Journal of Textual Reasoning

Volume 3
Number 1 *Strauss and Textual Reasoning*

June 2004

Against Leo Strauss

Zachary Braiterman
Syracuse University

Journal of Textual Reasoning 3:1 (June 2004)
ISSN: 1939-7518

AGAINST LEO STRAUSS

ZACHARY BRAITERMAN
Syracuse University

To paraphrase Franz Rosenzweig, if twentieth-century Jewish thought proceeds with the destruction of German Jewry from the sure path of the German liberal tradition set by Mendelssohn out into the void of pure pathlessness, then chronologically, the early Jewish thought of Leo Strauss, written during the 1920s and early 1930s provides the logical next-step, not out of, but into that nothing. And that is where the problem with the Jewish thought of Strauss begins. In the acid clarity brought to the choice between reason and revelation and to the challenge posed to the blending of God's voice and human expression in the work of Cohen-Buber-Rosenzweig, Strauss represents the *Feuerbach*, the fire stream through which contemporary Jewish thought must either pass or over which it must vault. Not just a body of work, the early Jewish thought of Leo Strauss stands in for the historical juncture that gave it shape, a vociferous and anti-liberal form of anti-modernism that reinscribes the history of modernism at its nadir. The early Jewish thought of Strauss reflects the new sobriety of Weimar Germany after the demise of *Jugendstil* and German Expressionism.

Among the varied forms of European modernism, Expressionism was unique in leaving room to crude and pallid spiritual expression: Jewish and Christian theology, theosophical and occult speculation, "the spiritual

in art," and a messianic utopianism based on loose combinations of Bible, Marx, and Nietzsche. The towering figures of twentieth century Jewish and Christian thought, Buber, Rosenzweig, Karl Barth, Friedrich Gogarten, Max Scheler, and Rudolf Otto owe their greatest contributions to the period between 1910 and 1920. Open to every gradation between the material and immaterial, Expressionism created a condition of possibility for the emergence of new religious discourse. The demise of its image-making power in the 1920s rendered revelation culturally incongruous, out of synch with the varied forms of what art historian Dennis Crockett calls "post-Expressionism" evidenced by *Neue Sachlichkeit* painting and the fascination with technology and rational function. For example: the clarity exhibited by artist and dramaturge Oskar Schlemmer at the Bauhaus, by the critic Siegfried Kracauer, and the strong family resemblance both shared with Strauss. Schlemmer, Kracauer and Strauss exemplify a more exacting modernism. Based upon unambiguous commitments to the visible and to the radical choice between the sacred and the profane, their logic left no place in the middle for a revelation mediated by human expression.

If the spiritual in art and the "theological feminism" that Strauss so disliked survived the new sobriety, they will have done so altered by postmodernism, a cultural condition more comfortable at play in imagination's hermaphrodite space between philosophical thought and aesthetic sensation.

Revelation and the spiritual in art survived the new objectivity. But while Buber and Rosenzweig, and not just them, but also Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee, continued to create some of their finest work well into the decade, they grew out of touch with the new reality. The case of Walter Benjamin leaves the most dispirited impression. In Benjamin's work, fully realized commitments to the contemporary aesthetic of surrealism, photomontage, and film sit side by side with unhappy nostalgia for mystic and cultic expression. But the new objectivity made no allowance for the melancholy illuminations of messianism, auras, and angels. Politically, the brave world of Weimar modernism was caught in the tough middle between fascism and communism. In a conversation

with Benjamin, Bertolt Brecht clearly meant to undercut his interlocutor in mind by calling Franz Kafka "a Jew-boy, ...a mere bubble on the glittering quagmire of Prague culture. ...The images are good of course. But the rest is pure mystification. It's nonsense. You have to ignore it…Depth is a separate dimension, it's just depth –and there's nothing whatsoever to be seen in it."[1]

I.

