

At the Limits of Rhetoric: Political Philosophy and the Media¹

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Abstract

The principles on which all the operation of the huge informing through the image and the world machine's operation are based are easily made evident. Its logic is that of what has no need to make sense, and the principles on which it is based are three: 1) the gross information has an immediate available sense for everybody; 2) what is important is present and even more, immediacy; and 3) information leads. The race of being the first in breaking the news is a sign of the unhealthy relationship we have with information. The moment breaks up in a cloud of information where everything is mixed without rhyme or reason. In this article, teacher Monserrat studies some of the aspects of the media, going into the limits of the rhetoric and political philosophy and using classical sources from authors like Socrates, Plato or Isocrates.

Key words: Rhetoric, political philosophy, media, Plato, Socrates.

1. The world as an insignificant spectacle: The domain of rhetoric

In a book intentionally written to be controversial, French professor Philippe Bénéton teaches us the effects of what he calls “equality by default”. “Equality by default” is the name he has given to the principle that characterises our advanced societies, which have decided to follow a downward levelling of everything that constitutes the actual reality of things. *A priori*, there is no need for them to be equal, but furthermore should they be equal, there is no need for them to be levelled downward. According to Bénéton's analysis, it turns out that the triumph of human rights comes paradoxically at the price of a methodical hollowing out of their substantial content. The processes of radicalisation of the

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claim for rights and the victory of individual autonomy ultimately result in the dispossession of the being, rendering it subjected to intensive watchfulness. As one of our newspaper commentators said recently, former extremist left-wing youths have ended up placing video surveillance on public thoroughfares when they had to exercise the responsibilities of governing. Our commentator found this to be an example of the paradoxical evolution typically found between youthful idealistic fervour and the harsh reality that these youths' conservative principles impose in adulthood. Our critical commentator is toying with our political leaders of today who were the young progressives of yesterday. It does not surprise me that a young defender of revolution ends up installing video surveillance on the street; it seems utterly coherent to me and is clear proof that the fundamental principles of their conception of society remain inalterable: some people are good and some are bad; therefore, "measures must be taken".²

For now, however, let us leave this public thoroughfare subjected to the surveillance of the authority, or to the vigilant eye of the police, and let us turn to the effects that Philippe Bénéton attributes to the action of "equality by default" in the mass media. To Bénéton, the principles underlying the entire functioning of the gigantic news machine that provides news via images and words are easily manifest. Their implicit epistemology harbours no mystery. Their logic is the logic of what does not need to make sense, and the three principles upon which it rests are: 1. Raw information has an immediately accessible meaning to everyone. 2. What matters is the current, and even more the immediate. 3. The image rules. The examples he cites are trivial, yet nonetheless effective. Bénéton cites televised news shows, the news on the economy that appears on them, the Dow Jones Index, for example. I quote his description:

"Yesterday afternoon, the Dow Jones Index dropped four points or rose three. I'm not sure which one and it actually doesn't matter. What matters more is that ritually, in France, in the United States, in Germany and elsewhere, the anchor of the evening news believes that it is his duty to provide this figure. What exactly does this index reflect? Is a variation of a few points significant? How can it be explained? What should we expect from it? In short, what is the meaning of this information? I confess my ignorance, and I imagine that I'm in good company. It is further doubtful whether the person speaking knows much more. That is, the information probably has very little meaning for both the person providing it and the person receiving it. And yet, judging by his expression when he is speaking, this is serious business. Look at him, the anchor, staring at the teleprompter where his text is scrolling down, and his articulation is perfect. He is a 'professional': he is not quite sure what he's saying, but he says it very well." (Bénéton, 2001:141).

The subject of the news is usually raw. By this I do not mean that it should not be somehow processed in order to be "communicable", or that it

² For a very accurate perspective, see Koselleck (1959).

should not correspond to the “facts” as they happen, but that precisely because of the very need for them to be communicable in a mass medium, they must adopt and take the form – even if it is not what they are – of a raw fact, a datum, an event, a case, a decontextualised proposition, that is, the form that is idealised in the “headline”. By the same token, what matters is the current, and even better, the immediate. Knowing is tantamount to immediately knowing what is happening, and the less distanced we are from the news the better. The race to be the first to report on the news, to tell the results of the elections right at an exit poll, is a sign of the unhealthy relationship we have with the news. The instant is shattered into a maelstrom of bits where everything is jumbled with no order or harmony, with no time to digest or even to find the nuance of the differences. The ephemeral and the fleeting are the lords that govern the economy of news broadcasts. The image rules. Wherever there is an image, everything must stop, even if it is a thoroughly insipid image, because the primary image which we are discussing does not reach the heart of things, does not discern, does not read. The primary image we are discussing reveals nothing unknown, hidden or profound. It is the surface of things, their *appearance*. Yet everything shown has been chosen. Using what criteria? The news machine saves itself from providing us with the selection criteria: what it explicitly states is that these criteria correspond to what our interest should be. However, what is implicit is a bit more complicated. On the one hand are the rules of the instrumental logic of the news machine: more information, more quickly, with more images and more spectacle; on the other hand is the law that expresses the spirit of the times: the preference for the epic of the physical man. The news machine prioritises the economy, sports, physical health, sexuality, in short, the wellbeing of the body. What profit does this yield in terms of knowledge? Who remembers what the important news was fifteen days ago, two months ago, one year ago? Bénéton’s analysis continues with this implacable critical logic, but we have to leave it now because it would not take us where we want to go. However, before explaining that, we must take yet another small detour.

