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The dust jacket labels this academic *roman à clef* “a mystery,” then explains that it is “based on the work of a real philosopher and some of his modern-day disciples.” Presenting themselves as staunch supporters of the democratic system, while secretly espousing nihilistic relativism derived from Nietzsche, they scruple at nothing in their quest to thwart popular sovereignty and egalitarian policy. Recourse to cryptic writing—most notably, placing their key message at the exact center of the document—allows them to communicate dark thoughts to one another and entice new followers without being detected. Although descended from financially comfortable families and schooled at the best private institutions, their clandestine nihilism overrides all sense of duty or obligation.

The story begins with the disappearance of Zach Blumberg’s dissertation on Joseph de Maistre. A Yale graduate student in philosophy, Zach returns to his Manhattan apartment one August evening and discovers that all the files of his dissertation chapters have been irreversibly obliterated from his computer and his backup diskettes stolen. In the next few days, he learns that the same has happened to every existing hard copy of the dissertation as well as his research notes. Zach’s efforts to determine who has done this to him and why expose the nefarious politics of philosopher Otto Stern and his disciples; prevent Yale Law School graduate and noted proponent of natural-law theory Circuit Judge Wendell Fry from being confirmed to the Supreme Court; and solve the mysterious death of Charles Wilson, a Princeton graduate student whose dissertation was also stolen. Not only does the tale portray how academics like Otto Stern and his disciples undermine popular government, it also provides a tour of the Ivy League as Zach’s sleuthing takes him from Yale to Princeton to Cornell and back again. Such institutions, most notably Princeton and Yale, contrast starkly with the desultory state college where Zach teaches a summer course.

A grim world this, yet one that is all too patently movie-set thin and one sided. So, too, are the characters. In addition to Zach and Judge Wendell Frye—no stand-in for Robert Bork, for he has published an article citing Bork (the quotation occurring, of course, in the middle)—there is Charles, who dies before making a personal appearance; his former girlfriend, Kate, a Princeton graduate student in Art History who soon takes up with Zach; emerita professor Alice Webster, a paradigm of learning and scholarly devotion who represents the best of academic life despite her ignorance of eighteenth-century French history;¹ and the impossibly pompous Hannibal Davies, a proudly logical-positi-

vist chair of philosophy at Yale who so unremittingly allows his sense of personal dignity to guide him that he has no use for reflection on virtue and vice. Numerous other characters flit in and out of the story, but apart from Andrew, Zach's classmate from college now comfortably ensconced at Cornell as a teaching assistant in philosophy, only Cornell philosophy professor Jules Hausman is noteworthy. A Stern student who has based his career on explicating the master's teaching yet fails to discern its cryptic nihilism until alerted by Charles, Hausman seems modelled on a former Cornell Nietzsche scholar with whose surname he shares a syllable. Once Hausman recognizes the enormity of Stern's deception, he strives to right his fellow disciples' wrongs, then hangs himself.

Of the duplicitous Otto Stern, precious little is said. Zach finds him "an interesting figure, actually," even though "a lot of academics think of him as pretty marginal." He notes, moreover, that Stern

had close intellectual relationships with some of the greatest postwar European philosophers. He founded a school that most people consider eccentric today, but it has a member or two on most of the best faculties in the country. (P. 49)

After perusing several books by Stern, Zach allows that "Stern wrote well and with a complete lack of technical jargon or footnotes" (p. 53). Although it is Charles who first discovers that Stern owes his nihilistic relativism to Nietzsche and his penchant for cryptic writing to the discovery that previous philosophers wrote so as to conceal their thoughts from ordinary readers, it is Zach's familiarity with Joseph de Maistre that facilitates his grasping the significance of these insights.²

Zach's research reveals that de Maistre was an anti-Masonic Mason who detested the notion of popular sovereignty and a cultural relativist who thought it prudent to conceal his beliefs. From Charles's dissertation Zach learns that in addition to having no faith in the ability of the people to govern themselves wisely, Otto Stern was also a cultural relativist who concealed his thoughts from all but his closest disciples. Judge Wendell Frye, it turns out, was so highly regarded by Stern as to be entrusted with his most private papers. No manuscript is thrown over a Senate office transom, but Zach does manage to fax damning material to a senator opposed to Frye's confirmation.

Nothing in the story serves to qualify it as a tract against cultural relativism. To the contrary, Zach Blumberg and his associates accept without flinching that there are no grounds for distinguishing between good and bad, just and unjust. But they believe in good and bad, just and unjust, nonetheless. In other words, the beliefs of Stern and his followers are not at issue.

