Artistic Symbols and Life in the *Metaxy*

In memoriam Robert B. Heilman, 1906-2004

Eric Voegelin reminds us frequently in his works that one the the principal duties of thinking and living is to keep in mind the encompassing context of the Whole of reality within which thinking and living occur. He knows how easy it is in our culture to forget the *cosmos*, as we strive to make sense of at least some part of the world or of ourselves as we focus on our specialized interests and ambitions. The forgetting of the *cosmos*, of the completeness of reality with its divine mystery, is a constant temptation in modern existence. This is the forgetting alluded to by G�rard de Nerval in 1854 in his poem "Golden Lines," where he admonishes "enlightened" thinkers caught up in dreams of control over a mechanistically-interpreted world:

> Your liberty does what it wishes with the powers it controls,
> but when you gather to plan, the universe is not there.1 [1]

Voegelin is always urging us to recollect the "there" of the fullness of reality within which we interpret and decide, within which societies try to organize themselves for action, within which history unfolds. His famous diagram in aid of a proper study of human affairs at the end of his essay "Reason: The Classic Experience" reminds us that the examinable hierarchy of being appears within the "limiting poles" of Apeiron and Nous, of impenetrable founding depth and creatively forming divine intelligence, which together for our consciousness constitute the circumambient divine mystery. And the same reminder sounds in the concluding paragraphs of

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1 [1] G�rard de Nerval, "Golden Lines," tr. Robert Bly, in Bly, ed., *News of the Universe: Poems of Twofold Consciousness* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1980), 38.

his masterwork *The Ecumenic Age*, where Voegelin gently points out that, in the final analysis, "[t]hings do not happen in the astrophysical universe," but rather "the universe, together with all things founded in it, happens in God."2 [2]

In the post-cosmological existence that is ours to live, we can only orient ourselves in conscious recollection of the Whole of reality if we apprehend in some way the transcendent divine mystery and our involvement in it. Awareness of the Whole of reality entails remembering that we exist in between immanence and transcendence, that human lives are lived in what Voegelin calls the *metaxy*. And it is only through the constant remembrance of our life in the *metaxy* that can we develop those "virtues of openness toward the ground of being," as Voegelin calls them, the virtues of faith and hope and love, that allow our rational and spiritual capacities to unfold in a normative way.3 [3] If reason ignores or resists the meaningfulness of its own pull toward the transcendent divine ground, it will not reason well about the human situation in reality, about human happiness, about values and their pursuit, about suffering and evil. If our loving remains distracted or divorced from its natural relationship to the unrestricted act of love that is the origin of all loving, then both the scope and the ordering of our concerns and intentions will be distorted. If we are to be truly ourselves, truly human, then our

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2 [2] Eric Voegelin, "Reason: The Classic Experience," in Voegelin, *Published Essays, 1966-1985*, vol. 12 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, ed. Ellis Sandoz (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 289-90; *Order and History, Volume IV: The Ecumenic Age*, vol. 17 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, ed. Michael Franz (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 408.

3 [3] Eric Voegelin, "Equivalences of Experience and Symbolization in History," in *Published Essays, 1966-1985*, 119.

imaginations must be sensitive to, and our understandings must be informed by, some significant apprehension of the meaning of life in the *metaxy*.

In our historical period of late modernity or postmodernity, it has become quite easy--especially for those with advanced educational degrees--to suffer an eclipse of the meaning of life in the *metaxy*, to succumb to what Voegelin calls the "vulgarian belief" that we are "no longer living in the cosmos but in a ‘physical universe'."4 [4] Easy, in other words, to forget or ignore the circumambient divine mystery. The principal underlying reason for this is that differentiating understanding has conceptually separated to a high degree each of the four partners in the primordial community of being: God, world, individual, and society. And the conceptual differentiation of the divine partner into the invisible "no-thing" of transcendence--especially where this differentiation has been most radical, in the West--has disposed many an imagination to accept the grossly obvious realities of nature, society, and self as making up the totality of being. To be sure, the basic *experience* of existence is always that of a completeness of reality, of a *cosmos* with its divine ground. But in the wake of the differentiations of consciousness, that experience can only be brought to properly integrated intelligibility if the culturally available symbolizations both of transcendence and of life in the *metaxy*--the basic mythic and revelatory symbols of differentiated consciousness--are both transparent for their genuine meaning and existentially convincing. Unfortunately, for reasons that occupied Voegelin's attention throughout his career, we live in an era when these symbols have tended to become opaque and unpersuasive to a striking degree, and when alternate symbolizations of the human situation which exclude transcendence and eclipse the reality of existence in the *metaxy*

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4 [4] Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age*, 264.

have shaped much of intellectual, political, and cultural life. One of the persistent questions running through Voegelin's work is: How, in our time, might we recover, or are people managing to recover, a convincing sense of the Whole of reality and of the divine mystery that embraces existence and history?

