



Foreword to Republication of “A Beginner’s Guide to Esoteric Reading”

Taking a hint is fundamentally different from deciphering a formal communication or solving a mathematical problem; it involves discovering a message that has been planted within a context by someone who thinks he shares with the recipient certain impressions or associations. One cannot, without empirical evidence, deduce what understandings can be perceived in a nonzero-sum game of maneuver any more than one can prove, by purely formal deduction, that a particular joke is bound to be funny.

—Thomas Schelling (pp. 163–164 in *The Strategy of Conflict*, Harvard University Press, 1960)

The distinction between *exoteric* and *esoteric* is that, with her text, an author offers certain ideas or meanings, the exoteric ones, that are explicit, obvious, or apparent, and between the lines offers additional or other meanings, the esoteric ones. The distinction implies a multiplicity of interpretations, obvious and nonobvious. An author writes esoterically if she intends to make some of her ideas or meanings nonobvious. A reader reads esoterically if he is alert and sensible to nonobvious meanings. If we look at the world, or at one’s set of worldly impressions, allegorically or theologically, as something authored and carrying meanings, economists may associate esoteric readers with entrepreneurs, who find opportunity in nonobvious interpretations of the world—the entrepreneur as exegete.

Today the topic of esoteric writing is very often associated with Leo Strauss (1899–1973). Strauss accentuated the esotericism of past authors because doing so was requisite to his view of things, historical and philosophical. But there is much about esotericism that can be separated from Strauss’s wider view of things. Only to a small extent did Strauss himself provide such separation. Nor have any of the

Straussians, that is, Strauss's students and admirers, provided very much in the way of instruction and edification about esotericism separated as much as possible from the wider Straussian view of things.

Enter Arthur Melzer. In his book *Philosophy between the Lines: The Lost History of Esoteric Writing*, published by the University of Chicago Press in 2014, Melzer strives to separate, where possible, the analysis and history of esoteric writing from the wider Straussian view of things, and he largely succeeds in doing so. If esotericism needed to be rescued from Straussianism, Melzer's book provides that rescue.

Melzer makes great strides in establishing the following claims:

- From Moses down to about the time of the American Founding (and the onset of the Industrial Revolution), esotericism was widely practiced and acknowledged; its ubiquity was taken for granted. And, outside the West, it typically still is. Melzer provides ample evidence in the book, and he provides still more in a freely available online compendium of quotations ([here](#)).
- In the 18th century there was a lively, open literature exploring the worthiness and justness of writing esoterically.
- From around 1800, the practice of esoteric writing declined sharply.
- A few decades later, people developed a lack of awareness of esoteric writing, even in regard to its practice in earlier times. The lack of awareness has persisted to today.

Melzer's book explains four purposes or forms of esoteric writing, called defensive, protective, pedagogical, and political. He elaborates reasons for the common hostility to esoteric reading. He also provides a beginner's guide to esoteric reading, which we reprint here.

Melzer himself is a Straussian. But, again, in offering up all of the things just listed, he strives to separate them from the wider Straussian view of things. And, then, particularly in the last chapter of the book, there is yet one more valuable offering: An explanation of the wider Straussian view of things.

Here we reprint, with permission of The University of Chicago Press, Chapter 9 of the book, verbatim. The two lettered footnotes are ours. The numbered footnotes are Melzer's endnotes. Instead of completing the citation information in those notes that refer to material cited earlier in the original book, the notes are left as-is, and a complete References section has been appended.

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A Beginner's Guide to Esoteric Reading^a

Arthur M. Melzer^b

[LINK TO ABSTRACT](#)

You tell me...that after the reading of my book, you are hardly any further along concerning the heart of the question. How by the devil! ... do you not read the white [spaces] of works? Certainly, those who read only the black of a writing will not have seen anything decisive in my book; but you, *read the white, read what I did not write and what is there nonetheless; and then you will find it.*

—Abbé Galiani to a friend

The loneliness of modern readers

If it is really true that most philosophers prior to the nineteenth century wrote esoterically, then we had better read them esoterically. Otherwise, we risk finding ourselves in the uncomfortable position of Galiani's friend.

In fact, doesn't the experience that his friend reports have some real ring of familiarity? We start out, many of us do, as enthusiastic undergraduates, eagerly hoping to learn from the great and wise thinkers of the past about whom people speak with such reverence. But after some time spent reading their books, we often find that we are "hardly any further along concerning the heart of the question." While these books contain many interesting ideas and sentiments, they also seem full of contradictions, illogic, and leaps of faith. From an early age, a quiet sense of disappointment hovers over our experience of such reading.

And yet we know that people in the past report having been greatly moved and formed by these classic works. Somehow these books spoke to them in a way

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that they do not to us. Isn't it reasonable to wonder whether our unique alienation from the writers of the past might not be due, at least in part, to our ignorance of their manner of writing? If we were to recover the art of esoteric reading, perhaps we might also restore something of this lost connection to the past.

Still, to say that "we" must learn to read esoterically does not necessarily mean that every one of us must. Some amount of division of labor is both possible and necessary in scholarship. Cautious analytic minds will do close analyses; bold, synthetic ones will provide sweeping syntheses. Those able to assimilate vast amounts of material in multiple languages from alien times will discover and detail the historical context. So also, those with a gift and taste for close textual analysis and reading between the lines will pursue the esoteric dimension.

All of us do not have to specialize in every one of these jobs, but we all have to appreciate the necessity of each. We also need to be well enough versed in each of the jobs to be able to understand, judge, and assimilate their particular contributions. In short, *some* of us need to devote ourselves to esoteric reading, and the rest need to be willing and able to give this work an intelligent hearing.

You can learn esoteric interpretation

For those seeking to learn to read esoterically, the first thing that needs to be understood is that there is not and cannot be a science of esoteric reading. It is an art, and even a particularly delicate one. Therefore, it is also not something easily taught.

There could be a science of esoteric reading, of course, if esoteric writing consisted of employing an exact "secret code," where the enciphered message can, in a rigorous, mechanical way, be deciphered. But such a code, useful in wartime and on other occasions, would clearly fail the purposes of esoteric writing. For if the writer is trying to avoid persecution and especially prosecution, the last thing he or she would want to do is hide a secret message in such a way that it could be demonstrably and scientifically decoded. Again, if the writer is esoteric for pedagogical reasons—to compel readers to think and discover for themselves—a mechanically decipherable message would again be completely useless. Given the long, variegated history of esoteric philosophical writing, one hesitates to assert categorically that no one has ever employed a strict code of this kind, but in general I agree with the formulation of Paul Cantor: "a demonstrably esoteric text is a

contradiction in terms.”¹ Thus, esoteric writing cannot be a science, in the first instance, because its very purpose compels it to avoid being so.

Even without such compulsion, however, esoteric reading could never be a science because there is too much individual variation in it: no two esoteric writers are the same. Thinkers have different beliefs, different mixtures of motives for writing esoterically, and they face different external conditions regarding censorship, the reigning political and religious ideas of their times, the degree of social health and corruption, and so forth. And even where all these factors are essentially the same—as with Plato and Xenophon, who were of the same age, born and raised in the same city, and both disciples of Socrates—one still sees a very considerable difference in general styles of composition as well as in esoteric technique.

But most fundamentally, there is no science of esoteric interpretation for the same reason that there is none for reading a poem or figuring out a joke. These are not rule-based activities—and, by their nature, they cannot be. Both a poem and a joke are ruined the moment they become obvious or predictable. The same is clearly true of esoteric writing. And there cannot be a science of the unpredictable—of indirection, allusion, and suggestion. To be sure, these are modes of communication that human beings are fully capable of understanding—there cannot be any serious doubt about that. But people understand them not by following a small number of general and stateable rules, but by the appreciation and combination of a thousand small rules and particular observations that, taken together, constitute what we mean by such things as intuition, tact, delicacy, sensibility, taste, and art.

So if esoteric reading is an art, how then does one acquire it? Approaching this question in Aristotelian fashion, one might say that, if it were a science, following fixed rational principles, it would be fully teachable. If, at the other extreme, it were a natural gift, like say perfect pitch, it would be neither teachable nor even learnable, but innate. But as an art, it is in the middle: it cannot be strictly taught, but it can be learned. So how, then, does one learn it? And the good Aristotelian answer is: by doing it.

No one teaches you, for example, how to understand jokes—but you do learn it (although here, as with poetic and esoteric reading as well, there is also probably an element of “gift”). There are no *rules* of humor that one person can or does convey to another, but only a *sense* of humor that each must, by his own efforts, exercise and develop within himself. You do so simply by listening to jokes and trying to figure them out, with others helping only by telling you if you got

1. Cantor, “Leo Strauss,” 277. Throughout this chapter I rely on this superb essay which the reader is urged to consult directly.

it right or not (or occasionally by explaining this or that particular joke, without conveying anything of a more general nature). Through this process the sense of humor—the particular intuitions and sensibilities involved—gets awakened, exercised, and honed.

The case of interpreting poetry, like that of esoteric reading, is similar, only more complicated. In the end, both are also learned and perfected by doing. But here there is a relatively larger role for teaching.

The first and most important thing for reading well is simply to *connect* with the text in the right way. If you do that, all the rest will tend to follow of its own. And to connect well, one needs certain attitudes and practices with respect to the text that can be described, explained, and conveyed by a teacher. To a beginning student of poetry, for example, one might first explain that to activate the full power of a poem, it is important to read it slowly and also to read it out loud. Similarly, one must give oneself over fully to the sounds and rhythms of the words, letting them work their effect on you, in a way that one commonly avoids doing in reading prose.

Beyond this, there are also certain general techniques, tips, and rules of thumb that can be very useful, even if they do not quite take one (as in a science) to the true heart of the matter. And these too are fully teachable. Thus, one can explain to our beginning reader of poetry the character and uses of the different meters and rhyme schemes, as well as rhetorical effects like metaphor, synecdoche, onomatopoeia, and so forth.

Last, it is very useful for stimulating and training one's interpretive abilities to have models for emulation, to observe the masters—either live or in print—in the exercise of their art. The masters cannot teach their art, but they can perform it, display it, and from this the students are able somehow or other to “catch on.”

Generally speaking, these are the three categories of things that one can try to provide for the guidance of readers of poetry—and of esoteric texts: connection or attitude, common techniques and rules of thumb, and models for emulation. After that, it is pretty much up to them.

“Only connect”: the right attitude toward the text and reading

The most essential thing for becoming a good reader of any kind, but especially an esoteric one, is simply coming from the right place with respect to the text—connecting with it. That is what awakens the requisite intuitive faculties and, before long, shows us that we are capable of far greater delicacy and insight than we previously imagined. This can be illustrated by a simple example.

Imagine you have received a letter in the mail from your beloved, from whom you have been separated for many long months. (An old-fashioned tale, where there are still beloveds—and letters.) You fear that her feelings toward you may have suffered some alteration. As you hold her letter in your unsteady hands, you are instantly in the place that makes one a good reader. You are responsive to her every word. You are exquisitely alive to every shade and nuance of what she has said—and not said.

