READING, NOT DECONSTRUCTING VOEGELIN AFTER ALL.

In an article I wrote in 1981, I made a first attempt to describe Eric Voegelin's work-method, his *Arbeitsmethode*. At the time I focused on the early work and pointed out that a complex methodology was already being employed, which had its origins in the German tradition of *Geisteswissenschaft* but which also was something very personal, reflecting Voegelin's search for meaning in the cultural manifestation of society. I would like to leave the discussion of the broader intellectual context to my friend J�rgen Gebhardt and would like to concentrate instead on something that is very important to me, primarily a scholar of literature, the question: how should we read Voegelin? For the purpose of answering this question I will not only look at certain key texts, especially of Voegelin's later years, but also discuss excerpts of conversation he and I had during the 1970s and early 1980s.

I have noticed, both in contacts with younger scholars interested in Voegelin and his work and in a number of the ongoing e-mail discussions in the Eric-Voegelin-Forum, that there is a strong temptation to ask questions such as "what did Voegelin think" about this or that phenomenon, or "what would Voegelin say" about such and such an event, trend, or political development. I admit that the temptation is there for all of us who have had direct or indirect contact with the man, but, having had to fight it in myself especially during the years following the end of the Cold War, I have come to the conclusion that, if I did know what Voegelin would answer to all my questions, I could set up my own web-site and become a Voegelin-guru and founder of a new kind of think-tank/cult combination, perhaps under the name of "New Ecumenic Science" or "Pneumotherapy in Search of Order." The fact is that any questions allowing answers in the spirit of Voegelin would be those relating to common sense issues, because those are the issues touching most of us most of the time. In "What is Political Reality?" Voegelin noted the common

sense dimension of the political, and he would have said similar things for aspects of personal and social reality. He taught us to see that only certain relatively few aspects of reality call for philosophical questioning, whereas most of reality requires other responses, involving artistic, scientific, or religious imagination.

How should we read Voegelin? was my initial question. To this question another question needs to be added, though, if we want to give a meaningful answer: why should we read Voegelin? I have already indicated that it is probably a bad idea to read Voegelin for information, or even advice and counseling in personal and political matters. Voegelin should be read only if and when the reader is willing to engage in serious thought about the range of problems Voegelin addresses in his writings, a range that in this case is exceedingly broad, but by no means a helter-skelter collection of polyhistorical tidbits to be consumed by those too lazy to think for themselves. Assuming agreement on this point, the why-question is answered relatively easily. Since Voegelin's writings cover a broad spectrum of scholarly/scientific disciplines, the primary reasons for reading are to be sought in these disciplines themselves. Especially Voegelin's work prior to the *Political Religions* will be read with regard to specific cognitive interests in sociology, political science, i.e., German *Staatslehre*, constitutional law, and of course race-theory. Then there are books like *On the Form of the American Mind* and the early essay on the German dramatic writer Frank Wedekind, whose two plays *Erdgeist* and *Die B�chse der Pandora* form the basis of the libretto of Alban Berg's opera *Lulu*. All of these writings require a knowledgeable reader who is familiar with the discourse of German *Geisteswissenschaften* and their offshoot during the 1920s and 30s "philosophical anthropology," as it was represented by Max Scheler and Helmut Plessner. Such a reader, who can be expected to know why he is reading these writings of Voegelin's, can also be expected to know how to read them, preferably in their original German. He will find texts that are often difficult to read, written in a language in search of an almost unattainable precision in dealing with its subject matter, a language that struggles with fundamental problems and is uncompromising in its determination to tackle these problems. While there are moments of clarity and simplicity, even stylistic elegance, the main body of Voegelin's earlier work is tough going. But to say this is to make hermeneutic excuses, as it were, and quite a few of Voegelin's contemporary critics did precisely that: they charged him with being hard to understand, fuzzy, too esoteric to boot. In other words, Voegelin had