Voegelin at times answers this by noting the growing fascination in Western modernity, both among scholars and the public at large, with ancient and comparative religion, with archaeology and prehistory, with exotic cultures and esoteric traditions, with mysticism and the study of archetypes. That is, when the major religious and philosophical symbolisms become unpalatable, are felt to be oppressively dogmatic, and so cease to effectively mediate for large numbers of people the truths of existence in the *metaxy*, some will embrace immanentist or materialist interpretations of existence, but many others will remain faithful to their basic experience of the cosmos and search for ways to articulate its divinely mysterious dimension. In his lectures on "The Drama of Humanity" at Emory University in 1967, Voegelin spoke to this tendency:

> If certain cultural concepts are destroyed, then you have to go about to recapture them somehow. That is one of the problems of the 20th century, that is the reason why so many people today, since we don't have a myth of our own in our civilization, will now go back into archaeology, into comparative religion, into comparative literature and similar subject matter because that is the place where they can recapture the substance which in our acculturated and now decultured civilization is getting lost. That is why people all of a sudden become Zen Buddhists. You have to become a Zen Buddhist because there is nothing comparable in Western civilization to which you can fall back, if a dogmatism has run out, as the Christian has in the Age of the Enlightenment.5 [5]

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5 [5] Eric Voegelin, "The Drama of Humanity," unpublished typescript of The Walter Turner Candler Lectures given at Emory University, April 17-20, 1967 (Eric Voegelin Papers, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University, Box 74, File 2), 5.

In my circle of friends, Buddhism is a fairly strong presence, and Voegelin has put his finger on one of the reasons.

Voegelin also repeatedly mentions how the works of creative writers, such as Val□ry, Proust, Mann, Musil, von Doderer, Joyce, and T. S. Eliot, evidence a search for and recovery of a sense of the larger order of being within which existence moves, and how important such authors were to his own existential and philosophical development. The literary arts, at their best, through the emotional immediacy and dynamic orientation of narrative, dramatic, and poetic symbols that evoke the complexities of the human struggle in the in-between of ignorance and wisdom, despair and faith, existential openness and existential closure, time-bound concern and timeless meaning, can help immeasurably in the remembrance of the completeness of being.

And, I would suggest, so may the rest of the arts. Although Voegelin only occasionally discusses art in general, the few comments he does make show that, in his view, a central purpose of art, literary or otherwise, is to evoke the *cosmos*, the unified Whole of reality, the fullness of being within which we think and live. In this, art at its best revivifies and inspires us by reminding us of the depths of meaning beneath the routine superficialities of our everyday living, of the horizon of mystery that embraces the astrophysical universe, and of the curious nature of our human existence in the in-between of world and divine beyond. This is the purpose and meaning of art I want to explore very briefly, bearing in mind the difficulties of metaxic remembrance in a time of militant immanentism and devitalized symbols of transcendence.

We may begin by noting that any significant artwork gives a strong impression of integrated completeness, presents us with a certain wholeness of content and form that is deeply satisfying. However specific and delimited its subject matter, its elements, or its perspective, it

provokes in us a sense of self-containment and totality, and thus reminds us of the unity of all things. This is why Voegelin describes the experience of significant art as being "closer to cosmological thinking than anything else": it recalls for us the primary experience of the cosmos in which all the dimensions of being are felt as present and interpenetrating. "All art," he stated in a 1965 discussion,

> if it is any good, is some sort of a myth in the sense that it becomes what I call a *cosmion*, a reflection of the unity of the cosmos as a whole. The odd thing about a work of art is that it is an intelligible unit even if it is only, in the most naturalistic sense, a segment of a reality that extends around it in all directions. . . . How to produce such units and make them convincing models of the unity of the world--that is the problem in art.6 [6]

This raises the question: How is this problem solved? What enables a work of art to successfully reflect, and thereby evoke a remembrance of, the *cosmos*?