We shall now cite a text by a slightly earlier author:

“So the orator (rétor) does not teach (didaskalikós) what justice or injustice is before the tribunals and other groups of people (okhlón); the only thing he does is convince (peistikós). Naturally, he could not teach such important things (megálaprágmata) to such a huge mass of people (dé pouokhlón) in such a short time (en olígokhróno).” (Plato: Gorgias, 455a).

This excerpt from Plato comes from a passage in which the character of Socrates is speaking in the dialogue entitled *Gorgias*. In the excerpt cited, rhetoric constructs persuasion. In this he concurs with Isocrates, who believed that the benefits of rhetoric derive from the mastery and subjugation of force via the word. The rhetoric of both Isocrates and Gorgias rightly celebrates the triumph of the word over force:

“As it is natural for us to convince each other and to demonstrate what we are deliberating on, not only must we distance ourselves from

the savage life, but we must then gather together, populate cities, establish laws, discover techniques; the word has helped using almost everything that we have invented.” (Isocrates: *Nicocles* III, 6).

However, this celebration of the word over force aims to occupy the entire space of political life. What would obligate us to act on the Socratic question is precisely an effort to counter this desire to occupy the totality of the dimension of human reflection and actions. Professor Jordi Sales has used the term “doxosophies” to refer to the knowledge that after having achieved a successful sphere of effectiveness, attempts to occupy the entire space of political life and become the critical instance or tribunal from which everything is judged. Socrates questioned this aim in every case – although now we are only concerned with rhetoric – and thus managed simultaneously to first reveal the limitation of this *doxosophy* and its subordination to another instance that judges, a critical instance which would yield *philosophy*, and secondly prompt an unintended effect, namely the antagonism of the orator and his brethren since he uncovers the weakness and error in their pretension for everything. Gorgias defines rhetoric as that which builds persuasion (*demiurgospeithous* [Plato: *Gorgias*, 453a]). What kind of persuasion? Socrates asks. Accepting that it is a given kind of persuasion leads to Gorgias’ subsequent refutation because he has already accepted the relativisation of the power of rhetoric along with its absolutisation. Rhetorical persuasion is specified with the purpose of what is just and what is unjust (Plato: *Gorgias*, 454b), and as a belief (*pístis*) instead of a teaching (*mathesis*) (Plato: *Gorgias*, 454d). From the latter derives the fact that two forms of persuasion are established: with and without teaching (*mathesis*) or knowledge (*episteme*). Rhetoric produces a persuasion that leads one to believe but that does not teach about what is just and what is unjust (Plato: *Gorgias*, 454e-455a). The orator does not teach (*didaskalein*); rather he leads one to believe (*epistein*). Socrates granted that the orator “could not, naturally, *teach* such important things to such a huge mass of people in such a short time”. Therefore, he must be satisfied with *convincing*, persuading as belief without teaching. In this brief excerpt, the model of life grounded upon rhetoric presents three essential features, which, following Jordi Sales, we shall refer to using the following neologisms: a) the *okhlogenetic* factor; b) the *oligochronic* factor; and c) the *megalopragmatic* factor (Sales, 1992:124-127).

a) The *okhlogenetic* factor: Rhetorical power cannot teach such important things to so many people (*okhlón*) in such a short time, but it can convince them. The persuasive function of rhetoric precisely achieves its efficacy in situations where there are many people. Rhetoric is possible and makes power possible in that it *engenders mass*. Sovereign rhetoric is what engenders the multitude or mass. Literally speaking, a “mass” (*okhlón*) is the mixture that stems from adding a liquid to a powder, yielding a solid, even pasty, substance. Therefore, pulverisation and the addition of a liquid are needed to create a new unit, the homogenous public that depends upon the word of the rhetorician. In his movement through the scene, it is clear that Socrates is not a part of the crowd that rhetoric creates and needs; rather his integration emerges as a

question of the conditions that enable and result from the massive action of civilised rhetoric.

b) The *oligochronic* factor: Rhetorical power has too little time (*oligokhronos*) to be able to teach a multitude such grand affairs, but in little time it can indeed convince. The reason is simple: it has little time because there are many people and what must be explained is too large. However, if we examine it more thoroughly it is not so simple: the orators and experts in the tribunals produce persuasion; they do not teach. However, they do manage to get the audience to say what they want them to say. The orator is the slave of the clock because the time to convince, the time he has to assemble the words to convince about great things is a scarce commodity, one that is vied for by more than one aspirant and which must be managed with the economy of maximal efficacy and celerity of information compared to his competitors. The monopoly on information is not characterised by the celerity of his information. "The free man always has the time to converse. (...) The orator is always speaking against the clock, urged on by the clock (...) because the adversary is above him ready to remind him of the points to which he must limit himself" (Plato: *Theaetetus*, 172d). There is little time, but persuasion, not teaching, takes place, because the act of educating that would disband the crowd and resize the truly attainable affairs via active, free conduits requires dimensions of the *vita activa* which have been violated by the efficacy of rhetorical action. The Socratic proposition is smaller, slower and targeted primarily at the individual conscience. Compared to rhetoric, which deals with large affairs in little time for many people, Socratic philosophy tends to lose in the game of appearances and short-term political expediencies.