refused to write the jargon of the social sciences, as it was used in Germany at the time. The reason for this refusal is intimately connected with the younger Voegelin's primary intellectual concern with what I will call the symbolic nature of reality. One image stands out as representative for Voegelin's way of understanding reality, a question that had puzzled the physics teacher of the high school student and which is described in the *Autobiographical Memoir*: What happens when one saws through a piece of wood? By separating atomic structures we get a glimpse of the problem of the stratification of reality. The image of the cut through a piece of reality and the question of stratification dominates the theoretical sections of the America-book and culminates in these sentences: "We cannot cut being apart in such a way that all the symbols are piled up on one side while the other contains only existence. All being is symbolic - which is to say that it is imbued with the tension of a unity that our clumsy [kantig] words can express only as duality of symbol and existence. To use language that comes as close as possible to this tension would require us to invent the category of singularity-in-duality. Such a formulation is not rationally intelligible; understanding, in fact, can come only from patient and careful examination [Anschauung] of all the facts in depth and in detail." (Voegelin, I, 24). Symbol and existence "transcend" into one another, consequently "*existence* is merely an expression for the transcendent nature of symbols, and to that extent is just as unreal, just as much grounded outside itself." (Voegelin, I, 23 f.) If we substitute the language of signifier and signified for Voegelin's symbol and existence, we are able to see that Voegelin, by not staying on the level of this linguistic distinction, shows the imaginary cuts through reality to be structures that are only perceived as real, as long as we do not understand what I would have to call paradoxically the "immanent transcendence of all structures of reality." Our sign systems can cut through reality so as to **rearrange** its structures, but they cannot cut reality so as to permanently **separate** its structures. The reason for this is of course that they themselves are part of reality, as Voegelin never tired of affirming. I see in all of Voegelin's writing, right down to the meditations of volume V of *Order and History*, an absolute faith in the coherence of the structures which was expressed early on in the statement that summarized the earlier reflections as follows: " Being is neither one nor two; as a whole it has no Archimedean point outside itself. Nor is it a closed rational system on the inside, for its transcendence into existence is an openness that essentially renders any closure into a system impossible. Thus being is never an assured asset, an absolutely certain possession, but always a self-transcendent movement." (Voegelin, I, 24) I would like to

argue that these passages constitute Voegelin's formative experience, and what is more, they also constitute the closest approximation to what Voegelin understands by the term experience, that is, something very closely related to William James' idea of "pure experience"

I am going to contrast these thoughts on the mutual transcendence between symbol and existence with a typical statement of the other Voegelin, the political philosopher who has found a symbol of political existence in his attempt to understand political reality, the idea of the "cosmion," the "little world of order, in analogy to the cosmos," as he puts it in the introduction to the *History of Political Ideas*. This Voegelin sides with the German idealist Schelling when he writes: "Above all: the political idea is only to a limited extent descriptive of any reality; its primary function is not a cognitive, but a formative one. The political idea is not an instrument of description of a political unit, but an instrument of its creation. Or, as Schelling has put it in his *Philosophy of Mythology*, it is not the nation who produces a myth, but the myth which produces a nation. The linguistic symbols coalesce in a system of political ideas by calling a ruler and a people by name, call it into existence. The evocative power of language, the primitive magic relation between a name and the object it denotes makes it possible to transform an anonymous field of human forces into an ordered unit by an act of evocation of such units." (Voegelin, XIX, 227)

Here, to the signifier, language, is attributed the magic power of creating political reality in the image of the cosmos. And what is the cosmos other than that Being of mutually transcendent structures, described in the passages I cited above! What is different in this instance is the cut, the cut through the cosmos, through which the emphasis is shifted toward the symbol, while existence emerges as that which is "an anonymous field of human forces" waiting for an "evocation" to become a little cosmic analogon. Order has to be created, and it becomes order only through the power of the symbol. But how else does the symbol receive its evocative power, if not through existence seeking a way out of "anonymous" disorder, thus implying an inherent self-transcendent movement? I submit that in these two passages we have a key to Voegelin's interpretation of reality.

