was one—are hence careful writers. (PAW\*, TOM\*) We note also that the paradox here goes deeper than the Zuckerts present things in their central chapter of *The Truth of Leo Strauss*. On the one hand, one criterion Strauss indicates as to when the historian or philosopher can justly, if cautiously, apply esoteric reading techniques is when the author, however casually, discusses the possibility and means of concealing their true opinions. (PAW 36, TOM\*) Just so, as Strauss alerts us, Plato in *The Seventh Letter* and Moses Maimonides in *The Guide for the Perplexed* had long before he had openly announced that they write esoterically. Maimonides graciously enumerates seven species of contradiction in "literary works" in the "Introduction" to *The Guide*, even singling out those practiced by "true philosophers" like Maimonides in the very same work. (GP 9-11) On the other hand, all such professions of esotericism—whether in Strauss' mouth or anyone else's—activate the vertiginous (a)logic of the liar's paradox: for, the naïve might ask, is Maimonides not speaking esoterically about his esotericism, thus concealing it in revealing it, and/or visa versa? Mutatis mutandis, if one were truly practicing esotericism, wouldn't one means to succeed in this undertaking be to deny one has done it, like the fabled Machiavellian Prince who is said to have counselled denial of Machiavelli? Things must go so far in this game of bluff-double that the Zuckerts claim that, since Strauss draws our attention to the centre, the centre cannot be important in his work (\*); Daniel Tanguay for his part opining, au contraire, that Strauss' esoteric teaching, truly, is sometimes as openly stated as the purloined letter is espied by Dupin at the

pinnacle of Poe's tale: crumpled, and albeit face down, atop the Minister's fireplace. (SPL 11/16-7) "Speech constitutes a pact", Lacan will remind us. So all discourse presupposes a minimal, foundational "good faith" which "I will only make use of ... if I see fit or if I am forced to, only in order to beguile bad faith". (FT 358/431) One reason for the hostility—and indeed the proliferation of conspiratorial fantasmata surrounding Lacan and Strauss raised above—is surely the uncertainty that pronouncing that one can see the legitimacy of deceiving the Other opens. Then there is the further, less theoretical, more political paradox, of which Leo Strauss was certainly aware. This is that the techniques of writing Strauss enumerates were conditioned by a species of persecution and censorship whose very forgetting in modern scholarship reflects how modern liberal states like America has long vindicated, and attempted to institute, freedom of thought and of expression. (PAW\*)

However these points then tally, the careful reader of Leo Strauss cannot help but note that Strauss does not wholly discourage the provocative hypothesis that he too plies the techniques he discerns in Maimonides, Farabi, Xenophon, Machiavelli, Plato, Lessing, and Spinoza. Strauss draws attention to his own diversions with a series of telltale phrases: "returning once more to the surface" or "our subject matter" (TOM 45), "however that may be", "Certain it is that..." (egs\*) He often avails himself of modal qualifiers ("perhaps") and conditionals ("if ...") to simultaneously state but distance himself from exceptional propositions. () Strauss' paragraphs, more intriguingly, are often as unconventionally long (many run several pages ()) as Lacan's are often unconventionally short and aphoristic. This supposition encourages the notion that they are to be read as artfully or playfully—but in any case significantly—numbered sections. (There are for instance 26 paragraphs in his Chapter on Machiavelli's Prince, which has 26 chapters, in *Thoughts on Machiavelli*). (TOM \*; Zuckert and Zuckert \*) Then there is the common teaching, to which we will return, at the numerical centres of Strauss' *On Tyranny*, "The Problem of Socrates", and *Natural Right and History*. The central chapter of Strauss' *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* for its part contains an extraordinarily powerful reading of Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*, wherein Strauss alerts us to how Nietzsche writes Platonically, including concerning how "the true philosophers are legislators" (\*\*). Strauss' opening, "old fashioned" denunciation of Machiavelli as a "teacher of evil" in *Thoughts on Machiavelli* is lavishly qualified—although, we observe, not contradicted—by Strauss' repeated praise in the body of that text: praise for Machiavelli's "perverted nobility of a high rank" (TOM 8, Intro, para. 13), and his "beautiful" and "very artful" writing. () These make him a "not unworthy heir" of the classical art of writing "manifested at its peaks". (TOM. 121; cf. ) Strauss tells us several

times that he presents certain ideas only “at their proper place”, without redirecting note or further indication (eg: SA\*), echoing Maimonides. (eg: GP 10) Finally, there is now published, epistolary evidence that Strauss so admired the great thinkers whose art of writing he deciphered that he could not help but imitate them. (refs.)