“Dearest John.” You know that she always uses “dearest” in letters to you, so the word here means nothing in particular; but her “with love” ending is the weakest of the three variations that she typically uses. The letter is quite cheerful, describing in detail all the things she has been doing. One of them reminds her of something the two of you once did together. “That was a lot of fun,” she exclaims. “Fun”—a resolutely friendly word, not a romantic one. You find yourself weighing every word in a relative scale: it represents not only itself but the negation of every other word that might have been used in its place. Somewhere buried in the middle of the letter, thrown in with an offhandedness that seems too studied, she briefly answers the question you asked her: yes, as it turns out, she has run into Bill Smith—your main rival for her affection. Then it’s back to chatty and cheerful descriptions until the end.

It is clear to you what the letter means. She is letting you down easy, preparing an eventual break. The message is partly in what she has said—the Bill Smith remark, and that lukewarm ending—but primarily in what she has not said. The letter is full of her activities, but not a word of her feelings. There is no moment of intimacy. It is engaging and cheerful but cold. And her cheerfulness is the coldest thing: how could she be so happy if she were missing you? Which points to the most crucial fact: she has said not one word about missing you. That silence fairly screams in your ear.

The example of this letter and your reading of it, while fanciful, is meant to be realistic: if you really had been in this situation, you really would have read the letter in something like this manner; that is to say, with a degree of sensitivity and insight—moving almost *effortlessly* from the lines to what lies between them—that far exceeds your experience with other texts. If this is granted, what it demonstrates is the primacy of connection over technique: if only one is situated in the right place with respect to a text, one can suddenly become, without prior training, a passable esoteric reader. It just comes naturally, because, from that particular place, our faculty of “communicative intuition,” so to speak, which lies dormant or rather underutilized within most of us, suddenly gets activated and exquisitely sensitized.

The first task in teaching esoteric reading, then, is to teach how to achieve something loosely resembling this kind of connection with a book. But this means that the crucial beginning point is to choose the right book to read in the first place.

For reading is not a mechanical skill that can be applied indifferently to any text. How one reads is inseparable from why and what one reads.

Thus, one must choose a book that one is capable of feeling passionately and personally about based on the hope of learning things of the greatest importance. If one reads with only a dry, academic interest, one is likely to achieve only a dry, academic reading. Real passion is necessary, first, to motivate the great effort and intensity that good reading requires. As Thoreau remarks in *Walden*:

To read well, that is, to read true books in a true spirit, is a noble exercise, and one that will task the reader more than any exercise which the customs of the day esteem. It requires a training such as the athletes underwent, the steady intention almost of the whole life to this object. *Books must be read as deliberately and reservedly as they were written.*²

We must feel passionately also to awaken and energize our deeper intuitions and concerns—to make full contact, read with our whole souls. Finally, passion is necessary to establish a real connection with the author of the book, who presumably shares with you this passion for its subject.³

But to actualize this connection, one must also approach the book with the right “tempo.” Esoteric reading, being very difficult, requires one to slow down and spend much more time with a book than one may be used to. One must read it very slowly, and as a whole, and over and over again. It will probably be necessary to adjust downward your whole idea of how many books you can expect to read in your lifetime.

The issue here is not just the *amount* of time devoted to going through a book but also the *kind*—as in the difference between driving and hiking as ways of going through the world. When you journey by foot you are no longer in that automotive

2. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, ed. Stephen Fender (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 92 (emphasis added).

3. This kind of passion and connection cannot, of course, simply be willed. One can feel them only on the basis of certain presuppositions that are increasingly uncommon. One must be a real, old-fashioned believer in books and especially in old books (old enough to have been written esoterically). One must harbor, that is, the lively hope that some of these old classics can teach one things of the first importance for one’s life that cannot so easily be found in more modern books. But if instead one is a firm believer in progress (so that later books inevitably contain all the solid wisdom of earlier ones) or, alternatively, in historicism (so that old classics are inevitably time-bound, expressing only the unquestioned assumptions of their society), then one will lack all reasonable basis for this kind of passion. With the best of intentions, one will be psychologically incapable of anything but an academic interest in these old books—which, given their difficulty, is too weak a motive and connection to enable one to unlock and truly understand them. In this way, the doctrines of progress and historicism—with their implicit but unavoidable dismissiveness toward the thought and writings of the past—become self-confirming: we expect that there is nothing truly important there, and that is what we find.

state of “on-the-way.” There is a spirit of tarrying and engagement that lets you enter fully into the life of each place as you reach it. This is how you must travel through a book. Nietzsche describes this very beautifully in the final paragraph of his preface to *Daybreak*, a passage that could well stand as the preface to every profound book.

A book like this, a problem like this, is in no hurry; we both, I just as much as my book, are friends of *lento* [slowly]. It is not for nothing that I have been a philologist, perhaps I am a philologist still, that is to say, a teacher of slow reading:—in the end I also write slowly. Nowadays it is not only my habit, it is also to my taste—a malicious taste, perhaps?—no longer to write anything which does not reduce to despair every sort of man who is ‘in a hurry.’ For philology is that venerable art which demands of its votaries one thing above all: to go aside, to take time, to become still, to become slow—it is a goldsmith’s art and connoisseurship of the word which has nothing but delicate, cautious work to do and achieves nothing if it does not achieve it *lento*. But precisely for this reason it is more necessary than ever today, by precisely this means does it entice and enchant us the most, in the midst of an age of ‘work,’ that is to say, of hurry, of indecent and perspiring haste, which wants to ‘get everything done’ at once, including every old or new book:—this art does not so easily get anything done, it teaches to read *well*, that is to say, to read slowly, deeply, looking cautiously before and aft, with reservations, with doors left open, with delicate eyes and fingers. ... My patient friends, this book desires for itself only perfect readers and philologists: *learn to read me well!*⁴

A teacher of esotericism is necessarily, like Nietzsche, a teacher of slow reading in this sense.

At this lower speed, new sorts of experiences and connections start to become possible. You begin to live with the book. It becomes your companion and friend. Your interactions with it become more unhurried, and so more wide-ranging, bold, and experimental, and at the same time more delicate, nuanced, and intimate.

4. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 5 (emphasis in the original). My attention was drawn to this passage by the website of Lance Fletcher, who also has an interesting discussion of it there, from which I have borrowed freely. See <http://www.freelance-academy.org>.

And what is especially important for the esoteric reader, at this lower speed the “particularity” of the text starts to emerge. For when you first read one of these books, say Plato’s *Republic*, you are simply overwhelmed. Three hundred pages of claims, arguments, observations, images, stories. All you can hope to grasp are the most gross features of the book. You inevitably experience most of the rest through a kind of haze—it’s just one thing after another. Only after a long time and many slow readings can you start to see all of it in its detail.

And then more than its detail: its particularity. That is, you begin to wonder—as you did with your beloved’s letter—why use this word here instead of these other words? Why broach this topic now and not a different one? Before this, you didn’t feel such questions because you were too overwhelmed and also because the text was covered in a false sense of necessity. The book is a classic, part of the canon. And the printed words sit there on the page in all their mechanical perfection—timeless, flawless, and universal—the same words that are there in countless other copies sitting on library shelves throughout the world. The book in all its details seems as necessary and immutable as a Platonic idea.

But when, through many slow readings, you gradually settle in to the book, this sense of false inevitability lifts, and you begin to feel how every topic, every argument, every word is the product of a *choice*. That, indeed, is what a writing *is*: not a fixed, necessitated thing, but a vast, delicate web of human decisions. As this thought fully dawns on you, you become truly alive to the text and full of wonder at its every decision and detail. These now cry out for interrogation and understanding. It is from this place—this connection—that you start to become a good reader.

But with books, unlike personal letters, it is very difficult to get to—and to stay in—this place. It often helps, as you read, to remind yourself of another story, this one true. One fine day in ancient Greece, Plato, a man of flesh and bone, sat down at his table before a clean sheet of papyrus. And after a few moments’ reflection, he chose to write a word, then another and still another, and these words became the *Republic*. A book is a sequence of choices.

Next, in order to make sense of these choices, one must strive to get close, to acquaint oneself as fully as possible with the text. That, to repeat, is why one must read slowly. But, in addition, one must read the book in its original language when at all possible. Many of the text’s linguistic subtleties, which can take on particular importance in esoteric interpretation, may be lost in translation. But one cannot learn every language, so where this is not possible, one should at least seek out the most literal translation available. The last thing one wants is a translation that, in its eagerness to win over the modern reader, papers over the difficulties, irregularities, and strangenesses of the text, which may turn out to be necessary parts of the author’s design.

Since no text exists in a vacuum, it is also important to familiarize yourself with the history surrounding it—both political and philosophical. The political history is of importance at all times, since writers are always addressing audiences that have been conditioned by existing political arrangements, but it will be especially important in those (typically modern) authors who are writing for the purpose of having a major political effect. Such writers are political actors, who, as such, cannot be understood without a close acquaintance with prevailing political circumstances.

Studying the *philosophical* history surrounding the text will also be important in helping one to figure out the author's vocabulary of terms, concepts, and questions. Often in a certain passage, a writer will be debating someone without openly acknowledging it, especially if the other is a contemporary. One needs to know the surrounding scene well enough to figure these things out.⁵ But it should also be kept in mind, of course, that the thinkers who had the greatest influence on the author or those whom he is truly responding to will not necessarily be those closest in time or place. If I were studying Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*, for example, I would surely spend far more of my background time reading Aristotle, whom Thomas calls "the philosopher," and Averroes, whom he calls "the commentator," than Brother John of Vercelli.

It is not enough, however, to form this vital connection to the text: one must also be able, as it were, to protect and sustain that connection against the powerful forces that oppose it. For notwithstanding the passionate desire to learn that may connect us to some classic work, when we actually get close to the book, inevitably a secondary force emerges that pushes us away. This force of resistance is composite, made up primarily of vanity, laziness, and ethnocentrism, in varying proportions. Thus, in our reading, when we come across a claim by the author that strikes us as incorrect, we puzzle over it for a while, but soon lazily dismiss it as a bit of weak reasoning on the author's part that we are clever enough to have seen through or else as a prejudice of the author's time. "That's just what people thought back then." We dismiss the author's claim, rupturing our connection, rather than doing what it is our true desire and interest to do: to strain every fiber to see if there is not after all some superior wisdom to his claim, and to search our own souls to see if it is not rather we who are prejudiced by our times.

Similarly, when we come across a passage that is textually incongruous—that makes no clear sense or contradicts earlier statements or departs from the author's declared plan, and so forth—we are quickly inclined to discount the problem as

5. See Quentin Skinner's *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes*, which gives a powerful demonstration of how the careful historical study of the rhetorical practices of Hobbes's age aid us in understanding his art of esoteric writing.

due to negligence on the author's part, or an unannounced change of mind, or the effect of competing influences, later editors, and so forth. We give in to our lazy dismissiveness instead of vigorously exploring all the other possibilities, including especially that the textual irregularity is part of the author's well-controlled effort to communicate esoterically.