In a publicity pamphlet for "The First Bauhaus Exhibition in Weimar, July to September 1923," Schlemmer looked back to its first days. "The *Staatliches Bauhaus*, founded after the catastrophe of the war, in the chaos of the revolution, and in the era of the flowering of an emotion-laden, explosive art, becomes the rallying-point of all those who, with belief in the future and with sky-storming enthusiasm, wish to build the 'cathedral of socialism.'" Chronicling the new guard's emergence, Schlemmer heralded "the next faith" at the Bauhaus, its reliance on reason, science, mathematics, structure, mechanization, power, and money, and the influence of Dada, the court jester, and "Americanisms transferred to Europe, the new wedged into the old world." Mocking the pretensions of Expressionism, Schlemmer proclaimed, "Man, self-conscious and perfect being, surpassed in accuracy by every puppet, awaits results from the chemist's retort until the formula for 'spirit' is found as well."[2]

Puppets were the cipher to the faith in machines, theater, and dance at the Bauhaus, a counterpoint to the romantic legacy that the new sobriety sought to overcome. In Heinrich von Kleist's essay *The Marionette Theater*, the puppet and God stake the two extremes of non-consciousness and super-consciousness between which the hapless romantic falls. "Paradise is locked and barred and the Cherub is behind us." Burdened by the laws of gravity and the limits of self-consciousness, no dance can match the

---

[1] Walter Benjamin, "Walter Benjamin Conversations with Brecht" in *Aesthetics and Politics*, edited and translated by Ronald Taylor, with an afterword by Fredric Jameson, (London: Verso, 1977), 89-90.

[2] Hans M. Wingler, *The Bauhaus*, (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1969), 65-6.

"ease, grace and pose," the "balance, agility, lightness" of the marionette or any other mechanical device. Unlike us, they need "only *glance* upon the ground, like elves, the momentary halt lends the limbs a new impetus." Far surpassing human capacity, "in dance, only a god was a match for matter; and that was the point where the two ends of the round earth met." Grace will return to human movement only after consciousness has passed through infinity, "most purely present in the human frame that has either no consciousness or an infinite amount of it, which is to say either in a marionette or in a god."[3]

Against the ideal of natural grace, Schlemmer sought to surmount the gap between puppet and human. By setting the physical body within the order of architectural space or in robotic, doll-like costumes, he transformed it into an abstract art-figure. In *Bauhaus Stairway* (1932), a group of female students ascend and descend a brace of stairs before the large glass windows inside the Dessau Bauhaus building. As observed by Karin von Maur, the image combines human and architectural figures, the staircase neatly structuring the picture into Euclidean order.[4] The curvature of the female body is juxtaposed to the vertical, straight- edged, architectural line. Young women with short hair appear androgynous and puppet-like. They are but one step removed from the costumed figures from the *Triadic Ballet*, a dance that sculpts the body into abstract geometry.[5] Schlemmer's theater transfigures human form, which can now perform any type of movement. Its motion defies gravity. Costumes and mechanical devices, automatons and marionettes, precision machines,

---

[3] Heinrich von Kleist, *Selected Writings*, edited and translated by David Constantine, (London: J.M. Dent, 1997), 413-16.

[4] Karin von Maur, "The Art of Oskar Schlemmer," in Arnold L. Lehman and Brenda Richardson (eds), *Oskar Schlemmer*, (Baltimore: The Baltimore Museum of Art, 198), 74.

[5] For a description of Schlemmer's theater work, including the *Triadic Ballet*, see Nancy J. Troy, "The Art of Reconciliation," Oskar Schlemmer's Work for the Theater," in Arnold L. Lehman and Brenda Richardson (eds), *Oskar Schlemmer*, 127-147.

glass, artificial limbs, outfits designed for deep-sea divers and modern soldiers expand the human capacity they simultaneously restrict.[6]

The desire to transform material limit links Schlemmer to the romanticism of von Kleist and to the Expressionism mocked in his Bauhaus pamphlet. On the one hand, he was drawn to art and painting, which he associated with religious and metaphysical values. On the other hand stood the new spirit represented by theater, dance, and technology. The expression in his letters and diaries continuously oscillate between romanticism and classicism, Grünewald and van Eyck, Van Gogh and Cezanne, primitivism and cubism, Itten and Gropius, India and America, divine and human.[7] What distinguished his work from Expressionism was the emphasis placed upon the optical. As early as 1913, he declared, "I believe in the world of the visible. I believe in the painter's mode of vision, i.e. abstraction won of familiarity with nature."[8] In 1942, shunned by the Nazis and no longer enamored of "Picasso-style abstraction, Schlemmer experienced "with unfamiliar intensity the mystic force that resides in the optical effects of nature." He found "the world of the visible opening up to [him] in a remarkable fashion, in all its density and surrealistic mystique" (LD: 399).

