Eric Voegelin: Early Unpublished Writings, Some Enduring Themes"

I.

Since Eric Voegelin's unpublished writings constitute neither a "secret doctrine", nor are they mere bits and pieces which fell from his writing desk, they should be discussed in relationship to his work as a whole. The focus of this work is stated in the motto to *Order and History* "'In the study of creature one should not exercise a vain and perishing curiosity, but ascend to what is immortal and everlasting'."[(1)] Thus Voegelin's theme is conversion: the turning of the soul away from all forms of self-love toward the order of charity. Since the soul is a symbol of concrete spiritual experience, Voegelin's contemplation of the soul takes place where he considers specific individuals. Most prominently, Saint Augustine; but Max Weber, Friedrich Nietzsche and Stefan George are the objects of such contemplation into the mid 1940's, a period which marks a particularly important time in Voegelin's work. I will return to the mid 1940's below. First I want to look at several published and unpublished texts, written between 1922 and 1944, with attention to Voegelin's treatment of the soul in his discussion of Weber, Nietzsche and Stefan George, before concluding with remarks on an unpublished manuscript on T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*.

II.

Voegelin's early unpublished writings can be grouped around two major texts: his dissertation, "Interaction and Spiritual Community" written in 1922 and "The Theory of Governance" written ten years later.[(2)] In the first, national cultures constitute the spiritual horizon. This is partly due to the subject matter. Voegelin investigates the "creative spirit" that brings forth the social aspect of phenomena. For example, sociology does not look at the essence of art, but it helps us to understand why a particular painting is a Dutch painting and not a French or German one. At the border of this theme we do encounter issues which later move to the center of his work. For example Voegelin discusses the relationship of spiritual experience and language, pointing out

that meaning can be lost if we do not keep the way open through language back to engendering experiences.[(3)] There are however deeper reasons for the orientation to national culture in 1922 than merely the limits imposed by the theme of his dissertation. These reasons can be seen in two essays on Max Weber which Voegelin wrote in 1925 and 1930,[(4)] to which I now turn.

As a result of the supposed dissolution of the medieval spiritual cosmos and the growth of inner-worldly rationality, the cultural world has been divided. On the one hand we have the space time continuum in which human actions are the objects of causal rational science, on the other we have the value dimension which exists at the irrational levels of national culture and individual personality. The great contemporary figure in German culture, Max Weber, attains to that place where meaning in the world is revealed to be the "object of play on the part of world-creating demonic powers".[(5)] From this "most lonely of places"[(6)] Weber returns to write the history of his own spirit as the history of occidental spirituality itself. In thus placing the stamp of his personality on the times he becomes their most powerful symbol.[(7)] To recapitulate: The stream of events which constitutes history can be explored by the causal laws of means-ends rationality. Human actions which enter the stream originate in irrational levels of being. There is a tension between the soul's freedom to create and the necessary conditions under which value decisions must be implemented in the world. And the instance which governs the soul's intervention into the stream of history is called "demonic".[(8)]

Much of what Voegelin says here is difficult to interpret. How do we know that the world divides radically between the external "world" of means-ends rationality and the soul embedded in the irrational? And what experience of the soul can the term "demon" refer to in a "disenchanted world"?

III.

In the unpublished "Theory of Governance", written several years after the 1930 essay on Weber, the dichotomy of world and soul is overcome. More than a work on government it explores the nature of the human being in the concrete experience of the meditative search for the ground of being. The meditating person contemplates the levels of being from the inorganic to the divine. At the beginning the meditating person's own heart seems to be the origin and motivation of the

journey. After the reorientation brought about by the conversion, s/he realizes that the meditation is a response to divinity and not an autonomous act. Voegelin therefore speaks of meditation as the "finite form of the blessed contemplation of God".[(9)] Referring to Descartes' third meditation Voegelin writes: "The act of creation fills not a moment of finite time, but is the continuously working force which conserves the person's life in time".[(10)] The position we encountered in the essays on Weber is overcome. There is not an unbridgeable dichotomy between a rationally controllable world without value and an irrational demonic source of value. Rather the soul in its attunement to the creative center of spiritual order has been formed by that center. Following such a conversion, there is no longer a danger of mistaking the laws governing the exploration of empirical reality for the laws of rationality as a whole. Nor is there is any longer a theoretical motive for constructing the "demonic" soul which imposes its image on the so-called external stream of events. Under these new circumstances Voegelin only uses the term "demonic" to refer to the closed soul. This change of meaning is documented in Voegelin's essay on Nietzsche published in 1944.

