

## Leo Strauss

### PERSECUTION AND THE ART OF WRITING

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"That vice has often proved an emancipator of the mind, is one of the most humiliating, but, at the same time, one of the most unquestionable, facts in history."

—W. E. H. Lecky

#### I

In a considerable number of countries which, for about a hundred years, have enjoyed a practically complete freedom of public discussion, that freedom is now suppressed and replaced by a compulsion to coordinate speech with such views as the government believes to be expedient, or holds in all seriousness. It may be worth our while to consider briefly the effect of that compulsion, or persecution, on thoughts as well as actions.<sup>1</sup>

A large section of the people, probably the great majority of the younger generation,<sup>2</sup> accepts the government-sponsored views as true, if not at once at least after a time. How have they been convinced? And where does the time factor enter? They have not been convinced by compulsion, for compulsion does

<sup>1</sup> *Scribere est agere*. See Sir William Blackstone, *Commentaries*, Book IV, chap. 6. Compare Machiavelli, *Discorsi*, III, 6 (*I Classici del Giglio*, pp. 424-26) and Descartes, *Discours de la méthode*, VI, beginning.

<sup>2</sup> "Socrates: Do you know by what means they might be persuaded to accept this story? Glauco: By no means, as far as they themselves are concerned, but I know how it could be done as regards their sons and their descendants and the people of a later age generally speaking. Socrates: . . . I understand, more or less, what you mean." Plato, *Republic*, 415 c6-d5.

not produce conviction. It merely paves the way for conviction by silencing contradiction. What is called freedom of thought in a large number of cases amounts to—and even for all practical purposes consists of—the ability to choose between two or more different views presented by the small minority of people who are public speakers or writers.<sup>3</sup> If this choice is prevented, the only kind of intellectual independence of which many people are capable is destroyed, and that is the only freedom of thought which is of political importance. Persecution is therefore the indispensable condition for the highest efficiency of what may be called *logica equina*. According to the horse-drawn Parmenides, or to Gulliver's Houyhnhnms, one cannot say, or one cannot reasonably say "the thing which is not": that is, lies are inconceivable. This logic is not peculiar to horses or horse-drawn philosophers, but determines, in a somewhat modified manner, the thought of many ordinary human beings as well. They would admit, as a matter of course, that man can lie and does lie. But they would add that lies are short-lived and cannot stand the test of repetition—let alone of constant repetition—and that therefore a statement which is constantly repeated and never contradicted must be true. Another line of argument maintains that a statement made by an ordinary fellow may be a lie, but the truth of a statement made by a responsible and respected man, and therefore particularly by a man in a highly responsible or exalted position, is morally certain. These two enthymemes lead to the conclusion that the truth of a statement which is constantly repeated by the head of the government and never contradicted is absolutely certain.

This implies that in the countries concerned all those whose thinking does not follow the rules of *logica equina*, in other words, all those capable of truly independent thinking, cannot be brought to accept the government-sponsored views. Persecution, then, cannot prevent independent thinking. It cannot prevent even the expression of independent thought. For it is as true today as it was more than two thousand years ago that it is a safe venture to tell the truth one knows to benevolent and trustworthy acquaintances, or more precisely, to reasonable friends.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> "Reason is but choosing" is the central thesis of Milton's *Areopagitica*.

<sup>4</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 450 d3-e1.

Persecution cannot prevent even public expression of the heterodox truth, for a man of independent thought can utter his views in public and remain unharmed, provided he moves with circumspection. He can even utter them in print without incurring any danger, provided he is capable of writing between the lines.

The expression "writing between the lines" indicates the subject of this article. For the influence of persecution on literature is precisely that it compels all writers who hold heterodox views to develop a peculiar technique of writing; the technique which we have in mind when speaking of writing between the lines. This expression is clearly metaphoric. Any attempt to express its meaning in unmetaphoric language would lead to the discovery of a terra incognita, a field whose very dimensions are as yet unexplored and which offers ample scope for highly intriguing and even important investigations. One may say without fear of being presently convicted of grave exaggeration that almost the only preparatory work to guide the explorer in this field is buried in the writings of the rhetoricians of antiquity.

