Literary Aspects of Philosophical Writing: The Case of Maimonides' Guide of the Perplexed

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The *Guide of the Perplexed* is a unique work in the long and complex history of Jewish books. As Maimonides puts it in the introduction, "[w]hat I register here is recorded in no book extant in our nation in our present age of exile."[1] Its literary form certainly has no parallel in medieval writing. Rather than a straightforward exposition, the work is "poetic" in the broadest sense of the word: it is carefully written and meant to be read with great care. As Maimonides admonishes the reader, "[t]o get the most out of this work and leave nothing behind, review the chapters against one another. Don't just focus on the main point of each chapter, but pay attention to each term used in the argument, even those not central to that chapter's theme. For the argument of the work is not laid out randomly but carefully and exactingly so as to omit no issue that needs clearing up." What precisely the message and meaning of the work is continues to be debated.[2] The elusiveness of the book's doctrine seems very much bound up with its literary form. It is this relationship between philosophical content and literary form of the *Guide* that I want to investigate.[3]

1 Here and in the following, I quote the *Guide of the Perplexed* from a pre-publication version of Lenn Goodman's new translation of the *Guide* unless stated otherwise. I am grateful to Prof. Goodman for making his translation available to me.

2 This essay builds on papers by the same title that I read at a Starr Fellows Seminar at Harvard University in 2021, at the 2022 AJS Annual Conference in Boston. I thank the members of the Spring 2024 BU Center for the Humanities Fellows Seminar for their comments on a further draft of this study. All remaining errors and shortcomings are entirely mine.

3 What I offer here is a preliminary investigation. The full argument will need to be made from a close reading of the *Guide*, which I hope to present in form of book tentatively titled "Maimonides and His Modern Readers".

The overall purpose of the treatise, as its title suggests, is to help its intended reader to find his way out of a state of perplexity. This is how this state of perplexity is described:

> [T]he specific purpose here is to arouse intellectually a religious, morally and spiritually mature person who is settled of mind and committed to the Torah's truth, who has studied and absorbed the philosophical sciences. Human reason draws such a person invitingly to its domain, but he is troubled by the surface sense of certain biblical expressions. Resisting what he still takes (or was taught) is the meaning of its multivalent, metaphorical, or ambiguous words, he hangs back, perplexed and confused. Should he follow his reason, reject what he took those words to say, and presume that he has shed core biblical precepts? Or should he hold fast to what he took those words to mean and fight reason's sway, dig in his heels and resist, feeling injured by reason, as though it had sullied his faith, retain his fanciful beliefs, yet remain deeply troubled by anxiety and disquiet.

It is this state of "anxiety and disquiet" in a conscientious person of faith that is meant to be remedied by means of what the treatise has to teach. The purpose of the writing is, thus, therapeutic, a remedy for an unhappy state of the soul, much as ancient Stoic philosophy was meant to achieve in its practitioners an untroubled state of mind. But the *Guide* is written for a soul troubled by a condition that was unknown to the ancients. He is disquieted by the seeming contradictions between the literal meaning of words of Scripture and the concepts of reason acquired by the study of science and philosophy. That both, Torah and philosophy, are to maintain their validity, that both are sources of knowledge and therefore must be brought into agreement with one another so as to resolve the "perplexity" of the troubled soul, distinguishes the situation for which Maimonides writes from that of the ancient Stoics.

Maimonides is aware of this difference between his own situation and that of the ancients. In *Guide* I, 31 he writes:

> Alexander of Aphrodisias says that there are three causes of disagreement about things. […] However, in our times there is a fourth cause that he did not mention because it did not exist among them. It is habit and upbringing. For man has in his nature a love of, and inclination for, that to which he is habituated. […] In a similar way, man has love for, and the wish to defend, opinions to which he is habituated and in which he has been brought up and has a feeling of repulsion for opinions other than those. […] All this

> is due to people being habituated to, and brought up on, *texts that it is an established usage to think highly of and to regard as true* […]. (Maimonides 1963: 66–67, emphasis added)

The perplexity in question doesn't arise from what Leo Strauss (1997: 386–388) called the "natural difficulties" of philosophizing alone, so that the difficulties could be remedied by philosophical means. This explains why the *pharmakon* or remedy provided by the *Guide* in no way resembles a traditional philosophical treatise.

What Maimonides does in the *Guide* is often seen as a repetition of the project of Philo of Alexandria (cf. Cortest 2017; Harvey 2000). In this view, Maimonides basically reinvents allegorical interpretation all over again, much as Philo did before him, without having direct exposure to Philo's writing or to those of Philo's Christian heirs, such as Origen of Alexandria. But even though both authors take recourse to figurative interpretations of Scripture, there are major differences between them with regard to their philosophical sources and hence to their respective purpose. Philo is a Platonist and strives to show that Moses anticipated the insights of Platonism. For Philo, Moses himself was a philosopher – indeed the greatest philosopher of all. The tone of voice of Philo's writings is apologetic, as he writes for an audience convinced of the greatness of Plato but not necessarily persuaded of Moses' superiority. Maimonides, on the other hand, is not an avowed Platonist, and his agreement with Aristotle's natural philosophy is limited to what Aristotle teaches with regard to the sublunar realm. When it comes to astronomy, the part of science that the medieval philosophers regarded as essential to metaphysical arguments, Maimonides – much like his Andalusian contemporaries – was skeptical of the Ptolemaic worldview and believed that Aristotle had been groping in the dark. For this reason alone, Philo and Maimonides were not operating under similar conditions and they were in the same position neither with regard to the philosophical tradition nor with regard to the Torah and its character as understood by the communities of their respective readers.