Most commentators, contra Catherine and Michael Zuckert, hence agree that Strauss came to practice esoteric writing, from shortly after his enthusiastic discovery of the same in the later 1930s. The very debate concerning this matter, together with the disagreements even amongst his students as to the contents of Strauss’ teaching, might also indicate this much. In this way, a further, opening difficulty of writing on Strauss and Lacan has emerged, and needs now to be stated. In James Rhoades’ words concerning Leo Strauss in *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*:

\*\*\*

## THE ANCIENT AND THE MODERN

The greatest difficulty facing a teacher who would speak concerning Strauss ‘with’ Lacan, though, surely concerns their contrasting stances concerning a key axis of Strauss’ reflection. This is the querelle between the ancients and the moderns, a quarrel which we will see Strauss set about reopening, despite contemporary complacency, with an unerring power.

Leo Strauss, as we will see, became convinced shortly after the appearance of his first book on Spinoza’s Critique of Religion that a theoretical, if not political, return to pre-modern political philosophy was possible and desirable. One component of his work is a powerful re-narration of modern political thought. As we shall be repeating, Strauss in one of his guises is an incredibly powerful, discerning, philosophical, historian of ideas. He has an unnerving capability to show the hidden necessities governing connections between ideas, and to trace philosophical positions back to their fundamental, founding axioms or decisions. This is one source of what we might call here the *Jouissance* of reading Strauss’ work, even for those not already under its spell. Choosing a Platonic metaphor, Strauss’ philosophical history of modern thought tells of “three waves” of modernity. (\*) The third wave, beginning with Nietzsche, seemingly culminates in metaphysical nihilism, ethical or political relativism, epistemological historicism, and repeated proclamations of ‘the end of philosophy’. On Strauss’ telling, however, it culminates in this lamentable terminus according to a powerful inner necessity. This necessity the mature Strauss traces back to

the revolution in the history of ideas inaugurated by Nicolo Machiavelli. (\*) The second wave of modernity which Strauss associates with Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Kant then Hegel was a late-born attempt to counteract modern rationalism's ignoble, widening gyre. However the attempt was bound to fail, despite its authors' best intentions, given their symbolic debt to the very Machiavellian premises of Hobbes and Locke they meant to oppose.

In the purview of Straus' narrative, our point is, the thought of Jacques Lacan is about to show up as a pre-eminently modern position, as it were, to the letter. Machiavelli inaugurated modernity, according to Strauss, by setting his back against the classical solution to the problem of political philosophy. Near the centre of *The Prince*, Machiavelli denounces ancient political philosophers for creating utopias and principalities which can exist in speech alone. (\*) The task for a new political teaching will be to cease striving for such improbable virtues or excellence. As the Baconian natural sciences were soon to also teach (\*), we cannot know men's final, highest ends: whether rational contemplation or obedience to the revealed word of God. (\*) Lowering our standards therefore (IPP 41), we should aim instead for achievable models of better commonwealths, not pie-in-the-sky fantasies or dreams. Fortuna or chance, a universe from which the gods have fled, replaces providence of the divine rule of the cosmos. But fortuna, who Machiavelli supposes is a woman, can be actively conquered. In order to do this, the modern prince should begin with how human beings are, rather than how philosophers or priests fondly opine we ought to be. The origins of human civilization lie in no noble beginning, presided over by benevolent Deity. In the beginning is scarcity, fear or "terror": scarcely human lives that in Hobbes' words are nasty, brutish and short (TOM 168). Human beings can no longer take their moral standard from nature. It is the insufficiency of the original 'state of nature' that causes human misery, mother to necessary invention, creativity or labor. Human beings should henceforth aim at progress, cultivating the sciences and the arts (viz. "culture"), rather than any return to august beginnings or ancestral pietas. (\*) The natural sciences, subservient to the common end of relieving the fragile human estate, supplant philosophy's pre-modern, essentially private—but in this way independent—calling. The modern enlightenment, *lucus a non lucendo* (47), is at its origin or best a kind of political, publicised or vulgarised Epicureanism. (\*) The need to craft ever more total institutions, institutions "with teeth in them" (43), replaces education to virtue as the law-maker's principal task. What is new and young replaces the old as what is highest or best. History takes on import as testament to the triumphs of the new, rather than as documentary of ancient models. (\*) The exceptional, and the virtu of courage, supplant