To return to our present subject, let us look at a simple example which, I have reason to believe, is not so remote from reality as it might first seem. We can easily imagine that a historian living in a totalitarian country, a generally respected and unsuspected member of the only party in existence, might be led by his investigations to doubt the soundness of the government-sponsored interpretation of the history of religion. Nobody would prevent him from publishing a passionate attack on what he would call the liberal view. He would of course have to state the liberal view before attacking it; he would make that statement in the quiet, unspectacular and somewhat boring manner which would seem to be but natural; he would use many technical terms, give many quotations and attach undue importance to insignificant details; he would seem to forget the holy war of mankind in the petty squabbles of pedants. Only when he reached the core of the argument would he write three or four sentences in that terse and lively style which is apt to arrest the attention of young men who love to think. That central passage would state the case of the adversaries more clearly, compellingly and mercilessly than it had ever been stated in the heyday of

liberalism, for he would silently drop all the foolish excrescences of the liberal creed which were allowed to grow up during the time when liberalism had succeeded and therefore was approaching dormancy. His reasonable young reader would for the first time catch a glimpse of the forbidden fruit. The attack, the bulk of the work, would consist of virulent expansions of the most virulent utterances in the holy book or books of the ruling party. The intelligent young man who, being young, had until then been somehow attracted by those immoderate utterances, would now be merely disgusted and, after having tasted the forbidden fruit, even bored by them. Reading the book for the second and third time, he would detect in the very arrangement of the quotations from the authoritative books significant additions to those few terse statements which occur in the center of the rather short first part.

Persecution, then, gives rise to a peculiar technique of writing, and therewith to a peculiar type of literature, in which the truth about all crucial things is presented exclusively between the lines. That literature is addressed, not to all readers, but to trustworthy and intelligent readers only. It has all the advantages of private communication without having its greatest disadvantage—that it reaches only the writer's acquaintances. It has all the advantages of public communication without having its greatest disadvantage—capital punishment for the author. But how can a man perform the miracle of speaking in a publication to a minority, while being silent to the majority of his readers? The fact which makes this literature possible can be expressed in the axiom that thoughtless men are careless readers, and only thoughtful men are careful readers. Therefore an author who wishes to address only thoughtful men has but to write in such a way that only a very careful reader can detect the meaning of his book. But, it will be objected, there may be clever men, careful readers, who are not trustworthy, and who, after having found the author out, would denounce him to the authorities. As a matter of fact, this literature would be impossible if the Socratic dictum that virtue is knowledge, and therefore that thoughtful men as such are trustworthy and not cruel, were entirely wrong.

Another axiom, but one which is meaningful only so long as

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

## II

SUPPRESSION of independent thought has occurred fairly frequently in the past. It is reasonable to assume that earlier ages produced proportionately as many men capable of independent thought as we find today, and that at least some of these men combined understanding with caution. Thus, one may wonder whether some of the greatest writers of the past have not adapted their literary technique to the requirements of persecution, by presenting their views on all the then crucial questions exclusively between the lines.

We are prevented from considering this possibility, and still more from considering the questions connected with it, by some habits produced by, or related to, a comparatively recent progress in historical research. This progress was due, at first glance, to the general acceptance and occasional application of the following principles. Each period of the past, it was demanded, must be understood by itself, and must not be judged by standards alien to it. Each author must, as far as possible, be interpreted by himself; no term of any consequence must be used in the interpretation of an author which cannot be literally

translated into his language, and which was not used by him or was not in fairly common use in his time. The only presentations of an author's views which can be accepted as true are those ultimately borne out by his own explicit statements. The last of these principles is decisive: it seems to exclude a priori from the sphere of human knowledge such views of earlier writers as are indicated exclusively between the lines. For if an author does not tire of asserting explicitly on every page of his book that *a* is *b*, but indicates between the lines that *a* is not *b*, the modern historian will still demand explicit evidence showing that the author believed *a* not to be *b*. Such evidence cannot possibly be forthcoming, and the modern historian wins his argument: he can dismiss any reading between the lines as arbitrary guesswork, or, if he is lazy, he will accept it as intuitive knowledge.

