

*Periagoge: Liberal Education in the Modern University*¹

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Conversation and the “Turning Around of the Soul”

One of the common criticisms of the contemporary university is that it lacks individuals unwilling or incapable even of conversing. Critics such as Anthony Kronman and Stephen Miller rightly observe that there’s something about contemporary culture and the contemporary university hostile to the arts or habits of conversation. Conversation has had a place in liberal education going back at least to the Platonic dialogue, if not back further, should one wish to see things this way, to the point in the evolution of bipeds that sat conversing so long that as apes, they lost their tails and became human beings.² Conversation as the primary mode of liberal education is not meant to produce “results” but is an ongoing quest for understanding the human condition in all its manifold. As Kronman notes of its participants, whether scholars or great texts: “They refer to each other, commending, correcting, disapproving, and building on the works of those who have gone before.”³ Michael Oakeshott captures the spirit of conversation by comparing

¹ I thank Tilo Schabert, John Gueguen, Mark Henry, Bruce Fingerhut, and James Rhodes for sharing their recollections of their teachers with me, and (along with Brendan Purcell) for commenting on previous drafts of this essay.

² Michael Oakeshott, “The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind,” *Rationalism in Politics*, (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991), 490.

³ Anthony T. Kronman, *Education’s End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 168; Stephen Miller, *Conversation: A History of a Declining Art*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006); I have reviewed Miller’s book here (“Friendship and its Language,” *The Cresset: A Review of Literature, the Arts, and Public Affairs*, Lent 2007 (<http://www.valpo.edu/cresset/2007/Lent%202007%20von%20Heyking.pdf>)).

it to gambling: “Conversation is not an enterprise designed to yield an extrinsic profit, a contest where a winner gets a prize, nor is it an activity of exegesis; it is an unrehearsed intellectual adventure. It is with conversation as with gambling, its significance lies neither in winning nor in losing, but in wagering.”⁴

Conversation is the expression of human freedom. In wagering, one risks everything. In learning, one risks everything one currently is, possibly to become what one cannot presently foresee. Conversation as liberal education implies liberation from the necessities, including our felt “necessity” to yield results. For Oakeshott, conversation is free because it is not about “anything” in particular. It is about the entirety of the human condition, but no single voice is dominant and no single definitive answer is expected. Even more, whatever “answers” get uttered are not judged by their utility. The free, or liberal, conversant has been freed from necessity. Conversation is thus not simply idle chatter, but the activity of existential virtue that expresses our engagement with reality. Eric Voegelin’s comment about one’s approach to critical history illustrates this well: “In order to write critical history, therefore, it is not enough to alter what one says; one must alter one’s very being (or, “one must be differently” (*man muß anders sein*)).”⁵

Conversation thus presupposes certain virtues of openness that themselves are not the same as conversation. Voegelin identified the capacity to have free inquiry

⁴ Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, 490.

⁵ Eric Voegelin, “The German University and German Society,” *Published Essays, 1966-1985, Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 12, ed., Ellis Sandoz, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 3. The alternate translation is suggested by Brendan Purcell, upon whose analysis of conversion in Voegelin’s teaching I rely in this paper (“Can a Philosopher Be a Prophetic Witness to the Truth?” Paper prepared for the 2007 Eric Voegelin Society meeting, Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association). All subsequent references to the *Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (University of Missouri Press 1990-2009) abbreviated as CW.

presupposes an openness toward truth that is not distorted by ideological agendas, utility, or *libido dominandi*.⁶ Conversation presupposes a willingness to converse.

Plato famously expresses the central experience of liberation in the following way:

Then there would be an art to this very thing," I said, "this turning around (*tes periagoges*), having to do with the way the soul would be most easily and effectively redirected (*metastrophe*), not an art of implanting sight in it, but of how to contrive that for someone who has sight, but doesn't have it turned the right way or looking at what it needs to.⁷

Teaching, as Voegelin frequently observed, is the art of the *periagoge*. In a university culture characterized by the treatment of knowledge as useful commodity, careerism, and political correctness, it is difficult to have a genuine experience of *periagoge* because the clamoring of those voices eclipse the gentle and fragile pull that wisdom has on us. So much of our modern civilization conspires against that gentle pull that we have difficulty explaining and justifying it, and we have barely recognize it when it happens. The lover of the good and noble is considered mystical, obscure, queer, strange, and unproductive.

In this essay, I shall examine two great scholar-teachers, Eric Voegelin (1901-85) and Gerhart Niemeyer (1907-97), in my own field, political philosophy, who navigated those clamoring voices and evoked a genuine experience of *periagoge* in their students (I shall provide some biographical introduction below). I shall consider their writings on education and on the university, but my focus will be on the activity of their teaching, as reported mostly, but not exclusively, in the tributes

⁶ See Eric Voegelin, "On Debate and Existence," CW 12, 36-51.

⁷ Plato, *Republic*, trans., Joe Sachs, (Focus Publishing), 518d.

their students paid to them. Many of their students experienced *periagoge*, and it is in their recollections we see the manifold of ways and occasions students experience *periagoge*. Because there is no one model of *periagoge*, one must expect a degree of variation among the accounts of students. Even so, certain patterns emerge.

Political Philosophy Against Ideology and the Social Scientists

Voegelin and Niemeyer sought to inoculate their students against the false presumptions contemporary ideology. As university teachers and scholars, they also saw that social science played a role in facilitating those false presumptions, either by their failure adequately to criticize ideology or by their outright support of them. After all, much of modern ideology speaks in the name of social science, whether of the positivist, Marxist, racist, or other “-ist” variety. As a result, their criticisms of social science were partly a criticism of contemporary ideology and the state of civilization, but they were also efforts to retrieve a place for liberal learning within the modern university.

Eric Voegelin’s lifelong work was an act of resistance against the dehumanizing ideologies of the twentieth-century, as well as the “softer” forms of intellectual confusion in liberal democracy that shared some of the philosophical lineage as the more aggressive ideologies.⁸ After receiving his doctorate under the

⁸ For a description of “resistance,” see Thomas W. Heilke, “Science, Philosophy, and Resistance: On

tutelage of the great legal scholar, Hans Kelsen, he taught law and sociology at the University of Vienna until he fled in 1938 to the United States. There he taught at Louisiana State University from 1942 until taking up the Max Weber Chair at the University of Munich in 1958 where he retired in 1969. After that, he was a Fellow at the Hoover Institution of War and Peace at Stanford University until his death in 1985. During the 1960s and part of the 1970s, he would teach a semester every two years at the University of Notre Dame. His writings were a large-scale diagnosis of the crisis of Western civilization and effort to regain order. His most significant works are his five volume *Order and History* (1956-85) and the *New Science of Politics* (1952).⁹ His teaching efforts, described in greater detail later in this essay, were directed at inoculating students against those ideologies, and to instill *periagoge* to those students who would listen. Voegelin saw social science (*Wissenschaft*) as less destructive than some other political thinkers of the twentieth-century, including Michael Oakeshott and Leo Strauss, though he was no less critical of its practitioners, including Max Weber.¹⁰ Weber's greatest achievement was in underlining the importance of being open to new developments in science, new discoveries in particular. The significance of Weber, which Voegelin attempted to continue, was in incorporating the discoveries of non-Western cultures into a general theory of humanity. Weber failed at developing a theory of humanity,

Eric Voegelin's Practice of Opposition," *The Review of Politics*, 56 (Fall, 1994): 727-752.

⁹ *Order and History*, CW 14-18; "New Science of Politics," CW 5. For more details of his life, see his *Autobiographical Reflections*, CW 34 and Ellis Sandoz, *The Voegelinian Revolution: A Biographical Introduction*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2000).