c) The *megalopragmatic* factor: The efficacy of Gorgian rhetoric is measured in the text with examples given by Gorgias himself on the way that the truly grand things (*megálaprágmata*) in the city have been achieved, such as the fortifications and walls. They are due to the merit of the rhetoricians, because the rhetoricians, not the doctors, for example, are the ones capable of convincing the ill person to take his medicine or let himself undergo surgery; if he wanted, the orator would even be able to get himself chosen as the doctor before the assembly (Plato: *Gorgias*, 456b). The capacity of rhetoric to fight against the multitude, to fight with the multitude, is so unique and superior to the specific technical skills that come before it that it is capable of overcoming the initially feasible dimensions. The socialised word subordinates and mutes the right word in its apparent inefficacy, which is weak before the whims of the ill person or before the passion of the crowd. This possibility of silencing those who only know about the specific particular compared to the whims of the many is the movement that enables the throngs to gather and be convinced of things that can become truly large, thanks to the number and the capacity of the multitude or mass.

Who would be capable of standing up to the force of the multitude which constitutes political power? Who has no fear of its force? Who does not concede

and bow to their opinions? And even worse, who would be capable of raising their voice amidst such noise?

2. A possible adaptation of the discourse that seeks the truth. Persecution and the Art of Writing. The indispensable memory of the difficulty of seeking the truth. Reticent writing

The question of the effects of the influence of philosophical questioning becomes particularly dramatic in relation to the legal system of the city. Let us recall the case of Socrates, who was accused, judged, sentenced, executed and later rehabilitated, by democratic Athens (Luri Medrano, 1998; Strauss, 1989). Philosophy has often been aware of this founding circumstance, and we should listen to what the philosophers have said about this awareness. However, much later, especially the movement that has been called the Enlightenment tried to demonstrate that in addition to undermining and diminishing the fundamental beliefs and institutions of democracy, the quest for knowledge and its popular dissemination supply the only solid basis for a given kind of *free* governance. Leo Strauss was persuaded by Nietzsche, Heidegger and Carl Schmitt's critiques of "modern rationalism", devastating critiques of the liberal political philosophy. These critiques blamed the spiritual decline of the West on the liberal and democratic principles that had ultimately triumphed after a longer or shorter gestation. The depth and rigour of Strauss' analysis, however, led him to transcend these anti-liberal and anti-democratic struggles that were shaking up Europe and to reconsider the appropriateness and the status of modern philosophical criticism in light of its ancient counterpart. Strauss reopened the grievance among ancients and moderns alike in the quest for an ancient liberalism that could be associated with the entity that became its refuge: philosophy. Strauss avoided the perils of Nietzsche, Schmitt and Heidegger, giving an even more profoundly conservative response to their conservative criticisms of tradition, and since he was even more profoundly conservative he was even more radical. Back in his earliest philosophical formulations, Strauss stated the following: we have fallen into a *second cave* because of our polemic against tradition: this is why we need a *history of philosophy* to mend the cave – from the second to the first cave or natural situation (Strauss, 1934:13). The "discovery of nature" is Strauss' attempt to achieve a source of inquiry for human actions that is not reduced to the will, arbitrariness or subjectivity of modernity, and that can sustain the comparison with the Torah or traditional Jewish law. However, Strauss, following Lucretius, always prompts thoughts of *De rerum natura*, the poem of uprootedness, of recognition of the despairing nature of the truth, as well as the reluctance to reveal this unredeemable absence of divinity or meaning or order in the world outside philosophical circles.

"The recognition of this truth, of this fundamental exile, according to which man lacks roots or the possibility of regret and reintegration into the community of faith that Maimonides had defended, of which religion specifically consists, is the result of philosophy". (Lastra, 2000:231)

If not Strauss' main contribution, at least his most famous one is the revival of a forgotten way of interpreting and understanding the relationship among philosophy, politics and communication. In *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, he outlines the principles of his hermeneutics, which earn him contradictory praise from H.G. Gadamer.³ Strauss gave a working plan that he prepared at the beginning of his sojourn in the United States this tentative title: *Philosophy and the Law: Historical Essays*. The title was the translation of a work of his published in Germany in 1935, *Philosophie und Gesetz*, but with the contents changed and expanded.⁴ Among the contents there is an essay entitled "Persecution and the Art of Writing", and he notes the planned outline of the subject: "What we can observe in the totalitarian societies of our day – that is, societies which eliminate the freedom of speech via a manifest policy – provides us with important guidelines for understanding the conditions under which numerous free spirits of centuries past have thought, expressed themselves and written. This subject will be dealt with in: (X) 'Persecution and the Art of Writing' (already published in *Social Research*, 8 [1941]). / I will include in this essay the observations on the controversy over the writings of Maimonides in the early 13th century. / In essay X, I should mention the question of knowledge as the emergence of the modern liberal society, which is characterised by recognition of every person's right to freedom of speech and has radically changed the condition of the literary production of heterodox or not entirely orthodox thinkers. It would seem desirable to discuss one example taken from the transitional period, from the period during which both ways of seeing freedom of speech, the old way and the modern or liberal way, were still at odds with one another. The most interesting example in today's context would be the controversy between Moses Mendelssohn and F.H. Jacobi over the Spinozism of Lessing. While preparing the edition of Mendelssohn's metaphysical writings for the *edició de jubileu*, I discovered unknown documents which shed new light on this controversy. A discussion of this controversy would enable me to examine Spinoza's philosophy in its relationship with mediaeval Jewish philosophy."

