

A Stance, an Attitude

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THERE'S A TICKET stub from a performance of Shostakovich's *The Nose* at the Metropolitan Opera in 2013 tucked into my father's copy of Leo Strauss's *Thoughts on Machiavelli*. On the page marked with the stub is a passage about writers' need to present their ideas "in an oblique way" when "it is too dangerous for them to attack the protected opinions openly or frontally." As Machiavelli puts it, sometimes the philosopher must "play the fool" to "please the prince." Strauss ends the paragraph with this kicker: "For to speak the truth is sensible only when one speaks to wise men." My father, whose name was Salvatore Giuseppe Rotella, ran community college systems for a living. His specialty was building new programs and institutions, creating vessels into which students and teachers and others could pour their lives, giving fresh shape to those lives. That required public money, and in order to get at it he had to develop a talent for the exercise of political leverage, alliance, and maneuver. His dedication to expanding the reach and purchase of School in the world obliged him to deal with Chicago's mayors from Richard J. Daley to Harold Washington, and with the Eritrean dictator Isaias Afwerki, among other princes. He had penciled an X next to the passage about speaking oblique truth to princes and another X in the top right corner of the facing page, so that he'd know to stop and look there when leafing through the book. My father was seventy-nine years old in 2013. A half-century after studying Machiavelli with Strauss he was still in a three-way conversation with his teacher and his touchstone political thinker.

Of the several prominent scholars with whom my father studied as a graduate student in political science at the University of Chicago in the late 1950s and 1960s, Strauss was the most celebrated star. Strauss, a Hessian Jewish émigré whose Dr. Strangelove accent and cigarette holder made him resemble the gnomish fashion designer Edna Mode in the *Incredibles* movies, died in 1973, and the fight

about his legacy goes on and on. Was he a gentle, cloistered pacifist who did a great service to liberal democracy by taking us back to the canon of political philosophers to uncover deep truths and enduring values that have been obscured by the extreme relativism that holds sway in modern life? Was he an illiberal elitist who equipped neocons to go forth on imperial adventures, lie to the people, and cloak authoritarianism with pious high-mindedness in the name of freedom? Was he somehow both at once? My father considered this struggle over Strauss to be a tail-chasing waste of time, and steered clear of it. He was a student of Strauss, but he kept his distance from both self-identified Straussians and their critics.

“Your father always liked Mr. Strauss”—they called their professors “Mister” back then at the University of Chicago—“and he enjoyed the classes, but he wasn’t an acolyte,” my mother tells me. My father especially enjoyed when they discussed Machiavelli in class, she said, because Strauss would single him out to ask about subtle shadings of usage and meaning in the original Italian. Strauss read Machiavelli as a bold and enterprising villain, an agent of modernity, who by decisively splitting politics from theology contributed mightily to the elevating of expedience over the notion of God-given natural rights that do not depend on any particular society’s laws or customs. This reading did not hold much resonance for my father, who, even though he had served as an altar boy in Asmara, Eritrea, where he grew up, had put God and all His pomps well behind him. He was an eminently practical man who considered Machiavelli an intellectual mentor, wouldn’t spare another thought for God and such until death was upon him, and tended to treat rights and power in pragmatic, entirely nonabstract terms: who horse-trades with whom for what.

From what I know of my father—a Sicilian father, which means that I have to read between the lines to get at an inner life he was not in the fulsome habit of sharing—it seems to me that he was likely to regard as irrelevant or objectionable not only the idea of God-derived natural rights but also most of the other ideas that Straussians treasure as their teacher’s legacy. My father’s dissertation was about the seemingly endless political crises in Italy after the Second World War, and

the basic argument was that these crises were caused not by structural economic or social conditions in the country, which were actually improving at an impressive rate during the postwar era, but by political operatives who thought to gain tactical advantage by destabilizing the government. This is the kind of understanding of self-dealing and power seeking at the expense of the public good that came as a natural adjunct of being Sicilian. He didn't need to study with Leo Strauss—or Edward Banfield or Hans Morgenthau or any of the other big-shot social scientists with whom he studied at the University of Chicago—to know that this is how things work. I'm left wondering what exactly about his encounter with Strauss he found so memorable and inspiring that he was still thinking on it half a century later.

One thing I've learned as both student and teacher is that you can't always predict what effect teaching will have on learning. In the classroom, output can flow from input in eccentric bends and leaps, and often the models offered by teachers or fellow students, rather than the content of the subject matter, make the most lasting impression. When I think about what I learned from my teachers, subject matter rarely comes first to mind. These days, I remember them primarily for how they carried themselves, how they modeled the process of teaching and learning. Each appears in memory as a characteristic stance, an attitude toward the universe.