Even if one does not equate his project with that of Philo, Maimonides still stands for a tradition that imbued the Scriptures with philosophical depth. Some modern critics of Maimonides, foremost among them Baruch Spinoza, went to great length in their attacks on this approach. For Spinoza, Maimonides was guilty of substituting the "ravings of the philosophers," namely of Plato and Aristotle, for the plain sense of Scripture. Maimonides appeared to Spinoza as not just mistaken but as dishonest. As Spinoza argued in the *Trac-*

tatus Theologico-Politicus, the words of ancient prophets had no deeper meaning but were well-intentioned attempts to impose a moral and political order on an unruly people. Prophecy was varied by individual style and marked by the life-world of each individual prophet, time-bound and practical in concern and orientation, political-theological in nature, and unrelated to the pursuit of intellectual perfection, of which those prophets were entirely innocent. There was no shred of philosophical doctrine contained in their proclamations, and the Laws of Moses were merely the new taskmaster imposed on a liberated slave people who hadn't shed their slave mentality. It wasn't – as one might speculate in light of Plato's *Laws* – a free law for a free people. Maimonides, one of few thinkers Spinoza mentions by name and criticizes explicitly, was not a careful reader of Scripture but one of those who bent its text to his will. His was the approach to giving the Scriptures timeless meaning that Spinoza meant to defeat once and for all (cf. Wolfson 1934).[4] For him, naturalizing prophecy and historicizing the Law of Moses meant giving modern man a chance to conduct his political affairs without the interference of religious power.

But there are other ways of reading Maimonides. In the attempt to read Maimonides afresh, I am aided by considerations of the literary aspects of philosophical writing more generally – that is, the problematic relationship between the appearance of truth in our minds and the linguistic or symbolic forms in which it invariably appears to us. Spinoza believed, with Descartes, that rational arguments about God, Nature, and human thriving could be stated as clearly and distinctly as geometric demonstrations and that therefore philosophical investigations could proceed with the same compelling force. And yet his own major philosophical work, the *Ethica, more geometrico demonstrata*, engendered completely opposite interpretations. With Hannah Arendt's *Life of the Mind*, leaning on Kant's distinction between *Verstand* and *Vernunft*, one may distinguish between the rational and the reasonable. The rational concerns what can be stated clearly and distinctly, like a mathematical equation, while the reasonable concerns those squishy questions of meaning that remain elusive and forever bound to speech and its interpretation, speech and more speech. Where does Maimonides' *Guide* come to rest in this regard? Is it a mere restatement of the neo-Aristotelian doctrines he might have

4 As Leo Strauss argued, Spinoza also shared the goal of Stoic philosophy but, in contrast to Maimonides, he found biblical belief in a creator god itself a troubling proposition, cf. Strauss 1965.

shared with his Andalusian compatriots in the form of a forced interpretation of prophetic riddles and parables, or is there more to learn from the *Guide* and its complex literary form?

The challenge to read Maimonides more carefully links, in my mind, with the larger, more universal confluence between literary form and philosophical content. More than merely engaging questions of genre, style, and the employment of short forms such as aphorisms, metaphoric speech, riddles, or parables,[5] I am interested in general problems of saying and meaning (cf. Hegel 1979), problems that Maimonides would have been keenly aware of through his attention to the logic of negation and its employment in theological speech (*apophasis*), not necessarily in pursuit of a mystical "unsaying" but perhaps for the sake of drawing the attention of his intended reader to the ways in which human thought is intertwined with human speech.[6]

The *Guide* as a Case for a Larger Issue

One might approach the Maimonidean work as a particularly intriguing case of a more common and perhaps pervasive issue, illuminating the vaunted, though often neglected, relationship between philosophy and writing – something that we might call the *literary aspects of philosophical writing*.[7] This is not the same as asking whether the *Guide* was concealing a dangerous doctrine – as the medieval French rabbis who banned the book feared it did –, a doctrine that, while hidden under a veneer of conformity with conventional beliefs, might undermine piety and devotion to the Law. This medieval interpretation was echoed by Leo Strauss in a 1941 essay called "Persecution and the Art of Writing," where he broadened the suspicion of hidden nonconformity to argue that true philosophers always take recourse to a certain "art of writing" that

5 Cf. e.g. Maimonides' Commentary on Mishnah Sanhedrin X:1: "[…] they [the sages] were speaking by way of a riddle and a parable – since this is the way of great wise men" (Maimonides 2020: 10:1, 14).

6 On the neo-Platonic tradition of negative theology, cf. Armstrong 1977. On Maimonides as part of a Jewish "maieutic" tradition, cf. Kavka 2009.