Leo Strauss never wrote this book; instead, in 1952 he published a book that revisited some of these contents with the title of the essay we are discussing. In the study of certain thinkers from the past (Maimonides, Halevi, Spinoza and others) Leo Strauss discovered a following way of envisioning the relations between the quest for truth and society: philosophy and science, as the supreme expressions of man's activity, consist of an attempt to replace a simple opinion about things with knowledge of this "whole". Despite this, the world of opinion is the element in which society develops; hence philosophy and science themselves entail an attempt to dissolve the element in which society develops. Thus it follows that philosophy and science should be limited to a minority, and that philosophers and scientists should respect the opinions upon which society is grounded. This limitation to a minority stems from the very difficulty of the

³ H.G. Gadamer dedicated controversial pages of his famous work starting in the second edition to L. Strauss (Gadamer, 1989:493ss). Upon the publication of the first edition, both authors engaged in correspondence that continued the acquaintance they had made back in Germany when they were still students. The epistolary relationship has been published (Gadamer and Strauss, 1978:5-11).

⁴ This project ("Plan of a book tentatively entitled *Philosophy and the Law: Historical Essays*"), which comes from the Strauss archives conserved in the library of the University of Chicago, was published by K.H. Green (1997:467-470).

matter, while respect for opinion stems from the difficulty or impossibility of exchanging it for knowledge. These authors developed a particular expository method which enabled them to reveal what they considered the truth to a few without endangering the majority's unconditional acceptance of opinions. They would clearly differentiate between a truthful, esoteric doctrine and a socially useful, exoteric one. The crucial premise of this argument is the position which asserts that the world of opinion is the element in which society develops. And the idea that Strauss set forth has two implicit notions. One of them is historical: knowing whether there were ever great thinkers who held the view on the relations between philosophy and society as we have described them now and used it to guide their communicative activity; and a philosophical one: knowing whether this point of view is completely false, completely true or conditionally true (for example, "the world of opinion is the element on which non-liberal societies are developed").

In the brief compendium in which Al-Farabi synthesises Plato's *Laws*, there is a story in the prologue to illustrate a general principle (Al-Farabi, 1952). This principle says that learned men, when behaving repeatedly in a certain way, induce people to falsely believe that they will always behave in the same way. The story goes as follows. Once upon a time there lived a pious ascetic, a man who lived in isolation and abstinence in his love of mortification and humiliation, who habitually and consciously preferred pain over pleasure. He was known for being a man of probity, self-mastery, abstinence and devotion to the gods. Despite all this, or perhaps precisely because of it, he attracted the ire of the tyrant of the city. Overcome by fear of the tyrant, he wanted to flee, but the tyrant ordered him imprisoned, and to ensure that he could not escape, he ordered that all the guards keep careful watch over the city gates. The pious ascetic managed to get appropriate clothing for his purposes and donned it, although the story does not explain how he got it. He also got some cymbals, and faking drunkenness while singing along with the clashing of the cymbals he drew near one of the city gates at sundown. When the guard said, "Who goes there?" he answered jokingly: "I am the pious ascetic you're looking for". The guard thought that the man was teasing and let him pass. The pious ascetic thus managed to save himself without ever having told a lie (Strauss, 1988:135ss).

To Gadamer, Strauss' indications are "largely obvious on the surface", but not so obviously deep-down, which would prevent any certainty in their interpretation:

"Are not conscious displacement, masking and concealment of one's own opinion actually the extreme and rare case of a much more frequent situation, and even of the usual, common situation? Persecution (by superiors, the Church, the Inquisition, etc.) is nothing other than an extreme case compared to the deliberate pressure exerted or not by society and advertising on human thinking." (Gadamer, 1989)⁵

⁵ This is an opinion also shared in a wonderful article introducing the hermeneutics of Leo Strauss by Professor J. Blanco Echauri (1996:89-108).

Strauss' position is radical: it expands to the entire history of philosophy (always truly opposed by religious or political power) against the ingenuous enlightened thesis of saying everything and explaining everything. And both persecution and the quest for a reader who could be a potential disciple come into play in this concealment. Gadamer refuses to accept this because it is extremely difficult to find criteria that unequivocally establish this dissimulation:

"I do not see very clearly that when contradictory propositions are found in an author, the concealed and occasional ones should be taken as the expression of their real opinion (...). Contradictory points are indeed a prime criterion for truth, but unfortunately they are not an unequivocal criterion for hermeneutic thinking. (...). It seems totally certain to me that this sentence of Strauss', so enlightening at first, cannot be applied to the so-called Platonic errors in Socrates' argumentation, the sentence that when an author shows contradictions that any schoolchild today could easily identify, then we should suppose that not only are they deliberate but they are meant to be discovered." (Gadamer, 1989).