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Among them is Sadako Tengan, my first- and second-grade teacher, whose gentle but firm no-nonsense air encouraged the variously foaming and dreamy-detached maniacs under her tutelage to fit ourselves into the scheduled activities of the day like so many bottles of 190-proof spirits into the cardboard-slotted interior of a liquor store box. And there's Raymond Lubway, my fifth-grade teacher, who earned my distrust by making us sing Gilbert and Sullivan. I can still see him banging on the old upright piano in our classroom with his longish silver hair flopping and regimental mustache aquiver, urging us on with a florid passion that seemed so self-exposing that it embarrassed me for his sake. I vividly recall recognizing within myself a

bone-deep urge to distrust and resist everything this guy cared about, but I grew up a little that year because I realized that I had no choice but to try to be a pro about it and get through it somehow. I memorized the precious unmusical tongue-twisting songs, and I acted in the Gilbert and Sullivan pastiche play (though I swore a great oath that this would be the last time anybody got me on stage, and so far I've stuck to that resolve).

I can still see versions of a certain look on the faces of Margaret Matchett, my math teacher throughout middle school, and Etiennette Pillet, my French teacher throughout high school. It's the look of a good teacher who's used to succeeding, a decent person warmly committed to her subject and her students, realizing that despite year after year of effort on her part this particular student is not going to come around on her watch. Neither of them gave up altogether on me, but each visibly concluded that it was time to cut her losses and expend her energy on students who would put more into their own educations than I was willing to put into mine in her subject at that stage of my school career. I can't fully explain why I resisted them, though I can identify the feeling of hexed futility that pervaded me in their classrooms. Tracking my own shameful lack of progress in their faces, I learned something about teaching that stayed with me: You owe it to all your students to try to reach them, but sometimes you don't reach one, even after years of trying. Sometimes a student is fundamentally you-proof at that stage in his or her schooling, as I was in the cases of both Mrs. Matchett and Mme. Pillet.

With some teachers and subjects, it's just the opposite. You walk into that classroom and you become an optimal, even ideal, version of yourself in a way that stays with you forever. This kind of quiet exaltation happened to me more often, and less and less by haphazard lightning-strike luck, as I developed the skill of taking an interest in things. Hal Hoffenkamp, with whom I took a high-school English class called *The Hero as Seeker* in which we read Saint-Exupéry's *Night Flight* and watched *The Hustler*, set a tone of patient confidence in the depth of the work and in the ability of the community of inquiry to get to the bottom of it. "I'm not sure what's going on in this story, but there's

plenty to figure out,” his manner seemed to say, “and together we’ll figure it out, and we’ll take as long as we need to. We’ve got all semester.” Darlene McCampbell, my high school’s Shakespeare specialist, conveyed a similar confidence in her students, but hers managed to seem much more personal. She was glad you could make it to class that day because we were discussing *Twelfth Night*, in which she found deep interpretive joy, and she was looking forward to talking about it with you, and she seemed so sure that you’d rise to the occasion that you didn’t want to let her down.

Joseph Siry, whose architecture courses I took in college, would stray in front of the screen and into the projected image of the building on which he was lecturing, eyes closed. The image of the house or church or skyscraper under consideration would ripple across his long, stark form as he sought the right descriptive turn of phrase or analytical formulation—the very image of the thinker inhabiting the object of his thought, and vice versa. His example, like those of Mr. Hoffenkamp and Ms. McCampbell, comes back to me when I’m reminding myself to put good work on the syllabus and to trust that work and the students, and to put aside concerns about whether those students will be able to get into that good work. They will find a way, and I’ll help them by letting them know I’m sure they’ll find that way, and by making a show of finding my own way into it.

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Thinking about models of teaching and learning offered by notable teachers I’ve encountered—and there are many more on that list than the mere sampling represented by the foregoing survey—made me want to check in with Rich Slotkin, the distinguished scholar of American violence and the frontier. He has been my rabbi, as they say in Chicago politics, in the School business since I attended a reading he gave on campus in my freshman year of college. He was a professor of American Studies, but he was reading from a novel in progress, and somewhere deep inside, below the level of conscious awareness, I noted that being a professor was a good day job for a writer and that the arrangement seemed to agree with him. My first impression of

him was of a big bearded guy with a commanding voice, though as I got to know him I came to hear his voice as more interested in getting things right than commanding, and to realize that if he shaved off the facial hair and trimmed his thicket of 1980s hair he would be revealed as a banty little guy with an outsize presence. I went on to take several classes with him, and continued to seek him out for guidance over the years. He's retired now, and we still keep in touch from time to time. Part of what makes Slotkin an excellent correspondent is that he's satisfyingly in character. Years ago, when I was getting ready to fly across the country for a campus interview, I received an email from him that read, in its entirety, "Now go and smite Amalek, and spare not his camel or his ass."