Unlike Schlemmer, and this makes his thought so brutal, Kracauer evoked the same commitments to the visible in order to bludgeon religion, mysticism and metaphysics. Having finished reading *The Star of Redemption*, he wrote Leo Lowenthal, "I despise this kind of philosophy, which makes of the hymn a system, and twaddles on about creation, revelation, and redemption in such excited tones as to move a dog to

---

[6] Oskar Schlemmer, "Man and Art Figure" in Walter Gropius (ed), *The Theater of the Bauhaus*, translated by Arthur S. Wensinger, (Middletown: Wesleyan University, 1961), especially 28-9.

[7] See Nancy Troy, "The Art of Reconciliation: Oskar Schlemmer's Work for the Theater" in Arnold L. Lehman and Brenda Richardson (eds.), *Oskar Schlemmer*, (Baltimore: The Baltimore Museum of Art, 1896), 127-148.

[8] Oskar Sclemmer, *The Letters and Diaries of Oskar Schlemmer*, selected and edited by Tut Schlemmer, translated by Krishma Winston, (Evanston: Northwestern Press, 1972), 13. Henceforth: LD.

pity."[9] Tendentiously partisan, his review of the Buber-Rosenzweig Bible reflects the new objectivity in its complete hostility to *Jugendstil*, Expressionism, and religious renewal. The new translation was compared to the poetry of Stefan George: aesthetic, unreal, not of the age. Kracauer was unable to grant that all this twaddle was not un-modern if only because neo-romantic and Expressionist bathos belong to the history of twentieth century art-styles upon whose carcass the new sobriety fed. To see this, however, would have required greater critical care and hermeneutical charity than Kracauer was prepared to give in 1926.[10]

The formal choice that propelled Kracauer was the one between "common" public life and private spiritual/intellectual experience, reality and "aesthetics," everyday life and exotic constructs, rigid oppositions staked between "x" and "not x," self-consciously understood as two equally extreme and disagreeable options. This homogenizing logic played out throughout nearly all his articles from the 1920s collected in *The Mass Ornament*. In the collection's title essay, critical reason stands opposed to "the mythological delusions that have invaded the domains of religion and politics."[11] (MO: 80). The brilliant "Hotel Lobby" sets pure, empty immanence against the house of God's absolute transcendence. Opposed to religious renewal *tout court*, Kracauer accused Max Scheler of simultaneously embracing relativism and Catholicism. "By creating this hermaphrodite of natural religion, Scheler has now really fallen between two stools" (MO: 208). In "The Crisis of Sciences," it was shown how Ernst Troeltsch failed to reconcile the contingent relativism of historical research alongside the intuition of absolute values, "an Archimedean point outside the historical process" (MO: 218).

---

[9] Cited by Leo Lowenthal, "As I Remember Friedel" in *New German Critique*, (#54, 1991), 9.

[10] Lawrence Rosenwald notes, Kracauer had at his disposal only "the bare text" of the first Genesis translation without benefit of the later commentaries that Buber and Rosenzweig penned in response to critics like Kracauer. Lawrence Rosenwald, "On the Reception of Buber and Rosenzweig's Bible" in *Prooftexts* 14 (1994), 149.

[11] Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimer Essays*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 80. Henceforth: MO.

Ultra-modern, the nihilism brooked no compromise. Parodying Buber, Kracauer argued that, "reality can be reached *only* by means of a path that leads through the 'unreality' of the profane" (MO: 200), a sentiment which repeats itself at the conclusion of the review, "For today access to truth is by way of the profane" (MO: 201). A prelude to catastrophe, the word "only" admits nothing other than its own narrow grip. Kracauer therefore rejected the work of Walter Benjamin as "a type of thinking that is foreign to current thought. Such thinking is more akin to talmudic writings and medieval tractates for, like these, its manner of presentation is interpretation. Its intentions are of a theological sort" (MO: 259). The new sobriety allowed no room, not just for theology and Judaism, but for foreigners and interpretation, restricting not just the renewal of religion, but modernity as well. Against interpretation, it programmatically strangled each and every attempt to open spiritual life out into the modern world while confining modernity to the deadest plane of immanence.