Concerning the passages from the *Form of the American Spirit*, one could of course argue that they represent a stage in Voegelin's intellectual development that is still so strongly influenced by the theoretical and philosophical issues of Neo-Kantianism and the Dilthey - Misch school of

Geisteswissenschaft that it would be ill-advised to connect these early attempts at formulating a philosophical hermeneutics - for that is what we are dealing with - to Voegelin's mature thought, especially his late formulations regarding the "complex consciousness - reality - language." But I would at least make a structural connection between the open system symbol - existence, structurally still insuffiently described as "singularity-in-duality," and the complex that emerges in Volume V of *Order and History*. "Words and their meanings [i.e., signifiers and signified] are just as much part of the reality to which they refer as the being things are partners in the comprehending reality," it says there. (Voegelin, XVIII, 31) The "comprehending reality" is not yet explicitly present in the early work, but it is implicitly the hermeneutic guide in the search for an understanding of the structures of reality. That this has been a primary theme in all of Voegelin's thought becomes evident when we look at one of the central texts of his earlier work, *The History of the Race Idea*. Operating with the distinction between *Denkbilder*, thought images, and *Urbilder*, primal images, Voegelin attempts to design a hermeneutic that would serve as a guide for the perplexed. To quote a key passage here: "Let us take a look at the horizons the theory of primal images and thought images opens up for us. The constructions of thought images, we have noted, cannot be simply verified; they are not simply true or false but are attested to by the primal way of seeing to which they are integrated. The primal ways of seeing and the primal images they make visible also cannot be weighed against each other as to their true content - they are all true, for they see what is real: the transitoriness of the sensory world, the experiences of death and of grace, these are all just as much experiences of something real as the experience of creative productivity and the certainty of living out a personal law in earthly life." (Voegelin III, 16) I realize that the theory of thought images and primal images would need to be put into its intellectual context, but I cannot do this here. Suffice it to say that Voegelin was grappling with the question that would occupy him throughout his life: what are the structures that account for continuity and discontinuity, constancy and change, individuality and variety? The question had arisen in the context of the reductionist biologism of the contemporary race theories, but it transcended their occasional problematic. Going back to Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, Voegelin shows that the hermeneutic circle applies to the phenomenon of life and its structures, "that the parts of the phenomenon cannot 'explain' each other - that is, the individual form cannot be 'explained' by the species, and the species cannot be 'explained' by the evolution of form; morphologically and historically, life as a whole is a primary phenomenon."

(Voegelin, III, 19) Nearly fifty years later this thought recurs in the context of the "complex of consciousness-reality-language" in � 3 of *In Search of Order*, where the question of the "natural" and "conventional" theories of language is discussed. Voegelin does not take sides on this issue because "both groups are right in their motivations, as well as in their attempts to explore the conditions incidental to the origin of language and its meaning; and yet both are wrong inasmuch as they disregard the fact that the epiphany of structures in reality - be they atoms, molecules, genes, biological species, races, human consciousness, or language - is a mystery inaccessible to explanation." (Voegelin XVIII, 31)

The hermeneutic of the "complex" should have become clear by now. Voegelin's absolute rejection of any form of reductionism, be it any of the ideological forms of the past three centuries, or the subtler metaphysical, theological, and ontological forms that ultimately try to conceptualize the structures of reality, "auf den Begriff bringen," as this is called in good Hegelian German. Any reader of Voegelin must approach his own work from this angle, or he will get bogged down in precisely the dogmatism its author so relentlessly attacked that some readers are moved to ask whether there isn't any final doctrine in Voegelin's work. The truth of the philosopher is not that of the prophet, or the poet, or the myth-maker. Thus, on the occasion of discussing history as "eternal being realizing itself in time" in "What is History?" Voegelin introduces the notion of "units of meaning" in order to make sure that the reader does not ascribe meaning to the individual parts of this unit. In fact, by hyphenating the parts of this unit he draws attention to their having meaning only as a whole. "There is no entity called 'being' that once would exist in the medium of eternity and, after its realization, in the medium of time, nor is there an 'eternal being' that suddenly would appear as an object in time; nor a 'temporal being' that would be transfigured by the realization and acquire the attribute of eternity; nor are there media of time and eternity with objects flitting from the one to the other." (Voegelin, XXVIII, 50) The device of the "negative proposition" becomes eminently important, especially in Voegelin's late thought, as a guard against sophistic and gnostic literalizations that would destroy the balance of meaning. While Voegelin's attention to language has of course been widely discussed and compared to, among others, Heidegger's approach to language, an extensive analysis has yet to be given. I would go as far as to suggest that there is a deconstructionist element in Voegelin's mature philosophical thought, even though Voegelin had no use for