These are the resistances that slowly wear us down. It is imperative, then, to find some systematic way to *sustain* our connection in all its original earnestness and energy.

The best way of doing so—although this suggestion will be met with great resistance—is to provisionally adopt, as a working hypothesis or heuristic device, the assumption that the author is essentially omniscient: correct in all the major aspects of his thinking and also in perfect control of all the major aspects of his writing. Since humans are never omniscient, this assumption obviously involves a considerable exaggeration (a point to be discussed at greater length below). Nevertheless, embracing it—*provisionally*, as I say—is a useful heuristic device and indeed a rational expedient because necessary to counteract the even more harmful and distorting tendency within most of us to believe the opposite. It is a question of self-management. We *need* an exaggerated faith in authorial omniscience to save us from the debilitating influence of our laziness, vanity, and prejudice, and to empower us to maintain the energetic level of open-mindedness that we truly intend.

A similar piece of advice is given by Montesquieu, who, in his *Pensées*, presents his own brief account of how one ought to read a book.

When one reads a book, it is *necessary* to be *in a disposition to believe* that the author has seen the contradictions that one imagines, at the first glance, one is meeting. Thus it is necessary to begin by *distrusting one's own prompt judgments*, to look again at the passages one claims are contradictory, to compare them one with another, then to compare them again with those passages that precede and those that follow to see if they follow the same hypothesis, to see if the contradiction is in the things or only in one's own manner of conceiving. When one has done all that, one can pronounce as a master, "there is a contradiction."

This is, however, not always enough. When a work is systematic, one must also be sure that one understands the whole system. You see a great machine made in order to produce an effect. You see wheels that turn in opposite directions; you would think, at first glance, that the machine was going to destroy itself, that all the turning was going

to arrest itself. . . . It keeps going: these pieces, which seem at first to destroy one another unite together for the proposed object.⁶

But, to repeat, this whole posture, which is very much out of step with our times, will raise hackles and suspicions. People will rush to object that the assumption of authorial omniscience can easily be taken too far, leading to abuses. That is obvious enough. There have been whole periods in history, like the Middle Ages, when the reigning religious and philosophical dogmas pushed people toward an excessive deference for thinkers of the past, and this had the effect of greatly stifling thought. In such times, a very different, exaggeratedly *skeptical* heuristic device would be needed to stimulate thought.

But we do not live in the Middle Ages. We live in the digital age of breezy irreverence and short attention spans where excessive authorial deference is, to say the least, not our major problem. What is more, the reigning philosophical doctrines of our day, with their celebration of “the death of the author” (in Roland Barthes’s famous phrase), all push powerfully in the other direction—almost as if they were expressly designed to flatter the forces of resistance and dismissal. So the assumption of authorial omniscience, although always dangerous, is nevertheless necessary today and precisely because it runs strongly counter to the tendency of our times.

There is also another big advantage to this provisional assumption: it is self-correcting, whereas its opposite is self-confirming. By giving the author every benefit of the doubt, every opportunity to prove himself right, one still leaves open the very real possibility that he will fail and so prove himself wrong. The provisional assumption of infallibility will eventually correct itself if it does not pay off. But the opposite assumption that prevails today—call it “authorial hyperfallibility”—tends to confirm itself. By flattering our inclination to dismiss the author after relatively little effort when he disagrees with us, this assumption works to close off the possibility of discovering that the author was right after all. If you assume there is not much to find, you will likely not find much. Thus, although both assumptions involve an exaggeration, the former is manifestly preferable as a heuristic device—as an aid to genuine connection and discovery.

But in order to maintain and properly develop one’s connection to the book, one further working hypothesis is required—this one in tension, not with our times, but with the central thesis of this work. One must proceed—at least at the beginning and for a good long time—on the assumption that the book is *not* written

6. Montesquieu, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Caillois, 1:1228, quoted and translated by Pangle, *Montesquien’s Philosophy*, 13 (emphasis mine).

esoterically. In *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, Strauss presents a number of rules for the responsible conduct of esoteric reading. The first two are these:

Reading between the lines is strictly prohibited in all cases where it would be less exact than not doing so. Only such reading between the lines as starts from an exact consideration of the explicit statements of the author is legitimate.⁷

In other words, one must always *begin by reading literally*, taking the surface text, the “explicit statements,” at face value. And if one is able to understand and explain the text adequately in this manner, then one has no warrant to go searching beneath the surface. But if the text contains significant problems that, despite one’s very best efforts, resist resolution on the literal level, then and only then does it become legitimate to investigate whether they can be successfully resolved through a nonliteral, esoteric interpretation (especially if the author hints at this possibility, for example by speaking of the esoteric practices of some other writer). But even then, of course, not any esoteric interpretation is warranted, but only one that, as it were, grows out of the surface text and out of an exact understanding of its particular problems and puzzles.

These rules suggested by Strauss are reasonable and necessary, but in practice they give rise to the following grave difficulty. One’s awareness of the possibility or even likelihood that the text is esoteric—an awareness promoted by his writings and mine—can easily undermine one’s ability to take the surface seriously and to exert these needed efforts. One sees this problem especially in graduate students (but not only there). Once they learn about esotericism, they feel they have achieved a privileged perspective. They don’t want to undertake the long and challenging work of studying the surface argument. The surface is for dupes. They want to cut to the chase. What’s the secret? Whenever they encounter a seeming contradiction or puzzle in the text, they quickly decide that the author does not really mean it, he’s being esoteric here, when some further hard thinking or historical research might reveal that there is a perfectly good explanation on the literal level. In other words, the awareness of esotericism itself becomes yet another factor contributing to the aforementioned forces of resistance and dismissal: it hinders people from thinking with the requisite energy and seriousness about the surface argument of the text.

This is a real problem and there is no simple solution to it. Certainly, it helps to be aware of it. One further thing to try is another working hypothesis or heuristic posture: one must emphasize to oneself the uncertainty as to whether the author

7. Strauss, *Persecution*, 30.

is really esoteric, or at least very esoteric, or, at a minimum, whether this particular puzzle in the text is due to esotericism. And one must continually stress one's scholarly duty to always give the literal level its full due. One might even make some sort of rule for oneself: no esoteric interpreting allowed until after the completion of three careful, literal readings, including a full engagement with the secondary literature.

One's attitude to the secondary literature is a large part of the problem being addressed here. When students hear of esotericism, their first impulse is to turn their backs on the nonesoteric scholarly literature. They need to be shown that precisely the opposite attitude is what they especially need. For given the absolute necessity of beginning from a thoughtful nonesoteric and literal reading of the text, and given the peculiar disadvantage that they themselves labor under in this area as believers in esotericism, they are the ones in greatest need of the secondary literature that has devoted itself to this task.

In short, an important part of learning to read esoterically is becoming aware of and cautious about the dangerous temptations to which this interpretive approach itself inevitably gives rise.

Some common esoteric techniques

If one truly connects with a book, I have been arguing, one will spontaneously begin to read it with delicacy, tact, and, where appropriate, esoteric sensitivity. This is possible because many esoteric techniques—like poetic ones and comic ones—are intuitively obvious and do not need to be studied. One of the ways this intuition works is that when you suspect an author of hiding something, you start to think about how you would go about hiding that thing if you were in his place. Like every good detective, you start to think like a criminal. Continuing in this vein, I will try to describe, explain, and historically confirm some of the more common techniques of esoteric writing.

It is necessary to emphasize once again, however, that every esoteric writer is different. Thus, a more precise account would treat each individual thinker separately. Since lack of space, to say nothing of other shortcomings, prevents me from doing so, all I can hope to provide here is a basic "starter kit," which the reader will have to supplement in turning to any particular writer.

Let us begin where we left off: esoteric interpretation must start from a literal reading, taking the surface text at face value. It acquires the right as well as the means for venturing beyond the surface only if it encounters problems there—contradictions, ambiguities, surprises, puzzles—that *compel* it to go beyond. The *surface itself* must point you beyond it.

If most people do not see these pointers on the surface, that is, paradoxically, because they do not read literally enough. Consider very simply what we do when we read. We do not plod along like second-graders, reading one word after another. We skim along the words and sentences, taking a representative sample, and then we essentially *form a guess* of—conjecturally reconstruct—the meaning from that partial information. Certain speed-reading techniques even teach you to read a line left to right and then, to save time on the return, the next line right to left—or several lines at once. Surprisingly, we are able to do this—precisely because in reading we are not passive but active. Since we are conjecturally putting the meaning together for ourselves, it is not necessarily a problem that we encounter the parts in the wrong order.

This fairly commonplace observation about the constructive character of reading has an important further consequence. Part of the difficulty of this inferential process is that, not only are some of the words missing, but others, which are present, do not easily fit into the meaning that we have conjecturally constructed for ourselves. So an inseparable part of this process is the ability to ignore or wave off the pieces that do not fit our meaning-hypothesis (unless the lack of fit becomes too glaring and we have to go back and start over). In other words, normal, “literal” reading is not only a *constructive* process, but also—what necessarily goes along with this—a *suppressive* one, shutting our eyes to things that do not seem to fit.

And this filtering process is a large part of what makes esoteric writing possible. It turns out that you can plant all kinds of “pointers”—problems and contradictions—right there on the surface of the text and they won’t be noticed. You can hide things in plain sight. Either the reader, busy constructing the meaning for himself, eager to make sense of it all, will not notice them at all, or if he does, he will just dismiss them as part of the standard level of meaningless noise to be encountered in every text. The point is: *shrugging off textual problems* is an essential aspect of the normal, constructive process of reading. Without being aware of it, we are always cleaning up the text, eagerly making it more coherent than it is. That is why this kind of reading does not typically become aware of the irregularities and puzzles through which, in an esoteric work, the surface points beyond itself.

Thus, in saying that the first step in esoteric interpretation is a literal reading, what I mean is a *genuinely* literal reading. This is not normal reading but something that becomes possible only through a conscious break with normal reading. One has to stop one’s mind from grabbing a few words and running off to construct a meaning. One has to stay glued to the text, slowly reading every word, but above all one has to stop filtering out the things that don’t fit. One has to see the text in its messiness. It is only through a literal reading in this precise sense that one can encounter the textual problems that legitimate and guide an esoteric interpretation.

Once one has become aware, through this process, of the problems in the text, the next step is to interpret or make esoteric sense of them. But how does one do that? John Toland, in his treatise on esotericism, suggests that one should look for a key in the text itself: "It is to be, for the most part, borrowed by the skillful from the writers themselves."⁸ Since the author certainly desires that the intelligent reader be able to penetrate his veils, it makes sense that he might endeavor to provide him some subtle guidance. Thus, it is very important to be on the lookout for such clues, especially whenever the author speaks about writing in general or his own writings in particular. Rousseau, for example, places a "Notice on the Notes" at the beginning of his *Second Discourse*, where he declares:

These notes sometimes stray so far from the subject that they are not good to read with the text. ... Those who have the courage to begin again will be able to amuse themselves the second time in beating the bushes, and try to go through the notes. There will be little harm if others do not read them at all.