When I asked Slotkin if he had anything to tell me about the devious paths a teacher's influence can take, he told me a story from his days as a student at Brooklyn College in the 1950s. "I took the Big Shakespeare Lecture with Professor Grebanier, who was famous enough to figure in a Woody Allen joke," he wrote. "He was pompous and self-important—and, worse than that, he had named names in the 1950s when the Brooklyn faculty was being purged of 'subversives,' so my parents, who were alums, despised him. Nevertheless, he was a fabulous lecturer, a showman who even made his obnoxious manner an effective tool for getting the point across and making it memorable. I learned more about lecturing from him than from smarter, better, more scholarly profs I had later on." More than sixty years later, Slotkin could still hear Grebanier's "plummy and self-satisfied voice and tone," and could list the lessons he took away from Grebanier's approach to lecturing as stage performance: "Enjoy yourself, and pleasure communicates itself. You aren't doing a data dump, you're performing the way you deal with your subject, the way you analyze, appreciate, respond. And you change the act with each class, depending on what play or novel or film you're dealing with, and what mode of analysis you want to demonstrate. One model per class, and don't do it all at once. So if you did ironic distance last time, try passionate engagement this time, and by the end of the term you will have

conveyed a repertoire of responses. How much of that I understood at the time I couldn't say, but that was the takeaway over time."

Slotkin hastened to point out that he had genuine mentors at Brooklyn College, including the pathbreaking historian John Hope Franklin, "who not only taught me how not to think like a white boy all the time and fostered and praised my work for him in Am Civ but also protected me from retaliation when I challenged the red-baiting president of the college over his repression of the student press." And he gives eternal thanks to Miss Rockmore, his freshman English teacher, who set him on his path in life by telling him that he had a fine mind, despite his B average in high school, and that he might like to revise his plan to teach high school English and write fiction on the side and instead become a college professor and get paid to write. Slotkin sent her a copy of his first book, *Regeneration Through Violence*, which won the American Historical Association's Albert J. Beveridge Award for the best book in American history and was a finalist for the National Book Award. "She was very moved," he told me, "and of course had to admit she didn't remember me. The teaching load at Brooklyn College was horrendous."

Grebanier was not one of these genuine mentors, but, for all his self-absorption, he not only taught Slotkin invaluable lessons about teaching and learning, he also inspired him by deigning to notice him. "My personal connection with him was minimal, and I had no more than one or two conversations with him about my work," Slotkin wrote. "But it's exciting to be taught by a first-class mind or even a mere academic celebrity, even if you don't buy their line or aren't even interested in the subject. If such a prof then pays you the tribute of taking you seriously, the validation is real and important."

The story about Grebanier put me in mind of a colleague I had at a previous academic job. He was, as far as I could tell, a fraud who devoted most of his energy in class to shoring up his sense of himself as an apostle of high culture. I once sat outside his classroom on a bench for twenty minutes or so, listening to him patronize, belittle, and dismiss a student who had mustered the courage to break

into his extended monologue to offer her own interpretive gloss on a scene in a Shakespeare play, a view not quite perfectly identical to his own interpretation of the scene. He had left the door of his classroom open, and he projected theatrically, so anybody walking by could hear him. I had been heading down the hallway, minding my own business, and the sound of his affected, self-important voice, which made me want to punch him right in the middle of the demeaning little smile he kept pasted on his face whenever I was around him, had stopped me in my tracks. (I realize now that his floppy silver hair, regimental mustache, and stage diction remind me of Mr. Lubway.) And yet, a prominent writer who majored in English at this school a long time ago credits the old fraud with changing his life by teaching him Shakespeare and Milton and taking seriously his early efforts at writing poetry. The prominent writer means every word of it, and no doubt the old fraud—who was a much younger fraud, or maybe not yet a fraud, when the aspiring writer encountered him—did indeed change that writer’s life. You never know who’s going to learn what from whom. Styles, as they say in the boxing business, make fights.



You can listen to recordings of Leo Strauss’s seminars on the website of the University of Chicago’s Leo Strauss Center. There are plenty to choose among, whole semesters of class meetings on the works of Aristotle, Cicero, Grotius, Kant, Montesquieu, Nietzsche, Plato, Spinoza, Vico, Xenophon—you get the picture. Each class begins with a student reading a paper, which is left off the recording (for which we should all be grateful, according to my father and other former students of Strauss), and then Strauss gets down to business, spinning out the question or problem of the day into an extended riff only occasionally interrupted by anyone else’s voice. Students do ask questions from time to time, but they’re momentary eddies in the endless tide of his off-the-cuff lecture. He also asks questions at times, but they’re not very good questions. He’ll ask, “Who is the most important classical thinker about X?” A student voice will pipe up:

“Uh, Cicero?” “Yes,” says Strauss. “Now, Cicero, . . .”—and off he goes for another hour into his explication of Cicero’s take on X.