The application of these principles has had important consequences. Up to a time within the memory of men still living, many people, bearing in mind famous statements of Bodin, Hobbes, Burke, Condorcet and others, believed that there is a difference in fundamental conceptions between modern political thought and the political thought of the Middle Ages and of antiquity. The present generation of scholars has been taught by one of the most famous historians of our time that "at least from the lawyers of the second century to the theorists of the French Revolution, the history of political thought is continuous, changing in form, modified in content, but still the same in its fundamental conceptions."<sup>5</sup> Until the middle of the nineteenth century, Averroes was thought to have been hostile to all religion. After Renan's successful attack on what is now called a medieval legend, present-day scholars consider Averroes a loyal, and even a believing, Muslim.<sup>6</sup> Previous writers had believed that "the abrogation of religious and magical thought" was characteristic of the attitude of the Greek physicians. A more recent writer

<sup>5</sup> A. J. Carlyle, *A History of Mediaeval Political Theory in the West*, I (2nd ed., London, 1927), 2.

<sup>6</sup> Ernest Renan, *Averroès et l'Averroïsme* (3rd ed., Paris, 1866), 292 ff. Léon Gauthier, *La théorie d'Ibn Rochd (Averroès) sur les rapports de la religion et de la philosophie* (Paris, 1909), 126 ff. and 177 ff. Compare the same author's "Scolastique musulmane et scolastique chrétienne," *Revue d'Histoire de la Philosophie*, II (1928), 221 ff. and 333 ff.

asserts that "the Hippocratic physicians . . . as scientists embraced a supernatural dogma."<sup>7</sup> Lessing, who was one of the most profound humanists of all times, with an exceedingly rare combination of scholarship, taste and philosophy, and who was convinced that there are truths which should not or cannot be pronounced, believed that "all ancient philosophers" had distinguished between their exoteric and their esoteric teaching. After the great theologian Schleiermacher asserted, with an unusually able argument, the view that there is only one Platonic teaching, the question of the esotericism of the ancient philosophers was narrowed down, for all practical purposes, to the meaning of Aristotle's "exoteric speeches"; and in this regard one of the greatest humanists of the present day asserts that the attribution of a secret teaching to Aristotle is "obviously a late invention originating in the spirit of Neo-Pythagoreanism."<sup>8</sup> According to Gibbon, Eusebius "indirectly confesses that he has related whatever might redound to the glory, and that he has suppressed all that could tend to the disgrace of religion." According to a present-day historian, "the judgment of Gibbon, that the *Ecclesiastical History* was grossly unfair, is itself a prejudiced verdict."<sup>9</sup> Up to the end of the nineteenth century many philosophers and theologians believed that Hobbes was an atheist. At present many historians tacitly or explicitly reject that view; a contemporary thinker, while feeling that Hobbes was not exactly a religious man, has despaired in his writings the outlines of a neo-Kantian philosophy of religion.<sup>10</sup> Montesquieu himself, as well as some of his contemporaries, believed that *De l'esprit des lois* had a good and

<sup>7</sup> Ludwig Edelstein, "Greek Medicine in its Relation to Religion and Magic," *Bulletin of the Institute of the History of Medicine*, V (1937), 201 and 211.

<sup>8</sup> Lessing, *Ernst und Falk*, 2nd dialogue; and "Leibniz von den ewigen Strafen," *Werke* (Petersen and v. Olshausen edition), XXI, 147. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Platons Werke* (Berlin, 1804), vol. I, 1, pp. 12-20. Werner Jaeger, *Aristotle* (Oxford, 1934), 33. See also Sir Alexander Grant, *The Ethics of Aristotle* (London, 1874) I, 398 ff. and Eduard Zeller, *Aristotle and the Earlier Peripatetics* (London, 1897), I, 120 ff.

<sup>9</sup> James T. Shotwell, *The History of History*, I (New York, 1939), 356 ff.

<sup>10</sup> Ferdinand Tönnies, *Thomas Hobbes* (3rd ed., Stuttgart, 1925), 148. George E. G. Catlin, *Thomas Hobbes* (Oxford, 1922), 25. Richard Hönigswald, *Hobbes und die Staatsphilosophie* (Munich, 1924), 176 ff. Leo Strauss, *Die Religionskritik Spinozas* (Berlin, 1930), 80. Z. Lubienski, *Die Grundlagen des ethisch-politischen Systems von Hobbes* (Munich, 1932), 213 ff.