the rule of political life, and the virtue of moderation, as the moderns' orientation. In Machiavelli, the founder or new prince, unafraid to use law-making violence, has "the most exalted" status. (\*) In Hobbes, society must be created from the basis of pre-political individuals in the state of nature, alone with their natural rights to self-preservation—that is their selfish interest—and their bankable fear of violent death. (\*) Following the two world wars, if not after Nietzsche, when the moderns' faith in progress failed, all that remains of the modern hope that scientific enlightenment would make humans happier is the virtue of "probity": one that carries forward Machiavelli's "realistic" unmasking of all utopian hopes, but now as an end in itself. It is left to we later moderns to embrace authentically, with unflinching, opened eyes, our irredeemable forsakenness and finitude. With these Machiavellian parameters of Strauss' moderns in mind, well might we ask, thinking of Jacques Lacan: what more modern thought could there be than psychoanalysis? Freud famously conceived psychoanalysis' claim that man is not master even over his own psyche as a third, modern or scientific blow to humans' premodern, prescientific narcissism: following Copernicus', which showed the premodern view of the earth as centre of creation a myth; and Darwin, who likewise toppled man's theologically ordained, highest place in creation. (\*) Science, to whose *Weltanschauung* psychoanalysis wishes to subordinate itself, is the triumph over all wish-fulfilling fantasy, pre-eminently religious illusion. (\*) To live truthfully may not make us happy. But science is the highest triumph of the reality principle, and this is or ought now to be sufficient. "Better ordinary unhappiness than neurotic misery". (\*)

Lacan does not challenge these orientations. Lacan radicalises them. The beginning—the psychoanalytic state of nature, as it were—from which should learn to unravel the discursive coils of our destinies is the earliest childhood, pace Freud. Yet this, Lacan goes beyond Freud, means' human beings', uniquely long, post-natal dependence on its first others. This lasting primordial helplessness means that culture—what Lacan calls the Law—marks itself earlier and more deeply in human being and desire than has ever been previously fathomed. Otherwise the too-unnatural masks, shapes and vicissitudes human sexual desire takes on would have no explanation. The decisive episode in shaping this desire is the exceptional, founding moment Freud fathomed as the castration complex. By very name—we pun—this is the most radical strike at individuals' primordial narcissism imaginable. We should henceforth look or rather listen to discern the truth of the subject via their speech and language. It will reveal itself there only in the most exceptional moments: in slips, symptoms, inhibitions, anxieties, dreams, theatrical actings out, and the unlikely plays of wit. It is difficult to think of a central Lacanian notion—whether

name-of-the-father, phallus, subject, act, objet petit a, or sinthome—which does not direct us to what ‘sticks out’ from the norms of how we would like to perceive ourselves. Each is an ‘extimite,’ as Lacan felicitously puns: exceptions which direct us to our most intimate core, and the irremediably comic primal scene in a subjectivity whose tragedy will inhere in our wanting, nobly, to know nothing more about it. Psychoanalysis should not renounce its allegiance to modern science. It should strive rather to formalise its own foundations in critical interchange with the most novel, conjectural sciences, structuralist linguistics and anthropology (\*), then post-Godelian or -Bourbakian mathematics (\*). This obtains, even though there is scant prospect that human beings will ever conquer the insistent Unbehagen in civilisation, since these are rooted ultimately in Thanatos, the death drive. We note it would surely be hard to imagine any more radical exemplification of the view Marlowe attributed to Machiavelli—“I hold there to be no sin but ignorance” (at TOM 13)—than this teaching which does not shrink from postulating a drive for death at the heart of the human psyche. It would also be hard to imagine a thought more distant from, and fundamentally incompatible with (cf. Lear\*), what Leo Strauss admired in the measured nobility of the ancients.