IV.

Voegelin examines Nietzsche's attempt to create a new order of values in an effort to overcome the spiritual crisis which had brought forth the conditions which Weber, a generation after Nietzsche, had accepted as irreversible "fate". Nietzsche believes that the occident's lost spiritual unity can be regained by a change of heart. But, because the philosopher's soul remains closed to divinity, his model for the regeneration of the spirit--the so-called superman--is willfully constructed and cannot serve as a pattern of true order.[(11)] The demonically closed soul resists the conversion and therefore fails to reach the fructifying ground of being. It is not the creative soul but merely the private one.

Voegelin contrasts Nietzsche's unsuccessful attempt at spiritual renewal with the more hopeful effort of Stefan George as it manifests itself in his poem "The War", written in 1917. Voegelin points out that although George is not a Christian, nevertheless the "sense of the sacramental unit of Western mankind" is still alive in him. In George's view, the catastrophic political disorder is the result of a falling away from divinity.[(12)]

Writing in 1944 Voegelin no longer shares the hope which animated Stefan George in 1917 that spiritual renewal might still come from Germany. Indeed in the period between 1943 and 1945 we see Voegelin taking leave of Germany; a Germany, which as his anamnetic experiments show, was no less mystical than George's. It is the period in which Voegelin becomes an American citizen and it marks the last time that German thinkers seem to dominate his work: the letter to Alfred Sch&#65533;tz on Edmund Husserl, the two extensive essays on Nietzsche, the key chapter on Schelling in the *History of Political Ideas.* It also marks the turn from Stefan George to T. S. Eliot; specifically to the Christian meditation of *The Four Quartets*. Alfred Sch&#65533;tz and Eric Voegelin discussed the poem in the Autumn of 1943, or at about the same time Voegelin was conducting his own meditative experiments. The poem's subject is the soul, divinity and conversion. I turn now to Voegelin's unpublished notes on that poem.[(13)]

V

The titles of the four sections which make up the Quartets are place names, each corresponding to a phase of spiritual development. Burnt Norton is the place in empirical space and time where the meditation begins. The village of East Coker introduces the historical dimension. It is where Sir Thomas Elyot lived, the sixteenth century humanist whose concern, like T. S. Eliot's, was to keep the language of the spirit alive. For, as Voegelin writes: "History is constituted in the continuity of generations and civilizational meaning" (p.6). In the third poem, The Dry Salvages, the scene shifts to America. This is not just an emigration from place to place. It also evokes the deeper stratum of the soul where action is not experienced pragmatically in its relation to historical community, but in its immediacy to death. Such action is beyond the texture of history, but it is not beyond effectiveness in building community. The attainment of this depth is the one act that "'shall fructify in the lives of others"'. (In other words, the conversion opens the soul for participation in divine love which is the creative source of both action and contemplation). The last poem "Little Gidding" evokes an English place name and a monastic founding. Here is the intersection of "'timelessness and time"'. From Burnt Norton to Little Gidding, and corresponding to the stages of the meditation, we see the place names steadily yield their material and empirical meaning. At the end of the poem reflection turns back to the beginning. Eliot writes: the end of all exploring is "to arrive where we started/ And know the place for the

first time." (IV, 5, 28-29). For it is the converted soul which regards its beginnings in their true light; not as a geographical places, but as a states of the soul.