even a wonderful plan; Laboulaye still believed that the apparent obscurity of its plan as well as its other apparent literary deficiencies were due to censorship or persecution. One of the most outstanding present-day historians of political thought, however, asserts that "there is not in truth much concatenation of subject-matter, and the amount of irrelevance is extraordinary," and that "it cannot be said that Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws* has any arrangement."<sup>11</sup>

This selection of examples, which is not wholly arbitrary, shows that the typical difference between older views and more recent views is due not entirely to progress in historical exactness, but also to a more basic change in the intellectual climate. During the last few decades the rationalist tradition, which was the common denominator of the older views, and which was still rather influential in nineteenth-century positivism, has been either still further transformed or altogether rejected by an ever-increasing number of people. Whether and to what extent this change is to be considered a progress or a decline is a question which only the philosopher can answer.

A more modest duty is imposed on the historian. He will merely, and rightly, demand that in spite of all changes which have occurred or which will occur in the intellectual climate, the tradition of historical exactness shall be continued. Accord-

<sup>11</sup> George H. Sabine, *A History of Political Theory* (New York, 1937), 556 and 551. Friedrich Meinecke, *Die Entstehung des Historismus* (Munich, 1936), 139 ff. and 151, footnote 1. Édouard Laboulaye, "Introduction à l'Esprit des Lois," *Oeuvres complètes de Montesquieu* (Paris, 1876) vol. 3, pp. xviii ff. Laboulaye quotes in that context an important passage from d'Alembert's "Éloge de Montesquieu." See also Bertolini's "Analyse raisonnée de l'Esprit des Lois," *ibid.*, pp. 6, 14, 23 ff., 34 and 60 ff. The remarks of d'Alembert, Bertolini and Laboulaye are merely explanations of what Montesquieu himself indicates for example when he says in the preface: "Si l'on veut chercher le dessein de l'auteur, on ne le peut bien découvrir que dans le dessein de l'ouvrage." (See also the end of the eleventh book and two letters from Helvétius, *ibid.*, vol. 6, pp. 314, 320). D'Alembert says: "Nous disons de l'obscurité que l'on peut se permettre dans un tel ouvrage, la même chose que du défaut d'ordre. Ce qui serait obscur pour les lecteurs vulgaires, ne l'est pas pour ceux que l'auteur a eus en vue; d'ailleurs l'obscurité volontaire n'en est pas une. M. de Montesquieu ayant à présenter quelquefois des vérités importantes, dont l'énoncé absolu et direct auroit pu blesser sans fruit, a eu la prudence de les envelopper; et, par cet innocent artifice, les a voilées à ceux à qui elles seroient nuisibles, sans qu'elles fussent perdues pour les sages." Similarly, certain contemporaries of the "rhetor" Xenophon believed that "what is beautifully and methodically written, is not beautifully and methodically written" (*Cynegeticus*, 13. 6).

ingly, he will not accept an arbitrary standard of exactness which might exclude a priori the most important facts of the past from human knowledge, but will adapt the rules of certainty which guide his research to the nature of his subject. He will then follow such rules as these: Reading between the lines is strictly prohibited in all cases where it would be less exact than not doing so. Only such reading between the lines as starts from an exact consideration of the explicit statements of the author is legitimate. The context in which a statement occurs, and the literary character of the whole work as well as its plan, must be perfectly understood before an interpretation of the statement can reasonably claim to be adequate or even correct. One is not entitled to delete a passage, nor to emend its text, before one has fully considered all reasonable possibilities of understanding the passage as it stands—one of these possibilities being that the passage may be ironic. If a master of the art of writing commits such blunders as would shame an intelligent high school boy, it is reasonable to assume that they are intentional, especially if the author discusses, however incidentally, the possibility of intentional blunders in writing. The views of the author of a drama or dialogue must not, without previous proof, be identified with the views expressed by one or more of his characters, or with those agreed upon by all his characters or by his attractive characters. The real opinion of an author is not necessarily identical with that which he expresses in the largest number of passages. In short, exactness is not to be confused with refusal, or inability, to see the wood for the trees. The truly exact historian will reconcile himself to the fact that there is a difference between winning an argument, or proving to practically everyone that he is right, and understanding the thought of the great writers of the past.