7 Cf. Jaeger 1923: 4: "[B]esonders die Fachphilosophie und die Literaturphilologie sind stets geneigt, die Form als etwas Literarisches zu betrachten […]." Jaeger's critical comment supports my thesis, namely that the form of philosophy is not just a literary "mask" that can be dropped but something essential to understanding the content or intent of serious works of philosophy.

keeps the multitude in the dark while communicating matters that only a careful reader may discern between the lines.[8] In contrast to Strauss, I want to use the case of Maimonides to interrogate, indeed question and challenge, the conventional distinction between philosophical writing and literature.[9] To see philosophy as the other of literature rather than on a continuum of literary forms, or to conceive of philosophy as pure thought, even a "scientific" endeavor, and not also as a product of language and the imagination, seems insufficiently reflected.[10] While this insight is certainly not new, it has yet to receive the attention it deserves in the field of Jewish philosophical studies.[11]

The question is not whether philosophical writing and literature are on a continuum of modes of speech but where on that continuum they fall and how literary form and philosophical content are related in each case. Some texts penned by literary authors are also profound works of philosophy.[12] In other cases, philosophical authors ably draw on literary forms such as dialogue to give expression to philosophical thought.[13] There are also cases where poetry,

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8 Strauss believed that this "art of writing" had first been cultivated by Plato. He believed that Maimonides was a Platonist in this regard, someone who understood the reasons why the true opinion of a philosopher must be concealed to all but the most discerning readers, cf. Strauss 1941; Zank 2004; Diamond 2002.

9 Josef Stern similarly takes on the idea that the *Guide* was meant to convey a specific doctrine, albeit one concealed under a thick layer of dissimulation (cf. Stern 2013). On Stern and his conclusion that Maimonides' philosophy is best understood as skeptical of true knowledge, cf. Pollock 2013.

10 Analytic philosophy arose as an antidote and corrective to the language dependency of all metaphysics. Cf. Stewart 1878: 112 (cited in Patton, 2011).

11 This investigation builds on studies related to problems of taxonomy and classification that I explored in previous publications, cf. Zank 2007, 2017, 2021.

12 Eminent modern examples include Voltaire's *Candide*, Rousseau's *Emile*, Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, and Johann Wolfgang Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, a classical *Bildungsroman*. One might argue that any nontrivial poem or novel is driven by some inherently philosophical problem. More's *Utopia* paved the way for the modern novel as a projection of possible societies, both utopian and dystopian. But even this has its antecedent in the Atlantis myth recounted in Plato's *Timaeus*.

13 There is the form of philosophical dialogues pioneered by Plato, emulated by Cicero, and renewed by Enlightenment philosophers such as David Hume. Closer to Maimonides' time, we might recall Ibn Tufayl's philosophical desert island novel, *The Epistle of Hayy Ibn Yaqzan*, which was the model for Daniel Defoe's Enlightenment novel, *Robinson Crusoe*, and of course Judah Halevi's *Sefer ha-Kuzari*. Modern authors of influential philosophical plays and novels include Rousseau, Goethe, Lessing, and Jacobi. Kierkegaard's use of pseudonyms, by which he "stages" his philosophical and theolog-

fact, fiction, allusive suggestions, and rational arguments are inextricably enmeshed with one another. An eminent example of this might be the great debate on Lessing's "Spinozism" between Jacobi and Mendelssohn, which involved private and public letters, publications and counter-publications. It hinged on a, perhaps invented (cf. Altmann 2007),[14] account of a conversation between Lessing and Jacobi, and ultimately concerned the philosophical views of a playwright who never publicly espoused any.[15] The original conversation between Jacobi and Lessing revolved around a poem by J. W. Goethe, the famous "Prometheus."[16] If this seems a remote and largely forgotten case of an entanglement between philosophy and literature, it should be recalled that the debate compelled European thinkers and writers to take another, rather consequential look at Spinoza (cf. Förster/Melamed 2015; Folkers 1998; Goldenbaum 2009). Philosophy, I would argue, may be propelled by thought but thinking itself can be stimulated by the literary imagination.

Maimonides: Bio-bibliographical Background

The author of the *Guide of the Perplexed*, Moses Maimonides (1138–1204), was a scholar and physician whose legal, medical, and philosophical writings were of great renown in the Arabic, Latin, and Hebrew scholarship of the medieval world. His pathbreaking comprehensive systematic codification of Jewish law, the *Mishneh Torah*, remains foundational to rabbinic legal culture, and thereby to Jewish communal life, even today (cf. Twersky 1949). He was the first to formulate, in *Thirteen Articles of Faith*, a Jewish creed articulating what Jews believe in that were eventually adopted into the prayer books of the entire Jewish diaspora (cf. Kellner 1986). His influence straddles the traditional ethno-linguistic

ical explorations, is another case to be considered. Nietzsche, a master of the philosophical aphorism, uses the prophetic mode of speech in Zarathustra. The examples could be multiplied.

14 More generally on Jacobi and the question of philosophy as a "manner of writing," cf. Ortlieb 2010.

15 On Lessing and the question of belief, cf. Kerber 2021; Allison 1966.

16 Namely, "Prometheus." Mendelssohn found the poem immature and disturbing, cf. Jacobi 2004. Poetry and philosophy intersected in Hölderlin's contributions to the formation of German idealism and Novalis' Spinozist influence on the Romantic movement.

divide between Sephardic/North African Jewries and the Ashkenazic communities of Northern and Central Europe and their respective offshoots. Wherever there is a Jewish community around the globe, the name of Maimonides (aka Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam), R. Musa ibn Maimoun (Maimouni), Al ra'is Musa al yahudi) is revered. Works that found wide circulation include his medical treatises (cf. Bos 2022; Stroumsa 1993) that were based on his extensive practice in Egypt, where he treated the illnesses and diseases of the Fatimid and Ayyubid elites he served, as well as caring for the poor of the community whose recognized leader he was. He had already made a name for himself as a young man with a public letter that urged rabbinic forbearance for Jews who had yielded to forced conversion under the radical Almohads that swept the Maghreb and invaded Moorish al Andalus, the home of Maimonides' family and his own.[17] His turn of mind bore the imprint of that of his father and his circle, who were heirs to the brilliant civilization of Umayyad Al Andalus, where Hebrew and Arabic poetry flourished, where the works of Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle and of their commentators circulated in Arabic translation, and where the genius of the Baghdad "renaissance" flourished and provided the standard curriculum of logical, mathematical, astronomical, legal, and theological-metaphysical works to be studied before one could be considered a learned man.[18] It is characteristic for Maimonides that he subscribed to the oft-repeated dictum that one ought to accept the truth, no matter the source (cf. Mühlethaler 2014).