¹⁰ Voegelin wrote several focused studies of Weber: "On Max Weber," *Published Essays, 1922-1928*, CW 7, 100-17; "Max Weber," *Published Essays, 1929-1933*, CW 8, 130-48; "Introduction" to "New Science of Politics," CW 5, 88-108; "The Greatness of Max Weber," (Eleventh Lecture), *Hitler and the Germans*, CW 31, 257-74. See also *Autobiographical Reflections*, CW 34, 39-41.

but Voegelin credits him for seeing the importance of trying. Voegelin's full explanation is worth quoting:

If Weber nevertheless did not derail into some sort of relativism or anarchism, that is because, even without the conduct of such analysis, he was a staunch ethical character and in fact (as the biography by his nephew, Eduard Baumgarten, has brought out) a mystic. So he knew what was right without knowing the reasons for it. But of course, so far as science is concerned, that is a very precarious position, because students after all want to know the reasons why they should conduct themselves in a certain manner; and when the reasons – that is, the rational order of existence – are excluded from consideration, emotions are liable to carry you away into all sorts of ideological and idealistic adventures in which the ends become more fascinating than the means. Here is the gap in Weber's work constituting the great problem with which I have dealt during the fifty years since I got acquainted with his ideas.¹¹

Many of the "ideological and idealistic adventures" that strive to fill the gap were explained in my other contribution to this volume. In explaining the Weberian starting point of his life's work, Voegelin situates it in the student's need to have the activity of Weberian science explained. In other words, Voegelin recognizes how central the existential truth of science is to students, perhaps more central to them than for their elder professors. Weber recognized the dead-end of specialization, but could not adequately develop an account of political and historical reality that could unify the details of new knowledge whose study he pioneered.¹² For Voegelin, the example of Weber demonstrates the possibility for philosophical openness in social science which is infrequently followed.

¹¹ *Autobiographical Reflections*, CW 34, 40.

¹² See my account of Weber and specialization in science in my companion essay in this volume, "Obstacles to Liberal Education in the Modern University."

For Voegelin, “openness,” a concept he derived from philosophers including Plato and Henri Bergson, meant viewing the empirical materials as they are. Ideologies are a form of self-assertion, or *libido dominandi*, because they distort empirical materials into a ready-made self-image. Materials that do not fit get discarded or one pretends they do not exist, an intellectual move whose most extreme political expression is the concentration camp.¹³ The “softer” form of this self-assertion can be found in the positivist methodologies that sustain American (and German) political science.

Voegelin’s criticisms of social science date back to his early career in the late 1920s during his time at the University of Vienna, where academic and political life was strongly influenced by Hans Kelsen’s legal positivism and neo-Kantian methodologies.¹⁴ Neo-Kantian Normlogik made two moves that Voegelin came to reject. The first was the positivist position that anything that lies outside of the capacity of the physical sciences to examine, including theology, philosophy, history, etc., was not an appropriate object of science understood as empirical analysis. Yet, the neo-Kantian did not reject the existence of such topics. Rather, this led to the second move, which was to regard these topics as “values,” as Max Weber did. But such a move assumes that the scholar who examines them “approximates the function of the transindividual evaluating subject (transcendental ego) of cognition, if and insofar as he himself incorporates the cultural value of being a cultivated

¹³ Eric Voegelin, “Science, Politics, and Gnosticism,” 264-65, 274-5.

¹⁴ For details, see Thomas Heilke and John von Heyking, “Editors’ Introduction,” *Published Essays, 1922-1928*, CW 7; Jürgen Gebhardt and Barry Cooper, “Editors’ Introduction,” *On the Form of the American Mind*, CW1, ix-xxxv.

person.”¹⁵ The effort of the German educational effort of *Bildung*, then, was to create this cultivated person who could stand above the empirical materials. Voegelin’s extended criticisms of neo-Kantianism point out why this bifurcated view of reality – raw and disorganized empirical data on the one hand, and the transcendental ego who wills his own reasons for organizing those data – is untenable. Voegelin would carry these criticisms to the United States when he would criticize the less sophisticated versions of positivistic and historical political theory in the Anglo-American world.¹⁶

Let us return to Voegelin’s assessment of Weber, whom Voegelin saw as closely connected to neo-Kantianism. Voegelin admired Weber’s “openness” to new possibilities but thought he lacked a deeper sense of openness, or Platonic eros, that might have enabled Weber to formulate a deeper sense of humanity out of the fragments of materials he collected. Reflecting upon Weber’s continued attempts to formulate the human spirit in the modern age (e.g., his admiration for Tolstoy), Voegelin concludes Weber’s transcendence was unresolved.

Voegelin cites two key episodes of Weber’s biography pertinent to our discussion of *periagoge*. The first is Weber’s existential reflections inspired by his illness. He told his wife that “Some time I will find a hole, out of which I rush up

¹⁵ Gebhardt and Cooper, “Editors’ Introduction,” CW 1, xv.

¹⁶ Voegelin, “Political Theory,” in CW 33; “The Oxford Political Philosophers,” CW 11, 24-46. Barry Cooper observes that Voegelin was impatient with American debates in the 1950s and 1960s over social science, methodology, and behavioralism because “he had already dealt with these issues at a philosophically more sophisticated level some thirty years earlier” (*Beginning the Quest: Law and Politics in the Early Work of Eric Voegelin*, (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2009), 18).

again into the heights.”¹⁷ Voegelin considers the symbol of a rocket shooting out of a hole one of an ideological activist, who rushes out from oppression up to the heights. However, Weber was no ideological activist, as his resignation over the modern age was leavened with an inarticulate longing for transcendence: “Beside this, one thinks of the Platonic parable of the cave and of the man who is open to transcendence and feels himself compelled to turn himself around in order to carry out of the *periagoge* and ascend toward the light. Quite differently Max Weber: He rushes like a rocket out of the hole. The symbol for that age and for its unresolved tension could hardly be more characteristic.”¹⁸

A few pages later Voegelin cites Weber’s exchange with his wife, Marianne, over his question to her whether she could think of him as a mystic. His rejoinder to her negative response is poignant: “I suppose it could be that I am one. Since I have dreamed more in my life than one should really allow oneself to do, I am also nowhere at home with complete certainty. It is as if I could and would also completely withdraw myself from everything.’ That is a splendid formulation of the Pauline *hos me*, the *as-if-not*, of the Christian counsel, ‘Be in the world, but not of it.

¹⁷ Voegelin, “The Greatness of Max Weber,” in *Hitler and the Germans*, CW 31, 270. Voegelin cites Eduard Baumgarten, *Max Weber: Werk und Person: Dokumente ausgewählte und kommentiert von Eduard Baumgarten*, (Tubingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1964), 638.

¹⁸ Compare with an earlier (1925) assessment of Weber, “On Max Weber,” CW 7, 111-16, where Voegelin finds Weber’s transcendental ego in the lonely company of his daimon. Yet, Weber’s daimon functions differently from that of Socrates: “the ultimate meaning of life is not to find its meaning, but constantly to create it. For our consciousness there is a point before the world, where we are alone, so alone that no one can follow us there.” Cooper describes Weber’s daimon as “a somewhat Nietzschean way of referring to the neo-Kantian transcendental ego. However name, the task of the historical scientist was to marshal his will and ability to impress a concrete shape or form upon history” (Cooper, *Beginning the Quest*, 33). Writing in the 1920s, Voegelin would find the mightiest symbol of the age, and the clearest expression of the existential state of social science, was Weber’s lonely conversation with his daimon (see also Heilke and Heyking, “Editors’ Introduction,” CW 7, 7).

Live in the world as if you did not live in it and belong to it' (cf. 1 Cor. 7:29-31)."¹⁹ For Voegelin, the stakes of unresolved transcendence, stunted *periagoge* if you will, are high because failure to bring out the highest erotic longings in human beings can be catastrophic. As Voegelin found with Weber, and with Plato, eros is a terrible force that can be good or evil. The purpose of education, then, is to evoke the experience of *periagoge* in the Platonic sense, but starting from the spiritual disturbances of the modern age, of which Weber was one of the greatest articulations.

Gerhart Niemeyer's confrontation with social science is less extended than that of Voegelin because he regarded it as part of the wider story of modern ideology.²⁰ Like Voegelin, he too fled Nazism, in Germany, and after teaching at Princeton University and Oglethorpe University in Atlanta, he taught at the University of Notre Dame from 1955 to 1992. He and Voegelin were friends and Niemeyer incorporated many of Voegelin's insights on ideology, reason, and faith, into his numerous essays and books, most notably, *Between Nothingness and Paradise*.²¹ Niemeyer relied on Voegelin's criticism of Weberian social science in the *New Science of Politics*, and,

¹⁹ "Greatness of Max Weber," *Hitler and the Germans*, CW 31, 273.