It is reasonable to take this as a clue that his deeper thoughts, intended for "those who know how to understand," are to be found especially in the notes; and if there are any contradictions between the notes and the main text (which there are), these should be resolved in favor of the former.

Similarly, Francis Bacon has included in his *Advancement of Learning*—albeit in widely scattered places—an extensive discussion of writing that is very useful for the interpretation of his own works.⁹ Other thinkers give hints about how they should be read by showing us how they read other writers. Thus, Strauss, in his interpretations of Maimonides, Spinoza, and Machiavelli, draws primary guidance from how the first two read the Bible and the latter, Livy.¹⁰

Beyond this, there is also a certain logic inherent in the situation of trying to communicate esoterically, a logic that makes it possible to deduce certain elemental strategies. If the thought to be conveyed has the structure "I claim X about Y," then there are essentially three possible ways to dissemble in communicating it. One can dissemble regarding the "I," the person who is making the claim, or regarding "Y," the object of the claim, or regarding "X," the content of the claim itself. One could of course also combine several of these strategies.

In the first case, one openly states the objectionable idea but manages to put it in somebody else's mouth. In the broadest sense, you do that by publishing the

8. Toland, *Clidophorus*, 76.

9. For both of these examples, see the excellent discussion by Cantor, "Leo Strauss."

10. See "The Literary Character of the *Guide for the Perplexed*," in Strauss, *Persecution*, 55–78; "How to Study Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise*," in *ibid.*, 142–201; and Strauss, *Thoughts*, 29–53.

whole book anonymously or pseudonymously—and no one denies that this was done all the time, especially in the early modern period. So it stands to reason that a writer might also pursue the same strategy in a more targeted fashion by arranging to have a certain specific view expressed by some character, real or fictional, from whom the writer can conspicuously distance himself. One possibility is to put it in the mouth of a child, a madman, a drunkard, or a fool, speakers who enjoy a certain immunity because they are presumed not to know what they are saying. For example, Diderot explains in a letter to Sophie Volland regarding his work *D'Alembert's Dream*:

It is of the greatest extravagance and at the same time, the most profound philosophy; there is some cleverness in having put my ideas in the mouth of a man who is dreaming: it is often necessary to give to wisdom the appearance of folly to obtain admission for it.¹¹

Appropriately, in *In Praise of Folly*, Erasmus has Folly herself explain this idea:

From [fools] not only true things, but even sharp reproaches, will be listened to; so that a statement which, if it came from a wise man's mouth, might be a capital offense, coming from a fool gives rise to incredible delight. Veracity, you know, has a certain authentic power of giving pleasure, if nothing offensive goes with it: but this the gods have granted only to fools.¹²

Alternatively, one might put the offending claim in the mouth of a villain, again real or fictional. The English Deists, for example, would often quote some irreligious passage from the villainous works of Hobbes or Holbach, suitably surrounded with words of high disdain and refutation. But they would also make sure that the refutation came off as bland and weak in comparison with the power of the quoted passage. In this way, they sought, in the already quoted remark of Bishop Berkeley, to “undermin[e] religion under the pretence of vindicating and explaining it.”¹³ A like strategy was commonly practiced—and similarly attacked—in Renaissance Italy by such thinkers as Tommaso Campanella, Giulio

11. Quoted and translated by Lester G. Crocker in *Diderot: The Embattled Philosopher* (New York: Free Press, 1954), 311.

12. Erasmus, *Praise of Folly*, trans. Hudson, 50.

13. For an excellent account, see David Berman, “Deism, Immortality and the Art of Theological Lying,” in *Deism, Masonry, and the Enlightenment: Essays Honoring Alfred Owen Aldridge*, ed. J. A. Leo Lemay (Newark, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1987), 61–78; and *A History of Atheism in Britain: From Hobbes to Russell* (New York: Croom Helm, 1988).

Cesare Vanini, and Cesare Cremonini.¹⁴ In both czarist and Soviet Russia this technique was also very common. According to Lev Loseff, a Soviet dissident writer who wrote a book about the use of Aesopian language in Russia,

In political journalism quotations have been Aesopically manipulated since the nineteenth century by one favored and still widely used method: the stated opinions of the regime's ideological opponents, when quoted, are framed by what from the standpoint of the Russian censorship are ideologically correct counter-claims; these latter arguments, however, take such a deliberately banal form that they are given no credence by the reader and are merely screens.¹⁵

As Strauss points out, the broad popularity of this general strategy helps to explain an otherwise puzzling fact about the great literature of the past, that it contains “so many interesting devils, madmen, beggars, sophists, drunkards, epicureans, and buffoons.”¹⁶

The second strategy consists in expressing a criticism openly and in one's own name, but dissembling the true target of it. In the *Discourses*, Machiavelli explicitly discusses this strategy in speaking, not indeed of himself, but of Roman writers under the empire. They were forbidden to criticize Caesar, who was the source of all the subsequent emperors' authority. Silenced in this way, they expressed their views covertly by criticizing Catiline, who had tried and failed to do just what Caesar had done, and also by praising Brutus: “unable to blame Caesar because of his power, they celebrate his enemy.”¹⁷

But in describing this strategy of speaking about Z when you mean Y, Machiavelli is at the same time employing it, for this open description of the Roman writers is also meant, covertly, to be about himself—to teach us how to read him. This becomes clear, as Strauss points out, in the very next chapter, where Machiavelli celebrates the great virtues of pagan Roman religion—an indirect way of criticizing its enemy Christianity.¹⁸

Another example, which many scholars have pointed out, is Montaigne's very explicit critique of Mohammed's and especially Plato's doctrine's of the afterlife: his true target was something else. As one critic put it: “Montaigne stabs

14. See Zagorin, *Ways of Lying*, 305–316; and Don Cameron Allen, *Doubt's Boundless Sea: Skepticism and Faith in the Renaissance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1964).

15. Loseff, *On the Beneficence*, 109.

16. Strauss, *Persecution*, 36.

17. Machiavelli, *Discourses*, trans. Mansfield and Tarcov, 32 (1.10).

18. Strauss, *Thoughts*, 33.

the Christian teaching...through the body of Plato.”¹⁹ It was indeed a very common practice, especially among early modern thinkers, to go on at length about the ancients, the Chinese, the Amerindians, the Hindus—either in extravagant praise or blame—as an indirect means of criticizing their own government and religion.

The same strategy is just as apparent in more contemporary authors. According to J. M. Ritchie, writers in Nazi Germany could count on “the sensitivity of the reader to pick up a literary allusion, a biblical reference or a historical parallel with relevance to National Socialism.”²⁰ Similarly, an article in the *New York Times* about the covert practices of Tin Maung Than, a dissident writer and newspaper editor in Myanmar (Burma), reports:

“You cannot criticize,” Mr. Tin Maung Than said. “You have to give hints that you are being critical, that you are talking about the current system.” ... He wrote about repression in the education system under British colonial rule. Readers were nudged to draw their own conclusions about the education system of today. He wrote about flag burning in the United States, ostensibly to criticize it but, between the lines, to give a glimpse of freedom. “If we want to talk about fear, we cannot talk about fear in the political context,” he said. “So we talk about children’s fear and its impact on society. The key is that you have to give little hints that you are not really talking about children.”²¹

Again, the article “Aesopian Language” in *The Modern Encyclopedia of Russian and Soviet Literature* reports:

Writers tended to employ a number of stock situations, comparisons and contrasts as well as techniques. These included narration about life in foreign countries with implicit application to the writer’s own society, such as Saltykov-Shchedrin’s 1863 article “Parasite Dramatists in France” ...[and] narration about current events in the guise of an account about the past.²²

Lev Loseff agrees and emphasizes the particular popularity of this technique:

19. Montaigne, *The Essays of Michel de Montaigne*, ed. and trans. Jacob Zeitlin (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1934), 2:500–501, quoted by David Schaefer, *The Political Philosophy of Montaigne* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 94.

20. Ritchie, *German Literature*, 119.

21. Seth Mydans, “Burmese Editor’s Code: Winks and Little Hints,” *New York Times*, June 24, 2001.

22. Parrott, “Aesopian Language,” 43.

In literary writing, and in Russian literature particularly since the latter half of the eighteenth century, one of the most widely proliferated types of Aesopian plot has been the exotic variety, its infallibility ironically sworn to by Nekrasov:

When the action is shifted to Pisa
Endless volumes of fiction are spared.²³

The two strategies we have discussed so far are relatively concrete and uncomplicated, since the main issue—the *content* of the claim or thought involved—is stated openly, and all that is dissembled is the very narrow question of the source or the target of that claim. And it is not as if there is a wide range of possible answers in play. In each case, the esoteric reader is really faced with a simple, yes-or-no question: contrary to appearances, is the claim being advanced secretly embraced by the author himself and is it really meant to target the author's own time and place? To be sure, the answers may still be difficult to arrive at, but at least the questions themselves are very obvious and determinate, and thus the reader can know exactly what he or she is looking for.

The situation becomes much more complex and open-ended when we turn to the third strategy, which involves dissembling the very content of the thought or claim. Here, at least in principle, the hidden thought of the author could be anything at all. The esoteric reader is much more at sea. There are some thinkers, to be sure, regarding whom the possible alternatives are, in practice, very narrow. Most Hobbes scholars would agree, for example, that if there is any issue of esotericism here at all, it is confined to the very specific question: atheist or unorthodox believer? (But even here, it is not so clear that the issue of religious belief can be completely separated from other elements of Hobbes's thought such as the status of natural law, the meaning of obligation, and the source of the binding power of consent and social contract.) At any rate, with many other thinkers, with Plato, for example, the possibilities in play are far broader. To judge simply by the history of the interpretation of Plato and the "Academic school" beginning in antiquity, his esoteric teaching could be anything from mysticism to Epicureanism, extreme dogmatism to extreme skepticism—and everything in between.

Further contributing to the complexity and open-endedness of the third strategy is the fact that there is a very wide range of possible methods and techniques that can be used when one seeks to cover over, but subtly indicate, the content of one's thought. In what follows, I will describe some of the most important of these, without aspiring to anything approaching exhaustiveness.

23. Loseff, *On the Beneficence*, 65.

The most obvious way to express a thought while not making it too clear is simply to state it unclearly. In one degree or another, every esoteric writer employs this basic expedient. We have already seen Thomas Aquinas openly recommend it:

Certain things can be explained to the wise in private which we should keep silent about in public. . . . Therefore, these matters should be concealed with obscure language, so that they will benefit the wise who understand them and be hidden from the uneducated who are unable to grasp them.²⁴

There are, however, a number of different ways of speaking unclearly, most of which are listed by Diderot in a previously quoted letter where he explains how he avoided the censors: “Me, I saved myself by the most agile irony that I could find, by generalities, by terseness, and by obscurity.”²⁵ One can avoid clarity, he suggests, by speaking in very general and unspecific terms (generality), or by compressing one’s thinking into very few words (terseness), or by expressing oneself in terms that seem to mean either nothing at all (obscurity), or the opposite of what one means (irony), or—I would add—more than one thing (ambiguity).