First, the language of art consists of symbols, of images rich in multiple meanings and emotional power, that in their allusive density of reference can evoke all the overlapping ranges of concern, the ambiguities and conflicts, the complexities and paradoxes, the uncanny depths and the transcendent intimations, in the drama of human living. Art entails the refinement of the symbolic languages of various artistic media toward condensations of expression that are both richly overdetermined with meaning and open-ended in their symbolic allusiveness, so that they

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6 [6] Eric Voegelin, "In Search of the Ground," in Voegelin, *Published Essays, 1953-1965*, vol. 11 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, ed. Ellis Sandoz (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 240.

are "perpetually stimulating," as Val&#65533;ry says, making us want to return to the best artworks over and over.7 [7]

Next, the symbolic elements of an artwork are united in a pattern of internal relations whose rhythms, balance, proportions, tensions, similitudes or recurrences reflect and evoke the fundamental ordering of the cosmos. The concrete pattern of internal relations among the symbolic elements in an artwork, carefully chosen and arranged by the artist, creates a sense of harmony and rightness that, at its best, produces a sense of the inevitability of form, of the work's needing to exist.8 [8]

A good work of art, therefore, suggests both the completeness of meaning in, and the established order of, the *cosmos* that founds our creaturely participation.

Now, as a reflection and celebration of the unity of the cosmos as a whole, an artwork reminds us that reality consists of both perishable things and the timeless meaning that grounds them, of both immanence and transcendence. On the one hand, works of art honor and re-enchant the world perceived through the senses, the world of "the ten thousand things" in the Chinese phrase--nature in its variety and beauty, objects of daily use, colors and shapes and sounds, human beings and their languages, suffering and delight, emotions from the darkest to the most ecstatic, historical and personal events and the many different qualities of lived time--by

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7 [7] Paul Val&#65533;ry, "The Idea of Art," in *Aesthetics*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Pantheon Books, Bollingen Series XLV N&#65533; 13, 1964), 73.

8 [8] On the pattern of internal relations, the inevitability of form, and the symbolic meaning in a work of art, see Bernard Lonergan, "Art" (Chapter 9), in *Topics in Education*, vol. 10 of *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, eds. Robert M. Doran and Frederick E. Crowe (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 211-22.

revealing the particularities of concrete being in fresh, delightful, startling, perhaps even shocking, ways. On the other hand, they do this precisely by rendering each thing transparent for the mystery that it is and for the greater mystery that embraces it, intimating or suggesting the superabundant meaning that grounds things, the "divine aura" that things retain and that perpetually calls forth our wonder.9 [9] So art inspires us to love the things of the world, our perceptions of them, our freedom to perceive them and explore their meanings in ever-novel ways, and at the same time inspires us to love the timeless, invisible, eternal meaning that underlies and accompanies their showing-forth.

The structural element in any artwork that enables it to suggest the timeless divine meaning in the *cosmos* is the balanced patterning of its symbolic elements. In his poem-cycle *Four Quartets*, T. S. Eliot describes how it is the pattern, the form, of an artwork that allows the sequence of discrete words, the temporal flow of musical sounds, the visible and perishable object, to elicit a consciousness of transcendent meaning beyond all temporal movement and physical specificity:

> Words move, music moves
> Only in time . . .
> . . . Words, after speech, reach
> Into the silence. Only by the form, the pattern,
> Can words or music reach

9 [9] Eric Voegelin, *Order and History, Volume V: In Search of Order*, vol. 18 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, ed. Ellis Sandoz (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 93.

> The stillness, as a Chinese jar still
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> Moves perpetually in its stillness.
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> Not the stillness of the violin, while the note lasts,
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> Not that only, but the co-existence,
>
> Or say that the end precedes the beginning,
>
> And the end and the beginning were always there
>
> Before the beginning and after the end.
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> And all is always now.10 [10]

The perfected pattern of the artwork lifts consciousness up to an apprehension of the timeless meaning intersecting the world at every place and every time, sparking an intimation of our lives in the *metaxy*.