²⁰ *Within and Above Ourselves: Essays in Political Analysis*, (Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 1997), 247-9. V. Bradley Lewis analyzes Niemeyer's assessment of legal positivism in his *Law Without Force*, and the role this assessment plays within his overall thinking concerning political order ("Gerhart Niemeyer: Political Order and the Problem of Natural Right," *Political Science Reviewer*, 31 (2002): 119-26).

²¹ *Law Without Force: The Function of Politics in International Law*, (Transaction Publishers, 2001, reprint) and *Between Nothingness and Paradise*, (South Bend: St. Augustine's Press, 1998, reprint). A sample of his essays were collected in two separate volumes: *Within and Above Ourselves: Essays in Political Analysis* and *Aftersight and Foresight: Selected Essays*, (University of America Press, 1988). A tribute volume to his work was published as, John Geugen and Michael Henry, *The Good Man in Society: Active Contemplation: Essays in Honor of Gerhart Niemeyer*, (University of America Press, 1989); an online symposium of essays that review his work can be found in *The Political Science Reviewer*, Fall 2002, 31 (1) (<http://www.isi.org/journals/archive/issue.aspx?id=71280b0e-0941-4a11-93e1-59aee2b929bc>). Biographical details can be found in Paul V. Niemeyer, *A Path Remembered: The Lives of Gerhart and Lucie Niemeyer*, (Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2006).

according to James Rhodes, Niemeyer taught Voegelin's *New Science of Politics* to undergraduates in 1959, spending "significant time on the Weber chapter."²² Even so, Niemeyer had developed a critique of positivism as early as the early 1930s when he studied under legal scholar Herman Heller, whose *Staatslehre*, which Niemeyer helped prepare on account of Heller's untimely death, criticized the positivist conception of law as being an abstraction unrelated to sovereignty and the state.²³ Niemeyer, like Voegelin, saw the limitations of legal positivism in its inability to account for the greater political reality that science must address.

For Niemeyer, the positivism of social science is rooted in the modern turn, seen in thinkers including Thomas Hobbes, of viewing human beings in terms of the physical properties, which constitutes a reduced view of humanity. The biggest problem with social science is that while it can provide numerous details about external facts, its "taboo on theory" means it cannot understand the meaning of events. For someone of Niemeyer's generation, the failure of social science to understand totalitarianism was damning. A positivist social scientist like Herman Finer could, in *Mussolini's Italy*, provide a superbly detailed account of Mussolini, but "the book utterly failed to comprehend the spirit of evil in fascism. Its incomprehension was a fitting foil to Neville Chamberlain's illusion that Hitler was nothing more than a zealous German patriot who merely desired to unite all ethnic Germans and who could be appeased by offering him the German-speaking part of

²² Personal communication with James Rhodes.

²³ Niemeyer, *A Path Remembered*, 146. Hermann Heller, *Staatslehre*, ed., Gerhart Niemeyer, (Leiden, A. W. Sijthoff, 1934).

Czechoslovakia".²⁴ A more recent example of the failure of positivism to understand political reality can be seen in the attempt at criticism that Columbia University President Lee Bollinger, a legal scholar of the First Amendment, directed at his university's guest, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. After listing a litany of human rights atrocities committed by the Iranian regime, the best Bollinger could do was to call Ahmadinejad, who was at least nominally elected, a "petty and cruel dictator."²⁵ The best contemporary positivism can describe radical ideologies is as an anti-type to American constitutionalism.²⁶ Is it any wonder, for Niemeyer, that the student rebellion in France in 1968 began their demonstrations at Nanterre University against the sociology department and its "positivistic approaches."²⁷ Social science finds itself helpless in responding to questions of meaning, but its own foundations also create the expectation of having meaning explained and created. For this reason, Niemeyer took special interest in teaching literature detailing the inability of liberal and morally relativistic societies to counter the rebellious young (e.g., Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* and Max Frisch's *The Firebugs*).²⁸ Social science flatters the young by holding out the promise of knowing the whole of social reality, but lacks the spiritual depth to satisfy their yearnings.

²⁴ *Aftersight and Foresight*, 194, citing Finer, *Mussolini's Italy*, (London: V. Gollancz, 1935).

²⁵ Lee C. Bollinger, "Introductory Remarks at SIPA-World Leaders Forum with President of Iran Mahmoud Ahmadinejad" September 24, 2007 (<http://www.columbia.edu/cu/news/07/09/lcbopeningremarks.html>).

²⁶ I have provided my own analysis of the Iranian President's ideology in, "Iran's President and the Politics of the Twelfth Imam," Guest Commentary, Ashbrook Center for Public Affairs, November 2005 (<http://www.ashbrook.org/publicat/guest/05/vonheyking/twelfthimam.html>).

²⁷ *Within and Above Ourselves*, 270.

²⁸ Gregory Wolfe, "Discerning the Spirits: Gerhart Niemeyer as Culture Critic," *Political Science Reviewer*, 31(1) (Fall 2002): 170-2.

The radical ideologies of Comteanism, Marxism, and so on constitute attempts to create a “fuller” view of humanity, but largely on the basis of the early modern effort. Niemeyer sees already in the positivism of early modernity the dream of “autonomous man” whereby, indeed, the empirical facts of existence are given, but man is free to will any meaning to them. This is the root of the fact-value distinction but also the basis for the dream of the revolutionary whose rule over meaning expands into a dreamlike desire to dominate all of reality. It is dreamlike because it is an act of the imagination. The point of modern thought is not understanding reality, but changing it, a goal “not confined to revolutionary ideologies but characterized the approaches to natural science, psychology, and sociology. The product of this kind of education is the modern self, characteristically split into self-pity and self-deification or magnification.” This modern self is reproduced through various versions of modern education, most dramatically in totalitarian societies whose education is “designed to produce docile instruments useful to the totalitarian rulers alone.”²⁹

For Niemeyer, the goal of contemporary higher education must be to overcome the *libido dominandi* characteristic of modern thinking, which means education must necessarily be about the whole person. Niemeyer frequently referred to Aristotle’s notion of “existential virtues” (a term he borrowed from Eric Voegelin), which, distinct from and more comprehensive than moral and intellectual

²⁹ *Aftersight and Foresight*, 335-6. A former chairman (and law professor) of the Calgary, Alberta, Board of Education voiced this sentiment when he stated: “The child is not your child. Canadian children are the property of the state, like our oil, our gas, and our pipelines...it's the law.” (Quoted by William Gairdner, speech delivered to Queen’s University (Kingston, Ontario) School of Law, 2 March 1994, posted here: <http://www.williamgairdner.com/politicalcorrectness-libertyeq/>).

virtues, refer to “the complex of attitudes required for the harmony and unity of a human composite, a realm of common existence,” which are expressed most deeply in the practice of friendship.³⁰ Education, then, instills ethical and intellectual virtues, but ultimately must be directed to the existential virtues and the capacity of students to practice friendship.

The practice of friendship sustains his reflections of the Western university:

The Western university, then, not only embodies the concept of being but, is also, a philosophical realism which presupposes that there is an external world independent of the mind, and that it is intelligible.... It is all the same implied in the manifold of the university’s teaching activities, all of which proclaim publicly that something is, that our minds can know it, and that we can transmit reliable knowledge through conceptual constructions of our minds.³¹

Niemeyer contrasts the *communicatio* of the Western university with the “communities of monks” of Theravada Buddhism “pursuing their subjective paths to personal enlightenment.” In fact, the “communities of monks” cannot be communities because they in fact share no reality but nirvana, which means extinction, and so community, or friendship, is impossible in such communities where “the concept of dependent origination... [bars] any idea of being in the minds of its adherents” or communicated among them. Communication, which implies communication about the something that is eminently sharable among all participants, is the essence of the university, as it is for friendship.³² Thus, Niemeyer’s call for the “restoration of *ratio*” in the modern university is also a call

³⁰ *Between Nothingness and Paradise*, 194.