The initial response to Maimonides' halakhic works was mixed (cf. Kanarfogel 2023). The leadership of the Talmudic academies in Baghdad feared the impact of a concise and systematic exposition of the law as competition to their authority and expertise, which was expressed in *responsa* to legal queries. Maimonides' often apodictic legal decisions also raised eyebrows among his contemporaries in Southern France. Among the Muslim authorities of his time the suspicion circulated that Maimonides, while residing in Fez, had converted to Islam but reverted to Judaism later on – a severe crime in Islamic law. Some of

17 For biographical background, cf. Halbertal 2015. For cultural context, cf. Stroumsa, 2012.

18 I write "man" to indicate that there prevailed, in those days, a culture of male dominance that was not just unquestioningly accepted by Jews and Muslims but also subtended by the neo-Platonic ontology that coded the mind as male and the body as female. The "human" form one ought to strive toward was considered something entirely disembodied.

his Jewish opponents suspected that his belief in the resurrection of the body, while included among the *Thirteen Articles of Faith*, was not genuine, forcing him to compose an apologetic essay on Jewish eschatological beliefs, the coming of the Messiah, the resurrection of the dead, and the world to come (cf. Halkin/Hartman 1993). But none of these controversies were as consequential as the response to the translation of the Judeo-Arabic *Dalalat al-ha'irin* into Hebrew, which brought it into circulation among the Jews of France, who were completely unfamiliar with the Aristotelian thinking it referenced and uncomfortable with the self-evident importance the Andalusian school attached to philosophical inquiry (cf. Stroumsa 2019). The *Guide* was banned, as was Greek wisdom (*hokhma yevanit*) in general, as detrimental to Halakhic zeal and mystical devotion to the Torah. This fierce opposition did not prevent the book from being circulated and studied, including in its Latin version (cf. Hasselhoff 2005), but it assured that the *Guide* led a marginal life among devout Ashkenazic Jews until it was rediscovered, printed, and diligently studied among Jews touched by the spirit of the European Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries.[19] Moses Mendelssohn attributed his hump to the study of Maimonides' work on logic (*Millot ha-higayon*), and Solomon Maimon, a student of Kantian philosophy, honored the great medieval rationalist by his choice of name and included a detailed outline of the *Guide* in his famous memoir (cf. Maimon 2020). In North Africa and Yemen, the *Guide* was revered as a mystical treatise, largely owing to the influence of Maimonides' son Abraham (cf. Lobel 2021).

On the *Guide* and Its Intended Readers

The ostensible aim of the *Guide* is to resolve the perplexity or confusion that arises in the mind of one for whom the Torah and the Prophets hold utmost authority and who has also acquired a basic education in mathematics, logic, and astronomy. Maimonides addresses Joseph b. Judah directly as his immediate correspondent, but he says that he also writes for those who, like him, are bewildered by the contradictions between the statements of the prophets whose veracity they accept on faith, and the truths they have acquired by virtue of their study of the sciences. A further source of confusion arises from the – to

19 As a Sephardic Jew, Spinoza was aware of the *Guide*, which he refers to with appreciation in his *Ethica* and criticizes in his *Theological Political Treatise*. Similarly, the *Guide* enjoyed a lively reception in early modern Italy, cf. Nadler 2019; Motzkin 2011a.

Maimonides sophistical – arguments for the existence, oneness, and incorporeality of God proffered by the rhetorical arts of the *mutakallimun*.[20] The book that arose out of this correspondence stirred anxiety among those who feared that it promoted the study of science and philosophy at the expense of devotion to the Mosaic Law. While this fear of libertinism may have been stirred by the behavior of some of its superficial readers, it is difficult to see how it could arise from a careful reading of the *Guide*, a book that shows how the authority of the Torah can be maintained while seriously engaging with questions of apodictic and demonstrable truth.[21]

The book does not teach Aristotelian or Platonic philosophy but presupposes exposure to science and philosophy amongst its readers to a degree that causes confusion and perplexity. But it may be too narrow to think of the text as only addressed to the type of ideal (or rather less than ideal) reader Maimonides primarily wishes to reach.

According to Leo Strauss, the "Epistle Dedicatory" offers an answer to the question for whom, or for what type of person ("the perplexed"), the *Guide* has been composed (cf. Strauss 1963).[22] The need to answer this question arises, for Strauss, from the fact that it seems neither entirely addressed to the vulgar nor to the elite. The vulgar are told not to bother with the treatise as it would merely confuse them, and members of the elite may not need it in order to know what there is to know. When addressing the work to his absent pupil, Joseph, Maimonides describes his excellences and deficiencies. Joseph is described as possessing "passionate desire for things speculative and especially for mathematics." He "had an excellent mind and a quick grasp." He showed interest in "things divine as well as in an appraisal of the Kalam." On the other hand, Maimonides felt compelled to admonish him to proceed in an orderly, systematic manner rather than "impatiently or unmethodically." In particular, Joseph had "turned to divine science without having studied natural science" (Strauss 1963: xviii). It appears from what follows in Strauss' essay, that Maimonides is primarily concerned with this deficient order of study (divine sci-

20 Cf. *Guide* I:71 (Maimonides 1963: 179–183).

21 Scholars have argued that Maimonides' belief that the prophetic revelations represented philosophical/scientific truth in popular form was conventional at the time he wrote, cf., e.g., Berman 2008. I think this is too schematic an approach which overlooks that science, especially Ptolemaic astronomy, was under careful reconsideration at the time of Maimonides, especially in Al Andalus, cf. Saliba 2019.

