

mous erudition but lack of any sort of pretense—and always some very pertinent thoughts on whatever literary questions happened to come up. (I once made bold to tell him that I thought *Gone With the Wind* was not trash fiction but a very good novel, and he replied yes, it was, its narrative made you want to keep on reading, to find out what was going to happen next—and why.) And of course there were questions—and answers—on even more celebrated works as time went along. Whatever the case, I became more at ease with him and had less hesitation about venturing an opinion in his presence.

I begin by saying all this because this is part of the likeness of him as captured in this distinguished biography by Joseph Blotner, Professor of English Emeritus at the University of Michigan and author also of a two-volume biography of William Faulkner, which many would call definitive. Mr. Blotner's way here is conscientious, careful, tactful but also frank; and the result is a calling up from the past of a memorable impression of both the man and his life and some very fine assessments of his enormous literary output as novelist, poet, and critic, and the only writer to win Pulitzer Prizes for both prose and poetry. And he does it all with judicious and meticulous care.

There are so many ways a reviewer could approach his task here, but for me the best *foci* would be *heart* and *home*—Warren's abiding love in all his work for all the pieties of home and family, which he always characterized as "very close, very close," friends both old and new, respect for geography (especially that of the American West) and, above all, history. And his memory was, I should imagine, longer than death. Some critics thought less of his fiction than his poetry, but I would say he was a master in both modes, depending perhaps on the particular scene and situation. And of

course, with Cleanth Brooks, he helped revolutionize the college teaching of literature through a series of splendid textbooks. (What could he *not* do, I sometimes wondered, and recalled Allen Tate's assertion that he was the most gifted person he had ever known.)

Perhaps there would be no better way to give the reader some idea of his characteristic positions on all matters of life and death, and some of his principal thematic concerns than to quote from two of Warren's comments given some importance by Mr. Blotner. On religion, he says,

"I'm a naturalist. I don't believe in God. But I want meaning in life. I refuse to believe it's merely a sequence of events. So I write stories and poetry. My work is my testimony."

Speaking to a friend about the South, he observes,

"I love it. My house in the North is really just a big hotel to me. A place I stay. The South will always be my home."

And on the whole, I think these are typical. The love for time and place, family and friends are of course part of his Southern heritage. And beyond that there is an even deeper article of faith, evident in both his fiction and his poetry: as Jack Burden observes about his (presumed) great-uncle, Cass Mastern, in what many take to be his finest novel, *All the King's Men*,

...the world is all of one piece. He learned that the world is like an enormous spider web and if you touch it, however lightly, at any point, the vibration ripples to the remotest perimeter....

And you never get away with anything: "Nothing is ever lost" is almost a refrain in some of Warren's other work. And there is such a thing as Original Sin, though Willie Stark, as echoed by Jack Burden, doesn't call it that: "Man is con-

ceived in sin and born in corruption and he passeth from the stink of the didie to the stench of the shroud." Is it any wonder then that Warren was a great admirer of Thomas Hardy? Or Herman Melville or Nathaniel Hawthorne? But always life is meant for living in the here and now, for rejoicing in the moment, nowhere more ecstatically than in a poem written to his daughter, Rosanna, only one year old:

*For fire flames but in the heart of a
colder fire.*

*All voice is but echo caught from a
soundless voice.*

*Height is not deprivation of valley; nor
defect of desire.*

*But defines, for the fortunate, that joy in
which all joys should rejoice.*

He was a hard, extremely well disciplined worker; and he had—after talent, genius—some good luck. But there were bad times too—his first marriage to Emma ("Cinina") Brescia, which seems to have been contracted and maintained for many years by little more than passion; family sorrows in the loss of parents and others, an accident which led to the loss of an eye, more than occasional illnesses some of which sound like psychosomatic ailments. But then on the other side of the ledger there were his extremely happy second marriage to novelist and critic, Eleanor Clark, the birth of their two children, Rosanna and Gabriel, and, as he became more and more successful, a more than adequate income which made it possible for the family to live well and travel widely. But always, always it was poetry which sustained him, by his own admission, in his fundamental discipline, serving in many ways almost as a kind of religion and a means of bringing to all his life order and meaning and to all of us joy and wisdom. That seems to me his ultimate legacy, and I can think of none finer.

Leo Strauss's Crisis

CHARLES BAMBACH

Leo Strauss and Nietzsche, by

Laurence Lampert, *Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996. 229 pp. \$22.50.*

IN A NOTEBOOK from the late 1880s, Nietzsche writes: "What I relate is the history of the next two centuries. I describe what is coming, what can no longer come differently: the advent of nihilism.... For some time now, our whole European culture has been moving as toward a catastrophe, with a tortured tension that is growing from decade to decade: restlessly, violently, headlong, like a river that wants to reach the end, that no longer reflects, that is afraid to reflect."¹ Anyone familiar with Nietzsche's work will readily grasp the implications of this brief notebook entry. It is intended not merely as an imprecation against the recklessness and immoderation of a certain form of European political or cultural life; it also serves as a way of announcing the collapse of a whole tradition of scientific rationality that goes back to Descartes, Bacon, Hobbes, and their contemporaries. Nietzsche understands this collapse as a "crisis" confronting the fate and destiny of European culture, and he believes that the only way to salvage the positive remnants within that culture is to overcome its historical legacy. Constructing a narrative of Europe's future

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rooted in a conflict with its past, Nietzsche positions his own age as a transitional epoch which must decide about the meaning and value of the Western tradition. As he sees it, the crisis of modernity presents itself to us as a decision between two foundational traditions within Western history represented by the names Jerusalem and Athens.