³¹ *Within and Above Ourselves*, 244.

³² This does not mean, however, that the good “beyond being,” as Plato describes it, which is ineffable, cannot form the basis of friendship and community. Conversely, it can. For details, see James Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence: Plato’s Erotic Dialogues*, (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2003).

for the restoration of the activity of *communicatio*, the practices of the existential virtues, which includes, as a first step, breaking the “taboo on theory” established by positivism.

Part of the *communicatio* that constitutes the university is its relation to tradition. Niemeyer, of course, was not interested in nostalgia, for he had a precise understanding of tradition: “Tradition provides a framework for decisions.... Tradition attends all relations between particular persons.... Tradition is public memory – the stuff that Aristotle describes as ‘civic friendship.’”³³ Just as memory is the central intellectual faculty in an individual, and the memories of a life lived together constitute the foundation for friendship (for it provides the foundation for their future projects), so too does public memory constitute political community. In other words, tradition is the symbol human beings use to describe themselves as parts in a whole, and which experienced as succession, a “memory of what is significant.” Of course, there are disagreements over what is significant, but discussing, arguing, and, changing imperceptibly, and above all, piously receiving this, as “one approaches the wounds of a father” (Niemeyer cites Burke), constitutes the essence of tradition, and of community.³⁴ Tradition was Niemeyer’s term for the responsibility we have of caring for the inheritance we receive as human beings, of “everything that bears a human face, for all human questing for the ground, the end, and the way.” As friendship is the profoundest expression of the community formed by teachers and learners, so too tradition is the profoundest expression of the civilizational ground upon which those friendships are nourished and practiced.

³³ *Within and Above Ourselves*, 255. See also *Between Nothingness and Paradise*, 175-78.

³⁴ *Aftersight and Foresight*, 345.

With these preliminary theoretical reflections concerning the activity of thinking and teaching in the contemporary university in mind, we now turn to Voegelin's and Niemeyer's activity of teaching in the contemporary university.

Teacher as Prophet: Gerhart Niemeyer

Plato's description of education as a turning around (*tes periagoges*) of the soul (*Republic* 518d3-4) is key to understanding the teaching efforts of both Voegelin and Niemeyer. For Gerhart Niemeyer, the "metaphysical" takes on added weight because of the darkness of the civilizational cave from which learning needs to emerge. While Niemeyer may not have thought of himself as a prophet, John Geugen's use of this category for him and his colleague Stanley Parry is apt: "The correct ("prophetic") response is 'metapolitical'—that is, educational, cultural, and religious attempts to recover the 'substantive meaning' of our political community in the tradition that expresses our 'experience of truth.'"³⁵ The "prophetic" teacher does more than initiate a student into his cultural "inheritance." The "prophetic" teacher explicitly views teaching as directed against the entire person of the student in its intellectual and spiritual dimensions. It is what Niemeyer called, borrowing from Voegelin's analysis of Aristotle's virtue theory, existential virtue, which refers to the virtue of the whole person. Bruce Fingerhut's recollection of his first day of class with Niemeyer expresses this experience: "I realized at that moment that all

³⁵ John Geugen, "Stanley Parry: Teacher and Prophet," *Logos*, 10(2) Spring 2007: 109.

my previous education had served only one purpose-to get me into that classroom with that man. I would have to start over.”³⁶ Similarly, Gregory Wolfe states: “An encounter with Gerhart Niemeyer is not merely a mental experience, but one which affects the whole person.”³⁷ Here are clear, though compact, expressions of what Plato meant by describing education as *periagoge* – the turning around of the soul.

Friendship is a consistent theme in the testimonials among former students for Niemeyer, though perhaps “fellowship” with students, as Mark Henry remarks, is a more appropriate term: “His life was filled with friendships, many spanning half a century or more, because of the generosity of his spirit and his immensely attractive personality. He had a gift for and an intense appreciation and need of friendship and “fellowship,” which included nurturing friendships with his students.”³⁸ His proximity also makes itself felt on the recollections of former students: “It’s a look on his face that I chiefly remember, as of someone trying politely to leave a conversation-and a room-with a mouthful of spoiled porridge.”³⁹ Gabriel Restrepo, who studied with Niemeyer at the Phoenix Institute, a summer program where students attend Notre Dame to study political philosophy also emphasizes Niemeyer’s capacity for friendship as central to his teaching. He recounts Niemeyer’s appreciation for the physical proximity of friends on the occasion of a comment Niemeyer made to a friend on the occasion of his friend’s ordination: “We do not see each other often but I never feel that the interstices have meant a loss.

³⁶ Bruce Fingerhut, “Look for the Lift: A Biographical Essay on Gerhart Niemeyer,” *Political Science Reviewer*, Fall 2002, 31 (1): 34.

³⁷ “Tabula Gratulatoria,” in *The Good Man in Society*, 304.

³⁸ Michael Henry, “The Presence of a Teacher,” *University Bookman*, 46(1) Spring 2008 (<http://www.firstprinciplesjournal.com/articles.aspx?article=861&theme=home&loc=b>). This is a review essay of Niemeyer, *A Path Remembered*.

³⁹ Fingerhut, “Look for the Lift,” 33.

Thus I was not to sad not to be able to talk to you that night. It was not an occasion for conversing. I saw you, I felt your hand, and got the glance from your eye. No more was needed.”⁴⁰ For Restrepo, Niemeyer’s success as a teacher and a scholar derived from his capacity for friendship and its centrality for being human.

Even so, as intimated by Henry’s preference for the language of “fellowship” over “friendship,” Niemeyer’s friendship was closer to a fatherly love of his children (mostly sons, as Notre Dame was male-only for the majority of time Niemeyer taught there, admitting its first female students in 1972). Niemeyer was far from cutting the image of the obsequious contemporary academic who poses as an equal to his students. The obituary published in *Notre Dame Magazine* called him a “staunch conservative” who “was an intimidating figure to students.”⁴¹ Walter Nicgorski, his colleague, provides a more balanced account in his recollection of having a close professional, but not personal, relationship with him, and that “Niemeyer was not regarded as having a disposition or practice of speaking readily of his personal state,” as friends might tend to do.⁴² However, Gregory Wolfe recalls some of Niemeyer’s personal pathos in the classroom: “In his pointing out Thomas Mann's own intense suffering over the tragic fate of Germany, Niemeyer's own suffering resonated in the classroom.”⁴³ Gueguen recalls Niemeyer never had difficulty connecting with students, whom he frequently invited to his home for discussions. Niemeyer had the capacity, after posing to students a direct question,

⁴⁰ Gabriel Mora Restrepo, “The Political Philosophy of Gerhart Niemeyer,” *Pensamiento y Cultura*, 2 (1999): 136.

⁴¹ “In memoriam,” *Notre Dame Magazine*, Autumn 1997: 6.

⁴² Walter Nicgorski, “Politics, Political Philosophy, and Christian Faith: Gerhart Niemeyer’s Journey,” *Political Science Reviewer*, 31 (Fall 2002): 41-2.

⁴³ Gregory Wolfe, “Discerning the Spirits,” 174.

of looking “into us, as it seemed, to help us find the answer somewhere within, quietly urging with his reassuring, confident eyes.” Gueguen invokes novelist Marion Montgomery’s phrase of those a father has chosen as sons to describe the experience of being a student of Niemeyer.⁴⁴ Michael Henry describes Niemeyer’s fatherly love in light of his appreciation of tradition:

In his continued efforts to promote our success I believe he was motivated certainly by a fatherly interest in our personal accomplishments, but also, on a deeper level, by a sense of responsibility for fostering a succeeding generation to continue the work in which he saw himself engaged, handing on a critically deepened understanding of what he had received. Niemeyer’s excellence at “fathering” grew out of his contemplative dedication to “sonship”; that is, he gave a lifetime of profound thought to the tradition, and the faith, he had received. Because he strove to live and even to embody what he knew and loved he was able to transmit to his students an example of the life of philosophy in the truest sense, the life dedicated to the loving search for wisdom.⁴⁵

As noted above, Niemeyer understood that tradition could not be accepted uncritically. More to the point, handing down involves not simply the transmission of doctrine, but also imparting the existential virtues, which one does by example, and which draw from deeper depths of the human soul than does tradition.