Leo Strauss responds to this criticism of the weakness of his premises with by supplying proof, such as this:

"If a society bans its writers from freely discussing the principles upon which it is grounded, we are legitimated to pose the question of whether a writer who belongs to such a society and stands up in defence of his principles is defending those principles because he is convinced of their validity or because he is giving way to a superior force. The question becomes even more acute if it is a writer of great intelligence who explicitly says that it is not wrong to teach doctrines that people know are erroneous. And even more important is the problem of whether his writings are full of enigmatic details that would easily be imperceptible if someone does not pay enough attention to them" (Strauss, 1959:224).

The influence of persecution on literature consists precisely of the fact that it requires all writers who hold heterodox points of view to develop a peculiar writing technique. However, what kind of writing can be protected from persecution and yet serve as philosophical communication? How is this feat possible at the limits of communication?

"Everyone whose thinking does not follow *equine logic* or, in other words, everyone capable of independent, honest thinking, cannot condescend to accept the points of view sponsored by the government. Persecution cannot prevent independent thought," said Leo Strauss (Strauss, 1952:23). When he speaks about "equine logic", he is referring to Parmenidean logic, and especially to the logic that characteristics the inhabitants of the country of the Houyhnhnms according to the narrator of *Gulliver's Travels*. In equine logic, it is impossible

to say “what is not” because lies have no place in their world. Gulliver recounts that the horses “do not have a word in their language that means lie or falsehood”.⁶ Absolute frankness is not a characteristic of human creatures. For this reason, we must write and read “between the lines”.

“This literature is not meant for all readers, but only for faithful and intelligent readers. It has all the advantages of private communication without sharing its most important disadvantage – that it only reaches the writer’s acquaintances. It has all the advantages of public communication without sharing its most important disadvantage – capital punishment for the author. However, how can a man work the miracle of speaking in a publication for a minority and silencing himself for the majority of his readers? What makes this literature possible can be expressed through the axiom that unreflective men are careless readers, and that only thinking men are careful readers.” (Strauss, 1952:25).

“Another axiom that is meaningful, however only as long as persecution remains at the limits of legal procedure, is when a careful writer of average intelligence is more intelligent than the most intelligent censor”. (Strauss, 1952:25-26).

The reassessment of the technical resources of this reticent, elusive or esoteric writing is Strauss’ most renowned contribution. Let us recall, for example, the latent significance of repetitions, of meaningful silences, of important contradictions. The caution that the writer imposes on himself must also be imposed on the interpreter in order not to assume more than what is insinuated: this method should only be applied in the certainty of a clarification more evident than what in *historicist* texts were nothing other than errors or symptoms of decline or weakness. Writing can then become the refuge of philosophical communication veiled in a textual tapestry where mirages are woven. However, is this description of a situation of persecution valid for our times? Strauss tempered his argumentation with the following reflection, which would also have the virtue of distracting us from the prejudice which claims that by being the latest we are also better than the ones before us, and making our situation the general norm: “The attitude that people adopt towards freedom of public discussion decisively depends on what they think about popular education and its limits. Generally speaking, the pre-modern philosophers were less bold on this point than modern philosophers are.” (Strauss, 1952:33). The possibility of formulating the distinction between two kinds of esoteric writing, that of those who believe that the distance separating the “sages” from the “masses” cannot be spanned, and that of those who believe that it can be modified by progress in popular education, therefore results from what we think about the redemptive value of the scope of education. “Esoteric literature assumes that there are basic truths that would not be uttered in public by any decent man because they could harm many people who, after being injured, would naturally tend to injure the one who uttered the unpleasant truths. In

⁶J. Swift: *Gulliver’s Travels*. From another perspective, we have also used Gulliver’s travels in the perennial discussion between *idealists* and *realists* in politics (Monserrat Molas, 2007).

other words, it assumes that the freedom of research and the freedom to publish all of the results of research are not guaranteed as basic facts. This literature is essentially related to a society which is not liberal.” Strauss continued to set out to resolve this issue, but the simplicity of his response is nonetheless surprising. Strauss had adopted the esoteric way of writing. He continues the text thus:

“The answer is simple. In Plato’s Symposium, Alcibiades – that renowned son of Athens – compares Socrates and his speeches with certain sculptures that are truly ugly outside, but that contain the most precious images of divine bodies. The works of the great writers of the past are lovely even on the outside, yet their visible beauty is manifest ugliness compared to the beauty of those hidden treasures which are revealed to one only through an arduous, never simple and always pleasant endeavour. This always difficult though always pleasant effort is, I believe, what philosophers have in mind when they recommend education. They feel that education is the only answer to the always disturbing question, to the political question par excellence, of how to reconcile an order that is not oppression with a freedom that is not license.” (Strauss, 1952:37).