Let us only add here what many readers will have for some time been wanting to interpose. Strauss’ hypothesis concerning esoteric writing, whatever the parallels between its means and Freud’s unconscious primary processes, points to a conscious, fully intentional, deployment of these means. More than this, it is an art practiced at best by a happy few. We might have been tempted in this light to have said that what reading Strauss can add to psychoanalysis’ understanding of its own antecedents, is an indication that it is not only in literature, religion, and mythology, that Freud’s discovery of the unconscious was prefigured. It finds a further, noble precedent in the rhetorical arts of the philosophers. Yet the Freudian field is that of the unconscious creativity of the human psyche. Moreover, whatever the pecuniary realities, the truth analytic interpretation aims at is not a truth, or an initiation, meant only for the few. It shares the modern democratism, which for Strauss began with Hobbes’ anthropological revolution. As Lacan writes playfully in the same, sole piece of writing wherein he had earlier mentioned Leo Strauss:

It is especially necessary to the scholar, the sage, and even the quack, to be the only one who knows. The idea that deep within the simplest of souls—and what’s more, in the sickest—there is something ready to blossom is one thing. But that there may be someone who seems to know as much as them about what we ought to make of it ... come to our rescue, you categories of primitive, pre-logical, and

archaic thought—nay, of magical thought, so convenient to attribute to others! It is not fitting that these country bumpkins should keep us breathless by posing enigmas to us that prove overly clever. (IL 433-434/521)

## FUNDAMENTAL ALTERNATIVES (EROS AND TRUTH)

So we repeat that our ambition here is no way to diminish the fundamental differences between the thoughts of Leo Strauss and those of Jacques Lacan. Ecumenism is for the “feeble-minded”, Lacan once opined, ridiculing liberal Catholicism with characteristic boldness of speech. (ST 742/847; Pound 16). We will see in seminar 2 how one fundamental marker of Strauss’ thought is a similar scepticism concerning the prospects of ideological syntheses or “internalisations”: whether of philosophy and theology, or of religious Orthodoxy and modern premises. (\*) In this spirit, no dialectical or other miracle of the reconciliation or mediation of opposites should be expected here. Our work, we similarly hope, will exceed being one more exemplification of that inescapably affecting endeavour: that of a scholar trying to bring together two thinkers he has differently identified with, and which no one previously had thought to compare.

Of course, the interested reader might point to biographical comparisons between Strauss and Lacan—near exact contemporaries—that an historian of ideas might make something of. Some of these are even provocative. Both thinkers came late to prominence. Both came to prominence in their different fields in the early 1950s. Strauss came from an Orthodox Jewish background; Lacan was educated by the Jesuits. Both seem to have lost their faith by their adolescence. Both were young admirers of Spinoza (\*), and profoundly moved by the thought of Martin Heidegger. Strauss attended Heidegger’s lectures in Freiburg, attesting to sense in them—beyond his own non-understanding—something “fundamentally important to man as man”. (\*) Lacan translated Heidegger’s later essay “Logos” into French, visited him in the Black Forest, and drove him around Paris, when Heidegger came to France. (\*) Both Lacan and Strauss attended and were captivated by Alexandre Kojève’s famous lectures on Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Geist* in Paris in the 1930s. Both Lacan and Strauss maintained a lifelong friendship with the eccentric, self-professed Sage or “Right-wing Marxist”, despite fundamental differences in their thought—and in Strauss’ case, despite emigration from Europe to the New World. As we will see, perhaps the closest point of proximity between their respective teachings comes in the nearly simultaneous seminars either gave on Plato’s *Symposium* in 1958-1959, respectively in Paris and Chicago.