Geugen explains this deeper, “prophetic,” dimension of Niemeyer’s fatherly love toward his students: “At Notre Dame, Parry and Niemeyer saw themselves as mentors engaged in restoring tradition ‘to its ontological status as the form of

⁴⁴ John Gueguen, “A Student’s Teacher: Gerhart Niemeyer (Feb. 15, 1907 – June 23, 1997),” *Political Science Reviewer*, 27 (1998): 1-2, 6.

⁴⁵ Michael Henry, “The Heritage of Gerhart Niemeyer,” *The Intercollegiate Review*, Fall 1997: 3. Henry elsewhere comments: “Many of his students sought and found in him, not just a mentor, but a father who entered with them into a profoundly loving, mutually loyal spiritual and intellectual fellowship based on a shared love of the Good” (“Gerhart Niemeyer Symposium: Introduction,” *Political Science Reviewer*, 31 (Fall 2002): 31).

society.’ They strove to ‘re-experience’ that tradition in the company of young minds, apprentices who would one day have disciples of their own. In their souls would survive ‘in a critically purified manner . . . the order of society’ (“RT,” 135f). The classroom was already a ‘re-constructed community’ discovering how to ‘experience truth’ and how to induce the same experience in others with full respect for the freedom of their minds and wills.”⁴⁶ The activity of liberal learning is found in the form of fellowship because partaking in the tradition of learning means taking the meaning of tradition as community seriously.

Education requires clearing of the ideological underbrush that hinders the erotic quest for truth. In a lesser teacher, this clearing might take the form of alerting students to the “crisis” of Western civilization and of the university that frequently taints analyses of higher education.⁴⁷ A problem with “crisis” as part of one’s pedagogy is that one can never really experience *periagoge*, the turning around of the soul. Liberation is always haunted by the fact that one must always turn around and solve political problems. While we have a duty to our polis, “crisis” mentality prevents us from enjoying the necessary moment of liberation that is the precondition of our ability to serve our polis with righteousness. As Niemeyer observes in his essay, “The Glory and Misery of Education,” liberal education is rooted in the liberation of the soul from necessity, and this liberation also forms the

⁴⁶ Geugen, “Stanley Parry,” 109, citing Rev. Stanley J. Parry, CSC, “The Restoration of Tradition,” *Modern Age* 3, no. 2 (Spring 1961): 125–38.

⁴⁷ Timothy Fuller notes how this crisis mentality, which characterized Allan Bloom and which Michael Oakeshott rejected, corrodes the experience of liberal education: “Oakeshott characteristically resists all apocalyptic formulations, seeing in them recipes for suspending conversationality in favor of a politicizing counterrevolution that will define education as the carrying on of war by other means” (“Introduction,” to Michael Oakeshott, *The Voice of Liberal Learning*, (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2001), xxxii).

precondition for community formed by the desire to know.⁴⁸

As a conservative and critic of modern ideology and utopia, the “crisis” mentality certainly was an option available to Niemeyer. However, as Rhodes argues, it was an option he refused to take because his conservatism was rooted in “common sense,” which meant more than the opinions common to the United States, but rooted in the great tradition of philosophical realism in the ancient Greeks and philosophical Christians.⁴⁹ The conservatism of Niemeyer was definitely not ideological conservatism, but rather rooted in an appreciation of the complexity of reality in its manifold; monism, the hallmark of ideology, cannot be present when this manifold is recollected.

So Niemeyer, following Plato, begins liberal education with an assessment of political disorder. Gueguen recollects his teaching method from his notes of a year-long seminar he took with Niemeyer on communist ideology. Gueguen identifies three stages over the course of the year. In the first stage, Niemeyer covered the basic political ideas and doctrines of communist ideology. Yet, this was not all, even in this first stage. The point of understanding the ideology was to ascend to philosophical fundamentals.⁵⁰ If Leninism views being as revolution, then Niemeyer would push the class to ask what is being, which would lead them to consider Lenin in light of other, greater, philosophers including Plato or St. Thomas Aquinas. Similarly, reflecting upon the Marxist vision of society would lead students to consider what a society in general is. Or politics. Or human nature. Liberal

⁴⁸ *Aftersight and Foresight*, 340.

⁴⁹ James Rhodes, “Gerhart Niemeyer: Seeker of the Way,” *Logos*, 10(2) Spring 2007: 120-23.

⁵⁰ Gueguen, “A Student’s Teacher,” 5-6.

education is the ascent from the cave.

Gueguen observes these philosophical questions, as fundamental as they are, pointed to moral questions, the next stage, reached early in the second term of the course. If communist ideology does not penetrate to philosophical fundamentals, one must ask why. For Niemeyer, as he argues most extensively in *Between Nothingness and Paradise*, it is the very nature of ideology to reduce reality to a single part. If philosophical inquiry moves from part to whole, or individual to species, then ideology treats the part as the whole, thereby distorting things, and doing both intellectual and physical violence to one's political world. The violence of communism in the Soviet Union and elsewhere is predicated on the violence in thought.

The moral stage gives way ultimately to the religious. The moral stage explains the evil of the ideology but does not save one from it, which involves evoking the full amplitude of human experience that ideology seeks to destroy. Gueguen draws from his class notes to quote Niemeyer: “[Christianity] hits the mind, the emotions, the will – the whole man.” Communist ideology tries to replace Christianity and even mimics it with its own plans to save the world, its own hell, its own purgatory, its own utopian paradise. Of course Christianity differs, but one cannot fully appreciate the nature of ideology without also understanding what it apes, and this requires appealing not only to knowledge of Christianity, but to its lived experience. Gueguen notes: “it has become more apparent to me that Dr. Niemeyer was using the ideology as a way to shape the souls of young people so that they could more truly appreciate the real questions and their answers. His goal was

not unrelated to the traditional ends of a liberal education. Only when we were armed with such an education could we effectively undo the work of Marx and Lenin.”⁵¹

In the next section, we shall see that Voegelin’s teaching followed a similar pattern of existential ascent. Niemeyer’s teaching method appears to follow his own life experience. Walter Nicgorski observes a similar tripartite pattern in Niemeyer’s written work over the course of his career:

Niemeyer was, in a chronological sense, first a man of politics, indeed a passionate man of politics; then, out of distress and perplexity, he became a man of philosophy searching to understand the roots and causes of the disorder he found; and then, a man of Christian faith whose own inquiries and life came to be shaped decisively by that faith. The progression from politics to philosophy to faith was not one where the earlier stage is left behind at each point. Rather, each stage represented a new center for his life in which the earlier concerns and emphases still had a critical role. Niemeyer remained passionately concerned with politics even when he came in the light of Christian faith to have a well-informed sense of the limits of politics. Niemeyer never abandoned philosophical inquiry, but at a certain point his inquiry became clearly directed and illuminated by Christian faith; he embraced the notion of “faith seeking understanding.”⁵²

Indeed, the three stages – political, philosophical, and Christian (which overlap to a large degree with Gueguen’s philosophical, moral, and religious stages), while distinct, cannot be separated. Niemeyer himself observes this unity in one of his early essays written before he converted to Christianity, where he describes the insidious moral project of social science’s logic: “In claiming to be able to solve the problems of social life by scientific methods, the social disciplines really undertake

⁵¹ Gueguen, “A Student’s Teacher,” 7-8.

⁵² Nicgorski, “Politics, Political Philosophy, and Christian Faith,” 44-5.

to make moral decisions on the basis of strictly logical derivations from facts.”⁵³ All science implies a morality, which means that the scientific understanding of science must also be a moral judgment of science.