The “simplicity” of Strauss’ response is not so simple if we notice that, in order to respond to “our” liberal society, Strauss utilises Plato’s device, and if we furthermore notice the irony concealed in the even more specific reference to Alcibiades. The frankness or outspokenness of Alcibiades and Athens should be considered bearing in mind first the tragic reality of the three-fold traitorous fate of Alcibiades which came with the defeat of Athens, and secondly the fact that Strauss warned that the difficulty in understanding the classics comes from the contemporary reader’s exposure to the “brutal and sentimental literature of the last five generations”. “We need a second education to accustom our eyes to the noble reserve and the tranquil serenity of the classics”. This ethics of literature is eminently idealistic and consists of “the preference for recalling the good before the bad”.⁷ Carlo Altini comments on Strauss’ response in this way: the problem of esotericism and reticent writing corresponds not only to tyrannical and totalitarian societies in which the right to the freedom of research and the public dissemination of its results is not guaranteed; rather it is also characteristic of liberal societies, especially in response to *conformism*. The recipients of the esoteric philosophical works may still be not philosophers but potential young philosophers who must be guided towards the truth through popular opinions. The text, or writing, is the philosopher’s act of love towards the young of his own species.⁸ We would further add to Strauss’s ethics of literature and the usefulness of esotericism against conformism its necessity in

⁷ See Soleràs’ comment in the Joan Sales novel *Incerta glòria*: “la serenitat dels classics consisteix en no llegir-los” (the serenity of the classics consists of not reading them).

⁸ Altini (1998:227), paraphrasing Strauss. To study Strauss today, not only is the essay by Lastra cited necessary, so is the work by Altini (2000).

an order that seems increasingly more subjugated to the expression “politically correct”.⁹

3. Communication and transmission: From Aristophanes to Plato. Analysis of Plato’s Symposium

Strauss suggests that persecution fails wherever caution is the guiding principle in one’s mission as a dissident writer whose intelligence enables him to guarantee his personal safety without diminishing the efficacy of his undertaking. The effect of persecution forces writers to use a particular writing technique. Strauss illustrates this with an extreme example where persecution shows its most brutal face. It is easy to imagine, he says, a writer who, free from all suspicion and respected by the only political party existing in a totalitarian state, is guided by his studies to question the rectitude of the official interpretation of the history of religion. Surely no one would prevent him from publishing a virulent criticism of liberal opinion. To this end, he would have to first outline this opinion in order to later criticise it. In the course of his exposition, which is brimming with numerous literal citations and a host of technical terms, using the characteristic resources of official propaganda, he would confer unjustified importance on insignificant details, omitting some of the most important questions. And only when he has reached the core of his argumentation “would he write three or four sentences in this vivid, concise style susceptible to drawing the attention of the youth who love thinking” (Strauss, 1952:24). This central passage would outline the position of the adversaries more clearly, more irresistibly and more implacably than in the best times of liberalism, abandoning “all the absurd excrescences of the liberal credo which had the chance to proliferate in the heyday of liberalism, in the times therefore that were approaching stupidity”, in such a way that “his young and reasonable reader would have a fleeting vision of the forbidden fruit for the first time” (Strauss, 1952:25). The crux of the work, its critical part, would consist of

⁹ The book by Lastra (2000) reaches the core of Strauss’ philosophy. However, from Lucretius on, with Lessing as one of the cores of Strauss’ thinking according to A. Lastra, is it not difficult to explain Strauss’ mission to exert *political* influence – or was it merely *political philosophy*? And was Stanley Rosen right when he provocatively claimed that Strauss was even more radical than those who thought that philosophy was over, because he thought that philosophy had never existed? The light that Lastra sheds on Lucretius and Strauss has give us yet another clue for explaining a lack of Plato in Strauss: Strauss rarely cites the Letters. Strauss disdains the Academy. Yet again I am using a provocative formula: Strauss never understood Plato because he thought that Plato was ancient; yet Plato, and in this we are with Stanley Rosen, is modern, not ancient. What is the nature of human nature? Ultimately, Lastra’s study of Strauss leads us to this fundamental problem. Strauss argues that history does not necessarily have a direction or character. Human beings can never control their fate because the world is never totally intelligible or rational. There is always something that escapes human understanding. This limitation means that there can never be a perfect political order, the repository of the truth. Strauss claims that the preservation of humanity relies on recognition of the limited or determined nature of human life. He suggests that human beings do not remain human if they do not recognize the existence of something that is more than them – what has traditionally been called god or gods. As a philosopher, he leaves the question clearly posed. As an epicurean, suggests Lastra, gods are distant and have no relationship with human beings. As a Jew, Strauss resides in the mystery of the presence and absence of Yahweh. As a politician, suggests Rosen, Strauss would do with Plato but the same as Kojève did with Hegel (see Rosen [1987a], especially the third and central chapter which lends its name to the title of the book and which is devoted to his teachers Kojève and Strauss).

the deployment of the most virulent theses from the official books of the governing party. After his passionate and joyous reading of the brief central passages, the intelligent youth would find these pages particularly dense and distressing, thus discriminating the true meaning and scope of the expository part, especially after successive readings. The example seems forced, but recent history yields surprising examples: in the past decades we have witnessed the discovery of works that had remained closeted in the secret archives of the Soviet political police, along with works that were published in the purest reticent or esoteric style that we have discussed, such as the texts on the philosophy of language in Plato which are dealt with from the standpoint of orthodox theology (Maristany, 2002). Having all the advantages of communication, both public and private, but none of its disadvantages (personal safety is never seriously threatened), esoteric literature is targeted exclusively to intelligent, trustworthy readers: the circumstances require and determine their minority status.