Nor does the novel or any of its characters present a ringing defense of democracy. The Sternians are never faulted for deeming the mass of citizens uninterested in questions of good and bad, justice and injustice, or, worse yet,

incompetent judges of such questions. Their sin, rather is trying to conceal such opinions and engaging in other acts of deceit as they pursue their political goals. Zach's jejune defense of the people's right to know things they care little about is summarily dismissed by Jules Hausman, as well it should be. Not some blind faith in the ability of the people to govern themselves well despite their shortcomings, but Hausman's sense of the need to preserve due process leads him to give Zach Charles's missing dissertation, an act that derails the Sternians. In the end, Alice Webster confesses that she opposed Frye mainly because he was "a liar and hypocrite," even more "a lunatic right-winger" whose "appointment would have meant a step back for women, the poor, the environment" (p. 274). Here Zach, but not Kate, has the grace to protest weakly.

The novel's final scene illustrates all too vividly the minor place accorded these larger issues. Observing the interactions of an older couple, especially how solicitous each is of the other, Zach somehow finds their conduct vindicates Alice Webster's judgment that it does not matter if "there is no such thing as truth and everything is permitted." He continues,

It isn't that Maistre and Stern and the rest of them are wrong; it's just that their ideas don't seem all that important anymore. In fact, they seem a bit silly, compared to the grown-up business of living.

"With that thought," the narrator concludes, "he settled back in his seat and permitted himself to daydream of Kate and happiness."

It is not that Zach and his fellows consciously imitate Nietzsche's last men. No, merely content to enjoy the simple pleasures of life, though admittedly unable to justify their actions, they blithely think the thoughts they can.

The novel is flat and unappealing. Zach's erotic attachment to Kate is so poorly described that he appears to be as unprepared and unimaginative a lover as he is a teacher. The Sternians, evil as they may be, have no character—no face or soul. We learn only that they are young, Waspishly handsome, well dressed, and that they drive expensive cars. Mysteriously able to break into apartments and offices, manipulate computers, infiltrate secure government buildings, and pull strings from afar, they exist mainly as shadows. And the narration is marred by numerous foolish errors. Even though the tale unfolds according to a daily agenda, days evaporate without mention. Thus, after discovering on Tuesday that the last copy of his dissertation has disappeared (p. 14), Zach makes a long, tedious trip to Yale to look for his notes that very day only to find that they, too, are missing. When he returns to New York on the late train that evening and runs into Alice Webster, she asks him what he is doing there on a Friday night (p. 21); similar slips occur in Chapters 2–3 and 8–9. Similarly, Zach's dissertation advisor, Professor Mollendorf, loses his heavy German accent in a matter of weeks (compare p. 9 with pp. 140–41); the place Charles meets his death changes from a Virginia to a Washington-area

motel (compare p. 124 with pp. 171–72); and the Memorial Bridge entrance to Arlington Cemetery is graced with a traffic light (p. 175).

To be sure, Peter Levine's task was quite difficult. It is far easier to write about actions than ideas and more difficult to arouse a reader's excitement when discussing the implications of a philosophical argument than those of a lawyer's plea or a gangster's threats. Perchance amusing to those who want to think the worst of people they imagine to be Sternians and maybe even to those who consider themselves putative Sternians, the novel nonetheless raises a question in no way answered by Zach's final recourse to daydreams. Nor can Alice Webster's judgment that it does not matter whether truth exists and that everything is therefore permitted pass without challenge, her personal charm, talent as a teacher, and general human decency notwithstanding. To leave matters at such an impasse serves no more to vindicate Jules Hausman's noble death than to rebuke Hannibal Davies' self-centered complacency.

NOTES

1. Her poignant recollection that "when Louis the Fourteenth was executed, someone shouted, 'Jacques de Molay, you are avenged'" (pp. 31–32) suggests confusion with Louis XVI, who was executed in 1793 or dyslexia; Louis XIV died of natural causes in 1715.

2. The narrator misses a unique opportunity here to sharpen the contemporary focus of the novel. Since he has no compunctions about citing names of actual academic figures, one wonders why he did not allude to the current debate surrounding the Nietzschean leanings of the "real philosopher" Stern is modelled on by evoking Shadia Drury. Again, as part of Zach's research on de Maistre, Levine might have had him consult Stephen Holmes's *The Anatomy of Antiliberalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993). Holmes adorns his book with the apothegms of that revolutionary enigma and devotes a whole chapter to the Stern model, then sums up his grievances against him by complaining about how difficult he is to read.

Perhaps Levine avoided the ploy because examination reveals how singularly incapable Holmes is of reading accurately. For example, when blaming this scholar for the "bold counterfactual" claim "that the ancients could have invented modern science, but . . . refused to do so because they knew it would be 'destructive of humanity'" (p. 83 and n. 57), Holmes asserts: "but even though such positions are essential to his position, they are never openly discussed or defended. Indeed, they are deftly wedged between paragraphs of dense textual commentary." The claim, found at the beginning of the author's reply to two critics (Kojève and Voegelin), is fully documented in the immediate sequel; see *On Tyranny*, p. 178, Holmes's reference to *What Is Political Philosophy?*, p. 37, being blind.