Niemeyer, then, saw the classroom as the place of recreating the originary experiences of philosophical eros as well as caritas in his relationships with his students. This leads Rhodes to cite Josef Pieper’s description of teaching for St. Thomas Aquinas in his tribute to Niemeyer. The full quotation is worth reproducing:

The teacher, remarks Pieper, enjoys a “relationship with truth, the power of silent listening to reality,” and combines it with “something that probably cannot ever be learned,” namely, “loving devotion to the learner, . . . loving identification of the teacher with the beginner” that fosters true learning. True learning is “more than a mere acquisition of material.” Indeed, it is a “growing into a spiritual reality which the learner cannot yet grasp as a purely intellectual matter.” The teacher’s loving care of the learner causes the learner to “recognize the amazing qualities, the *mirandum*,” of a subject and puts the learner “on the road to genuine questioning. And it is genuine questioning that inspires all true learning. Granted, the teacher imparts information and engages in the disputes of the day. These efforts, however, properly “end like the Platonic dialogues; they make no claim to offering comprehensive answers, but throw the gates open to an infinitude of further seeking” so that “the road opens up into a boundless unknown.”⁵⁴

With Niemeyer one can identify a greater clarity of the teacher’s identification with the souls of his students, drawn from Niemeyer’s caritas, which deepens the moral reasons for his nonpresence as one who “teaches” his student “the power of silent listening to reality.”

⁵³ Niemeyer, “Faith and Facts in Social Science,” *Theology Today* 5(4) (January 1949), 490.

⁵⁴ Rhodes, “Gerhart Niemeyer,” 114, citing Josef Pieper, *Guide to Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Mentor-Omega Books, 1962), 87,88, 91.

I attended the University of Notre Dame as a PhD student and had the opportunity to attend a reading group under Professor Niemeyer's guidance in fall of 1994. We read his translation of *Anamnesis* by Eric Voegelin.⁵⁵ I recall him as a wonderful teacher who asked deep and penetrating questions of us. I also recall he was very demanding in our attention to the text and the seriousness of our endeavor. Some of my colleagues were a little intimidated by what they took as brusqueness, which we chalked up to his German style of teaching. I recall not being terribly intimidated. My own German background gave me the understanding that German authority figures can have a tender heart underneath; it is a bit of a ritual to reach that tender heart. I never got to know Professor Niemeyer as well as his former students I have cited in this essay, but I can say he exercised *caritas* in his desire for us to understand the central questions of human existence found in this text. His "brusqueness" was really a desire to focus the attention of us students onto the existential questions raised by the text. Not only did I learn to read this text carefully, and not only did I gain a philosophical vocabulary to help me understand what was going on in this difficult text, but I also understood the importance of the teacher's presence, and why we could say certain things are true simply because they are and not because they comply with some further standard or rule. As Gueguen notes of Niemeyer's capacity to encapsulate great thoughts in a brief phrase, I gained insight into how truth gets embodied in the existential movement of the human person. "Justice," "virtue," and "truth" became lived realities, and not academic abstractions, lying "out there" to be blithely manipulated by a bored and

⁵⁵ Eric Voegelin, *Anamnesis*, trans., Gerhart Niemeyer, (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1978).

alienated modern academic.

Eric Voegelin: “Phenomenon” and Founder

In addition to being a great teacher, Gerhart Niemeyer was a friend of Eric Voegelin and student of his thought.⁵⁶ While Niemeyer left behind an important legacy of written work, it is no insult to Niemeyer to characterize Voegelin as the profounder and more original thinker. This is one reason Voegelin’s capacity as a teacher gets mixed reviews.⁵⁷ Tom Flanagan, who took undergraduate classes from both, regarded Niemeyer the better teacher. Niemeyer’s teaching method was Socratic. He was “constantly asking people questions and getting them to explore. And he orchestrated all this so that we would also come together. I can remember all the books I read in Niemeyer’s class. In contrast, I can’t remember anything specific that Voegelin said, although he was there for an entire term.”⁵⁸ Niemeyer, who exercised Socratic eros as well as caritas, evoked a greater reaction from this particular former student. If Michael Oakeshott is correct in his observation that a teacher is not really a teacher unless the student learns, then Flanagan’s memory of his experience and of his readings might serve as a useful marker of Niemeyer’s greater capacity as teacher. However, we should be cautious to avoid drawing too hasty a conclusion.

⁵⁶ For details, see Rhodes, “Gerhart Niemeyer,” 118 and Niemeyer, *A Path Remembered*, 310-14.

⁵⁷ Invaluable in this regard are the recollections of a large number of his students in Barry Cooper and Jodi Bruhn (eds.), *Voegelin Recollected: Conversations on a Life*, (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2008).

⁵⁸ *Voegelin Recollected*, 132.

Flanagan reflects the sentiment of many undergraduate students of Voegelin in noting he was “mesmerized” by Voegelin. He was “a good speaker” and “tremendously erudite and interesting.” Reading in the same volume the recollections of Voegelin’s students at the University of Munich, one is not surprised by Flanagan’s reaction. Voegelin’s lectures were wide ranging, and for most mortals, astonishment, not understanding, was the main reaction. Thus, Flanagan concludes, Voegelin “wasn’t really a teacher, he was a phenomenon.”

Flanagan’s testimonial serves as a reminder that a great mind (and one certainly not hostage to one’s fragmentary specialization) risks being incomprehensible to students. The testimonials of his students at Louisiana State University also testify to his greatness as a scholar, but they tend to speak more positively as his capacity as an undergraduate teacher. Part of this might be due to the fact that Voegelin was still an immigrant during his time at LSU. He was learning to become an American, and may have been learning this from his colleagues, as well as his students even while he was teaching them. One of the constants in their recollections is that it was obvious Voegelin was being magnanimous toward them. He was obviously a great man, and they took his magnanimity as old world generosity and style.

The gap between student and teacher also characterized his relations with his German students. It seems Voegelin left LSU for Munich with the hope of recreating the *Geistkreis* of scholars he enjoyed in Vienna in his youth.⁵⁹ Either that

⁵⁹ See comments by Tilo Schabert in *Voegelin Recollected*, 105. For details of Voegelin’s life in Vienna, see *Voegelin Recollected*, 220-253. He describes the *Geistkreis*, which was composed of scholars who would remain his lifelong friends: “It was a group of younger people who met regularly every month,

or a school of scientists who could rejuvenate the activity of science in Germany.⁶⁰ However, this was not meant to be, in part due to his own (self-imposed) isolation and lack of friends.

As a teacher of undergraduates, Voegelin had a reputation among many for strictness and being unfriendly, but it seems this was a strategy to weed out ideological or simply stupid and lazy students. According to Claus-Ekkehard Barsch, Voegelin's strategy benefited those who stayed. It seems it helped them gain clarity on the fundamental issues. Moreover, he observes how appreciative Voegelin was for students to talk to him in walks between classes. Voegelin's former students at LSU and ND confirm this side of him.⁶¹ Ellis Sandoz notes how Voegelin gave undergraduate and graduate students a sense they were participating with him in the activity of science: "To this degree Voegelin was doing *science* as he taught, whether in lecture or in seminar—and everybody knew this is what we were doing: the students and class were to greater lesser degree participants in a persuasive inquiry, in something appreciated as a search for truth, for truth that mattered! I think this palpable sense of participation in the activity of inquiry was perhaps the chief source of Voegelin's popularity as a teacher."⁶²

one of them giving a lecture on a subject of his choice and the others tearing him to pieces.... An important characteristic of the group was that we were all held together by our intellectual interests in the pursuit of this or that science, but that at the same time a good number of the members were not simply attached to the university but were engaged in various business activities." (*Autobiographical Reflections*, 35-36). The lack of identification with the University of Vienna reminds us of Stephen Miller's observation that the "clubbable men" of the Enlightenment pursued their most important conversations outside the parameters of the universities (*Conversation*, 79-118).

⁶⁰ *Voegelin Recollected*, 111.

⁶¹ *Voegelin Recollected*, 81.

⁶² Ellis Sandoz, "Eric Voegelin As Master Teacher: Notes For A Talk," Roundtable Discussion, American Political Science Association & Eric Voegelin Society, Annual Meetings in Chicago, September 4, 2004. I thank Professor Sandoz for sharing his notes with me.