As it recalls us to our life in the *metaxy*, art inevitably quickens our awareness of being free creatures engaged in a process of self-making. Art is among other things an exploration of the possible uses of our freedom: it shakes us out of our settled habits and routines, and our concern with practicalities or systematic thought, in order to explore new ways of feeling and experiencing, fresh modes of perceiving, richer possibilities of living. Art reminds us of the fact that the free life of consciousness moves with a meaning beyond all causalities, all determinisms, as we engage in the dramatic artistry of shaping ourselves through choice and decision.11 [11]

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10 [10] T. S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton," ll. 137-49, in *Four Quartets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), 19.

11 [11] See Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, vol. 3 of *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, eds. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 208-209; *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 63-64; "Art," 215-17, 232.

All good art reminds us of this, but the best art also inspires us with direct evocations of the divine transcendence whose freedom is the foundation of our own. The greatest art is the art that opens us to explicit consideration of the divine mystery in which our openness originates.

When, in this way, art quickens our apprehension of our lives in the *metaxy* and of the divine mystery, it provokes in us that distinctive kind of spiritual restlessness described by Plato in the *Symposium*, where Diotima describes to Socrates the nature of love as a wonder-filled longing peculiar to spiritual existence, existence in between mortality and immortality, ignorance and wisdom, poverty and resource, yearning and fulfillment.12 [12] We are the spiritual creatures within whom the things that pass away and the divine plenitude meet and interpenetrate in the illumination of consciousness, and just like falling in love, the best works of art reveal this condition to us while inducing a mood that is simultaneously one of deep yearning and deep fulfillment. True works of art are in fact born in the love that mediates between world and divine mystery, and in truly appreciating them we are moved to re-enact that love, with its spiritual simultaneity of yearning and fufillment.

Occasionally an artwork will take this condition as its subject matter. For example, there is a well-known poem by the seventeenth century haiku master, Bashō, that captures the flavor of spiritual existence wonderfully:

Even in Kyoto--
hearing the cuckoo's cry--

12 [12] Plato, *Symposium*, 202b-207a.

I long for Kyoto.13 [13]

Here Bashō expresses, in one perfectly balanced image, the fundamental *eros* of life in the *metaxy*--the longing, triggered by beauty, for a fullness that is both infinitely beyond and superabundantly present. Just like Bashō's cuckoo cry, the best art renews our awareness of and love for the divine mystery that is at once a beyond of things and the very presence of things. We return to the unity of the cosmos itself, then, when we return to a Mozart aria or a symphony of Mahler, to Giotto's *Deposition* or a Chardin still-life, to Brancusi's *Bird in Space* or Michelangelo's *David*, or to any drama or story or poem that recalls for us the flavor of the infinite while it re-enchants the world.

All good art, as Voegelin noted, functions as some sort of myth, in reflecting and reminding us of the unity of the cosmos as a whole. With the collapse of the efficacy of the major religious myths in the post-Enlightenment West, artists have become, for many people, the most important evokers of mythic consciousness and creators of mythic symbols. Of course, art is not religion, and the poems of Blake or Wordsworth or Yeats or T. S. Eliot, the novels of Joyce and Mann, the compositions of Beethoven or Wagner or Stravinsky, the paintings of Friedrich or Turner or C�zanne or Rothko, however mythically powerful they might be, are no substitute for the public myths that securely orient a culture in relation to the ultimacies and mysteries of cosmos and history. As Jacques Barzun points out, art "does not foster a community of saints or establish a community of love."14 [14] Neither does it provide for the critical control

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13 [13] Robert Hass, ed. and trans., *The Essential Haiku: Versions of Bashō, Buson, & Issa* (Hopewell, NJ: The Ecco Press, 1994), 11.

14 [14] Jacques Barzun, *The Use and Abuse of Art: The A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts, 1973* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, Bollingen Series XXXV N� 22, 1975), 96.

of meaning made possible through philosophical exposition, doctrine and exegesis, ritual and liturgy, or mystical theology.

Still, though the epiphanies of art lack all these, significant art can perform the more basic task of reawakening, in the inhabitants of a disenchanted and disoriented culture, a culture dominated by immanentism, materialism, the flattening of psychological experience, pseudo-religion, and religious fundamentalism, that fundamental awareness of *cosmos* and divine mystery that underlies the major symbolisms of myth, philosophy, and revelation. And this makes it of major importance in our contemporary effort to "return from symbols which have lost their meaning to the experiences which constitute meaning," as we seek to recover the reality of existence in the *metaxy*.15 [15]

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15 [15] Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age*, 107.