Assessed from the standpoint of my generation of classroom teachers, Strauss doesn’t know the first thing about how to run a class. Since his time, more and more teachers have tried to get out of the business of throwing fish at students and instead have turned to trying to impart fishing technique—or, as edspeak sometimes puts it, they have sought to replace the sage on the stage with the guide on the side. Strauss is a sage in flowing garments backing up a dump truck to center stage and spilling from its tipped bed a flopping load of fish. In the class sessions I’ve listened to, he almost never asks authentic questions that would lead students to engage his thinking with any dynamic give-and-take. His questions typically have one-word answers, and students’ questions, even when they begin to challenge or extend his thinking, become occasions for him to pile on another fifty choruses of wailing guitar solo, not trade fours in any kind of meaningful exchange. If Strauss was a junior colleague and I was observing his graduate teaching, I’d feel obliged to sit him down for a talk about how to ask a question, how to orchestrate a discussion, how to pass the ball and not just shoot and shoot and shoot.

On the other hand, there’s an argument for the old-school model in which the teacher lectures and everybody else listens. If he’s by far the best shooter—or, if you prefer, guitar player or cook or painter or fisherperson—in the room, maybe the most efficient thing he can do is just let it rip and invite everybody else to pay attention to the ways he models virtuosity. I can learn from that kind of teaching, and in fact I enjoy learning in that way. Though I don’t lecture all that much anymore in class, I appreciate a good lecture. When I was in grad school in American Studies in the late 1980s and early 1990s, I made a policy every semester of attending, in addition to the small and intense discussion-based graduate seminars in which I was enrolled and the undergraduate lecture courses for which I served as a teaching assistant, at least one undergraduate lecture course in which I wasn’t enrolled: Vincent Scully on architecture, Jon Butler

on religion, Jean-Christophe Agnew on cultural history, Richard Brodhead on literature, and so on. (I'm just old enough that when I was a grad student university faculties were still largely the same Planet of the Guys that they were for my parents, though this has changed for the better since then.) Each lecturer had something in particular to offer as a model. Agnew, for instance, was a master of the framing device—an opening image or quotation or anecdote that would turn out to contain within it the essence of everything the day's lecture had to say, and to which he would return at the end to draw together all the threads of argument in climactic symmetry. Brodhead stood out as a voice stylist. His own natural speaking voice resembled that of the cartoon character Snagglepuss (“Heavens to Murgatroyd! *Exiit*, stage *left!*”), but he used a different customized voice to play up aspects of form and theme when he read from the work of each of the authors covered by the survey of nineteenth-century American literature. The stoner drone of his Whitman rings clearest in memory. Though I wasn't enrolled in these lecture courses, they're where I learned much of what I learned in grad school, both about American culture and about how to teach.

The same principle informs the many hours I spent hanging around in Larry Holmes's gym in Easton, Pennsylvania, when I had my first academic job, at Lafayette College. Like everybody else in the gym with any sense, I watched Holmes train as much as I could. Still an active professional fighting meaningful bouts well into his forties, he had held the heavyweight championship for a prodigious seven-year span, fought everyone from Ali to Tyson, and made a place for himself in the first rank of the best heavyweights of all time. Sparring with him would have been instructive in its own way, it's true, but he was so much better than everyone else present that most of what anybody there could have learned from that experience would have been that none of them was anywhere near good enough to match up profitably with Holmes, which we already knew. There was, arguably, more to learn simply by watching him, day after day, get himself ready to fight like Larry Holmes. I had no ambitions to be a fighter, but Holmes was offering object lessons in a much broader curriculum that has only

grown in significance for me over the years: staying committed to your craft over the long haul, banking and leveraging the compound interest of experience, adjusting technique to account for your changing kit of wherewithal, renewing your command of the basics even as an advanced practitioner.

So I can see the case for Strauss taking an endless solo and everybody else shutting up and paying attention to him, but this approach can go too far, which almost always happens when you let one player take all the solos. Think of guitar players who just won't stop. The blues-rock world has been full of them for generations now—guys (and they're almost always guys) who just keep the choruses coming, yet another note-dense run culminating in screaming bends way up high, yet another nasty figure repeated and repeated over a relentless groove until the crowd gives in and dutifully goes "Whoo." I pictured the late Johnny Winter, for instance, as perpetually taking a solo even when he had no guitar in his hands, even in his sleep. When it was time to play a gig or record an album, a roadie would just slip a plugged-in, volume-cranked guitar between his endlessly noodling pale hands. No matter how good a player like that might be, after a while—two songs, half a set, maybe even a whole set—I get full up on guitar overkill.