Voegelin also evoked an erotic attraction, especially from some of his female students. Using an eclectic method of studying student behavior in all his classes, Barsch notes of Voegelin's brighter female students that "their eyes were open and their legs were open. And they looked like they were in a mixture of relaxing and the opposite of relaxing.... Tense! Always. I think that Voegelin had an erotic attraction. That was my general impression."⁶³ Voegelin exerted a Socratic eroticism of the soul that characterizes great teachers, and that reminds us this form of eroticism calls forth the entire person.⁶⁴ Plato expresses it well in the *Phaedrus* when he speaks of the lover "shuddering" while beholding his beloved whom he sees as the icon of the good.⁶⁵

The gap between the "phenomenon" and student narrows in the recollections of his graduate students. According to Tilo Schabert, he regularly invited his staff and students for gatherings at his Munich apartment and sometimes for a barbeque at his cottage in Weilheim.⁶⁶ He certainly preferred the company of his students to his colleagues. However, some of his students express frustration at his aloofness and incapacity for conversation.

All the limitations of Voegelin's personality and his aloofness seemed to dissolve for those graduate students who ended up participating in his own scientific investigations. He was in constant conversation and dialogue with them concerning the latest books, theories, and current events.⁶⁷ Schabert explains that

⁶³ *Voegelin Recollected*, 82-3.

⁶⁴ See William Deresiewicz, "Love on Campus," *American Scholar*, Summer 2007: 36-46 (<http://www.theamericanscholar.org/su07/love-deresiewicz.html>).

⁶⁵ Plato, *Phaedrus*, 251a.

⁶⁶ *Voegelin Recollected*, 89.

⁶⁷ Tilo Schabert, "Die Werkstatt Eric Voegelins," *Zeitschrift fur Politik*, Marz 2002, 49(1): 83-95.

Voegelin's "workshop" consisted of his immediate research assistants, but also those with whom he corresponded by letter, and his students in his lectures:

After initiating a conversation – and without considering whether what was to follow would interest all who were present or would even be acceptable to them – Eric Voegelin would present the latest ideas that had come to him in the course of his thought, of his work. Manifestly, these were ideas that he wanted first to "test." They were delivered in that manner he always maintained: one of presenting them as conceptual discoveries that were absolutely unfamiliar, shocking and unorthodox, yet of a far-reaching significance. Voegelin usually proceeded in precisely the same way in lectures and presentations, especially during the discussion round. On such occasions, he appeared as the figure of the experimental mind that rebelliously probed to the furthest, least expected limit. The effect upon his audience was palpable: it too now brimmed with creative excitement as well. Voegelin regarded his lectures as a manifestation of his workshop that had no parallel anywhere else. As a matter of particular note: it was at just such lectures that Voegelin won others over to his thought and gained them for the study of his work.⁶⁸

Students, who could not possibly fully understand what Voegelin was talking about, could still sense the significance and thrill of scientific inquiry. Here was a scientist's existential motion in truth. Of course, Voegelin was not a regular scholar in the sense of being a specialist. An exuberant gnat biologist can thrill his students by teaching them about its digestive organs. Voegelin, as we have seen, was attempting to move beyond Weber's attempt to develop a theory of humanity.

Thomas Hollweck elaborates Voegelin's invitation to students to "think with" him:

Voegelin as a teacher, that means to me first of all, Voegelin as a keen observer of the person with whom he was having a conversation and as someone who visibly

⁶⁸ Schabert, "Die Werkstatt Eric Voegelins," 91. Translation taken from unpublished English translation. I thank Professor Schabert for sharing his manuscript with me.

thought your thoughts with you, which my by no means meant that his thought processes would arrive at the same end as your own. This is when things would become extremely interesting; for then you knew that something important was going on, something that embodied to me the essence of *Wissenschaft* and philosophy. Voegelin never had any need to interrupt, except to interject “what do you mean. I do not understand,” when I had once again failed to express my thoughts clearly.⁶⁹

Under the circumstances of “thinking with” a talented graduate student, Voegelin displayed a Socratic sense of teaching deeper perhaps even than of Socrates, who, it seems, never “thought with” another interlocutor in the sense of treating him as an equal, at least in terms of the topic at hand.⁷⁰ His Socratic teaching was the result of his capacity to remove himself from the topic of inquiry: “It is the sign of a sovereign thinker that he has no need to mention his own writings on a particular subject and that he does not chew the cud of old accomplishments. When Voegelin invited you to read something he had written it was, as Tilo Schabert points out, ‘work in progress.’ Voegelin invited you to think with him, not about him, not against him, but about the subject matter.”⁷¹

Of course, an inequality existed between Voegelin and his top students by virtue of Voegelin’s intellect, which, the students recognized: “What I personally valued more than anything else in Voegelin’s thinking was its analytical power. He was the only man ever from whom I would accept statements about what cannot be proven, because I knew that if anyone ever had, he had thought it through and had

⁶⁹ Thomas Hollweck, “Roundtable Discussion: Voegelin as Master Teacher,” Comments presented at Eric Voegelin Society, 2004 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association (<http://www.artsci.lsu.edu/voegelin/EVS/2004%20Papers/Hollweck22004.htm>).

⁷⁰ This is a contentious claim, as Socratic ignorance, if we take it seriously, implies a genuine equality among Socrates and all men. Søren Kierkegaard brings this equality out very well.

⁷¹ Hollweck, “Voegelin as Master Teacher.”

not relied on intuition.”⁷² Even so, for several of his German students, the authority of his intellect meant something more than giving them the faith to take his word for granted on this or that topic. His German students grew up in the post-World War II period, which meant their own parents – fathers in particular- were directly affected by the war. The fathers of some were killed (which meant they barely would have known them), while others had been National Socialists.⁷³ Voegelin was a father figure for many of them for the same reason Socrates was a father figure for the dispossessed youth of Athens. The old order was either dead or corrupt, and he represented the new way for many of his students (though he seems not to have noticed nor cultivated this kind of relationship).

Many sides of Voegelin the teacher treated here so far are gathered up in the series of lectures, “Hitler and the Germans,” delivered in 1964, that perhaps constituted the climax of his teaching career.⁷⁴ As we have seen, many of Voegelin’s students regarded him a mesmerizing “phenomenon” but his significance was not altogether clear to them. His significance to this audience, composed mostly of students, was clear because the topic was about them, or rather, about the society they had inherited from their corrupted parents. Purcell compares the performance to Socrates pulling Athenian youths out of their cave: “For his audience, encountering Voegelin delivering the lectures was like meeting someone coming up from the underworld of Plato’s cave, would be their Socratic guide. In that sense,

⁷² Hollweck, “Voegelin as Master Teacher.”

⁷³ *Voegelin Recollected*, 113.

⁷⁴ Voegelin, *Hitler and the Germans*, CW 31. The following analysis draws upon Purcell’s analysis of these lectures, which focuses on Voegelin’s performance of them, instead of the published version (“Can a Philosopher Be a Prophetic Witness to the Truth?”).

Manfred Henningsen remarked that their greatest impact was in their actual performance, ‘in expectation of a German metanoia.’”⁷⁵ Purcell argues that Voegelin, for whom, like Socrates or Kierkegaard, philosophy is a way of existence instead of simply holding concepts, the lectures were intended to recreate the capacity for civic friendship in truth in Germany, a rebuilding of souls in “a community of existential concern”: “That’s perhaps the fullest significance of those lectures – they expressed Voegelin’s own *philia politike*, his attitude of political friendship towards his audience. They were intended to ground the common *homonoia* – likemindedness in participation in the same divine nous – a new generation of German *spoudaioi*, of an inner dignity and external civic virtue equivalent to Max Weber’s.”⁷⁶ Like Socrates who refounds the beautiful city in the souls of the young with whom he converses, Voegelin attempted to reconstitute the life of truthfulness in a destroyed German society.

Purcell analyzes the method of Voegelin’s attempt to evoke *periagoge* in his students. He draws upon Kierkegaard’s program of eliciting in his audience three steps in conversion: aesthetic, ethical, and religious, as well as a fourth step, towards the truth of existence. These steps are comparable to the ones Gueguen, and Nicgorski to a degree, notice of Gerhart Niemeyer’s teaching. These steps of ascent are attempts to practice the “art of the periagoge,” as Voegelin referred to liberal education.