The basic motive for writing this book, beyond such diverting tid-bits of intellectual history, is a philosophical one. Leo Strauss and Jacques Lacan, I believe, are two of the most profound and important thinkers of the twentieth century. They present two, fundamentally alternative, accounts of what Strauss calls the meaning of the whole. Or at least, as we will have in the end to qualify, both thinkers proffer contrasting accounts of that whole which comprises what the ancients called the political or human things: the nature or constitution of human beings as political, desiring, speaking beings. As Alan Bloom has commented of Freud, psychoanalysis promises a modern equivalent of what ancient philosophy was: an account of the human psyche: which would allow us inclusive insight into the nature and causality of human speech and action, creativity and political being. One way in which Strauss' powerful characterization of modern thought then surely does not fit Lacan's thought is this. Lacan's thought, and psychoanalysis, surely holds that that the truth of each individual is historical in kind: "the unconscious is the chapter of my history that is marked by a blank or occupied by a lie: it is the censored chapter." (FFS 215/259) Yet psychoanalysis, and Lacan, have received most grave criticism, from Marxist and feminist critics in particular, for their fundamentally ahistorical, non-historicist accounts of human subjectivity and desire. Whatever else it may be, Lacanian thought is not an historicism. (\*) Like classical philosophy, and as Strauss retrieves it, it is rather an account of human being per se, as shaped by the confrontation of the individual with a Law—in Lacanian, a "discourse of the Other"—that preceded, transcends, profoundly shapes, and will outlast her qua individual. In Lacanian language, one could even venture that Strauss and Lacan are united insofar as they both offer accounts of human being as a "split subjectivity". For Strauss, human beings are divided between "the city and man": ultimately, the demands of the nomoi and morality, versus our higher openness to the fundamental questions (What is the best way of life? What is Law? What is a God?) addressed antagonistically by philosophy and revealed religion. For Lacan, human beings as such are split between self-consciousness and the unconscious; imaginary *mescconnaissance*, symbolic identification, and the Truth of the Real; ultimately, between a vital nature we have never known, and a culture to which we can never accede without telling remainder.

In the service of these competing accounts of the human condition, Lacan and Strauss both undertake the most extraordinarily far-reaching, and extraordinarily ambitious, engagements with the history of Western philosophy, literature, and political thought. We enumerated the extent of these respective engagements above. We add here only that for both, in Strauss' opening words in *City and Man*:

It is not self-forgetting and pain-loving antiquarianism nor self-forgetting and intoxicating romanticism which induces us to turn with passionate interest, with unqualified willingness to learn, toward the political thought of classical antiquity. We are impelled to do by the crisis of our time, the crisis of the West. (CM 1)

We have seen Strauss' cogently powerful account of the moderns, which underlies his discourse of crisis, and motivates his siding with the ancients. Yet Lacan's modernism, we shall see in Lecture 2, did not preclude his own radical critique of modern subjectivity and the 'human sciences'. Indeed, although psychoanalysts and psychoanalysis since Freud has fallen far short of this august calling, Lacan maintains that "it expresses nothing less than the recreation of human meaning in an arid era of scientism." (FFS 239-289) This is why, Lacan comments, while the subjects (rhetoric, dialectic, poetics, grammar, and witz) he ventures to recommend for psychoanalysts in his programmatic Rome Discourse, "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis": "... may sound somewhat old-fashioned, I would not hesitate to recommend them as a return to our sources." (FFS 238/288)

Perhaps my central reason however for venturing a comparative analysis of Lacan and Strauss would be this. Contemporary authors such as Jonathan Lear have noted the putative similarities of psychoanalysis to classical philosophy. Freud himself was of course ever keen to emphasise the ancient, Platonic heritage to soften the scandal of his own, controversially expanded notion of Eros in *The Three Essays on Sexuality* of 1905. (\*) Significantly enough for us (see lectures 5-6), Plato at the start of Book IX of the *Republic* begins his description of the life of the tyrant by stating that he lives in reality the most ignoble desires most people only dream about. Just as Glaucon's Gyges in that text can think of nothing better to deploy his god-like invisibility for (Rep. 360c) than to kill the King and seduce his wife (Rep. 359c-360b), so too the "bestly and savage part" of the psyche the tyrant is a slave to "doesn't shrink from trying to have sex with a mother, as it supposes, or with anyone else at all, whether man, god, or beast. It will commit any foul murder ..." (Rep. 571c-d)