The difference between them and a true virtuoso is the difference between a pathological ball hog, the kind who shoots the ball too much and scores a lot of points and loses to less talented but more cooperative and balanced teams, and a principled ball hog like Michael Jordan, who shot just enough to win but also passed and played defense and ran the court in ways that made his teammates better. Consider, in that light, the Chicago blues giant Buddy Guy at his transcendent nonpareil best and Guy at his headache-inducing, thuddingly self-indulgent worst. Match Guy with a genuine band and he turns into Michael Jordan, as you can hear in his cardiopulmonary exchanges with the pianist Otis Spann on the album *A Man and the Blues*. But reduce the band to musical flunkies who are there to give Guy a groove over which to solo majestically ad infinitum, and he'll just chuck it up over and over, à la World B. Free.

You can hear the ball-hog effect when Strauss's students talk in class. He's not passing them the ball in any kind of useful rhythm, not running plays that set them up to succeed, so when students do pipe up they're either just going through the motions of accepting the ball from Strauss for a moment and then handing it right back to him to shoot some more or they're trying to wrest the ball from him and at least briefly hog it themselves, since that's what they've learned from him about what being a smart person amounts to. Such interruptions usually lead to Strauss soloing even more effusively to make up for them. He sounds pleasantly surprised that somebody had the courage to speak up, but he's listening to what they have to say mostly to the extent that he can launch from it into more soaring riffs of his own that leave the student's contribution obscured beneath clouds of rocket exhaust. The dynamic of the class is that Strauss shreds and shreds, amp cranked to ten and both hands on the fingerboard at blinding speeds, then a student interrupts to fumblingly shred a little in imitation, then Strauss turns up to eleven and shreds a whole lot more. He could really play, and it's often instructive to be up close to that kind of ability, but was he doing much actual teaching?

"Your father always said that most of his professors at the U of C were not very good teachers," says my mother, Pilar Vives Rotella, who got her PhD in comparative literature at the University of Chicago in the same year, 1971, that my father got his in political science. "That was my experience as well. Famous scholars and great minds and all that, yes, but there weren't many who stood out as teachers." Walter Blair, who taught Twain, was at least funny. She fondly remembers him saying that papers were due "by sundown." And there were gentlemen, like Gwin Kolb and Norman Maclean. But with the exception of Wayne Booth, who knew how to orchestrate a real discussion, none showed much in the way of what I would regard as classroom chops. Like my father, my mother's a terrible University of Chicago snob who has never tried to conceal their shared conviction that their alma mater represents the pinnacle of human civilization. Have they mentioned all those Nobel laureates? Why, yes, they have. But she went on to a long career as an ace classroom teacher at St. Xavier

College, Sarah Lawrence, and Chapman University; she grades with old-school rigor; and she calls them as she sees them. The plain fact is that in her time the U of C (which has worked hard to rebrand as “UChicago,” a term I will consent to use approximately never) did not have much of a teaching culture, which made it fairly typical of the age. There was a lot of professorial soloing, variously tedious or brilliant or self-regarding or inspired, and to be a student there was to be serially bludgeoned with the blunt instrument of your professors’ genius.

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So what did my father learn from Strauss? Was it like what the Straussians say they learned from Strauss? Was it like what he learned from dealing with Noah Robinson, a notorious Chicago businessman connected to players in local politics on both the legit end of the spectrum (he’s Jesse Jackson’s half-brother) and the stone gangster end (he was tight with the El Rukns, a gang descended from the legendary Blackstone Rangers), who tried to strong-arm my father into giving him a City Colleges food-services contract but lost his opportunity to make good on his threats when he was arrested for murder and eventually sent to prison for life? Was it like what he learned from dealing with tyrants like Richard J. Daley and Isaias Afwerki?

