Arthur Melzer: *Philosophy between the Lines: The Lost History of Esoteric Writing*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014. Pp. xvi, 453.)

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Melzer offers the first comprehensive, contemporary account of philosophic esoteric writing, that is, the practice of concealing a writer's deepest thoughts from the broader public (including the censors) while conveying them to attentive readers. Even though the possibility of such a form of writing has been the subject of widespread scholarly controversy ever since its rediscovery by the great twentieth-century philosopher and philosophical scholar Leo Strauss, Melzer marshals an overwhelming body of evidence to show that it was "well known, openly discussed, and almost universally practiced" from antiquity through the first half of the eighteenth century (xii). He aims to restore not the practice of esoteric writing but rather that of "esoteric *reading*"—that is, "the recovery of a crucial but long-lost element of philosophical literacy" that is essential for enabling us to understand the thought of the greatest authors (xii–xiii). His book "is essentially an effort to redescribe the history of Western philosophical thinking and writing as it appears when viewed from the standpoint" of the "fundamental but neglected problematic of theory and praxis"—that is, the difference between what reason discovers to be true and what it is safe or salutary to say in full view of the public (74). Melzer undertakes not only to demonstrate the "historical reality of esotericism" but to address the reasons for the *denial* of this reality in the thought of "late modernity" (260).

The issue of esotericism, as both Strauss and Melzer represent it, is of far more than antiquarian interest. Rather, it is the key to assessing the historicist position, which has dominated the study of philosophy since Hegel, according to which human thinking is inevitably constrained or determined by the time and place in which a writer lived. In other words, according to historicism (in its radical form nowadays renamed "postmodernism"), it is impossible for even the profoundest of philosophers to transcend their times, so as to gain access to an objective reality. Of course, in asserting the truth of this claim, historicists inconsistently exempt their own doctrine from it. But historicism derives its most powerful support from the manifest fact that the greatest writers (to say nothing of their less profound counterparts) *seem* to uphold the characteristic prejudices or dominant assumptions of their respective political and social milieus—for instance, Aristotle's account of "natural" slavery, Maimonides's deference to the biblical teaching that the world was created rather than being eternal, and Locke's apparent acceptance of the traditional (Christian) natural-law doctrine. It is in this regard that Strauss's rediscovery of esotericism holds its greatest significance: if, as a host of writers from different eras whose testimony Melzer assembles attest, the greatest philosophers wrote in such a manner as to outwardly accommodate the conventional opinions of the societies in which they lived, while subtly questioning

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those beliefs in a manner that only a few would uncover, the mere fact of the *apparent* broad disagreement among those philosophers need not reflect the human individual's incapacity to transcend his environment. As Melzer puts it, prior to the modern liberal era, "the price of real intellectual freedom was precisely the well-cultivated appearance of being a bound prisoner of one's time" (347). But while appreciation of the practice of esotericism refuted the assumption that the philosophers endlessly disagreed with each other, it was also the key, as Strauss demonstrated, to grasping the truly fundamental break in the history of political philosophy that was initiated by the early modern thinkers as a byproduct of their battle to overcome Christian theocracy (in contrast to historicist claims of a basic continuity between medieval thought and modern philosophy)—a break that they had to obscure for reasons of both self-protection and rhetorical persuasion.

Melzer usefully distinguishes among four forms of philosophic esotericism: "defensive," aimed at protecting a writer against persecution for expressing heterodox opinions; "protective," intended to secure the people themselves against the potentially debilitating effects resulting from widespread circulation of philosophic opinions that called into question their society's religious and moral foundations; "pedagogical," obscuring a philosophic author's beliefs by means of hints that compel the serious reader to think through matters for himself, under the author's subtle guidance; and "political," the form of concealment engaged in by writers of the Enlightenment (including their precursors dating back to the sixteenth century) who conspired to "rationalize" political society, in such a way as ultimately to minimize if not eliminate the need for the first two kinds, if not the third. Melzer stresses the need to distinguish these philosophic forms of esotericism from its mystical forms (such as Gnosticism and Kabbalah) with which it has nothing in common—aside from the periodic use of the latter as a guise for the former.

The decline in awareness of philosophic esotericism, Melzer observes, is largely a function of the triumph of its fourth form—that is, the Enlightenment. But that victory was a Pyrrhic one, since the consequence of the seeming triumph of popularized rationalism was dissatisfaction with its practical consequences—whether in the form of pseudoscientific totalitarian ideologies like Marxism, or the weakening of local loyalties as a result of globalization, or the dangers of technology freed from moral restraint, or what appeared to some to be the sheer meaninglessness of a life devoid of religious meaning or higher civic purpose. At the same time, at the theoretical level, precisely because of its "reliance on the idea of progress," modern rationalism engendered "a kind of hyperfoundationalism," that is, the quest "to lay down solid, even indubitable, foundations" for knowledge—in contrast to the zetetic character of Socratic philosophy as Strauss articulated it (341, 360). When that hope proved to be groundless, the result was the crisis exemplified by postmodernism. What this entailed was the rejection not merely of rationalism but of the very notion that reason can be the guide to a meaningful life, or can enable us to judge soberly among alternative political possibilities.

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It was Strauss's rediscovery of philosophic esotericism, Melzer argues, that offered a way out of the crisis of modern rationalism, by reopening the possibility that the classical political philosophers, once their works are studied with sufficient care, can help us find means of reconciling the life of reason with the well-being of society as a whole. Indeed, since so-called postmodernism is really only an offshoot of the problematic modern "project," it is Strauss himself, Melzer judges, who is the true "postmodern."

In view of the massive evidence of the past practice of esotericism assembled by Strauss and his students in their analyses of particular philosophic works (some awareness of which, as Melzer indicates, still survives among non-Straussian scholars of the French Enlightenment—as well as, I would add, of Montaigne), the question arises of why these findings have met with such indignant resistance in the scholarly community as a whole. In part, as Melzer observes, the very notion that a serious author would have concealed his opinions runs contrary to the contemporary morality of authenticity or sincerity (even though we are well aware of the practice of secret writing by subjects of dictatorial regimes). In addition, however—although Melzer does not say this—two other factors need to be considered. One is sheer scholarly laziness: it is a lot easier to pigeonhole Plato's or Machiavelli's writings as reflections of what one already "knows" to be the dominant assumptions of their time than to study them with the care Strauss showed to be necessary to understand them. The other is political: just like the inhabitants of Plato's cave, many contemporary academics are overwhelmingly resistant to the possibility that the serious study of philosophic writings of the past would call into question their own partisan assumptions.

It is to be hoped that Melzer's outstanding study will help to awaken some of those self-styled intellectuals, or their students, from their dogmatic slumber.

–David Lewis Schaefer
College of the Holy Cross

Robert Howse: *Leo Strauss: Man of Peace*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2014. Pp. xi, 188.)

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Perhaps one could have anticipated as much. A few forceful and intensively thoughtful reactions to the recent spate of often ludicrous efforts to turn Leo Strauss into the secretive godfather of American neoconservative imperialism are proving of immense benefit to those intent upon learning from Strauss. Especially if one conjoins them in critical and reciprocal conversation, these

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