Like Nietzsche, Leo Strauss (1889-1973) understood the modern era as one of crisis and decision concerning an unresolved tension between Jerusalem and Athens within the Western tradition. But where Nietzsche turned to the history of metaphysics for his genealogy of Western nihilism, Strauss argued that "the crisis of modernity is primarily the crisis of modern political philosophy."² To set Strauss and Nietzsche in dialogue is to confront this essential difference between politics and metaphysics as a way of thinking through the tensions in Western history. Within most contemporary Nietzsche scholarship there has been little interest in addressing the concerns of Strauss; and among Straussians, although Nietzsche has been discussed in a desultory manner, he has never really been the central focus of study. Laurence Lampert's *Leo Strauss and Nietzsche* tries to remedy this situation by placing these two thinkers within a dialogue about the meaning of crisis for the modern European tradition. Lampert comes to his task well prepared. The author of two other books on Nietzsche dealing with the early modern tradition (Bacon and Descartes) and a close textual reading of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Lampert employs his considerable knowledge of Nietzsche in this book. His manner of proceeding is decidedly hermeneutical and shapes his work in all its details. Though Lampert's principal interest here appears to be directed at Strauss, his real focus is the value of Strauss's work for understanding Nietzsche.

Lampert begins by discussing the his-

tory and scope of Strauss's "furtive reading" of Nietzsche in an Orthodox Jewish household in Germany during the Weimar years. It was there, Lampert tells us, that Nietzsche so "dominated and charmed" him that Strauss came to a lifelong engagement with the topic of Nietzsche's thought. And yet Strauss never really wrote at any great length on Nietzsche, though Nietzsche did exercise a furtive influence on his writings. Not until the very last year of his life did Strauss compose an essay on Nietzsche—"Note on the Plan of Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*" (1973)—which, at eighteen pages, Lampert deems "the most comprehensive and profound study ever published on Nietzsche." Little wonder then that more than half of Lampert's study is devoted to a close, paragraph by paragraph analysis of Strauss's essay (the text of which is presented in full at the end of the book). Lampert's method here follows the style of "slow reading" practiced by both Strauss and Nietzsche. And yet on one crucial point he breaks with the subjects of his study. Where Strauss and Nietzsche employ a rhetorical style which conceals and obscures, Lampert aims at clarity and thoroughness. Abjuring any hint of Derridean literary analysis, Lampert presents himself as a scholar and teacher of "public decency" against the "corruption" of an obfuscating academic style. And yet he appreciates Strauss's own insight about the esoteric nature of philosophical writing: that "the truth about all crucial things is presented exclusively between the lines."³ Such a strategy of esoteric writing demands an art of furtive reading whereby the hidden meanings of philosophical texts open themselves only to those schooled in the slow and arduous practice of political hermeneutics. But such a practice is not new. It was already deployed by Plato in his obscure, allusive, and ironic dialogues which on their surface fostered the conventions of the

city, yet, when read furtively, aimed at revolutionizing the city by advocating the rule of philosophy. And it is the Plato of allusion and irony who figures prominently in Lampert's analysis of Strauss's Nietzsche essay.

For Strauss, Plato becomes the crucial figure in rethinking the history of the West back to its originary foundations since it is in Plato's defense of reason, justice, truth, and order that Strauss finds a way out of the *aporias* of nihilism and historicism that have precipitated the crisis of modernity. By pitting Platonic political philosophy against modern social science, Strauss reconfigures the perennial quarrel between the ancients and the moderns. One might have wished for a more thoroughgoing analysis of this decisive quarrel within Strauss's work, but Lampert's interest lies elsewhere: in the significance of Nietzsche's thought for a Straussian history of Platonic political philosophy. And yet there is more. Despite its predominant focus on Straussian themes and topics, the distinguishing mark of Lampert's study is its distinctive approach to Nietzsche. Lampert's book avoids for the most part any reference to contemporary Nietzsche scholarship—either in America or Europe. To wit, the only prominent Nietzsche commentator mentioned in the work is Heidegger, and he is discussed only briefly and in disparaging terms. But in no sense does this constitute an oversight in Lampert's research. On the contrary, what Lampert puts forward is a subtle critique of contemporary Nietzsche scholarship, rooted in a Straussian "history of Platonic political philosophy" meant to serve as an alternative to a Heideggerian "history of being." As Lampert puts it, "Leo Strauss's Nietzsche is the best Nietzsche yet, the one nearest to the still almost secret Nietzsche of Nietzsche's great book." In this sense, *Leo Strauss and Nietzsche* attempts to offer "a whole new history of

philosophy" by revealing the secret Nietzsche of Strauss's furtive reading. The stakes here are not small.