Since these forms of unclarity are all fairly obvious, let me just briefly illustrate two. An example of obscurity is provided by Vaclav Havel, who describes, in a passage previously quoted, how he wrote his *Letters to Olga* while under the eyes of his prison guards in communist Czechoslovakia:

Very early on, I realized that comprehensible letters wouldn’t get through, which is why the letters are full of long compound sentences and complicated ways of saying things. Instead of writing “regime,” for instance, I would obviously have had to write “the socially apparent focus on the non-I,” or some such nonsense.²⁶

Terseness or brevity is another form of unclarity with a particularly long history. We have seen, for example, Rousseau’s statement about how he wrote the *First Discourse*:

I have often taken great pains to try to put into a sentence, a line, a word tossed off as if by chance the result of a long sequence of reflections. Often, most of my readers must have found my discourses

24. Aquinas, *Faith, Reason*, 53–54 (art. 4).

25. Diderot to François Hemsterhuis, summer 1773, in Diderot, *Correspondance*, 13:25–27. Translation mine.

26. Havel, *Letters to Olga*, 8, quoted by Patterson, *Censorship and Interpretation*, 11.

badly connected and almost entirely rambling, for lack of perceiving the trunk of which I showed them only the branches. But that was enough for those who know how to understand, and I have never wanted to speak to the others.²⁷

In his thinking, he engages in a long sequence of reflections (the “trunk”) but then shows the reader only his conclusions (the “branches”) which therefore appear disconnected and rambling. He shows us some dots and challenges us to connect them. A similar form of terseness is used by Montesquieu according to the account of Hippolyte Taine (quoted earlier):

We must possess some intelligence to be able to read him, for he deliberately curtails developments and omits transitions; we are required to supply these and to comprehend his hidden meanings. ... He thinks in summaries.²⁸

Similarly, Maimonides declares in his introduction that one way in which he has hidden his teaching in the *Guide of the Perplexed* is by extreme brevity, conveying only “the chapter headings.” And in using this technique (and this phrase) he is only following the explicit injunction of the Talmud:

The Account of the Chariot [i.e., of Divine Science] ought not to be taught even to one man, except if he be wise and able to understand by himself, in which case only the chapter headings may be transmitted to him.²⁹

A means of avoiding clarity that is very different from those just considered—generality, terseness, obscurity, irony, and ambiguity—and one that can also be elaborately suggestive, is the use of stories, allegories, myths, fables, parables, and so forth. The very fact that, in Russia, the practice of esotericism was known as “Aesopian language” testifies to the popularity of this technique. Francis Bacon, in his list of the various forms and uses of poetry in the *Advancement of Learning*, states that a poetic style can be used to help demonstrate and illustrate a body of thought, but it can also be used for the opposite purpose: “to retire and obscure it: that is, when the secrets and mysteries of religion, policy, or philosophy

27. Rousseau, “Preface,” 2:184–185.

28. Taine, *Ancient Regime*, trans. Durand, 260 (4.1.4), quoted and translated by Pangle, *Montesquieu's Philosophy*, 17–18.

29. Maimonides, *Guide* 6, quoting from Babylonian Talmud, Hagigah 11b, 13a.

are involved in fables or parables.”³⁰ Similarly, Hobbes speaks of the ancients who “rather chose to have the science of justice wrapped up in fables, than openly exposed to disputations.”³¹ This technique is obviously a great favorite with Plato. In all his analogizing, dramatizing, storytelling, and mythmaking, he isn’t just being poetic, but esoteric. As we have heard Alfarabi report in his commentary on the *Laws*:

The wise Plato did not feel free to reveal and uncover the sciences for all men. Therefore, he followed the practice of using symbols, riddles, obscurity, and difficulty.³²

Toland makes the same point in saying that Plato wrote “rather poetically than philosophically” as a means of concealment.³³ For readers to whom this still seems unlikely, consider that Plato himself makes exactly the same point about an even more unlikely subject: he claims that Homer, Hesiod, and some other early poets were covertly presenting Heraclitean ideas about nature when they gave their genealogies of the gods and other mythical accounts. As Socrates states in the *Theaetetus*:

Have we not here a tradition from the ancients who hid their meaning from the common herd in poetical figures, that Ocean and [his wife, the river goddess] Tethys, the source of all things, are flowing streams and nothing is at rest? (180c–d)³⁴

Similarly, Montaigne, a writer notable for his frequent use of stories and quotations, acknowledges at one point that he often uses these forms to suggest things that he is not willing to state openly:

And how many stories have I spread around which say nothing of themselves, but from which anyone who troubles to pluck them with a little ingenuity will produce numberless essays. Neither these stories nor my quotations serve always simply for example, authority, or ornament. I do not esteem them solely for the use I derive from them. They often bear, outside my subject, the seeds of a richer and bolder

30. Bacon, *Advancement of Learning*, ed. Kitchin, 81 (2.4.4).

31. Preface to *De Cive*, in *Thomas Hobbes: Man and Citizen*, ed. Bernard Gert (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991), 103.

32. Alfarabi, *Plato’s Laws*, 84–85.

33. Toland, *Clidophorus*, 75.

34. See also 152e; and *Cratylus* 402a–c. For a similar view, see Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Physicists* 1.4–9; and Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1.984b15–30.

material, and sound obliquely a subtler note, both for myself, who do not wish to express anything more, and for those who get my drift.³⁵

As we have seen, even Jesus makes it explicit that he employs his famous parables for the express purpose of obscuring his meaning:

Then the disciples came and said to him, “Why do you speak to [the people] in parables?” And he answered them, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given.” (Matt. 13:10–12)

Another method, distantly related to what Plato attributes to Homer and Hesiod, is to state one's views, but to conceal their novelty and heterodoxy by clothing them as much as possible in the terminology and categories of the reigning philosophical and religious orthodoxy. This tactic is clearly described—indeed resolutely insisted upon—by Descartes in a letter to one of his more imprudent disciples:

Do not propose new opinions as new, but retain all the old terminology for supporting new reasons; that way no one can find fault with you, and those who grasp your reasons will by themselves conclude to what they ought to understand. Why is it necessary for you to reject so openly the [Aristotelian doctrine of] substantial forms? Do you not recall that in the *Treatise on Meteors* I expressly denied that I rejected or denied them, but declared only that they were not necessary for the explication of my reasons?³⁶

In the *Advancement of Learning*, Bacon, another enemy of Aristotelity and scholasticism, indicates that he follows this same practice, without of course openly revealing why. “Wheresoever my conception and notion may differ from the ancient, yet I am studious to keep the ancient terms.”³⁷ D’Alembert sees very clearly that Bacon practices this esoteric technique and even criticizes him, as we have seen, for taking it too far, timidly hiding his novelty too much. Bacon “seems to have shown a little too much caution or deference to the dominant taste of his century in his frequent use of the terms of the scholastics.”³⁸

35. Montaigne, *Complete Essays*, 185 (1.40).

36. *Œuvres de Descartes*, 3:491–492, quoted and translated by Hiram Caton, “The Problem of Descartes’ Sincerity,” *Philosophical Forum* 2, no. 1 (Fall 1970): 363.

37. Bacon, *Advancement of Learning*, ed. Kitchin, 88 (2.7.2); see 89.

38. D’Alembert, *Preliminary Discourse*, 76.

Because many esoteric writers employ this practice in one degree or another, it is an important rule of esoteric reading to carefully follow the usage and potentially changing meaning of key terms and concepts in the text. It is essential, for example, to closely monitor Machiavelli's every use of the word "virtue," in order to see how he gradually brings this crucial, traditional term around to a radically new meaning.

There is another very common esoteric strategy that enables a writer, should he so desire, to state a novel or dangerous thought even quite clearly—just so long as he takes it all back by contradiction. More specifically, he must make the dangerous statement in a muted and unobtrusive way and surround it with more explicit and more emphatic and far more numerous statements to the contrary. He will soon discover that most readers will find a hundred reasons to discount and ignore the first statement. For in reading a book, as in reading the world, we all start with a profound and powerful tendency to believe that what we see repeated everywhere must be true. The beginning of wisdom in both realms is to recognize this as a fundamental illusion. The most important truths tend, on the contrary, to be rare and secret, covered over by what is repeated everywhere. Thus, in esoteric reading, we must resolutely reverse valuations and give more weight and credence to the quiet, isolated statement than to the ones noisily repeated everywhere else in the book.

The esoteric reader, then, must be especially on the lookout for those unique places where the mask of conformity momentarily slips and the heterodox truth is allowed to be glimpsed. At those moments, to be sure, the internal voice of conventionality, imperfectly conquered, may reassert itself. One thinks: "Can it *really be* that the author spent all that time and all that effort asserting and even thoughtfully elaborating and arguing for the orthodox view when he didn't really believe in it?" To which one must firmly reply: it is much easier to see why a heterodox thinker would frequently say the orthodox thing than why an orthodox thinker would ever say the heterodox thing. For this reason, John Toland asserts as a fairly reliable rule of esoteric reading:

When a man maintains what's commonly believ'd, or professes what's publicly injoin'd, it is not always a sure rule that he speaks what he thinks: but when he seriously maintains the contrary of what's by law establish'd, and openly declares for what most others oppose, then there's a strong presumption that he utters his mind.³⁹

39. Toland, *Clidophorus*, 96.

A strikingly similar claim is made by Malebranche—and later quoted approvingly by Bayle:

It is a rule of good sense that when someone speaks in the language of the people and following common prejudices, we should not take literally everything said even if it is repeated often in the same terms; but if someone says only one single time something contrary to prejudice we must take it with great strictness. Should a philosopher say only one or two times in his life that animals do not consciously perceive, I believe him a Cartesian on that ground and I have reason to believe it: but even if he says one hundred times a day that his dog knows him and loves him, I do not know what to think of his sentiments, because when one speaks as the others do and following common ideas one does not always say what one thinks.⁴⁰

Sometimes, of course, an author will contradict the conventional or orthodox view not openly and frontally but only indirectly through the denial of one of its essential premises or consequences. Thus, we find this somewhat modified formulation of the rule in Strauss:

If an able writer who has a clear mind and a perfect knowledge of the orthodox view and all its ramifications, contradicts surreptitiously and as it were in passing one of its necessary presuppositions or consequences which he explicitly recognizes and maintains everywhere else, we can reasonably suspect that he was opposed to the orthodox system as such and—we must study his whole book all over again, with much greater care and much less naiveté than ever before.⁴¹

At this point, however, a very common counterargument—call it the “fallibility objection”—will be raised. At the risk of a brief digression, it will be useful to confront it at some length. The rule for reading just recommended proceeds on the assumption that the contradictions (and other blunders) one comes across in the text are intentional, part of the author’s exquisitely controlled esoteric design. But how can one ever be sure of this? People make mistakes and contradict themselves in their writings all the time. Thus, isn’t this particular kind

40. Nicolas de Malebranche, *Réponse à une dissertation de Mr Arnaud contre un éclaircissement du traité de la nature et de la grace* (Rotterdam: Reinier Leers, 1685). Quoted by Pierre Bayle in Bayle, Daniel de Larocque, Jean Barrin, and Jacques Bernard, *Nouvelles de la république des lettres* (Amsterdam: H. Desbordes, May 1685), 794–795 (art. 8).