Late in his career, after a thirty-year run at the City Colleges of Chicago and while he was chancellor of the Riverside Community College system, my father had a chance to return to Eritrea to help its government overhaul its higher-education system. He had spent his childhood there, his parents having moved to Asmara from their Sicilian hometown to take advantage of the opportunities for skilled artisans like them that had been created by Italy’s imperial adventure—a foreign enterprise, as Sicilians saw it, hatched by Northerners who might as well be Austrians and who gave lip service to outlandish ideas like the rule of law and the nation-state. The experience of going back to Eritrea, a country he loved, offered an unpleasant reminder that, as he had learned in Chicago, a boss is a boss. Isaias, the dictator (they use first names in formal address there), played along with

my father and the other American and European consultants until he suddenly realized that better colleges would probably produce more and better dissent, at which point he not only shut down the reform effort but took steps to neutralize the whole system. My father switched over to salvage mode, working to help his great friend and fellow college president Wolde-Ab Isaac get out of there and into a good position at some other branch office of School Inc. before Isaias decided that Wolde was a problem that could be made to disappear. Wolde now has my father's old job as chancellor of the Riverside Community College District, and lives in the house in which my parents lived during their time in Southern California. Did I mention that my father was Sicilian?

Was studying with Leo Strauss—as opposed to, say, being Sicilian, or being an immigrant—an experience that could adequately prepare my father for any of these tests of acumen and fortitude? Strauss's commitment to the notion of natural rights, the bedrock of his philosophy, strikes me as a matter of irrelevance to my father. My father was the soul of probity, the kind of public servant who could endure ethical scrutiny without fear because he never cut corners or bent rules, but he didn't bother with theorizing it. As I understood his thinking, there are rules and you follow them, and it doesn't matter whether the rules are the product of political compromises or derived from some transcendent principle above the rule- and norm-making reach of any given society. You follow the rules because when people don't follow the rules you end up with something resembling the quagmire of corrupt self-dealing and social inertia he hoped to leave far behind him when he came to America in 1951. He was caught up in the romance of Italian culture, but Italy was his model of a nonfunctional polity, like the car-crash videos they scare you with in driver's ed.

Another Straussian fundamental that didn't seem to do much for my father was the idea of esoteric language. Many Straussians claim that Strauss taught them the importance, the inevitability, of deception in the defense of Western Civilization, which lost its way when it lost touch with its philosophical grounding in eternal truths

it had once known, before they were eclipsed by relativistic thinking. Strauss felt it was necessary to close-read works of political philosophy as works of literature, plumbing beneath their surface language to uncover hidden meaning, because philosophers are obliged to write on two levels of public utterance, esoteric and exoteric. The former is what they really mean, the latter what they feel they can acceptably be seen as saying, given the place and time and political climate in which they write. Strauss used this line of argument to justify acting like a high-theory English professor, teasing meanings from the text that may not be apparent on its surface, but it has also been used by Straussian neocons to justify lying to enemies, allies, the public, just about everybody. Remember when the Bush administration told everybody that the Iraqis had weapons of mass destruction? Well, see, Western Civilization needed to start a war. . . .

This whole category of thinking strikes me as dead on arrival when it comes to my father, even though the passage he marked in Strauss's book on Machiavelli addresses exactly this subject. He didn't have much patience for what he regarded as the interpretive pretzel logic applied to texts by literary critics, and when he took a break from his usual nonfiction reading in history or politics to read some fiction it was usually something with a gun on the cover. "I'm a consumah," he would say in dismissive self-defense, the New York accent he had acquired on arrival in this country at the age of seventeen resurfacing when he felt pressed by the presence of people like my mother and me who did, in fact, regularly engage in interpretation of literature. And as a writer and speaker he pretty much said what he meant, with minimal head fakes or filigree. He wasn't a great public speaker—he was prone to ruminative pauses, which my mom attributes in part to his practice of winging his speeches from minimal notes—but it was always clear what he meant. His public utterance was, in fact, bracingly free of secret subtext. So was his private utterance, for that matter, when he did feel like uttering at all. "Shit or get off the pot" was about as far as he went in the direction of layered metaphor.

I could keep going point by point through the Straussians' canon of principles they say they learned from their mentor, and I could

keep showing how those principles didn't really seem to have any particular purchase on my father. While I'm at it, I could probably do the same for the Straussians, too, especially those like Paul Wolfowitz and Abram Shulsky who went into the hands-on, nontheoretical exercise of power as highly placed neocons. Wolfowitz and Shulsky, who both contributed significantly to the direction of America's disastrous adventure in Iraq, and most of the other hands-on Straussians are not very persuasive when they try to portray their behavior as shaped by Strauss's teaching, nor are their critics all that successful in doing the same. Sometimes it seems more the case that it wasn't Strauss's specific ideas that enabled the hands-on Straussians but rather that they found it inspiring to sit in a seminar with a famous thinker with a heavy Middle European accent who talked about Aristotle and tyranny and such, up close to a very smart person being very smart. It's exciting to be taught by a first-class mind or even a mere academic celebrity, as Slotkin put it. Then, in retrospect, they (and their critics) not very convincingly cited Strauss's teaching as an intellectually respectable rationale for what they went on to do, like lying and seeking politically expedient advantage in the name of natural rights—because, after all, esoteric deception is the philosopher's work, and politics is inherently compromised and separate from the search for truth.