The term “persecution” encompasses a variety of phenomena, which range from the Inquisition to ostracism. Its multiform condition explains why examples can be found even in periods that can be considered relatively liberal, such as Athens in the 5th and 4th centuries BC, certain Muslim countries in the Middle Ages, Holland and England in the 17th century or France and Germany in the 18th century. Philosophers’ biographies illustrate how they have suffered from persecution at some point in their life. However, the nature of esoteric or reticent literature is determined not exclusively by persecution but also by the diversity of perspectives on the limits of popular education that characterise the ancient and modern philosophers. Thus, starting in the mid-17th century, a certain number of heterodox philosophers who had suffered from persecution published their books not only to communicate their thinking but also because they thought they were contributing to the abolition of persecution:

“They assumed that the suppression of freedom of thought and the publication of the results of free thinking were accidental, an excrescence from the mistaken construction of the state, and that the realm of general darkness would be replaced by the republic of universal light” (Strauss, 1952:33).

They thought that there would be a time when practically total freedom of speech would be possible thanks to popular education. The attitude of the pre-modern philosophers was fundamentally different. They believe that a profound abyss separates the sages from the vulgar folk. Philosophy or science was an affair of the few, this would not be changed by any progress in education, and furthermore, philosophy was suspicious and odious to the majority of people. Therefore, their opinions needed to be concealed from the non-philosophers and limited to the oral instruction of a group of disciples or writings about the most important matters with only brief indications.¹⁰ Their writings, therefore, are generally more esoteric, and thus what predominates in

¹⁰ See Strauss (1952:34). Strauss was thinking about Cicero: *Tusculanae Disputationes*, II, 4, and especially about Plato: *Phaedrus*, 64b; *Republic*, 520b2-3 and 494a1-10; *Timaeus*, 28c3-5; *Letter VII*, 332d6-7, 341c4-e3, 344d4-e2. See Strauss (1946:326-367).

them are the most convenient opinions held by the vulgar folk, while they surreptitiously reveal indications on the philosopher's true opinion on the crucial questions. These books, therefore, contain two lessons, one exoteric, popular and edifying, and the other esoteric, philosophical, between the lines, targeted not so much at the philosophers as to "those youth who love the truth" or those intelligent enough to become the chosen few who know the truth of things. These youngsters must be led step by step from the popular opinions, which are practically and politically expedient, towards the pure and simple theoretical truth. The esoteric texts are "written speeches caused by love" (Strauss, 1952:36).

Let us close with another story, this one true. It is a story about the limits of communication and politics. One of the culminating moments in the Peloponnesian War was Athens' expedition to Sicily, an impressive military enterprise which could have marked a pivotal point in the war. Democratic Athens decided to embark upon the expedition, investing its utmost in terms of money, supplies and men. The excitement over the expedition was at its peak when an irreverent deed, which at first seemed irrelevant, put the entire venture in jeopardy. It happened that the majority of stone Hermes sculptures which peppered the city of Athens – blocks with a quadrangular structure showing figures of the god; custom dictated that many of them be built in the city – appeared decapitated one night. No one knew who had done it, but the deed struck the superstitious souls of the Athenians and they promised a generous reward for whoever would reveal the masterminds. They furthermore handed down a decree which stated that if anyone knew of another act of impiety, he should openly denounce it under the guarantee of impunity, regardless of whether he was a citizen, outsider or slave. Thucydides, whom we are following in this story, added that the utmost importance was attached to this affair because it was interpreted as an omen for the expedition and at the same time as a revolutionary plot with the purpose of overthrowing democracy. The occasion was seized upon by foreigners and slaves to denounce the fact that there had been other mutilations of divine statues performed by certain young men on drunken sprees, as well as parodies of mysterious celebrations held in private homes. These accusations also involved Alcibiades, who was supposed to lead the military expedition. His enemies wished him ill, but they avoided judgement until the expedition had departed. They wanted his friends gone, and thus they started the summary judgements with capital punishments after the expedition had already left. They commanded that Alcibiades return to Athens, leaving the expedition. The fact that Alcibiades ended up going to the enemy side and that the expedition ended up failing resulted precisely from this lack of unity.¹¹

Hermes was the son of Zeus and Maia, born in Arcadia. He was the messenger of the gods, a kind of herald who oversaw peace and war, the battles and loves of the gods, the internal system of Olympus and the link between the world and Heaven, land and Hell. He was charged with carrying the souls of the dead to Hell; he was the god who presided over games and assemblies, the god of eloquence and rhetoric and of all messengers, merchants and communicators, always alert and always vigilant. Among the many inventions and stories attributed to him (precise language, writing, wrestling, dancing, the

¹¹ Thucydides: *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, VI, 27, 28, 53, 60. See Strauss (1964).

lyre, etc.), he was the most famous for decapitating Argos, who was watching over one of Zeus' lovers on assignment by his jealous wife. In the city, stone statues of Hermes were placed at intersections as the patron god of communication. The attack against the stone Hermes, their decapitation or castration, was readily interpreted as an attack against the city's most intimate ties, and as such, the ties that united the city into an integrated unit with the word, which made everyday life possible. It was also an attack against democracy, because this communication was open to all citizens and even outsiders in the guise of trade and exchange. Attacking Hermes meant attacking communication; it meant placing limits on it.