22 Strauss' copious writings about Maimonides are now conveniently collected and annotated by Kenneth H. Green, cf. Strauss/Green 2013.

ence before natural science) and writes the *Guide* to make up for it. The *Guide* thus seems to be written with the aim of redirecting the mental orientation of someone interested in divine science toward attending to the connection between natural and divine science, the former being the condition for the latter. At the same time, the *Guide* "does not itself transmit natural science" (*Guide* II 2). This leads to the conclusion (Strauss 1963: xix) that the intended reader of the *Guide* "stands at the point where speculation branches off from acceptance of authority," even if it is the authority of Maimonides. One might conclude from this that placing divine science before natural science leads to another variant of idolatry, whereas placing natural science before divine science is another way of seeking "the apple of gold in a filigree of silver."

While written for readers who had great interest in "divine science" and some, though not complete, knowledge of "natural science" (in the Aristotelian sense), Maimonides risked the dissemination of his work among readers who had no background in "natural science" and therefore had no idea that "divine science," properly understood, needed to be grounded in "natural science." What do we make of the fact that Maimonides supervised a translation of his writing that was addressed to readers who had not been exposed to the philosophical literature that circulated in Arabic but not, at that time, in Hebrew? It seems as if Maimonides wrote for different kinds of readers, just as he says the Torah addresses different readers at the same time, while entirely speaking "in the language of human beings." The most basic statement we can make in this preliminary orientation is that the work offers a guide to interpreting the prophetic language of Scripture without forcing a reader to take the first sense of its words that comes to mind as their intended sense.[23] The words of Scripture themselves are turned into prompts for thought guided by a few basic assumptions, namely, the existence, the oneness, and the incorporeality of the deity (cf. *Guide* II, Intro and Chapters 1 and 2). In order for Scripture to function in this way, the literal sense of words that suggest otherwise must be distinguished from other meanings that are lexicographically actual and attested in biblical linguistic usage rather than merely allegorical.[24] In other words, there

23 Contrasting this principle, Rashi and his successors insisted in their commentaries that the plain sense of the words of Scripture never loses its meaning and significance. See Rashi's introduction to his commentary on the Torah, now easily accessible in Michael Carasik's translation of the *Miqra'ot G'dolot* (JPS), cf. Carasik 2015.

24 In this regard, Maimonides is not simply repeating methodologically what Philo of Alexandria had already done. In terms of his interpretive method as well as his mode

are real possibilities of meaning that require the reader to become active in deciding the most appropriate sense of the terms in question where they occur in prophetic speech. Thought and judgment must be activated based on multiple types of knowledge and put to use in the mind of the reader to achieve a state of mind that sets one on the path toward human perfection, not necessarily through recourse to science or philosophy, but through becoming habituated to reading actively and mindfully.

Literary Characteristics of the *Guide of the Perplexed*

Even the most superficial reader of the *Guide* will be struck by the fact that it is an odd book.[25] The manner of its exposition of matters pertaining to the language of the prophets is obscure, confusing, and intentionally cryptic.[26] The work deals with the ruses and parables by which the prophets teach about recondite matters of ultimate concern that are indicated by the rabbinic terms *Ma'aseh bereshit* and *Ma'aseh merkavah*. The former pertains to the exposition of Genesis 1 or the story of creation, which Maimonides summarily identifies with the subject of physics or "natural science" in the Aristotelian sense of the term; the latter pertains to the exposition of Ezekiel 1, the vision of the divine chariot, which Maimonides summarily identifies with the subject of metaphysics, "divine science," or "theology."[27] One may argue that the manner of Maimonides' exposition in the *Guide*, especially the obscure organization of the work, arises from the need to circumvent the rabbinic stricture against the public exposition of those two critical chapters. The author found it needful

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of exposition, Maimonides (pace H. A. Wolfson) is therefore not to be embedded in a single trajectory that begins with Philo and ends with Spinoza, cf. Wolfson 1977.

25 Postmodern readers are perhaps more likely than typically modern ones to appreciate "disorganization" as an organizing principle of certain types of literature. Cf., e.g., Kleymann 2021.

26 No analysis of Maimonides can ignore his acknowledged and unacknowledged debt to prior thinkers. The originality of his thought may even be an optical illusion that will dissipate the more studies bring to light the views he shared with others. Cf., e.g., Pessin 2016. The literary form of the *Guide*, however, remains a unique product of its author's imagination.