It must, then, be considered possible that reading between the lines will not lead to complete agreement among all scholars. If this is an objection to reading between the lines as such, there is the counter-objection that neither have the methods generally used at present led to universal or even wide agreement in regard to very important points. Scholars of the last century were inclined to solve literary problems by having recourse to the

genesis of the author's work, or even of his thought. Contradictions or divergences within one book, or between two books by the same author, were supposed to prove that his thought had changed. If the contradictions exceeded a certain limit it was sometimes decided without any external evidence that one of the works must be spurious. That procedure has lately come into some disrepute, and at present many scholars are inclined to be rather more conservative about the literary tradition, and less impressed by merely internal evidence. The conflict between the traditionalists and the higher critics is, however, far from being settled. The traditionalists could show in important cases that the higher critics have not proved their hypotheses at all; but even if all the answers suggested by the higher critics should ultimately prove to be wrong, the questions which led them away from the tradition and tempted them to try a new approach often show an awareness of difficulties which do not disturb the slumber of the typical traditionalist. An adequate answer to the most serious of these questions requires methodical reflection on the literary technique of the great writers of earlier ages, because of the typical character of the literary problems involved—obscurity of the plan, contradictions within one work or between two or more works of the same author, omission of important links of the argument, and so on. Such reflection necessarily transcends the boundaries of modern aesthetics and even of traditional poetics, and will, I believe, compel students sooner or later to take into account the phenomenon of persecution. To mention something which is hardly more than another aspect of the same fact, we sometimes observe a conflict between a traditional, superficial and doxographic interpretation of some great writer of the past, and a more intelligent, deeper and monographic interpretation. They are equally exact, so far as both are borne out by explicit statements of the writer concerned. Only a few people at present, however, consider the possibility that the traditional interpretation may reflect the exoteric teaching of the author, whereas the monographic interpretation stops halfway between the exoteric and esoteric teaching of the author.

Modern historical research, which emerged at a time when

persecution was a matter of feeble recollection rather than of forceful experience, has counteracted or even destroyed an earlier tendency to read between the lines of the great writers, or to attach more weight to their fundamental design than to those views which they have repeated most often. Any attempt to restore the earlier approach in this age of historicism is confronted by the problem of criteria for distinguishing between legitimate and illegitimate reading between the lines. If it is true that there is a necessary correlation between persecution and writing between the lines, then there is a necessary negative criterion: that the book in question must have been composed in an era of persecution, that is, at a time when some political or other orthodoxy was enforced by law or custom. One positive criterion is this: if an able writer who has a clear mind and a perfect knowledge of the orthodox view and all its ramifications, contradicts surreptitiously and as it were in passing one of its necessary presuppositions or consequences which he explicitly recognizes and maintains everywhere else, we can reasonably suspect that he was opposed to the orthodox system as such and—we must study his whole book all over again, with much greater care and much less naïveté than ever before. In some cases, we possess even explicit evidence proving that the author has indicated his views on the most important subjects only between the lines. Such statements, however, do not usually occur in the preface or other very conspicuous place. Some of them cannot even be noticed, let alone understood, so long as we confine ourselves to the view of persecution and the attitude toward freedom of speech and candor which have become prevalent during the last three hundred years.

### III

THE TERM persecution covers a variety of phenomena, ranging from the most cruel type, as exemplified by the Spanish Inquisition, to the mildest, which is social ostracism. Between these extremes are the types which are most important from the point of view of literary or intellectual history. Examples of

these are found in the Athens of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C., in some Muslim countries of the early Middle Ages, in seventeenth-century Holland and England, and in eighteenth-century France and Germany—all of them comparatively liberal periods. But a glance at the biographies of Anaxagoras, Protagoras, Socrates, Plato, Xenophon, Aristotle, Avicenna, Averroes, Maimonides, Grotius, Descartes, Hobbes, Spinoza, Locke, Bayle, Wolff, Montesquieu, Voltaire, Rousseau, Lessing and Kant,<sup>12</sup> and in some cases even a glance at the title pages of their books, is sufficient to show that they witnessed or suffered, during at least part of their lifetimes, a kind of persecution which was more tangible than social ostracism. Nor should we overlook the fact, not sufficiently stressed by all authorities, that religious persecution and persecution of free inquiry are not identical. There were times and countries in which all kinds, or at least a great variety of kinds, of worship were permitted, but free inquiry was not.<sup>13</sup>