Krakauer knew very well that hotel-lobby modernism is a suffocating dead-end place in which a person can "vanish into an undetermined void, helplessly reduced to 'a member of society as such'" (MO: 179). "The desolation of *Ratio* is complete only when it removes its mask and hurls itself into the void of random abstractions that no longer mimic higher determinations. The only immediacy it then retains is the now openly acknowledged nothing, in which, grasping upward from below, it tried to ground the reality to which it no longer has access" (MO: 180). As in a tale by Kafka, the modern world constitutes into an architectural universe composed of dungeons, burrows, seamlessly constructed, impermeable and impenetrable. Kracauer observed," *The more systematically they plan it, the less they are able to breathe in it*" (MO 268, emphasis added). Built piecemeal, open and permeable, the "Great Wall of China" in the tale told by Kafka represents a counter-image of the true ideal. And yet, Kracauer still believed that even though the "sought after solution is unattainable" it was "at the same time attainable here and now" (MO: 277). He called it "the place of freedom" without explaining, as it were, how one gets from the hotel lobby to the Great Wall of China (MO: 278). No less beholden to

the archaic and exotic, the call for a "*real transformation of our entire essence*" (MO: 223) was even more vague and unclear-cut than the so-called romanticism for which he ridiculed Buber and Rosenzweig.[12]

And this brings us to Strauss. While Kracauer sought to radicalize Enlightenment with more Enlightenment, Strauss was anti-modern, and it was this "which is precisely what renders [them] inner- modern."[13] But the same either/or logic defined his thought, just as it had Kracauer. In *Philosophy and Law*, Strauss stood a radical form of revelation and orthodoxy over against modern philosophy and its expression in political Zionism and atheism. "The contemporary situation seems to allow no way out."[14] And like Kracauer, Strauss rejected all attempts to find one. Cohen, Buber, and Rosenzweig he took to task for abandoning literal belief in supernatural revelation, for having not" *unreservedly* [returned] to tradition" (PL: 8, emphasis added). In synch with the *Neue Sachlichkeit* return to optical objects in painting, Strauss called for an explicit embrace of dogmatic *content*. Correlating revelation to reason or to intense, empty encounters does not meet this high demand, the purity of which admits no human admixture.

No less than Kracauer, Strauss rejected the very idea of "interpretation" in his search for the original significance of revelation, literal belief in "the existence of God, an existence that is entirely indifferent to human existence and human need" (EW: 69). What he called

---

[12] For a more sympathetic approach, see Miriam Hansen, "Decentric Perspectives: Kracauer's Early Writings on Film and Mass Culture" in *New German Critique*, (#54, 1991), 47-76. Hansen argues that Kracauer's apocalyptic understanding of modern culture participates in the discourse of modern Jewish messianism insofar as he invokes a community of contemporaries who share his alienation and capacity for critical self-reflection (71-5). While his thoughts on "The Great Wall of China" support that thesis, they do nothing to dispel their inherent vacuous character when compared to the forceful clarity of his critique.

[13] Leo Strauss, *Leo Strauss: the Early Writings* (1921-1932), translated and edited by Michael Zank, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 5. Henceforth: EW.

[14] Leo Strauss, *Philosophy and Law: Essays toward the Understanding of Maimonides and His Predecessors*, translated by Fred Baumann, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1987), 19. Henceforth: PL.

the "enclosed world of the past," "*an entire enclosed world*," was an ideal and imaginary construct of his own creation (EW: 70). Living under an "open sky," modern theology was said to have "[stretched] the meaning of words to the point that they retain barely any of their original sense." Reason, presence, and eternity are perhaps vague abstractions, "merely an unreal shadow and no longer the powerful personality of religious doctrine," "unworthy of belief" (EW: 76-7, 207). Except the world-view invoked by Strauss was not the world of Bible and Talmud, whose God was never other to the correlates of physical need and human confirmation. Nor was it medieval philosophy, in which the conception of God was just as abstract and limited by human cognition as the modern versions rejected by Strauss. A caricature of revelation, the creation of "an entirely closed world" resembles the modernity pictured by Kracauer, with its seamlessly constructed dungeons and suffocating burrows.