27 The neo-Aristotelian tradition combined genuine Aristotelian doctrine with the neo-Platonic doctrine of emanation. More accurately, because of a false attribution of an Arabic version of the Enneads of Plotinus, the neo-Aristotelians of the Middle Ages considered neo-Platonic ontology genuinely Aristotelian. Cf. Adamson 2022.

to write about matters that were legally forbidden from being made the subject of writing, and his "art of writing" was the means to heed the letter of the law while suspending it because of the need of the hour.[28] But there are other or additional possibilities to account for the deliberate obscurity of the work. Maimonides felt the need to write about something that was not just forbidden to write about, but that he deemed necessary to put in writing because it involved a long-forgotten insight into the relationship between true knowledge and prophetic speech, between truth and language, that he believed to have recovered and feared would be lost if it was not preserved all over again. At the same time, the insight he wished to impart was not simply a hidden doctrine. If I am not mistaken, the *Guide*, much like a Platonic dialogue,[29] was written to stir the reader to acquire a new habit of reading and thinking.[30] The genre of the *Guide* – a book as unique in Jewish literature as is the Torah itself – is didactic, but it is also akin to poetry in that it alludes rather than articulates. Its effect was to be mimetic, or it was to have no effect at all. If his *Mishneh Torah* repeated the legal content of Written and Oral Torah in clear and distinct utterances (i.e., without recourse to poetic speech), the *Guide* performed a repetition of the most important characteristic of prophetic speech by using the imagi-

28 Cf. Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Yesodey Hatorah 4:10-13. The "need of the hour" was invoked by the rabbis of the Mishnah when they decided to transgress the law against writing down the Oral Torah.

29 The analogy with Plato I see concerns attention to literary form, indirect communication, and the instilling of certain habits of mind in the reader, the awakening of the reader to critical thinking, much as Goethe understood Plato. See *Plato als Mitgenosse einer christlichen Offenbarung* (1796): "Gewiß, wer uns auseinandersetzte, was Männer wie Plato im Ernst, Scherz und Halbscherz, was sie aus Überzeugung, oder nur diskursive gesagt haben, würde uns einen außerordentlichen Dienst erzeigen und zu unserer Bildung unendlich viel beitragen; denn die Zeit ist vorbei da die Sibyllen unter der Erde weissagten; wir fordern Kritik und wollen urteilen ehe wir etwas annehmen und auf uns anwenden" (Goethe 1895: 140).

30 The emphasis on the right kind of habits and the need for habituation are an inheritance of Aristotelian ethics. That Maimonides was aware of the detrimental effect of the wrong kind of reading habits is clear from *Guide* I:31 where he considers habituation to taking revealed texts as ultimate authority, to be accepted without thinking, an obstacle to philosophizing that was unknown to the Ancients.

nation in the service of reason,[31] to stir in the reader the activity of thinking, even of thinking critically.[32]

As a written text, the *Guide* is a substitute for speech. As a *philosophical* text it is writing about speech and its relation to thought. As a *Jewish* philosophical text, it is a writing about prophetic speech that aims at action, namely, action of the limbs as well as action of the heart, which is the seat of the intellect. Maimonides both *employs* the imagination and writes about the role of the imagination in prophecy, drawing attention to the distinction between intellect and imagination. Without the imagination we cannot begin to know, or say, what we mean by that distinction. Caught in the seemingly inescapable echo chamber of saying and meaning, Maimonides *gestures* toward an "ascent" from one to the other.[33] The speech delivered in the Guide is *performative* in ways reminiscent of classical Aristotelian poetic theory; it remains incomplete, unless it causes a certain responsive action in the mind of the reader. As a philosophical dialogue with the intended reader, it aims at a certain *mimesis*, though not of emotional identification, *anagnorisis*, or *catharsis,* as in Greek tragedy, but of the intellect.

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31 *Guide* II:34. The prophecy of Moses, according to Maimonides, was distinguished from all other ranks of prophecy by the subordination of the imagination to the intellect or reason. Maimonides expressly refrains from elaborating on this ultimate rank of prophecy. Cf. Motzkin 2011b.

32 I am aware of importing Arendtian and Kantian tropes that might strike the historically sensitive reader as anachronistic. I hope to justify this terminology in the larger version of this project, a reading of Maimonides in light of his modern readers, especially Spinoza, Maimon, Cohen, and Strauss.

33 In this connection, we must consider Maimonides' psychology, as laid out in "Eight Chapters," where he makes clear that "the soul is a unit" that manifests in different activities but cannot be divided into actual parts, even if the physicians speak in this manner. It is only in speaking about the soul that we take recourse to parts of the soul or multiple souls, such as the appetitive, nutritive, perceptive, imaginative, and rational soul. This implies that thought and imagination are really classifications of types of activities of the soul, not distinct entities, or hypostases. The soul is one, and the human soul is human *in potentia* or *in actu*, depending on how we think and act as human beings.

Strauss's Political-Philosophical Interpretation of Maimonides' "Art of Writing"

Maimonides undoubtedly employs some of the tensions between saying and meaning for rhetorical purposes, i.e., to avoid conveying in writing opinions on matters whose public exposition the law prohibits. But he also draws attention to the limitations of language and hence to tensions inherent in the characteristics of language. In other words, some things are sayable but should not be said, and some things are knowable but cannot be put in plain language. Among the modern authors who took the consideration of Maimonides' instructions on how to read his treatise as a prompt to consider some of the larger implications for philosophical writing was Leo Strauss. Strauss believed to have rediscovered an element of style buried and largely forgotten in the wake of the Enlightenment, namely "exoteric" writing.[34] He suggests that a philosopher's meaning may (and even *must*) be concealed, though perhaps in plain sight and on the surface of a text rather than in a presumed elusive depth.[35] Or it might be communicated indirectly and "between the lines." This heuristic assumption suggested for Strauss the opposite of the hermeneutical rule formulated by Kant in regard to Plato, namely, that one ought to understand an author better than he understood himself. In contrast, according to Strauss, to understand an author better than he understood himself, one must first and foremost understand him as he understood himself.[36] This observation arises for Strauss from his reading of Maimonides and his Arabic philosophical predecessors, and it paves the way for his conception of Platonic

34 The importance, in Strauss' mind, of Lessing points to the fact that the German dramaturgist and playwright renewed an earlier philosophical awareness for the necessity of careful writing that addressed multiple audiences at the same time. If Strauss was right, Lessing practiced this art even though it seemed to have been rendered obsolete by the Cartesian principle of writing "clearly and distinctly".

