

Philosophy Between the Lines: The Lost History of Esoteric Writing

By Arthur M. Melzer

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Winner of a CHOICE Outstanding Academic Title Award in 2016

Philosophical esotericism--the practice of communicating one's unorthodox thoughts "between the lines"--was a common practice until the end of the eighteenth century. The famous *Encyclopédie* of Diderot, for instance, not only discusses this practice in over twenty different articles, but admits to employing it itself. The history of Western thought contains hundreds of such statements by major philosophers testifying to the use of esoteric writing in their own work or others'. Despite this long and well-documented history, however, esotericism is often dismissed today as a rare occurrence. But by ignoring esotericism, we risk cutting ourselves off from a full understanding of Western philosophical thought.

Arthur M. Melzer serves as our deeply knowledgeable guide in this capacious and engaging history of philosophical esotericism. Walking readers through both an ancient (Plato) and a modern (Machiavelli) esoteric work, he explains what esotericism is--and is not. It relies not on secret codes, but simply on a more intensive use of familiar rhetorical techniques like metaphor, irony, and insinuation. Melzer explores the various motives that led thinkers in different times and places to engage in this strange practice, while also exploring the motives that lead more recent thinkers not only to dislike and avoid this practice but to deny its very existence. In the book's final section, "A Beginner's Guide to Esoteric Reading," Melzer turns to how we might once again cultivate the long-forgotten art of reading esoteric works.

Philosophy Between the Lines is the first comprehensive, book-length study of the history and theoretical basis of philosophical esotericism, and it provides a crucial guide to how many major writings--philosophical, but also theological, political, and literary--were composed prior to the nineteenth century.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Melzer has written the most compelling, surprising, and persuasive defense of Strauss's thought that I have ever read. It deserves a wide and appreciative audience. And if it gets one, the consequences could be enormous. Because if Strauss was right in the way he interpreted the Western philosophical tradition, then much of modern scholarship -- and, by extension, our civilization's understanding of its intellectual and political inheritance -- will need to be radically revised."

(Damon Linker, *The Week*, 2014-10-31)

"*Philosophy Between the Lines* offers the best statement on this topic that there is. Melzer makes clear that the topic is important and his book is so well-written, cogently argued, and thoroughly researched that it will be of great interest to readers in intellectual history, history of philosophy, and all related disciplines."

(Michael Zuckert, University of Notre Dame)

"Modern scholarship has been afflicted by an astonishing amnesia about esoteric writing. The manner in which Melzer undertakes to overcome that amnesia reminds me over and over again of the way Holmes tries to demystify his own modus operandi to the befuddled Watson: 'You see, but you do not observe.' This is a work of exceptional clarity about a phenomenon that is commonly held to be impenetrable or unintelligible or nonexistent."

(Ralph Lerner, University of Chicago)

"This is a book scholars have needed for a long time. There has been so much more heat than light in the contentious debates about esoteric writing since Leo Strauss tried to reanimate attention to the phenomenon in the 1930s that it is surprising that no one has tried to set out carefully the various aspects of the rhetorical practice and to compile the evidence that it not only existed but was a prominent feature of philosophical writing until the nineteenth century. Melzer has finally done this; lucidly, patiently, and in a graceful conversational style. But he goes much farther. His book is philosophical as well as scholarly. It goes to the issue of late modern self-understanding itself, what we care about and what one might call our collective psychological relationship to the issue. No one even remotely interested in the topic of philosophical writing can afford to ignore this book. It is a major achievement and the sort of book that anyone can both strongly disagree with and at the same time be very grateful for."

(Robert B. Pippin, University of Chicago)

"*Philosophy Between the Lines* is a treasure-house of insight and learning. It is that rare thing: an eye-opening book. It is candid about secrets, and there is no book like it. Melzer succeeds in his aim of showing that until the Enlightenment, almost all philosophers wanted to be understood by only a few and were worried that if they spoke all the truth they knew they would suffer persecution or contribute to the demoralization of society. Without an awareness of the esoteric strategy, we would not know how to understand the course of speculation from Plato onward. Melzer lights up every issue he examines. By making the world before Enlightenment appear as strange as it truly was, he makes our world stranger than we think it is."

