

The Legacy of Leo Strauss

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The Artist as Thinker: From Shakespeare to Joyce, by George Anastaplo, Chicago: Swallow Press, 1983. xiii + 499 pp. \$35.00 (paper \$16.00).

"THE PROPER WAY to read depends not only upon a 'method' of reading but perhaps even more upon the suppositions about the good, about prudence, and about human nature on which the soundest reading rests." Certainly the proper way to read Professor George Anastaplo's *The Artist as Thinker* is as a venture in political philosophy rather than as an ordinary attempt at literary criticism. This observation is not as quaint as it may seem. Even a casual examination suggests the book's unorthodox character, with the contents consisting of three distinct parts: (1) a more or less conventional section of thirteen chapters analyzing the works of literary artists ranging, as the title says, from Shakespeare to Joyce; (2) seven appendices dealing with various concerns of philosophy and literature; and (3) a set of 289 footnotes, some of them long enough to be minor essays themselves. As the reader may have guessed, the entire book is broadly political in character, dealing as it does with social life, or life in the polis.

Literary critics may well regard this book as a curiosity. True, Shakespeare and Joyce are present, as well as others such as Melville, Dickens, and Milton. But, strangely, so also are such lesser artists as Mary Shelley, Robert Louis Stevenson, and even Gilbert and Sullivan. Even more strange is the fact that some chapters are devoted almost exclusively to small portions of works or to lesser known or even inferior works by their authors. The chapter on Mark Twain, for instance,

focuses largely on the Boggs-Sherburn shooting incident in *Huckleberry Finn*. Almost the entire chapter on Matthew Arnold is devoted to "Dover Beach." And Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* and *The Rape of Lucrece* receive more attention than his more familiar achievements. In short, *The Artist as Thinker* covers a range of materials varying widely in both character and quality.

While Anastaplo's interpretations are sometimes as uneven as the works he criticizes, the chapters on Mark Twain, Dickens ("A Christmas Carol"), and Lewis Carroll are particularly well done. He has also done his homework. The chapters are well-documented through the extensive use of footnotes and citations included within the text. Nor are the references merely *pro forma*: Anastaplo frequently makes judicious use of his acquaintance with biographical detail and secondary source material.

The best written and most interesting portion of the book, however, is not on a literary figure at all, but on Leo Strauss, Anastaplo's mentor on political philosophy. The chapter is beautifully done. While the author's admiration for Strauss is plainly evident, he has done his character sketch with such depth and fairness and with such respect for detail that one might suspect him of having stolen the description from Plutarch. Anastaplo has given us an artistic rendering of a man eminently deserving of our memory: the description of Strauss shows vividly how a great man can still be very human, and Anastaplo enables us to see both the strengths and the weaknesses of his subject. In fact, some of Anastaplo's colleagues have complained that the biographical essay is not sufficiently prais-

ing of Strauss. The complaint is unjustified. One does not have to indulge in hero-worship in order to depict a great man as a hero, and Anastaplo's presentation is amply flattering to the memory of his most influential teacher. The book itself is in some ways a kind of testimony to the power that Strauss exerted over his students.

Without doubt George Anastaplo is himself a "Straussian," for better and for worse, whatever the differences between himself and other disciples of Strauss. While Anastaplo has himself noted in this book certain problems he has had with others, notably Glenn Thurow and Harry Jaffa, anyone familiar with the writings of Strauss and his devotees can readily discern that *The Artist as Thinker* is Straussian in character. It may be true that these academic descendants of Strauss have sometimes disavowed the legitimacy or clarity of the term "Straussian," yet the term has meaning and remains common currency among knowledgeable students of political philosophy. *The Artist as Thinker* might in fact be regarded as one substantial footnote in documenting the importance of the legacy of Leo Strauss.