35 Note the spatial metaphors, which are common in this type of discourse. To what extent is our thinking guided and limited by the metaphors we employ? Cf. Blumenberg 1960.

36 I retain the conventional gendering of generalization as "male," though here I draw attention to this pseudo abstractness as a marker of the embodied characteristics of philosophical storytelling. Using male gender feigns an abstract and universal characteristic of philosophical articulation but, at the same time, it undermines its claim to universality. This is an excellent example of the linguistic/semantic quagmire of philosophical communication.

political philosophy. Strauss also takes Maimonides to have been completely in control of any contradictions the *Guide* might contain, deploying them intentionally. Strauss thus casts Maimonides as a perfect author, imitating how Maimonides casts Moses, namely, as a prophet *sui generis*.[37] The purpose of Strauss' statements is to caution the reader not to attribute inadvertent errors to a competent author whom we ought to presume to be cognizant of the implications of what he or she writes. Strauss also seems to caution us to avoid the biographic and historical fallacies of substituting personal or historical context and sources of influence for a thinker's actual thought, which must be established, as far as possible, by a careful reading of the text itself. The presumption of perfect authorial control seems to clash with the modern critique of language. For the early Romantic critic J. G. Hamann,

37 There are tensions in the biography of Maimonides that are at odds with the persona he projects in his writings. In the *Guide* and elsewhere, Maimonides projects an image of himself as a calm, deliberate, dispassionate, objective, measured, and careful man. Yet he spent a year in a state of abject depression after his brother died in a shipwreck. Later in life, he was overwhelmed with responsibilities that made it impossible for him to write anything but medical treatises on the conditions he was treating at court, including indigestion and impotence. There is also the strange occlusion of his life as a convert to Islam. To be sure, he must deny the fact of his conversion to avoid punishment, potentially even death. But the fact that he carried a secret suggests that he was well versed in the arts of dissimulation when it was expedient. This is not to suggest a deficiency of character but to complicate our image of the man. Much like the famous midrash about the sheikh who had a picture of Moses painted and, upon viewing the portrait, could not believe that the man represented, a man full of vices and evil inclinations, could be the same prophet who had led the Israelites out of Egypt. The answer he is given is that this was indeed a truthful portrait of the man and his character traits but that the famous leader had had to conquer his vices and evil inclinations. So, too, in the case of Maimonides. We cannot simply extrapolate the personality from the persona on display in the writings. The first literary artifice to note is therefore the authorial persona "Maimonides," which should not be confounded with the man. Even Moses, after all, was compelled to wear a mask when speaking to the Israelites after the second period he spent on the mountain, when he spoke to the Holy One, Blessed be His Name, "face to face." If the *Guide* represents an *imitatio* of that famous ascent and descent that is its major subject, then we must expect its author to wear a mask of sorts as well. The problem intimated here – the need to distinguish between the authorial persona that appears in a text and the actual author – is an important bone of contention in literary theory, specifically the theory of the novel. The position I take here is closer to that represented by Käthe Hamburger (1957) than to the one found in Mikhail Bakhtin (1981a).

language is excessive in that it always exceeds the meanings we intend or are aware of. Critics of language, including Fritz Mauthner, disparage the idea that anything can be articulated as clearly and distinctly in any language as was previously thought (cf. Hartung 2013; Henne/Kaiser 2000; Fuchs 1990). For Strauss, however, to begin to study a careful writer of the past requires the assumption that there is no such thing as the unintended meaning of a carefully written text. There obtains, at least heuristically, a perfect agreement between meaning and speech.[38]

Clearly, this is an exaggerated claim when it comes to human authors, and perhaps even when it comes to divine ones.[39] Human authors are never fully in control of the meaning of their writing. The hyperbolic claim of complete authorial awareness is, it seems, either naïve and delusional or, if employed with a view to being challenged, rhetorical, part of a "mask" employed to deflect the beholder's gaze.[40]

Toward a Different Interpretation

Taking a different point of departure than Strauss, I want to draw attention to a more fundamental aspect of the tension between saying and meaning, one that was well articulated in the Cambridge school of "ordinary language" philosophy. The question was perceptively voiced, among others, by Stanley Cavell in essays published under the title "Must We Mean What We Say?" Cavell (2002: 69) raises the question whether poems can be paraphrased. Translating this question to our context, I would ask: Can the philosophical meaning of Maimonides be expressed in terms other than the ones he uses – that is, can it be extracted from, and restated without, its "Jewish" form? Can we have the

38 It is not clear to me how this maxim can be made to agree with Plato's skeptical view of all written communication.

39 The limitation of divine knowledge of particulars is a theme in Maimonides' *Guide* and elsewhere. Mendelssohn renews it in his writing about Spinoza. For Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, our knowledge of particulars is the key problem.