What attitude people adopt toward freedom of public discussion, depends decisively on what they think about popular education and its limits. Generally speaking, premodern philosophers were more timid in this respect than modern philosophers. After about the middle of the seventeenth century an ever-increasing number of heterodox philosophers who had suffered from persecution published their books not only to communicate their thoughts but also because they desired to contribute to the abolition of persecution as such. They believed that suppression of free inquiry, and of publication of the results of free inquiry, was accidental, an outcome of the faulty construction of the body politic, and that the kingdom of general darkness could be replaced by the republic of universal light. They looked forward to a time when, as a result of the progress of popular education, practically complete freedom of speech would be

<sup>12</sup> In regard to Kant, whose case is in a class by itself, even a historian so little given to suspicion or any other sort of skepticism as C. E. Vaughan remarks: "We are almost led to suspect Kant of having trifled with his readers, and of nursing an esoteric sympathy with Revolution." (*Studies in the History of Political Philosophy*, Manchester, 1939, II, 83.)

<sup>13</sup> See the "fragment" by H. S. Reimarus, "Von Duldung der Deisten," in Lessing's *Werke* (Petersen and v. Olshausen edition) XXII, 38 ff.

possible, or—to exaggerate for purposes of clarification—to a time when no one would suffer any harm from hearing any truth.<sup>14</sup> They concealed their views only far enough to protect themselves as well as possible from persecution; had they been more subtle than that, they would have defeated their purpose, which was to enlighten an ever-increasing number of people who were not potential philosophers. It is therefore comparatively easy to read between the lines of their books.<sup>15</sup> The attitude of an earlier type of writers was fundamentally different. They believed that the gulf separating “the wise” and “the vulgar” was a basic fact of human nature which could not be influenced by any progress of popular education: philosophy, or science, was essentially a privilege of “the few.” They were convinced that philosophy as such was suspect to, and hated by, the majority of men.<sup>16</sup> Even if they had had nothing to fear from any particular political quarter, those who started from that assumption would have been driven to the conclusion that public communication of the philosophic or scientific truth was impossible or undesirable, not only for the time being but for all times. They must conceal their opinions from all but philosophers, either by limiting themselves to oral instruction of a carefully selected group

<sup>14</sup> The question whether that extreme goal is attainable in any but the most halcyon conditions has been raised in our time by Archibald MacLeish in “Post-War Writers and Pre-War Readers,” *Journal of Adult Education*, vol. 12 (June, 1940) in the following terms: “Perhaps the luxury of the complete confession, the uttermost despair; the farthest doubt should be denied themselves by writers living in any but the most orderly and settled times. I do not know.”

<sup>15</sup> I am thinking of Hobbes in particular, whose significance for the development outlined above can hardly be overestimated. This was clearly recognized by Tönnies, who emphasized especially these two sayings of his hero: “Paulatim eruditur vulgus” and “Philosophia (ut crescat libera) esse debet nec metu nec pudore coercenda.” (Tönnies, *op. cit.*, pp. iv, 195.) Hobbes also says: “Suppression of doctrines does but unite and exasperate, that is, increase both the malice and power of them that have already believed them.” (*English Works*, Molesworth edition, VI, 242.) In his *Of Liberty and Necessity* (London 1654, 35 ff.) he writes to the Marquess of Newcastle: “I must confess, if we consider the greatest part of Mankind, not as they should be, but as they are . . . I must, I say, confess that the dispute of this question will rather hurt than help their piety, and therefore if his Lordship [Bishop Bramhall] had not desired this answer, I should not have written it, nor do I write it but in hopes your Lordship and his, will keep it private.”

<sup>16</sup> Cicero, *Tusculanae Disputationes*, II, 4. Plato, *Phaedo*, 64 b; *Republic*, 520 b2-3 and 494 a4-10.

of pupils, or by writing about the most important subject by means of “brief indication.”<sup>17</sup>