Part of that legacy is a basic distrust of historicism and of a reliance upon historical detail. The feud with historicism is common for Straussians, and Anastaplo is one of the standard-bearers. "Are not theories of history dubious enterprises," he asks rhetorically, while elsewhere he speaks of the need to "struggle" against the idea that "historical setting" is necessary to understand the great masters. Not surprisingly, then, Anastaplo has relied on precious few historical references for background material.

While his reluctance to refer to historical background does not seem to have done much harm to *The Artist as Thinker*, the book *does* suffer from another malady common to other Straussian writings: a certain poverty of style. Many of the stylistic foibles which readers have come to identify as lamentably characteristic of standard Straussian publications can also be found in *The Ar-*

tist as Thinker. Thus we find Anastaplo making much too frequent reference to the unspecified "one," as in the following passage: "One does one's duty to one's own (including the particular poor toward whom one happens to have an obligation); one is sensitive to the concerns of others; one avoids . . ." While this sentence is admittedly an extreme example, it nonetheless serves to illustrate a chronic problem for the author. Another problem is that he too often engages in a dialogue-type style that shows little scruple about asking rhetorical questions or ending sentences with prepositions, both of which he does on innumerable occasions, and the results are often wearying. In short, the book could have been much improved had more time been devoted to the old-fashioned craft of writing.

In a quite different respect, however, it is safe to say that Anastaplo has taken extraordinary pains to write his book carefully. He has apparently made a prodigious effort to see to it that the design of the contents is tightly structured, and there can be no doubt that he has succeeded. The carefully laid plan of the book is derived from the respect Anastaplo has for a suggestion by Strauss that, in a listing of a series of items by an author of stature, the most important item is often the central one. In *The Artist as Thinker* Anastaplo employs this observation to good advantage when examining the works of others, and the technique figures prominently in his own construction as well. Thus, for example, the book's three main parts are made up of various chapters, appendices, and footnotes; and these are in turn further divided into numerous subsections. The thirteen chapters (plus prologue and epilogue) that make up the book's first segment are themselves partitioned into three to thirteen parts, always odd in number and therefore always providing each chapter with a readily identifiable centerpiece. Similarly, the seven appendices that make up the book's middle portion are likewise odd in number, the fourth appendix being "Art, Craftsmanship, and Community."

The last part of the book consists of 289 footnotes, and, if the reader has not already guessed, yes, the longest footnote is the central one, number 145. That Anastaplo intends for the footnotes to stand as a section apart is obvious since both early and late in the book he says in identical language: "The reader is urged, as with my other publications, to begin by reading the text without reference to the notes."

Evidently Anastaplo shares Plato's fascination with the idea of significance through numbers, and for the reader the results are intriguing, if demanding. Consequently, any future observer approaching Anastaplo's book on its own terms will obviously be required to take the book seriously and read it very carefully indeed. It does not take too much effort, however, to perceive that even on the surface level *The Artist as Thinker* is concerned with ancient questions about nature, prudence, justice, and the public good. In fact, Anastaplo has candidly told us his main theme: "One finds that the petty and the common often do interest moderns more than the grandiose and the noble. (This shift is central to this book, as we move from Shakespeare to Joyce.)"

Anastaplo's overt theme is thus a time-honored one: that man in modern society has lost the traditional sense of wholeness in community and as a result has become increasingly fragmented, introverted, and disjointed. Near the end of the book, in the chapter on Joyce, Anastaplo indicts the world of modern times when he refers to "the more or less steady retreat from the grand public world of Shakespeare into the intense, intimate, the all too often disturbed private world of the modern artist — that private world in which neither old-fashioned nobility nor genuine philosophy nor the deepest piety can be taken seriously." On several other occasions, Anastaplo laments the loss of the sense of community in our day, a loss he attributes to the modern infatuation with individuality and "self-expression," of which Joyce is, of course, the paradigmatic expression.