40 On the trope of the "mask" of Moses as a representation of a specifically Jewish hermeneutic, cf. Bruckstein 2001. As to the "perfect authorship" of M., note that Alfred Ivry, in his recent monograph on M., denies the assertion of authorial perfection. Instead, he reads the *Guide* as an ad hoc composition. He explains contradictions in the text as indications that M. changed his mind on certain things over the course of writing it. Cf. Ivry 2016.

"golden apple" without its "silver filigree"? In raising this question, I am arguing for a return to a more Aristotelian than Platonic approach to reasoning represented in the *Guide*, similar to what H. G. Gadamer (1997: 244) suggested when speaking of Aristotle's "limitation of theoretical insight in the practical field."[41] Maimonides' "art of writing" seems to hover between Platonic and Aristotelian insights, but these insights are never presented in his writing without also attending to biblical and rabbinic metaphors. It is this peculiar webbing of discourses represented in the *Guide* that strikes me as most pertinent to the question of its literary form.[42] I proceed on the assumption that the manner of writing is significant for what Maimonides means to say, or rather for what his text is meant to do and accomplish in the mind of a careful reader.

In philosophical terms, awareness for the quirks and limits of language leads us to question the straightforward meaning of the correspondence theory of truth, a theory Maimonides explicitly professes (cf. David 2022). Does this theory mean what it says? If truth obtains when what we represent to ourselves in our minds corresponds to what obtains outside our minds, if thinking thus corresponds to being, but thinking cannot be done without recourse to language, how serious can one be about truth claims? If truth cannot but be communicated in words, how can we know that it corresponds to being, unless being itself appears in language? But the claim that God can be adequately expressed in human terms is denied by Maimonides. The correspondence theory of truth is therefore limited to things we can articulate with apodictic certainty.

Is there a kind of "pure" thought without recourse to speech?[43] Or can speech, critically employed, mediate access to being? Is speech a hint to truths that appear behind the veil of human language and points to something that is "beyond being"? Does truth appear in words, or is it something we can mean or communicate without saying it in words? According to Hegel, for example, the truth value of language is problematic because it only expresses generalities,

41 "So hat Aristoteles die Möglichkeiten theoretischer Einsicht im praktischen Felde eingeschränkt. Nun scheint mir das gleiche für die Hermeneutik zu gelten und damit für die 'Geisteswissenschaften' und für alles Verstehen überhaupt" (transl. MZ).

42 Daniel Weiss, in *Paradox and the Prophets*, makes a similar argument for the language of Cohen's *Religion of Reason*, drawing on Bakhtin's concept of "heteroglossia" (cf. Weiss 2012). On the neologism разноречие [raznorechie], literally "other-speech-ness," see Bakhtin "Слово в романе" [Slovo v romane] (cf. Bakhtin 1981b).

43 I prefer "speech" to "language," though language, in the sense of having words, is more closely related to reason, while "speech" may be associated with pre-rational signs and utterings, including the "speech" of animals and preverbal infants.

concepts, not actual things. The individual things are essentially ineffable. They can only be pointed to, but not said, and therefore vanish the moment we refer to them in speech.[44] But how do we "point" to a being that is not a thing? Whenever I speak about something, I obscure it. This is not merely a theoretical problem for Maimonides but also a practical one that ties into his Aristotelian concept of the human form. The entelechy of the human being, human perfection, lies in becoming an intellect *in actu*. Teaching, even in the lesser form of writing, is meant to trigger, in the student's mind, the very activity he means to foster. The closest parallel we have in classical western philosophy is Socrates, or rather the Socrates of Plato's early dialogues.

Thinking, which I believe is what the *Guide of the Perplexed* means to teach, is necessarily always not just about things and thinking about things but also about how things dis/appear in speech and about thought and experience as articulated and, indeed, constituted in and by speech. This is true also, and especially so, when a philosophical text engages with the boundaries between objects of "knowledge" and products of the "imagination," specifically when writing about prophets and prophecy, which is the main subject of the *Guide*. Of course, prophets and prophecy are the subject not just of the *Guide*, but also of some of the writings of Maimonides' predecessors, including al-Farabi.[45] But the *form* of the *Guide* by no means resembles that of their writings. It is utterly unique not so much in the philosophical problems it tackles than in its literary form. No interpretation of the *Guide* should be deemed adequate that does not account for the literary aspects of Maimonides' writing.

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44 Rosenzweig famously challenged this reductionist conception of speech with regard to concrete beings. To augment and rectify it, he draws on second-person rather than third-person speech, which Hegel did not consider. Another way of relating directly to someone arises in *naming*. Far from abandoning the philosophical project of German idealism (see Pollock 2013), Rosenzweig thus *artfully* augments and completes what seemed to him fragmentary and incomplete. Rosenzweig does this by lacing references to artistic representation throughout the *Star*'s argumentative structure. The overall project is classified, by Rosenzweig, as "narrative philosophy," as first postulated by Schelling. Rosenzweig is therefore an important witness to the *necessary* conjunction of the philosophical with the literary-aesthetic pursuit. Cf. also Benjamin Pollock's essay in this volume.

45 Pace Strauss, one ought to consider that "prophetology" – and hence political philosophy – was perhaps not the *main* subject of Arab philosophy before or after Maimonides. On the critique of Strauss and Straussian approaches to medieval "Muslim" philosophy, cf. Gutas 2002; Kaya 2014.

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