A Brush with Leo Strauss

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The popular press has lately discovered Leo Strauss (1899-1973), a political philosopher relatively unknown outside the academic world. Strauss's critique of liberal democracy turns out to have greatly influenced not only a number of conservative scholars in political philosophy, but also many powerful figures in the resurgent conservative media (William Kristol, for example) and the current Bush administration (most conspicuously, Paul Wolfowitz). How odd, then, that Strauss, the alleged granddaddy of neoconservatism, would also have touched an abstract painter who is a passionate, voting, liberal Democrat. But he did.

My encounter with Strauss began when I was an undergraduate at Mount Holyoke College in the late 1960s. A semi-square, bookish girl in high school, I arrived on campus only to run smack into the political convulsions of the Vietnam War, the rise of militant civil-rights activism, the beginnings of the "do your own thing" culture, and a smorgasborg of sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll. An arty sort in spite of my studiousness, I started taking painting and drawing classes right from the start – not knowing, of course, that silk-screeny Pop Art had just finished rendering those activities irrelevant. My actual major, however, was political science, and I became engrossed with political philosophy. It was while writing a paper on Rousseau that I encountered Strauss's seminal work, Natural Right and History. It shocked me. Like almost every girl back then who wore granny glasses and miniskirts, I had Marx's critique of bourgeois society down cold. But until I read Strauss, I'd never encountered a put-down of modern life

channeled from the ancient Greeks.

What most people now think of as the result of historical cause and effect, Strauss saw more in terms of "human nature." This is the most misunderstood part of Strauss's teaching, because the mention of "human nature" triggers in us a reflexive fear of a fixed, probably unfair order, and a gut skepticism. But Strauss used the term to find an alternative to what he understood to be the enervating and misleading attempts by social science to model the political realm of human beings on the mechanistic schema of the natural sciences. Strauss didn't question the validity of science, the way postmodern philosophy does, as just another "social construct" dangerously malleable by the ruling classes. Rather, he thought that human endeavors are guided by distinctly human aspirations, beyond understanding gained from watching animals in the wild or conducting laboratory experiments. In particular, the desire on the part of great men to be great is one of those aspirations. Strauss believed that modern liberalism's horrific failure was demonstrated by the carnage of Verdun and the evil of Hitler, and necessitated a radical solution. For that, he turned back to the ancient Greeks. There he found the language he needed – "soul," "virtue," "greatness," and yes, that loaded word "regime" – to fashion his critique of modern liberalism.

My encounter with Strauss continued when, a year or so after graduation and unclear about what I wanted to do with my life, I got a job in academic publishing in a small town near New Haven. I also began to entertain ideas of being a painter, and so I set up a little studio. Usually, aspiring artists with any ambition head to art schools for graduate study, or hie themselves off to big cities and throw themselves into the art scene. Lacking that kind of commitment, and painting only part time, I knew my art was feeble. My isolation from other artists made it feebler still. I was floundering. Meanwhile, I was beginning to make friends with several young graduate students and faculty members at Yale. Among them was Tom Pangle, now a famously conservative professor in political philosophy at the University of Toronto but at that time a resident teaching fellow at one of Yale's colleges. Tom invited me to join his reading group on Plato's *Symposium*. I jumped at the chance to think seriously about political philosophy again.

Although I didn't realize it at the time, the group was for me a substitute for graduate art-school seminars, or hanging out in art bars and fulminating over the aesthetic issues of the day. We met once a week in Tom's living room. Everyone except me was a bona fide Straussian and was in one way or another connected to Yale: They'd either studied directly with Strauss or with his chief American disciple, Allan Bloom, or they'd read everything Strauss had written. Tom, who had studied with Bloom as an undergraduate and written his master's thesis under the guidance of Strauss himself, was the leader. He never made me feel inferior because I wasn't a legitimate academic, didn't read Greek, or wasn't as fully steeped in Strauss as the rest of the group. Instead, he seemed to welcome the point of view of an

artist.

The group's concerns were the increasing separation of modern liberalism from the legacy of the ancient Greeks (the rift between the "ancients and the moderns," Jonathan Swift and others before Strauss had called it), and the chasm between reason and faith (between "Athens and Jerusalem," in Strauss's words). To me, this was pretty heady stuff. But Tom always framed age-old questions in a way that seemed entirely new and exciting. Instead of comparing a democracy with monarchy, for instance, Tom would ask if we might not be better off with a king as head of state. Maybe modernism, liberal democracy included, was just one big, wrong turn in history. And history, instead of being a leatherbound manual where we pick up pointers about avoiding the mistakes of the past, became a scold that showed how we'd failed to become the exemplars we might have been.

In the mid-'70s, I finally committed myself to being an artist and enrolled as a graduate student in painting at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. There, as almost everywhere, installation art had replaced painting (and ordinary sculpture, too) as the favored form of contemporary art. Huge wooden fortresses occupying the whole school courtyard, rocks scattered around an otherwise empty room, and globs of glued feathers sticking out of distressed mattress springs had pushed painting on canvas deep into the closet. The Art Institute was packed with energetic young artists whose only questions about art were how big their "pieces" could get, or how they "felt" about their art.

