What use might Voegelin be to poets, and vice versa?

It is a difficult question. Voegelin is a subtle author and poetry is difficult even to define. Moreover, poetry and politics are apt to arouse extraordinary rancour. What follows, therefore, is suggestion, not dogma, certainly not ideology.

The simplest tack, of course, might be to write poetry on Voegelinian themes, rather as Lucretius did for Epicurus. One might compose an ode on the Metaxy or a sonnet sequence on the failings of Martin Luther.

This would be a very bad idea.

Sermons in verse are deadly to write, and worse to read.

Also, by the consensus of our society (not something to be ignored lightly), we communicate information in prose and mathematics, not poetic numbers. And finally, and most importantly, such an approach would only bear on the subject of this or that poem, not on poetry as a whole.

How then to find a deeper connection?

Memory, like a sieve, not only discards but selects. From what I had read of Voegelin, five themes, stood out in my memory: transcendence, response, tension, symbolism, and luminosity.

These terms are not items of information but indices to experience. Further, none of them may be correctly understood without the others. There is no response without transcendence, no tension without response, no symbolism without the recognition of tension.

The experience to which this nest of terms points is familiar. John, Mary, Socrates, confront a universe and recognize themselves as individuals and the universe as a mystery. They articulate the experience with language symbols, such as "mystery," "zetesis," "tension," and "myth." The language symbols thus created are liable to various deformations.

A similar pattern occurs, I believe, when we compose and read poetic imagery.

A very simple example:

O, my Luve is like a red, red rose

Consider this line from a Voegelinian point of view.

The poet speaks in response to an unsettling and mysterious reality, in this case, the lady in question. Anyone who has taken up a new field of study, whether another person, the Latin
Language, or the income tax code, knows that it is only at this point that one learns how far one stands from the new object of passion.

Burns articulates the experience by the creation of two poles. The woman becomes the "Luve" and the poet by implication, the lover.

Note that these terms are understood as provisional and partial. No one believes or is expected to believe that the parties involved are defined by such language.

The tension between these poles, between the mystery and the respondent, is bridged with the image of the rose.

So far, so good.

But the line cannot work by itself.

To communicate truth, it needs, firstly, the rest of the poem (which we will not go into), and secondly, from the reader, a balanced response.

If the poet is lucky, the reader will understand the line for what it is; that is, in its formal capacity, as an element of an entire poem, and as an example of a large class of imagery: and the reader will also understand it for what it is not; for example, a doctoral thesis. The reader, if the poet is lucky, will use this line as a help to understanding the poet's reality, and thus, as far as that reality may match the reader's experience, his or her own situation.

Often, of course, the poet is not lucky.

The poet's writing may be simply clumsy. The author may misjudge the audience, as in the example quoted by D.L. Sayers:

**The [something] torrent, leaping in the air,**

*left the astounded river's bottom bare;*

More sinister errors arise from the audience's side.

A valid image may become a cliche through overuse. No "I see what you mean," is evoked from the audience. Many of our most familiar political terms, such as "democracy," "fascism," and "human rights," have suffered this fate.

Very often, in political and philosophic language, a cliche ossifies into dogma. There is not much danger to Burn's line, unless we were to debate learnedly whether, as a rose, the beloved should be pruned or covered with compost. But the dogmatization of poetic language in the Bible, and in other scriptures, is still with us.

Worse, we may mistake the poetic process itself.
Someone may assert, perhaps someone has, that Burns did not, could not, concern himself with the woman he speaks of in her own reality. On this view, no one operates except from appetite; our image is therefore an instrument of seduction, or domination (he is reducing her to a plant!). In this case, the lady is understood as real only as reflection of the poet himself. She has, in fact, been immanitized.

Even worse would be to adopt the error as a tool. This takes us into the realm of verbal magic, sophistic rhetoric, and advertising.

Is this similarity in pattern accidental?