However—and here will close by returning to our beginnings—what Milner calls Lacan's "classicism", it seems to us, is most at play in what drew Lacan throughout his career to return to what Nietzsche, and Strauss after him, called "the problem of Socrates". (see 3 below) This is that in psychoanalysis, as in the Platonic Socrates, the dialogic search for Truth is not an "objective" business, on the *sine ira et studio* model of modern scientific

method. Rather, the search for Truth is tied irrevocably by Plato to the enigmas or vicissitudes of human Eros, the animating force or daimon of the human psyche. Plato's Socrates repeats that, as medicine is for the body, so philosophy as he conceives it would be to the soul. (refs Apo; Riv. Lov.) Ancient philosophy is a kind of therapy of desire, which operates through the means of speech. Its end is precisely that eros should not "live like a tyrant" within the enlightened individual. (Rep. 574e). Like contemporary classicist Pierre Hadot in the French orbit, Strauss will emphasise again and again that philosophy for the ancients, in contrast to the moderns, was before all else and above all else a bios or way of life. (\*) The truth the philosopher seeks, that is, is also a transformative truth—at least a truth whose very pursuit implicates the philosopher's soul.

I take it that a modern reader cannot fail to see that, however different the contents of psychoanalytic teaching, psychoanalysis as a praxis of "talking cure" recalls the Socratic aspiration: one whose notion of anamnesis also inescapably invokes the Platonic antecedent. (\*) The reader of Lacan can also be reminded in this opening description of classical philosophy as a bios, of Lacan's enigmatic definition of psychoanalysis as the science which above all includes the subject of science in its purview. (ref.) One could be tempted to think here concerning Lacan and psychoanalysis, what we might often think concerning Strauss' predilection for commentary: that Protagoras' claim at the beginning of Plato's eponymous dialogue (Pro. \*), that the wise had until him cloaked themselves behind masks of poets, might apply for psychoanalysis in an age when academic philosophy has almost wholly forgotten its Socratic origin. (cf. Zizek\*) Then there is Lacan's career-long insistence, to which we are now brought, on the distinction between "reality", the object of knowledge; and truth, which by contrast involves the subjectivity or "position of enunciation" of its seeker. (FFS 213/256) Braumgardt, in an important article, notes that this distinction emerges fully when we note that what is decisive for Lacan is the opposition of truth versus lie, rather than the concern for true versus untrue reportage of states of affairs. (Braumgardt 2002, 6) Freud, we know, placed psychoanalysis under the Delphic banner associated with Socrates: gnothi seauton (as usually translated: "know thyself").

If the author may then be permitted then to lay his cards on the table, I would contend that what makes Strauss' and Lacan's thought uniquely interesting is precisely that they both, in different ways, resituate inquiry so that it asks us to question ourselves, insofar as we are seekers after truth. As Nietzsche had asked before them, at the opening of *Beyond Good and Evil*: why do we want the truth? Why not rather untruth? (ref.) On one hand,

there is clearly a shared debt in both Strauss and Lacan to Heidegger's notion of truth as *aletheia*—that is, both revelation and concealment. This sense of double or twofold truth echoes in both Strauss' and Lacan's ways of reading texts and the psyche. Jacques Lacan—again I am laying out a hand—seems to me the most intellectually ambitious, eccentric or innovative legatee of the Heideggerian lineage. Lacan's "return to the meaning of Freud" in fact brings this lineage together in the most unlikely manner, with motifs drawn from Cartesian and German idealist thought. Strauss, for his part, presents the most incisive critique of Heideggerianism. On one side, Strauss will situate Heidegger's teaching concerning "authenticity" and "being-towards-death" in the context of wider European, post-Nietzschean nihilism and historicism: an historicism which could not present, although it does not directly legislate, Heidegger's political opting for fascism. (\*) On the other side, Strauss acutely identifies how, in Heidegger's thought, "there is no place for political philosophy. That place has been taken by the god or the gods." (refs) Strauss' post-Heideggerian retrieval of concealed teaching in the history of Western ideas, that is, is also a return, specifically, to political rationalism as he frames it. Strauss' interest in political philosophy responds to his interest in the Socratic question, which he thinks Heidegger's thought so disastrously can offer no decisive answers, beyond decision itself: how should we live? What is the best way of life? Strauss follows this question, as it led Plato and Aristotle, into the question concerning what is the best political regime? What ends ought to orient human beings' political lives together?