⁷⁵ Purcell, “Can a Philosopher Be a Prophetic Witness to the Truth?”, 2, quoting Henningsen, “Eine Mischung aus Schlachthof und Klapsmühle, Einleitung zu Eric Voegelin,” *Hitler und die Deutschen*, (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2006), 38.

⁷⁶ Purcell, “Can a Philosopher Be a Prophetic Witness to the Truth?”, 6. Henningsen documents a number of students in attendance who would go on to form a cross-section of German *spoudaioi*, representing media, government, bureaucracy, and the academy (“Einleitung zu Eric Voegelin,” 19).

The first step toward conversion is to enter into the aesthetic by means of irony and satire. Efforts by post-war German philosophers, historians, and social scientists to explain the Nazi phenomena were pathetic because they too participated in the destruction of reality (which helps explain why the title of Voegelin's lectures was "Hitler and the Germans" (my emphasis), to show that Hitler does not arise in a cultural vacuum). Voegelin borrows heavily from Karl Kraus's satires on the Nazis and culture in the inter-war period to demonstrate, with a considerable degree of bluntness, how anyone should have seen the destruction of order in society. Satire exposes the destruction, but the ironic presentation of details enables the audience to distance itself from "the commonly accepted doxa of academic contemporary historiography."⁷⁷ Voegelin bluntly demonstrates to his students that the paragons of intelligence and morality in their society are stupid idiots. No wonder he was professionally isolated in Germany! Even so, Purcell singles out the aesthetic as Voegelin's first step toward evoking periagoge in students. Satire and irony are not meant to belittle or intimidate, as many of his students thought, but was "aimed at healing through cauterization." Of course, satire and irony can appear as mere insult to some, and, without the shared background of being young in a corrupt society like Voegelin's German students were, it would be difficult to determine the target of Voegelin's barbs.

From the aesthetic, Voegelin moves to the ethical. It should be noted, though, that Purcell's Kierkegaardian categories (to which Voegelin does not refer) are existential, not temporal, ones. This means that each is present at each and every

⁷⁷ Purcell, "Can a Philosopher Be a Prophetic Witness to the Truth?", 3.

point of the lectures. One does not find the first lecture in the aesthetic, the second lecture in the ethical, and so on.

Having demonstrated the absurdity of the Nazis and their subsequent “scientific” interpreters, and having achieved an ironic distancing from the authoritative claims of the latter, Voegelin elicits ethical conversion expressed first as moral indignation and second as affirmation of moral order as a key constituent of scientific understanding of political reality. The absurdity of participating in the secondary reality of ideology deserves moral indignation, which is an affirmation of participation in a common reality. Voegelin uses the example of a journalist who criticizes a former Auschwitz prisoner for losing control on the witness stand and calling a former guard a murderer, even though the guard “merely” beat him into a cripple. Voegelin’s indignation at the journalist is apparent: “For what it is saying is that one should peacefully allow oneself to be killed and shouldn’t in any way shout ‘murderer!’... As long as I have not been killed, I must not say that the other person is a murder. If I see that this other one is committing murder, I still may not say ‘murderer!’ before he has been convicted in a proper court.”⁷⁸ One can see in the journalist a legalist mindset that would prohibit the former prisoner from speaking truth when doing so breaks the letter of the law.

Having affirmed the moral order in the conversion to the ethical, Voegelin then elicits religious conversion, or perhaps more accurately, “conversion to the transcendent.”⁷⁹ From affirming the moral order in the ethical conversion, Voegelin moves into the transcendent under which the individual stands to be judged by that

⁷⁸ Voegelin, *Hitler and the Germans*, CW 31, 64.

⁷⁹ Purcell, “Can a Philosopher Be a Prophetic Witness to the Truth?”, 4.

standard. Voegelin identifies the loss of reality, rooted in man's desire to be the creator of his own existence and values, as the source of German disorder, and cites one sentence of Novalis to summarize this sentiment: "'The world shall be as I wish it!' There you already have in a nutshell the whole problem of Hitler, the central problem of the dedivinizing and dehumanizing."⁸⁰ In contrast, Voegelin succinctly clarifies the transcendent, and empirically true, standard under which man exists: "The experience of reason and spirit agree on the point that man experiences himself as a being who does not exist from himself. He exists in an already given world. This world itself exists by reason of a mystery, and the name for the mystery, for the cause of this being of the world, of which man is a component, is referred to as 'God.' So, dependence of existence on the divine causation of existence has remained the basic question of philosophy up to today."⁸¹ Of course, Voegelin was not a spokesman for Christianity or any other religion. But Christianity, as well as Socratic political philosophy, calls upon the individual to live his life in truth and to be judged by that truth. The "experiences of reason and spirit" tell us life is to be lived in existential truth, and that philosophy is not simply the holding of right or even true opinions and concepts. This enables Voegelin to devote considerable attention to criticizing the Christian churches during the Nazi era, for they failed to bear witness to transcendent truth. Willingness to live under judgment expresses the "openness" toward the divine ground discussed above. Only such souls are capable of political and philosophical friendship. That Voegelin was capable of

⁸⁰ Voegelin, *Hitler and the Germans*, CW 31, 88.

⁸¹ Voegelin, *Hitler and the Germans*, CW 31, 86.

eliciting such friendship in his university lectures testifies to his greatness as a teacher.

The “Hitler and the Germans” lectures appear to have been foundational events for those who heard them. Many in the audience went on to form important parts of the German regime. Our analysis of his teaching began with some reservations of his talents, which his former students explained to be the result of his greatness as a scholar, which tended to make it difficult for students to keep up with him. Those who were able to develop a working relationship with him identify his capacity to “think with” the student as the bond between them. More the original scholar than Niemeyer, Voegelin “pushed ahead” with his science and thinking, which risked leaving behind students. However, as we saw with Purcell’s account of the “Hitler and the German” lectures, Voegelin was very capable of teaching to a wide array of intellects, and of condescending (in the good sense of the term) to the longings of the students.

Conclusion

Voegelin and Niemeyer understood teaching in the Platonic terms of turning around the souls of students from the crisis of their civilization, toward existential truth. Their written work matches their teaching efforts, first in terms of diagnosing the crisis and finding a way out of it. It is an idle question to ask who was the better teacher, for each had his strengths and weaknesses, and each individual student reacted differently to both men. Even so, their different self-understandings as

scholars appear to have resulted in different teaching styles. Voegelin, the more original thinker, seemed to have had a more pronounced impact on those who could “think with” him. Niemeyer was more self-consciously a father-figure for his students and therefore, while still highly demanding of their attention and intelligence, did not regard his students as people who could “think with” him. Instead, Niemeyer attempted to re-create the originary experiences of the tradition of thinking that he understood himself as handing down. For all the attention Niemeyer and Voegelin paid to recollection (after all, Niemeyer translated Voegelin’s book, *Anamnesis*), Voegelin was less interested in viewing himself as an imparter of a tradition. This is not to say he, like a progressivist, rejected tradition. Rather, he seemed to have treated tradition as a starting-point for inquiry, and it was the activity of inquiry that interested him the most.

However, it is difficult to say much more about their respective teaching methods. Even though I have identified a three-stage “ascent” in each one’s method, it should be made clear that these three stages are rough categories, and that each stage is not to be understood as isolated from the others. In this sense, one can appreciate the complexity of their teaching and the “art of the perialoge,” which entails a wide array of arts and techniques to get students to learn. As Ralph McNerny explains in his contribution to the Festschrift for Niemeyer, teaching is a task that “cannot be accomplished” because all a teacher can do is point.⁸² He cannot make his student learn and therefore is always the helpless initiator of liberal education. One might think teaching is for this reason a futile task. However,

⁸² Ralph McNerny, “Reflections on Teaching,” *The Good Man in Society*, 137.

the helplessness of the teacher might be one reason Socrates in the *Symposium* explains how Diotima describes the multi-dimensional eros as: “courageous, stout, and keen, a skilled hunter, always weaving devices, desirous of practical wisdom and inventive, philosophizing through all his life, a skilled magician, druggist, sophist.”⁸³ The same adjectives could be used for Voegelin and Niemeyer, who participate in the way of thinking of teaching of Diotima and of Socrates.

⁸³ Plato, *Symposium*, 203d-e.