But what about Anastaplo himself? Has he also succumbed to the modern passion for novelty? Is he perhaps in his own way undermining traditional wisdom? It is true that he denies that he is "conventionally conservative" and admits to having been a liberal when he first met Strauss. But it is also true that he is quite willing to admit to holding an old-fashioned set of values. While he may not be "conventionally conservative," he clearly is in some respects at least unconventionally conservative; he certainly is no conventional liberal. Unquestionably his announced thesis is palatable to one particular strain of conservatives, that is, the traditionalists, or cultural conservatives. This should not be surprising: the general orientation of many of Strauss's descendants is frequently compatible with the concerns of cultural conservatism. Although Straussians and cultural conservatives often have different vocabularies, both share a premodern respect for the verities, nature, tradition, and old-fashioned piety, and conversely are suspicious of the modern deification of individuality, self-expression, radical democracy, and revolution.

But, penetrating as his argument might be, Anastaplo has not developed his point to the fullest. He has left the most important conclusion unsaid. While he deplores the worship of individualism that has become so pronounced in recent centuries, and while he especially regrets the deteriorating sense of community, he has preferred to keep his text on a detached philosophic plane and has thus declined to state the obvious — obvious at least to a host of less philosophic conservatives who would argue that the growing fascination of the free spirits of the modern world with "the individual" is the inevitable result of their loss of interest in that which is beyond the individual: the Divine. The growth of a secular consciousness is the concomitant result of the decline of Christianity's influence on Western culture. For as Christianity has grown less important, the concern for the "self" has grown more important. Thus the modern artist's desire

becomes more to "express himself" than to comprehend the natural order of things. The modern artist is more concerned with things strictly human than with the relationship of man to the Divine.

In political terms, of course, the results have been catastrophic. Paradoxically, Christianity deplores the miserable wickedness and worthlessness of man left on his own, and yet glories in the value of man as a creature of God. Modern secular trends have reverse tendencies: they tend

to glorify man as the noblest of beings, yet, not seeing him as ennobled by any divine element, have seen fit to debase him through the use of slave labor camps, psychiatric institutions, goon squads, and the like. The decline of Christian consciousness is at the root of the modern glorification of the self, and, while this lesson may seem to be trite, it is one that we in the West have not learned very well so far, and may be doomed to learn much better in the future.

Ethics Without Principles?

Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy, by Bernard Williams, *Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985. ix + 230 pp. \$17.50.*

ONE OF THE CHIEF tasks of philosophy, as understood by Socrates, is to tell us how we should live and why we should live that way. Should we grant philosophy this high prerogative Socrates claimed for it, and should we still expect so much from it, now that it has become an academic discipline so far removed by its analytic abstractness from the concrete practices of our living? These questions preoccupy Professor Bernard Williams throughout his latest book, and his answers to them will not be encouraging to those who still think philosophy can deliver on its Socratic promises.

Philosophy, as Williams defines and practices it himself, is an "abstract, rationally reflective" discipline that specializes in critical analysis. The limpid, painstakingly deliberate style of his book will be familiar to any reader who has been exposed to analytic philosophical writing — but it is, surprisingly, the ghost of Nietzsche that haunts these pages,

though he is hardly mentioned in them. The rigorously analytic manner of Williams's thought belies its Nietzschean argument that reason cannot provide us a rational justification for our ethical convictions. It cannot trace those convictions back to any absolute principle; nor can it provide us a new, rationally justified set of beliefs derived from such a principle, in spite of the ongoing effort of Kantians and utilitarians to perform just this feat. First principles are out of its reach. For philosophy is just as hemmed in as we are by our historical condition. Try as it might, it cannot lift us above that condition to some absolute standpoint from which we might grasp, in all its transparency, an ultimate justification for our particular actions. It cannot give us a vision of how we ought to live.

What task remains for ethical philosophy once one has reached that conclusion? Only the task that Williams undertakes in this book: an elegant, skeptical dissection of philosophy's limits and rational pretensions. But the most unexpected surprise of the book is not its skepticism toward philosophy but its insistence that the ethical dimension of our lives will be richer when we wean ourselves from the vain hopes it has made us cherish. Williams thinks we will do more justice to,