

***Philosophy Between the Lines: The Lost History of Esoteric Writing.* By Arthur M. Melzer. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014. 453p. \$?**

Arthur Melzer's *Philosophy Between the Lines* is a masterful treatment of the "lost" history of esoteric writing from Socrates to the present day. The book aims to "more clearly display, document, and...reverse [the] extraordinary act of forgetting" of esoteric writing in modern times (xii). If the author is right in insisting that esoteric methods of writing and interpretation were commonplace from Socrates right up to modern thinkers such as Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, then it is a striking fact in need of explanation that the notion of esoteric interpretation is now viewed by many scholars as a strange and questionable doctrine advanced by a handful of Straussians, in which one flips to the middle page of a book to discover its "hidden meaning." Before reading *Philosophy Between the Lines*, I myself was not well disposed toward the practice of esoteric reading. However, this book has convinced me that any attempt to read the history of philosophy without being willing to pry into the author's "secret intentions" would be a naive and ill-conceived enterprise. The textual evidence Melzer marshals in favour of the historical pervasiveness of esoteric writing, supplemented by some plausible explanations about why such a practice makes sense, is hard to resist.

"Esoteric" writing refers to the "practice of communicating one's unorthodox thoughts primarily 'between the lines,' hidden behind a veneer of conventional pieties, for fear of persecution or for other reason" (xii). The conventional wisdom of our age, as Melzer observes, is that this practice is not only uncommon, but lamentable, insofar as it contradicts the imperative to expose our ideas to the light of rational scrutiny. Although he repeatedly insists that his primary interest is simply in demonstrating the historical existence and pervasiveness of the practice of esoteric writing, this thesis is reinforced by an extended argument showing that philosophers have had respectable reasons for engaging in such a practice.

The motivation for an ambitious defense of the historical importance of esotericism is that if Melzer is right in claiming that esotericism has been a constant companion of philosophy, at least up until the end of the eighteenth century, then the failure to advert to its existence will surely distort our understanding of the history of philosophy. In particular, we may mistake *exoteric* genuflections to the orthodoxies of the day for pondered philosophical conclusions, thus discrediting brilliant minds or assuming they were trapped in the mantras of their day. As Melzer puts it, "[w]e will systematically cut ourselves off from [the] thought [of the thinkers we read] precisely in its most unorthodox, original, and liberating part" (xiii). And this blindness to the true intentions and beliefs of philosophers will also systematically distort our understanding of the history of thought, since we may perceive deep connections and patterns between thinkers based on mere decoys.

Melzer opens his argument by marshalling a wide range of textual evidence for the existence and importance of esoteric writing from classical to modern times,

including some sources we might not have expected, such as Jesus, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, Descartes, and Diderot.

With the historical reality of esotericism established, he then proceeds to tell a story about how, in spite of the abundant historical evidence, the practice of esotericism was (with some notable exceptions, such as Strauss, Kojève, and Gadamer) largely forgotten in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Indeed, not only forgotten, but heartily *resisted*. The author offers a few possible explanations for this deep-seated resistance. Here, let me just mention two: First, insofar as esotericism is a way of coping with a fundamental rift between the needs of philosophy and the demands of the practical world, an admission of the reality of esotericism may be perceived by modern thinkers as a threat to their hope for some sort of deep reconciliation between theory and praxis. Second, the expansion of freedom of expression has rendered the practice superfluous in many modern nations.

The next stage in the argument is to patiently document the different purposes and corresponding forms of esotericism. Here, Melzer brings out and exemplifies how esotericism, far from being an arbitrary or whimsical act of self-indulgence, is typically a serious response to a serious practical problem. The four forms of esotericism identified by Melzer are what he calls defensive, protective, pedagogical, and political esotericism. *Defensive* esotericism seeks to conceal teachings that might put the life or person of the author, his family, or his associates, in danger. *Protective* esotericism aims to protect society from bad effects that the open propagation of philosophy may have on it. *Pedagogical* esotericism aims to conceal some of the truth in order to lead the student gradually to higher stages of enlightenment. Finally, *political* esotericism aims to temporarily conceal the author's true intentions in order to more effectively advance an unorthodox political project.

Finally, Melzer speculates about how the practice of esotericism was "forgotten." To simplify, the story has five parts: first, the subordination of esotericism to the political project of liberating modern man from the vestiges of superstition and religion; second, the increasingly *open discussion* of the phenomenon of esotericism; third, a highly troubled and ambivalent assessment of esotericism, insofar as it is viewed as both necessary to transmit revolutionary ideas in a conservative culture, and at odds with those very ideas (such as the triumph of reason over "superstition," religion, and tradition); fourth, outright hostility toward the practice; and finally, "in a final act of self-overcoming" (283), the abandonment of the practice and the denial that it ever existed to any significant degree.

This story of the great "forgetting" brings the main line of Melzer's argument for the historical importance of esotericism to a close. Before concluding, let me point out two "weak links" in the argument. First, the story of the great "forgetting" of esoteric writing moves too fast. Although Melzer convincingly shows that *something* must have happened to turn us moderns against esotericism, "the increasing ambivalence and hostility toward esotericism" which is supposed to have emerged during the

modern age is narrated in barely five pages (278-283), with few textual references along the way. One comes away with the impression that Melzer's story about how the practice of esotericism was swept under the carpet is at least as speculative as it is historiographic.

The second weakness in this work, in my view, is that the final section, which rehearses Strauss's main arguments against historicism, does not seem to strengthen the central argument of the book in any significant way. Although esotericism plays a critical role in Strauss's argument against historicism, the anti-historicist argument is very ambitious and cannot possibly be adequately defended in the space of forty pages. While it may help the reader better understand the place of esoteric reading in Strauss's thought, this does not seem germane to the author's main rehabilitative project. Surely the goal was to rehabilitate esotericism as a credible method of philosophical interpretation, not to rehabilitate Strauss's critique of historicism (something a forty-page essay is unlikely to achieve anyway)?

Notwithstanding these weaknesses, *Philosophy Between the Lines* is an impressive work of scholarship, and deserves to be read by anyone with a serious interest in the careful reading of philosophical texts. It offers its readers a compelling restatement and elaboration of Strauss's case for taking seriously the practice of esoteric reading and writing, and one that will probably result in more than a few conversions from the anti-esoteric side. Even readers who have an "allergic reaction" to the thought of engaging in esoteric methods of interpretation would be well-advised to read this book. In doing so, they might bear in mind that some parts of the book are more "slam-dunk" than others. In particular, while Melzer's speculations about the reason for our "forgetting" of the history of esotericism, and his rehearsal of Strauss's arguments against modern historicism, are controversial, the evidence marshaled by Melzer on behalf of the widespread existence and importance of esoteric writing since the birth of philosophy, is very impressive and well documented. This book puts the case for the historical reality of esoteric writing persuasively and eloquently. It will significantly advance Strauss's efforts to overturn the modern prejudice against esoteric writing.