The only hands-on Straussian I've encountered who makes a convincing case for the great man's influence on him is Kirk Emmert, and that's mostly because Emmert limits the case so drastically. Emmert, who received his PhD in political science from the U of C in the same year as my father and is now an emeritus professor of political science at Kenyon College, worked in the Ford White House (where he helped to draw up the Helsinki Accords), assisted on Charles Percy's Senate campaigns, and eventually served three terms as mayor of Gambier, Ohio, the small town where Kenyon is located. So he got a taste of practical politics at the local as well as the national and international levels. When I tracked him down in Florida, he told me that sometimes he had indeed drawn direct guidance from Strauss's lessons as he made his way in the world far from the classroom. "For instance, Strauss said, when we read Aristotle, that every regime

tends to go to its extreme over time,” Emmert told me. “Whether it’s military glory or serving God or social equality or whatever, a regime tends to pursue more and more of it. That’s been very useful to me.” And he argued that Chuck Percy’s campaigning “didn’t just pander to voters but tried to educate them, and Strauss would have approved of that.” But most lastingly important of all to him, Emmert said, was Strauss’s strong sense of “the subordinate importance of politics.” Strauss would have understood Emmert’s return to academia from applied politics as an ascent, not a retreat. “He emphasized that political life is bound by circumstances, and you can’t be overly optimistic in your expectations of what you can accomplish in it,” Emmert said. “There are other, more worthy ways to spend your life, like the pursuit of truth, the life of the mind.”

Emmert would remind himself of the limits of applied politics when he grew frustrated with the repetitive and meandering quality of the meetings over which he presided as mayor of Gambier, which if you don’t count Kenyon students has a population well under a thousand. He told me, “I’d say to myself, ‘This is the human comedy. Let people talk.’” But, he added, he did get things done as mayor: reduced water loss, built sidewalks, increased park space. When I asked if he ever had occasion to think about the painstaking close-reading of texts conducted in Strauss’s classroom as he went about his mayoral business in Gambier, he said, “Lots of days would go by when my experience in academia wasn’t relevant, but sometimes it was.” When an ethics commission tried to address Kenyon’s domination of the town by limiting what public officials associated with the college could do, Emmert applied his mentor’s style of textual scrutiny to the legislation that had set up the ethics commission, arguing that the body didn’t have the power to do what it was trying to do. “A losing battle,” he said, “but that’s a moment when my training felt relevant.”

When I was a kid and my parents were doing whatever they could to bring in a little more money, my father had a side gig teaching a night course in basic political science at the Illinois Institute of Technology. A lot of cops took this course because they were angling for credits they needed to get promoted. My father played the Strauss

role in that class, riffing on long-dead thinkers for hard-handed guys who took notes and variously marveled or quailed or scoffed at the world of ideas opening in front of them. Some of his students would come to our house, and they were always on their best and most respectful behavior: *Why, yes, I will take more coffee, Doctor Rotella, and thank you.* I remember one better than the others, Mr. Jennings, a balding detective who had a pencil mustache and wore a brown suit with a quiet Ellingtonian elegance. He took the bullets out of his gun and showed it to me, and he humored me with some slow-motion self-defense moves when I asked what he would do if I came at him by surprise and tried to disarm him from behind like *this*. I once overheard Mr. Jennings say to my parents, “The more holes in a body, the more likely we can just go ahead and arrest whoever loved them the most.” Teaching Aristotle and Machiavelli to Mr. Jennings and his fellows might have been the only thing my father did that directly bore the marks of Strauss’s influence. Other than that, Strauss was not much more than a stance, an attitude, an aura—an example of a thinking person who did what he did with impassioned virtuosity, even if it had little to do with what my father ended up doing.

♦ ♦ ♦

When I helped my father and uncle clean out my grandmother’s house in Queens after she died in 1995, I discovered on a bookshelf a copy of the Thematic Apperception Test. It’s a sheaf of black and white images on thick white card stock now discolored by age, wrapped in a soft gray-green cover on which there’s a note from the publisher, Harvard University Press, that says, “This test is sold on the understanding that the plates are not to be publicly displayed.” There’s a notation in faint pencil in the upper right hand corner of the front cover: 5/56, RXST, 6⁰⁰. The Thematic Apperception Test is a curious artifact of midcentury social science, more art than science. Like a Rorschach test using the works of Edward Hopper instead of inkblots, it consists of a collection of twenty numbered black-and-white images derived from a variety of recognizable sources—magazine illustration, Thomas Hart Benton-style painting, noir movie still, Dorothea

Lange-style photo, Edvard Munch—evoking tableau, and so on—that show a series of ambiguous, fraught, often doomy scenes. A woman buries her face in her hands, a boy contemplates a violin and bow on a table in front of him, a man with a Sinatra forelock pulls away from the embrace of a woman with steeply arched eyebrows, a young woman with two books in her hands looks off into the middle distance while behind her an older woman faces in the opposite direction with her eyes closed and a shirtless muscular man plows deeply furrowed fields with a white horse, and so on. The test subject would look at the pictures and tell stories about what's happening in them, what they mean, and the social scientist would use those stories to come to conclusions about the subject's inner life.