For Strauss, as we will see, esoteric writing has several justifications. The first and lowest justification is the philosopher's interest in self-preservation; his fear of persecution. (\*) However, esotericism also embodies philosophers' sense of political responsibility. This responsibility hails from their asking, each in their own way and context, Nietzsche's question concerning our desire for truth or otherwise. Is it always benevolent—as we moderns have come to suppose—to want the truth? Are there not some species of truth that it is better for some, perhaps most, people not to concern themselves with? And what, in particular, must we say, when we consider the political or ethical signification of our own activity, as lovers of the truth? Is it not the case that the very "element" of society is a set of more or less unshakably, hence non-rationally, accepted opinions or assumptions, so that the *skepsis* associated with philosophical reasoning must always be received with anxiety by "the city"? (FAW 220)

Lacan for his part shared the classical philosophers' sense that most people, most of the time, have little taste to confront the truth of their desire of concern for psychoanalysis.

Following Freud, Lacan from the beginning went so far as to posit a “passion for ignorance” or non-knowing in human beings (I, 277-278): a fundamental ‘je n’en veux rien savoir’ (‘I don’t want to know anything about it’ (XX 9/1) at the basis of the ego, and the origin of what psychoanalysis posits as resistance. (ref.) The Platonic teaching of the need and nobility of certain species of pseudos (deceits or fictions)—a teaching with which Strauss’ name has become irretrievably associated—is one thing. Yet it is vertiginously outbid by Lacan’s Delphic repetition that the truth itself has “a fictional ordering”, as well as being “that which makes the very existence of fiction possible”. (E 11/17, 7/12)

## JUSTIFICATIONS

Let us then close this Introduction by presenting what seems to me the third and highest justification of esotericism. To recall: first, we have seen, there is the reality of persecution and censorship whose co-naturality with esoteric writing Strauss first alerts us. This is a reality which is historically variable, and Strauss might say ignoble. The second justification comes from philosophers’ consideration of what Strauss terms their political responsibilities:

OT citation.

This involves a political species of self-knowledge: a politics of philosophy, as Strauss will insist, which licences the political presentation of philosophy, through the art of esoteric writing. (ref.; see Lecture 2) For it concerns what we can term in Lacanian language the philosopher’s own position of his enunciation: that is, how his pursuit of the truth appears before the court of the Other of “the city”. Yet: neither of these justifications for esotericism, it would seem, can stand as compelling in a society characterized by freedom of speech and the mass commercial media, a society wherein Nietzsche or Machiavelli’s blasphemies seem themselves as old-fashioned and toothless as the revealed religions seemed to Machiavelli or Nietzsche.

There is however a third justification of esotericism. It is pedagogical, not political: and hence can stand in a liberal society. It answers to the sense that there are some species of truth that one cannot access, except at the price of intellectual elbow grease, as Lacan says at the opening of the *Ecrits*. In his central essay on Maimonides in *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, Strauss considers Maimonides’ statement that the communication of the secrets of the Torah is not simply forbidden. It is impossible. It is impossible because

the nature of the Truths in question. These mysteries are not susceptible of direct communication, whatever the politics of the matter. Strauss may comment that a rational Law can not prohibit something that is impossible. (PAW 59) Lacanian defines castration as precisely a founding prohibition of what is as such impossible: undivided, Edenic bliss or Jouissance. (ref.)

However that may be, Maimonides' reflection here points to another justification for the kind of indirect communication Leo Strauss and Jacques Lacan devoted the best part of their lives to deciphering, if not practicing it themselves. Lacan points to what we mean here when he says that his rhetoric is intended to have "training effects" on his listeners: pre-eminently "little shoes", aspiring analysts. (E 493-4/722) That is, it aims to transform the subjectivity of the auditor, beyond simply informing him. The transformation in its turn requires an active work and assumption of responsibility for learning for oneself. To cite Lacan once more:

One has but to look to see that, wherever one does not come by such knowledge by pounding it into one's head by tough experience, it falls flat. It can neither be imported nor exported. There is no information that stands up unless it is shaped for use. (XX 89/97)

To compare, consider that Strauss for his part famously points to how Machiavelli's concealment of a telling blasphemy in his Discourses on Livy has a similar pedagogical function:

By concealing the blasphemy, Machiavelli compels the reader to think the blasphemy by himself and thus to become Machiavelli's accomplice ... Machiavelli is anxious to establish this kind of intimacy if only with a certain kind of reader he calls 'the young'. Concealment as practiced by Machiavelli is an instrument of subtle corruption or seduction. He fascinates the reader by confronting him with riddles. Thereafter the fascination with problem-solving makes the reader oblivious to all higher duties if not all duties. (TOM 50)