Leo Strauss suggests that Plato's *Symposium* took place precisely that night. Towards the end of the *symposium*, which had transpired so far without drink extraordinarily – because they were still hung over from drink the previous night – and without a flautist – so they could talk like educated people – after the succession of laudatory speeches of the new deity, *Eros*, and after Alcibiades' speech praising Socrates, who had interrupted the *symposium* by arriving totally drunk and occupying the stage and taking the floor, the order was definitively lost:

“Then Agathon got up to sit next to Socrates, but suddenly a throng of people in the midst of a binge showed up at the door of the house, and since they found it open because someone was leaving, they directly entered where we were and laid down on the beds. A huge uproar ensued, the order that had been now vanished, and people were forced to drink wine abundantly” (Plato: *Symposium*, 223b).

After the upheaval, the *symposium* resumed. Eryximachus, Phaedrus and several others got up and left. Eryximachus and Phaedrus, temperate and notorious abstainers, were accused of mutilating the Hermes along with Alcibiades and his friends, notorious drunks and pranksters. Plato does not say this, but all these names were known by his readers as having been accused of violating the Eleusinian mysteries and mutilating the Hermes statues.¹² What was discussed that night at the party at Agathon's house?

The *symposium* was a celebration of the award that the playwright Agathon had received. According to Phaedrus' opinion, they had decided to celebrate it with a series of speeches in praise of a new deity, *Eros*, which joined gods and men together with new bonds, instead of speeches in praise of Aphrodite, which would have been more common. The dinner was tinged with a clearly erotic, political charge with the praise of the god that is human-deity more than the traditional gods. Among the participants were recognised lovers, and their praise of *Eros* was very circumscribed to their private relations. What is more, all the speakers in the *Symposium*, with the exception of Aristophanes,¹³ were presented in the *Protagoras* as disciples of their masters.¹⁴

¹² This was Leo Strauss' opinion according to Rosen (1987b:285).

¹³ Aristophanes took an increasingly prominent role in the economy of the dialogue. Plato treats him with special deference and introduces him as one of those elements that ultimately brings something to the final resolution of the dialogue, when Aristophanes and Agathon fall asleep while listening to Socrates. The fact that one of Aristophanes' early texts, which has not

The *Symposium* ended up being the second part of the *Protagoras*, where we are shown the result of the different sophisticated educations in wealthy Athens: transmission and communication have ended up a notorious failure at a peak in the city's greatest success, which precedes its greatest failure, the defeat to Sparta and the civil war. To Jordi Sales, the accomplishment of Platonic teaching is that it shows us where philosophical effort as a possible *symposium* lies, that is, dealing with it with more or less "hardened" spirits and the difficult knowledge of its possible "flexibilities" or rejuvenations.

"For this reason, it is primarily known as a difficult opportunity of lost occasions of the previous symposiums as preparations for flawed destructions or transmissions. Avoidable destructions? Improvable or correctible transmissions? From where? Perhaps from a game, one that is even more difficult than the previous ones, between the Academy as an institution and dialogue as tragic-comic-philosophical writing."
(Sales, 1996:13)

Let us conclude: It is often forgotten that without politics the conditions for communication cannot arise, that without communication there is no possibility of a real politics, that the limits that allow communication are political: the city wall is the protected area where Hermes could find a place. However, attacking Hermes, or attacking communication, is tantamount to slaying the city from the inside. It is often forgotten that those who attack the Hermes can be individuals or the state itself, and in both cases it is a process of self-destruction. It is often forgotten that the city must exist in order to guarantee the possibility of a rudimentary elementary communication, that of the common citizen, the kind that can only guarantee the kind of education that gives meaning to the universal right to vote. Nor should we forget the ever-present possibility of losing the conditions that make freedom of expression possible. The fact that the conservatives frame the battle for education and the university in these terms should lead us to think about how we can change the argumentative disguises. "Education is the only answer to the always disturbing question, to the political question *par excellence*, of how to reconcile an order that is not oppression with a freedom that is not license" (Strauss, 1952:37), that we think about the possibility of an education that situates us with respect to the definition of the contemporary political enterprise.

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survived, is precisely entitled *Banquetters*, and that its subject was education, is still worthy of a study.

¹⁴ See Sales (1996). We are following this study subtitled precisely "El *Convit* platònic, filosofia de la transmissió" (Plato's *Symposium*, philosophy of transmission).

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