41. Strauss, *Persecution*, 32; see 169–170, 177–181, 186.

of esoteric interpretation that works by seizing upon the author's supposedly intentional blunders based on some kind of old-fashioned idealization of human nature? Doesn't it ignore what our more realistic or honest age is able to see more clearly: the simple phenomenon of *human fallibility*—the random lapses, the meaningless errors, the inevitable irregularity to be found in every writing? There is just too much "human static" on the line to permit of the kind of esoteric interpretation that draws large consequences from tiny irregularities.⁴²

This important objection (which continues the discussion of "authorial omniscience" begun in the previous section) is one manifestation of the hermeneutical pessimism that is a leading characteristic of our time. But does this marked tendency of our age represent a unique insight or a local prejudice? That is what is unclear.

In reply to this specific objection, one must start from a distinction that has been neglected. It is certainly true—and has always been known—that *most* books are filled with all kinds of unintentional errors and shortcomings. But the particular procedures for esoteric reading being proposed here are not intended to apply to most books: they do not aim to supply any kind of "universal hermeneutical theory." They are expressly designed for a tiny subset of books, primarily the great masterpieces and works of rare genius. And while rare geniuses too are fallible—if "even Homer nods," as Horace says—still they are sometimes capable of feats of concentration, control, and perfection that are in a class entirely by themselves. We would all like to insist on our ordinary sense of plausibility, but in truth there is nothing at all plausible about the *Divine Comedy*, or the B Minor Mass or the *Pietà*. If we did not know such things existed, we might well be tempted to say they are not possible. To pick a simpler example, most people cannot even imagine being able to play an entire game of chess blindfold, but there are people who can play twenty such games simultaneously. The current world record is forty-six.⁴³ There is a great danger in claiming to know what human beings are and are not capable of.

What is clear is that we today feel very powerfully that past ages naively entertained too exalted a view of the great thinkers and writers; but we must concede, if we are honest, that it is possible that, on the contrary, it is we who somehow take too jaundiced a view. To judge of the latter possibility, it would help if we could step outside of our own perspective and see ourselves from the standpoint of an earlier observer.

Enter Tocqueville, who is ready with some apt observations on just this issue. We have already heard him describe the familiar leveling tendency of democratic

42. For a good example of this argument, see John Dunn, "Justice and the Interpretation of Locke's Political Theory," *Philosophy* 16, no. 1 (1968): 68–87.

43. Eliot Hearst and John Knott, *Blindfold Chess* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009).

cultures: “the general idea of the intellectual superiority that any man whatsoever can acquire over all the others is not slow to be obscured.”⁴⁴ Beyond this, he emphasizes that in our informal, mobile, and dynamic commercial society, we have grown dangerously accustomed to writing that is hasty, prolix, artless, and inexact—in a word, peculiarly “fallible.” He dedicates an entire chapter of *Democracy in America* to the claim that, for an antidote, we desperately need to immerse ourselves in the literature of classical antiquity, lest we altogether forget what exquisite care and refinement, what jewels of delicacy and precision, great writers are really capable of.⁴⁵ In short, he predicts something like our coming hermeneutical pessimism and “fallibilism” and regards it as a culture-bound distortion.

To Tocqueville’s observations one could add the closely related fact that earlier ages seem to have taken the whole question of rhetoric and composition far more seriously than we do. The greatest ancient philosophers—Plato, Aristotle, Cicero—all dedicated major works to rhetoric, as did certain medieval and early modern philosophers like Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Erasmus, and Hobbes. More generally, from antiquity through the late nineteenth century, rhetoric—being one-third of the “trivium”—constituted an essential part of the established curriculum of higher, liberal education. Today, it is so utterly neglected that most people are completely unaware that it was ever considered so important. Something like rhetoric and composition, on a very rudimentary level, are taught in our primary schools, but rarely in college, except on a remedial basis, and not at all in graduate school.⁴⁶ Somehow, nobody today finds it the least bit strange that graduate students, future academics, who will be spending the rest of their lives reading, writing, and lecturing, study not one word of rhetoric. Our actions and institutions speak loudly, betraying a deep and unquestioned assumption that there is nothing too terribly serious to be learned here.

This remarkable neglect seems to represent the ultimate expression of the cultural transformation that Tocqueville feared: conditioned by modern society, we have essentially come to forget that prose composition is or ever was a high art that could be studied and practiced and—with great and sustained effort—polished to a high degree of perfection. Thus, we approach writing with a combination of artistic inexperience and literary easygoingness, which makes it more or less inevitable that when we read masterful writers of the past, we often fail to appreciate their well-honed art of composition or even to recognize that such an art exists and that they

44. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Mansfield and Winthrop, 613 (2.3.21).

45. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* 2.1.15: “Why the Study of Greek and Latin Literature Is Particularly Useful in Democratic Societies”; see also 2.1.11–14, 2.1.16–21.

46. To be sure, many scholars today write *about* rhetoric as a theoretical topic, but that makes all the more striking their neglect of it as a *practice*—as something that could teach them and others how to write.

are practicing it. Thus, we systematically underestimate the degree of control and precision that these great past writers of prose aspired to and were in fact able to achieve, their general human fallibility notwithstanding.

Our experience of past writers has been still further distorted by one additional factor: our ignorance of esotericism. This has caused us to assume that all the many contradictions and other blunders we find in the text are unintentional, whereas many and especially the most egregious are probably part of the author's esoteric design. As a result, we systematically overestimate the frequency of genuine errors and contradictions to be found in the greatest writers. In this way, ignorance of esotericism inevitably leads to the exaggeration of fallibility. This in turn leads us to conclude that close esoteric reading is impossible. In this way the long-standing denial of esotericism comes to be self-confirming.

While these arguments do not come close to settling the matter, there is at least good reason to suspect that our dominant literary instincts of pessimism and hyperfallibilism are culture-bound, deriving from certain limitations imposed by our particular historical circumstances and experiences. With this suspicion in mind, let us return to the point from which we began this digression, the question of whether major contradictions (and other blunders) in the text should be regarded as intentional. Let us try to evaluate the dominant paradigm of our culture by examining the views on this issue of readers from a variety of other historical periods. Consulting the views of earlier readers is particularly important here because in earlier periods, prior to the age of forgetfulness, people had vastly more concrete, hands-on experience of esoteric reading than we do, so their reactions are likely to be far more educated and empirically based than our own. They speak from experience, we from a combination of gut feelings and abstract theory.

We certainly find an attitude starkly different from our own in Maimonides, who, in his lengthy introduction to the *Guide of the Perplexed*, takes up the very question of what to make of the contradictions that one finds in various kinds of texts. He is speaking here primarily in his capacity as a *reader* of texts, including esoteric ones. It is clear from his finely observed account—he explores no fewer than seven different causes of contradictions—that he is no less “realistic” and hardheaded than we and fully acquainted with the fallible, sloppy, random side of human nature. Thus, one cause of contradictions, he reports, is when the author changes his mind but leaves both views in his book, and another is when the author is simply unaware of the contradiction. But at the same time, Maimonides emphasizes the great inequalities that exist among human minds; and he does not hesitate to assert that he is particularly experienced in the higher levels of thought and literary artistry. It is this direct experience that gives him the confidence to assert that in the greatest writings we possess (as also in his own), major contradictions are almost certainly intentional, produced by one form or another of

esoteric design.⁴⁷ That is what his own experience of reading and interpreting—as well as his experience of writing esoterically—tells him.

A similar conclusion is reached by Toland. He begins by endorsing an observation of Cicero about the great prevalence of contradiction in philosophical writing: “[Cicero] rightly concludes that the same philosophers do not always seem to say the same thing, though they continu’d of the same opinion.” Toland adds that this ancient claim regarding contradiction is also “as true as Truth itself, of many writers in our own time.” What then is the cause of this striking phenomenon? He answers:

Nor are we to wonder any longer, that the same men do not always seem to say the same things on the same subjects, which problem can only be solv’d by the distinction of the External and Internal Doctrine.⁴⁸

Again, we have already seen Machiavelli’s admonition—“When one sees a great error made by an enemy, one ought to believe that there is deception underneath”—as well as the similar statement by Pope: “Those oft are stratagems which errors seem / Nor is it Homer nods, but we that dream.”⁴⁹ Even in the thoroughly modernist James Joyce, one reads:

—The world believes that Shakespeare made a mistake, he said, and got out of it as quickly and as best he could.
—Bosh! Stephen said rudely. A man of genius makes no mistakes. His errors are volitional and are the portals of discovery.⁵⁰

In contrast to the reigning opinion of today, these various thinkers, representing vastly different times and places, all agree that, notwithstanding our great human fallibility, the significant contradictions to be found in the works of the greatest writers should be—and, with some care, *can* be—interpreted as part of their intentional esoteric design.

What is also apparent from these diverse statements is that over the last two thousand years, the strategy of deliberate contradiction has been very widely practiced. And from this simple fact, this long-running popularity, it is perhaps

47. Maimonides, *Guide*, ed. Pines, 17–20.

48. Toland, *Clidophorus*, 77, 85.

49. Machiavelli, *Discourses*, trans. Mansfield and Tarcov, 307 (3.48); Pope, *Essay on Criticism*, 69 (lines 175–180).

50. James Joyce, *Ulysses: An Unabridged Republication of the Original Shakespeare and Company Edition, Published in Paris by Sylvia Beach, 1922* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2009), 182. Although Stephen Dedalus is clearly Joyce’s alter ego, one cannot assume that the view expressed here is Joyce’s settled opinion.

possible to draw further support for our conclusion. For it would seem to indicate that this esoteric technique has also met with reasonable success, that it has tended to be recognized by its intended audience.

After all, esoteric philosophical writers typically start off as *readers* of earlier philosophers—indeed *esoteric readers*. And it is very likely that this initial hermeneutic experience is very important in helping them determine what strategies to use in their own esoteric writing. If they had commonly found, in their own personal efforts at esoteric interpretation, that the technique of contradiction and of other intentional blunders was too difficult to decipher owing to the frequency of unintentional blunders (as predicted by the fallibility objection), they surely would not have continued to use that technique in their own writing. They do, after all, want to be understood. Therefore, when a thinker makes significant use of a given esoteric technique, he is at the same time asserting, through that deed, his considered opinion—probably based on long, personal experience of esoteric reading—that that technique is indeed decipherable by a careful reader. Thus, when we encounter a widely popular esoteric technique, like deliberate contradiction, that *popularity* must also be seen as wide *testimony* to its decipherability—testimony that is, in this case, very broadly distributed over time and place and that represents the considered reflection of some of the greatest minds applied to a great range of firsthand hermeneutic experience. By contrast, the skeptical and pessimistic objections of our contemporaries are based on little if any hands-on experience of esoteric interpretation. In view of all this, it seems reasonable to conclude that the interpretive pessimism uniquely characteristic of our time should be viewed with considerable skepticism, and that the rules for interpreting contradictions in the text as stated above by Toland and Strauss are likely to prove both sound and practicable for the careful reader.

