The Recovery of Philosophical Esotericism

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Arthur M. Melzer

We inhabitants of Western liberal democracies are the first people in recorded history to find the idea of esoteric writing by philosophers to be incredible and even morally repulsive. In this very important book Arthur Melzer sets out to change that. Even those (like me) who need no persuading of the long-standing and only recently lost practice of philosophic esoteric writing will heartily welcome this work, which makes the case so convincingly, raises and answers so many potential objections, and explains so compellingly how the practice came to be forgotten and then denied. Melzer’s examples are numerous and varied, his metaphors fresh and arresting, his whole manner one of a humane invitation from a very learned and reasonable man. His (attained) goal is not to defend earlier views of esotericism, but solely ‘to answer the historical question of whether’ the premises of esotericism ‘were widely believed and acted upon’ (p. 163).

To this end Melzer presents testimonial evidence supporting philosophic esotericism and the theoretical reasoning behind its practice – including the two distinct sets of assumptions or discoveries that underlie its differing classical and modern modes. He also proposes reasons for the contemporary resistance to philosophic esotericism. He delineates what he finds to be four different forms of esotericism: defensive, protective, pedagogical, and political.
Finally, he draws a practical consequence, offering his readers a beginner’s guide to reading esoteric works – the bag of tricks, as it were, that have been deployed for millennia. And in a concluding chapter he spells out how the rediscovery of esotericism changes the ‘whole philosophical landscape’, making possible a new defense of philosophic rationalism against the radical historicism of Martin Heidegger and his followers.

The recovery of philosophic esotericism is no small feat. One must in the first place overcome the great problem that esotericism is ‘resistant, by its very nature, to open and clear disclosure’. But the evidence of its existence that Melzer recovers and presents, in a synoptic account of philosophic writing over almost three millennia, is ‘massive in extent, universal in distribution, and virtually uncontradicted’ (p. 29); it discloses both perduring patterns and the major shift in practice that came with modernity. But to recover philosophic esotericism one must, in the second place, raise and answer multiple objections along the way. Some argue for example that esotericism is a neo-Platonic, religious import into philosophy, but Melzer shows that ‘the testimony to esotericism long predates Neoplatonism’ (p. 26); in the ancient world all parties agreed, for example, that Aristotle withheld certain truths from most readers (p. 44). According to another widespread opinion there was no persecution of opinions or beliefs in the ancient world; Christianity, like Judaism and Islam, ‘replaced the pluralism and toleration inherent in pagan polytheism with monotheism’ (pp. 144-45). To refute this claim, Melzer first reminds readers that so-called tolerant paganism put Socrates and many more to death. He then notes that Christianity’s intolerance of certain philosophic positions is just the flip side of its ‘embrace and need for philosophy’ (pp. 146-47), owing to the absence of nomos in Christian revelation. ‘[I]n the ancient, pagan world, the gulf between philosophy and the prevailing religion was obviously far greater than in the Christian world’ (p. 19, emphasis added). Finally, with the help of Fustel de Coulanges, Melzer puts to rest the Enlightenment canard, with its source in Voltaire, that ancient Athens ‘allowed complete liberty not only to philosophy but to all religions’ (pp. 148-9). (All the more unfortunate is Melzer’s misrepresentation of Christianity as separating religion from politics, the church from the state, or obscuring ‘the essential unity of what might properly be called the theologico-political realm’ [p. 183]. Contrast Thomas Aquinas, ST II-II Q 104 art. 3.)

Ancient Esotericism

Melzer succeeds above all by making us keenly aware that philosophic esotericism is ‘not merely a technique employed to deal with an occasional, practical