My father told me that Edward Banfield used this very copy of the Thematic Apperception Test to conduct the research for *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* (1958), a community study of a Southern Italian town he conducted with significant assistance from his Italian-speaking wife, Laura Fasano Banfield. Called Montegrano in the book, the actual town was Chiaromonte, in the Basilicata region, way down in the arch of the boot of Italy—so, while the Chiaromontese might have been looked down on by Northern Italians as brutish Southerners, from my Sicilian relatives' point of view they would be highfalutin Northerners. Banfield was one of my father's first teachers at the University of Chicago when my father got there in 1956. When my father went back to Italy in 1957 to study for a year at the University of Pavia, Banfield loaned this copy of the Thematic Apperception Test to him, the two having agreed that my father might conduct further research for Banfield if he had time while he was there. This research didn't happen, Banfield moved on to Harvard in 1959, and my father ended up hanging on to the test, which he stashed on a shelf at his parents' house in Queens.

Ed Banfield was a close friend of Leo Strauss, but Banfield was no theorist. Strauss, in fact, once made a jokey speech lamenting his total failure to get the practical Banfield to take seriously the abstract idea of natural rights. Banfield had worked for the Department of Agriculture and traveled in the rural West as a publicist for the Farm

Security Administration during the war, and he was interested in how governments actually do things and why those things do or don't help people. A formerly committed New Dealer who had lost his Rooseveltian religion, Banfield came to doubt and eventually to reject the effectiveness of government programs in improving the lives of citizens. In the 1960s and 1970s he achieved greater prominence as a notorious conservative who blamed the welfare state and the cultural tendencies of the lower classes for helping to create the urban crisis, an argument that my father would not have endorsed. After all, my father went on to devote his professional life to government-funded higher education, finding ways to redirect public money and power to the benefit of people who weren't already rich and powerful. But I can see how Banfield's attempts to determine just what government could accomplish and how it might or might not do people any good would appeal to my father, even if for him the value of the inquiry was not in proving how public institutions didn't work as advertised but in helping to figure out how to design them so that they did.

And my father saw eye to eye with Banfield on the larger lessons taught by Italians' seemingly baked-in resistance to civil society and the efforts of the modern nation-state to improve the lives of citizens, which Banfield parsed in *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society*. Banfield coined "amoral familism" as the label for an ethic of mutual suspicion, envy, and nepotism that weakened social capital and undermined the community's ability to get together to act for the common good—not because there was something uniquely bad about Southern Italians but because they were entirely normal in their response to historical conditions like poverty, a high death rate, and corruption. Banfield, who was more interested in aggregate ethos and world view than in individual personality, noted that his Southern Italian subjects were obsessed with calamity and barely able to imagine change for the better other than by an improbable stroke of fortune. "In only two of 320 stories told by 16 Montegrano peasants who were given Thematic Apperception Tests did a family prosper by thrift or enterprise," Banfield notes, "and even in these cases the success was not great enough to raise it out of the peasant class."

Whatever else it accomplished, Banfield's book explained my father's Sicilian hometown and the *cafoni* and *poltroni* of his extended family so well that for the rest of his life he continued to cite it when the conversation turned to what he had hoped to leave behind when he came to America.

One of the images in the Thematic Apperception Test, Number 16, is intentionally blank, to encourage test subjects to free-associate without a specific visual cue. I imagine, as Number 16, a charcoal portrait of my father in his Lambretta-riding 1950s student incarnation: the lean and immigrant-hungry son of a carpenter and a seamstress, wearing the standard best-and-brightest uniform of sport coat and skinny tie, with clipped dark hair and black-framed Clark Kent glasses; ambitious, the very embodiment of thrift and enterprise, on the make in a place where he could exercise these virtues to the fullest and prosper; richly aware of the venality and tribalism and resistance to change that can foil big plans for progress, but burning to get out there anyway and take his shot at making something that lasts. Banfield and Strauss and the rest of his teachers helped equip him to do that, even if it was by introducing him to ideas he resisted or dismissed or disagreed with outright. You just never know who's going to learn what from whom.