In the same vein, it is also important to be on the lookout for other intentional blunders. One common practice, for example, is the use of altered quotations. We have already seen a classic example of this in the second chapter: Machiavelli quotes a phrase from the New Testament as part of his description and criticism of David's tyrannical behavior—but in the Bible, the phrase refers to the actions not of David but of God.⁵¹

Another very common esoteric strategy that is, in a way, the opposite of contradiction is dispersal. With contradiction, you state the dangerous idea whole, but then negate it by placing an opposite whole on top of it. With dispersal, you divide the idea into parts, presenting one in one place, another in a different place,

51. Machiavelli, *Discourses* 1.26.

so that the whole idea is present in the book, but hidden because dismembered and dispersed.⁵²

As we have seen, Maimonides declares in the introduction to the *Guide* that the truths he means to convey are

not set down in order or arranged in coherent fashion in this Treatise, but rather are scattered and entangled with other subjects that are to be clarified. For my purpose is that the truths be glimpsed and then again be concealed.⁵³

Similarly, Clement of Alexandria, the Platonizing second-century church father, indicates in the very title of one of his books—*Stromata* or “Miscellanies”—his intention to use this esoteric technique, “since the composition aims at concealment.” As he explains in a chapter entitled “The Meaning of the Name *Stromata*”:

Let these notes of ours...be of varied character—and as the name itself indicates, patched together—passing constantly from one thing to another, and in the series of discussions hinting at one thing and demonstrating another.

As he continues in a later chapter, his book has

here and there interspersed the dogmas which are the germs of true knowledge, so that the discovery of the sacred traditions may not be easy to any one of the uninitiated.⁵⁴

Montesquieu is another writer who employs this strategy, although he is less willing to announce it openly in the way that Maimonides and Clement do. The obvious drawback, however, of following this strategy without announcing it is that then your book will tend to be dismissed as rambling and disordered—a fate certainly suffered by the *Spirit of the Laws*, especially in more recent times. It

52. On this technique, see the superb discussions by Ralph Lerner, from which I have profited, in “Dispersal by Design: The Author’s Choice,” in *Reason, Faith, and Politics: Essays in Honor of Werner J. Dannhauser*, ed. Arthur Melzer and Robert Kraynak (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008), 29–41, and in *Playing the Fool: Subversive Laughter in Troubled Times* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

53. Maimonides, *Guide*, ed. Pines, 6–7 (introduction).

54. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata, or Miscellanies*, in vol. 2 of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1983), 409 (bk. 4, chap. 2), 556 (bk. 7, chap. 18).

is only in a private letter defending his book against this particular charge that Montesquieu states more openly how he has written it:

That which renders certain articles of the book in question obscure and ambiguous is that they are often at a distance from the others which explain them and that the links of the chain which you have noted are very often at a distance the ones from the others.⁵⁵

In a similar way, d'Alembert, in his admiring analysis of the book, feels the need to respond to “the pretended lack of method of which some readers have accused Montesquieu.” It is necessary, he claims, to “distinguish apparent disorder from real disorder.”

The disorder is merely apparent when the author puts in their proper places the ideas he uses and leaves to the readers to supply the connecting ideas: and it is thus that Montesquieu thought he could and should proceed in a book destined for men who think, whose genius ought to supply the voluntary and reasoned omissions.⁵⁶

Montesquieu encountered the problem that he did largely because, for a variety of reasons, he sought to combine the strategy of dispersal with a book that took the outward form of a systematic treatise, so that the lack of order, deriving from his strategy, made his book seem fundamentally defective.

Other literary forms—dialogues, essays, dictionaries, and encyclopedias—being inherently more disjoint and promising less in the way of order and system, go together more naturally with the dispersal strategy. By writing dialogues, for example, Plato is able to move from one very partial account of things to another without producing an appearance of defect or failure. One of the keys to understanding Plato, according to Strauss, is to see that each dialogue is intentionally partial or one-sided, abstracting from something important relating to its subject matter. In the *Republic*, the dialogue on justice, for example, the whole erotic side of life is both downplayed and denigrated—think of the collectivization (i.e., abolition) of family life or the identification of the tyrant with *eros*—in a way that is reversed in the *Symposium*.⁵⁷

55. Montesquieu to Pierre-Jean Grosley, April 8, 1750, quoted and translated by Paul Rahe, *Montesquieu and the Logic of Liberty* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 87.

56. D'Alembert, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: A. Belin, 1822), 3:450–451, quoted and translated by Pangle, *Montesquieu's Philosophy*, 11–12.

57. See Strauss, *City and Man*, 62, 69, 110–111; and Strauss, *Rebirth*, 154–155.

Montaigne is another classic practitioner of dispersal. His *Essays*, with its repeated claims of spontaneity and the deliberate avoidance of order, is a perfect vehicle for this strategy. While pretending to allow his mind simply to wander where it will, he carefully plants the disassembled pieces of his systematic view. As he acknowledges at one point:

My ideas follow one another, but sometimes it is from a distance, and look at each other, but with a sidelong glance. . . . It is the inattentive reader who loses my subject, not I. Some word about it will always be found off in a corner, which will not fail to be sufficient, though it takes little room.⁵⁸

Seeing how this particular game is played, one might turn one's suspicions next to Pierre Bayle, who happens to have been a great admirer of both Maimonides and Montaigne, and who does appear to be employing a version of their dispersal strategy in his sprawling *Historical and Critical Dictionary*, with its rambling essays and byzantine notes inside of notes. In the "Clarifications" that he appended to the second edition in reply to some criticisms by religious authorities, he more or less openly admits this. Speaking of some of the heterodox opinions that he reports in his *Dictionary*, he states:

If a man . . . should relate, among vast historical and literary collections, some error about religion or morality, one should not be disturbed at all about it. . . . No one takes as a guide in that matter an author who only speaks about it in passing and incidentally, and who, by the very fact that he acts as if he were tossing off his views like a pin in a field, makes it well enough known that he does not care to have followers at all. . . . This is how the faculties of theology in France behaved with regard to the book of Michel de Montaigne. They allowed all this author's maxims to pass, he who without following any system, any method, any order, heaped up and stirred together all that came into his mind. But when Pierre Charron [Montaigne's friend and disciple] . . . bethought himself to relate some of the views of Montaigne in a methodical and systematic treatise on morality, the theologians did not remain tranquil.⁵⁹

58. Montaigne, *Complete Essays*, trans. Frame, 761 (3.9).

59. Pierre Bayle, *Historical and Critical Dictionary: Selections*, trans. Richard H. Popkin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991), 396–397.

Bayle explicitly acknowledges that in composing his *Dictionary* as he did, he was seeking to give it the same immunity and appearance of harmlessness that Montaigne had given to his *Essays*, and by the same means—intentional disorder, offhandedness, and dispersal.

Still further testimony to the popularity of this technique can be found in Condorcet's lengthy description, examined above, of the wily literary campaign waged against throne and altar by the philosophers of the early modern period. He describes these writers as

employing every form from humor to pathos, from the most learned and vast compilation to the novel or pamphlet of the day; covering the truth with a veil to spare eyes too weak, and leaving others the pleasure of divining it; sometimes skillfully caressing prejudices, the more effectively to attack them; almost never threatening them, and then *never several at one time, nor ever one in its entirety*.⁶⁰

These last items point to the strategy of dispersal: one never shows all of one's cards or presents the whole of one's critique in any one place.

This turns out to be exactly what Strauss reports finding in his studies of Spinoza and also of Hobbes:

To exaggerate for purposes of clarification, we may say that each chapter of [Spinoza's] *Treatise* serves the function of refuting one particular orthodox dogma while leaving untouched all other orthodox dogmas. ... Fundamentally the same procedure is followed by Hobbes in the Third Part of his *Leviathan*.⁶¹

Let me cite one last report of the technique of dispersal—this one by another careful reader, John Locke. The first, if much less well-known, of Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* is a close interpretation and refutation of Filmer's treatise *Patriarcha*—which Locke reads esoterically. As he explains, Filmer feared to put off his readers by too precise and complete an account of his doctrine of authority, so “clear distinct speaking not serving everywhere to his purpose, you must not expect it in him.” Instead, Filmer intentionally “scattered” his teaching “in the several parts of his writings” or “up and down in his writings.” Filmer acted

like a wary physician, when he would have his patient swallow some harsh or corrosive liquor, he mingles it with a large quantity of that

60. Condorcet, *Esquisse*, 216–217. Translation mine (emphasis added).

61. Strauss, *Persecution*, 184 and n82.

which may dilute it that the scattered parts may go down with less feeling and cause less aversion.⁶²

One may of course wonder whether Locke himself did not also make use of this technique that he attributes to Filmer.⁶³

In all of the esoteric strategies discussed so far, the dangerous thought is indeed stated, but hidden in some way—by being obscured, contradicted, or dispersed. But the purest or most classic esoteric technique is to communicate a thought precisely by *not* saying it—by meaningful silence or conspicuous omission. This may sound particularly arcane, but it is actually a fairly common and intuitive form of communication. For example, according to communications scholars Ge Gao and Stella Ting-Toomey, it is characteristic of the indirect style of conversation found in contemporary China, which “emphasizes what is implied or not said, rather than what is said. . . . That is, focusing on *how* something is said, and on what is *not* said, is equally, if not more important, than what is said.”⁶⁴

In this context, it is also well to recall your beloved's letter: almost all the important thoughts were conveyed by significant omissions, especially by her failure to mention that she missed you. In normal communication, every positive statement derives much of its meaning through reference to a silent background of expectations—expectations produced by the situation, by shared understandings, and by the preceding statements. This is what makes it possible to convey ideas by *not* saying certain things, that is, by the conspicuous violation of those expectations.

Thus, in the first chapter of Xenophon's *Constitution of the Lacedaemonians*, where he proposes to examine the uniqueness and wisdom of the famous Spartan regime, he sets up a certain structure or rhythm: first he describes how certain things are done in the other Greek cities and then he explains the very different, almost opposite practices of Sparta. But, as Strauss points out, in one case he omits the parallel. He tells us that in the other Greek cities young maidens are kept on a very austere diet with respect to food and wine, but he neglects to say a word about the Spartan practice in this matter. This is a loud silence, since it breaks the rhythm, violating the expectation the author has just created. It spurs us to supply the missing thought ourselves, and, following the established pattern, we are led to conclude that Spartan maidens must be immoderate with respect to food and wine. This thought, furthermore, is clearly meant to play into a widely held opinion

62. Locke, *First Treatise*, in *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (New York: New American Library, 1965), sections 23, 8, 9, 7.