If in both Strauss' and Lacan's work what becomes the stake is a species of transhistorical truth whose pursuit is nevertheless freighted to have transformative value, we hence propose, this is because the truth that each man pursues—the truth of the subject, or of the political condition in which we are implicated--can only be won through overcoming,

through hard work, the passion for ignorance both see at the heart of our political subjectivity per se. And for Lacan as much as for Leo Strauss, this is precisely the register of truth that thought in the age of the exact sciences has forgotten or closed over (XX\*): however we assess Strauss' unusually bold claim that perhaps the best name for the modern enlightenment is "Obfuscation" with a capital O. (TOM 173; Fink 110)

If we were to choose one image to describe our aim here it would be an image from Plato's Republic. Socrates has been talking of the relations between the accounts of justice in the individual soul, and the city, which bear the same name, although they are different things. Because his sight in these matters is so dim, Socrates claims to be unable to hope to espy justice unless he considers it in the larger thing, the polis. Hence, he proposes a method to Glaucon, so they can proceed:

And we agreed that this larger thing is the city, and so we constructed the best city in our power, well knowing that in the good city it would of course be found. What, then, we thought we saw there we must refer back to the individual and, if it is confirmed, all will be well. But if something different manifests itself in the individual, we will return again to the state and test it there and it may be that, by examining them side by side and rubbing them against one another, as it were from the fire-stick<sup>s</sup> we may cause the spark of justice to flash forth, and when it is thus revealed confirm it in our own minds. (Rep. 434e-435a)

Just so, our hope is here is that, by as it were rubbing together the two sticks of Lacanian thought concerning the psyche and Straussian reflections on political philosophy, a distinct light might be cast on the same. At least, we may be able or what Strauss termed the 'fundamental alternatives' facing we moderns.

To anticipate: the structuring of the sessions bespeaks three convergent principles, which aim to situate the intellectual comparison between Strauss and Lacan as meaningfully as possible. First, there is the Platonic cave allegory, whence we must ascend with the thinkers from, and return to, where we begin today (Seminars I (Monday) and V (Friday)) Second, taking a cue this time from the closing lines of Plato's Symposium, the middle sessions are structured around the contest between philosophy and poetry, and comedy and tragedy: Seminar II hence looks at the two thinkers' engagements with comedy<sup>s</sup> and Aristophanes, Seminar III's first hour juxtaposing Strauss' Symposium with Lacan's. Seminar III's second half and Seminar IV (Thursday) consider respectively tragedy (in its Platonic proximity to

tyranny), then the two thinker's engagements with the West's monotheistic lineages. The third principle is that, if Seminars II through IV can consider Lacan's and Strauss' accounts of what the latter called Athens (theoria) and Jerusalem (religion, morality), the two great premodern sources of our contemporary world, Seminars I to V return us to the largest opposition in Strauss' thought, the ancient and the modern ∞

## NOTES

1. See also in the Hobbes sub-chapter of Natural Right and History, in a context identical to that of his explicit invocation of Holmes and Moriarty—namely, a discussion of the relation between Machiavelli's and Hobbes's teachings. Strauss writes that for Hobbes "death insofar as man can do something about it, i.e., death insofar as it can be avoided or avenged, supplies the ultimate guidance." To this claim Strauss affixes a paradoxical note that at first reads as little more than a throwaway line: "One would have to start from here to understand the role the detective story plays in present-day moral orientation." From LSDS.

2. Amusingly, in \*, Lacan even wrote a piece on the number 13. (Cf. TOM 51\*)

3. To this list we might lately add works of exoteric exposition and apology of the master (cf. Michael and Catherine Zuckert (2006), Thomas Pangle (2006), Steven Smith (2006), Peter Minowitz (2009) for Strauss; Bruce Fink, \*, or even some of Žižek's work for Lacan) directed at well-meaning Others.

4. See Lacan "Lituraterre": "I am less implicated as an author in my writing than people imagine, and my *Écrits* is a title more ironic than people think, when what is at stake are either presentations designed by conventions or, let us say, 'open letters' in which I lay out a portion of my teaching". (at Fink 2004, 64)