Derrida's assault on the word and his preference of the written sign. On the other hand, I remember Voegelin's essentially positive reaction to Derrida's "La pharmacie de Platon," which we discussed in the late seventies and which is perhaps Derrida's most penetrating analysis of the question of what he calls "logocentrism" and writing � propos an interpretation of Plato's *Phaedrus*. Voegelin's own logocentrism, blatant logocentrism by deconstructionist standards, is very much aware of itself, though, and devices such as the "negative propositions" are not just mitigating afterthoughts but originate in a profound philosophical skepticism in matters of language.

The other side of the coin, and with this I return to my earlier statement about the two Voegelins, is the political theorist's empirically based understanding of the magic power of the word. Here, Voegelin's mentor Karl Kraus plays a decisive role. The word, speech, evokes reality. But what kind of reality is it that is evoked by the word? The other Voegelin turns out to be closely related to the first, except that he is the ultimate dialectician. Look at the following passage from the introduction to the *History of Political Ideas*: "As the primary function of language symbols involved in political ideas is to constitute reality, we are faced by a peculiar problem arising from the basic possibility to use the evocative terms in a quasi-desriptive function. In order to understand this problem it must be always kept in mind that language permits one to evolve elaborate systems of though back of terms that empirically denote nothing. The magic power of language is so strong that the mention of a term is always accompanied by a presumption that in using the term we are referring to an objective reality. Such quasi-descriptive use of language gains in strength when it appears in intimate connection with the evocative functions proper, as is the case with political ideas....There is, generally, no clear division between evocative and descriptive language in political thought, and the proper function and meaning of a political idea can, as a rule, be determined only by inquiring into its place in a complicated process involving the following phases: the primary purpose of the political idea is to evoke a political unit, the cosmion of order, into existence; one this purpose is achieved, the cosmion is a real social and political force in history; and the a series of descriptive processes sets in, trying to describe the magic unit as something not magically but empirically real. The attempt is inevitably bound to fail, but it is renewed nevertheless persistently and has produced an overwhelming wealth of political theories that all try to describe the magic unit in terms of something that may be

considered objectively real. Every realm of being and every human activity have been drawn upon to formulate an empirical analogy for the imaginative reality of the cosmion." (Voegelin XIX, 228 f) I have to cut the quote short here and summarize the rest. The "in terms of which" the magic unit is described cover the entire spectrum what we normally call reality, and yet, what remains in the end are, for the most part nothing but "magic adventures" themselves. Rarely is a thinker able to "break the spell and arrive, if not a completely adequate, at least at a skeptical treatment of the problem." A case in point is Max Weber with his theory of the types of action.

Voegelin, the political theorist, intended to follow Max Weber and to break the spell by writing a history of the evocative word, conventially called a history of political ideas. But since Voegelin, the philosopher, was always watching over the political theorist, the "skeptical treatment of the problem" proved to be a dead end. The hermeneutics of evocation succeeded in uncovering the historical forces of the West from its beginnings in Egypt and Mesopotamia to the great ideological battles of the past three hundred years, but it left unanswered the question that intrigued the philosopher: Do the evocations form a meaningful pattern, are these the right cuts made through reality in its historical dimension? Voegelin's readings of the texts that make up the *History of Politcal Ideas* are all "strong" readings. The power of the written word is demonstrated through the method of interpretation that stipulates that "a thinker's language takes precedence over the interpreter's. A change of language is permitted only if the interpreter can show the thinker's analysis to have a defect that requires the new language for its emendation," as Voegelin will state years later in "The Beginning and the Beyond." (Voegelin, XXVIII, 196) Some readers may remember that the case of Voltaire is one that clearly requires a new language, because his own language has become so theoretically deficient in Voegelin's understanding that it can no longer be read on its own terms. The Voegelin who chooses his strong authors from Saint Augustine to Joachim, from Dante to Nietzsche asserts the presence of the written word and likens it to that of the spoken word. The evocative force of the written word is not only acknowledged, it becomes the constituent of history. Yet somehow the "grand historical narrative," as Peter von Sivers has called it, refuses to reach its dramatic climax, history drowns in the bloody orgies of the hate waves and totalitarian movements that were the signature of the twentieth century. Voegelin, the political theorist and master sleuth of political sentiments and evocations creates an evocation of his own through the "discovery" of gnosticism

