Voegelin at York

Before watching the DVD preserved by Zdravko Planinc and produced by Fritz Wagner I made an effort to record my recollection of the event. This is sound Voegelinian procedure at least insofar as what is immediately recollected owes its priority to the extent of "excitation" that remains in consciousness after several years -- in this instance, slightly more than thirty.

First, York did not seem to me at the time, or now, to be particularly congenial to Voegelin's work. I was surprised that he was invited. Given the general popularity then at York of "hermeneutics," in a rather vague sense of the term, the presence of Gadamer was less a mystery. But who at York knew of Lonergan? And, with Lonergan, of Fred Lawrence? Alan Bloom, of course, was downtown at the U of T, but he was a notorious Straussian and such creatures were clearly out of favour with my colleagues -- or so I thought. And Roger Poole was simply unknown to me.

In other words the event was unexpected. It turned out to be a delightful surprise. A second preliminary observation: I did not know who actually issued the invitation to the participants and organized the event. There was a rumour they were Irish graduate students, an additional mystery. Where did <u>they</u> come from? Perhaps one of the others on this panel can recall.

Third, it seemed as though the conference went on for a week though in fact it took place over three days.

Fourth, I recalled there had been a discussion of literature and that speakers each gave individual lectures --Roger Poole spoke of his dead friends, Aristotle and Virginia Wolff-- but the most interesting part of the conference was a joint discussion on how to read Plato's Republic. This was, for me, especially memorable because it afforded the usually ebullient and dapper Allan Bloom an opportunity to exhibit albeit briefly his deferential side. I remember thinking that both Lonergan and Voegelin were more penetrating in their analysis than Gadamer and that only those three were really on the stage.

In other words, for a relatively young assistant professor whose first book had not yet seen the light of day and who had written precisely one article on Voegelin, this intense event seemed to appear from nowhere, and to engage the audience in a discussion of almost sublime philosophical significance. It was, to use a Voegelinian term, almost luminous.

After making a few notes on what I recalled, I watched the DVD. So much for methodology.

On the Plato panel, Bloom went first. The bright lights hurt Gadamer's eyes so Bloom thoughtfully requested they be dimmed -- and then joked about Gadamer being in the shadows.

Much of what Bloom said was, I think, quite acceptable: we need to look first to the self-understanding of authors; Kant's interpretation of Plato is "boring;" Heidegger's criticism of Kant opened the possibility of learning from as well as learning about the Greeks, particularly as concerns the truth, which turns out to be more than Heidegger's understanding of a-lethia, in my view. Incidentally, one-on-one, Allan Bloom was highly congenial regarding the different ways of reading Plato. I was using his translation of the Republic at the time and we had earlier

enjoyed a lengthy discussion of is over lunch. Much of our conversation concerned the proper translation of pephukene. He preferred, naturally, by nature." I thought "in the beginning" was better.

Second, Bloom's criticism of modern classical scholarship and its presumption of neutrality with respect to the Greek understanding truth, his criticism of the relative neglect of the dramatic dimension to the dialogues, and, more profoundly, his criticism of historicism as destroying the grounds of science, including political science, was fine so far as it went. He ignored, however, the underlying "metaphysical" issue, which around the same time Emil Fackenheim, also at the U of T, discussed in Metaphysics and Historicity, namely the distinction between the major metaphysical tradition, which Fackenheim called "ontology," and the minor one, which, following Schelling, he called "meontology." And the latter metaphysical tradition understood historicity -- not historicism -- as a significant (but by the ontological tradition, which included Bloom's, neglected) dimension of reality.

Third, Bloom expressed but did not reflect upon this distinction in his interpretation of the Republic as an "attack" on myth. He considered, for instance, the early dismissal of Cephalus as evidence of Plato's dismissal of myth. Moreover, according to Bloom, Socrates was guilty of injustice because of his views of the gods and of his replacement of the gods with the ideas. This replacement apparently solves the problem of injustice done to philosophers but also burdens them with a permanent conflict with the city. He concluded that Plato leads us to the centre of the theologico-political question.

Attentive or astute listeners will understand Bloom's argument as expressing the position of one of the epigonal schools said to employ a Straussian approach. Indeed, the theologico-

political question is something of a trope; in any case it is more fundamental for Bloom than Spinoza's text.

Gadamer, who spoke next, indirectly and gently, and then explicitly, disagreed with Bloom. He also drew attention to the drama of the Republic but added that Socrates controlled its development. Moreover, he mentioned its comedic dimension, which usually is overlooked, regarding the family. We normally do not see the joke about family dynasties in fifth century Athens -- from Pericles to Alcibiades, for example -- but most of us see the humour in the "miscalculation" by the family committee that leads to the generation of bad kids by the guardians. After all, you have to be pretty thick, or a social worker, not to see the comic side of bodily eros.