I believe not. Rather, I would like to suggest, with great diffidence, that Voegelin and metaphor, (and metaphor is the heart of poetry) may work from a similar deep principle.

Whatever else a poem is, it is an artifact, like a chair. It is, further, an artifact made of words. It has to be made, and made of words to be a poem. This has necessary consequences.

Like a chair, a poem is meant to maintain its own shape and form. In this it differs from prose, whose words, as Valéry notes, are meant to be dissolved into understanding; or bread whose point is to perish into nourishment.

A poem's purpose therefore, whatever that purpose is, is in its form and not its elements. If the purpose cannot be inherent in all its elements, it cannot be in any single element.

The purpose of a poem, while it does concern the subject material (whether a lady or the foundation of Rome) cannot be limited to that subject material. Like a chair, a poem is designed to fit an exterior end.

Further, since words are necessary then whatever words are meant to do must be taken into that final poetic purpose.

The base purpose of words is communication of truth, of some sort, about reality, in some aspect.

Thus, if a poem is all it should be, then whatever the subject material of the particular poem in question, the message of that poem is an unspoken truth about that particular subject material.

Further, since poetry is one as a genus, it ought to have a generic message.

I submit that the only message that transcends all subjects in this way, and yet is true in every particular subject is the message of transcendence itself. I have to conclude, with hesitation, that the message of poetry, as a genus, is that reality as a whole and every part of it, is charged with significance beyond itself.

Whatever is, is strange.
Now here is the point of this neo-scholastic rambling. The same attitude to reality, the poetic core, as it were, works, I suggest, in the vision of Eric Voegelin.

In the Voegelinian universe, we operate between an upper and lower limit. Below us is an unsettling sense that we are not quite as real as we would like to be. We have names for this fearsome possibility, such as death.

Above us, described in the two famous questions of Leibnitz, is a horizon of mystery.

In the altogether tense middle ground we describe as life and reality, our political and philosophical terms are responses, true but qualified, to our situation, and are meant to be understood as such.

Clearly, Voegelin is not composing poetry. He works in prose and that prose aims to formulate insight as explicitly as words will allow. But his central insight is that the phenomena of politics and philosophy are poetic, that is, symbolic, potentially luminous for transcendence, and working by persuasion.

This insight is, I believe, part of Voegelin's essential flavour. It may explain why he appeals so intensely to a limited audience, and is so widely and thoroughly ignored. That the universe may mean more than itself, that it has a symbolic, not to say sacramental core, is a most disquieting thought.

What does this say for politics and political science?

Poetry, according to our consensus, is personal, private, allusive, and non-judgemental (in a nice way). Politics is, or ought to be, realistic, that is, founded on money or force majeur. Actually, as Chesterton pointed out years ago, a politics founded on money or force is almost wildly unrealistic. He is quite right, it is unrealistic, and it is unrealistic because it is unpoetic. It is unpoetic because it has been made so. The great theme of the History of Political Ideas is the more-or-less deliberate "thinning" of the poetic, that is, the transcendent, dimension from our civic affairs. The unspoken theme of Order and History is the re-discovery of this dimension.

What can Voegelin do for the poets? In our society, for the most part, we keep poetry and politics apart. Many poets are rabid partisans (usually on the left), but little is written on the political process itself. The Muse, it seems, is not interested in the committee meeting or the sewer bill.

Voegelin's insight, and his decades of acute analysis, restore the whole range of politics as an object of poetic contemplation. It may provide a road to authentic public poetry. After all, if the universe is mysterious, so is everything in it. The luminosity that shines through our great political symbols--Rome, Jerusalem, Tienamin, Washington--continues through the whole fabric, down to the county clerk's office.

Clearly, we are not looking for propaganda. The job of poets is to communicate wonder, not state policy. We do not need any more late Horatian odes.
However, if we remember the insights of Eric Voegelin in this matter, we will remember too, and bear more closely in mind, Plato's insight that the state is the best of dramas, and it may be that in doing so, both in politics and poetry we will do all right.

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