as a movement that survives its ancient origins, enters a stage of latency, and returns with full force and in different shape as the formative power of modernity. It is no accident that this Voegelin became much more widely known than the first and perhaps lasting Voegelin, for his method of interpretation resembles far more that of his gnostic contemporaries and their recent forerunners than the gentle readers of his early and late work would like to admit to themselves. We do indeed have to learn to read the two Voegelins in somewhat the same manner in which the young author of the America book admonishes his readers to look at Being: not as one, not as two, but as "singularity-in-duality."

When I ask the question how we should read Voegelin, we ought to keep in mind that we, too, as readers are called upon to ask ourselves what we are reading Voegelin for. Definitely not to get a quick opinion on a matter of our interest. Voegelin's work requires systematic reading, just as that of any other major thinker. I have a record of a conversation with him on precisely this issue, during which we discussed his way of writing. He was working on the meditation "Wisdom and the Magic of the Extreme" at the time, 1979, and he talked about writing a piece like this. There was no outline that he followed, instead, the essay developed as the result of an ongoing thought process. "Transitions are good places to check whether what one has done so far can stand," he remarked and added: "It does not matter what I happen to be thinking about this or that, but what emerges as the process of thought (*Gedankengang*)." In order to follow this process of thought, the reader must be willing to engage in it himself. The difference between reading the *History of Political Ideas* or *The New Science of Politics* and major parts of *Order and History*, especially Volume V, *Anamnesis*, or the later essays, such as "Equivalences of Experience," "Wisdom and the Magic of the Extreme" and "The Beginning and the Beyond," to name only a few, requires an interpretive response from the reader. I have written extensively on the former two texts and have always found myself redrawing their lines of construction, engaging in a dialogue with the numerous theses advanced in these works, and testing them against more recent scholarship, something that Voegelin definitely saw as the mark of scientific," i.e. "wissenschaftliche" work method. Relatively little interpretation is involved in this process; what counts is that the material supports the theoretical conclusions. In the case of Voegelin, as in that of other major scholars, sometimes it does, and sometimes it doesn't, or at least, it allows for alternative readings.

Voegelin's *philosophical* writings cannot be approached in this manner. They demand of the reader a willingness to immerse himself completely in the thought process and then to begin to make that process part of his own reflections. This is a long and potentially lifelong process in which there are no shortcuts. Increasingly, Voegelin himself became aware of the role of the imagination in this process, the result of the tension between reality as given, as a *datum*, and reality as a non-*datum*, or, as he called it on occasion, "non-existent reality." Voegelin dealt extensively with the imaginative aspect of finding the "expressive symbols" for the metaleptic experiences of non-existent reality in � 11 of Volume V of *Order and History* where he writes of reality as both "internally imaginative" and, with regard to the symbols being "true," as "internally cognitive." The reader, therefore, has to read imaginatively while not losing sight of the cognitive aspects of the philosophical, revelatory, or mythical text. At the same time the reader, and by that I mean one form of metalelptic participation in the "comprehending reality," must guard against perverting the "creative" metaleptic process into "an autonomously creative power" of the kind we find in Romanticism, or a good deal of deconstructionist criticism -- not all of it, by any means -, authoritatively symbolized in Goethe's *Faust*. The formula of what I called in Voegelin's presence the "controlled imagination" is stated very clearly and simply in the following sentences: "Every thinker who is engaged in the quest for truth resists a received symbolism he considers insufficient to express truly the reality of his responsive experience. In order to aim at a truer truth he has to out-imagine the symbols hitherto imagined; and in the assertion of his imaginative power he can forget that he is out-imagining symbols of truth, not the process of reality in which he moves as a partner." (Voegelin, XVIII, 53 f.)