VI

What light can the conversion, which does not take place in time, although its "occurrence" can be correlated to calender events, cast on the enduring aspects of Voegelin's "early writings"? Two points:

1.From the days of his dissertation, through his essays on Weber and up to the "Theory of Governance", we have been able to follow a transformation in Voegelin's discussion of the soul. The full range of the soul could not come into view in the 1922 dissertation in which national culture provided the spiritual horizon. But quickly Voegelin turned to investigate the implications of this orientation by contemplating the life and works of Max Weber, a representative of German national culture. In further comparisons with, and approaches to, Nietzsche and Stefan George, Voegelin articulated the universal Christian understanding of the soul which he had developed in the "theory of Governance".

But I would like to caution against mis-reading intellectual development in terms of chronology. Such a reading runs the risk of focusing on external events and of attributing intellectual insight to psychological "causes" or "impulses". This brings me to my second point.

2. Since the "immortal and everlasting" are equally distant--and equally close--to all points in time, the spiritual dimension is always present. In discussing Voegelin's dissertation I pointed out that his theory of language dealt with the need to protect the spiritual and experiential roots of meaning. He warned against the danger of losing the meaning in language which had lost touch with the engendering experience. The concern with the experiential roots of meaning is constant in Voegelin's work. In the examples I have used, it accounts for the close attention to Weber's language as well as for the interest in Stefan George and T. S. Eliot as preservers and renewers of language. For what is preserved is meaning, and optimal meaning is found in the experiences of the soul open to divinity. Thus Voegelin's themes are present at all stages of his work--sometimes directly articulated, sometimes more compactly presented. And I therefore conclude that his early work should be read in the same light in which his later works are read. For if we

are to try to understand the works of a human soul, an author's or our own, we too must overcome a "vain and perishing curiosity" and ascend to what is "immortal and everlasting".

1. 1. St. Augustine, De Vera Religione. Quoted in: Eric Voegelin, Order and History, vols. I-V, (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1956-1985), preface.

2. Eric Voegelin, "Wechselwirkung und Gezweiung". Typescript, Eric Voegelin Papers, Hoover Institution Archives, box 51, file 5.

Eric Voegelin, "Herrschaftslehre und Rechtslehre" (ca. 1930-1932). Typescript, Eric Voegelin Papers, box. 53, file 5.

3. "When...the meaning is fixed in words and these are all we have connecting us to the meaning, it can happen that if the person receiving the communication does not understand it the way the person imparting it does, i.e. because the two do not share the same intuition, that thinking in terms of words takes the place of thinking in terms of meaning". *Interaction and Spiritual Community*, translated by W. Petropulos, Typescript, p. 47.

4. Eric Voegelin, "�ber Max Weber", in: *Deutsche Vierteljahresschrift f�r Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte*. Vol. III (1925), 177-193. Reprinted in: Eric Voegelin, *Die Gr��e Max Webers*. Edited by Peter J. Opitz. (Munich: Fink Verlag, 1995),9-29.

Eric Voegelin, "Max Weber. Rede gehalten anl��lich der zehnten Jahreswiederkehr seines Todestages am 13. Juni 1930 in der Wiener Soziologischen Gesellschaft", in: *K�lner Vierteljahreshefte f�r Soziologie*. Vol. IX (1930), 1-16.

Reprinted in: *Die Gr��e Max Webers*,29-48.

5. Voegelin, "�ber Max Weber", 14.

6. "�ber Max Weber",27.

7. "�ber Max Weber", 27-28.

8. "�ber Max Weber",12,27-28.

9.Voegelin, "Herrschaftslehre", Chap. 1, 15.

10. "Herrschaftslehre", Chap. I, 13-14.

11. Eric Voegelin, "Nietzsche, the Crisis and the War" in: The Journal of Politics (1944), 177-212. Here 185-186, 196-197.

12. Voegelin, "Nietzsche", 198-200.

13. Eric Voegelin, "Notes on T. S. Eliot's *The Four Quartets*, Typescript, Eric Voegelin Papers, microfilm reel 64 [The box and file no. must be checked--W.P.]