The appeals made by Strauss to an "absolute and immutable" revelation (PL: 7) only work to undermine religion. Revelation is forced to legitimate "unambiguous commands to philosophize" (PL: 40). He upheld the "*unconditional* superiority of medieval over modern philosophy" (PL: 52), a "total order" (PL: 53), a "perfect society," the "perfection of man" that only obedience to prophets can promise (PL: 100), and prophets for their "direct knowledge of the upper world" (PL: 104, 105), a religion that he himself was unable to embrace. Strauss set the bar so high for revelation that he could not live under its rule. By the time he came to write a brilliant eulogy to Weimar German Judaism, the 1965 preface to his 1930 book on Spinoza, the conflict between reason and revelation had ground down to a standstill. Seen as a belief system in its own right, the quest for the certainty of necessary and evident truth in rational philosophy is an act of will, just like religious faith. Reason cannot refute belief in an omnipotent and unfathomable God and anything is possible if such a God exists. Impossible to *know* philosophically, *belief* in revelation, Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, and biblical miracles remains theoretically possible (JP: 170-2).

Just not for Strauss. Still demanding a radical choice between extreme orthodoxy and extreme secular modernity, he chose neither. Religious

Zionism was the only clear solution to "the crisis" of modern Judaism, but he rejected it as "not feasible, humanly speaking, for all Jews." Strauss was to explain to a young American critic, "I rejected all attempts to interpret the Jewish past," and not just the Jewish past, but revelation itself, "in terms of culture. Therefore the emptiness of which you complain. In other words, for me, the question is: truly either the Torah as understood by our tradition, or, say, unbelief" (JP: 343). The critique of modern Judaism and all its great projects was total: the liberal State (the private sphere permits discrimination), political Zionism (an empty shell without Jewish content), cultural Zionism (a gross distortion of Judaism into high-culture), and modern Jewish philosophy (imagistic, subjective, selective) (JP: 142-53, 318-20). Not much remained to Judaism except ancestral fidelity, the symbolism of unredeemed existence, and the vague sense that "being is radically mysterious" (JP: 320, 327, 328).[15]

The nothing left by Strauss to Judaism is a mirror image to the nihilism reflected in the Weimar era writings of Kracauer. As Michael Zank notes of the unresolved and irresolvable tensions that drove Strauss, "Once the extreme opposites are seen as equally grounded in irrational assumptions, and once the reconciliation of such assumptions is excluded, only one alternative [remains]: the philosopher who articulates this insight gloating in the heroism of the ability to stare back at the Gorgon's head of – absolutely nothing" (EW: 27). In the process, Strauss neglected the precarious "something" that negates the false choice between everything and nothing, in this case liberal Judaism and liberal democracy. Compared

---

[15] See Kenneth Hart Green, *Jew and Philosopher: The Return to Maimonides in the Jewish Thought of Leo Strauss*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), henceforth: JP, and David Novak (ed), *Leo Strauss and the Judaism: Jerusalem and Athens Critically Revisited*, (Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. 1996). Werner Dannhauser suggests that filial piety, i.e. "love of one's own," is the only reason why Strauss never explicitly embraced Athens over Jerusalem (169-70). In contrast, Hart Green calls Strauss a "cognitive theist." But the fact that Hart Green chose to place a "brief and allusive" statement regarding Strauss' religious belief in a footnote reflects quite strongly against the latter's ultimate relevance for Jewish philosophy. So too does the more burdensome fact that, unlike Strauss, Jewish philosophers generally tend to pursue Jewish thought in the main body of their work.

to the ideological capaciousness worked by Rosenzweig and his collaborators into the design at the *Lehrhaus*, compared to Buber's consistent opposition to left- wing totalitarianism and to right wing nationalism in both Europe and British Mandate Palestine, compared to these attempts to stretch out the political and pedagogical space of Judaism, to make it more capacious and open to the maximum of that which is alien. Staining his early writings on Judaism, Strauss' association with Carl Schmitt and German ultraconservative politics of the late 1920s and early 1930s was part of a more general propensity to shut down the difference represented by the now excluded middle.