With this we have reached the core of Voegelin's late philosophy and the question of how Voegelin should be read. I believe that a creative reading of Voegelin's work is precisely what the author intended with his writing. That such a reading may share certain elements with literary criticism, occasionally even a Derrida, or a Harold Bloom, a Bakhtin, certainly a Robert Heilman, is something that Voegelin himself very strongly believed. In reading Plato, he told me once, one can show how the myths advance the prior discursive thoughts. But one can also reverse this and say that literary criticism provides "as it were, the first part of this two-part act." The role of the imagination is ultimately that of filling in the blanks in the whole of reality. Descartes attempted to undo this and to reach certainty through eliminating the imagination.

Myth completes the rational dialogue, and the Platonic anamnesis is thus not simply remembrance or recollection, but the reason why we are able to speak imaginatively about the "non-given" in reality. These thoughts of Voegelin's remind me of one of Kafka's deeper aphorisms, in which he say that language can only hint at whatever is outside the sensible world, that it can never even approximate metaphorically that non-sensible reality, because, in analogy to the sensible world it only deals with property and the relations of proprietorship. Voegelin would probably not have gone quite this far, but he would have conceded that this is one of the problems of language. Instead, Voegelin did say at the end of his life that the language in which something is said, the word changes, because it is the "incarnation of non-existent reality." Language is reflective of the process, something that in my opinion puts Voegelin much closer to the more advanced linguistic theories than is commonly ackowledged. Continuity of thinking and writing for Voegelin is linked to the process, i.e., the "complex consciousness - reality - language." He therefore considered the apocalyptic symbolism of the Second Coming, and with it apocalyptic symbolism as such a denial of the complex and saw in Plato's *mache athanatos* the more adequate symbol. But even the Platonic myths are not exempted from the process, and Voegelin was very much aware that such symbolism as the pre- or post-existence of the soul are symbols with which the imagination responds to the problem of the divine persence in the human being. It is doubtful that Plato had any experience of this, he added with an ironic smile. Shortly before his death, Voegelin seriously entertained the idea that Plato was a Skeptic, a theory advanced by, among others, A.H. Armstrong. He asked, this time very seriously: "Did Plato know that what he believed was not true?" This question touches on problems with which I cannot deal here, but which will have to be considered if Voegelin's philosophical thought is to be judged on the level it deserves to be judged on. The direction of Voegelin's late work seems to be clear to me, it increasingly became the direction of negative theology.

I leave the answer to careful readers of Voegelin's work. What I attempted to do in this paper was to give a rather broad general idea of how the reader might want to approach a reader's work. Because Voegelin was foremost that, a reader, a strong believer in the written word and its constitutive function in reality. But he would even go beyond that, for instance when he became seriously interested in prehistory and the research done by scholars such as Marie K�nig in Germany, in the sixties and seventies. The evocative power of the word and the symbol is

grounded in its descriptive and its imaginative power. This leads to a mystical understanding of language going back to Dionysius Areopagita's millennial idea of language as the "figuration of the invisible" that we see in Goethe's "farbigem Abglanz" and in Rilke's word about poets as the "bees of the invisible." But now we move into a territory that borders on the territory where one finds Heidegger's philosophy of language, some of Wittgenstein's thoughts, and Derrida's *Comment ne parler* of 1987. Out-imagining the symbols becomes the equivalent for "transcending"; just as one cannot out-imagine reality, one cannot transcend it. But with the evocative power of the word and the symbol, grounded in its descriptive and its imaginative power, poets, prophets, philosophers have raised the stakes, have, in fact, enhanced reality. Nor are they the only ones to be doing so. And with that we are of course in a whole new area of problems.