Writings are naturally accessible to all who can read. Therefore a philosopher who chose the second way could expound only such opinions as were suitable for the nonphilosophic majority: all of his writings would have to be, strictly speaking, exoteric. These opinions would not be in all respects consonant with truth. Being a philosopher, that is, hating “the lie in the soul” more than anything else, he would not deceive himself about the fact that such opinions are merely “likely tales,” or “noble lies,” or “probable opinions,” and would leave it to his philosophic readers to disentangle the truth from its poetic or dialectic presentation. But he would defeat his purpose if he indicated clearly which of his statements expressed a noble lie, and which the still more noble truth. For philosophic readers he would do almost more than enough by drawing their attention to the fact that he did not object to telling lies which were noble, or tales which were merely similar to truth. From the point of view of the literary historian at least, there is no more noteworthy difference between the typical premodern philosopher (who is hard to distinguish from the premodern poet) and the typical modern philosopher than that of their attitudes toward “noble (or just) lies,” “pious frauds,” the “ductus obliquus”<sup>18</sup> or “economy of the truth.” Every decent modern reader is bound to be shocked by the mere suggestion that a great man might have deliberately deceived the large majority of his readers.<sup>19</sup> And yet, as a liberal theologian once remarked, these imitators of the resourceful Odysseus were perhaps merely more sin-

<sup>17</sup> Plato, *Timaeus*, 28 c3-5, and *Seventh Letter*, 332 d6-7, 341 c4-e3, and 344 d4-e2. That the view mentioned above is reconcilable with the democratic creed is shown most clearly by Spinoza, who was a champion not only of liberalism but also of democracy (*Tractatus politicus*, XI, 2, Bruder edition). See his *Tractatus de intellectus emendatione*, 14 and 17, as well as *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, V 35-39, XIV 20 and XV end.

<sup>18</sup> Sir Thomas More, *Utopia*, latter part of first book.

<sup>19</sup> A rather extensive discussion of the “magna quaestio, latebrosa tractatio, disputatio inter doctos alternans,” as Augustinus called it, is to be found in Grotius’ *De Jure Belli ac Pacis*, III, chap. I, §7 ff., and in particular §17, 3. See also *inter alia* Pascal’s ninth and tenth *Provinciales* and Jeremy Taylor, *Ductor Dubitantium*, Book III, chap. 2, rule 5.

cere than we when they called "lying nobly" what we would call "considering one's social responsibilities."

An exoteric book contains then two teachings: a popular teaching of an edifying character, which is in the foreground; and a philosophic teaching concerning the most important subject, which is indicated only between the lines. This is not to deny that some great writers might have stated certain important truths quite openly by using as mouthpiece some disreputable character: they would thus show how much they disapproved of pronouncing the truths in question. There 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. Those to whom such books are truly addressed are, however, neither the unphilosophic majority nor the perfect philosopher as such, but the young men who might become philosophers: the potential philosophers are to be led step by step from the popular views which are indispensable for all practical and political purposes to the truth which is merely and purely theoretical, guided by certain obtrusively enigmatic features in the presentation of the popular teaching—obscurity of the plan, contradictions, pseudonyms, inexact repetitions of earlier statements, strange expressions, etc. Such features do not disturb the slumber of those who cannot see the wood for the trees, but act as awakening stumbling blocks for those who can. All books of that kind owe their existence to the love of the mature philosopher for the puppies<sup>20</sup> of his race, by whom he wants to be loved in turn: all exoteric books are "written speeches caused by love."

Exoteric literature presupposes that there are basic truths which would not be pronounced in public by any decent man, because they would do harm to many people who, having been hurt, would naturally be inclined to hurt in turn him who pronounces the unpleasant truths. It presupposes, in other words, that freedom of inquiry, and of publication of all results of inquiry, is not guaranteed as a basic right. This literature is then essentially related to a society which is not liberal. Thus one may very well raise the question of what use it could be in a truly liberal society. The answer is simple. In Plato's *Banquet*,

<sup>20</sup> Compare Plato, *Republic*, 539 a5-d1, with *Apology of Socrates*, 23 c2-8.

Alcibiades—that outspoken son of outspoken Athens—compares Socrates and his speeches to certain sculptures which are very ugly from the outside, but within have most beautiful images of things divine. The works of the great writers of the past are very beautiful even from without. And yet their visible beauty is sheer ugliness, compared with the beauty of those hidden treasures which disclose themselves only after very long, never easy, but always pleasant work. This always difficult but always pleasant work is, I believe, what the philosophers had in mind when they recommended education. Education, they felt, is the only answer to the always pressing question, to the political question par excellence, of how to reconcile order which is not oppression with freedom which is not license.