

Eric Voegelin: Master Teacher

Copyright 2004 Barry Cooper

Although I am the chairman of this panel and so strictly neutral on all things, and although I was never one of Voegelin's pupils, I would like to begin by reading a few remarks by others who knew Voegelin as a teacher.

Asked whether he got along fairly well with female students, Robert Heilman answered: "I think so, I think so, yes. He was a very courtly man. To which they would respond favourably, even though they knew there was no prospective seducer there."

To the same question, Klaus Vondung replied: "Well, he treated them as students with respect to their intellectual performance. In this respect, he didn't make any difference between all the students. And, you probably know that two of his most brilliant students - the Herwig sisters, Dagmar and Hedda Herwig - they really were, and still are, brilliant minds. So, with respect to the intellectual performance, I think he didn't make any difference. On the other hand, with respect to personal attitudes, well he certainly was more conservative in his attitude. Because he thought that, if one wants to be a real scholar, one has to devote all of one's energy to scholarship. And then, finally, there is also private life; but if there is a conflict, always scholarship comes first. That was a rather strict attitude."

I would be interested to hear what members of the panel might say about Voegelin's treatment of his female students. However: let us hear from them.

Ernest Walters was an undergraduate student of Voegelin and a grad student with Strauss. This is what he said: "Voegelin was the first scholar I ever knew. He really was. I had some good teachers in physics (also had some rotten ones), but nothing like Voegelin. And the business of analyzing a text - you know, I can remember, we would read just two or three sentences in St. Augustine, and Voegelin would just go on and on and on about it. And everything he said was right! I couldn't believe he could get that much out of a text. And then the same thing occurred with Strauss."

Clause Brörsch, one of Voegelin's German students, said, "he was very ironical. Really a sense of humour. And he used lots allusions - to poets, and such; it was an ironic style, an ironic...wittiness, very much wittiness, spirit. And he looked in my eyes, into my eyes like the young Grimm, Gustav Grimm - so it was a typical Vienna style, you know what I mean.

Cooper: Who is Grimm?

Brörsch: Gustav Grimm is one of the famous, famous German actors in the '20s, at the end of the '20s, and after the war. He was a very famous; he was famous through all the world, his Mephisto. And his lectures were not like a typical German professor. The German professor gives a lecture, okay. The End. Voegelin made a break. He smoked a cigar. *And*, it was possible to ask him questions! And he answered. He really answered. He was quite different; he was a little bit distanced, ironic. But also, he was very polite, very polite.

You must understand Voegelin was not born a pedagogue. If a student, girl or boy, asked a question, really a question...he had patience. If the question was an intelligent question, and not only a rhetorical question, he was very patient. For example: a friend of mine, he was a fan

of Fichte, a *fan* of *Fichte*. And you know, Fichte was one of the "enemy." And it was a dialogue; he asked Voegelin and Voegelin answered, he asked Voegelin back, Voegelin answered. He was really patient, and he was *friendly* to him. But if any student asked something stupid, really stupid, without ground, with only a rhetorical sense, you know...he was very very rude. He didn't say, "well, this is an interesting question..." but something else◆