(George Kateb, Princeton University)

"Starting from the seminal work of Leo Strauss, Melzer has given us, in lucid prose, the most comprehensive

explanation and defense of the practice of esoteric writing we have. For Melzer, the overall function of esotericism is to make it possible for the reader to release him or herself from unconsciously accepted self-delusions: it is the basis of the 'realm of freedom.' Melzer distinguishes several forms of esotericism—defensive (evading censorship or persecution), protective (of 'dangerous truths'), pedagogical (the need to pass through obscurity in order to see clearly), and political (the production of a harmony of theory and praxis). It is necessarily left to the reader of this excellent work to decide if Melzer has written an exoteric or esoteric book. After all, after the condemnation of his *Emile*, Rousseau (about whom Melzer has written a fine volume) once wrote in a draft of a letter to the Archbishop Beaumont: 'In truth, there are no more secrets to keep, nor truths to silence.' A book that will call one out."

(Tracy B. Strong, University of California, San Diego)

"This is the new and fantastic book by Arthur M. Melzer.... the best book I know on esoteric writing and its history."

(Tyler Cowen *Marginal Revolution* 2014-10-01)

"Good prose strives to be clear and direct. Or so we all think now. Melzer's remarkable book shines a floodlight on a topic that has been cloaked in obscurity: esoteric writing. . . . *Philosophy Between the Lines* is a double achievement, a landmark work in both intellectual history and political theory. For the reader who is in the habit of underlining, be prepared to have a second pen on hand as your ink will run dry by mid-volume."

(*Wall Street Journal* 2014-10-27)

"Those of us introduced to the history of moral and political philosophy by students of Leo Strauss would sometimes ask for evidence backing their claim that the great writers of the past practiced a lost art of esoteric writing. . . . Here Melzer finally delivers the kind of work we asked for back then. . . . The book does an excellent job collecting the evidence for the existence of philosophic esotericism, . . . amass[ing] an enormous amount of testimony from major figures in every age from Classical Antiquity through the Renaissance and Enlightenment."

(*Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* 2014-10-28)

About the Author

Arthur M. Melzer is professor of political science at Michigan State University, where he is also cofounder and codirector of the Symposium on Science, Reason, and Modern Democracy. He is the author of *The Natural Goodness of Man*.

Users Review

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Florence Whitney:

The actual book *Philosophy Between the Lines: The Lost History of Esoteric Writing* will bring someone to the new experience of reading a book. The author style to spell out the idea is very unique. In the event you try to find new book to learn, this book very ideal to you. The book *Philosophy Between the Lines: The Lost History of Esoteric Writing* is much recommended to you to read. You can also get the e-book in the official web site, so you can easier to read the book.

Daniel Carter:

Playing with family in a park, coming to see the ocean world or hanging out with close friends is thing that usually you will have done when you have spare time, after that why you don't try point that really opposite from that. A single activity that make you not experiencing tired but still relaxing, trilling like on roller coaster you have been ride on and with addition associated with. Even you love Philosophy Between the Lines: The Lost History of Esoteric Writing, you could enjoy both. It is fine combination right, you still wish to miss it? What kind of hang-out type is it? Oh seriously its mind hangout guys. What? Still don't obtain it, oh come on its known as reading friends.

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Is it an individual who having spare time and then spend it whole day by watching television programs or just telling lies on the bed? Do you need something totally new? This Philosophy Between the Lines: The Lost History of Esoteric Writing can be the reply, oh how comes? A fresh book you know. You are consequently out of date, spending your extra time by reading in this new era is common not a geek activity. So what these publications have than the others?

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