63. See the discussion of Locke's reading and writing in Richard Cox, *Locke on War and Peace* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960), 1–44; and Michael Zuckert, *Launching Liberalism: On Lockean Political Philosophy* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 33–43.

64. Gao and Ting-Toomey, *Communicating Effectively*, 38.

that Spartan women were rather licentious, not only with respect to food and wine, but—perhaps in consequence of the latter indulgence—with respect to sex. This proves to be the first of many passages in which Xenophon’s artful and playful silences turn this grave encomium of Sparta into a very subtle satire.⁶⁵

Another, particularly striking example of the esoteric use of omission occurs in Alfarabi’s *The Philosophy of Plato, Its Parts, and the Grades of Dignity of Its Parts, From Its Beginning to Its End*. In this summary of Plato’s thought, the very title of which creates the expectation of comprehensiveness, there turns out to be not a single reference to the afterlife or the immortality of the soul. Even the summary of the *Phaedo* is completely silent on the subject. This striking omission, Strauss argues, is Alfarabi’s esoteric way of indicating that Plato’s genuine beliefs did not include his famous teaching regarding the soul’s immortality.⁶⁶

A further esoteric strategy, not unrelated to that of omission, involves the arrangement or plan of a writing. For you can convey information not only by what you say (or don’t say) but also by where you say it. For example, if you arrange the topics of your discourse in a discernible pattern, say, from less to more important, then you can communicate your view of the relative importance of various issues or phenomena without having to say anything explicitly—just by where you place the discussions. Again, Plato presents an extensive account of theology in the tenth book of his *Laws*, but on closer examination one notices that he has placed it in the context of a discussion of penal legislation. That conveys something about his views of religion’s role in political life. Obviously there are a hundred ways in which the placement or context of a discussion can silently communicate something important about its content. Conversely, one can also present a hint or puzzle to the reader by the violation of one’s plan, either by the introduction of a brief digression or of a wholly unannounced or ill-fitting topic, or by a surprising omission. For this reason, one of the first things that the esoteric reader should do in approaching a text is to construct a careful outline, paying particular attention to deviations and anomalies.

Still another esoteric technique concerning order is repetition. An author can make a claim or argument and then, somewhat later, “repeat” it—only with some significant (but perhaps barely visible) change. In this way, the writer signals the careful reader that the first statement was not his final or genuine view and points him in the direction of his true understanding.⁶⁷

65. See Leo Strauss, “The Spirit of Sparta or the Taste of Xenophon,” *Social Research* 6, no. 4 (1939): 502–536. On the notorious licentiousness of Spartan women, see 504n3.

66. See Strauss, *Persecution*, 9–16. For further discussion of the technique of omission, see Strauss, *Thoughts*, 30–32.

67. See Strauss, *Persecution*, 62–64; and Strauss, *Thoughts*, 42–45.

Finally, concerning order or arrangement in general, it is possible to formulate a basic rule. Common sense tells us—as does Cicero in his writings on rhetoric—that in the construction of a speech or writing, one should put the most important points at the beginning and at the end. The weaker or less important ones should go in the middle. This is because the listener's or reader's attention is typically greatest at the beginning, wandering off toward the middle, and picking up again at the end—at the sound of “and finally....” Consequently, if a writer has a heterodox idea that he seeks to communicate, not with maximum clarity and power but rather quietly and surreptitiously, he will carefully follow the opposite of this basic rhetorical rule and bury the dangerous idea somewhere toward the middle, while filling the beginning and ending with earnest protestations of the orthodox view. Indeed, through a somewhat stylized extension of this common practice, many writers will often signal what thought is really on their minds by placing it (or some hint of it) in the exact center of a list or sequence that they have constructed.⁶⁸

This list of esoteric techniques is far from exhaustive. I have simply tried to include those that are most common while also being most immediately intelligible and plausible by virtue of either their internal logic or their external testimony or both.

Some examples of esoteric interpretation

In addition to establishing a genuine connection with the text and possessing a basic understanding of common esoteric techniques, budding esoteric readers should also study some examples of esoteric interpretation—to see it done. Unfortunately, there is no single book that, in my view, combines all of the qualities that one would want in such a model for instruction and emulation. What follows is a short list of imperfect models.

But in using this list, readers must select works on writers that genuinely interest them. To appreciate a performance of esoteric interpretation and to learn from it, you must be a participant and not a spectator. You must begin by reading the text carefully on your own and struggling to interpret it. Only then will you be ready to understand and appreciate what the interpreter has found. If you sit back with arms folded, like a king who commands his wise man to say something wise, it will all fall flat.

From my own experience, I do believe that Strauss's interpretations are generally the best from the standpoint of esoteric penetration and especially

68. See Cicero, *Orator* 15.50; *De oratore* 2.313–315; Strauss, *Persecution*, 185; and Cantor, “Leo Strauss,” 273–274.

philosophical profundity. They also seem to me quite sober and accurate—not at all prone to “perverse ingenuity.” But their drawback for current purposes is that they are themselves quite difficult to understand. By taste as well as conviction, Strauss is averse to making things easy for the reader. He prefers to state his conclusions in a fairly compressed manner and challenge his readers to figure out for themselves how he arrived at them. He also likes to speak in the original vocabulary of the thinker he is interpreting without repackaging him in the terms and concepts of today, and this too can give his writings an initially antique and forbidding quality. I will recommend certain of his works below, but they are not the best place to begin.

To begin, we need an author who, in his interpretations, is willing to follow the very un-Straussian injunction—often found on mathematics exams—“show all work.” We need to see, once or twice, how the sausage is made. The best writing for this purpose that I am familiar with comes from an appropriately un-Straussian source: Stanley Fish. His “Georgics of the Mind: The Experience of Bacon’s *Essays*” is a brilliant and nuanced exercise in close textual analysis that openly displays, at every stage of Fish’s encounter with the text, what he thinks and why he thinks it.⁶⁹ He shows us what it feels like to truly take a text seriously, to engage its every word with patience and delicacy, to actually *trust* the author one has chosen to read, and to undergo, while striving to understand, the complex experience that the author, in his artfulness, has prepared for the careful reader.

Another excellent and highly communicative reader who, like Fish, is associated with the reader-response school of criticism is Robert Connor. His *Thucydides* is a very sensitive reading of Thucydides’s great history, a reading openly arrived at and clearly conveyed.⁷⁰ In conjunction with this, one should also read Clifford Orwin’s superb *The Humanity of Thucydides*.⁷¹ After that, one could try Strauss’s chapter on Thucydides in *The City and Man*, a brilliant essay, although not an easy one.⁷² This trio of works strikes me as perhaps the single best initial training course in close and esoteric reading, but it would involve a very serious commitment of time, especially when several readings of Thucydides himself must be included.

For shorter and easier fare, I would recommend—again, starting with non-Straussians—David Wootton’s closely argued “Narrative, Irony, and Faith in

69. Stanley Fish, “Georgics of the Mind: The Experience of Bacon’s *Essays*,” in *Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 78–156.

70. W. Robert Connor, *Thucydides* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984). Reader response is the contemporary method that has most in common with the approach to reading being proposed here. For a brief comparison of the two, see Cantor, “Leo Strauss,” 271–272.

71. Clifford Orwin, *The Humanity of Thucydides* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

72. Strauss, *City and Man*, chap. 3.

Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*,⁷³ and David Berman's "Deism, Immortality, and the Art of Theological Lying."⁷⁴ Then, for some Straussians: Wayne Ambler's esoteric reading of Aristotle's defense of natural slavery in the *Politics*, "Aristotle on Nature and Politics: The Case of Slavery."⁷⁵ Also, Clifford Orwin's careful reading of chapter 17 of the *Prince*: "Machiavelli's Unchristian Charity."⁷⁶ And Strauss's dense but clear "On the Intention of Rousseau."⁷⁷

Another particularly clear piece by Strauss is the posthumously published book *Leo Strauss on Plato's Symposium*.⁷⁸ This is essentially the transcript of a course that Strauss gave at the University of Chicago (edited and polished a bit by Seth Benardete). A more difficult but more finished work that was intended by Strauss precisely as a demonstration of how to read an esoteric text is *On Tyranny*. This work includes a detailed interpretation of Xenophon's short dialogue *Hiero or Tyrannicus* as well as a debate on it with Alexandre Kojève.

Other especially helpful writings on Plato are David Leibowitz, *The Ironic Defense of Socrates: Plato's Apology*; Allan Bloom, *The Republic of Plato*;⁷⁹ and Christopher Bruell, *On the Socratic Education: An Introduction to the Shorter Platonic Dialogues*.⁸⁰

Two other works to be recommended are Thomas Pangle's *Montesquieu's Philosophy of Liberalism: A Commentary on the Spirit of the Laws*, and Harry Jaffa's *Thomism and Aristotelianism: A Study of the Commentary by Thomas Aquinas on the Nicomachean Ethics*.

Finally, I would mention two last examples of esoteric reading, these more interesting for their source perhaps than for their content: both are by earlier philosophers. Augustine in *The City of God* gives an extended esoteric interpretation of the religious writings of the Roman philosopher Varro (and to a lesser extent of Seneca).⁸¹ It seems a clear and thoughtful interpretation, following many of the

73. David Wootton, "Narrative, Irony, and Faith in Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*," in *History and Theory* 33, no. 4 (December 1994): 77–105.

74. Berman, "Deism, Immortality," 61–78.

75. Ambler, "Aristotle," 390–410.

76. Clifford Orwin, "Machiavelli's Unchristian Charity," in *American Political Science Review* 72, no. 4 (December 1978): 1217–1228.

77. Leo Strauss, "On the Intention of Rousseau," in *Hobbes and Rousseau: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Maurice Cranston and R. S. Peters (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1972), 254–290.

78. Leo Strauss and Seth Benardete, *Leo Strauss on Plato's Symposium* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

79. Allan Bloom, "Interpretive Essay," in *The Republic of Plato*, 305–436.

80. Christopher Bruell, *On the Socratic Education: An Introduction to the Shorter Platonic Dialogues* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999).

81. Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Dods, 138–140 (4.31–32), 185–201 (6.2–9).

principles described above. In the end its utility for us is somewhat limited by the fact that Varro's writings have been lost in the intervening centuries.

Another, particularly charming example is provided by Samuel Butler (1835–1902), author of *The Way of All Flesh*, who was something of a philosopher as well as novelist. In 1879, he published a book on evolution entitled *Evolution Old and New: Or the Theories of Buffon, Dr. Erasmus Darwin and Lamarck as Compared with That of Charles Darwin*. Chapters 9 and 10 on the French naturalist and philosopher Buffon give an esoteric reading of his famous work *Histoire naturelle, générale et particulière*. Butler tries to show, among other things, that Buffon, while adhering to the biblical view on the surface, embraces an evolutionary view between the lines. Butler writes with wit and displays a particularly good feel for the motives, techniques, and pleasures of esoteric writing and interpretation. His work shows, better than most, how one could actually enjoy reading esoterically. Unfortunately, there is a drawback here too: whereas Buffon's book has not been lost, it does run to over thirty volumes.

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