Politics is the pivot around which revelation trumps reason in the early writings on Judaism, the modern emphasis upon inwardness and self-consciousness providing no basis upon which to civilize human community (PL: 13). Yet the Orthodoxy advanced in *Philosophy and Law* was but a rhetorical foil. Strauss only upheld the "form" of revelation, less drawn to ritual observance than to the prophecy of direct *perception*. The prophet "knows more, and more directly than the philosopher, ...blinded by the all too bright unaccustomed light" (PL: 89). He occupies the highest rung of human consciousness, "the stage of the *blissful*; the men of this stage see the thing in itself; they see, as it were, the light itself. In their seeing there is absolutely nothing seeming; they themselves become the thing they see" (PL: 105). Only this lends the basis upon which to create an ideal state, to mandate the freedom of philosophy, and to ensure the survival of humanity (PL: 99). The order for which the early Strauss longed was immutable, absolute, unconditional, even authoritarian. "The health of the world of the senses" and the survival of the political world is forced to rest upon the direct perception of the supernal world (PL: 104). An overpowering light applied directly to the optical nerve, an appeal to a concentration of order and authority two years after the rise of Hitler, it leaves one breathless.

If this is Jerusalem, it is a *polis* barely fit for human habitation – in contrast to the alternative space that Cohen, Buber, and Rosenzweig sought to build between the absolute bind of unbending orthodoxy and atheism, between that which belongs to God and that which belongs to

"man." Neither everything nor nothing, the sensation that revelation reflects the glimmer of a bare "something" lends more give and take to religious reality than the all or nothing approach advanced by early critics like Kracauer and Strauss. Unromantic, Buber and Rosenzweig did not abandon the public interest or restrict revelation to subjective consciousness. To the contrary. At much simpler fault was their inability to anticipate the future: the end of Jewish life in Europe, the dropping of the atomic bomb, Jewish majority status in the State of Israel, and the rise of global capitalism and American popular culture. Kracauer and Strauss survived the war in the United States where they remained. Gropius moved to Harvard, Mies van der Rohe and Moholy-Nagy to Chicago. Symbolized by the skyscraper, the modernism they advanced into the 1940s and 1950s was the one pilloried in postmodernism: sleek and cool, homogenous and corporate, the eclipse of God and of the spiritual in art.

II.

I do not believe that Strauss sought to "*harmonize* Judaism and philosophy by exploring their radical difference" as suggested by Batnitzky and Zank in their more generous call for papers to this special edition. I say so because the sound of radical difference is dissonance, not the contrivance of a harmony he opposed in his early writings. For his part, Zank explains that, in turning away from biblical and rabbinic source material, Strauss left open for later the re-engagement of Judaism. First one has to make one's move from the cave of modern consciousness to Plato's cave, i.e. to the cave that represents the state of natural ignorance. "For *only* then," Zank argues, could Strauss re-consider what revelation means to the so-called natural "man," free from the modern modifications and mitigations that confound the border between religion and philosophy. First return to the *polis* before proceeding to revelation. Perhaps Strauss was unable to deliver upon the promise; and perhaps it is true, the project remains unfinished, too vast a task for one single lifetime. But was there ever a need to complete the task? The tradition of modern Jewish thought did not and does not need Strauss to return it to the *polis*

it never left, does not need the nihilism observed by Zank in Strauss, who "abandoned Judaism at its darkest hour" to no pragmatic program upon which to reconstruct Jewish life (EW: 36).

The current revival of Straussian thought represents the philosophical spearhead of conservative Jews, for whom, as Zank notes, Strauss' early statements regarding Jews and Judaism remain "unfinished business." Liberal Jews might very well suspect that the eulogy penned by Strauss to the culture of Weimar German religious thought in the introduction to the Spinoza book reads very much like a done deal. The liberalism against which to measure Strauss is not the caricature pilloried by its anti-liberal critics; not the liberalism of individual freedom and feckless hedonism, but rather the liberalism of individual freedom and feckless hedonism in tandem with bourgeois devotion to the social welfare of state, community, congregation, and family; the liberalism of Moses Mendelssohn, Abraham Geiger, and Hermann Cohen and their German Jewish critics; the liberalism pilloried by fascists and marxists; a dynamic midpoint whose pitiful collapse in Germany was co-terminous to the work of John Dewey and the New Deal. Our own choice after 9/11 eschews the strict difference between obedience and freedom. On one side we are faced with the religion and politics of tradition and authority that Strauss himself could not accept, an "enclosed world of the past" even more contrived than the modernity he rejected. On the other side: a postmodern mutation of the modern world, open to reason and sensation, to all of that which sits between extreme atheism and extreme orthodoxy, to a fleeting presence that is at once *harut* and *herut*, both inscribed and free upon the tablets of law.