Meanwhile, I was slogging around in Straussian doubt. While my peers were hammering, welding, tossing, photocopying, guy-wiring, and lighting to beat the band, I was bogged down, wondering how art as a whole fit into a good society, whether it really helped make people into excellent human beings, and why it seemed that Rousseau might be right that art was good for bad (sophisticated, decadent) people and bad for good (simple, hard-working) people. While I was pondering the connection between making art and lying (the place of lying and deceit in human affairs, extracted from Plato and Machiavelli, was a favorite Straussian subtheme), my compatriots were lapping up Lucy Lippard, Robert Smithson, and other smart art critics and artists who were writing about things like the dematerialization of the art object or the obliteration of the boundaries between art forms. While I was reading Lessing, Schiller, and Tocqueville, the go-getters around me were deep into Baudrillard and Foucault. At one point, feeling feminist stirrings, I joined a women-artists' discussion group. But the vaccination didn't take. While I certainly agreed that male patriarchy had long held back woman artists, I couldn't shake the suspicion that there was a lot more to the difference in the historical ambitions and accomplishments of men and women than a simple lack of opportunity.

My most painful experience occurred in a seminar I took with Dennis Adrian, the brilliant, caustic, chain-smoking Orson-Wellesian Chicago art critic. Cynical about everything

except art, he grew so exasperated with my constant Straussian questions that he turned his raspy, world-weary voice on me to ask angrily: "Why do you always have to force everything into a hierarchical order? Why can't you just see the world as a horizontal display?" I was mortified, but Adrian was right. I was ordering everything I saw from bad to good to best because I'd learned from Strauss the idea that nature is a complicated hierarchy, where some things are "higher" than others, and where the details are ferociously fought over in every generation. Adrian was clearly irritated by what he saw as my elitist way of thinking, but most artists and art critics, I knew full well, experienced art – if not life – in exactly this hierarchical sort of way. In other words, they were actually really like me, no matter what they said, reacting to art in a more or less hierarchically arranged way, from contempt to disapproval to boredom to mild interest to infatuation to awe.

I managed to get through the Art Institute with a degree, although I emerged a deeply divided artist. There was the "me" making my own paintings and trying to get a leg up in the art world, and the "me" pondering why anybody who saw the big picture would bother to make paintings at all. When I moved to Los Angeles, I got a job teaching painting at Art Center College of Design, a professional art school where hyper-industrious students frequently go directly from their graduation ceremony to design jobs at General Motors. Its academic humanities program was, at the time, just sufficient to qualify the studio-intense college as a degree-granting institution. Suddenly, my academic background, heretofore an albatross to me as a professional artist, came in handy. I was asked to teach an academic course of my own design, and the dormant Straussianism in me reawakened.

I called the course "Thinking About Art" and steered my students on a collision course with the then-ubiquitous art-education lobby's bumper sticker, "You Gotta Have Art." I hauled out Bloom's translation of Rousseau's "Letters to M. d'Alembert on the Theater," the essay in which the philosopher argues that bringing theater to Calvinist Geneva will be the ruination of a good city, and taught it through the prism of Bloom's and Pangle's probing questions about the place of art and artists in society. There I'd be, sitting in my studio in my painting clothes, cuticles stained with alizarin crimson, cigarette in hand, reading Rousseau or Lessing or Nietzsche and writing marginalia for the class. Swinging between a canvas-in-progress and a dog-eared philosophy book became the pattern of my life.

It's common, of course, for contemporary artists to question the worth of their art. A lot of artists wake up in the middle of the night and despair over being unrecognized, or not having any shows scheduled, or being broke. But an artist exposed to Strauss develops a disturbingly wider view of art and ends up seeing art careers with some detachment. Such an artist tends to question the worth of art in general. So is Strauss good for an artist? Yes and no. He's great for helping you stick to your guns and resisting fashionable trends. But he's bad

– very bad – for maintaining a fierce ambition to make a big mark in your own times. He teaches his readers that all times are not equal, and that there can be mediocre or even bad times.

Artists are doers and makers more than thinkers and footnoters. Too much thinking or philosophy of any kind is dangerous to artists because it can lead to indecisiveness. But Strauss's philosophy, in putting the drive for greatness up front, is something that certain artists actually can use to understand themselves. After all, Willem de Kooning wanted his paintings to be worthy enough to hang on the wall next to a fresco by Piero della Francesca; Miró said he wanted to "break Picasso's guitar"; and Whistler, in a conversation with a flattering patron about his own art, wittily wondered why she would bother dragging the name of Velázquez into their discussion.

In retrospect, though, I think it would have been easier for me as a painter if I'd never encountered Strauss. I could have just tended to the vicissitudes of paint and canvas and the vagaries of getting gallery representation. In the long run, however, Strauss's skepticism about modernism made me struggle mightily with my own times and, eventually, taught me to live in them. Strauss never demonstrated that he knew what it is to love being a modern human being, let alone to love being a modern artist, or a modern woman. Nor did he acknowledge in his thought the particular modern joy that comes from the easy mixing of the sexes, where men and women mingle comfortably, freely, and creatively. I think that for all the problems of our times, Tocqueville was right that the spread of political equality and the benefits of science make for a better happiness and approximation of justice than humankind has ever experienced. If the price for modern happiness is having a hundred merely good sculptors instead of one great Praxiteles to admire across the millennia, so be it.

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