Gadamer then took issue with Bloom's characterization of the "poets" on two grounds. First, if there was a conflict between the philosopher and the poet, they must already have a common ground on the basis of which they disagreed. Gadamer was silent regarding the obvious question (as was Bloom): what was that common ground? Was it nous or poetry?

Second, Gadamer said, the later poets also criticized Homer and Homer's gods. If Bloom were correct regarding "the" poets, rather than considering the greater insight of later poets as compared to Homer, Gadamer's unasked but implicit question was: how is this possible? That is, if poets could criticize poets, their criticism or the insight that emerged from it could not itself be poetry. Perhaps, once again, it was akin to the noetic spiritual movement that ended in philosophy? Bloom's answer, delivered during the general conversation, to which I shall return, was to refer again as he did in his main presentation to "Socratic atheism." For Bloom, it would

seem that the fundamental distinction was between "poets" who "believed" in the gods and "philosophers" such as Socrates who did not.

And finally, Gadamer said, in his own name, real piety is philosophy, not the soothsaying of Euthyphro or the ritual performance of Cephalus, just as real heroism is found not in Achilles but in Socrates' position at the end of the Apology or in the obligation of the philosopher to return to the cave.

Voegelin's talk is available in volume 33 of the Collected Works so I will mention only a couple of things. First, Voegelin called this discussion a "debate," not a more gentlemanly conversation. Second, he argued that the historical context, namely the fratricidal wars of the poleis and the consequent creation of refugees and strangers that later provided recruits for Alexander, but at the time made the need for, or at least the desirability of, an alliance against Persia particularly acute, indicated that Plato's reflections were concerned with imperial matters as well as those of the polis. That is, historical context matters.

Voegelin also discussed the parallels or equivalencies between Plato's epekeina, the Amon hymns, and the mystical symbolization of the divine behind, or beyond the "named" gods and remarked in passing that, starting in the Gorgias, the order of eros, which engenders cosmos rather than chaos, becomes central to Platonic philosophy.

Regarding the conversation among all the participants, it is worth noting that Gadamer agreed with Voegelin regarding "the divine" as being more important that "the gods" and noted that, even in Homer, the humans did not address the gods by name when, for instance, they made sacrifices. Homer named them, but that is another matter. Gadamer also rejected Bloom's use of

the term "believer" as being un-Greek. Often the verb nomizo, which appears several times in the Euthyphro and Apology, is translated as "believe in." I think a better translation would be "worship" or even "worship [the ancestral gods] in the ancestral ways." Moreover, this is how Strauss translated the term. Finally, I would mention that Bloom said not a word on Voegelin's and Gadamer's discussion of the beyond, though he claimed to maintain a "radical difference" with both of them.

On Voegelin's other contributions, in general conversation on the question of reading and on his specific talk on the structures of consciousness -- both of which are available in volume 33, I would note just a couple of things.

Prior to watching the DVD I remembered only the shadows cast by Voegelin's typical and characteristic gestures on the green blackboard behind him. They looked like puppets. Given that I understood very little of what he was talking about at the time, this was a highly symbolic experience: I was definitely in the cave.

A second remark: because this is the 200th anniversary of Darwin's birth I would point to Voegelin's remark that "as Kant has explained [in the Critique of Judgement], there is no such thing as a theory of evolution because the world-immanent processes presuppose always that if one species indeed should develop from one species into another species, that there must be something in species number one which, under certain circumstances, can develop into species number two; and where does that peculiarity of number one come from? and so on. And we get back into the regress into a beginning that is ultimately a divine beginning." Voegelin first made this point in his two race books of 1933 and was rebuked in 1936 by an administrative superior at the Vienna Volkshochschule for criticizing Darwin's so-called theory. Some things don't change.

A third remark: unfortunately the text is not reproduced in volume 32, but it concerns the "enlarged area of problems" that Voegelin was then concerned with. Order and History began with Voegelin's analysis of the symbolism of the imperial civilizations of the ancient Near East. Since the 1950s and especially since the redating of materials by radio carbon techniques after 1970, the historical beginning is much earlier than Voegelin thought when he began volume one of Order and History. Pre-imperial civilizations in Malta, Ireland, China, and Persia now attracted his attention. Indeed, he said, the even earlier neolithic and paleolithic symbolizations had to be considered as well. And they expressed experiences that were later found in the more adequate and "differentiated" language of philosophy.

Let me close by saying that, for me personally, this conference was the highlight of my otherwise rather dreary time at York. I would be surprised if that place had seen anything like it since then -- but I may be corrected by those who know more of the intellectual history of York.