By reconstituting the history of philosophy in the image of Platonic political philosophy and by positioning Nietzsche at the decisive turning point within that history, Strauss aimed at a way out of the nihilism and relativism of the modern age. Lampert seizes on that insight and attempts to argue for a new history of philosophy in which Nietzsche's "recovery" of philosophy's "basic Platonism" can challenge the modern, enlightened form of technological thinking defined by its "conquest of nature" and "the popularization or diffusion of philosophic or scientific knowledge." But in what sense will this recovery be "political"? If politics is genuinely the art of the local, then how can a reconstituted intellectual tradition function in a political fashion? These are troubling questions which never really get addressed by Lampert or by Strauss. Indeed, part of the problem in Strauss's confection of Platonic political philosophy is his idiosyncratic notion of the "political." For Strauss "the adjective 'political' in the expression 'political philosophy' designates not so much a subject matter as a manner of treatment; from this point of view, I say 'political philosophy' means primarily not the philosophic treatment of politics, but the political, or popular, treatment of philosophy or the political introduction to philosophy—the attempt to lead the qualified citizens, or rather their qualified sons, from the political life to the philosophical life."⁴ Such a view leads Strauss to defend the philosophical life as the highest vocation within the *polis*, a decision which follows the Platonic ideal of the philosopher king and the Nietzschean vision of the superior man. But does such an ideal provide a way out of the crisis of modernity that Strauss (through his reading of Nietzsche) defined as the crisis of modern political

philosophy? Does it hold out the hope to have found, in Nietzsche's words, "the exit out of the labyrinth of whole millennia" (*The Anti-Christ*, sec. 1)? To assess Strauss's work within this question frame, we need to situate it not merely within the history of Platonic political philosophy but also within its own historical context in Germany after 1918 and in America after 1945.

Strauss's fundamental perception of modernity as an era of crisis and decline grew out of his own experiences during the Weimar era when he read Spengler and became attuned to his Nietzschean analysis of nihilism. Viewing the modern period as "a gradual corrosion and destruction of the heritage of Western civilization," he scorned the levelling of classical values—both Greek and Hebrew—achieved through the modern practices of academic historicism and Weimar liberalism. Like other prominent Weimar intellectuals (such as Ernst Bloch, Gershom Scholem, Walter Benjamin, and Hans Jonas), Strauss sought a return to tradition through the esoteric and subterranean paths of a counter-tradition. And he believed that only in the hidden discourse written between the lines could the power of such a counter-tradition be reclaimed. In this sense Strauss was convinced that the way out of the crisis of modernity depended upon an art of esoteric hermeneutics prefigured in the writings of Nietzsche and Nietzsche's teacher, Plato. Lampert's work, as helpful as it is in assessing the significance of Nietzsche for Strauss and of Strauss for Nietzsche studies, does not really address the political context of Strauss's own writing. Nor does it locate Strauss's yearning for orthodoxy—his predilection for nature over history, his need to recover the classical past as a way out of the nihilistic present—in any specific historical context. He seems to believe that textual analysis alone will provide the neces-

sary insight for a new Nietzschean history of philosophy along Straussian lines. But Strauss's own decision to rethink modernity within the matrix of Platonic political philosophy was essentially an *historical* decision framed by the circumstances of his Neo-Kantian training and his political experience.

By privileging political philosophy over ontology and Plato over the Pre-Socratics, Strauss sought to recover the ethical dimension of thinking that he believed had been lost by German philosophy during the Weimar years—especially in Heidegger's *Being and Time*. If Plato had focused attention on the ethical problems of human beings within the *polis*, the Pre-Socratics had, for the most part, dispensed with political philosophy in order to focus attention on cosmological questions about the origins of being. During the 1920s, Heidegger seized on this distinction and, by reading Nietzsche as a modern day Heraclitus, attempted to rethink the history of philosophy in and through a dialogue with the Pre-Socratics. By choosing Plato as his model and positioning Nietzsche within the history of Platonic political philosophy, Strauss was covertly responding to Heidegger's decision to exclude ethics (and, by extension, politics) from the history of being.

Given Heidegger's own political decisions in 1933, it is clear to see why Strauss would challenge the Heideggerian reading of antiquity as a way to resolve the crisis of modernity. Because Lampert avoids any discussion of this complex historical tie within Strauss's work, especially as it affects his reading of Nietzsche, he misses an essential dimension of the Strauss-Nietzsche relationship. And yet Lampert does offer other helpful connections.

The strength of Lampert's work lies in its careful focus on the details of Strauss's Nietzsche interpretation. What readers of Nietzsche will find helpful here is the